

The Rayman Book 1

Chapter 1 Midsummer Festival

'Let's make some silence,' he said softly to himself as he pulled a blanket out of his pack. He folded it several times, placed it on a large flat rock and then sat down on it cross-legged. He wriggled about a bit to get comfortable and closed his eyes. At first he was aware of the warmth of the sun and the sounds of the mountain all around him, but soon the process took him and he felt only peace. He surrendered himself, blending once more with the infinite, busy doing nothing.

The morning sun shone down upon him from a cloudless sky. It had risen high enough for its light to reach the very bottom of the slope below. The ridge overlooked a narrow valley made by the river running along the bottom. In places where the rocks were harder the water had been forced to cut a gorge. Now the crystal clear water splashed and gurgled over rocks, and its motion sent up clouds of spray that hung in the air, casting rainbows in the occasional shaft of sunlight. The heavily scented air was filled with the song of birds and the drone of insects. It was very tranquil.

High up on the northern side of the valley a narrow path followed the contour of the hill. It wended its way through dense deciduous woodland and a few clearings. The young man was seated a little way off this path on a headland close to the edge of a vertical drop. He was an unexceptional looking person of average height, athletic and heavily suntanned. He was clean-shaven but had very long brown hair tied back in a disorderly ponytail. He looked to be in his early twenties. Dressed in a faded brown shirt and shorts that blended in with his surroundings, he was hardly visible. Beside him was a pair of well-used walking boots, and leaning against a solitary pine tree was a backpack with a long slim case attached. He was a musician and the case contained his instrument. Some said he was more than just a simple musician, but no two people could agree exactly what he really was. No one used his real name, because they didn't know what it was. They simply called him the Rayman. It was a name he preferred because, unlike most people, he liked to be different.

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He remained seated and perfectly still for quite some time but eventually he began to stir. His awareness returned from a blissful rest that made sleep seem like a shallow doze. He lay back on the rock and let the world intrude slowly through his senses. He pulled up each leg in turn and gently massaged them. He was a little stiff from climbing up and down hills since early dawn. He stretched elaborately before standing up and moving through some ancient postures to loosen up his muscles. After a while he squatted and

rummaged in his pack for fresh clothes. He pulled out a shirt and trousers that were made of thin white cotton and very colourfully embroidered. They looked new. He unfolded and shook them before hanging them on a nearby bush. He stripped off his dusty travelling clothes and cleaned himself thoroughly with a towel he had dampened in the river when crossing it in the early morning. Though the hot sun dried him quickly, this brief wash was invigorating. He dressed slowly then put on a pair of lightweight sandals rather than his heavy boots, which he tied to the bottom of his pack. He removed the tie from his long, unruly hair, brushed it out and held it behind his head as he put on a beaded headband. It would not be as comfortable in the heat as the tie but it was part of his stage clothes. It also concealed some of the more interesting controls for his instrument. He wouldn't need them until much later, but it took a little time to set them up properly and it would be much easier to do that here where there were no distractions. He detached the case from the clips that held it onto his pack and opened it. He turned the instrument on but didn't pick it up. The instrument was very unusual. It was long and thin, with seven strings on a narrow body. It was made of natural wood and finely inlaid with complex geometric patterns. All the controls were hidden in its smooth and sweeping lines. He closed his eyes to concentrate better. Small sounds and occasional sparks of light issued from the instrument as he made adjustments to controls hidden in the neck. When he was satisfied that everything was working, he flexed his feet in the sandals. They were brand new. He was pleasantly surprised to find that they not only fit, they were also very comfortable. He would have worn them anyway, because they were a gift from a community in return for musical entertainment. He had stayed a few nights and knew that many of them would travel to the festival for his concert. He expected them to check if he was wearing their gift. They had looked after him well and he wanted to please them.

