

Enemy Mine

Artifice: Episode Five

Smashwords Edition

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Chapter 1

Spying the anthropomorphic wolf now holding a gun and moving towards him, John was near halfway to jumping headfirst off the log and diving into the water for cover. He breathed a little better when he realized that the pseudo-werewolf Radin was only handing him back the weapon he had initially come into the swamp with.

“Ah, thanks, Radin,” John said, relieved. “I don’t think Commander Nuretz would appreciate me losing this right off the bat.”

The creature paid little acknowledgement to his gratitude, and merely growled, “You two wait here. Noo-retz pick you up soon.”

“Farewell, old friend,” Garh said, watching the creature hop back into the submarine.

John had no idea how far they had travelled through the pitch-black underwater tunnels. The beacons that had illuminated their path were spread so sparsely that they might as well have not been there. Nevertheless, Radin had expertly piloted the relatively small submarine and gotten them to the rendezvous point.

Still, while he had trusted the old man to not place them in unnecessary endanger, he wasn’t altogether unhappy that the ride back to the outskirts of the swamp was over.

“Well, then,” John said to Garh, “Looks like we wait for a bit now.”

“Should I even bother asking how you got to this little corner of the swamp with no other boats in sight?”

“Sorry, Commander,” John shook his head. “Trade secrets and all. Plus, even if I told you, I doubt you’d believe me. Hell, I doubt I believe it, and I was there.”

“Sounds about par for the course in these parts,” Nuretz shrugged. Pointing to the sidearm he had previously given John, Nuretz asked, “I trust you didn’t need to use that?”

“Not at all,” John confirmed. “Though, I do have some questions regarding it?”

“You’ll have to take those up with someone smarter than me, I’m afraid,” Nuretz said. “My expertise mostly falls within the practical aspects of using these weapons. Still, I’ll see if I can arrange an audience with a Cluster researcher for you.”

“That’ll be appreciated, though I suspect Ganz, or even Nolan might be a better choice to talk to them,” John admitted. Moving to unclip the holster, he continued, “I’d best be giving this back to you guys as well-”

“Keep it,” Nuretz said, shaking his hand in a dismissive motion. With a chuckle, he added, “Besides, we can’t have our newest *admiral* going around unarmed.”

With the past night’s escapades still fresh in his mind, John had almost forgotten the fact that he had been issued the honorary rank by the Nebar Cluster. Shaking his head, he said, “Thanks, though you’d better double check that the person who gave me that promotion wasn’t drunk off his rocker.”

“I think Fleet Admiral Krane was relatively sober when he did it,” Nuretz laughed. “Now, I know maths isn’t my strong suit, but I’m quite sure there were initially three of you?”

“Ganz is temporarily helping the old man with something,” John assured him. “We’ll get some sort of signal when he’s ready to come out, I’m assuming.”

“Sounds good,” Nuretz said, not questioning any further. “So, where to now?”

Garh grunted as he hopped into the small boat, extending a hand to John.

“Back to Iathera, then a hot soak,” John replied, settling as best as he could on the hard seat. “I think our mute friend here might have the same idea in mind, as well. Though, I think we’d both prefer separate baths. No offense, Garh.”

Garh grunted.

John absently wondered if both Nuretz was also aware of Garh’s special status as Iathera’s spymaster, and if they were both comically trying to keep the secret from each other. From what he’d seen of Garh, he wouldn’t put it past the stoic creature’s sense of humour.

“Sounds good to me,” Nuretz agreed. “It’s not a bad swamp, as they go. But, I’ll be glad to see it behind us.”

“Agreed. Let’s pick up your men and head back then.”

“Thought I’d deliver this package back to you personally, Lady Venarya.”

“My thanks, Commander, and I appreciate you getting it here in one piece,” Venarya replied, looking at John. If she thought it strange that the little scientist Ganz was missing, her

face betrayed nothing. “Also, I think you’d best hurry and check in with Director Rinard and Admiral Krane. I believe they’ve got some new intelligence from the operation at the Gates.”

“It was my next stop, but thanks for the heads up,” Nuretz said. “Anything you can tell me now?”

“Just snippets of information, but it’s a strong possibility that Grandmaster Minardo has decided to come out of exile.”

Nuretz’ expression was one of mild bewilderment.

“Exactly,” was all that Venarya could say, shrugging.

“Well,” Nuretz said with a shrug of his own, “I’d best go see what this is all about. Thanks for the heads up, again.”

“Anytime, Commander,” Venarya smiled. “Take care.”

“You too, Lady Venarya.”

Nuretz now gone, Venarya purposefully walked over to John, now leaning against the wall and wondering if his tired muscles would ever recover from the night’s adventures.

Reaching up one hand and grabbing John behind the neck, she pulled him in until their lips met.

“I wasn’t gone that long,” John joked. “Not that I’m complaining, mind you.”

“Don’t make me spank you.”

“Promises, promises...”

The reunion continued for a few more minutes, and they had now managed to migrate to the living room, when Venarya paused to ask between kisses, “I hope you didn’t dump Ganz off at Rheus’ place? He’ll probably want to get some sleep after all that walking.”

John had to think fast. The only people not in the swamp who knew that Ganz and the old man were now back on Earth were John and Garh, and they had both promised Smiljan not to reveal his current whereabouts.

Then, of course, there was the slight issue of John promising Venarya not to experiment with his newfound abilities unless supervised either by herself or Mag. To that end, it would be tricky explaining exactly how the two scientists ended up on Earth without using Rheus’ portal.

“Please don’t ruin the moment by mentioning those two,” John joked.

Venarya smiled, but the look in her face showed that she was still expecting an answer.

“He’s with the Old Man,” John said, sidestepping any specifics. “All I know is that Smiljan asked him for a favour, and Ganz seemed pretty keen on the idea of helping him out. And, before you ask, no, I have no idea what that favour was.”

“Hmm,” her look was slightly suspicious, but a quick, devilish smile returned. “Okay, sounds good. Now, how about we try to finish what we started earlier?”

“Are we in agreement then?” the woman robed in black asked.

“You tell a good story, I’ll grant that,” Intendant Yazril countered. “However, all I have to go on is your word.”

“Over the centuries, have we ever been known to be deceitful in any of our dealings?”

“Honest truth be told, you lot are so tight-lipped I don’t think you’ve ever had the opportunity,” Yazril answered. “Still, if what you’re saying has even a flicker of truth, I can’t ignore it.”

“So, we have an arrangement?” the woman repeated.

Yazril furrowed her brow, “I’m not the sole decision maker, but you’ve made enough of a case that I will advocate on your behalf.”

“You’ll stress the importance of the situation?”

“I will.” Narrowing her gaze, she added, “For your sake, though, I sincerely hope you’re not playing me for a fool.”

The dark robed woman met her gaze and replied with a resigned tone, “By the end of this, I daresay that you’ll probably wish I had been.”

Chapter 2

“Okay, this joke is going way too far now,” John groaned. “Did I offend one of the gods here or something? And, technically speaking, didn’t we already get interrupted tonight?”

“I’ll talk to Quinn and see if he can sacrifice an orgot or two for you,” Venarya smiled, getting out of the bed and donning a robe. “I’ll be back.”

“And I’ll start getting dressed,” John said, fully expecting the previous scenarios to play out yet again.

Venarya left John and headed downstairs. Opening the door, she wasn’t sure if to be surprised at seeing Intendant Yazril there, accompanied by Garh.

“Sorry about this, Venarya,” Yazril apologized. “This is yet another one of *those* things that can’t wait.”

“Not at all. Come in,” she said quickly. Closing the door behind them, she asked, “More bad news from the old man?”

“If only,” Yazril said. “It’s probably better if John’s here as well, so we can keep him up to spee-”

“Way ahead of you,” he called out, entering the room and doing up the last of his shirt buttons. “Heard the door and figured I’d save time. Also, hey there, Garh. Long time, no see.”

Garh grunted.

“Ah, thanks. Sorry about the interruption,” Yazril apologized again. “I know you’re probably eager to get some sleep.”

“No trouble,” John assured her. “What’s happening?”

“Do you remember that Sisterhood temple to the South?”

“The one that the giant pyramid blew up with its laser cannons of doom?” John asked. “Yep, I’ve got a vague recollection of it.”

“Well, I just received a visit from one of the Sisters.”

Venarya raised an eyebrow, “Even with that catastrophe, I wouldn’t have expected any of them to show up around here.”

“Not welcome around these parts?” John asked.

“No, nothing like that,” Venarya turned to explain. “They’re reclusive to the point where many people wonder if there’s anyone actually in those temples, and if the Sisterhood’s actually

just a fairy tale. The few times I've encountered them have been terse, to put it lightly. For the most part, they seem to be singularly dedicated to some obscure mission or task. No one seems to know what it is, though."

"Until now," Yazril interjected. "I've just been made privy to what appears to be either a great threat, or a great delusion. If it's true, we'll all need a few stiff drinks before breakfast."

"Well then," John said, slowly realizing that going back to bed wasn't going to be an option anytime soon. "Let's all take a seat and get comfortable."

"The Sisterhood claims that their temples," Yazril began, "serve an integral function to the well-being of everyone on this world."

"Sounds like every other religious spiel I've ever heard, and I've heard quite a few in my day," John commented, perhaps a touch more harsh than he intended. "Sorry, go on."

"She told me of their ancient texts that speak of a time before our own history was well documented."

"In other words, it's probably going to be incredibly hard, if not impossible, to verify," John said. Sighing, he added, "I'm sorry... again. I think the lack of sleep is starting to get to me. Continue, please."

"Before I continue, Intendant, we know about your, shall we say, personal connections," the robed visitor began. Holding up a hand, she added, "It's not a threat, just full disclosure. To that end, we know that you have access to a partial record of the events I'm about to relay to you."

Yazril's eyes narrowed.

"Rest assured that we have no intention of revealing your secrets."

"Go on, then," Yazril said, a tense look still in her eyes. "Tell me about these events."

"Very well, then. When humans first arrived on Dracsos," she started, referring to the continent that lay even more west than the Kierdan continent of Diurna, "we came as refugees. On the run from some sort of cataclysm.

She saw curiosity in the eyes of Yazril and held up her hand, “And, before you ask, the nature of this cataclysm is lost even to us. However, we escaped one terror only to be beset by another. Records say that our arrival here was then plagued by a great enemy.”

John curiosity had been piqued by the initial vague statements, and what he really wanted to ask Yazril was, So, who really are you?

Respect for the fact that she would tell him if she deemed it relevant made him ask the second most pertinent question instead.

“So, what you’re saying is that humans aren’t native to this world? How come no one’s mentioned that bit before?”

“It’s been quite a long time, and history is more legend than fact from that era,” Yazril said. “Historians still squabble over even minor details regarding events that old. Besides, any sane theory that questioned human origins would also have to be able to hypothesize an alternative possible answer to the question of where humans actually came from.”

“I guess that sort of makes sense,” John agreed. “Though, it does sound a little bit far fetched.”

“Don’t be so hasty. The short of it is that it’s probably true. I do have access to some particularly obscure historical records which would tend to indicate that humans, in effect, popped up out of nowhere on Dracsos.”

Venarya’s eyes widened a little.

“I trust you won’t enlighten any of your scholars, Venarya? If the remainder of what I’ve been told is true, this knowledge may be too dangerous to let out into the open.”

“Very well,” Venarya promised. “I’ll have to admit that my people’s own historical accounts don’t extend much beyond our own borders.”

“So, where did the humans initially come from?” John asked.

“Before you got here, I wouldn’t have been able to even postulate a theory,” Yazril replied, one eyebrow raised at John.

John took a second to register what she was implying. “What?! You’re kidding? Earth? How?”

“You’re in a better position to answer that than me,” Yazril shrugged. “Does your world have any historical records of a people fleeing from something and then disappearing?”

“Could be dozens of accounts, for all I know. Hell, everyone here could be a descendant of refugees from Atlantis, for all I know. I mean, I couldn’t even think about where to even start looking to figure that one out. I’m no historian, but I think that our own historical narratives start getting a little spotty even going back a thousand years. Do you know what they were initially escaping from?”

“I don’t, and I don’t believe my guest knew either.”

“Well, we can discuss that after,” Venarya said, steering them back on track. “What else did she say?”

“Do you have any idea who this great enemy was?” Yazril asked her visitor.

“Its precise nature, or even how it manifested itself, is lost to us,” the robed figure admitted. “However, that was not through negligence. It appears that it was deliberately excised from any records, once the enemy had been banished. From what little we can piece together, we suspect that our ancestors thought it wise to do so, lest some fool with too much knowledge should attempt to resurrect the threat.”

“Yes, you had mentioned before that the enemy had been banished, not defeated,” Yazril said. “Banished to where?”

“That we don’t know. Like I said, we barely managed to scrape together that bit of information from our records. All we know for sure is that when we escaped our predicament, ending up on this world, we unfortunately caught the notice of something. Something that apparently also managed to find its way into this world, but with ill intent. Whatever it was, the state of affairs concluded with it being sent back from whence it came.”

“I don’t suppose you have any texts that are more descriptive than that?”

“Negative,” the figure shook her head. “We’re not even sure how exactly the enemy was banished. All we do know is that we were instructed to construct temples in close proximity to wherever humans settled, lest the enemy find its way back here.”

“Instructed by whom?”

“We don’t know.”

“Okay, fine. Now, how does a stone building stop an otherworldly enemy from returning?”

“The buildings themselves don’t,” the figure said. “The tasrac devices housed in them do, however.”

“I see. And the device from the temple just south was destroyed in the attack, I assume?”

“No,” the robed figure shook her head. “The device itself is immense, and housed deep under the temple. However, the temples themselves were described to act as an amplifier. With it destroyed, the device’s effectiveness is diminished.”

“What exactly are these devices doing? How do they work?”

“We don’t exactly know.”

“What?” Yazril was getting tired of that answer.

“We were handed down very explicit instructions on how to create the devices, and how to deploy them. Other than that, we know next to nothing regarding their precise function.”

“You never investigated them further in all this time?”

“There was no way to be sure if tampering with even a new and undeployed device would have unforeseen consequences,” the robed figure explained. “Considering the stakes, we didn’t dare risk it.”

“Makes a degree of sense, I guess.”

“Which brings me to the reason I now stand here in front of you. We believe that the temple was deliberately targeted. And, if it was...”

“Then there’s a chance that someone may be trying to subvert your alleged mission?” Yazril completed her train of thought.

“Precisely.”

“Why do you think you were targeted?” Yazril asked. “To me, it looked like the pyramid was just making a show of strength, with you as the unfortunate bystander.”

“And that would have been our conclusion as well, had that been the first temple that we had lost.”

“What?”

“One of our temples on the north coast, the one closest to the Citadel, was laid to waste.”

“The same Citadel that’s currently a warzone? How come I never heard about this?”

“We made sure it wasn’t reported and was kept quiet.”

“What makes you think that that temple was also specifically targeted?”

“It happened right at the start of the war up north,” the robed figure said. “A small strike force made their way directly to us, bypassing quite a few villages and fortifications along the way. They besieged us for two days.”

“Did they manage to take anything of value?”

“Negative,” the robed figure shook her head. “We destroyed the temple ourselves when we realized that defending it was a hopeless cause.”

“Destroyed? How?”

“Unimportant. As it stands, we’re certain this isn’t a coincidence.”

“I see,” Yazril said, noting her reticence to answer the question for later. “So, this temple up north isn’t serving whatever function it’s supposed to?”

“Not exactly. We destroyed only the above-ground structure. Similar to the situation here, the underground device is still operational, albeit quite diminished. Some Sisters remain there to maintain it as well as they can. Whoever attacked us, we can only assume that they don’t realize exactly how the devices are constructed and housed.”

“This is all fascinating,” Yazril said. “But what do you expect us to do?”

“We desire a favour from you, Intendant,” the robed figure said. “Something in the way of a contingency plan, should any more of our temples fall.”

Venarya raised an eyebrow, but said nothing.

“And, I’m afraid I’ll have to omit this part of the story,” Yazril said, sounding sincerely apologetic.

“What!” John exclaimed. “Come on! That’s a bit like ripping the last page out of a novel and then putting it back on the library shelves.”

“Believe me, I would tell you if I could,” Yazril said. “However, I myself am under certain... restrictions for the time being.”

“How are we supposed to implement this contingency plan of theirs, then?” Venarya asked, a little bemused.

“That part is solely on my plate, I’m afraid,” Yazril explained. “But, I did manage to wrangle one concession out of her. Which, incidentally, is part of the reason I’m standing here at this hour.”

“Very well, you have a deal,” Yazril told the robed woman. “But, I’ll need an act of good faith on your part.”

“That is reasonable. Go on.”

“I’d like to have my people examine a copy of the instructions for those devices.”

“Excuse me?” It was the first time so far Yazril had seen the woman come close to losing her composure.

“I have access to trustworthy resources that might be able to shed light on their precise function,” Yazril explained. “Considering the stakes you claim, and should the worst happen, don’t you agree that it would be wise to have yet another potential fallback plan?”

The figure stood silent for a few moments, lost in thought. Finally, she opened her mouth, “Agreed. But, I implore you, please exercise prudence when sharing this information.”

“You have my word.”

“Wow...” was all Venarya could say.

“Exactly,” Yazril said. “Someone should be bringing you three copies of those instructions today. One is for Rheus and yourself, one for John and his friends, and one for the Old Man. Garh will pick it up from you and transport it to him, once it’s delivered.”

John then realized he was in a bit of a pickle, seeing as how no one else was supposed to know that he had temporarily taken Smiljan back to Earth as a favour.

“Ah...” John began, then trailed off as he noticed Garh giving him a slight shake of his head.

“Yes?” Yazril turned to him, and Venarya followed suit.

“Never mind, just a lack of sleep catching up with me again. Sounds like a plan.”

“Now,” Yazril continued, “regarding the part of the conversation that I can’t mention, I’ll be going away for a few days. Hopefully less. However, considering the situation, I can’t leave us headless. Venarya, you’ll be in charge of the city.”

“I’ll take good care of it, Yazril,” Venarya promised. “I expect Krane, Petrarca, and Nolan will be more integral in the decision making while you’re gone, though.”

“Agreed. Just see they don’t turn it entirely into a military encampment.”

“I promise,” Venarya smiled.

“Now, I’ll be needing access to the tunnels here,” Yazril said. “I trust there’s no one using any of those buildings?”

Venarya blinked in surprise, “Yes, they’re all currently empty. I take it you’re leaving immediately?”

“Yes, unfortunately,” Yazril said, standing. “Now, seeing as how I’ll be out of contact, is there anything I’ve forgotten to mention, or anything you need?”

“That’s a loaded question,” John chuckled. “But, assuming your unexpected guest comes through on her promise, I think we’ve got all we need for now.”

“Agreed,” Venarya said.

“Very well, then. I’ll be back as soon as I can,” Yazril said. “I do have one more request, John. More in the way of a favour, actually.”

“I’ll certainly try to oblige, if I can.”

“May I borrow Jensen?”

Chapter 3

“Are you sure we won’t be leaving The Gates defenseless again?” Venarya asked.

“Even with the two thousand troops that we’re pulling back, that still leaves over three thousand Rangers and Cluster armed forces to maintain watch,” Krane assured her. “A sneak attack won’t succeed again with those types of odds, and an enemy army will make too much noise to catch us unawares.”

“Plus,” Nolan added, “in the event that we do need to abandon the fort, our men should be able to move around the southern part of the jungle, and make their way to the coast. There’s just too much area for an enemy to cover if they feel stupid enough to try to blockade the whole forest.”

“And if they try to attack the ships?” John asked.

“Our ships have been told to run like hell at the first sign of trouble,” Nolan said. “It just means our boys will have a longer walk home from The Gates.”

“And with the amount of traffic we’ve got going back and forth there right now, there’s no way someone won’t see something wonky before it gets bothersome,” Petrarca said.

“What traffic?” Venarya asked.

“Ah, sorry, I think we forgot to mention that,” Krane apologized. “We’ve got quite a few shipments of construction supplies being sent over there. Considering the size of the fort, though, it won’t be enough to make the place unassailable. But, it’ll add a little more defense for our boys.”

“Okay, you’ve sold me,” Venarya said. “Just remember to be careful, in case they try another assault to destroy The Gates for good this time.”

“I doubt they will,” Petrarca said. “They had ample opportunity to set the place ablaze the last time. I think they’ve got what they wanted. Or, whoever gave them their orders got what they wanted out of this.”

“Which is another issue we’ll have to deal with after this,” Venarya said. “We need to get ahead in this little game we’ve been suckered into playing.”

“Agreed,” Krane said. “But, for now, those two thousand troops will be integral in our assault on the pyramid tonight.”

“Speaking of which,” John said, “are you sure you’re able to get the breaching explosives together, Nolan?”

“Well, it would have been helpful if you didn’t leave the only scientist from Earth over in the middle of a swamp,” Nolan said in a flat tone. “But, I should be able to cobble something together.”

“I can probably help with that,” came a voice from the couch in the next room.

John had thought that the eccentric man with the prodigious beard had finally decided to catch up on his sleep, now that Ganz had taken temporary leave.

“I thought I told you to get some rest,” Venarya called out.

“And miss all this?” Rheus chuckled. “You must be even more crazy than you think I am.”

“Rheus,” John began, “are you sure?”

“Of course.”

Nolan looked like Rheus had offered to kick him in the head.

“Fine, then. But, I want Nolan supervising you,” John said.

Nolan now looked like John had also tendered an offer for a supplemental kicking.

“Well, looks like everything’s ready for tonight,” John said, watching the group walking away to begin their preparations. “Though, with the luck we’ve been having, I’m fully expecting an asteroid to fall from the sky just before we start the assault.”

“Don’t tempt fate,” Venarya chuckled, though her mind seemed elsewhere, clearly occupied by the prospect of pondering any necessary contingencies.

“I’m sure it’ll be fine,” John said, making an attempt to reassure her. “We’re about due for some good luck, I’d say.”

“You should know better than to try to lie to me,” Venarya said with mock sternness, then smiled, “But, thanks for trying.”

“Anything to bring you back to the present,” John joked. “Though, I’m really curious as to what Yazril needs Jensen for? I guess we’ll find out when he gets back with her. Er... he is coming back, right? You don’t think Yazril needs his life essence for some arcane ritual or something?”

“Idiot,” Venarya smirked. “I couldn’t even begin to guess. You’ll just have to wait and see.”

“Figured as much,” John shrugged. “I just hope he’s not too disappointed in not being able to partake in the little raid tonight on the pyramid.”

Venarya laughed. “You must really be suffering from a lack of sleep if you think Nolan had any inkling of letting him join in.”

“Ah, yes, I’d forgotten about our local nursemaid,” John chuckled. “Plus, we’d probably get no end of grief from Mel if we got her favourite dog walker killed. Do you think that’s why Yazril took him? To get him out of harm’s way as a favour to us?”

Venarya shook her head, “I doubt it. She sounded like she had enough to worry about already. She’s got her reasons though, I’m sure.”

“Speaking of Nolan, he had made a request to me prior. It makes sense, but I figured I’d run it past you in private first?”

“Go ahead.”

“You know about Doyle?” John asked, still not exactly sure how much she had managed to extract from his mind on that first night.

“Of course, and it makes sense.”

“But, I didn’t even ask the question yet?”

“I’m assuming that Nolan wants to bring Doyle here, yes?” Venarya said. “And the answer is that I agree. Armies won’t win this game. We need strong minds who can get to the bottom of what exactly is happening.”

“Hence, Doyle?”

“Yes,” Venarya confirmed. “I gathered that you highly regard their investigative skills?”

“To say the least,” John said. “I remember Mel being so intent on making sure that we hired Doyle that she invented the position of Chief Audit Officer. And you know how hard she is to please.”

Venarya smiled, “One of these days, she’ll be in the room and you won’t know it.”

“Won’t be the first time,” John laughed. “I can run faster than Mel, anyway.”

“Well, if you can get Doyle here, I won’t object.”

“I don’t think the *getting* part will be a problem,” John said. “I can almost guarantee that Doyle will be even keener at snapping up this opportunity than Ganz. Though, at least this time I won’t have to worry about finding a human-sized leash.”

“So, you’re headed back now?”

“In a little bit. I figure I’d give Yazril’s new friends an hour or so to show up,” John said. “I can’t help but being more than a little intrigued by them.”

“Can’t say I blame you,” Venarya said. Peering into the distance, she added, “And, speak of the devil...”

John looked off to the distance to see what could only be a contingent of Freewater Rangers, accompanying a black robed figure.

As they drew closer, John almost involuntarily winced upon seeing the identity of one of the Rangers.

“Kitam!” John called out when they got into earshot. “I thought you’d gone to The Gates?”

“Oh! Hi there, John! I just got back,” the talkative Ranger started. “I was there though, and at Admiral Ancor’s side pretty much the whole time. But, then he said I was needed for a special mission. Needed to bring back all the intelligence that we collected back there safely. Even let me use his fastest ship! Said nothing was too quick for me-”

“Glad to hear that,” John cut her off, hoping to quell her before she built up too much steam. “I see you’ve brought a friend for us.”

“Ah, yes,” Kitam indicated the silent figure. “The Intendant left instructions with the guards at the city gates to make sure she got here in one piece. Though, I don’t really think there’s much danger in the city itself-”

“But we can’t be too sure,” Venarya smiled. “Thank you again for your diligence, Kitam. We can take it from here.”

“Any time, Lady Venarya. It’s what you guys pay us for, after all,” Kitam beamed. “Send a message if you need anything else and we’ll come running. That goes for you too, John. And don’t you forget about my offer when this is all over!”

John was hoping that *she* had forgotten about her offer of a tour of the city, and was definitely sure he saw one of the other Rangers holding back a snicker. It took all his will to force an eager smile and reply, “Most definitely, Kitam. I promise!”

As the Rangers departed, Venarya turned to the figure and said, “I’m Administrator Venarya, and this is John, a trusted adviser.”

The figure stepped forward and gave a formal bow. She threw back her cowl to reveal a sharp featured, yet striking, face. A melodic voice said, “I am Sarasel. Judging from a lack of the

Intendant's presence, am I correct in assuming that she has departed to initiate her part of our arrangement?"

"Indeed," Venarya said. "I'm currently in charge until she returns."

"In that case, I'm here to assist with research into these," Sarasel said, indicating the pouch she carried in one arm.

One of Venarya's eyebrows crept up, "Am I to understand we'll be chaperoned while we study these documents?"

"Nothing of the sort, Lady Venarya," Sarasel replied, handing the pouch over. "My presence here is merely a gesture of goodwill. You are free to do with the manuscripts as you see fit. Should you have any questions regarding them, I'm to assist you to the best of my ability. However, should you prefer my departure, I will not object."

Venarya thought for a second, then replied, "That won't be necessary. I-"

She cut short her sentence as she spied a large figure making its way to them, and continued, "Ah, here's the Intendant's valet. He'll be aiding us in delivering one set of documents. I'm afraid I can't reveal his precise destination to you."

Sarasel turned to see Garh walking up, but if showed any discomfort at the sight of the mute giant, she hid it well. She gave Garh a calm nod and turned back to Venarya.

"Now, there are three copies of the manuscripts in here?" Venarya asked.

"That is correct. There are three envelopes within that pouch."

"Perfect." Venarya continued, "John and Garh will each take a copy, while the third remains here with me. Do you object to that?"

"None," Sarasel replied. "As I said, they are yours to do with as you see fit."

"Very well," Venarya said. "I'm assuming you have no current accommodation plans?"

"None in this city, no."

"I'll get you situated in some nearby quarters, then," Venarya said. Opening the pouch, she took out two envelopes and handed them out. "Garh, do you mind seeing John safely back home before making your delivery?"

Garh nodded and grunted in what John assumed to be the affirmative.

"In that case, we've all got business to take care of, and I'll see you two later," Venarya smiled. "John, I'll meet you back here in a few hours?"

“Sounds about right, but it all depends on Doyle,” John said. “But, I’ll try to send back word in case of anything.”

As expected, the walk back to Rheus’s workshop had been a silent one. However, even once inside the workshop, Garh kept up the pretense and remained mute. John wondered if maybe Garh wasn’t letting his paranoia get the better of him, then remembered himself having similar ponderings of being covertly observed even when inside Tesla’s swamp fortress.

John did wonder if Garh intended to give him Tesla’s letter. Taking an idle look at the envelopes, he blinked in amazement. His envelope was noticeably bulkier than the one Garh carried, and wondered how the giant had managed that. It took a second to realize that he had handed his letter to Garh to hold while he had tried to remove a rock from his shoe earlier.

I guess he’s Yazril’s spymaster for good reasons, then.

“Well, thanks for the escort here, Garh,” John said. Holding up his envelope, he added, “I’ll see that this gets to the right place.”

John could swear that the giant gave a slight smile to accompany his usual grunt.

Wasting no more time, John then mentally signalled the portal to begin bridging the void between worlds, and watched as the light dancing in the stone arch eventually settled itself, revealing a shimmering image of his living room back on Earth.

Stepping through, John gave the room a cursory sweep with his eyes. Despite the low odds of any probable foul play, John still couldn’t help feeling a touch paranoid himself.

Guess being involved in a war can really mess with your thinking.

Seeing nothing amiss, he turned, gave a wave to Garh, then mentally deactivated the portal.

His next priority was now to get to the main offices in New York. Normally a plane ride and a border crossing away, he had somewhat accidentally discovered the ability to create portals between locations on Earth.

Picking up his mobile phone from its charger, he sent a quick message to his sister Sophia to check if the coast was clear in the penthouse above the main offices.

The reply came back almost immediately, *No one here. Use the wall on the south side of your old bedroom. Also, if you’d bothered to look at your email first, you’d have realized that there’s now a secure camera link that you can use to check it yourself!*

John winced. *So much for being the nice sister.*

He headed to his computer. As stated, there was an email from Sophia with a secure link to a camera feed from the living room of the penthouse, along with a note saying that the before-mentioned wall on his bedroom had been cleared of ‘debris’. *Hope they didn’t toss out my Hulk Hogan poster.*

He walked back to the wall now reserved for portal activities, and began the mental process of constructing a bridge to his old bedroom. Wisps of fog began to appear and started swirling. As the sideways hurricane grew larger, it began to glow an iridescent white. Eventually, the glow subsided and the light coalesced into a shimmering portal, through which he could clearly see his old room.

He quickly made his way across the threshold and deactivated the portal. Looking around, he noticed that the poster was indeed gone.

Oh, well.

Putting aside nostalgia for the time being, he opened the bedroom door, dashed down the hallway into the living room, and ran straight into Sophia.

