# Strange New World

Artifice: Episode One

by

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# Chapter 1

It was definitely chilly in here.

John didn't need to open his eyes to tell that the fireplace had gone out. The good news was that he had at least managed to keep enough of his faculties last night to ensure that he had covered himself with a blanket. The bad news was that those same faculties had failed to tell him to actually sleep on the bed.

*Well, at least I ended up on the couch, rather than the floor this time*, he thought.

With a tired motion he tossed the blanket to one side, got up, and stretched with a weary yawn. A resigned sigh escaped his lips as he then glanced at the corner of the room which, until recently, had contained a small stack of wood.

Shaking off the lingering remnants of sleep, he finally noticed the wind howling outside. Seeing the mid-morning sun obscured by the falling snow was sight enough to make him want to creep back into the not-so-warm comforts of his couch.

*Best take a look at the fences now before it gets much worse. Last thing I need is another skunk getting through and spraying the cabin*, he thought, silently cursing his laziness and wishing that he hadn't put it off since last evening.

As best as he could in his current state, he attempted a short whistle. From the bedroom, he heard what could only be the sound of two bodies jumping off the bed and scurrying toward him.

John bent down and fondly rubbed the heads of the two great shaggy dogs which, contrary to his condition, appeared brim-full of energy.

"Wanted the bed all for yourselves again, and decided to leave me on the couch, I see?" he fondly teased. "Maybe I should see about getting a second bed just for the two of you."

He rethought that, "On second thought, maybe not. Each of you would probably try to stake a claim on a bed apiece, and I'll still be stuck on the couch."

One barked and wagged her tail, as if in response.

"Quietly, Penny", he moaned, one hand instinctively going to the side of his head. "I'm still trying to gather whatever wits I have left over from last night", he added, sneaking a guilty glace at the near empty decanter on the table.

Penny cocked her head and looked quizzically at him.

“I know, I know. It seemed like a good idea at the time. Come, we’ll take a walk, check the fences, and get our… well… my head cleared up.”

With the two dogs trailing behind, he walked up to the closet and opened the door to get a coat.

Then, to his eternal and certainly unexpected surprise, he saw a dragon staring back at him.

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Rheus turned the round stone over in his palm, closely examining it. The material itself was nothing remarkable, and appeared to simply be a common rock that one would expect to encounter anywhere. However, the strange geometric engravings were a novelty he hadn’t seen before. It certainly didn’t resemble any written language he’d ever seen, and more so, it seemed to trigger a sense of unease in Rheus.

*Just my imagination*, Rheus thought to himself.

“Wherever did you find this, Mag?” he asked.

-*Far*-, he heard her reply.

“I’m guessing this was the reason for your extended trip?’

-*Part*-

“As obscure as ever”, he joked fondly, “but what am I supposed to do with it?”

-*Watch*-, came the reply, as she held out a taloned claw and beckoned for the item to be returned.

He handed the strange rock back, and watched as she walked over to a stone arch that seemed to be haphazardly embedded with an odd, blue crystal.

Mag then stood in front of the arch, closed her eyes, and contorted her face as if in deep concentration.

Rheus watched on, confident that she wouldn’t put him in any danger. Plus, his curiosity had managed to get the better of him.

This was mainly due to the fact that the portal she was attempting to open didn’t require any strange rocks to activate, and furthermore, that portal was supposed to only be coupled to his quarters. He continued observing as the portal slowly triggered; the outer arch glowing an incandescent blue, and the inside a swirling mass of white light. The swirling mass of light

gradually dimmed and coalesced into a shimmering window. As the shimmering settled into a stable image, it finally allowed Rheus to view the portal's new destination.

It was most certainly not his quarters.

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Admittedly, it wasn't a very big dragon. Not like the ones in stories, at least. Still, the creature was not minute, and appeared to be just over eight feet tall. A crocodilian head sat perched atop an elongated neck, and intently stared at John with dark blue reptilian eyes. The creature's skin – *or were those scales?* - was nearly pitch black with a hint of dark purple. Glancing over the creature's shoulder, John saw what appeared to be wings folded along its back and draped along the floor like a cape. All in all, he didn't care much for his chances should the creature prove to be hostile.

Now, when put face to face with an eight foot tall dragon, most people would have taken stock of the situation and bolted like the wind. Thanks to last night, however, John was still a little worse for wear, and took a moment to fully comprehend what his eyes were seeing.