Now much revived, he bent down to repack his backpack. He took the instrument out of its case and carefully propped it against the tree before refastening the case and attaching it to his pack. He hoisted the whole lot onto his back and shook it roughly into place before picking up the instrument. He put its strap over his head and moved his shoulders around to adjust the load until it felt comfortable. Only then did he test the strings and tune them slightly. He brought up the sonics and tried a few runs to loosen up his fingers. Satisfied, he began to play a happy little marching tune, walking in time as he set off along the path. As it neared the edge of the gorge he caught glimpses of bright colours moving through the trees far below. They would be fellow travellers on their way to the gathering, already wearing their holiday clothes. They probably lived close by. They had chosen the much easier and cooler route under the trees along the riverbank. He was several hundred feet above them, and their laughter and chatter were muted by the distance. He could of course have taken the easier route, but that would have meant

travelling with many other people. His choice of the higher path was deliberate. Few people had the energy to climb the way he had and this almost guaranteed he could travel on his own. He was on his way to play at the midsummer festival, the biggest gathering of the year, and for him this isolation was a necessary part of his preparation.

After walking for half the morning, he had stopped to meditate once he was near his destination. The trees had begun to thin out and when he reached the end of the ridge a vista opened out in front of him. In the far distance tall rocky peaks were silhouetted against the bright blue of the sky. Lower down, the steep slopes gave way to rounder hills that in turn flattened out into broad open fields. He could just make out small white rectangles of houses dotted among the green of the fields and their hedgerows. These buildings were isolated farms and hamlets, but there was one slightly larger settlement visible just a few miles away. Closer to him, framed by trees in the V of the valley, he could make out the open field that was his destination. It was bordered by thick hedgerows with huge oak trees scattered among them. The open space was filled with dun-coloured tents and the occasional brightly painted wooden travel van. There were many people and stalls and several compounds filled with animals. The holiday gathering was also a general market which attracted people from long distances. Most would have been there for several days already, allowing plenty of time to trade their spare produce and pick up new supplies. Now they could just socialise and perhaps look for a few luxury goods. The market had been there for days, but today was midsummer and this celebration was traditionally the highlight and focus of the entertainment. The crowd looked much bigger than in any previous year. The Rayman found that it both excited and frightened him. Except when performing, he was rather shy and reclusive and avoided crowds whenever possible.

Near the far end of the field stood a high wooden stage erected exclusively for the entertainers. This huge platform was big enough to dwarf everything around it. It had an off-white canvas roof and a backdrop that flapped lazily in the light breeze. The Rayman could see people on it, and even though it was early he could just make out faint strains of music drifting up to him on the breeze. A huge grin spread across his face and his hand reached back, seemingly of its own accord, towards the instrument case hanging behind his back.

'Not yet, preparation.'

These words came into his head automatically and his hand dropped back to his side. He remembered his old teacher saying that the best music comes out of silence.

'If your mind is cluttered so is your music. You can play to rid yourself of problems, but it's not very uplifting for others to listen to and there are better ways to soothe yourself.'

That was when he had decided to meditate. He paused to look around until he spotted a flat rocky outcrop below him. It was off the path and big enough to set up his camp, should he want to. There was also a splendid view down along the gorge. A fainter, more wistful smile had softened his features as he made his way down to it. He had gratefully taken off the pack and leant it against the pine tree. He then sat down and eased off his walking boots before preparing to recreate his inner silence.

Now very much refreshed, he made his way down towards the valley bottom. He had discovered this path by accident the previous year and knew that eventually it would bring him out at the edge of the gather field. After a short time he had to stop playing to free his hands for balance. The sandals were comfortable, but they didn't have the grip of his walking boots and their soles tended to slip and slide. Chances were that he would not be noticed by anyone until he was right in among the revellers. This was precisely what he intended. When he reached the flatter ground at the valley bottom he made his way through the trees to a stile that led directly into the gather field on the other side of a thick hedge. He found himself pretty well hidden behind a covered stall filled with fresh vegetables. Boxes were piled up close against the hedge but there was just enough room to manoeuvre among them. Although the stall was a minor one away from the main market area, there were plenty of people in front of it. The Rayman was hidden for the moment but he had better move soon or it was likely he would be spotted. The music from the stage was winding down in the last verse of a song he knew well. Perfect timing.