“Nice to see you too,” Sophia said, getting up. “Also, ouch.”

“Sorry, sis,” John apologized, offering a hand to help her up. “Just in a hurry to make sure Ganz isn’t about to blow up the building or something.”

“He’s doing fine,” Sophia said. “I just checked up on him not too long ago. Now, care to explain why exactly we’ve got a long-thought-dead mad scientist working in a now-secret laboratory in our building?”

“Well, I couldn’t exactly call him *mad*—”

“Johnny...,” her voice carried subtle but menacing undertones.

“Sorry,” John held up his hands. “The truth is that I don’t really know. I do have his assurance that whatever he’s doing isn’t any threat to us. Plus, Ganz is watching him.”

“Oh, that last part makes me feel *real* safe.”

“You been hanging around Mel recently?”

“Funny,” Sophia said, but visibly less agitated. “It’s just that these favours for your new friends are starting to add up, financially speaking.”

“You’re worried about that?” John exclaimed, slightly confused. “We could afford to do this again a hundred times over and not even notice it on the books. This isn’t even a rounding error at this point.”

“Agreed, the money itself isn’t the issue,” Sophia said. “The problem is who might notice the money being moved around. Our chief auditor is particularly adept at catching these *rounding errors*, as you call them. And, I’d prefer not to have to explain this whole business to Doyle.”

“Ah,” John said. “Well, actually, speaking about that...”

“I’m dead,” Sophia said. “I must be dead.”

“What?” John said, having finished his explanation, and now waiting for Sophia’s answer regarding Doyle.

“I’m dead,” Sophia repeated. “That’s the only explanation. I’m in hell, and this is my punishment. To have you torturing me with ever escalating, heart-attack inducing requests for eternity.”

“So, I have your blessing to recruit Doyle?”

Sophia glared at him, then shook her head in dismay, “Sure, just make sure you know what you’re doing. Now, I’m going to go see if the upstairs window opens. Maybe I can wake up from this dream by jumping out.”

“I love you too, sis,” John got up and gave her a quick peck on the cheek.

“Don’t think I’m not keeping a running tab for you.”

“I wouldn’t dare think otherwise,” John grinned at her. Turning to leave, he thought of something. There really wasn’t a good reason to give the second set of papers to Rheus at the moment, seeing as how he was sharing office space with Smiljan. With as sweet a smile as he could muster, John added, “Also, do you mind keeping this pouch inside your safe for me?”

“John!” Ganz exclaimed. “What’s up? Wasn’t expecting you back so soon.”

“Hello, John,” Smiljan said, walking around from the back of whatever piece of equipment they were working on. “I assume there’s been another recent development?”

“And you’d be right,” John said, taking out the first parcel of papers and handing it to him. “But, not the bad sort. Not exactly, anyways. I’m here to bring this to you.”

“What’s this, then?” Smiljan said, poring over the documents. His eyes widened slightly and he looked up, “Where did you get these?”

“That’s a bit of a long story, and I’m feeling the lack of rest catching up with me,” John said, moving toward a break area. “We’d best grab some chairs.”

As John relayed the tale, Smiljan’s eyes constantly shifted between John and the papers, though John was sure the eccentric gentleman was taking in every word he said.

“And then I brought them to you,” John finished the story. “Now, you seemed to immediately recognize what those documents are?”

“Not their precise purpose, no,” Smiljan admitted. “But, I identified enough material at first glance to know that there are *very* few people who are knowledgeable about the type of tasrac manipulation that’s required to implement whatever was outlined in these plans.”

“Yourself being one of them, I hope?” John asked.

To John’s surprise, the old man shook his head, “No, I’m sad to say.”

“Ah, it was a longshot-”

The old man gave a rare smile and interrupted him, “However, I do know someone who is.”

“Well, at least we seem to be getting our share of good news finally,” John said with a breath of relief. “Are you able to get hold of them? I mean, I really hate to pull you back so soon...”

“That won’t be necessary,” the old man removed a notepad and pen from his waistcoat. “Alisa is more than capable of contacting them. I’ll pen you a note here. Have Garh deliver it to her, and she’ll arrange everything for you. I’m afraid you won’t be able to use my portal to get there, as my guardians are under quite strict orders to efficiently deal with anyone or anything attempting to enter through it. With that in mind, Garh doesn’t need to trek all the way back to my manor. Tell him that when he encounters one of my sentries at the edge of the swamp, just give them this note and they’ll deliver it for you.”

“By sentries, I’m assuming you mean the big honking werewolves?” John joked. “Too bad you won’t be able to come along this time, Ganz.”

“Ha ha,” Ganz said.

“Also, I’m adding instructions to relax the shoot on sight orders regarding my portal,” the Old Man said. “Just in case you need emergency access to my base in the future.”

“Sounds good. One question though?”

“Go ahead.”

“How will I find your friend afterwards?”

“He’ll find you, don’t worry.”

As John rounded the secluded hallway leading to Doyle’s office, he realized that, in his haste to help with the new situation, he had neglected to actually find out more about what Ganz and the old man were up to.

Shaking his head, he put the thought aside for the time being. He had bigger issues to worry about now.

Just as he was about to knock on the office door, a female voice called out, “Come in, John.”

John was bemused for a second, until he saw the security camera covering the area. *Clever girl.*

Walking in, he saw Doyle sitting behind the desk in her spacious office. She was an unassuming middle-aged woman, but the hawk-like eyes that appraised him still held the spark of youth.

“Pleasure to have you back here, John,” she said. “Have a seat.”

“Thank you,” John replied, taking roost in the comfortable chair across from her.

“Care for a drink?” she asked, motioning to a crystal decanter and two glasses.

John thought for a second, then sighed, “Sure. I could probably use several, to be honest, but one will do.”

One eye narrowed ever so slightly, but she made no comment as she poured and handed the drink to John, taking one for herself as well.

Taking her seat again, she asked, “Now, what can I do for you?”

“Where to begin...” John pondered, taking a sip of whisky. “It’s a bit of a long story-”

“Would this long story perchance involve the charter of a jumbo jet for no apparent reason, a cross-border shipment of near-military grade equipment, and - saving the best for last, of course -

a false recall on several thousand pounds of explosives? The last of which, I might add, despite having been marked as destroyed, appears to have mysteriously vanished.”

John took another long sip.

“So, you’re claiming that Nikola Tesla is, at this moment, working in a lab downstairs?”

“Among other things, yes,” John replied.

“Am I allowed to meet with him?”

“Well, I don’t see why not,” John said. “Are you saying you’ll join up with us? Also, why don’t you think this story is crazy?”

“Oh, you can rest assured that I think it’s completely insane,” Doyle said. “However, I’m confident that Melissa would have had you committed to an asylum at this point, rather than chartering empty jets for you.”

“Thanks, I think.”

“Now, once I fully verify your story,” Doyle said, “am I correct in assuming that you’ll be leaving to go back immediately after?”

“That’s the plan.”

“Okay. Wait here a minute,” Doyle said. “Let me get my things.”

John wasn’t sure what exactly she was planning on getting. Granted, the office was spacious, but there wasn’t any closet or suitcase visible.

He silently watched as Doyle got up and walked over to a corner of the room. Placing her palm on a dark glass vase, he heard a click and watched as a section of the wall swung inward. Glancing inside, John could see that the passageway led to a quite luxurious apartment.

“What the hell...” was all John could say.

Doyle turned around, a very rare look of mild surprise mixed with delight in her eyes. “You really didn’t know about this?”

“I... no...” was all John could sputter. “How did you manage... I mean...”

“This was your sister’s idea.”

“Sophia did this?”

A sly grin crept into her face. “Wrong sister.”

“Melissa?”

“This was what sold me on the job,” Doyle admitted. “I had quite a few job offers back then. They each tried to coax me with quite large amounts of money, various benefits, and absurd limits on power. However, none of them, except for your sister, caught on to the fact that I *really* hate commuting. Especially in this city.”

“Birds of a feather, then,” John could only laugh, “She’s the same way.”

Picking up a bag near the entrance, Doyle said, “All set. Let’s go.”

“Wait a sec,” John said. “You always have a travel bag ready to go?”

“You don’t?”

“Er, John?” Ganz said, looking up from the piece of equipment. “Back so soon? Again?”

“Yep, just a quick stop before we head back,” John said.

“We?” Ganz asked, before looking behind John and spotting Doyle. “Oh, hello there, ma’am. You’re from Iathera, I assume? I’m Ganz, and that’s, er, Smiljan walking up to us over there.”

John got a strange look in his eye as he said, “Ganz?”

“Yes?”

“Do you recognize her?” John asked, indicating Doyle.

“Er, sorry,” he shrugged. “I have to admit I didn’t really learn too many faces over ther-”

“This is Doyle, our chief auditor! She’s not from Iathera!”

“Oh, okay... I...”

“She was present at your budget meeting this year!”

“Well, I mean, I can’t really remember all the people that were there...”

“The only other people were Sophia and McGarrett!”

“Ah!” Ganz said, a faint hint of recognition finally dawning on him. “Sorry, ma’am.”

“No problem, Ganz,” Doyle said, stifling a smile.

“And this is the man you wanted to see,” John said, as Smiljan walked up to join the group. “Smi-... er, Mister Tesla, allow me to introduce you to our chief auditor, Doyle. She’ll be heading back with me to see about making some sense out of the situation.”

“Please, we’re all friends here,” Smiljan said. “Smiljan, or Nikola, will do. It’s a pleasure to meet you, Doyle.”

“Same here, I’m sure,” Doyle said. “Now, what was your mother’s maiden name, and how long did you serve in the military?”

John was taken aback by the direct line of questioning, but Smiljan continued to smile as he replied, “Duka Mandic, and I avoided conscription by absconding to Tomingaj. Though, I would expect anyone pretending to be me should also have those facts memorized.”

“True, but your mannerisms also speak volumes. Plus, the signature you penned on that note you gave to John seems legitimate. I guess it’s a good thing you’re still sentimentally attached to your old John Hancock after all this time” Doyle smiled. Turning to Ganz, she asked, “Do you believe he is who he says he is?”

“Unless there are more genius-level imposters hiding in swamps on alien worlds, I’d have to say yes,” Ganz said. “His skills are also consistent. Even taught me a couple of tricks so far.”

“In that case, I’m satisfied,” Doyle said to John. Turning back to Smiljan, she said, “Sorry for putting you on the spot.”

“I would expect no less from someone with your responsibilities,” Smiljan smiled. “An apology is not necessary.”

“Well, that’s that,” John said. “Before we leave, is there anything you guys need? Any messages to deliver, or material you need brought back?”

“No, I think we’re good,” Ganz said.

“Okay, I’ll try to check back in as soon as I can,” John said. “See you later.”

It wasn’t until John was almost back at the penthouse that he realized that he had forgotten again to find out what exactly Ganz and Smiljan were trying to do.

Chapter 4

Jensen kept a constant eye on his surroundings, as had been instructed by Yazril. The two of them walked wordlessly and with purpose as they approached the circular building.

Whatever was going on, it seemed that Yazril didn't want to risk having even a Ranger patrol catching sight of them. Approaching the door, Yazril took a final look at their surroundings. Apparently satisfied, she unlocked and entered the empty Institute building, signaled to Jensen to follow, and sealed the door behind them. The two of them now stood in near pitch darkness.

Reaching into a small bag, Yazril took out a small sphere. "Here, take this," she held out the device, and Jensen's hand nearly recoiled back as the sphere started to emanate a soft glow.

"Sure thing," Jensen took the device.

"Follow me."

"Wouldn't it be better for you to have this if you're leading the way?"

"I don't need it," was all she said.

For the next few minutes, they quietly made their way through the myriad of dark passageways.

"What is this place?" Jensen asked, breaking the silence.

"The outer ring of these circular buildings contain classrooms as a cover for their true purpose," Yazril replied, not breaking pace. "But, with the Institute curriculum currently on hiatus due to the war up north, these structures now lie empty, save for the odd groundskeeper that checks in on them occasionally."

"And what exactly is this *true purpose*?"

"You'll see shortly," Yazril said. Halting her gait momentarily, she turned and added, "My only request is that you not mention anything that you see to anyone else, unless necessity demands it."

"You don't trust the others?"

"Quite the contrary," Yazril shook her head. "Sorry, but I keep neglecting to account for the fact that you're not originally from here. You see, the history of this world is littered with countless old legends. Most of those, I'm sure, are nothing more than exaggerated old wife's tales. But, among those that can't be easily discounted, are tales that speak of creatures that can

pull the thoughts straight from your head, and corrupted tasrac artisans creating devices capable of doing the same.”

“I see,” Jensen said, his eyes widening a bit. “So you guys are convinced that these mindreading threats exist?”

“Some of us are,” Yazril replied, “and that’s cause enough to maintain secrecy during stressful times such as these. Your friend, Venarya, is one of those that’s convinced the threat is real, and I’ve no cause to doubt her. I’m surprised she hasn’t mentioned it to you?”

“Truth be told, we haven’t had much time to talk,” Jensen shrugged. “No doubt she’s probably mentioned it to John. But, with everything going on, it probably slipped his mind to tell me.

“One thing though,” Jensen added, “Does this mean that everyone on this world is living in constant paranoia?”

“Good grief, no,” Yazril said. “Most people just treat those stories as nothing more than old fairy tales. The few that do think they might exist simply think of them somewhat as a force of nature. After all, what point is there being in constant panic over a storm that will happen either way?

“Plus,” she added with a wry smile, “what secret knowledge does the average person have that’s worth invading their mind to steal? Grandma’s old recipes?”

Jensen chuckled at that, “Understood. So, most people don’t even believe in them. And, those that do, don’t really pay much mind to fearing them.”

“For the most part. Though, there are even some who believe in them, but don’t fear them. In fact, they hope they may even encounter one.”

“Come again?”

“Some of the legends speak of exquisite sirens that seduce young men, then covertly extricate the thoughts from your brain while in the throes in passion,” Yazril said, a sly smirk evident even in the low light. “You can probably do the math on that one yourself.”

“I see,” Jensen almost laughed. “I’m guessing that those specific tales are strictly contained within the realm of bad fiction?”

“Correct,” Yazril said. “I’ve seen nothing to indicate they exist. I suspect bad poetry as the culprit.”

“Now,” Jensen said, “taking into account that the other mind-reading threats may actually exist, aren’t you taking a bit of a risk bringing me along with you? What if someone picks at my brain to find out about this secret mission of ours?”

Yazril looked a touch uncomfortable at that. Though, it didn’t appear to be related to the fear that Jensen had expressed. She looked almost like she had gotten caught with her hand in the cookie jar.

After a few seconds of silence, she began, “I had hoped we could have this conversation closer to our destination. But, suffice to say that I may be in a position to stop that particular situation from becoming a possibility. For you, at least.”

Jensen raised an eyebrow, but said nothing.

“There’s a reason I requested you in particular. You remember your little trip to Freewater?”

“It’s hardly forgettable, I have to admit.”

“Well, you impressed me. And, more importantly, you impressed Stelson.” Her tone expressed the significance of that compliment. “Also, last but not least, you helped get those Ranger reinforcements here. Without them, who knows if our enemy had plans to lay waste to Iathera? After all, I’m assuming there was some purpose in their attempt to halt your trek to Freewater. My insight says that your skills, along with your distinct position as a member of John’s company, makes you an invaluable asset in the future. To that end, I’ve, well... to put it bluntly, secured the option of augmenting your mind to avoid having it succumb to such tactics. Should you wish it, of course.”

“So, you’ll have me use another one of those strange box-things that helped me learn the language here? Only, this one will give me some sort of... psychic defense?”

“Not a precise description of the procedure, but close enough.”

“And you’re doing this out of the goodness of your heart?”

“I’m doing this to protect my city. If, in the process, I can secure the support of another who shares my obligations, then that’s a bonus.”

“And if I don’t want it?”

“Then I’ve gambled and lost,” Yazril said simply, her voice neutral. “In the end, it’s your choice. Whatever the outcome, know that you’ve earned my respect.”

Jensen kept quiet for a few moments, then replied, “I accept.”

Yazril let loose the breath she didn't realize she had been holding in, and replied with a simple, "Thank you. Shall we proceed, then?"

Jensen nodded, and they continued walking down the corridors, "One question though."

"Go ahead."

"Why not give all the others this same treatment? That way everyone can keep everyone else in the loop."

"Arms race," she shrugged. "I've no doubt that, should our enemies catch on to this countermeasure, they'll eventually devise a method of defeating it. Therefore, I've no choice but to restrict access to it."

"Why not someone more important? Why not John? Or Venarya herself?"

"I've offered it to Venarya, but she's declined. Something about possible complications regarding her physiology," Yazril explained. Chuckling a little, she added, "I take you don't consider yourself important?"

"You know what I mean," Jensen said, though he couldn't help but smile in return.

"Consider the following," Yazril said. "If an enemy is concerned and occupied with the lion that I have on his front yard, then that means that I can send in my fox through the back door to slit his throat from behind."

"Nicely put," Jensen whistled. "I think I understand."

They walked in silence for a while longer, slowing only as they approached a massive circular metal plate set into a wall. Carved upon it was a series of ornate symbols and patterns.

Any other time, Jensen would just have assumed it was some sort of modern art installation, but he had a feeling he knew what was about to happen.

"Secret passage?" Jensen asked.

Yazril blinked and answered, "Yes. How did you know?"

"Just intuition," Jensen said, half sighing.

"The entire inner portion of this building is sealed off behind barriers such as these," she said, holding her hand up to touch the center of the plate. "Pay close attention to how I open this, should you have need in the future."

"I hope you're not anticipating your demise?"

“Anticipating? No,” she shook her head. “But, if anything should happen to me, you may require this knowledge. As it stands, only a few other citizens of Iathera have any inkling regarding what you’re about to see.”

Jensen had to admit to himself that his curiosity was piqued. “Go on. I’m watching,” he beckoned to her.

“This ring with the green stone,” she indicated one of the rings she wore, “simply needs to be placed in the centre of this plate.”

As she did just that, a click sounded, followed by a low rumbling. As she removed the ring, the plate rotated and slid off to one side, revealing a small room.

“Follow quickly,” she said. “We only have a few seconds before it closes again.”

As she predicted, the plate slid shut just after they entered the room. The small orb that Jensen held was the only source of illumination, but it clearly outlined another smaller ornate plate on the other side of the room.

“Use the blue ring on this inner door,” she said, doing just that. “When inside one of these chambers, make certain you don’t use the wrong ring. Else, you won’t be alive long enough to regret it.”

She offered no further explanation, and Jensen didn’t feel one was necessary. Dead was dead, no matter the cause.

“Got it,” he said.

As the door slid open, he wasn’t sure what to expect.

In front of Yazril, he could only see a blue glow, possibly emanating from some sort of lighting in the room ahead.

As he walked into the room proper, the source of the light became evident. It was coming off the mountainous piece of tasrac that was protruding from a giant pit located where he assumed the very center of the building would be.

Around the pit, the cavernous room was filled with all sorts of strange machinery.

“That’s not good,” he heard Yazril mutter to herself.

He turned to see her looking at the roof of the building.

“Up there,” she pointed for Jensen’s benefit. “See how close the tasrac is to the ceiling?”

Indeed he did. The mound of tasrac peaked at just under two metres below the roof. A bit puzzled at first, he then remembered something John had said about tasrac crystals actually growing over time.

His assumption was confirmed as Yazril explained, "Tasrac doesn't grow at a particularly prolific, or really even noticeable, rate. However, with these buildings being temporarily abandoned, that crystal could compromise the integrity of this structure very soon."

"I'm not quite sure I understand the full story here," Jensen said. "I thought you were saying that most people in Iathera don't even know about the existence of this place. Or, places, I should say – given the existence of quite a few of these circular buildings here in the Institute?"

"You'd be correct assuming that," Yazril confirmed. "Go on."

"There's quite a bit of equipment in here. I'm also assuming that whoever works here does so in secret anyways? Did they leave because of that war up north?"

"You could say that," Yazril said.

"I see," Jensen replied, detecting a note of reticence in her voice and deciding to drop the subject.

However, to Jensen's surprise, she turned to look him directly in the eyes and asked, "Given our new working relationship, would you care for the entire story as a sign of good faith?"

"Well, I can't say I'm not curious," Jensen admitted, still slightly taken aback.

"How much do you know about the history of this city?"

"Just what John told me," Jensen said. "Founded about five hundred years ago or so as a sort of school, with the city growing around it."

"That's more or less accurate. Now, how much do you know about the Syrilo?"

"Not much, I have to admit," Jensen frowned. "Again, only what I've heard from John. Something about them resembling giant mantises?"

"Again, more or less accurate," Yazril said. "Before the Institute existed, this area was all Syrilo territory. Part of the treaty with them involved an exchange of technology with the Old Man. As such, he helped to build what you see in front of you."

"What exactly is the function of this place, though?"

"Take a good look at that hunk of crystal," Yazril said. "Tell me if you notice any differences between it and the tasrac you've normally seen around the city."

Jensen ventured as close as he dared to the edge of the precipice and stared at the giant crystal.

“Is it just me, or does this crystal not have any of those sparkly bits in it?”

“Correct,” Yazril smiled. “Most tasrac nodes are exactly like what you described. A very, *very* small amount of them are like this. The Syrilo refer to these as *pure tasrac*. It’s the reason we have that gun that’s on your hip right now, as well as those Cluster defense platforms that we used to disable the pyramid.”

“Normal tasrac can’t be used to construct those?”

“No, and we prefer to keep that others ignorant of that fact,” Yazril said. “Should anyone else discover the secret, it may start an uncontrolled arms race across the entire world.”

“Hold on a second,” Jensen thought for a second. Indicating his sidearm, he said, “What if someone else managed to get their hands on one of these, and then took it apart? Wouldn’t they immediately see the difference in the crystal?”

“No,” Yazril smiled again. “They would only see a piece of normal tasrac inside.”

“Okay, now I’m confused.”

“Let me backtrack a bit. Five hundred years ago, the Syrilo controlled this entire northern continent. Given what they had seen of human politics, they were just as happy to keep it that way.”

“Can’t say I’d disagree with them on that point.”

“Well, at that time, pure tasrac was a useless commodity. Syrilo artisans were thankful of the fact that it wasn’t more prevalent inside the ground.”

“How so? Considering how valuable you’ve made it out to be.”

“Any attempt to mine it in a manner similar to traditional tasrac simply resulted in the pieces of broken crystal immediately becoming explosively unstable, much to the short-lived regret of the miner.”

“Ouch.”

“Exactly. Mind you, the force of the explosion was nothing compared to the devices that you and John managed to create, but it was enough to convince the Syrilo to avoid any areas where the pure crystals were in relative abundance. Thankfully for them, these crystals are quite uncommon.

“Now,” Yazril continued, “Rumour is that the Old Man had prior successful experience working with pure tasrac, but was hampered by the extreme rarity of it. When he found out about this wealth of nodes here, he secured an arrangement with the Syrilo, resulting in the Institute being built.”

“As a cover for a mining operation?”

“Not precisely,” Yazril half-grimaced. “I’m skipping over a few of the extraneous facts, but this *is* a legitimate place of study, as well as a bustling and lively city.”

“I see. How is the crystal extracted though, considering that mining it would probably blow up half the town?”

“That’s where this specialized equipment comes into play,” she said, indicating the paraphernalia all around the room. “The Syrilo use these devices to extract, for lack of a better word, *essence* from the pure tasrac and transfers its properties into a piece of standard tasrac. As a result of this, the pure tasrac node is slightly diminished in its growth rate and size.”

“Hence, stopping it from poking through the roof?”

“Precisely.”

“Why isn’t this place manned then? From what I understand, the Syrilo aren’t taking part in the war up north?”

“Once that machinery is active, we might as well light a beacon advertising what we’re doing here,” Yazril said. “Tasrac manipulation at that scale can be detected by quite a few... well, *undesirables*. Which is part of the reason why we constructed a school primarily dedicated to the study of tasrac here.”

“So, cover the suspicious noise with unexciting academic noise? Smart.”

“You catch on fast,” Yazril complimented him. “Indeed, the *noise* created by the staff and students working with their own tasrac experiments blanketed the area, effectively hiding the true purpose of these particular buildings.”

“How long before those things start to poke through the roof?”

“I’d say this one has at least a few more months before I’d really start to worry,” Yazril assured him. “But, I’ll still need to check the other buildings to see their situation. Still, this building was one of the first to be mothballed, so the others should be in a better state.”

“I see,” Jensen said. “So, I guess you’re hoping that war up north resolves itself sooner rather than later then?”

“Not only for this reason,” Yazril said. “Even so, I estimate it would be almost another year after the war ends before we get this place back up to what it was before. After all, even if you were carefree about sending your child to an area close to a former warzone, you’d still be a little hesitant when taking into account all the other events that have taken place here recently.”

“Point taken. What’s your plan regarding this mining operation then?”

“That’s where our new friends come in,” Yazril said. “We may possibly have the opportunity to kill two birds with one stone. Did John relay what the envoy from the Sisterhood had told me?”

“Yes, though I’m not sure I even understood how we could even begin to help with their problems.”

“That’s where these nodes come into play.”

Jensen looked at her, puzzled.

“The Syrilo are *very* good at working with tasrac, even moreso in the last five hundred years that they’ve been affiliated with the Old Man.”

“Go on.”

“While their areas of study didn’t focus as much on weapons research, such as what the Nebar Cluster is doing, they excelled in using it for more... esoteric purposes.”

“Such as?”

“Similarly to what we fear our enemies can do, they have the capability of detecting the use of any other tasrac device within a large area.”

“Okay, but how does that help us though?”

“In order for those Sisterhood temples to do what they were claiming, they should have been broadcasting a very large... *noise*,” Yazril explained. “However, the Syrilo never reported any activity in either area. Even the remaining temples on this continent show no signs of any sort of major tasrac activity. In fact, the immediate area around the temples show absolutely no sign of *any* tasrac activity.”

“Not even something as simple as a reading lamp?”

“Correct. But, I would tend to believe that they should have some sort of tasrac devices, no matter how minor. In this day and age, it would be like existing without needing to breathe.”

“Could these temples be a sham then, with the Sisterhood just living there as cavemen... er... cavewomen?” Jen asked, a slight frown on his lips. “Even unknowingly? Something to the effect of some weird tradition that just got muddied over the ages?”

“It’s quite possible, but that’s why I demanded to have our friends go over the plans for whatever devices the Sisterhood is using,” Yazril said. “Plus, just from the envoy’s demeanor, I’m inclined to believe her.”

“I see,” Jensen said. “But, what if the Syrilo just neglected to mention any tasrac activity around the temples?”

“Impossible,” Yazril said, but offering no further explanation. “They would have alerted us.”

“Okay, now how does that relate to these nodes?”

“Part of the... agreement with the Syrilo had them share the location of any other pure nodes they may have run across in the past, along with any new ones they may encounter,” Yazril said. “The location of those two destroyed temples just happen to lie almost exactly in spots where pure nodes are also located. Albeit, much deeper underground than the ones located here.”

Jensen put two and two together, “So, you think these temple devices are somehow powered or linked to these pure nodes?”

“Precisely. If so, we’ll see about constructing those Sisterhood devices and placing them in these buildings.”

“And, judging by the lack of any noise whatsoever at these temples, you think that these devices may help mask any mining operations?”

“Very good,” Yazril complimented him. “Yes, I’m hoping that if we can fulfil our end of the bargain and get these devices functioning here, we may be able to resume our mining operations sooner than expected.”

“Sounds good, as long as some enterprising Institute student doesn’t happen to accidentally discover anything.”

“Oh, that won’t be an issue. I suspect that we’ll have to decommission these buildings anyway.”

“Come again?”

“From what I gather, this entire structure would need to act as a sort of amplifier for the device,” Yazril said. “I’m not sure what kind of hazard that would pose to any occupants. Plus, there’s the chance that it would probably affect any experiments taking place in these buildings.”

“Wouldn’t that seem a touch suspicious?”

“We’ll pass it off as campus renovations,” Yazril shrugged. “We’ll construct new buildings for the students, and no one will be the wiser.”

“And if someone asks why these ones haven’t been torn down?”

“We’ll think up a cover story, I’m sure.”

“I’m sure you will. You lot seem craftier than a pack of coyotes trying to get at a henhouse,” Jensen chuckled. “Well, I guess I’m up to speed. What now?”

“We travel the rest of the way underground,” Yazril said. “Follow me.”

Jensen followed behind her as she approached a small room off to one side of the chamber. She opened the door, and his orb revealed a staircase descending into what seemed to be the bowels of the earth. Granted, the orb didn’t give off much light, but he couldn’t even begin to see where the staircase ended within sight.

He had already come this far. So, putting aside any reservations, Jensen followed Yazril down.

Twice he had been tricked into thinking the staircase had ended, only to find that both times were only a landing which twisted around to lead to another set of steps.

Well, at least it was all downhill.

Finally, they arrived at the bottom of the stairs. Jensen figured that they must have trekked at least a few hundred feet underground. Ahead of them was a short passageway with a stone door leading to the next phase of the journey.

Stopping just before opening the door, Yazril turned and said, “Remember, the Syrilo workers may have temporarily evacuated this place, but they were instructed to leave it guarded. If you see something, don’t attack unless I give the signal.”

“Not a problem,” Jensen confirmed. “Got it.”

Just gotta’ remember not to shoot at anything that looks like a giant bug. Shouldn’t be too hard.

As the door opened, Jensen saw the familiar blue glow again, and he stepped out into another huge chamber carved into the earth itself. This space, however, was an order of magnitude larger than the upstairs area from where they had started their descent.

Most of the space was taken up by what appeared to be the base of the crystal that culminated upstairs. If it seemed large from up there, then it was positively mountainous from this point of view. As Jensen looked up, the chamber tapered to follow the shape of the crystal, until it opened up into the building upstairs.

“This thing’s larger than I expected,” Jensen commented idly. “Are you sure it’s safe for us to be so close to it?”

“Absolutely,” Yazril said, but offered no further comment. She seemed to be keenly looking around for something as they walked to what looked like the opening to a large cave mouth.

So far, the place looked truly abandoned. Jensen saw no signs of life, human or giant bug. He wondered if the Syrilo had somehow neglected to leave a guard behind.

As they walked closer to the cave entrance, however, Jensen thought he could hear a faint rumbling. Try as he might, he couldn’t pinpoint the source. As he continued to look around for clues to the sound, it altogether stopped. As Yazril didn’t break her stride and seemed relatively unperturbed, he let it pass for now.

About fifty paces from the cave entrance, all hell broke loose.

A wailing noise that could only be described as half-roar and half screeching erupted from directly overhead. Jensen snapped his head upwards just in time to spy a large hole in the roof of the chamber.