These few seconds also gave him time to notice that Penny and Em were on either side of him, also looking at the strange creature – and wagging their tails. Also, a strangely dressed man with a prodigious beard appeared to be off to one side of the scene. Still, the fact that he was almost face to face with a dragon dulled the need to find out why the man appeared to be wearing a bathrobe.

He glanced over to the man and waved with as friendly a smile as he could muster given the circumstances, all the while hoping that he wouldn't order his pet dragon to devour him. The man returned his gesture with a slightly puzzled smile and a wave of his own.

-*Safe*-

He jumped back a step. The word had seemed to come from the creature, but its maw had not moved an inch.

-*Safe*-, the voice repeated.

"Um… Hi?"

-*Yes*-

"Um… did you just speak to me?" John asked, pointing to himself.

-*Yes*-

"Um… what do you want?"

-*Come*-

"Me?" John asked, pointing to himself again.

-*Yes*-

"Um," repeated John for the third time, still a little unsure what was occurring. "How do I do that?"

The creature's expression changed to what looked like one of slight amusement.

-*Walk*-

Reassured a little by the almost human joke, John nervously chuckled and murmured to himself, "I guess that would be logical. Well, as logical as listening to a dragon in my closet."

While still a bit shaken by the whole experience, he nevertheless tried to regain his wits. "Still, I have to admit that it's a more intriguing prospect than going out in that weather, and besides, I doubt I'll ever get an offer like this ever again."

With that, John took a deep breath, and before he could raise any self doubts as to what he was about to do, took a step forward.

"Hopefully, seeing dragons and hobos inside your closet isn't the first sign of alcohol-based brain damage," he silently muttered to himself, as he took those final few steps forward – and, simultaneously, braced himself and covered his face with a hand against the possibility that he might simply be hallucinating and walking blindly into the rear closet wall.

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There was a sudden tingling that shot through his body as he stepped through, and his hair felt like it was standing on end. But, upon completing the transition with the next step, the odd feeling disappeared as quickly as it had occurred.

The man was speaking to him, but the words were gibberish to his ears. Sensing his incomprehension, the man turned and appeared to pose a question to the somewhat small dragon. In response to whatever the dragon had replied, he walked over to a cupboard and took out a long, silver coloured box and three long rods.

-*Sit*-, he heard, as the dragon beckoned to a nearby chair.

He sat, and watched as the man attached the rods to the bottom of the box in the form of a tripod. Looking more closely, the box itself couldn't really be used as a box, as it had open ends on two opposing sides.

*More of a miniature tunnel than a box,* John thought.

Satisfied with his work, the man picked up the strange contraption, brought it over, and placed it with an open end pointed towards John.

-*Hand*-, came the dragon's voice, as the man pointed to the end closest to John, then to John's hand.

A trifle hesitant, but still curious, he placed his hand in the box and realized that there were tiny grooves on the inside in the rough shape of a palm. Fitting his hand on the pattern, he waited and watched as the man pulled up a chair opposite John and also sat down. The man then unclasped a small silver pin from the lapel of what appeared to be his bathrobe and placed it carefully on top of his end of the box.

John took a glance at the pin and saw it had a design of what appeared to be a leaf. Very pretty, he thought, but the whole contraption made even less sense now.

Satisfied with the placement of the pin, the man then started to turn what John had previously assumed to be raised decals at the side of the box. After about half a minute of seemingly random adjustments, the man then placed his hand into his end of the box, closed his eyes and sat back.

About ten seconds in, the ringing in his ears started. Another ten seconds later, he began to see spots and a strong tingling feeling started creeping up his arm. By reflex, he tried to pull his arm away from the box, but couldn't. In fact, he tried and found that he couldn't move or utter a sound. He started to wonder what he had gotten himself into this time, but that thought didn't last too long. After another few seconds, the room went dark and John blacked out.

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"Hello, can you hear me?"

The voice had a slightly worried tone to it.

*Great. A nosy neighbour intruding on my bender. Can't even finish my crazy dream.*

John groaned in response and tried to open his eyes, and immediately regretted it. The light was overwhelming, and John was forced to immediately close his eyes again.

“Ah! The light, of course! Here, let me close the windows for you.”

Amidst his agony, John could hear the sound of footsteps traveling around the room, followed by sounds of shuttered windows closing.