'If you can manage it, always make a grand entrance. It will lift your spirits and excite the audience. This gets things moving in the right direction. Mind you, if it doesn't work it can be very embarrassing, but that's the risk you take.'

He could almost hear the laughter in the words in his head. It was his teacher's most attractive trait. He was just where he wanted to be. He took a deep breath and slowly let it out to calm himself. Even so, his heart was beating quickly when he stepped out from behind the stall. He turned up the sonics to performance level and struck the first notes of his signature tune. Almost kicking his heels in the air he danced out into the field to appear as if from nowhere. As always the children reacted first. Squealing with joy they surged towards him, dancing and clapping their hands. The adults were slower to react but were no less happy to see him. Very quickly he became the centre of a mad, whirling mass of humanity. Later, he remembered playing at a stall selling puppets and toys. The owners had come out with marionettes to dance with him, much to the amusement of the children. He remembered playing to an old woman seated on the steps of her travel van. He had flirted outrageously with her, inviting her to dance with

him. She was pleased but embarrassed, and he had to dodge the half-peeled potato she threw at him as the crowd around them laughed. Shocked at what she'd done, she covered her face with her shawl. He had worked his way through the stalls towards the stage where he had to lift the sonics to overcome the roar of recognition from the big crowd gathered in front. The tune he played was a complex blend of many influences and definitely his own. No one else could possibly play it, at least not on just one instrument. A drummer on the stage picked up the beat. Free from keeping both the rhythm and the melody, he was able to show off more of his skills. The Rayman channelled his excitement into the music, creating more and more complex patterns in a blistering whirl of fingers. Still playing, he found himself suddenly lifted up onto the platform by unknown assistants. He began to recognise the other musicians as they joined him in a final triumphant repetition of the chorus. They had all played with him before and knew their parts well. The applause when they finally finished was like being thrown into a freezing river. He'd been so immersed in the music that the response from the crowd startled him. He stood slightly stunned before raising his arms in the air to acknowledge the applause. Calling out assurances that he would be back, he made his way to the back of the stage. He stopped to greet the other musicians and received hugs and kisses.

It seemed it was all over in an instant, but he could tell from his fatigue and the sweat in his eyes that he must have been playing a long time. He climbed down the wooden steps to the private backstage area where he could take off his pack and relax. No one else was there, which was unusual. He didn't realise that all the other musicians had gone out to the front of the stage to listen to him play. Surprised and pleased not to have to deal with lots of people straightaway, he propped his instrument in the sun to recharge. His entrance and performance had worked. He was tremendously elated but also very relieved. On the stage behind him a new tune started to play. He was aware without really knowing why that it was being played with much more enthusiasm than the first song he'd heard.

A tall, willowy girl had followed him. She pushed her way around the canvas backdrop and jumped down beside him, not bothering to use the steps. She shook her head and just grinned at him. She was striking but not really pretty. Her features were angular and strongly defined and she had thick, dark eyebrows. She was rather skinny, more muscular than most women but she curved enough not to be mistaken for a man. Her long, dark, curly hair was caught neatly under a velvet cap that matched the deep blue of her richly embroidered dress. This marked her out as another performer. Smiling broadly, she said, 'Rayman, always the showman.' She hugged him and gave him a quick kiss on the cheek before catching his hands between her own, holding him in place so that she could look deeply into his eyes.

'Carrie,' he greeted her, blushing with the warmth and intensity of her welcome. 'How are you?'

Not answering, she turned and pulled him by a hand towards the entrance of the backstage area.