Before he could examine it in detail, a horror burst out from within it.

An enormous serpentine form descended at speed from the burrow, landing just in front of the cave entrance, and barring their passage.

Jensen’s eyes went wide. He had seen no shortage of bizarre creatures in his short time on this world. But, even compared to the demonic looking sacras he had encountered recently on his trip to Freewater, this thing looked like death incarnate.

Its body must have been at least eighty feet long, and resembled nothing more than a centipede of monstrous proportions. Staring directly at them, the first thirty feet of its body reared up, and another roar erupted from its pincer-equipped maw.

The only reason Jensen didn't immediately grab his gun and try to blast the thing was the fact that Yazril was still walking calmly up to the creature. Still, he did a quick mental calculation to see if he could run back to the doorway if needed.

It looked like the creature was on the verge of pouncing when it spied Yazril, and then abruptly relaxed its threatening posture as Yazril stopped directly in front of it.

Jensen, still shell-shocked from the whole encounter, didn't dare utter a word and watched the situation unfold in front of him.

He wasn't sure if he could be any more surprised at the whole situation, then blinked in amazement as he saw the creature do an approximation of a bow to Yazril, and then began to speak, "Apologies, Sovereign. I did not expect you."

"As did I, Syrilo," came the response from Yazril, a questioning tone in her voice.

The creature cocked its head slightly to one side, "I was posted here recently, Sovereign. We received word of the recent attacks. I, along with several others, were stationed here against the possibility of these installations being breached."

Jensen didn't know if to be comforted or nervous at the fact that the creature seemed to be quite eloquent. That is, when it wasn't trying to kill them with terrifying efficiency.

"I see," Yazril replied. "You may continue your vigil with my blessing. We will continue our journey."

"Of course, Sovereign," the creature bowed again. It turned to look at Jensen now. "This one accompanies you?"

"He does."

The creature then gave another curt approximation of a bow to Jensen and said, "May your path be clear, friend. Revel in the honour that has bestowed upon you."

"Thank you," Jensen managed to say without squeaking. "Same goes for you."

It turned back to Yazril, "I will trouble you no more, Sovereign. I will relay word of your passage to the others here, and you may continue the rest of your journey undisturbed."

Yazril nodded as the creature leapt upwards with amazing agility, covering the more than fifty foot gap with ease, and disappeared back into the burrow.

The rumbling faded off into the distance, and Yazril said, "I'm sorry, Jensen. I didn't expect to see him here, or I would have warned you in advance."

“No worries,” Jensen said, still a little shaky from the whole experience. “I’m just glad we didn’t have to fight him. That would have been an unceremonious end to our journey.”

“Perhaps,” Yazril chuckled. “Again, sorry about that.”

“What was that last thing that he said to me about? What *honour*?”

“Very few non-Syrilo are ever allowed to go where we’re going.”

“That reminds me,” Jensen said. “I probably should have asked this before, but where exactly is our destination?”

“Supoc,” Yazril replied. “The capital city of the Syrilo.”

“So we’re going to use this tunnel to sneak out of the city, then hike over there?”

“Not exactly,” Yazril half-smiled. “You’ll see quite soon, I promise.”

“Okay,” Jensen said. “Also, you called that creature *Syrilo*. That thing didn’t look like any kind of mantis to me! Giant or otherwise.”

“It’s not a widely known fact, but Syrilo don’t always look like what you were told,” Yazril explained.

Jensen couldn’t fathom how any evolutionary process could create related creatures that varied to that degree, but he let it pass for now.

“You’ll want me to keep that last part a secret, I’m assuming?”

“It would be greatly appreciated.”

“Very well,” Jensen said. “One last thing, why did you call the creature *Syrilo*?”

“Come again?”

Jensen could tell from the look in her face that she wasn’t being coy this time.

“I mean, why call it by its race, rather than a generic title or honorific, if you didn’t know its actual name? Not to offend, but it isn’t it just a tad, well... for lack of a better term, racist?”

“Ah,” her eyes lit up as she grasped what he was asking, and she smiled slightly. “Not at all. In their culture, *Syrilo* is actually the generic honorific. I should have explained that to you earlier as well.”

“Well, no harm, and I’ve learned something new,” Jensen chuckled. “I think that empties my bag of pressing questions for now. Shall we continue?”

“Let’s.”

They walked the remainder of the way to the cave mouth. The passage was well over thirty feet wide, which could explain how the creature made its way in here. Though, it seemed perfectly capable of digging its own tunnels if need be.

Once in, they had only strode about two dozen paces when Jensen realized that he could see a wall on the opposite side from him, with no sign or any other passages branching off anywhere. This cave was simply just a large antechamber.

Assuming that Yazril knew what she was doing, he walked silently behind her as they approached the dead end.

“Stand back a little while I do this part,” Yazril said, as the rock wall now stood directly in front of them.

Not sure what was about to happen, he backed up about a dozen paces behind her, and watched.

Yazril raised her hand and laid it against the face of the stones. Almost immediately, her arm seemed to catch ablaze with a ghostly blue fire.

The fact that Yazril didn't flinch, coupled with a lack of burning clothing, led Jensen to deduce that that was probably supposed to happen.

About ten second later, the stones around her hand started burning as well, spreading its ethereal conflagration until the entire wall was alight.

Another minute passed, and Jensen was so taken up by the sight of the burning wall that he almost missed the fact that the light intensity in the rest of the chamber also started to increase. Gazing around, he saw the remaining walls and roof were now covered with blue glowing sigils written in strange script. Try as he might, he couldn't make out any words, or even if it *was* a form of writing.

A few moments later, the burning wall shifted its hue from blue to bright white, flaring to such a degree that Jensen had to cover his eyes momentarily. The light subsided, and Jensen moved his hand to see what was now happening.

The glow was now completely gone, replaced by a shimmering image of an alien landscape.

A city filled with tall and twisting spires, all illuminated by a crimson twilight, filled the space formerly occupied by the rock face.

“Quickly now,” Yazril said, beckoning him forward and breaking him out of his reverie. “The portal will only stay open for a few moments.”

Wordlessly, Jensen followed her.

Chapter 5

“Can you understand what I’m saying?”

“Yes, I can,” Doyle replied, taking a few deep breaths before opening her eyes. “Thank you, Rheus. That’s quite an amazing device.”

“Not a problem, and thank you. Though, in all honesty, you should probably thank Mag for it. She’s the one that helped supply us with this contraption,” Rheus replied. “I should probably get back to helping Nolan with those explosives for tonight, Venarya. I notice he tends to get grumpy sometimes.”

“Gosh, I wonder why,” John almost snickered.

“I can take it from here,” Venarya assured the man with the prodigious beard. “Just check back in with me later and let me know how it’s going.”

“And try not to drop any more stuff on Nolan’s head,” John advised.

“Funny,” Rheus said, hurrying out the door.

Turning to Doyle as she got up, Venarya said, “I’d customarily offer you a tour of the city under normal circumstances, but I’m afraid I’ll have to ask if you’re ready to jump into the thick of things?”

“I’m used to it,” Doyle nodded. “Let’s get to work.”

As they started walking, John asked, “What have you got in mind for us to tackle first, Venarya?”

“I had actually wanted to get our friend Doyle over to the Cluster,” Venarya explained. “Start at the beginning, so to speak, and see if there’s anything a fresh set of sharp eyes might be able to suss out.”

“Makes sense,” Doyle said.

“However, Director Rinard had a few reservations about doing that until we get the pyramid situation resolved,” Venarya said. “It seems that pretty much every ship they have available is committed to either ferrying troops, transporting supplies, or on patrol. Also, seeing all the difficulties our enemies have thrown at us recently, there’s no way to really guarantee safe passage.”

“So, what’s the plan then?” John asked.

“It seems Admiral Ancor sent a gift along with their last dispatch of intel,” Venarya said. “We’ve got the body of one of the attackers from the incident at The Gates. We’re hoping you could shed some light on it, Doyle?”

“In what way?”

“The armour is nothing like I’ve ever seen, and I suspect,” she gave a sideways glance to John, “that someone from your world may be able to decipher some of the technology we’ve found on it.”

“More explosives?” John asked.

“No,” Venarya shook her head. “Some sort of sealed suit. We’re fairly sure that Grandmaster Minardo’s cult – the attackers – couldn’t have created something like that without help.”

“You think whoever attacked you also helped them?” Doyle asked.

“Indeed,” Venarya said. “Last we heard, Minardo and his followers were living off the land on their island compound. By all rights, they shouldn’t have even had any ships, much less ones equipped for battle.”

“I see,” Doyle said. “I’ll be glad to help in whatever way I can.”

“Great,” Venarya smiled. “The body’s at one of the medical buildings here in the Institute. I’ll take you to it.”

“Speaking of back home,” John began, “I’ve got some stuff to get to Ganz and Smiljan out in the swamp. I don’t suppose Garh’s still around?”

Doyle raised one eyebrow slightly, but said nothing.

“I’m not exactly sure. But, let’s find out,” Venarya said, as they opened the large doors to Rheus’ building and stepped outside. Turning to the Ranger guards, she asked, “Kitam, do you mind helping John with tracking someone down?”

“Sorry, ma’am.”

“No problem. Thanks for your help, anyway,” Kitam said with a tip of her hat to the gate guards.

“If you see him, let him know we’re looking for him,” John added.

“Er... sure,” the guard added, obviously not wanting anything to do with involving himself in a conversation with a giant tusked sasquatch.

As they walked away, Kitam said, “Sorry, John, but that’s the last place I can think of checking. He’s not at the command buildings, the docks, or any of the city gates.”

“Hmm,” John muttered to himself. “Looks like I’ll have to improvise.”

“Huh? What’s that?”

“Oh, sorry, just thinking aloud,” John said. “Do you remember if we saw Command Nuretz at any of those places?”

“Hmm, I believe so,” Kitam said. “I think he was with Director Rinard at the main operations command area.”

“Okay, let’s go there.”

“Sure thing,” Kitam beamed. “You know, the building next to it is actually quite a good bakery. I mean, not now, what with the current situation and all...”

Venarya must have suspected something, thought John. Why else is she punishing me with this?

“... and if it wasn’t for that sacra, I’d have never finished becoming a Ranger,” Kitam was saying.

“What? Oh yes, quite good. I’m glad to hear that,” John tried his best to pretend that he had heard any of the one-sided conversation.

“Yep, and I’ll sure be happy when this whole business is settled, I tell you,” Kitam started on another tangent, not noticing John’s lack of tact. “There’s been no decent fish to buy for the last little while! But, the rumour mill says that Old Blarki’s been reconciled with his son. You know what that means?!”

“Yep, definitely do! You’ll be getting your favorite fish again!” John said with a forced smile, as he tried to head this conversation off before Kitam picked up too much steam. “Hey isn’t that the command building right over there?”

“You want me to do what?”

“Believe me when I say it’s extremely urgent,” John pleaded to Nuretz.

“What isn’t these days?” Nuretz threw up his hands in defeat. “Okay, give me the note. I’ll see to getting it there as fast as I can.”

“Well, at least you won’t have to hike all the way into the swamp,” John tried to cast a brighter light on his task.

Nuretz just gave him a flat stare.

Chapter 6

“Sovereign, welcome,” the Syrilo buzzed in greeting.

Having gone through the portal to the strange city, Jensen stood silent as Yazril addressed what he assumed were the equivalent to city gate guards. He was also more than a little pleased to see that these sentinels were what he had initially imagined Syrilo to look like.

Still, their appearance was truly alien. Even the diminutive raslin he had encountered on the way to Freewater had had that element of mammalian adorability. But the visages he gazed at now were something from an old fifties sci-fi flick.

Not to say that they were ugly. The creatures stood proud and regal in their duty. Also, the lack of any obvious weapons indicated that these creatures must be formidable on their own terms.

“Do you require an escort, Sovereign?”

“No thank you,” Yazril declined the offer. “Continue your vigil, Syrilo.”

“As you wish, Sovereign.”

The guards returned to their posts at either side of the portal, and Yazril started walking toward the city.

Glancing back, Jensen noticed that, on this end, the portal was not hidden. It was quite ornately decorated in fact. The crystal arch seemed to carry the same speckled look as tasrac, save for the fact that it was purple. Engraved all along its length were runic symbols similar to what he had seen in the cave chamber.

He didn't stare at it too long, just in case the guards took offense.

Instead, he now turned his gaze skyward, or what he had assumed was skyward, looking for the position of the sun. From the low reddish light, he had assumed it to be in the process of setting, indicating that they had travelled quite some distance.

What he saw made him blink in amazement. The entire sky was shimmering with the ruby light.

Bemused, he almost failed to notice the high cliff walls surrounding the scenery.

Except, they weren't cliffs. They were the walls of a colossal cave.

Yazril had noticed him, and said, “Sorry, I should have explained. Supoc is located quite a ways underground. The primary ways in and out are via portals.”

Jensen whistled. “Underground cities a common thing over here?”

“Not as such, no,” Yazril smiled.

“How far did we travel?”

“I’m afraid I can’t tell you that,” Yazril said apologetically. “The precise location of this city is a closely guarded secret.”

“Should’ve guessed,” Jensen said. “What do we do next?”

“I’ll be meeting with the council,” Yazril said. “This will probably take a little bit. I’ll take you somewhere where you can refresh yourself in the meantime.”

Jensen had to admit that he was more than a little curious as to the proceedings of the upcoming meeting. However, while Yazril didn’t use a stern tone, he got the feeling that staying put somewhere else for the duration wasn’t a suggestion.

“Sounds good,” Jensen said. “I could use a bit of rest.”

Walking through the city, Jensen took a closer look at the buildings surrounding him. They sure didn’t appear to be made out of stone. That much he felt certain about.

Jensen could almost swear that the building facades resembled nothing more than what he imagined the exoskeletons of titanic-sized insects would look like. Even the great twisting towers above him seemed vaguely biological, rather than the result of masonry.

His musings on architecture were interrupted by Yazril announcing, “Here we are. I’ll get you settled in.”

She stood in front of what Jensen assumed to be a door, as the colouring of the circular area was more of an off-red, rather than the near camo-green of the rest of the building. He didn’t see any sort of knob or other device to open the door, and assumed Yazril would probably be doing the trick with her rings again.

However, she simply knocked twice on the door.

A moment later, the centre of the panel began to open up and expand outwards, similar to an iris. In less than a second, an empty space took the place of the panel.

“Follow me,” Yazril said, entering the doorway.

Jensen did just that, wondering if the houses were actually some sort of stationary giant insect, and not caring to contemplate as to which part of the creature's anatomy they had just walked through.

"Is this building... alive?" Jensen decided to ask.

Yazril smiled, "Not as such. Think of it more like biological technology. It's a bit of a Syrilo specialty."

"I see...", Jensen said. "How come I've never seen anything like this at the Institute?"

"Most people aren't aware that it exists," Yazril said. With a slight inflection to her voice, she added, "And the Syrilo prefer to keep it that way."

"Point taken," Jensen said, putting up his hands in mock defeat. "So, all their cities are underground?"

"No," Yazril said. "They have normal settlements as well, which is what the rest of the world sees."

"Ah, what about-"

Jensen didn't get to finish asking his question.

At that moment, a young blonde woman walked in from a room in the back. Jensen didn't know if to be more amazed at the fact that she was absolutely stunning, or that she wasn't a Syrilo. Every other being he had seen in the streets so far had been a member of the insectoid race. Furthermore, judging from what Yazril had been saying, he certainly hadn't been expecting to find another human here.

"Intendant," the newcomer smiled at both of them. "How nice to see you again. And you've brought a friend!"

"Hi there, Zodra," Yazril said in return. "It's a pleasure to be back. This is Jensen."

"Great to meet you, ma'am," Jensen said, tipping the hat of the Ranger costume he still wore.

"And a real life Freewater Ranger at that, too. I've always wanted to meet one of you," Zodra said. Then, with a sly look, added, "Or is he another one of your agents, Yazril?"

"You've got me," Yazril admitted. "He's helping us out with that problem back in Iathera."

"I've heard tell about that," Zodra said. "As bad as it sounds?"

"Possibly worse, if we don't get on top of it soon."

"Ouch."

“And, speaking of which,” Yazril said, “I’ll need to be meeting with the council now. Can I entrust him to your care? He’s had quite the ordeal over the last few days, and could probably use a hot meal and some rest.”

“You can say that again,” Jensen agreed.

Zodra smiled at Jensen, “Don’t you worry, Yazril. I’ll see he’s fed, and then we’ll see about getting him a nice, comfortable bed for those tired, lovely eyes.”

“I think Yazril might have been exaggerating about those sore muscles of yours,” Zodra teased, rolling over to face Jensen and kittenishly running a finger across his chest.

“Well, if they weren’t before, they will be after that workout,” Jensen chuckled. “Though, I could probably summon a bit of reserve energy, if you’re up to it?”

“Tempting,” Zodra sighed and pouted her lips, “but I’ve got some errands that I absolutely have to take care of. Will you be okay here by yourself for a little while?”

“I could sleep here for a week, if they’d let me,” Jensen joked. “I haven’t had a bed this comfortable since I had to watch Mel’s dogs in Dubai.”

“Hmm, where’s that?” Zodra made idle conversation as she started donning her clothes again.

“A place far, far away, and a lifetime ago, it seems,” Jensen said.

“Ah,” Zodra said, now dressed and leaning in to give him a quick kiss. “I’ll try to be back before Yazril returns. If I’m not, I suspect she’ll be in a hurry to get back home, given what’s happening back in her city. Tell her I said bye if I miss her.”

“Will do,” Jensen promised. “Though, I’m hoping I won’t have to.”

“You’re sweet,” Zodra smiled, giving him another peck. “Now, get some rest while you can.”

Chapter 7

Nuretz looked down at the shoes he had polished no less than an hour ago and sighed.

“Here we go again,” he muttered to himself, then started walking down the small dock and into the swamp. He called out to the rest of the squad behind him, “I’ll return as soon as I can. If any trouble shows up, hop in the boat and run like hell back to Iathera. I need live soldiers helping to guard the city, rather than dead heroes over here. I’ll find my own way home.”

“Are you sure you know what to do?” Nolan asked, his tone noticeably more gruff than usual. “I don’t want you inadvertently blowing up half our assault team tonight.”

“I’ve got it, I promise. We’ve already finished all these,” Rheus insisted, indicating the corner stacked with finished explosives. “We’ve only got three more left anyway. You can go ahead and make sure everything else is ready to go.”

“Alright. Just please be careful with those leaves,” Nolan said, still unsure if he was making the stupidest decision of his life. “I don’t need you taking out a chunk of the town.”

“I’ll be fine,” Rheus insisted. “It’s a relatively simple process. I must say, this new solution Venarya devised for the fuses is quite ingenious. I would never have thought to-”

Nolan held up his hand to silence the small man, “Fine, just be careful. *Please.*”

As he walked out the door, Nolan half-expected to hear a deafening blast behind him. Shaking his head, and trying to put the thought of Rheus playing with explosives out of his mind, he did have to admit that the new solution that Venarya had just sent over was quite clever.

The strange properties of this world had forced them to use a genetically engineered bacteria from back home. This bacteria, once overfed with a specially designed food, was able to generate an enormous amount of electricity. In fact, it generated so much that it was able to temporarily overpower the pervasive dampening effect of tasrac, which normally would drain any source of electricity on this planet before it could be used to power anything. That brief surge of electricity could then be used to detonate conventional explosives, which were usually also inert on this world.

One of the problems had been finding a way of creating some sort of a timer to prevent the bacteria from firing off prematurely, before everyone else had managed to get to a safe distance.

Venarya had then produced a plant whose large leaves were as tough as leather, but rapidly decayed and disintegrated once cut away from the stem. They had used that to separate the bacteria tank into two halves, the top half holding the bacteria food, which would then be dumped into the pool of hungry organisms about a minute after the leaf had been cut. In fact, the decay time of the leaf could even be shortened by trimming off more of the stem.

However, that had the adverse requirement of having to lug around a potted plant with your fancy new explosives.

Not anymore, though.

Prior to them starting work on tonight's batch of explosives, Venarya had sent over a crate of the before-mentioned leaves, but already detached from the plant. The only thing stopping them from decaying appeared to be the small poultice wrapped around the cut end.

The note had also warned them that the poultices would not delay the degenerative process indefinitely, and to make sure all unused explosives were defused after tonight.

Nolan really hoped Rheus knew what he was doing.

Nuretz was lost in thought as he stood waiting against the tree. He almost didn't dash out of the way in time as a huge wolf-like creature dropped out of the tree, and onto the spot he previously occupied.

"Getting closer to catching you, Noo-retz," the creature turned and said.

"I was distracted," Nuretz chuckled. "Glad to see you again, Duba."

"You too, Noo-retz," Duba replied. "Why you come back though? No one here."

"Yep, I know. I've got a message from the Old Man," Nuretz said. "I need you to get this note to Alisa as soon as you can."

"So there's been no activity at all from the Pyramid?" Nolan asked.

"Nothing," Krane confirmed. "For all we know, the explosions, combined with half-sinking into the ocean, may have been enough to kill whatever crew's in there."

"Or, alternatively, there could be ten thousand troops holed up in there waiting for us?"

"Always a possibility," Petrarca said, walking in.

“Any news?” Krane asked.

“Same as usual,” Petrarca shrugged. “My submarines still haven’t seen squat in terms of anyone trying to sneak out of that thing. I’ve got a couple of them salvaging some of that white crystal as well. After we confirm that it’s not going to explode in our faces, I’ll send it on to Venarya and see what her eggheads can make of it.”

“Sounds like a plan,” Nolan said. “Do they have any idea on what it could be? You said that you suspect it may just be tasrac?”

“Yes,” Krane piped in. “But, we’ve never seen tasrac in a pure white colour before, so I’d advise keeping an open mind – especially considering everything else that’s been happening.”

“Makes sense,” Nolan said. “How are we doing on troops?”

“We’ve got close to nine thousand Cluster Marines, plus another thousand Iatheran soldiers,” Krane said. Wincing, he added, “Though, we really need to make sure we get some of those Marines back home as soon as we can. We’re running extremely short-staffed right now, and don’t want to make ourselves a target again.”

“Agreed,” Petrarca said. “What about the Rangers?”

“The bulk of our contingent is temporarily reinforcing The Gates, leaving us with about two thousand here right now,” Krane said. “However, considering that most of them can’t even swim properly, I’ll have them deploy in the city as a last line of defense in case things go really wrong.”

“So, now we wait?” Nolan said.

“Everything’s been set in motion, and the squad commanders seem to have everything in hand regarding logistics,” Krane said. “So, we might have an opportunity to grab a few hours of sleep before all hell potentially breaks loose. I advise you make use of it, gentlemen.”

“What do you make of it,” asked Venarya.

Doyle frowned in concentration, “Just from an initial assessment, I’d say this looks almost like some sort of hybrid between a hazmat suit and combat gear. Aside from the recent hole in the chest area, this suit looks like it’s designed to be completely airtight.”

The single enemy body that had been recovered from the attack on The Gates now lay on a slab in front of the two ladies, temporarily pulled out of the cold storage area of the medical building.

“I sense an unsaid *but*?” Venarya said.

“And you’d be correct,” Doyle confirmed, still not looking up from her examination of the body. “A sealed suit this size, with no obvious air tank, should have nowhere near enough oxygen for him to survive for an hour, much less a day.”

“Hmm, I may be able to shed a little light on that,” Venarya offered, her brow furrowing in thought. “There are devices, powered by tasrac, that help with swimming in shallow water. These breathers are relatively small though, and the tasrac in them generally only last for about a maximum of twenty minutes before needing to be recharged.”

“You’re thinking they may have a larger scale model built into this suit somewhere?”

“A strong possibility,” Venarya shrugged. “I can’t think of another option at the moment. The thing, though, is that they only work when submerged. Not that there’s any point in needing them to work on land, of course.”

“Interesting,” Doyle said. “Well, one way to find out. I’ll examine it in more detail, and then let’s see if we can figure out a way to get this suit off him without resorting to a knife. I’m really hoping they didn’t glue it together on to themselves.”

“I see you took your job quite literally,” Zodra heard Yazril’s voice speaking in her head, as she walked down the street. *“There are other ways of obtaining a biological sample, you know? A single stray hair taken while he was sleeping would have sufficed.”*

“But none of the alternatives were quite as fun,” Zodra sent the thought back. *“You really should try it more often.”*

Yazril ignored the jibe and replied, *“Do you have everything you need?”*

“Indeed I do. Though, I still can’t imagine why exactly you wanted to do this procedure? What reasons could you possibly have?”

“Exactly,” came the reply. *“My reasons.”*

“Fine,” Zodra sighed. *“Are you finished with your council meeting?”*

“Just about,” Yazril said. “I’ll meet with you shortly. Begin prepping the process as soon as you can.”

Chapter 8

“Are you sure you don’t want me to show you more of the city?”

“Oh, no. That’s okay, Kitam,” John tried to think quickly. “I’m a little tired from all the walking, plus you probably need to get ready for all the action tonight. I don’t want you all tuckered out as well.”

“Ah, yes, I’d almost forgot about that. Funny how hanging around with friends can take your mind off any problems,” Kitam beamed at him. “Thanks for looking out for me, though. I should probably grab an hour’s nap if I can. Well, I’ll see you around. Take care tonight, and don’t get in any trouble!”

“Same goes for you. Watch yourself out there,” John replied. As much as he hated to admit it to himself, he had grown quite fond of the talkative Ranger and sincerely hoped she stayed safe during the assault on the pyramid.

Slumping into the couch, it looked like Venarya was still out and about with Doyle, and John didn’t particularly care for examining a corpse right now.

There was only one obvious thing to do.

Getting up, he walked over to the front door, opened it, and caught the attention of one of the Ranger guards.

“Hey guys, I really need to grab a nap. Can you wake me in an hour or so?”

“That’s got to be it,” Doyle said.

“Not much to look at, I have to admit,” Venarya said, using a gloved hand to remove a small metal cylinder from inside the calf of the dead attacker’s suit. “Superficially, at least, it seems to resemble a larger version of the breather we ourselves use. Of course, that’s not to say the inside of it isn’t completely different.”

“True,” Doyle agreed. “What next? Any plans for further examination of it?”

Furrowing her brow, Venarya thought for a few seconds. “Ganz and the Old Man are both occupied at the moment. Plus, if the Old Man was busy enough to need to request our help, I doubt he’d appreciate us piling more work on him. No, I think I’ll courier this along to the Cluster and have them take a look at it.”

“As long as they’ve increased their security measures since that breach I heard about,” Doyle said.

“They say they have,” Venarya said. “But, regardless, I’ll be sending along my own squad of soldiers to keep an eye on the device at all times.”

“Sounds good, provided they don’t get too offended about that.”

“They’ll live,” Venarya said. “In any case, they’ve admitted that they’re stretched thin over there right now in terms of security. I don’t think they’ll mind at all.”

“If you say so,” Doyle said, looking back at the device. “A quick question, though?”

“Go ahead.”

“Regarding the attack on the Gates,” Doyle began, “I heard that the fort itself is basically one large barricade to something called the Plaguelands?”

“Yes, that’s true,” Venarya confirmed.

“What exactly is that place? I’ve not managed to gather much info about that since getting here.”

“Well, I’ve not travelled there specifically, but I believe I can fill you in,” Venarya said. “From what I know, imagine a nature preserve full of all manner of mutated, vicious beasts.”

“Mutated?”

Venarya shrugged, “Again, I’m probably not the best one to be asking about this. But, the creatures in there were once what you’d consider *normal*. Over time, they slowly change into nightmares. Think fluffy bunnies with fangs, armour hide, and the temperament of a rabid wolf. Then, imagine the same process happening to a bear, or worse.”

“I see,” Doyle said. “Do we know what causes this mutation?”

“No one’s dared go in there for a long time to investigate,” Venarya said. “Apparently, people are no more immune to the effects than rabbits.”

“There must be conjecture, though?”

“There is a ... working theory,” Venarya said. “If you go a little bit past the Gates, the area seems to be filled with some sort of miasmatic fog. There were a few brave souls who’ve tried to explore it. The few that survived the creatures in there had merely doomed themselves to another fate.”

“Go on.”

“They had been driven stark raving mad, and ultimately... perished.”

“And it’s thought that this fog is the cause?”

“Yes,” Venarya said. Indicating the corpse, she continued, “and considering our friend here seems to have been equipped with a sealed breathing system, we may have proven that theory. Or, at least, that’s what these attackers seemed to also believe.”

“True,” Doyle said. “Enough, at least, to have designed this suit for that and not for combat.”

“My thoughts exactly,” Venarya said. “The lack of armour as well tells me that they wished speed over durability.”

“Though, I’m surprised they didn’t treat the material to absorb blasts, similar to the Ranger coats?”

“Not all materials can be given that treatment, from what I understand,” Venarya said. “And, on top of that, the actual procedure to do that is a jealously guarded secret by both the Cluster and the Rangers.”

“Iathera doesn’t know how to do it?” Doyle asked, surprised.

“I’m sure Yazril has the recipe hidden away somewhere for a rainy day, but there’s really no need, considering we get all our weapons and armour manufactured by the Cluster itself,” Venarya shrugged. “Best to let the experts handle it.”

“And avoid any leaks. Smart.”

“You catch on quick,” Venarya smiled.

“Thanks,” Doyle said. “But, one thing puzzles me. That whole attack on the Gates seems to be nothing more than a glorified raid. They had ample opportunity to sack the place, but only opted to destroy the communications room. Despite no one seeing it, I’m betting they headed into the Plaguelands themselves to retrieve something.”

“Makes sense.”

“But what was it they were trying to get? One of the creatures in there?”

“Possibly, but I doubt it,” Venarya said. “Admiral Ancor had mentioned to me that during the trip from the village to the Gates, they had encountered several of the creatures already roaming around the forest. The Rangers themselves confirmed that the smaller creatures do manage to get out from time to time, hence having patrols to hunt them down.”

“Well, considering the effort that was expended in this raid, I’d have to assume the attackers knew that,” Doyle said. “Perhaps they were after a specific creature?”

“Maybe, but they did seem to be on a tight timeline. Unless, of course, they knew a way to hunt that potential creature quickly.”

“Perhaps,” Doyle pondered. “Is there anything else in the Plaguelands? No ancient mystical ruins or anything else cliché like that?”

Venarya laughed, “Not that I know of. But, like I said, I’m not particularly an expert on that area. Truth be told, I’m not sure if anyone is.”

“Fair enough,” Doyle said. Pointing to the corpse, she continued, “Well, I’ve had enough of staring at this guy for a bit. Let’s put him back on ice after I get a couple samples of his clothing.”