John didn’t have shuttered windows. *Uh-oh*.

“Okay, try to open your eyes again – slowly though.”

Again, against better judgment, he followed the instructions and, upon opening his eyes, found that the pain had receded to the point of being bearable.

His faculties - and eyesight - returning, John began to take stock of the situation again. The nosy neighbour was in fact the strange man in the funny bathrobe. Yes, there was a small dragon in the room – playing with the dogs no less. And yes, the man did just speak English.

“I’m assuming by the fact that I can understand you, and by the fact that my brain feels like it’s on fire, that you just used that crazy tripod-box to give me some sort of magical crash course in your language.”

“Well, slightly inaccurate, but that explanation will suffice for now. A pretty remarkable device, isn’t it?”

Taking stock of how this morning had already played out, John answered, “All events considered, that’s probably one of the least strange things I’ve seen so far today – no offence to your tripod-box thingy, of course.”

“None taken at all! I do apologize for the whole unconsciousness thing. That’s never happened before.”

“It was unexpected. But, all things considered, I suppose it was worth it.”

“Glad you’re feeling pragmatic about it,” the strange man grinned. “Now, back to the very first question I asked you – who are you?”

# Chapter 2

Former Lord General Athash, now the Kierdan Regent and self proclaimed Western Lord, sat back in his command tent and reflected on the recent events he had set in motion. *In one more day, they'll be there. Then, I'll be fully committed to this. Nowhere to hide or run if I fail.*

Yesterday, he had stood at the top of that hill, gazing after the departing fleet. All the time, he was wondering if he had done the right thing.

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As the last of the ships cleared the harbour mouth, Athash waved his sword in salute and silently wished them luck.

"That concludes our part of the bargain," he commented.

"Indeed, my lord," replied his ever present aide-de-camp Rush.

"Let's just hope we don't end up regretting this whole affair in the end."

"True, sir. At this point, we can only hope that they keep their end of the bargain."

"That's the thing, my friend. Sometimes, fate doesn't always allow us to keep our promises… and sometimes, well, you just get double-crossed. I'm still not entirely comfortable with the fact that our part in this bargain forces a new front for us. When you have enemies on all sides, there's a certain word that comes to mind: *Surrounded*."

"True again, sir. But, it's not like we were given much choice in the whole matter."

Athash laughed, "Someone once told me: *'There's always a choice. Just not always a good choice.'* But, I know what you mean. I just hate having my hand forced. Come, let's go. There's still a bit of work to do."

"Yes, sir."

As the ships slowly started to vanish in the distance, Athash and Rush silently walked back down the hill to rejoin the waiting army.

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Three men stood around the table, intently analyzing a large map.

Those events from yesterday still lingered in the back of Athash's mind. However, he was practical enough to realize that worrying about it would accomplish nothing, and he forced his mind back to current matters.

"We've completed the fortifications, and now have a total of four thousand troops guarding the mouth of Ling's Passage. Anything short of a full invasion force attempting to get through will be ground into mincemeat. So far, they're showing restraint and don't appear to be readying an attack anytime soon."

Athash nodded in approval. "Good, Rush. And the new shipyard's status, Pavic?"

"The last delivery should be here early this evening. We've established a wide cordon around the new shipyards, and they should be fully operational within a day," replied General Pavic.

"Estimates say that the new batch of ships should be ready in approximately fifteen days, sir. Assuming minimum spoilage, then that should bring our total count to just over twelve hundred. As of an hour ago, we now have seven hundred and ninety three ships available for use," supplied Rush. "That's not including the three hundred and eighty-five that we just sent out. But, from what I've seen, I'm not counting on those coming back anytime soon, if at all."

"Excellent, but we need to be extra careful from here on out. If word gets out about this, we can expect the other nations to stop dawdling about whether or not to intervene in our little crusade," cautioned Athash. "If they prematurely realize that this is a prelude to further invasion, this *will* end in disaster."

"Quite true. I advise drawing out the siege for as long as we can. Make it look like we're wary of losing any more men. As they lack an accurate count of our actual numbers, that should placate any fears of us posing an immediate threat," suggested Pavic.

"Not a bad idea. Meet with the general staff and start drawing up plans. I'll be along in a bit."

"I'll see to it."

"Also, Helena sends her regards. She also sent a special message to me. Needless to say, I shouldn't show my face around within a hundred miles of her if I let anything happen to you," said Athash with a grin.