'Come on, let's go get something to eat before you take over the show again.' He pulled back, a little startled. Laughing, she just pulled harder until he was forced to move along with her. They walked through the narrow space between a hedge and the backs of a row of colourful stalls. They had to push their way into the main selling area between a stall selling metal pots and pans and another selling carved beds. Carrie dragged him along the walkways pushing quickly and forcefully through the noisy crowd. They got through largely unnoticed. Though some people recognised him, they were moving too fast and were gone before they could react. When they reached the cooked food area, Carrie stopped near a wooden plaque that was the sign for Don and Emily's stall. Plain wooden tables and benches were set up in front of a large travel van that had plenty of smoke rising from its chimney. Some of the tables were protected from the weather by a bright green awning attached to the van and propped up by tall poles sunk into the ground. On this hot day, the sides of the awning were lifted up to let in the slight breezes. The Rayman, distracted by the mouth-watering smells coming from the van, hardly noticed that people were staring at him. He realised that he was extremely hungry. Carrie turned to him and seeing that he was almost drooling asked, 'When did you last eat?'

The Rayman tilted his head to one side to think and said with a teasing smile, 'Probably the day before yesterday, although I don't remember exactly.'

'Ah, you idiot! How do you expect to keep going this evening if you haven't stoked up really well beforehand?'

The Rayman's smile broadened. 'Don't worry, I planned to eat here today. The food is always so good, I like to be as empty as possible so I can really enjoy it.'

Just then Don, the serving man, noticed them and rushed over.

'Rayman, Carrie, my great pleasure – whatever you like,' he exclaimed, gesturing wildly. 'On the house.'

Carrie laughed as she steered the Rayman to a quiet table hidden in the shade at the edge of the stall and well back from the main walkway. The Rayman sat down and smiled warmly at the eagerly waiting Don.

'Two large portions of whatever you think is your best, please.'

Carrie snorted at this as she too seated herself. 'Piled so it's falling off the plate for him, but only half of that for me, please.'

'Coming right up, right away, yes, yes...,' Don responded enthusiastically. He turned and shouted at the top of his voice in the direction of the van, 'Two Rayman specials, Em.'

The Rayman frowned as Don hurried away after a muffled reply from Em, but Carrie kicked him under the table and he smiled in resignation. People

walking by stopped and stared, and Carrie noticed that the seats around them filled quickly.

'You're good for business,' she said. 'It's part of the price you pay for a free meal.'

'I know, I'm sorry...,' he started to apologise, shrugging his shoulders, but stopped as Don returned and began setting cutlery in front of them. The Rayman's hunger reasserted itself and he paid more attention. Emily, the cook, came out with freshly baked bread cut thick and laid on a board. She set it down along with two bowls of steaming soup. Don brought out another tray with a golden-crustied pie and an assortment of smaller side dishes. All were piping hot and smelled so wonderful that the Rayman had no idea where to start. He thanked Emily effusively as she placed a bowl of soup in front of him. When he started to eat it ravenously, she said, 'Play well tonight,' and shyly touched him on the arm before heading back to her kitchen. He promised to her back that he would do his best, then turned around to find a huge slice of bread right in front of his nose, offered by Carrie.

They continued to eat in companionable silence for some time. The food was delicious. The Rayman thought they must have been given a dish of absolutely everything on the menu. None of the portions were large but there were so many to choose from that he was soon having trouble deciding what else he could possibly eat. Although he had been very hungry, Carrie noticed that he took extra care not to spill anything on his showman's clothes.

When at last he had slowed down a bit, she asked him softly, 'When did you think up that entrance stunt?'

Looking up with an enthusiastic grin, the Rayman asked in a loud voice, 'Did you like it?'

She kicked him in the shins under the table, making him wince. Carrie was more physically expressive than most people. He wasn't used to that.

'Last year when I left I found the entrance to the high path,' he said more softly. 'I was avoiding the crowds and stumbled onto it. No one seems to use it. It seemed too good an idea to waste.'

Carrie frowned, remembering how upset she was when he had sneaked away after the concert. Her mother tried to explain that he must have only been protecting himself from the mob, as she called the audience.

'I thought it would be a bit different. I hate all those introduction speeches. I just want to play.'