It was sheer instinct that caused John to roll over and mutter to a non-present Venarya, “What do they want this time?”

Opening his eyes, he realized that he was talking to a pillow. Along with that came the insight that the person knocking at the door was probably the Ranger waking him up as instructed.

“I should’ve told them two hours,” he sighed, stretching and then trying to wipe the haze from his eyes.

Stumbling downstairs, he got to the door and opened it to see the Ranger standing there. However, standing next to him was a small bald man who seemed to be outfitted in a manner not dissimilar to what John thought a stereotypical East Asian monk would look like. Or, at least what he assumed one would look like, judging from all the old movies he’d seen.

John blinked and, in his half groggy state, tried to make sense of what was going on.

Did the pyramid also blow up an ancient monastery or something on the way here?

“Sir, we were just about to wake you when he showed up,” the Ranger said, indicating the other man. “Said you sent for him?”

“Huh? I did?” John wondered if he was still asleep.

“Your friend Alisa said you needed my help?” the small man said, a patient smile on his face.

“Ah!” John finally realized that this was the person Smiljan had arranged for. “Of course! Come on in.”

If the Ranger found this odd, he did a good job of not showing it. “I’ll leave you two to it then,” he said. “We’ll be outside if you need anything.”

“Thanks,” John said. “Actually, could you send a message to Venarya for me? Tell her she should probably hurry back here.”

“Will do, sir.”

“Thanks again.”

“You got here pretty fast,” John commented to the little man, ushering him to the living room.

“I was in the area,” the visitor grinned. “And I had no better offers on the table. I’m Tiolth, by the way.”

John really wanted to find out more about the monk getup, but, remembering the first time he’d encountered a Ranger, he figured he’d bite his tongue until Venarya got back.

“I’m John. Can I offer you anything in the way of refreshments? I’m fairly sure I know the difference between Venarya’s pantry and poison cabinets.”

Tiolth laughed, “Thanks, but I’m fine. Now, Alisa said you needed help with a project of yours?”

“I don’t know if *project* is the right word, but the Old Man assured me that you had enough knowledge of tasrac to help decipher something?”

Tiolth raised an eyebrow in curiosity, “Something beyond Smiljan’s capabilities? Now, you’ve really got me intrigued.”

“Here,” John fished the second copy of the Sisterhood documents from his pocket, and passed them over. “What do you make of this?”

The visitor took the papers and started perusing them. As the moments passed, his ever-present grin began to fade.

“Do you realize what these are?” Tiolth looked him straight in the eye and asked.

“I know what we’ve been told they supposedly are,” John admitted.

“Which would be?”

There was no way to say it without sounding crazy.

“The blueprints for some sort of massive device designed to keep some nasty otherworldly presence from finding us.”

Tiolph blinked, then laughed aloud.

“It’s not?” John asked, taken aback slightly.

“It very well could be,” the visitor replied, his grin back. “I was moreso referring to the fact that these documents detail a way of working with tasrac that *very* few people know about. Myself being one of them.”

“That’s good to know at least,” John said, a touch disappointed that he may end up with next to no usable information from this strange man. “So, you can’t really elaborate on the device described in those papers?”

“Now that I know what to look for, I probably can,” Tiolph said. He started reading through them again, “How did you come across these?”

John had to make a quick judgement call at this point. Lying about the origins of the documents may hinder any sort of proper investigation, and, John assumed that Smiljan would have warned him about revealing too much information.

“The Sisterhood.”

Tiolph raised an eyebrow in question.

“You saw that giant pyramid thing that’s sunk in the harbour?”

“Hard to miss,” the strange man grinned.

“Well, it took out the Sisterhood temple to the south on its way here,” John explained. “A short while later, one of their members showed up here and told Yazril some secretive mumbo-jumbo about their temples housing devices which repel some great evil.”

Tiolph whistled, “You lot don’t do anything by halves, do you?”

“Do you think their tale has any merit?”

“Like I said, it’s actually not outside the realm of reason,” Tiolph replied. “I’ll let you know what I find here.”

“Fair enough,” John said, turning to head to the kitchen to grab a drink for himself. “Are you sure you don’t want anything to eat or drink?”

“Well, something to wash down this apple would be nice.”

Sure enough, John turned around to see that the strange man had taken an apple from the platter on the coffee table.

“Not a problem. I think Venarya’s got a pitcher of that weird juice around here.”

John wasn’t sure if it was the lack of sleep, but as he walked around the kitchen, he couldn’t remember Venarya having a platter of apples in the living room.

Did they even have apples in this world?”

“Oh, one more thing,” John called out from the kitchen. “When Venarya gets here... well, let’s just say that it would be in my best interests if you say that Smiljan contacted you directly, and sent you here to help.”

Tiolph laughed, “Very well. I’ll keep your part in this to a minimum if questioned.”

Chapter 9

“They said what?!”

“Their words, not mine, Admiral,” the Cluster commander replied. “A couple of the more vocal Naradian refugees are demanding to know if they’re going to be prisoners here indefinitely.”

“Prisoners?!” Admiral Fescor sputtered. “They’ve got the run of the entire Isle of Safro! It’s a blasted pleasure center over there! If they were prisoners, they’d be in holding cells right now! Not that we even have anywhere close to the number of cells required, but still...”

“I know, Admiral. But, I suggest we head this off at the pass before it becomes more of an issue?”

“Agreed. We barely have enough manpower here to keep janitorial services running, much less put down a riot,” Fescor sighed. “Tell them that we’re working on getting them relocated to Iathera as quickly as we can. However, that city has its own set of problems right now. As soon as that’s resolved, we’ll have them moved. In the meantime, let us know if they require anything.”

“Will do, sir.”

Fescor sighed again, and focused on reading the reports related to last night’s storm cleanup. A few moments later, a polite cough at his door brought him out of his reverie.

He looked up to see his aide standing there.

“What now, Gadil?”

“A message from Admiral Skagant, sir,” Gadil reported. “He’s requesting your presence down at the docks where he’s got the captured ships moored.”

“Ships? He’s got more than one there now?”

“Nine at last count, sir”

Fescor sighed again. “Okay, I’ll head down there to see what he’s doing.”

“One crazy ship trying to run away from us wasn’t enough for you?” Fescor commented, walking up to his fellow admiral.

Skagant turned to him and nodded in greeting. “If you recall our conversation from last night, it was mentioned that I was going to try to raise a few of the sunken enemy ships to observe whether they try attempt to effect repairs to themselves.”

“And are they?”

“Indeed, albeit at a slower pace than the first one,” Skagant said. “I suspect that being submerged in the ocean may have impaired their abilities.”

“So they’re not currently trying to make a break for it?”

“Not at the moment,” Skagant said. “Though, I suspect they will do so, once they’ve completed sufficient repairs.”

Fescor shook his head and sighed again, “At least tell me you’ve got them tied up securely?”

“We have. We’ve also chained multiple anchors off the sides of each ship,” Skagant reported. “Should they manage to break their moorings, their speed should be hindered enough to allow us time to deal with them.”

“And what about the original one you towed in?” Fescor asked. “Is it still trying to head south for the winter?”

“We’re haven’t determined which direction it’s ultimately attempting to go,” Skagant said. “But, it has not relented in its pursuit of freedom.”

“That’s not what I... never mind...” Fescor said. “Just make sure someone’s keeping an eye on them.”

“Several people are currently serving in that capacity.”

“Fine, fine,” Fescor relented. “I’ll go get back to my paperwork now.”

“There is one more matter.”

Fescor really didn’t want to know, but asked anyway, “Which is?”

“We’ve recovered several of the Kierdan weapons from the wrecks we salvaged. They might possibly still be functional.”

“What? Where?” Fescor looked around wildly.

“Each one has been loaded into a longboat and towed outside the outer ring,” Skagant said, referencing the second ring of small islets surrounding the four main Cluster islands. “Should they detonate unexpectedly, we won’t suffer any casualties.”

“Fine,” Fescor threw his hands up in defeat. “Just make sure our own ships don’t run into them at night or something.”

“The longboats have been illuminated to prevent that.”

“I... ah, fine,” Fescor said. “What exactly are you planning on doing with them?”

“At this point, nothing,” Skagant said. “I’ve sent back a report to Fleet Admiral Krane. We’ll wait to see what he says.”

Chapter 10

“Hello, Venarya,” Tiolth said, hearing the door opening. “Long time, no see.”

Venarya turned to look at the strange man. Her eyes widened in surprise, before a smile broke across her face, “To say the least, you old scoundrel! Where’ve you been all this time?”

“Here and there,” the small man replied noncommittally.

“So, what name are you going by this time?”

“I’ve taken a liking to the name Tiolth for now.”

“Isn’t that the first name you used when we met?”

“Sometimes the old ones are the best.”

“Now, what brings you to these parts?” Venarya asked. “Especially now.”

“Not a coincidence,” Tiolth grinned. “Our mutual friend in the swamp asked me to take a look at these documents the Sisterhood passed to you.”

“I see,” Venarya said. Indicating the figure that had walked in behind her, she continued, “This is Doyle, by the way. She’s an investigator that works with John.”

“Pleasure to meet you, ma’am,” Tiolth got up to shake Doyle’s hand.

“Same here,” Doyle replied.

From the look in her face, John could tell that she was itching to ask why the strange man was dressed that way, but she held her tongue as well.

“Now,” Venarya asked, her tone one of slight caution. “How much do you know about what’s going on?”

“Outside or inside this room?”

Venarya raised an eyebrow.

“I’m up to speed with what’s been happening with regards to the attacks. Nasty business, that,” Tiolth said. “As for our little group... well, let’s just say that the whole time I’ve been here with John, I’ve been speaking English and he hasn’t noticed.”

John almost choked on the juice that he had been drinking.

Venarya tried to give Tiolth a stern look, but failed and finally smiled back, “One of these days, those tricks of yours are going to get you into a lot of hot water with the wrong people.”

“They’ll have to catch me first,” Tiolth laughed.

“Now, not that I don’t want you here, although that fact may be rapidly changing,” Venarya said, “but why didn’t the Old Man have you conduct this business at his place? I’m assuming he has far greater resources at his disposal than we do?”

John hadn’t thought that far ahead, and prayed that the strange man would give a good answer.

“Said he was in the middle of something else,” Tiolth shrugged. “I didn’t bother grabbing any details.”

John had to restrain himself from breathing a sigh of relief as Venarya apparently took that at face value and moved on.

“So, did you figure anything out from those documents?” she asked.

“Quite a lot that shouldn’t be,” the strange man said. “Do you remember why we decided that the best location for a prestigious school would be next to a giant swamp?”

“Yes,” Venarya’s eyes narrowed.

“Well, the Sisterhood apparently uses the same criteria that we do when evaluating real estate.”

“What?”

Tiolth glanced over to John and Doyle, then gave Venarya a questioning look.

“You can trust them.”

Tiolth raised an eyebrow.

“Trust me,” Venarya insisted.

“Very well,” Tiolth relented. Turning to John and Doyle, he started explaining, “How much do you know about tasrac?”

“Well, it’s basically the equivalent of some sort of magic crystal, from what I can tell,” John replied.

Tiolth laughed, “Fair enough, and more apt of a description than you may think. Now, there is a very special, and quite rare, form of tasrac we refer to as *pure tasrac*. Not the most creative name, I admit. This city happens to sit right over one of the largest collection of pure nodes ever found.”

“Not by coincidence, I’m assuming?” Doyle asked.

“Correct,” came the reply.

“What’s this pure tasrac good for?” John asked.

“Ask any tasrac artisan in the city, and they’ll tell you *‘not much’*,” Tiolth replied. “In fact, it’s quite dangerous for any miners that accidentally stumble across it.”

“What? I thought you were saying it’s important?”

“It is,” Tiolth said. “Let me ask you a question. Back on Earth, would someone in the middle-ages have a use for refined uranium?”

Despite himself, John couldn’t resist, “My uranium?”

Doyle and Venarya both shot him dirty looks, while Tiolth gave him an even wider grin.

“I think I see where this is going,” Doyle said, ignoring John. “It’s important, just not applicable to current level of understanding or technology on this world?”

“Correct. I mean, sure, you could probably try using the uranium to warm your house in winter, but the whole dying due to radiation thing may be problematic,” he grinned. The grin faded just as fast, as he added, “But, believe me when I say that I dread the day that full knowledge of pure tasrac manipulation becomes commonplace.”

“Is that why you only provided limited help to the Old Man?” Venarya asked. “He wasn’t particularly pleased on that point, if I recall.”

“He got over it,” Tiolth shrugged. “Those weapons I helped him create are the proverbial tip of the iceberg of what you can do with pure tasrac.”

“Getting back on track,” Venarya said, “what does this have to do with the Sisterhood devices?”

“Ah, yes, I was just getting to that,” Tiolth said. “It’s no coincidence that the Sisterhood has their temples constructed on those specific spots. First of all, these plans detail how to create a series of devices, not just one. The first one appears to locate a spot that happens to lie over a pure node, then presumably a temple is constructed on top of it. The last device in the chain interfaces with the node and basically tells it to broadcast some sort of beacon or signal. Also, the temples themselves appear to be constructed in a clever way which allows them to passively amplify whatever this signal is.”

“So, you’ve only a general idea, and you’re not exactly sure about the inner workings of the devices?”

“Contrary to what many may think, I’m not really omniscient or omnipotent,” Tiolth laughed. “I just happen to know a few tricks, that’s all.”

“How do you happen to know all of that, though?” John asked.

“Picked up a bit here, a bit there, and so forth,” Tiolth evaded.

“Fine,” John couldn’t help but chuckle. “Answer me one question, though?”

“You can ask, but I can’t promise an answer.”

“Where are you from originally?” John asked. “Earth?”

Tiolth thought on that for a long moment, finally shaking his head.

“No,” came his reply. “Someplace much further away. Or right next door, depending on how you look at it.”

“Well, that’s enigmatic enough to verge on being totally evasive,” John said.

Tiolth just grinned.

John changed the line of questioning, “What do you recommend we do, then?”

“Well, what is the Sisterhood recommending that you do?”

John looked to Venarya, who responded, “We’re not exactly sure. Yazril didn’t divulge that part of the story, and she’s gone for a bit.”

Tiolth looked intrigued, “But you have your suspicions?”

“Well, now I do. She hinted that they wanted a favour, hence the whole reason why they agreed to show us these documents in the first place. From what you’ve told me, I would guess that they want us to play host to one, or possibly more, of these temples?”

“A reasonable assumption,” Tiolth agreed. “Do you think it’s a good idea?”

Venarya looked temporarily taken aback, “Why? You’d advise against it?”

“I’m not saying that,” the small man said. “Just making sure you’ve considered all the options.”

“You think they want something else?”

“No, I think your theory’s correct,” Tiolth said, his grin widening. “But, there may be better ways to go about it. After all, those plans the Sisterhood gave you must be, what, eons old by now?”

“I thought you weren’t even sure what the device does?”

“True,” Tiolth replied. “But, a scribe doesn’t necessarily have to be literate in order to copy a document, making it a look a little bit neater in the process.”

“And how exactly are you proposing to do that?” Doyle spoke up.

“I’ll let you know that part as soon as I figure it out,” Tiolth laughed. “Plus, I’m not quite illiterate when it comes to this stuff. I’ll return tomorrow with what’s hopefully going to be a solution. In the meantime, I believe you’ll have your hands full dealing with that pyramid.”

“Are you going to want a copy of these documents to study?” John asked.

“No need,” the strange man waved it off, getting off the couch. “Pleasure to meet you two, John and Doyle. You both seem like nice folk, so try not to get killed tonight?”

“I’ll see if I can accommodate you,” John smiled.

“Nice to meet you, too,” came the reply from Doyle.

“I’ll be waiting,” Venarya said. “Oh, and one more thing?”

“Yes?” Tiolth asked, a look of mock innocence on his face.

“What’s with the apples again? You know I hate those.”

Chapter 11

“Whoever was in that thing, they’ve gotta’ either be dead or incapacitated,” John commented. “Why else haven’t we heard a peep out of them?”

“It’s got to be some kind of trap,” Rheus countered. “I think they’re just laying low.”

“I think you just really want to see those explosives in action,” John chuckled. “You’d probably be first in line if they were asking for volunteers to blow a hole in that thing.”

John, Rheus, Sarasel, Venarya and Doyle all stood on top of a makeshift observation tower, set up on a large armoured piece of scaffolding. While about fifty metres back from the seawall, they still had a good vantage point over the upcoming battleground.

In about twenty minutes, operations to seize control over the pyramid would commence. They could already see a plethora of watercraft taking their positions for the assault.

“I’m not going to say that’s not tempting, but I think I’d let the more young and foolish accept that task,” Rheus said. “Still, I wonder which poor soul pulled the short straw in leading the attack?”

Harker couldn’t believe his good luck.

An offhand remark to Commander Nuretz earlier about wishing that he could be there for the initial assault had apparently paid dividends for him, he thought, as his troop transport led the fleet approaching the pyramid.

He did look to the back of the boat and eye the bombs a little nervously. If he hadn’t been part of the blockade run, in which Director Rinard’s ship managed to break out and make it to Iathera, he would have never believed such weapons could even exist. As it was, he had seen quite a few friends fall victim to the Kierdan variant of the devastating munitions when the Cluster had been invaded.

Time for some payback.

“There are a million different ways that this could end up being a disaster,” Rinard muttered.

“Why are you even here?” Krane asked pointedly.

“Disaster or not, you’re insane if you think I’m sitting this one out.”

“It’s not like there’s much of a choice,” Petrarca offered. “We committed ourselves to this the moment we decided to sink that thing. No offense intended, Nolan. It wasn’t like we had much choice in that course of action, either.”

“None taken,” Nolan said, taking stock of the battle preparations from their own observation tower. Looking back at the scaffolding tower that held John’s group, he couldn’t help but almost growl, “I can’t believe we let those five come along to spectate.”

“Well, technically this city’s now under Lady Venarya’s control. We’re only allowed here at her pleasure,” Petrarca laughed. “So, she’s welcome to bring along anyone she likes. They’ll be okay, though. Besides, if the battle spills this far, something’s gone horribly wrong.”

Pointing to Rinard, Krane added, “Plus, we let this one come.”

“Gee, thanks,” Rinard said.

“You’re welcome.”

“We’re in position, and holding steady, sir,” the troop transport’s helmsman reported. “Water’s relatively calm for the moment. You’re clear to start.”

“Thank you,” Harker said. The pilot had done a fine job of bringing them alongside the downed pyramid. Giving the enemy structure a quick once-over, he could see that it did indeed appear to be made out of stone. Hopefully, that stone wasn’t too robust, or this next part may not go according to plan, he thought. Turning to his men, he ordered, “Clear the snapback area, and extend the boarding ramp!”

“Yes, sir!” came the answer. Men rushed to evacuate the centre of the boat, moving closer to either the bow or stern area, and leaving a fifteen foot wide empty gap on the ship’s deck.

Once everyone had gotten clear of the area, two men moved to release levers located on either side of the gap.

A loud and sharp crack erupted almost immediately, as the empty portion of decking quickly pivoted itself like an oversized mousetrap, thundering down on the nearby surface of the pyramid. A series of spikes on the far end of the ramp would accomplish the task of keeping it locked in position, provided the pyramid’s stone wasn’t, as Harker hoped, too solid.

“Are we secure?” Harker called out.

The two crewmen took a moment to examine the far side of the ramp, before one of them answered, “Aye, sir. We’re secure, and ready to board.”

“Any movement on that pyramid?”

“Still dead silent, sir.”

“Good,” Harker said. “Tell the second wave of transports to go ahead and dock, then signal our men to move out.”

A flare confirmed that his orders had been followed, and he watched as another five troop transports moved into position to latch onto the strange enemy structure.

As two hundred of his men rushed onto the pyramid, this was where things could get precarious. The structure was built like a giant set of stairs, with the height of each ‘step’ exceeding thirty feet. Harker’s men were now on the lowest level that wasn’t below water, but they were also vulnerable to ambush attacks from any of the upper levels.

To try to combat this, several of Petrarca’s ships armed with their strange weapons had been assigned to maintain a close perimeter on the area of operations. Should their spotlights pick up any enemy movement from above, they would endeavor to blast them to pieces before they became a threat to Harker’s men.

Looking at the strange squadron of ships that had been instrumental in repelling the Kierdan invasion, he still had no clue how they had managed to get defense platform weapons to work when not mounted to an actual defense platform, much less over water. For now, he just appreciated the fact that they *did* work, as his very continued existence might very well depend on them.

“Looks like they’ve got feet on the ground over at the pyramid,” John commented, watching the troops taking up covering positions.

“Five more ships moving in, as well,” Doyle said, pointing off to one side.

“I know I’ve asked before, Sarasel,” Venarya said, “but are you sure the Sisterhood has nothing even remotely similar to this pyramid recorded in their archives?”

“Sorry, Lady Venarya,” Sarasel shook her head. “I’m fairly well versed in our historical records, and I don’t recall anything that could possibly be related, not even as a tangential postscript.”

“How does something like that stay hidden, though?” John asked. “Surely someone in a ship, somewhere, must have spotted this thing floating around?”

“There are quite a few places that remain uncharted and unexplored,” Sarasel said. “Many with good reason.”

“Plus, if that thing can travel over land, like you say, that adds a whole new level of complexity to the equation,” Doyle said. “For all we know, it may have been covered with dirt and disguised as a mountain up until a week ago.”

“True,” John had to admit he hadn’t considered that as a possibility, but it did make sense.

“The five new ships are arriving at the pyramid,” Rheus reported, bringing them back to the present.

John watched as the ships used the same type of mechanism to latch on the pyramid, then wasted no time offloading their troops. Soon, almost the entire first level of the western side of the pyramid was filled with soldiers.

As the last squads took up their positions, each of the five ships launched a single flare. Wondering what that was intended to signal, he soon realized as he spotted another three dozen troopships start to approach.

“I’ll be the first to admit that that pyramid is pretty big,” John said, “but that new batch of ships might find parking spots to be a little tight. Wonder how they’re going to deal with that?”

“We’ve got everyone in place, sir. Third wave of ships are on the way.”

“Good work,” Harker said, standing up and making his way off his command ship. “Let’s move to that second level, then. Get the ladders!”

At that command, several dozen troops on his ship grabbed scaling ladders from the deck of the ship and followed him on to the pyramid. No time was wasted getting them in place, and scores of soldiers started their ascent toward the next level.

Harker looked at the third wave of transports to monitor their progress. Instead of also attaching themselves to the pyramid, these ones pulled up alongside the currently docked ships

and quickly lashed themselves to each other, creating a crude floating bridge. As soon as each ship was secure, troops piled out, carrying their own sets of ladders as well, half of which were passed up to troops currently on the second level.

Harker double-checked to see if he could spot any activity from any of the pyramid's inhabitants, but still saw nothing.

"Get to the third level!" he ordered.

His troops did just that, using the new ladders to quickly ascend.

So far, so good, Harker thought.

Once a few hundred troops had managed to get up to the third level, he grabbed a flare from inside his jacket, pointed it into the sky, and triggered it.

"Looks like my boys are up," Petrarca said.

"What's this?" Rinard asked, a slight note of worry in his voice. "I didn't read anything about that flare in the battle plans?"

"Calm down," Krane said. "Just a last minute addendum to give whoever's in that pyramid something else to worry about, rather than focusing all their efforts on countering Harker."

"What exactly are they doing?" Rinard asked.

"Normally, I'd just tell you be quiet and watch," Krane said. "But, seeing as how this part of the action is over on the far side of the pyramid, I'll explain."

"Gosh, thanks."

"Can you see those flashes of light over there?"

"I'm not blind, you know."

Krane ignored the jibe, "Petrarca's boys are concentrating a few shots over there. With any luck, the enemy will think we're going to be breaching from that side, and hopefully commit the bulk of their forces reinforcing over there."

"So we catch them out of position once we blow a hole in this side?"

"Good work. I knew there was a reason we kept you around."

"What if we actually manage to blow a hole on that side with those shots, though? And what if the enemy starts pouring out through it?"

“We’ve got Cluster sharpshooters on two dozen more ships on that side. Between them and Petrarca’s ships, we’ll just pick them off as they come out.”

“What if they get overwhelmed?” Rinard pushed. “They’re not going to have unlimited shots, you know?”

“Better they try to overwhelm us on the outside, rather than inside,” Krane shrugged.

Rinard looked wide eyed as he almost choked out, “Wait?! That’s your plan? Just pray we can beat them if they start to swarm us?”

Krane gave him a steady stare, “Those ships are also armed to the teeth with pyrine oil projectiles. I don’t fancy that our enemies will like running through red hot flames to get to our troops now. Don’t you agree?”

“Gah, fine,” Rinard was annoyed, but at least his voice lacked the worrying undertones of before. “What about those-”

The scowl Krane gave him made Rinard falter a second, before he puffed himself up and started again, “What about those turrets at the top? What if they’re actually working?”

“Aside from the fact that they haven’t used them since we blew the bottom of the pyramid apart?” Krane asked.

“Could be a trick.”

“A really stupid trick, then,” Krane said. “There’s no point, in any case. Petrarca’s ships have been told to watch for any signs of them coming back to life, and blast them away if they do.”

“Why don’t we just shoot them first?”

“You really want the Old Man to kill you, don’t you?” Krane asked, one eyebrow up. “Those are weapons that we’ve never seen before, and I’m sure he’d like to his hands on a relatively undamaged one, if possible.”

“Fine.”

“All done with the interrogation, are we?”

“I knew I should have gone on Venarya’s scaffold instead.”

Venarya looked up and John turned to see what she was watching.

He almost jumped off the platform when he saw the giant shape flying toward them, but quickly realized what it was. Still, he could see Doyle's eyes widen in shock as she spied the creature, and even Sarasel looked a touch nervous.

"Is that..." Doyle started to ask, trailing off.

"Yep, that would be our friend, Mag," Rheus supplied cheerfully, oblivious to the discomfort of the two ladies.

"She's harmless," John assured them.

"Don't be so sure about that," Venarya smiled. "But, we're safe."

They continued to watch as Mag drew closer, then landed on one corner of the platform. Folding back her wings, she looked at the assembled group, then nodded her head in greeting.

-Hello-

John replied with a friendly wave. Doyle, strategically standing behind John, half sputtered, "Did... did..."

"Yes," John grinned at her. "Sorry, I might have forgotten to tell you that part of the story. Also, it's considered rude to not say *hi* back."

Doyle gulped and replied back with a weak, "Hi."

"John..." Venarya chided him.

"Sorry, Venarya," John said. "But, honestly, when was I ever going to get the chance to do that again?"

"She can... understand us?" Doyle asked.

Mag looked amused at that, and they all heard the reply.

-Yes-

"I'll try to make it up to you," John said to the alarmed investigator. Turning to Mag, and remembering that Sarasel didn't know anything about their origins, he said, "This is Doyle. She works for me, and is trying to help us get to the bottom of what's happening. This other lovely lady is Sarasel. As you can tell, she's from the Sisterhood."

Mag cocked her head to one side, seemingly in puzzlement, then turned to Venarya.

-Explain-

John was halfway trying to sort through how he was going to explain the happenings since Mag had mysteriously departed, then saw Venarya walking up to take the relatively small dragon's talon in her hand.

He had almost forgotten about that. He continued to watch as they held each other's hands in silence for another few moments.

Sarasel looked confused. Doyle, equally perplexed, quietly asked, "What's happening?"

At that moment, Venarya released Mag's claw, then turned and answered, "Mag communicates via mind speech. She can read the thoughts directly from your mind should you so wish, but the effects are not pleasant. My physiology allows for a little more robustness in that regard.

Doyle nodded, and Sarasel seemed to accept that at face value.

That was slick, John thought. No mention of any sort of any sort of pseudo-telepathic prowess on Venarya's end meant that she still didn't fully trust Sarasel at this point. And, rightly so, to be quite pragmatic. After all, she just met her what, earlier that day?

"Is she here to help with the fight?" Sarasel asked.

-Maybe-

Harker still hadn't seen any signs of the enemy. Rumours from the Cluster ships that had observed the pyramid on its way in had said that it was manned by humanoid cats. If he hadn't personally known some of the captains that had said that, including Admiral Ancor himself, he would have suggested that the Cluster investigate its policy of alcohol on board its warships.

Either way, it didn't matter to him what shape the enemy was. As long as they were alive, then that meant, one way or another, that they were also capable of being dead.

"How are we doing?" he asked.

"We've got just over a thousand troops on the third level, and still no sign of the enemy."

"Good," Harker said. "We start at two thousand. Bring over six of the explosives, and tell the men to grab those tools and start hacking away at the walls as instructed."

"What are they doing?" Rinard asked, confused. "I thought we were blowing our way into the pyramid, not tunneling in with pickaxes?"

Nolan was the one who spoke up, “Those explosives, while powerful, are still pretty crude. I’ve tried to tinker with them to direct the blast as much as possible, but it’ll be more efficient if the explosives are placed in some sort of small crevice.”

Krane gave him a look as if to say, *Satisfied?*

“Oh, okay. Makes sense, I guess.”

“This seems like such a waste,” Rheus commented. “Unless the enemy’s got another trick up their sleeve, which I find unlikely at this point, the outcome’s pretty much determined. Why not just surrender?”

“This is one of the few times I’m inclined to agree with you, Rheus,” Venarya said softly.

“I thought you were eager to see your little toys in action?” John asked.

“Yes, I’ll admit,” Rheus said. “But, at what cost? Me blowing up patches of grass in the swamp is one thing, but this will probably just get a lot of people killed.”

“Well, hopefully they’ll surrender quickly once they realize what’s happening.”

“They may be determined to fight to the last man. Never underestimate the power of fanaticism,” Sarasel said. “I’ve a little experience in that regard.”

“Agreed,” John said. “I’m no stranger to that concept.”

“Still, I hope your optimism pans out,” Sarasel said. “The only thing this serves is to weaken us, while a greater enemy lurks in the shadows waiting to pounce.”

“You really believe in that ‘great unknown evil’ thing, don’t you?”

“I’ve seen nothing to convince me otherwise.”

“But, I’d wager, also nothing to convince you that it actually exists?”

“Well, I-”

At that instant, Sarasel gasped, her eyes closing and her hand going to her head. Opening her eyes after a moment, she turned to Mag, who seemed to be patiently looking at her.

“I...” Sarasel began. “Yes. If you can accomplish it, then by all means, yes.”

Before anyone else could ask what was happening, Mag launched herself into the air and started flying toward the pyramid.

“What was that about?” Doyle was the first to ask.

“She... she asked me if I truly wished for a bloodless battle.”