"That sounds like your sister, all right," replied Pavic with the same grin. "How'd she manage to convince Krask to relay the message?"

“Would you care to argue with her?” Athash laughed.

“Hah! Point well taken, old friend. Anyways, I’d best be getting back to planning out the remainder of this odd campaign. I’ll see you in a bit,” said Pavic, as he made his way out of the command tent.

Athash furrowed his brow as he tried to think of any necessary or, perhaps, not-so-necessary contingencies.

“Rush, I need you to meet with a few of your people. Get them to start spreading the word to the locals that things aren’t going as well as we hoped. Assuming that we have spies in the area that aren’t totally incompetent, then that should eventually filter through to the other nations, as well.”

“Will do, my lord.”

“Also, go over the security of the new shipyards again with Pavic – just as a precaution. We absolutely need to make sure that no one manages to discover what we’re doing. Make sure that, as far as anyone else is concerned, all we have there is a supply dump.”

“Not a problem, my lord,” affirmed Rush. “Will there be anything else?”

“Not for now. Give me an hour or so to go to grab a bit of shut-eye, then meet me back here.”

“Will do, my lord. I’ll see you in an hour.”

# Chapter 3

"That's quite a tale. If I hadn't witnessed your arrival with my own eyes, I could scarcely even begin to believe your story," commented Rheus. "I can't even imagine how, or why, Mag managed to do this."

After playing with the dogs for a few minutes, Mag had said a single word –*Errand*-, then departed abruptly, leaving Rheus and John to try to piece together as much as they could.

"I know the feeling," replied John. "I still think I'm going to wake up any second now."

"I'm still amazed by the fact that you don't recognize any piece of technology in here, yet you have comparative equivalents for many of them."

What had turned out to be Rheus's version of a small stove had been assumed by John to be simply a decorative countertop with patterns of blue crystal embedded in the surface as a decorative flourish. The crystal heated up whatever was placed on top of it, though John could see no visible means of controlling it. In fact, the blue crystal was embedded in almost everything in the same way. Even what turned out to be the equivalent of an oven mitt had small patterns of crystal which somehow repelled, or maybe they absorbed, the heat – regardless, given the current circumstances, John judged the correct answer to be a touch low on his list of current priorities.

He did, however, find out that Rheus was in fact wearing a bathrobe. As Rheus had explained, he had not anticipated any visitors today, and his quarters were normally one step away through the same portal that John had used to get here. He did, however, hope that Mag hadn't totally changed the way the portal worked, as that would involve a walk of a couple of blocks to get back to his residence. Apparently, walking around in your bathrobe did not appear to be any more socially accepted here, either.

The building they were currently in was part of a compound that was similar to a large school, and Rheus appeared to be this place's equivalent of an eccentric professor. For a second, Rheus looked at the large reinforced door and wondered if he had in fact stumbled across this world's version of a mental asylum. That would certainly make sense too.

"I know. Much of what I see here can only be described as, well, magic."

Rheus chuckled in response, "Well, there's a word normally reserved for entertainers of children – no offense, intended – but I can understand your point of view."

“None taken,” replied John.

At that moment, the dogs who had been quietly napping in a corner since Mag’s departure got up and trotted, tails wagging, over to the large door of the room.

Rheus and John both looked over to the door at the same time, just as a light, glassy sounding knock emanated from it.

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Even taking the appearance of Mag into consideration, John still couldn’t get over the appearance of the visitor. While Rheus looked no different from any other person, the visitor’s skin was a pale green, with long and voluminous dark-green hair that appeared to be flecked with glitter. The long white dress that she wore seemed to be made of a material similar to satin, and while conservatively styled, did nothing to disguise a lithe figure.

She was also incredibly gorgeous, in a strange alien way. Since she had entered the room, John had felt like he was a starry-eyed schoolgirl struck by her first crush. He found it was a struggle to take his eyes off of her, and smiled in greeting.

A bark drew him out of his reverie, as both dogs wagged their tails to greet the visitor, who then greeted them with a smile and a hug. *Her clothes didn’t pick up any dog hair.* John absently wondered if he could upholster his furniture in that material.