'It was rather spectacular, but my mother has been working on your introduction for ages. She'll need to be placated.'

'Oh!' The Rayman looked disconcerted. Carrie's mother had discovered him on his first visit to the festival three years before when he and some other musicians were playing away from the main stage. She immediately recognised that he had great ability and asked him to accompany her for a song, just the two of them. She had thought to do him a favour. His skilful support had made her sing her very best, which had wowed the crowd. She was an accomplished musician who usually ran the show, and his ability to

manipulate her into such a fine performance had thrown her completely. Later in repayment she brought him to the front of the stage for his first solo spot. She had no idea what she was letting everyone in for. He stole the show. It was a triumph for his teacher – ten years of study suddenly released on the world. No one had ever heard or seen anything like it. The Rayman was very grateful to her and hated to think of upsetting her.

'Don't worry. I'm sure she loved it,' Carrie reassured him. 'She's not that egocentric ... well, not quite,' she added with a grin, also raising her eyebrows. It was her mother who organised these gatherings on the family land and she kept everything under very tight control. She was a powerful and demanding woman. This year she had put Carrie in charge of looking after the Rayman, who was to be the star of the show. It was a job Carrie would have done anyway, so it wasn't really a job at all.

'Offer to accompany her and she'll forgive you,' she said after some reflection.

'Of course,' the Rayman replied, relaxing in relief.

'You do seem to have a flair for the unusual,' Carrie conceded, aware that people would talk about his entrance for years to come. It had been absolutely stunning. Brave too, brave or foolish. This brilliant young man was so totally fearless that she didn't know which it was. She instinctively knew that to be his friend she needed to be normal with him, to keep him grounded and definitely not applaud his actions too much, as other people did, or she would frighten him away.

'Do you have any new songs for us this year?' he asked hopefully, also changing the subject. Carrie had not written many songs, being both young and a perfectionist. She found writing to be hard work and much preferred singing. The songs she had written were considered rather special and were among those most often requested by the crowd. Unlike the Rayman, she was an eighth generation musician and no one found her ability the least bit surprising.

'I do have a new one, but it's not finished yet,' she said and dropped her head, smiling to herself because it was a song about him. 'I may finish it soon, but who knows.'

'Tell me about it,' he begged, but she only smiled back, more openly this time. She would love to see his face when it was ready. It would reveal her true feelings for him. That might be a shock and chase him beyond her reach forever, a chance she was not willing to take, at least not yet.

They made a big fuss over the quality of the food before leaving the stall. They even went to the back of the stall to see Emily, who blushed tremendously and could hardly speak. Don just stood in the doorway behind them, bursting with pride for her. They hadn't had too many interruptions thanks to Carrie, who wasn't afraid to glare when people came too close. It had been a pleasant meal.

Carrie delighted him further by insisting on spending the afternoon walking around the stalls with him, body guarding him, she called it. Everyone wanted to speak to him and many to touch him as well. She saw that all this attention

distressed him and tried to fend people off. She introduced him to friends and people she knew would be respectful – respectful or else. She was, after all, very capable of doing the job her mother had given her.

She enjoyed watching him obtain the modest things he needed. He traded for the different sizes of the wire used to make new strings for his instrument. In return the instrument makers asked him to try out all the instruments on display and give his opinion. It took a while and attracted a big crowd. He was genuinely impressed, only rejecting two – a viola with a crack in the neck, probably from the journey, and a harp that he said needed restringing to sound any good at all. He sighed and said it would be better to just take it apart for spares. Both were taken off the stall. Carrie looked back and noticed that the stall stayed crowded for a long time after they had left. No one else would let him pay or trade for anything, and they were both loaded down with gifts by the time the sun was low in the sky and they walked back to the players' area. Much to Carrie's amusement he needed to unpack everything from his pack and repack it several times before finally fitting everything in. He insisted on doing this straightaway, although she knew he would only have to unpack it all again when he made himself a bed for the night.