“Say what?” John blurted out.

“Don’t underestimate Mag,” Venarya said. “In ages past, whole armies were said to retreat at the sight of a vrang.”

“Why?” John asked, intrigued.

“I’m not exactly sure,” she explained. “This was way before even my time. They may be just stories.”

“But, the fact that Mag just flew off to single-handedly engage that pyramid would tend to indicate otherwise?”

“Agreed,” Venarya said, reaching into her satchel. She pulled a rod-shaped device from it a moment later, held it above her head, then fired a flare into the air.

The sound of Mag’s powerful wings overhead caused Rinard’s group to look up in alarm, though they visibly relaxed when they identified her.

“Good timing on her part,” Krane said. “Glad she’s finally back from wherever she went.”

“Agreed, but I doubt one more person on our side will matter that much,” Rinard said.

“Even if that person is a vrang.”

“You’ve obviously never frequented many taverns,” Krane chuckled. “Or you’d have heard the stories.”

“What stories?”

Krane didn’t answer. He had turned around to examine the source of the light from behind them, and was now staring at the flare that Venarya had just launched, speechless.

Rinard turned to look, and asked, “What’s that for?”

It was Petrarca who answered, “That, my boy, is the one flare our good Admiral thought Venarya would never have to use. It means that she’s expecting everyone to retreat to the boats and back away from the pyramid.”

“What? Why?! Aren’t we winning?”

“Well, we’re not currently losing, if that’s what you’re asking, lad.”

“I’ll be right back,” Krane got his tongue back. “I’m going over to Venarya to go see what’s going on.”

“I’ll go with you,” Nolan told him. “I just hope this isn’t some last-minute harebrained scheme that they just cooked up on the spot.”

“What?!” Harker exclaimed, eyes gaping at the signal flare on the shore.

All the troops around him halted what they were doing and stared at him, waiting for orders.

“Damn, I knew this was going too smooth,” he muttered. Raising his voice, he ordered, “Okay, folks, you see it too! Pack up and get back on the ships now! Leave the ladders! And, for goodness sake, be careful with those explosives!”

“Venarya!” Krane exclaimed, out of breath from climbing the ladder. “What’s going on?”

Nolan came up right after him. He glared accusingly at both John and Rheus, “Was this your idea?”

“Whoa, down boy,” John said, holding up his hands. “We had nothing to do with this one.”

“Mag volunteered for this, gentlemen,” Venarya spoke up. “Though, I have to admit I have no idea what she’s planning.”

“Are you sure about this, Venarya?” Krane pushed. “I mean, our troops are just about to break into the pyramid.”

“I’m sure,” Venarya confirmed.

“Worst case, we can resume the attack if Mag fails at whatever she’s attempting to accomplish,” Doyle said. “Also, hello Nolan.”

Momentarily caught off guard, Nolan was nevertheless quick to reply, “Ah, hi there, Doyle. Glad to see that John at least listened to one thing I’ve said, and decided to bring you along.”

Nolan looked like he was about to elaborate on that, just before he caught sight of John making suggestive glances toward Sarasel. Instead, he turned to the newcomer and said, “You’re new to the group. I’m assuming that your getup isn’t some bizarre variant of a Ranger uniform?”

Krane also looked quite curious, and looked to Sarasel for her reply.

It was Venarya who answered, “She’s from that Sisterhood temple that was destroyed just to the south, and may have information on an even larger problem for us in the future. But, for now, let’s focus on the current situation. I’ll brief you all after this current crisis is over.”

Krane took a long sigh, then said, “Very well. I’ll trust you on this one, Venarya.”

With that, he removed a flare from his jacket and fired it into the air.

“Well, at least it looks like it wasn’t a mistake,” Harker commented to himself.

One of the nearby troops turned to him, “Sir?”

“Huh? Oh, just saying that at least we have confirmation that they indeed wanted us to pull back,” Harker replied. “Why, though? Who knows?”

They had been forced to eject the boarding ramps from the six docked ships, as the spikes had embedded themselves too deeply in the pyramid’s stone to remove in haste. As such, should they need to board the pyramid again, another group of ships would have to perform the ad hoc docking procedure, while his initial group would have to tether themselves to those, along with the rest of the transports.

“Those explosives are secure?” Harker asked.

“Yes, sir. Got them stowed away in the back again.”

“We’ve checked that all of them are intact?”

“Yes, sir. Nothing looks awry on any of them.”

“Good,” Harker said. “At least we can breathe easy on that count. I wonder what’s happening down by the shore?”

“Hard to say, sir.”

At that moment, another trooper spoke up, “Sir! Up there!”

Half the troops immediately pulled their rifles out, as they observed the winged form of Mag flying toward the pyramid.

“At ease, everyone!” Harker called out. “That thing’s on our side! Let the other transports know to stand down! No shooting unless I say so!”

Not that they could hit it at this range, Harker thought. But, best to avoid tempting fate, or angering a small dragon.

They watched as Mag took up a position just outside the perimeter of the pyramid, using her powerful wings to keep her hovering in place.

-Surrender-

-Now-

Harker almost jumped out of his skin, and judging by the looks on his troops' face, so had they. Voices started chattering all over the ship. More than a few soldiers turned to look to him, near panic on their faces.

"It's okay, everyone!" he called out. "Calm down!"

At least, Harker hoped everything was okay. He knew the vrang was somehow associated with the higher up Iatheran officials like the Intendant and Lady Venarya. But, up until he had heard it speak directly into his brain, he had assumed it was just some sort of glorified pet.

Also, he wasn't sure if the fact that there were no further communications from shore was a good thing. Paranoid thoughts of this strange creature seizing control of the battlefield for its own obscure goals lurked in the back of his mind.

Still, he had received his orders, and he intended to follow them.

-Peace-

"How can we still hear Mag from so far away?" Krane asked.

"When you're speaking directly into someone's mind, I'm guessing loss of volume due to distance isn't a factor," Rheus shrugged.

"Still," John said, "I appreciate what Mag's trying to do, but does she really expect this to work? Whoever's inside that pyramid is probably a little shaken, but I don't think a polite request is going to get them to give up?"

"Carrot," Nolan said idly, staring intently at the ongoing drama in the harbour.

"Huh?" Rheus said. "What do vegetables have to do with this?"

"What I believe he's saying," John said, trying to head off an insult from Nolan, "is that Mag's offering them a carrot, before threatening them with a stick."

"Ah... okay," Rheus said, still a touch confused.

Nolan just turned to him for a second to give a quick glare, then returned to watching the harbour.

"Doesn't look like they're interested," Krane commented. "I wonder what the *stick* is going to be?"

"If it involves us having to re-deploy those troops," Nolan turned to John and growled, "you and I are going to have a long talk afterwards."

“Hey, I had nothing to do with this!”

“I don’t think that’s going to be an issue,” Venarya spoke up. “Look!”

They all looked to Mag to see what was going on. John wasn’t sure if it was a trick of the light, but he could swear that he saw a faint white glow forming around the small dragon’s wings.

He quickly put the spyglass up to his eye to get a better look.

Not only did that confirm that it wasn’t a trick of the light, but the glow was increasing in intensity. Soon, it was strong enough to cast illumination on the ships just below.

“I wonder what she’s planning on-”

John didn’t have time to finish the sentence.

Within the span of a second, the light coalesced into two glowing spheres, which then proceeded to launch themselves from either wing on to the side of the pyramid.

The explosions could be heard from the shore.

“What in blazes was that?!” Harker exclaimed, his ears ringing as he tried to shield himself from bits of rock that had been forcefully ejected from the structure.

The swearwords being uttered around the deck showed that his men were thinking the same thing.

“Okay, settle down, everyone!” Harker called out, trying to regain control of the situation.

“And check those explosives to make sure they’re not damaged!”

“What the hell!” Nolan blurted out. “Why’d we even bother making explosives if we had that thing around?”

“How much damage did she do?” Krane asked, his own spyglass pointed toward the water.

“I’m just checking our ships to make sure they’re not in any trouble down there.”

“Looks like a fair chunk of the top three levels got cut into,” Nolan reported. “Doesn’t look like she managed to completely breach the walls, though.”

“Still, that must’ve rattled whoever’s inside that thing,” John said.

-Surrender. Or death.-

John involuntarily shut his eyes tightly from the slight pain Mag's words caused.

"I almost forgot there was a reason that Mag only spoke in one word sentences," John tried to joke. "Well, let's hope that her not-so-subtle threat flushes the occupants of the pyramid out."

"Holy crap!" Rinard near shouted, still keeping his head low, even despite the distance to the pyramid. "Did you know she could do that?"

"Can't rightly say I've spent much time interviewing vrans," Petrarca said. His spyglass still glued to his eye, he said softly, "Well, well, well... won't you take a look at that?"

"Huh? What?" Rinard stood up enough to be able to use his spyglass, and exclaimed, "What in the world are those things?!"

"Up there, sir! Movement!"

Harker looked to the top of the pyramid and saw movement. Several humanoid shapes stood close to the edge. Some had their hands up in surrender, while a couple others looked like they were being carried by their companions.

"Looks like at least two dozen of them up there, sir."

"What? How?" Harker said, perplexed. "That pyramid's huge. Where's the rest of them?"

"Maybe dead when the pyramid went down, sir?"

"Perhaps."

"Also, I don't think that's what we need to be wondering about right now, sir," the marine said, trying to get a closer look with his spyglass.

"Come again?"

"We don't really have a good angle, but take a closer look at the enemy, sir."

Harker did as the marine suggested. Within a second of putting the device to his eye, he swore, "What in the world..."

The rumours, as ridiculous as they had sounded, were correct. The enemy looked to be nothing more than large anthropomorphic cats.

Harker wondered what the next move was going to be. *Did Mag expect them to retrieve the enemy from the top of the Pyramid?*

That was answered shortly when he heard, *-Down there-*, and looked up to see Mag gesturing to the first dry level of the pyramid.

Faster than he could have thought possible, the enemy descended one level lower in a simple jump.

Harker blinked in amazement. *Well, I guess they are cats, after all.*

Level by level, the man-like cats made their way down, until they stood on the level where Harker had commenced his assault. Three of them were also being cradled and carried, presumably injured.

“Those things are fast, sir,” the nearby marine said. “I don’t like this.”

Almost in reaction to his statement, the cat creatures all sat down, with the injured being laid down gently next to the group. Harker tried to read the expressions in the alien faces as best he could. He had expected to see something akin to burning hatred shining in their eyes. But, best as he could judge, all he could decipher was what appeared to be hopeless dejection.

“My instincts are telling me not to worry, but this does seem a little bit easy,” Harker agreed. “Even if we did have help.”

“Would be easy enough to pull up next to them and just blast them, sir,” the marine said softly. “Goodness knows they deserve more than that for the grief they’ve caused everyone.”

-Harker-

Judging from the fact that everyone else, including those on the other boats, were all now staring towards him, he assumed that that had been a general broadcast.

“Yes?” he spoke up, not sure if Mag would even be able to hear him from that far up.

Mag pointed at the prisoners, and said one word, *-Peace-*, before turning and flying back to shore.

The marine next to him gulped, “Think she heard us, sir?”

“Well, even if she didn’t, I’m not going to cross her,” Harker said. “Signal three of the ships that still have ramps to go secure that first level again, and then secure the prisoners on one of the ships that’s not carrying any explosives. Under heavy guard, of course.”

“Yes, sir,” the marine said, running off to relay the orders.

“I’ll be damned,” John said. “This whole thing was almost too easy.”

“Considering our track record, I’ll take any win I can get,” Rinard said. “Plus, doesn’t look like we lost anything, other than those six ramps.”

“I’m sure we can get those back for you,” Krane said sarcastically. “But, I’m certain the men will be thrilled to hear that they didn’t impact company profits.”

“Hey, did you *want* a battle?”

“Now, children,” Venarya chided them. “Let’s just be happy with the current situation.”

Venarya’s group had now migrated to Rinard’s tower to get a closer look at the action, now that all notions of danger seemed to be off the table.

“He started it,” Rinard muttered softly.

“Looks like Mag is headed back to us,” Rheus said, so engrossed in the events occurring on the ocean that he hadn’t even noticed the friendly bickering.

John turned his attention back toward the approaching vrang. “Is it just my eyes, or is she still glowing ever so slightly?”

It was Nolan who spoke up, “I think you might be right on that count. Let’s hope she’s got whatever that is under control.”

“I wouldn’t worry about that,” Venarya assured them, as Mag drew nearer.

A few moments later, Mag landed gracefully on the platform next to the group.

The glow seemed to have dissipated for the most part. But, every so often, John could see small traces of light dance over her wings. Her eyes, for as much as her face could convey any kind of emotion, gave her the appearance of being exhausted, or even in some sort of pain.

She said nothing, but made her way to Venarya and took her hand.

Long moments passed in silence as the two communicated soundlessly. As they waited, John could help but stare at the light playing across her wings. Whatever residual energy was still at work here, he hoped it wasn’t dangerous. Just in case, he tried to edge his way backwards toward the railing surreptitiously.

Finally, both Mag and Venarya released hands and opened their eyes. Mag silently nodded to the group, then launched herself into the air and disappeared into the night faster than John could have thought possible.

“What was that about?” Rheus spoke up.

“She was tired, and needed time to recover what whatever it was she just did,” Venarya explained. “She suggested that we try to communicate with them, to see if we can get any more information on whoever’s behind all this.”

“That should be easy enough,” Rinard said.

“She also indicated that they probably don’t speak a language that’s widely known.”

“That would make questioning them a little difficult,” Sarasel said. “How does Mag know this, though?”

John tapped his head, “Psychic powers or something like that.”

“I see,” Sarasel said. “Then how are supposed to communicate with them?”

“She indicated that their language may be related to one of the dialects that Doyle has knowledge of,” Venarya said.

It took John only a split second to figure out what Venarya was up to, and before Doyle could say anything to reveal her possible confusion, he spoke up, “Ah, yep, that could work. What do you say, Doyle? Willing to give it a try?”

Doyle may have been tired, but she was still sharp and caught on to the fact that she was supposed to play along, “I’m willing to try, but I can’t promise anything.”

John had to restrain himself from breathing a sigh of relief. Venarya had made the odd statement for Sarasel’s behalf, apparently. Mag had evidently told Venarya that the strange device that allowed John and his friends from Earth to communicate freely with everyone here would also allow them to talk to these cat-people.

Obviously, it would look extremely odd if everyone in John’s little group could speak cat-talk, so Venarya had chosen the person with the greatest investigative skills to conduct any type of interrogation or debriefing.

He’d have to remember to explain that to Doyle. But, knowing her, she had already figured it out before he did.

“What else did Mag say?” Rinard asked.

“That’s it.”

“That’s it?” Rinard seemed confused. “You seemed to be having quite the mental conversation.”

“She was tired,” Venarya shrugged.

“So, how long is Mag going to be gone?” Nolan asked.

“I’m sorry, but she wasn’t specific on that point.”

“Damn,” Nolan swore. “Considering that whoever’s plotting against us likes to surprise us at every turn, I’m sure we could have used her help again in the near future.”

“About that,” Venarya began, “I’ve got a feeling that, unless a *very* dire situation arises, this was a one-shot type of deal. Whatever that was that she did, it looked like it took a lot out of her. So, don’t make any plans that hinge on expecting something like this to happen again.”

“Ah,” Nolan looked a bit downcast. “So much for our *deus ex machina*.”

John couldn’t help but say, “I didn’t know you spoke French?”

Harker watched as the two ships unloaded their troops. Some immediately dashed into place to surround the prisoners, while the rest secured the immediate area.

Satisfied, Harker signaled the third ship, now holding station just twenty metres off the pyramid, to start making its way in. It had its boarding ramp lowered in less than a minute, and more troops poured out.

The giant cats must have expected what was going to happen next. All it took was a few Cluster marines gesturing with their weapons toward the third transport to convey the fact that they were required to board it.

Some of them picked up their injured, and they all moved quietly with no protest into the transport. On board, they sat quietly in the area indicated by their guards, and the boat pulled away.

“I still don’t know about this, sir,” the marine next to Harker commented. “Think they’re up to something?”

“I doubt it,” Harker replied. “But, let’s err on the side of safety.”

He ordered his ship to be moved to within earshot of several nearby transports.

“Go join the others on the pyramid. Use the ladders and make your way to the top,” Harker called out, once they had gotten close enough. “Look for a hatch or something, and make your way in carefully. Be extremely cautious, and assume there’s a trap around every corner. Make sure there’s no one, or cat, still lurking around in there. And, for the love of all that’s holy, don’t touch *anything*!”

“Looks like Harker’s going to have his boys comb the pyramid for stragglers, or for any other bad surprises,” Petrarca said, spotting Harker’s ship pulling away to join the makeshift prison transport. At the same time, the ships that had been congregated around him, presumably receiving orders, were now headed toward the pyramid.

“On that note, I think we’ll leave you fine military commanders here to complete the operation,” Venarya said. “The rest of us will head back to the Institute for some rest, and to get out from underfoot.”

“Are you sure?” Krane asked, one eyebrow raised. “Don’t you want Doyle to try and question the prisoners tonight?”

“I don’t think so,” Venarya said. “They look like they have injured among them. Have some of your medical personnel tend to them, under appropriately heavy guard of course. With that show of charity, perhaps they’ll be a little more open in the morning.”

“I guess,” Krane shrugged.

“Do you have a secure place to hold them?” Petrarca asked. “The lockups in my ships are sturdy enough, but even we may have trouble holding on to any prisoners that have built-in knives in their hands.”

“The Ranger HQ here in Iathera has a few strong cells we can use,” Krane said. “I’ll send word ahead and have them prepared for us.”

“Sounds good,” Venarya said. “Let me know if it doesn’t work out, though. I have a few buildings that could be temporarily converted for the task.”

“Glad I’m not one of your students, then,” Petrarca laughed. “Thanks. We’ll keep it in mind.”

Chapter 12

“Why do I get the feeling that my choice of accommodations wasn’t particularly random?” Doyle asked, picking up her bag and shouldering it. “I take it you want me to observe her?”

Both Rheus and Sarasel were now back at their respective quarters, while Doyle had returned to Venarya’s manor to retrieve her bag.

“It’s not that we don’t trust Sarasel...” Venarya began.

“-but we kinda’ don’t... yet,” John finished.

Venarya shot him a dirty look, “She appears well-intentioned. But, I believe you have a saying in your world regarding what a certain road is paved with?”

“Plus, while she seems nice, who knows where her loyalties lie?” John said. “Besides, your skill at this type of sneaky stuff is the reason my sister liked you so much.”

“Point taken, and thanks... I think,” Doyle said.

“Think of it as being back in college,” John grinned. “You and your new roommate can stay up late eating ice cream and having pillow fights.”

This time both women shot him dirty looks.

“Roommate,” Doyle repeated the word, ignoring John’s extraneous commentary. “Wow, haven’t had one of those in a while. Well, I’ll see what I can ascertain about her, and hopefully figure out if we have any cause to worry.”

“I doubt she has ulterior motives, as the Sisterhood seems to need us more than we need them at this point,” Venarya said. “But, better safe than sorry.”

“Agreed,” Doyle said, as she headed to the door. “I’ll wait for your summons in the morning then.”

“Sounds like a plan,” John said, suddenly realizing that it was going to be pretty apparent to Doyle that he wasn’t about to depart for his non-existent quarters, and he really didn’t want her to be speculating as to his sleeping arrangements.

Thinking quickly, he grabbed his coat from the back of a nearby chair and slipped it on.

“Jacket, huh?” Doyle turned to them before opening the door, a rare grin on her face. “You two lovebirds cold up there?”

Venarya just blinked in surprise, while John just stood there, mouth agape.

Finally, John managed to say, “How...”

Doyle winked, “If I couldn’t figure that one out, I would have expected you to hand me my termination papers.”

“But... how?”

Doyle’s sly grin stayed in place. “Don’t stay up all night,” was all she said as she opened the door and left.

Jensen woke up to a tapping noise. It took him a moment to realize where he was, but he was grateful for the fact that at least he wasn’t sleeping on the hard shell of a sacra again.

The noise sounded again, and he opened his eyes and saw Yazril standing at the doorway of his room, her hand lightly knocking on the doorframe.

He sat up, the covers falling down to reveal a shirtless chest.

Yazril paid it no mind, as she said, “Hi Jensen. Sorry, but my meeting ran a little late. How are you feeling?”

“That sleep did wonders, I have to say,” Jensen replied, stretching. He panned his head around the room looking for Zodra, but she was nowhere to be seen. Admittedly disappointed, he turned back to Yazril, “I take it we’re ready to head off back to Iathera?”

“I am, but we’ve got one last piece of business to attend to,” Yazril said. “Do you remember my offer from before?”

It took Jensen a second, but he quickly realized she was referring to the proposal regarding strengthening the defenses of his mind.

“Ah, yes, I’m ready to do this whenever you are.”

“Now, are you sure you wish to commit to this?” Yazril asked. “You do have the option of choosing not to, if you want?”

“To be honest, I don’t see much downside in it,” Jensen shrugged. Thinking quickly, he added, “I mean, *are* there any risks associated with it?”

Yazril shook her head, “Next to none. You have a greater chance of some unknown woman running up and randomly seducing you, to be frank.”

“I see...” Jensen said, trying to figure out if she knew about the little tryst and was making a joke, but she kept an earnest face the entire time. “Well, if you think there’s negligible danger involved, then I’m willing.”

“I do,” Yazril nodded.

“Okay, let’s do this then,” Jensen said. “I’ll get changed and meet you in the big room outside.”

After donning his clothes and gear, he walked out to meet Yazril. The subject of his not-so-hypothetical tryst was still nowhere in sight.

“Where’s Zodra?” Jensen tried to act casual, looking around for her. “I thought she’d be back as well. Wanted to say goodbye.”

“Probably got delayed somewhere,” Yazril said, seemingly lost in thought and not paying much attention to him.

“Something wrong?”

“What?” Yazril seemed to snap back to reality, and replied, “Oh no, just thinking about the best way to go about this.”

“Isn’t it pretty much just me sticking my hand in another one of those magic box things for a few minutes?”

“Not quite,” Yazril shook her head. She explained, “This procedure’s a little more involved.”

“Exactly how much more involved are we talking about here?”

“Well, for one, you can’t be awake for the duration.”

“Say what?”

“It’s purely for your own safety,” Yazril assured him. “If your mind is conscious, it compounds the difficulty of the procedure. We don’t want to cause you any unnecessary discomfort, or worse.”

“I’ve gotta’ admit, you’re not selling me on this,” Jensen said. “I mean, you guys *have* done this before, right?”

“The Syrilo have done similar procedures many times, which is why we’re recommending you not be awake,” Yazril said. “The first test subject reported agonizing pain during the operation. But the Syrilo assure me that all subsequent procedures were performed on unconscious subjects, with no discomfort reported afterwards.”

“I see...okay, well, I’ll take a leap of faith and trust the Syrilo on this,” Jensen said. “Now, how exactly are you proposing to render me unconscious? I’m really hoping it doesn’t involve an oversized novelty mallet?”

“Nothing like that,” Yazril said, not understanding the reference. “You’ll take a draught just prior to the procedure, which will safely put you to sleep. We’ll wake you right after the operation.”

“Sounds fine on that count,” Jensen said. “Now, I couldn’t help noticing that you kept using the words *procedure* and *operation*. In my world, those tend to suggest cutting me open and working on me...”

Yazril looked mildly surprised, “No, nothing of the sort at all. All the work will be done via external devices, distantly similar to the device you used to learn the language here.”

“I see,” Jensen said. A long moment passed before he continued, “Let’s do this, then. Where to?”

“Right here,” Yazril said, walking up to a section of wall containing a sealed door similar to the main entrance to the building.

Jensen watched as she knocked on the door, causing it to open and revealing stairs leading downwards. This whole time, he had assumed that this building was just Zodra’s home. Apparently it was quite a bit more than that.

“Follow me,” Yazril said, leading the way.

“Tell me the truth about something?” John said, using a hand to brush the water out from his hair.

“What’s that?” Venarya asked.

“Is this really one-way glass?”

Finally alone, the two of them were now enjoying the creature comforts of Venarya’s private indoor pool. Totally enclosed by a geodesic dome, the fact that it appeared to just be made out of plain old glass always nagged at the back of John’s mind, considering that fact that they never bothered with swimsuits.

Sidling up to John, she looked at him with a mock teary-eyed look, “Why? Are you ashamed of me?”

“Funny,” John said. “I just don’t want Rheus or some Ranger passing by and getting an eyeful. Also, you are disturbingly good at performing that facial expression. I’ll have to remember to stop giving you the benefit of the doubt sometimes.”

She stuck her tongue out and splashed him with water.

“Now that we’re finally alone again,” she said, “do you really want to discuss the finer points of home construction?”

“Isn’t that pretty much the same line you fed me last time?”

Bringing her face to about an inch away from his, she grinned in reply, “It worked before, didn’t it?”

“Any trouble?” Rinard asked, looking up from the pile of papers he was going through to address the newcomer.

“None, sir,” Nuretz replied. “They went into their cells as quiet as night.”

“What about the injured ones?” Krane asked, opening his eyes from a chair in the corner.

“The medics were a bit freaked out by the whole deal, but there were no issues,” Nuretz said. “All of the injuries appear to be minor, they said. Maybe a slight concussion on one of the cat-people, but that’s the worst of it.”

“Anything else noteworthy?”

“Not yet,” Nuretz shrugged. “Harker’s got the troops combing the pyramid. But, aside from some weird-looking equipment, they haven’t found anything too strange yet. However, considering the size of that thing, they’ll probably be wandering through it at least for the duration of the night. Possibly several. So, we may get a surprise or two yet.”

“What’s your assessment of the work Harker did tonight?” Krane asked.

“Better than most,” Nuretz said. “Kept his wits about him when we had those unexpected changes in plan. Can’t ask for more than that.”

“Good,” Krane said, settling back down in the chair and closing his eyes. “I’ll have to remember to give him a commendation or something if we get out of this alive. As for you, go get some sleep.”

“Will do, sir,” Nuretz said, opening the door to the makeshift office. “I’ll make one final check on those cats before I hit the sack, though. Also, hate to admit it, but those things freak me out looking at them.”

After Nuretz left, Rinard commented softly to himself, “You know, considering how many times he’s been to that blasted swamp and back, you’d think he’d be the last person to be uncomfortable around giant human-sized pets.”

“Mmm,” Venarya mumbled, opening her eyes and seeing John sitting up in bed. “What are you doing?”

“You hear that?”

“What?” Venarya was instantly awake. “I don’t hear anything.”

“Exactly,” John grinned. “I think we might finally get a night of uninterrupted sleep.”

Venarya punched him in the arm before closing her eyes again.

“Idiot.”

Chapter 13

As cramped as the Shark-class submarine she had used to get to Narad had been, the rickety old tub on which Dalja was now a passenger offered even less in terms of luxury accommodations.

The fact that the captain had chosen to hug the coast on the way to their mystery destination was particularly pleasing, seeing as how he had an almost constant bucket brigade of crewmen bailing out water from somewhere in the hold.

When the ship had started sailing south, her initial assumption had been that they would be headed to another staging point in Narad. But, the extended journey which now had them sailing east along the southern coast had indicated otherwise.

She wondered where her and the Kierdan spy, Kesomi, were headed, but chose to feign being uninterested.

They were now sailing past Kierd itself, and Dalja didn't consider that as an option for a possible landing. If it was, Rush wouldn't have sent them back in a barely seaworthy vessel, much less have needed a spy to infiltrate it, seeing as how Athash and Rush were effectively in charge of the kingdom.

Plus, the fact that they were on a ship, rather than trekking across land, implied that they needed to get on the other side of the Caldain Ridge mountain range. The mountains ran north to south through the entire length of the continent, leaving only Kierd and Narad on the western side, and the other five kingdoms to the east.

Their destination had to be one of those five.

The kingdom of Rakavi could be crossed off the list of possible destinations, seeing as how it was to the extreme north, and it would have been far quicker to sail in the other direction to get there. Even if they were for some reason trying to approach Rakavi from the far side, she was also certain that even the self-assured Kesomi would have doubts as to whether this so-called ship could even make it that far.

Of the remaining four kingdoms, only three of them touched the coast, leaving Sindjal landlocked. Sure, there were river systems that cut through to it from the coast, but anyone trying to sneak in using those would certainly be intercepted by patrols.

However, despite having no borders touching the sea, Sindjal was undoubtedly the most important of all the kingdoms. The brokerage houses there reportedly had more revenue than several of the smaller kingdoms combined.

Dalja also remembered hearing that, generations ago, this entire continent had been one large empire, with the capital located right in the heart of Sindjal.

Admittedly, history was not a subject that interested her to a great degree, and Dalja couldn't remember why the kingdom ended up being split into seven pieces. Regardless, she did know that various past rulers had tried to re-unify the kingdoms under their banner using either force or diplomacy, but had obviously failed.

Athash, however, seemed to have a decent shot at actually accomplishing it, she thought as she remembered the fragments of the war plans she had seen in his tent. Nesseris, the capital of Sindjal appeared to be lined up next in his sights. No doubt he was currently in the process of redeploying forces to be able to pounce on the central kingdom, but how?

She remembered the war plans mentioning an assault from the north. To do that, Athash's forces would have to march through Rakavi. But, with nearly the entire top half of the kingdom being a frozen wasteland, she suspected that the Lord General's troops would have little trouble in terms of resistance. If Athash moved fast enough and with enough troops, the relatively few soldiers that Rakavi fielded would be probably be forced to flee south to Sindjal, before their mutual defense treaty could be used to get reinforcements.

The resulting pandemonium from hordes of refugees fleeing south would more than likely be enough of a distraction to allow Athash's forces to mount a second attack against Sindjal via Narad using Ling's Passage. Sure, the Caldain Ridge mountain pass was currently fortified from the other side, but the expected chaos might just give Athash the edge he needed to break through.

As for the kingdoms of Jagada, Deso, and Malbis, well, they would have to be pacified as well. Jagada bordered Sindjal to the south, while Deso shared its western border with the landlocked kingdom. Further to the east of Deso lay the kingdom of Malbis.

Malbis would certainly be the last to the party. Jagada, just on the other side of Caldain Ridge from Kierd, would be in the best position to deploy retaliative naval forces against Athash's homeland, once the Lord General's hostile intentions were made clear.

At that point, Athash's offensive would turn into a combination defensive action, tying up valuable forces to defend Kierd.

Dalja began to realize that the spy's mission was probably to aid in securing some sort of pact that ensured that all three nations would be otherwise occupied, and unable to focus any resources on attacking Kierd itself while Sindjal was being laid to waste.