She let the other musicians have him then, so many of them wanted to run through parts with him. It was totally unnecessary for him, she knew, but he was modest in spite of his ability, and he was always willing to accommodate them. Perhaps that was why he was so good, she thought. He cared about the music no matter how simple or basic. He always gave everyone his full attention. They made such a fuss of him, yet he hardly seemed to notice that he was the centre of attention. She sat watching him, delighting in his gentle attentiveness. He could control those around him without any show of strength. To her, his gentleness was his most appealing attribute. She knew that she was overbearing and boisterous by anyone's standards, but this was due to her bizarre upbringing. It was not, she felt, who she really was, but a hangover from a tempestuous childhood. Her mother was quite dominant and she, true daughter of her mother, was not the submissive type. She had needed to grow up strong to survive at all. Her father was ... well, to be honest, he was very eccentric, but strong too – that was the only way to describe him. She loved them both, but living with them could be hard work. She sighed, wondering, as many children do, how different life would have been if she'd only been born to normal parents.

This year the Rayman had brought parts for the other musicians too. The parts were easy enough for them to learn. He had them written down but was equally happy to play them until they were learned by ear. No matter how insecure or important the musicians might feel they were, he ruffled no feathers. His quiet, businesslike manner was almost the exact opposite of her mother's unruly rehearsals, which sometimes degenerated into a mere battle of wills, a battle she always won.

'It's just a simple piece,' he said as he finally showed them how to put it all together. She doubted that he considered it exceptional that he could play all

the parts on any instrument no matter how difficult to master. It definitely wasn't just a simple piece of music, and it sounded like it would be fun to hear. It would also have the visual element that made him a unique performer. She thrilled to think what the evening held in store. She could hardly wait.

Chapter 2

The Rayman Special

The sun was setting slowly and had become a huge red ball just above the hills when the Rayman walked out to play again. In total contrast to what everyone expected, he played an exquisitely gentle solo, sitting on a stool all on his own at the front of the stage. He played with eyes closed, not moving and with a sad and lonely expression on his face. It was beautifully simple yet incredibly profound. It brought tears to Carrie's eyes. He had introduced it by dedicating it to the memory of his teacher. Starbright, he called him. She didn't know if that was his name or a description of him. The audience remained pin-drop silent after the last notes had died away. Even the birds and animals were quiet. How was he able to play like that? She knew he was a genius but this had taken her breath away. To completely finish her off he called her to the front of the stage to sing one of her own songs. It was a favourite of the crowd, a humorous song about being down. During the chorus she was astounded to see a blue wolf sitting beside her, howling in harmony. The Rayman just stood there, saying nothing and grinning at her consternation. How on earth had he done that?

After that there was pandemonium. A really wild ride, her mother said later. She somehow managed to fit in all the other music, music of every sort. But it had only really been preparation for the climax of the show. The Rayman special, Carrie called it in her head.

He started playing normally, moving among everyone in the band until they were comfortable with their parts. Then he walked to the front of the stage and began playing the lead. He built it slowly at first but gradually moved into overdrive; his fingers became just a blur. Sounds Carrie never would have thought possible from a simple stringed instrument moved around in space creating an audible landscape of tremendous depth. The band had taken off with him, playing better than ever before. They were totally inspired by his performance and the music he'd given them. At first Carrie thought it was her imagination, but the Rayman seemed to be glowing slightly, pulsing with the music. You never knew quite what that instrument of his was capable of. He had introduced the visual effects the second year he played there – subtle changes in the stage lighting that seemed to work with the mood of the music, amorphous images that radiated from him. The lighting guys had talked about nothing else all year. It was almost as if he was playing with light as well

as sound. That was how he'd been given his name.