The easiest way to do that was to try to create a secret alliance with one of the three kingdoms, who would be expected to keep focus away from attacking Kierd itself.

By her reasoning, Kesomi's destination must be either Jagada or Deso, as either one could be promised a share of the spoils in return for holding a second front for Athash. Malbis was simply too far away to be of much use, and as such couldn't be depended on to occupy the attention of the other two kingdoms to a great enough extent.

Of course, once all the enemy kingdoms had been pacified, she had no doubt that Kierd would discard their alliance and then turn on their partner in crime.

Now, if her suppositions were correct, she was sure that the alliance itself had already been formalized. There was no way that Athash or Rush had decided to wait this long to propose such a deal.

To that end, Kesomi's assignment was probably to deliver critical information regarding timing of the operation.

She now had an important decision to make.

Tossing the rock she had been carrying in the air and idly catching it, she pondered her choices.

From Rush's body language, she gauged Kesomi to be quite a prominent asset in Rush's covert dealings. That fact alone meant that he could be a treasure trove of information if captured. And if in the process of capturing him, she managed to kybosh his current mission, then that would be a bonus.

Plus, if her assumptions regarding how important Kesomi's assignment was, her next action could possibly have the potential to change the entire course of the war. Then again, it might do nothing.

Her initial mission had been simply to gather information and then slip away, but an opportunity like this couldn't be passed up. And, in any case, there were contingencies to handle situations such as this.

Well, looks like we get to put those to the test.

Dalja then tossed the rock into the water, as if bored of toying with it.

She had spotted a dolphin breaking the water several times during the journey, and feverishly hoped it was one of the pair that were assigned to the Shark submarine. When the ship had pulled out from the harbour, she had done her best to be as conspicuous as possible without drawing attention.

With any luck, the dolphin would retrieve that rock and bring it back to the submarine captain, who would then decipher her message and take appropriate action.

Alternatively, that was just a random dolphin, the rock was now sitting on the ocean floor, and the submarine was still waiting for her back at the coast of Narad.

“Ambush!”

Dalja instinctively went into a defensive posture at Kesomi’s warning, as she took stock of the situation.

They had, as Dalja had conjectured, disembarked under the cover of night on to the shores of Jagada. For just over half an hour, they had trekked north through a wooded forest, not spotting any signs of life save for the odd squirrel.

She caught sight of two men approaching from Kesomi’s side, and turned to see a further pair making their way towards her. All appeared to be armed with short blades.

Without waiting for Kesomi to say anything further, and assuming that he could take care of himself, she hurled a knife at one of her attackers, catching him squarely in the throat. Not wanting to risk missing with a second toss and leaving herself defenseless, she dashed forward, dropped to the ground, then rolled to one side.

The remaining attacker adjusted his path accordingly to intercept her, not losing any speed in the process.

As Dalja hoped, he slightly overextended his reach as he attempted to stab downwards toward her. The bandit hadn’t noticed the branch that she had picked up in her offhand during the roll maneuver, and she quickly brought it up to block his blade. As soon as the blade made contact, her other hand brought her own blade upwards, impaling him from the bottom of the chin and into his skull.

She pushed the attacker off her and hopped back up to aid Kesomi, but her eyes beheld the fellow spy leaning against a tree observing her, his own attackers also dead at his feet.

Her eyes flashed daggers at him.

“What?” Kesomi held up his hands in supplication. “You seemed to have it well in hand.”

“Let’s go.”

“We should probably check these bodies,” Kesomi suggested.

“You want to rob them of their rags?” Dalja near sneered. “Rush not paying you enough?”

“They may not be just simple brigands,” Kesomi explained patiently. “All reports say this area should be clear of any people, much less be dangerous.”

“Looks like your reports forgot to tell *them* that.”

“Exactly,” Kesomi replied. “We need to make sure they’re just displaced brigands, and not possible reasons for us to be more concerned.”

“Well, go right ahead then. You seem to have it well in hand.”

“Ah, come on,” Kesomi flashed that annoying smile of his. “Don’t be like th-”

He never finished sentence, as the entire area around them exploded with intense light.

“You idiots near blinded me!” Dalja half-growled, holding the wet cloth to her eyes.

“Well, we got a good look at what you did to those last four, so we weren’t taking any chances,” the captain of the shark said. Pointing to the motionless and manacled form of Kesomi on the forest floor, he added, “Besides, our flares were pointed at him. You just got a marginal hit.”

“Gee, thanks,” Dalja said. “By the way, were those four yours?”

“Nope,” the captain shrugged. “Just in the right place at the right time. For us, at least.”

“Any chance that my friend was correct about them before more than bandits?”

“I doubt it. We gave them a good search, and they were pretty shabby. Even their machetes were rusty. Why there were out ambushing people in the middle of nowhere, we’ll never know. Perhaps they were escaped prisoners or something similar?”

“How’s this one doing?” she motioned to Kesomi. “How long until he wakes up?”

“Those darts we hit him with afterwards had a pretty strong dose of tranquilizers, so he should be out for at least another few hours,” the captain said. “In any case, we’ll have him tied

up and under way before he wakes up. Regardless, you did good. Ready to head back with us, or need another few minutes to recover?”

Dalja mused on that for a moment, then said, “I don’t think so. As far as he knows, I’m still on his side. It might be better for you to let him think you’ve got me captured as well. See if you can get him anxious to cut a deal, before he thinks I can beat him to the punch.”

“What? But where are you actually headed to? Going to try to finish his mission for him?”

“I don’t even know what his assignment was, but I suspect he was carrying information to Jagada’s leaders to coordinate a battle against Sindjal.”

The captain blinked in astonishment, “Come again?”

Dalja filled him in on her suspicions, and the captain listened on.

“Makes sense,” he said. “And, if you’re right, this might throw a wrench into Kierd’s plans.”

“Maybe,” Dalja shrugged. “But I think Rush probably had contingency plans in place. Doesn’t seem like him to risk everything with one messenger, no matter how good he was.”

“So there might be more spies making their way inland is what you’re saying?”

“Maybe,” Dalja repeated. “But, I doubt it. He’s not that stupid, or wasteful. He’ll have something totally different cooked up. This is all beside the point thought. I need to find out what the rest of Athash and Rush’s plans are.”

“You’re going back there?!”

“I was sent here to gather information, not supposition.”

“You don’t think you’re pushing it maybe a little? You’re really hoping to convince Rush with another sole survivor story again?”

“Well, technically speaking, last time I wasn’t the only survivor.”

“You know what I mean,” the captain shook his head in frustration. “You know the kind of grief I’m going to get if I let you go back there without support?”

“You know the kind of grief you’re going to get if you *try* to make me leave with you?”

Chapter 14

“Back in the world of the living, are we?”

Jensen opened his eyes, and immediately wanted to shut them again to stop the room from spinning.

“This feels like the worst hangover I’ve ever had.”

“Here, let me help you,” Yazril said, moving to assist him in sitting up.

One of the Syrilo technicians in the room approached him with a cup.

“Drink this,” the creature said. “It will ease most of the discomfort.”

“Don’t need to be told twice,” Jensen groaned, as he took the cup.

“Most of what you’re experiencing is from the potion used to sedate you,” the Syrilo said, as it watched Jensen drink. “This will counteract any lingering effects.”

“How soon before it takes hold?” Jensen asked, almost mumbling his words. “I’m still rather fond of that dinner I had last night.”

“Within a few minutes. Please don’t get out of bed, or try not to move until the sedation has been fully neutralized.”

“Like before, I don’t need to be told twice on that either.”

As the moments passed, the nausea and general wooziness started to recede. He tried turning his head to find that the room didn’t seem to spin as much. He tried to pass the remaining recovery time examining the so-called operating room that he was in, as Yazril had been in quite a hurry to get started once they had reached the bottom of the staircase.

Aside from a closed wooden cabinet, and a few tables in one corner, there wasn’t really anything of note. The table thankfully didn’t seem to contain any kind of recognizable surgical tools, and he still had his clothes on, so that was a positive at least. The few items on the tables appeared to be several pieces of randomly shaped blue tasrac crystal, the function of which he couldn’t even begin to fathom. Two Syrilo technicians stood next to the table, casually watching him, but staying silent otherwise.

“What time is it now?”

“The sun should be rising in Iathera right about now,” Yazril said.

“So we can head back right after breakfast?” Jensen asked.

“Yes, but consuming any solid food is not currently advisable,” one of the Syrilo technicians buzzed. “Try not to eat anything for at least one hour, to avoid any adverse reactions with the medicines.”

“Well, I’m a big boy,” Jensen said. “I guess I can put off eating for a little bit.”

“We’re headed back as soon as you’re feeling better,” Yazril assured him. “By the time we arrive in Iathera, it should be safe for you to eat.”

“That is acceptable,” the Syrilo concurred.

“Well, feels like most of the bad effects are pretty much over and done with,” Jensen said. “Help me down, please. If I don’t suddenly go weak at the knees and keel over, I should be able to make it back with no issues.”

Yazril looked to the technician, who nodded in assent. She then complied with Jensen’s request, and he was soon standing on his own two feet again.

“How do you feel?”

“Like I had a touch too much tequila last night, but otherwise okay,” Jensen said. “Did I miss anything while I was in la-la land?”

“I did receive an update from one of my agents regarding the assault on the pyramid,” Yazril informed him. “It was apparently an overwhelming success, with no loss of life. On either side.”

Jensen whistled, “Can’t ask for much more than that. How’d they manage to pull that off?”

“I didn’t get too much in the way of details,” Yazril said. “But, there should be a full report waiting for me when we get back.”

“Well, let’s not keep them waiting,” Jensen said. Turning to the Syrilo, “Am I cleared to go? No chance of a stroke or me growing a third arm or such?”

“So, what’s the plan?”

“First thing, we eat some breakfast,” Venarya said, idly leafing through her closet for a dress.

“That part’s sort of a given,” John said. “What next? Do we get everyone assembled here?”

“I don’t think so,” Venarya said. “I’m still a little hesitant about how much information we relay to Sarasel.”

“Makes sense,” John said. “What are you thinking, then?”

“The two of us will go and meet with Nolan and Krane to get a quick rundown on the current situation,” Venarya said. “I suspect that we’ll be given the go-ahead to commence an interrogation when ready. If so, I’m going to make sure Sarasel is occupied studying those documents with Rheus.”

“You trust him to not get sidetracked looking for butterflies or something?”

“He’s a little eccentric-”

“*Little?*”

Venarya ignored him and continued, “-but I trust that the gravity of situation has been impressed upon him.”

“What if Sarasel just gets bored of him and decides to head off somewhere on her own?”

“I’ll make sure some guards are posted nearby, for their protection ostensibly.”

“Okay,” John said. “And while those two are occupied?”

“We, or should I say, Doyle will be conducting the interrogation,” Venarya said. “Now, I didn’t get a chance last night to fully explain, but I trust you understand what’s happening?”

“Something to the effect of me and my crew theoretically being able to speak to those cat-creatures, due to that magic box that’s somehow linked to Mag’s mind?”

“That about sums it up.”

“How sure are you that we’ll be able to talk to them?”

“I’m almost certain, considering that Mag herself told me last night,” Venarya said. “Just remember that only a few of us know how that device truly works. Krane, Rinard and the rest merely believe it lets you speak the local language here.”

“I’ll remind the others as well,” John said. “But, I mean, Krane’s not stupid. Surely he’s not going to believe that Doyle has arcane knowledge of some similar cat-language?”

“Keep in mind that as mysterious as our world is to you, that the same is true in reverse,” Venarya said. “Worst case, I’ll handle any fallout.”

“Well, I’ll try to pull them aside when I get a chance to make sure they know what’s up,” John said. “What about-”

A knock at the door interrupted him.

“At least they waited until we woke up this time,” John said. “You stay here and get changed. I’ll go see who’s there.”

“Okay, I’ll be down in a minute.”

John made his way down the stairs, and opened the door to a familiar face.

“Jensen! When did you get back? And where’s Yazril?”

“Only just now,” Jensen replied. “And Yazril headed back to her house after grabbing some Rangers to get me back here safely. Said she’d be headed to that makeshift command post that we’ve got set up by the docks immediately after.”

“Sounds like we might run into her after breakfast then.”

“Speaking of which, tell me I’m not too late for some grub?” Jensen asked. “Those stairs were murder.”

“Huh? Stairs?”

“Long story, boss,” Jensen said, trying to peek around John into the kitchen. Shrugging, he added, “I’m not even sure if I’ve said too much already. Now, about breakfast?”

“Oh, right,” John said. “Yep, we’re just about to get some tofu going on the stove.”

“John...” he heard a sharp voice from upstairs.

“Or not. Wow, she’s got sharp ears,” John grinned. “Let’s grab a seat in the kitchen. I think I know enough about how stuff works here to at least start the process of cooking. Now, did Yazril achieve what she wanted from her mysterious quest?”

“Truth be told, I’m not sure.”

“What do you mean?” John asked, realizing that, while he could read the labels of the items in the cupboard, he had no concept of what they actually were, much less what they tasted like.

“She had a private meeting somewhere,” Jensen explained. “I was, more or less, taking a nap.”

“Why’d she bring you along then? Lots of danger getting where she was going?”

“Not really, and I think I’m getting close to talking about some more restricted stuff.”

John shrugged, “Par for the course around here, then. Anything you *can* tell me?”

“There might possibly be a hundred-foot centipede monster lurking nearby,” Jensen grinned.

“Don’t they usually have a hundr... ah... I see what you mean,” John said, looking suspiciously at him. “Also, are you joking?”

Jensen just winked at him.

“Hmm... you know what?” John said, turning his attention back to the cupboards full of supplies. “I think I’m going to let Venarya sort breakfast out, before I end up making us oregano pancakes or something.”

“Wise choice,” a voice called down from upstairs.

“I thought Yazril had gotten some exaggerated reports when she first told me, but you’re saying that it’s true?” Jensen asked. “Absolutely no casualties?”

“Well, I figured that it’s about time we had some good luck for a change,” John shrugged, shoveling another spoonful into his mouth, and absolutely not caring about that fact that the dogs were eating the exact same dish. “What did you say this was again, Venarya? It’s delicious.”

“I don’t think the name translates well, but I believe it’s somewhat akin to potatoes and sausages on your world, from what you’ve told me,” Venarya said. Turning to Jensen, she said, “We may have had an easy victory this time, but that just means that our enemy’s probably going to redouble their efforts against us.”

“I fully agree, ma’am,” Jensen said. “All these incidents almost seem like a series of distractions, to be honest. When they do decide to come against us, I’ll expect nothing short of an all-out assault.”

“Doyle had mentioned the same thing to me yesterday, I think,” John said, still eating.

Venarya raised an eyebrow, “And you decided to mention it in a timely manner, I see?”

“Sorry,” John had the good sense to finally look up from his dish and blush. “I was running around quite a bit and it must’ve slipped my mind.”

“Well, we’ll see what conclusions Doyle can draw from the prisoners-” Venarya started to say, when her train of thought was interrupted by a knock at the door. “Looks like our guests have started to arrive.”

With Jensen’s arrival, Venarya had altered her plans slightly.

Immediately after descending the stairs, she had headed straight to the front door to ask the Rangers to summon Rheus, Sarasel, and Doyle. She had explained that, following breakfast, Rheus and Sarasel would head off to the main library to look for any relevant texts. Meanwhile, Venarya, John and Jensen would go straight to meet with the military commanders to find out the lay of the land with regards to the aftermath of the battle.

John wondered which of the bunch would be the first to appear, doubting that the strange pseudo-wizard Rheus would be able to drag himself out of bed after the past few days of non-stop hustle and bustle.

He was surprised to see Venarya leading all three of the expected guests into the kitchen.
“I take it none of you have had any breakfast yet?”

The meal now complete, the group had split to go accomplish their assigned tasks.

Rheus hadn't immediately caught on to the fact that he was supposed to be keeping Sarasel away from them, and Venarya had been forced to put her metaphorical foot down. She had, tactfully, reminded the eccentric man that not only was time of the essence, but that he also worked for her.

John hoped that the small man had truly gotten the message. He muttered out loud as they walked, “I'm not confident that Rheus won't decide that the library's useless and try to come join us.”

“You obviously haven't seen him around books. There's a reason I chose to send him to a place with a lot of them,” Venarya smiled. “Plus, I made sure he got the message. Quite literally.”

“Huh? What do you mean?”

“I slipped a note in his pocket.”

“Back to your old tricks, I see?”

She shrugged, “Sometimes the old ones are the best.”

Walking beside them, Jensen gave them a strange glance, but didn't say anything.

“I'll say one thing,” John mused. “That Sarasel's a tough one to read. I can't tell if she's really here to help, or just keeping an eye on us.”

“She's pretty enough. But, I agree, those eyes of hers are hard as nails,” Jensen said.
“Doesn't seem to be actively working against us, though?”

“That doesn't mean that she's not holding any information back from us,” Venarya countered. “Considering the wealth of historical records that they seem to have access to, I'd have expected them to have a little more insight on their so-called ‘great enemy’, as well as more understanding of those fantastic devices of theirs.”

“Can't fault that line of reasoning,” John admitted. “All the same, she may just be playing her cards close to her chest for now. Same as us.”

“Perhaps. I’m probably just being overly paranoid,” Venarya said, though the expression in her face showed that she didn’t truly believe that statement.

“I think you’re correct in your assumptions,” Doyle spoke up. “If her organization is as secretive and reclusive as you’ve said, they’re only going to divulge enough material as is absolutely necessary. I’ll see if I can get more information from her tonight. Hopefully, she opens up a bit, and doesn’t head straight to bed right away again.”

“Well, as long as she’s not an active threat, I think we should consider ourselves fortunate,” Jensen said. “We seem to have an abundance of those right now. So far, I count the Kierdan navy, these cat people, and that bunch that took out The Gates.”

“Don’t forget the ones that attacked you on your way to Freewater,” John reminded him.

“I think I may have intentionally blocked those out from my memory,” Jensen shook his head. “My legs still haven’t recovered from all that running.”

“Or those zombie things that I keep hearing about up north.”

“What’s this?” Doyle piped up.

“I keep hearing about those too,” Jensen said, curious. “What’s the story behind that?”

John shrugged, “You’d have to ask Venarya. I barely know more than that myself.”

“That’s a can of worms I’d rather not open right now,” Venarya said. “With any luck, that situation will remain contained to the north long enough for us to deal with our own problems.”

“Can’t argue with that,” Jensen said. “I’m just hoping we didn’t use up our allotment of luck last night.”

“Wake up, beautiful,” Jensen said softly to the sleeping figure in the chair.

“And here I was, hoping they’d keep you,” Nolan muttered, audibly sighing before he even opened his eyes. “That’ll teach me to wish for miracles.”

“I missed you too, boss.”

Nolan ignored him and looked to the others, “Ready to try talking to the prisoners, I take it?”

John shrugged, “*Ready to try* being the key part. Even if we do manage to communicate with them, what’s the chances that they’ll actually be in a chatty mood?”

“Hey, this was you guys’ idea, not mine,” Nolan said.

“I know. I know.”

“Did the soldiers uncover anything of note during their search of the pyramid last night?” Venarya asked.

“They’re still at it, and I’m still waiting for more updates,” Nolan said. “I didn’t decide to sleep in this chair for fun, you know.”

“I figured they’d be done by now?” John said.

“Did you happen to notice the size of that thing?” Nolan responded, one eyebrow arched. “Apparently, the inside of it is also littered with a maze of passageways. They’re having a right old time in there just trying to keep their bearings and avoiding doubling back by accident, from what I understand.”

“But they haven’t found anyone else inside so far?” Doyle asked.

“Not yet,” Nolan said. “But they’ve still got a ways to go. They estimate it’ll take at least until midday to map out all the areas not currently underwater.”

“Not even any dead bodies?” Doyle said.

“Nope, looks like that ragtag band we picked up might have been the entire crew,” Nolan said. “Unless the bulk of them were in the bottom part of the pyramid, of course. But, I doubt that.”

“Why do you say that?” John asked.

“The top level of the pyramid was a massive bridge and control centre,” Nolan explained. “The only enclosed area was a room smack dab in the middle. Well, we figured it was a captain’s office or something. At the least, it might have had some documents in there we could have tried to decipher.”

“Makes sense,” Jensen said.

“Well, it wasn’t,” Nolan said. “First off, there wasn’t any kind of door to get in. Just a bunch of panels. They pried one of them off and turns out it was just a massive shaft running straight down the spine of the pyramid.”

“A ventilation system?” Doyle asked.

“Maybe,” Nolan said. “There were also huge pieces of tasrac running down the length of it, almost like wiring conduit. The techheads from the Cluster tell me that they suspect it’s a control link to whatever mechanism powers the pyramid, and that it looks like it’s all the way at the bottom level. Judging from the power required to keep something that big in the air, I’m

guessing that the entire bottom level, at least, is dedicated to equipment. Regardless, they don't think there's any crew quarters down there."

"That's a ways down, though," John said. "So, it may be a while before we can get divers down there to investigate?"

"They're going to try when the sweep's complete," Nolan shrugged. "But, I don't know if their scuba gear is up to the task. They've got more-than-adequate submersibles and submarines from what I've seen, but those are way too big to be useful. If you're heading back anytime soon, you might see to grab us some from Earth."

"Will it work here?"

"Don't see why not," Nolan shrugged. "Just make sure there's no fancy electronics in them."

"I'll see what I can do."

"By the way, where's Krane and Petrarca?" Jensen asked. "I figured they'd be here in the command center with you?"

"Petrarca's back onboard his ship working on something. What it is, I don't know and I didn't ask," Nolan said. "Krane's over at Ranger HQ talking to Yazril and, incidentally, waiting for you guys. I volunteered to take firewatch here. And, speaking of which, don't you lot have something else more important to be doing besides keeping me awake?"

"Didn't Nolan didn't want to come along with you?" Krane asked. "I hope he didn't feel obligated to stay there? My staff would have alerted us immediately if any updates came in."

"I have a feeling that he needed some quiet time," Jensen said. "He hasn't pushed himself this hard in quite a few years."

"He's doing okay, right?" Krane asked, some concern in his voice. "Not stressed out or anything?"

"If anything, he's better than he has been in quite a while," Jensen smiled. "This kind of stuff is pretty much a welcome change of pace for him. But, I think he sometimes forgets that he's not as young as he once was. He just needs a little rest."

"Well, if you're sure," Krane said, dropping the subject. Looking at Doyle, he asked, "Now, about these prisoners, you're sure you can communicate with them?"

"I can't guarantee anything," Doyle shrugged. "But, I'll certainly try."

“Where are they right now?” John asked.

“Downstairs, in the cells,” Krane said. “Yazril’s down there already waiting for us.”

“Now, about that *us* part...” Venarya began.

Krane raised an eyebrow.

“I’m afraid you, along with any guards down there, will have to sit this one out,” Venarya said. “Sorry, but it’s not my call on this, or else I’d have you there.”

If Krane was curious as to who could give such orders to the head of the Iatheran Institute, his face didn’t betray it.

“No need to apologize,” Krane said. “But, if you start running into trouble down there, yell and we’ll come running.”

“Thanks. Hopefully, we won’t need to.”

“I doubt it, as well,” Krane grinned. “Yazril’s got that giant of a bodyguard with her, so those cats down there are probably petrified with terror right now.”

They descended the nearby stairs, and walked up to a reinforced metal door.

As the door creaked open, John was expecting to see the equivalent of a medieval dungeon laid out in front of them.

It wasn’t.

Bright lights in the ceiling illuminated an extremely large room painted in a clinical white colour. Barred cages lined the other three walls, nearly all of which each contained a single prisoner. The only exceptions were three cages which also held an extra prisoner lying on a cot. John assumed that these were the injured ones from last night.

The cat-people seemed to be fairly calm, considering their situation, John thought. There were no metal cups being banged against bars, nor cries of *Attica!*

Yazril was walking from cell to cell, carrying a basket of full of something. As she reached the next cell, John saw that it contained pastries of some sort. He watched as the prisoner wordlessly took one, without any sort of aggressive actions.

Not that they’d dare try with Garh standing right behind her, John surmised.

However, judging from the worried expressions on the faces of the Ranger guards in the room, it didn’t look as if they shared the same confidence.

“Sorry for not being around to give you your traditional midnight wake-up call,” Yazril jested, looking to them, but still finishing her round of the cells.

Venarya smiled, “Your trip went well?”

Yazril shrugged, “As well as could be expected. I’ll fill you in on it afterwards.”

“Well, I’m glad to hand control of this city back over to you. It was fun, but I’ve got enough to worry about, as it is.”

“Everything okay in the city? I couldn’t get any kind of civic report from Krane,” Yazril said. “This is one of the few times I wish Rinard could have been here.”

Venarya smiled, “Aside from a few vendors asking about when we plan on re-opening the bazaar again, it’s been quiet.”

“Glad to hear it,” Yazril said. She looked over to one specific person in John’s group and said, “You must be Doyle. I’m Yazril. It’s nice to meet you.”

John looked over to where the investigator stood and saw that she took a second to register what was being said to her. Covering a smile with his hand, he realized that she had been staring at Garh the whole time.

“Ah, yes, Intendant,” Doyle recovered. “It’s a pleasure to meet you as well.”

“All set to begin?” Yazril asked, as she delivered the last piece of pastry.

“Ready when you are,” Doyle replied.

She had regained her composure for the most part, but John noticed her still taking furtive glances at the hairy giant.

With reluctance obvious in their faces, the Ranger guards had left the room and now waited upstairs with Krane.

If things really ended up going south, John wondered if their screams for help would even penetrate that thick metal door. Still, remembering how much both Doyle and himself had initially been startled by Garh’s appearance, the giant did appear to be formidable. Should the worst happen, John figured he could at least hold off any attackers until they could escape, or for help to arrive.

Also, John could now get a good look at the prisoners. Had he not already been exposed to the likes of the Syrilo, Duba and his pseudo-werewolf ilk, and Garh, he would have been much more astonished at their appearance. Still, this lot was still far from ordinary.

All of them wore long but simple greyish-green tunics. None of them had footwear. But, it wasn't as if they appeared to need it. If anything, John thought, while remembering their acrobatic feats when descending the pyramid to surrender, shoes would probably hamper more than help them.

A few of them wore jewelry, such as bracelets and decorative armbands, though none of it seemed to be made out of metal. Those that were wearing trinkets also appeared to be mainly female. Or, so John thought, using an upper-body endowment perception skill honed by years of being single and rich.

He tried not to stare too much in an attempt to verify his theory.

Despite his familiarity with the other non-human races on this world, the faces of the prisoners were striking. Looking moreso like large housecats, rather than tiger or lion-like, they even came complete with varied patterns and colours on their fur. Some of the theoretical females even exhibited calico colouring.

Despite their situation, John was sure he could see expressions of curiosity in more than a few of their slitted eyes. Though, the majority of them just seemed to be downcast, unsure of what lay ahead of them.

Yazril looked to Doyle, who then nodded and stepped to the front of the group.

Taking time to look around the room, making eye contact with as many as she could, Doyle spoke, "I wish to speak with you."

A rather large number of ears pricked up, and some of the cats looked to each other with looks of bewilderment, and more of them looked back to Doyle with eyes full of suspicion.

However, no one responded.

"I know you can understand me," Doyle continued. She then repeated, "I wish to speak with you. Please."

A black and gray striped cat who had been leaning on the wall at the back of his cell walked forward to stare at her with a mild look of disdain, but said nothing.

Doyle walked over to with a few feet of the bars, and said, "I just want to talk. No tricks."

“Why should we believe you?” the creature finally spoke. “Nothing but grief has your kind visited on us.”

John wasn't sure what he was expecting, and felt a little relief at the fact that they weren't stuck communicating using some rudimentary pidgin dialect.

He also realized that both Yazril and Venarya would be unable to understand what was being said, so he quietly sidled up to the two of them and did his best to murmur translations.

“Up until you decided to lay siege to us, no one here had ever heard of you before,” Doyle replied. “Why did you attack? What did you hope to gain from this?”

The creature turned away, a look of disgust on its face, and almost snarled, “More trickery. Do with us as you may. No more bargains will we make with your kind.”

The gears started turning in Doyle's head, “Someone else offered you something in exchange for attacking us?”

The creature's eyes flickered for a second at Doyle, but it said nothing other than letting loose a low growl.

“For as much trouble as you've given us, we believe you may be nothing more than a cruelly-used pawn,” Doyle said. “As such, we hold no animosity towards you. Tell us what you know about our enemies, and you'll suffer no further repercussions or punitive actions. We'll even see about repatriating you back to your homes.”

“Or what?” the creature broke its silence. “You'll have your information tortured from us?”

“No. You'll be kept here and treated well,” Doyle stated, as earnestly as she could. “But countless more may suffer while we attempt to find alternate ways to deal with our *common* enemy.”

“Why should we believe you?” the creature repeated its very first words, though less harsh this time.

Doyle was silent for a long moment, then spoke up, “How can we convince you that we're trustworthy?”

“I really don't know,” Krane said, his voice filled with wariness. “Nothing about this seems like a good idea.”

“Considering that we’re already conducting a search of the pyramid, it’s a relatively simple request to honour,” Yazril said, though her face also expressed hesitance. “It may even result in a new ally, while we deprive our enemies of one of theirs.”

“To me, it seems that our enemies didn’t really care if these guys made it out alive or not,” Jensen said. “Plus, who’s to say that even if we flip them to our side, that they have any more of those pyramids? Or any weapons, for that matter.”

“Humanitarianism shouldn’t be contingent on what benefit the recipient can provide for you,” Venarya said.

“Keep in mind that these aren’t exactly starving children,” Jensen said. “They *did* attack us first. They’d probably still be roaming around free-as-a-kite if we didn’t have those wildcard explosives. And, who knows what else they were supposed to do after laying siege to Iathera?”

“To be perfectly pragmatic, the smart thing would be to use heavy interrogation tactics to extract whatever information they may know,” Doyle said. “We lose our position of strength the moment we start bargaining.”

“Wait, wasn’t this was your idea?” John said, confused. “You don’t think we should do what they’re asking?”

“I’m not saying that we should or shouldn’t do it,” Doyle said. “Just that it’s in our more immediate benefit to not comply with their request.”

“But?”

“For potential long term gain, it’s in our best interest to gamble. Especially, considering that our enemies have a tendency to surprise us at every turn, it helps to have a few aces up our sleeves as well,” Doyle said. “Also, like Venarya said, it’s the compassionate thing to do.”

“That compassion may also get us killed,” Krane said. “No offense, Venarya.”

“None taken,” Venarya said. “But, Doyle does have a point. And, it is a fairly straightforward request.”

“True,” John admitted. “All we have to do is take one of the captured cats to the pyramid to help to try and find one of the other cats who went missing just before they surrendered.”

“All the while hoping that our tame cat doesn’t intentionally trigger some failsafe that manages to kill everyone within a ten mile radius,” Krane said. “Forgive me for being skeptical, but this story just seems too convenient.”

“My intuition tells me that it is a sincere request,” Doyle said.

“I’ve also learned to trust that intuition of hers,” John said. Making eye contact with Venarya, Yazril, and lastly Krane, he continued, “But, that said, I can’t really claim to have a dog in this race. My people will go along with whatever you three decide.”

“Well, we know where you stand on the matter, Venarya,” Krane chuckled. “Yazril, if you think it’s worth trying, I’ll support you two.”

“I should have extended my trip,” Yazril tried to joke. After a few long moments, she replied, “Let’s do it.”

“You’re sure about this?”

“Wouldn’t miss this for the world, boss,” Jensen replied, strapping the remainder of his equipment on. “In any case, there’s no way I’m letting Doyle go in that pyramid without me watching her back. Though, I wouldn’t wake Nolan and tell him about any of this until I’m well out of earshot.”

“Funny. Just try to keep the both of you safe,” John glanced toward the rest of the group, assembled in the other end of the room and talking amongst themselves. “No telling what’s waiting for you guys in there.”

“You’re forgetting that we’ll have a full squad with us? Combined with the fact that there’s a few thousand troops already roaming around in there, I’d say we don’t have much to worry about.”

“Still, keep your eyes open.”

“Will do,” Jensen replied, more to placate John than anything else. “There is one thing I’m not sure about, though.”

“What’s that?”

“You think this Ranger outfit suits me?” Jensen did a mock twirl in front of John. “I must admit I’ve gotten rather fond of it. Not sure if I should swap it out.”

“Lack of sleep catching up with you?”

“Oh, that’s right, I didn’t tell you about that part,” Jensen said. “Admiral Krane offered me one of their Marine uniforms. I must say the black does make it look fairly snazzy.”

“I’m really tempted to tell you to wear one, considering that you had me wearing that useless sweat-box of a bulletproof vest when you first got here,” John said, idly brushing at the

Cluster jacket he himself was wearing. “But, I don’t think you want to be carrying around all this weight with the amount of climbing around you’ll probably be doing in that pyramid. This jacket alone is fairly heavy, and I can’t imagine the rest of the uniform being made out of satin.

Though, you are right about one thing. It does look pretty snazzy.”

“Hey, first of all, Nolan was the one that told you to wear that vest,” Jensen countered. “But, I’ll take your word for it. I do remember those Cluster guys huffing a bit when we got to the top of the tower on the way to Freewater.”

“What tower?”

“Long story. I’ll fill you in later,” Jensen said, adjusting the bandolier of knives across his chest. “I do admit to liking the mobility this Ranger armour has. Though, I might be the first Cluster captain to actively wear another outfit’s uniform.”

“Huh?”

“Krane also gave me official rank with them,” Jensen said, grabbing something from inside his coat. “Here, take a look.”

John looked at the badge Jensen held out, then chuckled a bit, “Well, don’t tell Ganz. I think he’s still a bit miffed about that janitor’s uniform he got.”

“What?”

It was John’s turn to say, “Long story. I’ll fill you in later.”

“Funny.”

“You think Nolan might have pulled some strings to get you that rank?”

“Are we talking about the same Nolan?”

“Ah, good point.”

“If anything, I think it was Harker,” Jensen shrugged. “I’m pretty sure it’s only ceremonial anyway. Something on the order of an honorary PhD or something similar.”

“Don’t be so sure. Krane seemed pretty impressed with you. If anything, I think they want to make sure there’s no room for ambiguity if you have to issue orders to any of their personnel,” John said. “At least, that’s what they told me.”

“Say what now, boss?”

“That’s a rather familiar way to address your Admiral.”

“Are you kidding me?”

“I’m pretty sure mine is just for contingency purposes,” John said. “Heavens help us if we get to the point where I have to command all their troops, though.”

“I won’t argue with that.”

“Well, try not to die before me. If everyone else on top has kicked the bucket, I should be able to promote you above me.”

“I don’t think that’s how it works,” Jensen said, making one last check of his equipment.

“Who’s gonna’ argue with me at that point?” John said. “One last question for you?”

“Yep?”

“That cat that was doing the talking,” John said. “By any chance, did they sound like they had a Russian accent to you?”

Chapter 15

“That’s them all right, sir.”

Yalic made his way quietly to the front of the longboat, and sprawled himself down in the bow. Putting the spyglass to his eye, he focused on the waters surrounding the island ahead of them.

Over a dozen of the jet black ships that had spearheaded the attack on The Gates lay anchored just offshore.

Currently immobile, he had to admit that were tempting targets.

However, the number of crew that still appeared to be awake and about on deck showed that the element of surprise might not last long. Plus, the Cluster didn’t really have that many ships on this side of the continent. As such, he couldn’t afford to waste them unnecessarily.

“Looks like you’re right,” Yalic confirmed. “The question is, why are they holed up here? They haven’t even made a defensive formation, or put out any patrols.”

“Could be just cocky, sir?”

“Maybe, but I doubt it. They seemed to know their limits when they attacked us,” Yalic said. “We’re sure this is Grandmaster Minardo’s island, right? I mean, we didn’t just stumble across them here by accident?”

“Positive, sir,” came the reply. “Maybe they’re just a decoy?”

“Could be right on that count,” Yalic mused. “If they did manage to snag something from the Plaguelands, they might have left these guys here to distract us while they hopped off to somewhere else.”

“What should we do, sir?”

“First thing, let’s head back to our ships before the sun comes up,” Yalic said. “We’ll send back one fast scout to make a report to Admiral Ancor, then try to sneak our way west and see if we can spot any other ships in the water. It’s a longshot, but it’s about all I think we can do, short of attacking those ships and besieging that island.”

Chapter 16

“I’m pretty sure I know what the answer is, but I need to ask again,” Krane began. “Are you sure you two want to do this?”

“Absolutely,” Jensen said.

“Can’t talk me out of it, so don’t even bother trying,” Doyle echoed the sentiment.

“Just making sure. Now, no offense to you two, but I need to do this as well,” Krane turned to John. “You’re technically their superior and employer. I won’t hold it against you if you decide to pull them out. And, if anyone does decide to make it an issue, they’ll have me to deal with. Now, are you comfortable with this operation?”

“Comfortable? Definitely not,” John said. With a grin, he added, “But, I’d have to throw both of them in lockup with those cats to stop them from going.”

“Fair enough,” Krane chuckled. “Just making absolutely sure before we commit to this.”

“Understood, and I do appreciate it,” John said.

“Now, I may not know the specifics of what exactly happened down in those cells, but I suspect you don’t want any loose lips regarding this mission?” Krane raised an eyebrow to them.

“That’s a fair assumption,” John said.

“Good. I’ve temporarily re-assigned some of Director Rinard’s personal guards as your infiltration team. These guys are the best we’ve got. They’re extremely good in a fight and know when to keep their mouths shut,” Krane said. “Your old friend Harker’s going to be leading them, Jensen. He doesn’t really have seniority within that crew. In fact, he’s the newest one of the bunch. But they’re professional enough to not mind, considering that Harker’s worked alongside you the most.”

“If he’s the junior man on that totem pole, I feel safer already,” Jensen chuckled.

“Your guide’s in there,” Yazril gestured to the small commandeered building near to the docks.

“With Garh, I’m assuming?” John said, noticing the distinct lack of a giant sasquatch in the immediate vicinity.

“Correct,” Yazril said.

“We’ll wait for you three out here,” Venarya said. “No point crowding her and making her nervous.”

“Yep, don’t want her getting spooked and jumping on top of a shelf, or it may take a while to coax her down with a saucer of milk,” John joked.

“Did she cooperate on the way down here?” Doyle asked, ignoring John.

“No incidents, other than strange looks from more than a few townsfolk,” Yazril said. “She didn’t try to make a break for it, or anything like that.”

“Good, I’d hate to have to play jailor while trying to watch our backs in there,” Jensen said.

“Shouldn’t be much of a worry,” Venarya said. “You’ve got fifty of the Cluster’s toughest with you. Just make sure to bring them back in one piece before Rinard notices them gone.”

“Hello,” was all Doyle could think to say, distracted by the nearby fearsome visage of Garh.

The cat creature nodded politely, though her face was plastered with a suspicious gaze. Her calico colouring was quite beautiful, and John had to force himself to remember that this was a fellow sentient being, not a cute kitty that needed a belly rub.

Putting aside his instincts, John decided to cut to the chase, and turned toward Garh, “Is there anyone that can hear us in here?”

Garh shook his head.

Jensen hissed in a low tone, “He can understand us?!”

“Yes,” John whispered back in an amused conspiratorial tone. “Also, I’m pretty sure he can hear us right now.”

John wasn’t sure, but he thought he saw a trace of humour showing on the giant’s eyes.

Jensen took the cue, and spoke to the cat creature, “We really mean you no harm. Like Doyle here said to your spokesman, whoever put you up to attacking us are probably the same people that have been causing us no end of grief over the last little bit.”

John added, “We have no desire to hold you prisoner for the crime of being manipulated. We’ll stick to the deal we made with your leader, and rescue your friend from inside the wreck of that pyramid. In exchange, you just have to tell us what you know about what’s going on.”

“And, considering that your way home may be immobile for the foreseeable future,” Doyle said, “we’ll see about finding you another safe way back, if you wish.”

“Who taught you our language?” the creature asked, her cautious expression not lessening.

This was going to be a sensitive topic, and John quickly debated with himself on how to answer. A second later, he answered, “Do you know what a vrang is?”

“Yes,” the creature replied, her expression showing a slight mixture of curiosity and bemusement creeping in.

“Well, there’s a resident vrang here that taught it to us,” John said. “How she learned it, we don’t know. Also, please don’t tell that to anyone else.”

“We can discuss this at length afterwards, if you wish,” Doyle said. “But, if you’ve decided to trust us, we should really hurry and make an attempt to rescue your friend? We’ll promise no tricks on our end, if you do the same?”

The creature eyed them for a moment, as if pondering their honesty, then replied, “Agreed.”

“My name’s John, by the way. These are my friends Doyle and Jensen. They’ll be accompanying you into the pyramid.”

“I am Besrut,” she replied. She wasn’t any more talkative, but her expression was noticeably less guarded.

“Nice to see there’s no shortage of crazy missions around these parts,” Harker said. “Can’t wait to see what the next one is.”

“Maybe we’ll luck out and end up having to scout a beach for beautiful women to invite back to a town shindig?” Jensen suggested.

“And maybe orgots will fly,” Harker laughed, referencing the huge creatures raised in the swamps for their meat.

“So, what do you make of our newcomer back there?”

“Which one?” Harker asked, looking at Besrut and Doyle sitting in the back of the ship. “They both seem somewhat intimidating.”

“The one with the furry ears,” Jensen said. “Though you’re not far off point with that statement. There’s been many a grown man who’s cringed at the thought of being called into Doyle’s office.”

“I’ll not doubt you on that one,” Harker said. “How in the world did she know how to communicate with them though?”

“That’s one of those things I can’t talk about again.”

“Ah, fair enough,” Harker said, not pursuing the topic further. “So, we’re hoping to find another one of these cats holed up in there? And bring them out with no bloodshed?”

“That’s the plan. Our friend there’s more familiar with the layout inside, and should be able to track down whoever it is we’re looking for.”

“Provided they’re not dead.”

“There is that, though I doubt that’s the case,” Jensen said. “From what we’ve been told, the missing cat went in the depths of the pyramid to do a damage assessment a few hours before we attacked.”

“Why’d they wait so long to go check on things?”

“Not sure,” Jensen said. “Maybe the area was too hot or unstable or something from the explosion? Regardless, whoever went down there took a bit too long to report back. They were just in the process of organizing a search when we decided to crash the party.”

“What’s the plan?” Jensen asked, the group now standing on the top of the pyramid. Just from the exertion of having to climb those several flights of ladders, he was glad he hadn’t opted to take the heavier Cluster armour. Jensen wasn’t sure if to feel respect, sympathy, or both for Harker and his men.

“Half the squad will go down the hatch and make sure everything’s normal. There should already be Cluster personnel taking a look at the equipment in that control room. In fact, we probably won’t be able to throw a stone in there without hitting someone we know, so check your targets,” Harker cautioned everyone. “Next, Jensen, Doyle and our guest will enter, followed by the rest of us. The prisoner will take point and hopefully lead us straight to the area where we’re supposed to find their comrade.

He continued, looking directly at Jensen and Doyle with a slightly apologetic expression, “I’m afraid I’m going to have to stick you two in the middle of the group, but we just can’t afford to have you crushed by falling debris or worse.”

“Understood, makes sense,” Jensen said, while Doyle nodded her assent.

“Now, ah,” Harker said, glancing at Besrut, “she can’t understand me, right?”

“Not at far as I can tell,” Doyle said.

“Okay, listen,” Harker said. “If things go sideways and she leads us into some kind of trap, we are going to try to take her out immediately before things get too hairy. You two grab a dozen of the men and run like hell out of here. Get any troops that you pass to cover your escape.”

“Prudent, but hopefully that won’t be necessary,” Doyle said.

“Agreed, but I’m not taking any chances,” Harker said. “Best to be prepared.”

“True,” Jensen said.

Raising his voice to address the squad around him, he asked, “Any questions?”

No one said anything, and Harker ordered, “Okay, first group move in and secure the area!”

Jensen had lost almost count of how many levels they had descended through the pyramid.

“Forget the beaches. I’d be happy if my next mission just didn’t have a mountain’s worth of stairs involved,” he muttered, remembering his earlier journeys to Supoc and Freewater.

“What’s that?” Doyle asked.

“Sorry, just talking to myself,” Jensen said. Looking around the massive hallway they were now traversing, he asked, “What do you make of this place so far?”

“You mean, how does it compare to the other floating stone pyramids that I’ve examined?” she asked, one eyebrow arched.

“Well, when you put it that way...”

She sighed, “I have noticed a few things. First of all, I don’t think this thing is made of stone.”

Jensen made a show of looking around, “Could’ve fooled me.”

She scowled at him, “Ever been in a real pyramid?”

“Can’t say I have, no.”

“For starters, they’re not this hollow on the inside, for the most part. Sure, they have passages and a few chambers, but the volume occupied by those are miniscule relative to the structure itself.”

“Okay...”

“What I’m getting at is that there were no steel-reinforced beams available back then to help maintain structural integrity.”

“So, you’re saying that, by all rights, this thing should be collapsing in on itself?”

“More or less, yes.”

“Why isn’t it, then?”

“I suspect the superstructure, or hull, is made of some other material,” Doyle explained.

“The stone is probably no more than a veneer.”

“That’s some pretty thick veneer.”

Doyle shrugged.

“Why go to all that trouble? Stone’s not exactly light. Especially when you want the damned thing to float. Why not coat the superstructure with sheets of thin metal or wood?”

“You’ll have to ask her,” Doyle said, gesturing to Besrut at the head of the group.

“Point taken,” Jensen said. “What else have you noticed?”

“Well, if go down another level, I think we’d better have some scuba gear handy.”

“Right, so that’s flooded,” Harker said, looking at the submerged stairwell. “Doyle, care to have a word with our guest?”

Doyle moved her way forward and spoke to Besrut, “You think your friend is down there?”

“The next level down houses the closest place with machines containing their own power. Most of everything else stopped working when we crashed. We were hoping that the machines would be able to give us at least a basic damage report.”

“You thought you may have been able to get this thing moving again?”

The cat shrugged, “Doubtful, but it was our only option.”

“Would your friend have risked going down there?”

“The chamber that he needed to reach was about fifty metres away.”

“Could he hold his breath that long?”

“He had a small container of air with him.”

“Would it last this long? He’s been gone for more than twelve hours now.”

“No, the air would only last for a few minutes I think,” Besrut shook her head. “But, once inside, the door to the chamber could be sealed shut. Then, a pump mechanism could be used that should fill the room with air and remove the water.”

“Why would such a mechanism exist? Is the pyramid intended to submerge?”

“I don’t really know,” Besrut shrugged. “Perhaps it was useful during construction, and too much effort to remove afterwards?”

“Interesting,” Doyle said, thinking. “Which way does the door to the chamber open?”

“Outwards.”

“I see. Pardon me a moment. Jensen, follow me,” Doyle said, walking away from the group.

“Yes?” Jensen said in a low voice, catching up to her.

“You heard all that?”

“Sure did,” Jensen said.

“You’re thinking the same thing I am?”

“I think so, and it’s not more musings about stairs.”

“Funny,” Doyle said. “Pressure difference?”

“Yep,” Jensen confirmed. “The weight and pressure of all that water is going to make to next to impossible to open that door, unless we can get Besrut’s friend to turn off that machinery and flood the room again.”

“You’ve got a couple of big assumptions in there,” Doyle cautioned him. “First of all, you’re assuming that our trapped cat is actually in there. Secondly, that they’re alive and conscious. Thirdly, we have no idea if we’ll be able to communicate with whoever’s in that room, short of banging on the door. And, even if we do, I highly doubt that these cats know Morse code. Lastly, considering that this cat went down there to check on the equipment, we’ll have to assume he’s some kind of qualified engineer. To that end, wouldn’t he have thought of that plan already?”

“Good points,” Jensen admitted. “What are you suggesting then?”

“I’d say the first thing is that someone needs to go down there and perform reconnaissance. We need to make sure that our appreciation of the situation is accurate. It wouldn’t do if it turns out that our cat simply drowned down there, unable to get the door shut in time and too far away to swim back.”

“I don’t know if I’d bring up that supposition just yet to Besrut,” Jensen said. With a sigh, he added, “I just hope the water’s warm when I hop in there.”

“You’re volunteering, I take it?”

“Yes, and don’t act all surprised.”

Doyle raised an eyebrow at him, but an amused expression showed on her lips.

“You did a fine job painting me into this spot,” Jensen chuckled. “We’ll need someone who can speak their language, in case there’s a panicked cat screaming out from behind that door, and I’m guessing you’re in no hurry to go yourself?”

“And get my hair all frizzy? Don’t be silly.”

“So, you understand how to use that?” Harker asked, gesturing to the small tube Jensen was holding.

“If I start running out of air, I put this end in my mouth, pop the other end off, and try to breathe through it like some kind of magic straw?”

“Well, I’d say you got the important parts correct,” Harker chuckled. “Just remember to exhale first to clear the tube. Don’t want your first breath to be a watery one.”

“One question though?”

“Go ahead.”

“How’s this device actually work?” Jensen looked genuinely perplexed. “There’s no way this little thing can hold twenty minutes of air. Not that I’m complaining, mind you.”

“To be honest with you, I have no idea. You’d have to ask one of the eggheads back home about that,” Harker said. “But, they do work. That much I can tell you.”

“Fair enough, I guess,” Jensen shrugged. “Anyway, I’m just glad we remembered to bring towels. Ready to dive in?”

“After you, my friend.”

“Gee, thanks.”

Taking a deep breath, Jensen dived in and began the swim to the doorway. Hearing the muted splash behind him, he made sure Harker was experiencing no difficulties before continuing along.

The light tied to his waist provided only scant illumination by the time he got to the doorway, and his lungs were starting to ache. Rather than trying to prove any bravado, he grabbed the air tube from the makeshift necklace and equipped it as he was told.

Fair to say, Jensen did have his doubts as to if the darn thing would actually work, and whether he was going to have to make a mad dash back to the entrance. However, he was pleasantly surprised to find that it worked as was described.

Turning, he saw that Harker had also equipped his breather, and was in the process of unhooking a metal rod from his waistband. Getting close to the door, Harker swung the bar four times, waited a few seconds, then swung it again.

After a long minute, there was an answering bang from the other side.

Harker swung again.

Again, there was an answering knock.

Harker then pointed back to the entrance, and both men swam back to regroup with the rest of the team.

“Obviously, we can’t be a hundred percent sure it’s him, but something’s alive in there.”

Besrut gave what appeared to be a sigh of relief.

“The question is,” Jensen continued, “How do we get him out? Even if we could communicate to him that he needed to flood the room and swim out, he may drown by the time the door even opens. In fact, he might well be aware of that, and that’s why he never came out.”

“Also, there is the possibility that the device to reflood the room and open the door is now malfunctioning,” Doyle said.

“This could be true,” Besrut said, the relief in her face starting to give way to despair.

“What about tunneling?” Jensen interjected. “You said that the stone is possibly a veneer over another stronger superstructure? We know the outer walls are thick as all hell, but they probably need to be. I can’t imagine the floors would be that solid?”

“It’s worth a try,” Doyle said after a moment of thought. “Explosives are certainly out of the picture for this.”

“Agreed,” said Jensen. “And to be perfectly honest, I’m a little hesitant to use even pickaxes in case the ceiling comes down on the poor guy. Plus, with my luck, we’ll punch right through the one retaining wall holding up this entire pyramid. All in all, I’m fine with coming up with the idea, but I don’t think you want me handling any sort of construction project.”

“Do you have any combat engineers nearby?” Doyle called out to Harker.

“Should be at least a dozen in shouting range,” Harker responded. “I see to round some up for you.”

“Looks like we’re almost through!” one of the engineers called out to Harker, who then nodded to Jensen.

Jensen walked over to the nearly complete hole, still amazed by the ingenuity involved in making it. Had it been left for him to figure out, he didn’t think he could have imagined anything else than smashing their way through the floor with heavy sledgehammers.

Instead the engineers had swiftly, but meticulously, examined the problem and arrived at a workable solution.

The first step was to determine the thickness and makeup of the floor. A large auger had been brought in, equipped with a long and narrow drill bit.

After what seemed like an eternity of drilling, the head engineer gave his report to Harker. It looked like they were in luck. Despite the fact that there was about six feet of distance between the two floors, the middle four feet was just empty air, with a one-foot thick ceiling and floor sandwiching it. It still wouldn’t be easy, but it was a far sight better than drilling through six straight feet of stone.

Harker had then suggested that they attempt to get Besrut to communicate with the trapped cat through the hole, which had proved a success on multiple fronts. Firstly, it had confirmed that Besrut’s friend was still alive and that the chamber was watertight for the time being, alleviating most of her fears and she was now more visible relaxed. Secondly, the trapped cat had been initially panicked, but was now calm and awaiting rescue, moreso after some small morsels had been lowered through the hole.

With that done, the engineers methodically drilled a series of small holes along the circumference of the intended larger hole. After examining their handiwork, they then secured straps in a netlike fashion around it, looping them around the bottom, then fastening it to a portable hoist.

After their use of quite elegant and precision tools and techniques, Jensen was a little surprised to see the engineers then break out old-fashioned sledgehammers and giant chisels, which they then used to unceremoniously remove the last connecting bits between the drilled holes.

As they broke the last of the supports, Jensen could see the pseudo-manhole cover drop a few inches into the hole, only to be caught by the hoist.

“Well, that’s half of the job done,” the chief engineer remarked.

“It’s ok, they won’t hurt you,” Besrut assured the new cat as he climbed the rope ladder out of the hole, now looking more than a little panicked at the small legion of Cluster troops surrounding them.

He didn’t speak, but still looked around furtively, as if wondering if he had climbed out a frying pan and into a furnace.

“Come with us,” Doyle spoke up with a smile. “We’ll get you some food and medical attention.”

After a second the cat blinked, mouth agape, at Doyle, after presumably registering the fact that she was speaking their language.

“It’s safe, I promise,” Doyle continued to assure him, offering a hand to finish the last rungs of his climb.

He looked at Besrut, who nodded at him.

After another moment of hesitation, he took Doyle’s hand and clambered out.

“Follow us,” Doyle said, gesturing to Harker to lead the way out.

“You almost gave me a heart attack just now,” Jensen whispered to her as they walked. “He could have clawed your throat out.”

“Calculated risk,” Doyle shrugged. With a teasing voice, she added, “Besides, you’d have been the one in trouble if that happened.”

“Funny.”

“I try to take a little nap and you go and do WHAT?!”

To say Nolan was livid would have been the understatement of the century.

“It’s okay,” Doyle held up her hands to defend Jensen. “I essentially ordered him to do it.”

“Really, now?” Nolan asked, smelling a rat. “So, he had no intention of going in there?”

“I’m right here, you know,” Jensen grumbled.

“Yes,” Doyle remained adamant, ignoring Jensen. “I let him know that *I* was going in, no matter what. Now, what options does that leave him?”

“I don’t know if *easily manipulated moron* works wonders for my reputation,” Jensen continued muttering.

“Agh... fine. But... why?” Nolan groaned, hands on his head, and also ignoring Jensen. “You had an army that you two could have sent to do this.”

“An army which doesn’t speak their language,” Doyle countered.

“I give up,” Nolan groaned. “Fine, then. What did you manage to find out?”

“Nothing, so far,” Doyle answered. “We haven’t questioned him yet.”

“Say what?”

“He needs medical attention,” Doyle said. “Besides, the whole point of us rescuing him was to prove to his companions that we could be trusted. I have a *slightly* nagging feeling that we’d be sending mixed messages if we started interrogating him straight away.”

“You’ve got a point, I guess,” Nolan admitted. “But, now what?”

“I’ll meet with Yazril, and go over our options,” Doyle replied. “Though, I suspect we’ll need to interview our hopefully now-friendly cats, and see if they have any knowledge they can cast our way. Jensen’s welcome to follow along with me, if he wants.”

“Gee, thanks,” Jensen said, finally receiving any form of acknowledgement. “I might as well, seeing as how the rest of the team’s disappeared. Where’d John and Venarya make off to anyways? I would have expected to see them here waiting.”

“Some messenger came by, and the two of them scampered off,” Nolan shrugged. “I think Rheus and Sarasel may have headed off to the library or something to look for anything they may have missed the last time they camped there. Just as well. Don’t need any more of you trying to sneak into that pyramid.”

“In that case, I’ll either go with you, Doyle, or I can keep Nolan company here,” Jensen jested. Looking over to Nolan, he asked with a grin, “Any preferences, boss?”

Chapter 17

“I think I may have somehow angered the god of walking uphill,” Jensen murmured, as they trudged up to Yazril’s mansion. “At least I should be thankful this place is a tropical paradise, and not Siberia.”

Yazril had quickly agreed to questioning the spokeswoman for the cats, but had insisted it be done at her manor, as to not give it the impression of an interrogation.

“You don’t see Besrut complaining,” Doyle said in a rare joke.

Jensen just glared at her.

The Rangers guarding the front door made way for them, their faces not betraying any expression at the strange group.

Yazril led them to the room, and bade them to take a seat.

“Help yourselves,” she beckoned to a spread of pastries and other finger foods laid out on the tea table.

Doyle translated for Besrut, who then followed Jensen’s lead in filling a plate with snacks.

Once they were all seated, Yazril opened up with, “Please, tell us your story.”

“I take it you’ve got a workable plan to convert our mining facility to some sort of planetary shield, then?” Venarya asked.

“Nothing that grand,” Tiolth laughed. “And not quite yet. But, be ready to move on this in about two weeks. I’ll get a list of supplies to you before that.”

“As long as there’s nothing too esoteric in there?”

“I wouldn’t worry too much about that. Focus more on getting a good group of trusted engineers in. You may want to pop by the Old Man when you get a second and make sure your little friend’s available,” Tiolth replied, looking at John with a slightly raised eyebrow.

“Uh... sure,” John said, trying to recover quickly. “It’ll be a lot easier now that Smiljan’s allowing me to connect straight to his portal from here.”

“What’s this now?” Venarya asked, a tinge of a frown on her face.

“It’s safe,” was all Tiolth said with his ever-present smile.

“Okay, then,” Venarya said, relaxing.

John, a little surprised at her accepting that at face value, opted to keep his mouth shut and examine that particular idiosyncrasy later.

“Now, you’re sure these modifications of yours will work?” Venarya asked. “I really don’t need the Institute blowing up right now.”

“I’ll try to avoid having that happen,” Tiolth grinned. “However, I suspect you may have bigger worries soon.”

“Come again?”

“You know that little war that’s going on up north?”

“I’ve heard of it.”

“Well, the Citadel’s in a lot more danger than anyone currently thinks. I’m a little surprised that it’s still standing, frankly.”

“Come again?” Venarya repeated.

“The Citadel thinks that the bulk of the enemy army is currently besieging them. That’s only about half true, and I mean that quite literally,” Tiolth began. “In fact, the other half of the army seems to be lying low for some reason or the other.”

“Just how big is this other half of the army?” John asked.

“I’d say, conservatively, minimum twenty thousand.”

“How come no one’s seen these troops before this?” John asked. “Did they just ship them in?”

“No, they’re literally lying low. That is to say, they’re hidden deep inside a few lakes to the northeast of the Citadel.”

“Say what? Like hiding inside submarines you mean?”

“No, I mean just that,” Tiolth said. “They’re standing around the bottom of a couple of lakes on the far side of the Citadel’s territory.”

“What? Now I’m really confused.”

Venarya chimed in, “Sorry, my fault, Tiolth. With all the other craziness happening, I never got a chance to fully explain the situation to John.”

Tiolth looked at John and grinned, “Well, no time like the present to bring you up to speed. How much do you actually know?”

“Other than Ganz mentioning something about fighting the undead or some such nonsense up there, not much.”

Tiolph chuckled, "Well, honestly, he wasn't quite that far off."

"Say what?"

"Well, not quite zombies, but close enough for the differences to be academic," Tiolph raised his hands in mock surrender. "But, let's start at the beginning, and I'll try to give a brief recap of events."

"Can't say I'm not intrigued, now that I know Ganz and Rheus weren't hitting the bottle too hard."

"Almost half a year ago, small towns to the north of the Citadel started to get raided," Tiolph began. "Now, normally, this would have been discounted as a pack of organized bandits operating in the area."

"But?" John prompted.

"But," Tiolph continued, "the raiders weren't interested in any sort of material goods."

"Go on."

"They left all valuables behind, and, in fact, put entire villages to the torch in their wake, complete with said valuables," Tiolph said. "However, they left the villages entirely depopulated. There weren't even any bodies left behind."

"I see..."

"Yazril had gotten reports of these raids as well," Venarya interjected. "First thing we thought was that perhaps slavers were operating in the area. But, that didn't make any sense on further examination."

"The whole leaving all the valuables behind thing?" John asked. "I can't imagine even the most adamant slaver going out of their way to not loot anything."

"That, and it didn't really make any sense to take slaves from there. Or, to be frank, anywhere on this continent," Venarya said. "There's no such market here, or even in the Southern States. Any slaves would have to be transported back across the ocean, where, I'm sure slaves would be easier to acquire."