'That ray man! We just left the lights off in the end,' her friend Karl had told her. Far from being upset, he was effusive. 'It was awe inspiring. The light moving all over the place. I don't know what he did, but it was tremendous.' Karl lost her then, muttering in his weird techno speak, polarised holography and parallax shift, or something like that. She hadn't understood a word. This year the Rayman completely topped anything he had done before. He not only controlled the lights but also somehow projected images into the air around him. He danced with a huge green dragon that flew off over the crowd making everyone duck as he laughed at their fright. Trees grew among the other musicians then flowered into clouds of sparks that turned into birds and flew off in every direction. The music told stories illustrated in 3D, right up until the astonishing climax.

Knowing him a little Carrie should have expected something like it. He just took off in a spiral of light that shot up into the sky exploding there like a rocket. It filled the sky with blinding light and a crescendo of sound. She had seen it with her own eyes. He flew straight up and then exploded in a wonderful, harmonious riot of colour and sound. The lights and sounds streaked away into the distant night sky, fading to nothing among the stars. One second he was there, the next he was gone. There was total darkness before the stage lights finally came back on. People were standing with necks back and mouths open. But there was no Rayman anywhere. She had been waiting to grab him and sneak him off somewhere quiet to help calm him down after what must have been a hugely strenuous performance. The audience was stunned, as were all the members of the band. Everyone had blank expressions. They stared up, saying 'Wow' over and over again. No encores this year. The previous year he had to play twelve before they let him leave the stage. Maybe this was his revenge. It was a show to be talked about for years.

Carrie was the first to realise it must have been a trick and he had simply gone backstage while everyone was distracted. She looked for him there, but no, he wasn't there and neither was his pack. That gave the game away. She smiled to herself. She had a good idea of where he was and was determined to find him, but not in the dark. It would be too dangerous. Sad but somehow infinitely satisfied she went to her bed, determined to be up bright and early so that she could catch up with him.

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The Rayman was surprised at how easy it had been. He simply generated an image of himself playing while he walked to the rear of the stage hidden inside the illusion of a massive bear. He had recorded himself playing into one of the sequencers, which he controlled through the headband to keep his hands free. It required concentration but he managed it. Still playing, he jumped down from the stage and collected his pack. It was a bit of a fiddle

getting it on, especially in the dark while still playing, but he did it. Then he took the route Carrie had shown him until he was out at the edge of the crowd. From a hundred yards away he played the finale, which was partly live and partly generated by a recording in his instrument's memory. Projecting the images from a distance was tricky because they tended to break up, but it worked well for the short time he needed to do it. He had worked on this section for months, but he was as surprised as everyone else at how very impressive it was. He had tested it, of course, but only in the confines of his house. Outside it was truly fantastic. He nearly gave himself away shouting in excitement. In the darkness that followed he noticed that the instrument's power-low warning light was blinking red. It quickly faded, going out altogether, something it had never done before. It would take days to fully recharge.

'Wow,' he said softly to himself, staggering a bit now that he could relax his concentration.

'Be a mystery,' his teacher had said.

He wondered if this was quite what he meant.

Quickly packing his instrument by feel he made his way across the field toward the stile at the start of the high path. He had checked the route surreptitiously that afternoon when walking through the market with Carrie. He had also found out a great deal about her. He thought he would most definitely like to meet her again, the sooner the better. He wondered how he could arrange it.

Nearly everyone was still in front of the stage. Those who weren't were asleep, and he met no one face to face. He tripped on a tent peg, which caused the tent's occupant to complain bitterly at being woken up. Then he blundered into the vegetable stall in front of the stile. In his haste to get away unseen he tripped over a box of carrots on the far side. No one came to investigate, but rather than search for the stile he climbed through the hedge, almost flying over it. It took a while scrambling around in the bushes until he found the path. Then he remained still until he was sure no one had noticed. Eventually he set off, walking slowly up towards the ridge top. It was dark under the trees but he could find his way if he moved carefully. He heard the noise of the crowd as they dispersed from the stage. Though he would have liked to be with Carrie, he was pleased not to have to endure the fans again. The first year had been bad enough – hundreds of people all vying for his attention, many touching him. It scared him, and while he enjoyed playing he had vowed never to go through that again. One day he might become used to it, but he wasn't yet.

He was really buzzing from the performance, but the physical effort of walking uphill was very calming. In the dark it took twice as long to reach the rocky ledge where he had meditated that very morning. He undressed,

hanging his clothes on a bush to air. Then he simply unrolled his sleeping bag on a flat area of lush grass and crawled in with relief, spending a long time looking up at the stars before rolling over and closing his eyes. It had been very good. The best gig yet. His last conscious thought before he fell asleep was, What they don't know is that I'm only just getting started.

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What woke him in the morning was not the sunlight that was just creeping over the tops of the distant hills but a frantic squeaking. He lay listening to it for some time without recognition before trying to locate its source. He was stiff and sore from the previous day's excesses, and it took him a while to get up. The noise seemed to be coming from lower down the cliff. Dressed only in his shorts he climbed a little way down to the edge of the drop. He looked over, and down to his right he could see a long brown creature about three times the size of a rabbit ineffectually trying to climb up the cliff from a ledge. It must have fallen and was now trapped under an overhang of rock. It was stuck on a narrow ledge that hung out over nothing. Several times it nearly disappeared over the edge. It was in serious trouble and looked likely to fall unless he did something quickly. He looked for a way down. It was very steep but not sheer, and it didn't look too difficult to reach a point just above the creature. He took time to figure out an easy route before cautiously working his way down to the ledge just above it. Lying down he took a firm grip on the stem of a large bush. He tugged hard, testing it carefully before leaning out over the edge.

Below him was a young otter that froze in place as soon as it saw him. They stared at each other and the Rayman realised there was a look of terror in the otter's bright little eyes. He dropped his head to break eye contact and started talking to it softly, hoping that his willingness to help would be communicated. The otter remained still, rigid with shock. How on earth it had got so far above the river he didn't know. Otters were playful and did travel overland between watercourses, but normally they kept close to water. Maybe it had come up the stream he could hear a short distance away. It was obvious that the otter was exhausted. It must have been trapped there for some time. It lowered its head to its paws and he took the opportunity to swing over precariously at full stretch. He just managed to grab it by the loose skin at the back of its neck. Taken by surprise, the otter hung limply at first but then began to struggle, rotating its head to bite him hard and deep on his thumb. He gave out a yell of surprise and pain and tried not to let go. He jerked hard on the bush in an attempt to pull them both up quickly. To his horror the bush moved and gave way as its shallow roots were pulled out. Suddenly he was falling headfirst straight over the edge of the cliff. In what seemed like slow motion he saw the long drop down to the bottom of the gorge. He was falling towards a steep scree slope that was much nearer but

still twenty feet below him. As he got closer everything speeded up and he hit the ground hard. The shock of landing pushed all the breath out of his body. He tumbled down further, winded and helpless. His passage set off an avalanche in the loose rocks. The momentum of his fall sent him plunging further down the slope towards the river, rolling over and over in a nightmare of pain and dust. Time seemed to slow down again as he smashed through the undergrowth and bounced through the small trees that grew sparsely lower down the steep slope. It went on and on. He fell in a dreadful series of uncontrolled cartwheels and somersaults until he was caught with a terrible jar in the branches of a young oak. His limbs were twisted in all directions. He remained pinned, unable to move. He was too deeply shocked to do anything even if he could. The rocks kept on coming and he was hit hard again and again. He became partially buried under the landslide he had caused. One arm was caught in a branch over his head; the other was trapped behind him. He couldn't move. He realised vaguely that he had been very badly hurt. A larger rock loosened from the cliff above, teetered and finally dropped, bouncing ponderously down the slope towards him. It finally smashed into his extended arm, pinning it against the trunk of the tree, trapping it there, and he passed out.

The dust hung in the air for a long time before it began to settle. Up at the top of the slope the otter rolled over where it had landed, shook itself vigorously, sneezed a few times and then loped away into the undergrowth.