"And the whole *no bodies* thing didn't sit well," Tiolph jumped back in. "Even the most careful slaver band would cause at least mortal injuries to a few victims during a raid. Plus, they certainly wouldn't cart the dead away."

"Makes sense," John said. "What happened then?"

“The raids continued, and the Citadel sent out patrols to try to stem them,” Tiolth said. “Some of those patrols even came back, complete with stories of being attacked by monsters.”

“I mean, considering that we just arrested a bunch of cat people, that just seems like another Saturday night in these parts,” John said. “Heck, those patrols could have run into some of Garh’s relatives looking for a snack. No offense to Garh.”

“True,” Tiolth laughed. “But, in this case, the monsters appeared almost human. The only visual differences were a series of thick black veins all over their bodies. However, they were entirely uncommunicative, and viciously unrelenting in their attacks.”

“Some sort of sickness maybe?”

“I guess it could be tangentially compared to a case of rabies from Earth,” Tiolth explained. “But, these... creatures were capable of working as a cohort to great effectiveness. Also, the defenders lost quite a bit of morale when they started seeing familiar faces among the attackers.

“Within a few weeks,” Tiolth continued, “all surviving villages had retreated to the Citadel itself, and they then issued an official call for help from Iathera.”

“Wow...,” John said. “I didn’t realize it was that bad. But, considering what could possibly happen if this situation spills into the rest of the continent, why isn’t anyone else helping?”

Venarya looked a bit uncomfortable at that, “Politics. There’s a lot of history and politics that we don’t have time to delve into right now. But, suffice to say, there’s quite a few people who won’t shed any tears if the Citadel falls.”

“But still...”

“I’m sure they’ll be more than willing to pop in and help once the Citadel’s on its last legs,” Tiolth commented. “Afterwards, I’m also sure they’ll be more than willing to carve it up its corpse among themselves.”

“Ouch,” John said. “Now, I realize this was the right thing to do, but why was Iathera willing to help?”

“That’s another long story, but the gist of it is that we entered into a mutual defense pact with them long ago to preserve the greater peace in the area.”

“I see,” John said, “Anything else I should know?”

“Not you as such,” Tiolth grinned, turning to Venarya. “I suspect Yazril’s relayed a particular bit of intelligence to you regarding the command structure of the attackers?”

Venarya’s eyes narrowed, and she paused a moment before asking, “The bear?”

“The bear,” Tiolth nodded.

Venarya’s gave a small sigh of resignation as she responded, “Are you sure?”

“Positive.”

“You’ve seen it?”

“Yes.”

“Damn.”

That was one of the rare few times John could recall Venarya swearing, which bewildered him even more than the last few lines of this conversation.

“This are those same bears you talked about a while back?” John asked, combing his mind to remember that short conversation he had had with Venarya a while back.

“Yes, but I still can’t fathom how one of them managed to survive,” she replied. “Especially for this long.”

“If they’re not the same, the resemblances are uncanny,” Tiolth interjected.

“Did they fight their last war with zombies as well?” John asked.

“No,” Venarya said. “Which was one of the reasons I was prone to discount the theory that they were the same.”

“I’d bring that theory back up to full price, if I were you,” Tiolth said. “At this point, I’d need *very* strong evidence to prove that they’re not.”

“How are any of them even alive?” Venarya asked, slumping back in her chair. “None of this makes any sense.”

“In my opinion, that’s academic right now,” Tiolth said.

“What happened at the end of this war?” John asked. “Why is it so hard to think that some of them survived and managed to stay hidden away?”

“Long story, again,” Venarya turned to him, “and one I was hoping I could forget. I’ll tell you about it later, I promise. I just need to get my bearings about me.”

John had to bite his tongue to avoid saying *no pun intended, I presume?*

Turning back to Tiolth, she asked, “Why attack the Citadel? They weren’t even involved in that war.”

“What better place to forcibly recruit an army than somewhere that no one cares about?”

“But to what end?” Venarya asked, almost in exasperation. “That was over five hundred years ago!”

“Some things aren’t that easy to forget,” Tiolth said. Shrugging, he added, “Or, it could be just a convenient distraction for our enemies.”

“And where did it even come from?”

“Same reproductive process as everything else, I figure,” Tiolth said.

Venarya glared at him.

“Down, girl,” Tiolth grinned. “One obviously slipped through the cracks.”

“How?”

“Hard to even guess at that, honestly,” Tiolth said, scratching his chin. “The end of the war was well, to be blunt, quite thorough.”

“Don’t remind me,” Venarya said. “In any event, we need to change our outlook and policy on this war. First, though, we need to figure out what their end goal is, and/or who put them up to this.”

“Considering that the answer to that first question entirely depends on the answer to the second, I’d say it may be a pointless exercise,” John said. “Not to say we shouldn’t change our stance on this war, mind you.”

“I entirely agree,” Tiolth grinned.

“I’m guessing you have something up your sleeve?” Venarya asked.

“I may have a trick or two that might help out,” Tiolth said.

“I’m going to get quite cross if you don’t stop that.”

“Sorry, couldn’t help it,” Tiolth laughed. “But, let me see what I can do. At the very least, I’ll try to figure out a way to block them from heading further south. Just a word of warning, though. I’d advise you to convince Yazril to try to convince Citadel to evacuate.”

“Is that all?” Venarya asked with a raised eyebrow.

“Whatever trick I end up using, it’s going to be bad news for anyone in that area,” Tiolth cautioned. “Also, it keeps them from inadvertently supplying the enemy with reinforcements by dying.”

“Can’t argue with that,” John said.

“Get all the civilians out at least,” Tiolth said. “Once I’m ready, I’ll let you know, then you can pull the remaining troops.”

“I’ll try, but this might be somewhat of a hard sell.”

“I have faith in you,” Tiolth grinned. “Also, there’s something else...”

“What?! Evacuate them?! To here?!”

“Believe me, I know,” Venarya said, trying to calm down Yazril. “You also know I wouldn’t be asking this lightly.”

Yazril groaned, “First, a waterchild, and now this.”

It was Venarya’s turn to exclaim, “Wait, what?!”

“Huh? What’s a waterchild?” a confused John asked.

“I don’t think it’s an immediate worry. Doyle and Jensen will explain when they get back from escorting our friendly cat back to her quarters,” Yazril said. “Sorry, John, it’s a long story, and you’ll have to wait.”

“Song of the day, it seems,” John chuckled. “No worries. Seems we have more immediate problems, anyway.”

“About that,” Yazril said, sighing. “Where do we even begin? I mean, you want us to evacuate *everyone* at the Citadel to Iathera? Including all the refugees that have flocked there?”

Venarya nodded, “Yes, we’ll soon have to make sure not a single person is left there. For now, we can evacuate the civilians.”

“Can I ask why?”

“From what I gather, the entire area around the Citadel will be rendered inhospitable,” Venarya said. “Hopefully temporarily.”

“Right,” Yazril put her head in her hands. “How do I even sell that to the Citadel?”

“Don’t let them know that we’ll be the ones behind it,” John suggested. “I mean, technically we don’t even know what precisely is supposed to happen. Tell them that your spies have gotten word of some sort of superweapon, as well as a whole mess of reinforcements headed their way. Be as vague as possible.”

“I’ll see what I can do,” Yazril said in resignation, slumping into the chair. “I take it that this will also have the effect of cutting off southern and eastern access for the enemy?”

“Exactly. Or, at least that’s what we’re hoping.”

“Can’t they just go around the west side of the Citadel?” John asked.

“Not that easy,” Venarya said. “The mountain range that the Citadel is built into is next to impassable. A lot of sheer cliffs and areas requiring engineers, which I’m sure they’re short on. They’d have to trudge north quite far to find a way through.”

“Well, they also apparently don’t need air to breathe, according to our friend. What about going east and just walking into the ocean, then just walking around to the southern coast?”

“They won’t be doing that there,” Venarya said. “Trust me.”

“We’re not just making this someone else’s problem are we?” Yazril asked. “An army that size moving north will still be a danger to those up there.”

“If all goes to plan, that army won’t be that size for much longer,” Venarya said. “And, assuming we’re really lucky, we may be able to put a stop to them altogether.”

“Plan?”

“Sorry, but I can’t share it right now,” Venarya frowned apologetically. “I’ll give you the details as soon as I can.”

“Fair enough,” Yazril sighed. “Well, I’ll see to start getting this evacuation in order. The hardest part is going to be convincing the Citadel to actually do it.”

“Don’t be so sure,” Venarya said. “Sounds like they’re in more of a desperate situation than even they think. Stress to them that there’s an enemy reserve force just as large, if not larger, as the army they’re currently fighting.”

“You’re absolutely sure about that one?”

“Positive.”

“Well, whatever plan you have, make it a good one.”

“Just out of curiosity, what plan is that exactly?” John asked. “How are you intending on stopping this army?”

“Tiolth and the Old Man aren’t the only ones with aces up their sleeves,” Venarya replied, somewhat grimly. “Calling in a five hundred year old favour may prove troublesome though.”

“You don’t say,” John gulped, remembering her age despite her youthful looks. “Let me know if I can help.”

“I will,” she smiled. “I may have to take a little trip though. A request like this isn’t the sort of thing you send a message for.”

“I’d imagine not,” John said. “Also, I couldn’t help but notice that you didn’t mention my upcoming trip to Yazril?”

“She’s got enough to worry about,” Venarya replied. “Plus, I don’t think Tiolth wanted it advertised.”

“Fair enough,” John said. With a chuckle, he added, “Though, I’m hoping me getting invited to strange places isn’t going to become a general theme. I’m still recovering from that trek through the swamp to meet the Old Man.”

“What makes you think Tiolth’s not taking you someplace perfectly normal?” Venarya asked with a smile.

“Are we talking about the same Tiolth? I wouldn’t be surprised if I ended up on that giant moon of yours this time, to be quite honest,” John remarked. “Heck, maybe I’ll run into Einstein this time.”

Chapter 18

“The Rangers had no idea what this thing is, and to be quite frank, I’ve no clue either,” Nuretz said. “Figured I’d run it by you first to see if you wanted it sent back home for study, or let the Institute have a crack at it? Or, perhaps, our friend in the swamp? Not that I’m looking forward to another trek in there again so soon.”

“Where did you say they found this?” Krane asked, not letting his eyes off the small silver box in his hands.

“On the walkways on top of The Gates. Or, at least that’s what the note said,” Nuretz explained. “Apparently, there was some heavy fighting there, and the Rangers managed to dispatch quite a few of the attackers before being pushed back. The attackers cleared out their dead afterwards, but looks like they missed this little thing.”

“It’s prettier than the other ones I’ve seen,” Krane remarked, still looking at the device. “I like the little designs they carved into the casing.”

“You know what that thing is?”

“Quite so, old friend,” Krane said, holding the device up for Nuretz to observe. “See that little ball suspended in the liquid inside? And, see that little arrow painted on it? Notice how it always returns to point in the same direction?”

“Yes,” Nuretz said, looking through the small window at the top of the device. “Looks like it wants to point Northwest.”

“These devices are, from what I know, tuned to always point to one particular spot, no matter where you are,” Krane explained.

“I see what you’re getting at,” Nuretz said. “You mean the attackers used those things to find their objective in the Plaguelands?”

“That’s still supposition,” Krane said. “But the existence of this device certainly seems to indicate that.”

“But, do these devices always point to a patch of ground somewhere, or could they also be pointing to some other device?”

“That part I’m not sure on, but it’ll be relatively easy enough to figure out where the thing is actually pointing to, eventually,” Krane replied. “As far as I know, it points to a location. But,

you could be correct, and this particular device could be pointing to some unknown relic or similar. And, if said unknown relic was, say, moved by an enemy force..."

"If that's the case, I certainly won't complain about having a way to track down the attackers."

"Agreed," Krane said, with a frown starting to creep into his face. "But, something still isn't sitting well. Now, I'm not that familiar with how these devices are created, but I'm going to assume that you need to have visited the destination area to get everything set up--"

"And if they were already there once before undetected, why not just accomplish their goals then? Or, just sneak in again?"

"Exactly. Something doesn't quite add up," Krane said, thinking for a moment. "Take this device to John or Venarya. Tell them everything I've told you. Have their people take a look at it."

"Will do, sir," Nuretz said. "If you don't mind me asking, how do *you* know so much about it?"

"I have one," chuckled Krane, pulling a less ornate metal box out from his jacket. "As does Director Rinard. You never needed one, if I recall."

"Come again?"

"Ours point to the fortress that the Old Man has in that swamp of his."

"Ah."

"Yazril's agreed to unlock all the cells, so you'll have the run of the floor if you need," Doyle said. "It's not much, but we hope that you'd consider yourselves guests for the time being, not prisoners."

"It is appreciated," Besrut replied. "Thank you."

"I hope you understand why we can't let you leave the building just yet," Jensen supplied. "There's a lot of scared people out there looking for anything to lash out at for the recent events, and we'd rather they not focus their attention on you."

"I understand," the cat said. "I'll make sure the others understand as well."

"Besrut!" a voice called out.

They turned to look for the source and saw the cat they had rescued waving for attention.

“Yes?” replied Besrut, as the group walked over to him.

“You explained to them what happened?” he pointed to Doyle and Jensen.

“Yes.”

“There’s something else they must know.”

“Starting to wish you’d never decided to come here?” Jensen jested. “Only a few moments to decide before we get to Venarya’s place.”

“I admit, the simplicity of my previous life does seem appealing right now,” Doyle replied. “But, as the kids say, you wish.”

“How about you guys?” Jensen turned to their Ranger escorts. “All the excitement getting you yet?”

One of the Rangers looked at him with a grin, “Not on your life, sir.”

“Glad to hear it,” Jensen said. “And no need for the formality, please. I don’t even know how much longer I’ll be allowed to wear this uniform, seeing as how I’m not even officially a Ranger.”

“About that, *sir*,” the Ranger’s grin didn’t drop as he handed him a note. “The captain asked me to give you this. Was going to give it to you when we got to Lady Venarya’s place, but now seems more proper.”

Curious, Jensen took the note and read it, eyes widening a little.

“What?”

“Something wrong, *sir*?”

“Is he sure?”

“Totally,” the Ranger replied. “If you give a command, the only one that can override it is Stelson himself.”

“You guys all okay with this?”

“Well, we can promise to give you a good dunking in the bay if you let it go to your head.”

“If it comes to that, I’ll deserve it,” Jensen laughed, “I’ll make a point of not ordering you guys to walk John’s dogs.”

“Are you sure you don’t need any help in there?” John called out.

“I’m okay, but thanks,” Venarya replied from the kitchen. “Take a few moments to relax before the others get back.”

“Thanks,” John said. Leaning back into the couch, he spied Venarya bustling through the kitchen, and a sudden pang of guilt swelled up in him. “Also, there’s something I need to tell you.”

“Yes?”

“You know the Old Man?”

“I’ve heard of him.”

John took a deep breath, as he almost struggled to say, “This might be a good time to tell you that the Old Man’s currently back on Earth. Please don’t throw anything at me.”

“I was wondering how long it would take you to tell me.”

“Wait, how did you know?”

“Are you sure that’s what you want your statement of apology to be?”

John blushed a little, then said, “I mean, I’m sorry for not telling you earlier. I wasn’t sure how many people he wanted to know.”

“Well, your instincts were somewhat noble, at least,” Venarya said. “Now, what did you learn from this?”

“Don’t lie to you?”

“Good boy.”

He started a little, as he didn’t notice Venarya had crept over to give him a kiss on the forehead.

“Now,” Venarya said, “go wash up before they get back.”

Chapter 19

“Thanks again for doing that little errand for me,” John said. “I appreciate it.”

Shortly after washing up, a knock at the door had heralded the entrance of Doyle, Jensen, and for some reason, Nuretz.

“No need for thanks,” Nuretz waved it away. “I won’t keep you all too long. I’m assuming that what I’m going to say will be relayed to you two,” he indicated Doyle and Jensen, “so I’m going to forego the cloak and daggers this time.”

“A fair assumption,” Venarya said. “Go on.”

“Fleet Admiral Krane asked me to deliver this to you,” Nuretz said, passing the device to Venarya, as he recounted the prior conversation.

Gears turning in Doyle’s head, she asked, “Tell me, Commander, have you ever used a compass?”

“The things that those egghead drafters use to draw circles? Can’t say I’ve had much cause to need one.”

“As I thought,” Doyle said, his eyes going distant for a moment. “I’ll have to speak to Ganz further on this.”

“Just don’t spread the story too far,” Nuretz cautioned. “The Old Man likes his privacy. Believe me on that one.”

“We’ll be discreet.”

“Appreciated,” Nuretz said. “If there’s nothing else, I’ll leave you lot to it.”

“That’s it for now,” Venarya smiled, getting up to escort him out. “Try to get some rest, and there’s also a takeaway bag for you. Don’t let it get too cold before you eat it.”

“I won’t, Lady Venarya,” Nuretz said with a rare smile. “Goodnight, folks.”

After he left, John muttered, “As if we needed more monkey wrenches thrown into the mix right now.”

“It may be a blessing in disguise,” Doyle countered, thinking. “This may answer a few nagging questions I had. If you can take me back home later this evening for a little bit, John? I need to follow up on a few things.”

“Not a problem. Nolan wanted me to grab some scuba equipment and some other stuff anyways,” John replied. “Where’s Rheus and Sarasel, by the way?”

“I made arrangements for them to show up a little later,” Venarya said. “That’ll give us time to hear the story from Doyle and Jensen. After that, we can decide how much to let them know.”

“I’m surprised Rheus wasn’t champing at the bit to get back here,” John said. “Surely they must be tired of going through those musty old books by now.”

“You severely underestimate him,” Venarya smiled. “Sarasel may not share his obsession with books to such a degree, but she seems to have immersed herself in the task for the time being. In any case, I hedged my bets by ‘suddenly discovering’ some interesting tomes from my private collection and sending it off to them, along with some food.”

“Fair enough. Though, I hope you sent more than minced orgot pies, for Sarasel’s sake,” John laughed. Turning to Doyle and Jensen, he said, “Well, guys, let’s hear the story before we get gatecrashed.”

“To begin with, we found out where that pyramid came from,” Doyle began.

“That’s good news at least,” John said. “Was the hidden mountain theory correct?”

“Not even close,” Doyle said. “Venarya, do you know what the Windrose Barrens are?”

“Yes,” she supplied. “It’s a particularly nasty patch of ocean far to the southeast, I believe. Lots of reefs and rocks everywhere. Covers quite an extensive area, if I remember correctly. Plenty of dangerous and unpredictable weather there as well. Ships totally avoid the area.”

“Makes sense,” John said. “Giant, hovering pyramids are just the thing to weather out storms and avoid crashing into reefs with.”

“And, with no ships going anywhere close to the place, where better to hide?” Jensen supplied.

“Indeed,” Doyle said. “Supposedly, there’s a community of forty three of these pyramids nestled in there, according to our now-friendly cats.”

“How many?” John sputtered. “We barely managed to defeat one of those things!”

“Supposedly, they’re non-hostile and just want to be left alone,” Jensen said. “Hence, them hiding out there.”

“Could’ve fooled me,” John said. “What made them turn semi-hostile to us then?”

“That’s where this thing called a ‘waterchild’ comes into the story,” Jensen said.

“Yazril mentioned something about that,” John said. “What is it? I mean, it doesn’t really sound dangerous at all from the name.”

“Well, boss, imagine a three hundred foot long manatee with the ability to shoot sonic blasts from its head.”

“I’m sorry, what?”

“That’s pretty much accurate,” Venarya said.

“I’m sorry, what?” John repeated. “I’ve seen some crazy stuff over here, but that takes the cake.”

“You should come with me to Freewater sometime, boss,” Jensen chuckled. “Just remember to bring a change of underwear.”

“Back to what we were talking about,” Doyle said, “About two months ago, this hidden community got attacked by a waterchild.”

“But, there’s forty three of those pyramids though,” John said. “Surely that amount of firepower would have been enough to handle even that?”

“Kind of,” Jensen said. “Usually, those beam cannons of theirs are enough to deter the creatures away. This one seemed determined to stick around though.”

“*Deter?*” John asked, incredulous. “Didn’t just one of those beams vaporize a Cluster warship? Just how tough *are* these creatures?”

“Extremely,” Doyle said. “The beam cannons seem to have minimal effect on them.”

“But,” Jensen interjected, “like a bee sting, if you get enough of them, you kinda’ learn to leave the hive alone.”

“This one, as Jensen said, stuck around,” Doyle said. “It would attack relentlessly, back off after being shot up, then return after a few hours. It kept that up for days, and Besrut, one of our friendly cats, claims that it almost succeeded in sinking three of the pyramids.”

“And things like these are just roaming around the seas here all the time?” John asked, eyes a little wide.

“They are incredibly rare to encounter,” Venarya explained. “And, out of those, only a small percentage involve the creature attacking. Testimonies from the few survivors also indicate the attacks were usually in self-defense. For example, I believe there was an incident where the five survivors claimed that the captain tried to ram the waterchild with his ship.”

“So, they’re sort of like even more gigantic-sized whales, with the ability to blast you out of the water if you tick them off?” John asked. “But why did it attack the cats then?”

“I’m not sure, and Besrut claims they don’t know either,” Doyle said. “They have been a constant annoyance for as long as she can remember. But, like I said, extremely rare to encounter, and they usually get scared off with a few shots from their cannons.”

“How did they get rid of this one though?”

“They didn’t,” Jensen said. “After fighting with the thing on and off for days, they had another unannounced visitor. Namely, a man pulled up to their community in a small boat.”

“How did he get in there?” John asked. “I thought the whole area around it was basically a natural minefield for ships?”

“They’re not sure,” Doyle said. “Perhaps his boat was small enough to maneuver the area safely, or maybe he had detailed maps?”

“Okay, but why didn’t the waterchild just blast him out of the water too? And for that matter, why did the cats let him get close? Sounds like they value their privacy, even under those circumstances.”

“I’m getting to that,” Doyle said. “He had a strange device mounted to the prow of his boat. It resembled a twenty foot mast, with a metal box halfway up, and a red pulsing globe at the top. According to Besrut, the waterchild caught one look at his boat, then took off like a bat out of hell. At that point he started waving to the nearest pyramid, and slowly sailed toward it.”

“I’m guessing the cats, true to their nature, were curious enough to let him approach,” Jensen joked.

“Here’s the really strange part,” Doyle began.

“I’m sorry? *Now* we’re getting to the strange part?”

Ignoring him, Doyle continued, “As the man approached, he started calling out to them in several languages, including their own.”

“Right... I’m assuming that’s still not a widely known language here?”

“No,” Venarya said simply.

“Besrut says, although she’s not altogether familiar with their history, that there are no more of their kind anywhere else, and they’ve been there for at least a few centuries. If not much longer.”

“They don’t know their own history?” John asked.

“I’ll get to that in a second.”

“Okay, go on.”

“Like Jensen said, they were curious enough at this point to let him onboard one of the pyramids and find out what exactly happened,” Doyle said. “He explained that he was an inventor of sorts, and that he had invented a device to repel waterchildren.”

“At this point, what’s another crazy inventor in this world?”

“Anyway, he said he had finally managed to track down a waterchild to test it on, but it scampered before he could prepare the device,” Doyle said. “He managed to finally trace it to that area. And, given how rare it is just to find a single waterchild, he decided to risk the storms and reefs.”

“And how did he know their language?”

“He claims that it was vaguely similar to another language he knew, and it was just dumb luck that they matched up enough.”

“Right,” John said. “And I’m assuming he wanted a little favour in return?”

“Correct,” Doyle said. “He was ecstatic to meet them, and seemed convinced that fate had let him there. He claims that a large number of his people were being held as slaves, and was in the process trying to organize a raid to retrieve them.”

“And, I’m guessing this raid would be a lot more successful if the cats could help by providing a distraction for them?” John asked.

“Correct again,” Doyle said. “He even gave them the device to repel any future waterchild attacks. Said he could always make more, now that he knew it worked.”

“And that’s how we met that pyramid,” Jensen said.

“You said something before about them not knowing their history?” Venarya asked.

“*Those* cats we captured don’t seem to know,” Doyle said. “It seems that the cat leaders weren’t too keen on risking themselves, even after all the help he gave them. They decided to send one of their oldest pyramids. The crew would be made up of quasi-rebellious youth and misfits.”

“They manned it with juvenile delinquents?”

“Not that extreme,” Doyle said. “But, this would be their chance to redeem themselves, according to their leaders.”

“And they agreed to volunteer for this mission?”

“I don’t know if *volunteer* is the right word, from what I understand of the situation,” Jensen said.

“Now for the even more interesting part,” Doyle said. “You remember that cat that we rescued. He was actually one of their more respected engineers. Do you want to know how he ended up in this mission?”

“From your tone, I’m guessing it’s not just to keep the pyramid’s engine running, in case the others decided to joyride it straight into a mountain?”

“He decided to sneak in to where the waterchild repelling device was being stored, to take a closer look at it,” Doyle explained. “The leaders were furious when they found out.”

“I can kind of understand that,” John admitted. “If he accidentally broke it, they’d be defenseless again.”

“True, but he never got caught sneaking in,” Jensen said. “He went to them himself afterwards.”

“What?”

“Upon examining the device, he was convinced it was nothing more than just a fancy light. He claims that the box and pole were just props to make it look grandiose,” Doyle said. “The leaders disagreed with him, to put it mildly.”

“So, he thought they were being duped somehow?” John said. “Can’t say I blame him. This crazy inventor seems to have more holes in his story than his boat should have had going through those reefs.”

“Yes,” Venarya said. “Almost sounds like the waterchild was a trained animal responding to stimuli.”

“Agreed, but that’s not the end of it,” Doyle said. “Our engineer also managed to sneak back in again before he left, switched the light out for a facsimile, then stashed the original one in that pyramid out there.”

“And we have it in our possession now?”

“We will in about an hour,” Jensen smiled. “We’ve sent a team in to retrieve it. Turns out that’s what our cat friend was doing down in the depths of the pyramid. He left it there when we rescued him, just in case.”

“So, if our crazy inventor decides to sic his pet on us, we may have a chance to throw a wrench into his plans?”

“Hopefully,” Doyle said.

“Did this crazy inventor give them his name, by the way?”

“He called himself Lazano.”

Chapter 20

“And here I was, hoping I’d never hear his name again,” Athash muttered. He raised his voice and called out to the guards outside, “Let him in.”

“My Lord General,” the man did a mock bow, as he entered the tent.

“Why are you here, Lazano?” Athash scowled, looking up from the map he had been studying.

“I can’t drop by just to be friendly?” the visitor asked with a grin.

“There’s nothing friendly about any of your visits,” Athash said, looking back to the map.

“Come on,” Lazano said, mock hurt in his voice. “I might start to think you don’t like me.”

“I don’t suppose it’s a coincidence that you came in ten minutes after Rush left to do an errand?”

“Of course not,” Lazano said. “No chance of him making it back here before I leave, no matter how fast he runs. Oh, I’m sure one of his many spies is eagerly chasing after him this very minute to report my presence. But, it won’t matter.”

“Why don’t you want him here?”

“No reason really,” Lazano shrugged. “I just think it’s funny.”

“Any particular purpose to you being here then? Other than playing hide-and-seek with my spymaster?” Athash asked, the scowl still there. “And, any particular reason you’re more irritating than usual?”

“You’ve got me. I confess,” Lazano said with a theatrical hand wave. “Just came to tell you that that nice boy of yours, Kesomi, is probably being tortured for information by the Cluster right now.”

“Say what?” Athash looked up and fixed his eyes on Lazano. “You mean Kesomi, our spy that Rush just sent out?”

“Unless he’s got more than one Kesomi, then yes.”

“And the girl?”

“Don’t know,” Lazano shrugged, a tiny note of annoyance in his voice.

“What happened to them?”

“They got attacked on the hike up,” Lazano said. “They killed the attackers, then the Cluster somehow managed to swoop in and snag Kesomi.”

“How do you know all this?”

“I sent the initial set of attackers,” Lazano said bluntly. “I didn’t figure on the Cluster being part of all this though.”

“What?! You better have a good explanation for all this!”

“Relax. The attack was meant to kill the girl only,” Lazano said, a slightly distant look in his eyes. “Something just wasn’t right about her.”

“Coming from you? That’s hilarious.”

“My employers wanted her out of the picture, and Rush seemed to be sweet on her,” Lazano said. “So, I took matters into my own hands.”

“Are we talking about the same Rush? And how do you even know about her?”

“Do you really need to ask that at this point?” Lazano said, his mocking smile starting to return. “Regardless, you have a problem.”

“Me?! You caused this whole mess!”

“I don’t think so,” Lazano said. “My attack failed quite spectacularly, it seems. And, if my other scouts hadn’t seen Kesomi being hauled away offshore, no one would have known that the Cluster was also trailing them.”

“Agh, fine,” Athash had to shake his head at the man’s twisted logic. “Now what?”

“Now, you need to assume that whatever Kesomi knew, the Cluster now knows.”

“You think Kesomi will break, instead of feeding them misinformation?”

“We have to assume the worst.”

“Do you realize how many plans are in motion right now?” Athash growled.

“Seeing as how I fashioned most of them? Then yes, I’ve got a bit of an inkling.”

“How did the Cluster even know about their mission?”

“Not sure.”

“Why didn’t you intercept whatever ship they had there?”

“As powerful as we are, we don’t maintain a fleet off every inch of deserted coastline,” Lazano said. “Just be thankful that my scouts were able to relay the information back this quickly.”

“So, all this planning was for nothing?”

“I don’t think so,” Lazano said. “Just means we need to shuffle a few things around. Tell Rush what’s happened, and I’ll be in touch shortly.”

Message From The Author

There we go, folks.

I really hope you enjoyed that episode. I know it was a long time coming, and I can only apologize for that. I promise I won't pull another George R.R. Martin again.

On a more serious tone, as I'm writing this, we're currently in the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic. I trust all of you are safe and coping well. I know that a lot of jobs have been lost and quite a few people just don't have disposable income at the moment, which is one of the reasons I chose to make this book free. I'm not rich, by any means, but I don't think I'm in any danger of being kicked to the streets or starving in the near future. I just wouldn't feel right taking the money, considering the worldwide situation.

I know it's not much, but I can hope that my silly book gave you a few moments of respite from reality.

That said, please keep safe.

If you're not doing so well, please reach out to those you know. There *is* someone that cares about you. You can even reach out to me if you need to.

If you are doing well, call up that old friend or relative that you haven't spoken to in a while for whatever reason. Make sure they're okay.

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