Rheus introduced her as Venarya, the head of the institution. That in itself was particularly startling, as she didn’t appear to be over thirty years of age, though that could just be a quirk of her race. Regardless, Rheus had not seen fit to explain her strange and relatively startling appearance. Perhaps he thought strange races were the norm in John’s world, or maybe he was simply enjoying a private joke? Rheus also didn’t seem to be suffering from the same effects that John was experiencing. Regardless, John had decided not to pursue the matter for the time being, and it was through sheer force of willpower that prevented stammering when he commented on her highly coincidental arrival at Rheus’s workshop.

“It was no coincidence. Mag suggested I stop by,” she said, with a smile that made John’s knees go weak.

John wondered how long that conversation had taken, given Mag’s enigmatic style of communication.

"I see our resident genius hasn't offered you any refreshments as yet," she jokingly chided Rheus. "I've arranged for Kail to bring some up."

"And that's why you're in charge," Rheus grinned. "I'd hate to think what would happen to this place if I had to run it."

John again wondered about what sort of food that would entail, and if he would be able to stomach it after last night's fiasco. With that thought, John suddenly realized something. He felt fine. Since he had been talking to Rheus, he hadn't felt the aftereffects of the drink from last night. *Must be adrenaline*, he thought.

Shelving that thought along with quite a few others he had accumulated since he arrived, he instead said, "Thank you. Some food right about now sounds great. I have to admit I'm curious to learn more about this place – this world of yours. I'm almost dumbstruck by the things I've seen so far, and I've only been in one room."

"Consider me your personal tour guide for today. And I'm sure Rheus's boss wouldn't mind him getting out and enjoying himself for a bit," she smiled. "Although, I would advise you to change clothes first, Rheus."

Glancing at the portal which still appeared to lead to John's closet, Rheus commented, "Yes, we may need to make a slight stop at my place on the way-"

"No need," she interjected with another smile. "I've arranged for some clothes to be sent up for you as well. I do know your quirks, old friend."

While still wondering how she had managed to get that much information out of Mag, John was polite enough to leave that question for later and instead ask, "Speaking of clothes, should I be changing as well?"

"No need," she said, with a wave of her hand. "We get visitors from many distant places here on a constant basis. Nothing short of a bathrobe will turn heads here."

Rheus had the good grace to blush.

At that moment, another glassy sounding knock was heard at the door. So it wasn't something else strange and unique to Venarya. The wooden door really did make a glassy noise when knocked.

"Come in," said Rheus.

The ornate handle turned and in entered another seemingly normal human. A boy, in fact. He was dressed simply, wearing just a pullover shirt and pants, and seemed to be about ten or

eleven years old. He didn't give John or Venarya's appearance a second glance, simply a polite nod and smile. Nor was he surprised by Rheus being dressed in a bathrobe. He simply said, "Here you go, sir. Food and a change of clothes," as he put down a covered tray and took off a bag that had been slung over his back. As he did so, both dogs, well trained enough to not disturb him when he was encumbered, moved over to his side with their tails wagging. As he noticed them, he smiled and reached out to rub their heads.

"Thanks, Kail. I'm actually heading out for the rest of the day with our guests here, so feel free to catch up with your friends. Don't get into too much trouble, and I'll see you tomorrow," said Rheus with a grin.

The boy's eyes noticeably lighted up and smiled back at Rheus, "Thank you, sir!"

Giving each dog one last playful tussle on the head, Kail sussed out John and Venarya as his benefactors for the day, and turned to them with a smile and also bid them thanks before dashing out the door to join his friends.

"Such a nice boy," remarked Venarya. "Don't corrupt him too much with your bad habits, Rheus. I'll leave you to change then, and give John a chance to snack on some refreshments before our excursion. I just have to leave a note for anyone that drops by, and then I'll meet you outside my office right after."

"Very well," acknowledged Rheus. "We'll be there shortly."

"Until then," John smiled.

As Venarya left and Rheus entered a side chamber to change, John closed in on the snack tray and took a glass of pink liquid and what resembled a slice of cake. Taking a sip first, he found it slightly fruity but with a taste he could not place no matter how hard he tried. Nevertheless, it was refreshing, and made John realize just how thirsty he was. The slice of cake tasted just like… cake. He was expecting an alien medley of flavours, but it was familiar and delicious.

While he was thinking of food, he realized that Penny and Em were going to be due for a feeding in a few hours. Thankfully, he had had enough cognizance in his altered state last night to at least make sure their food bowls were filled up overnight. That had bought him a few extra hours of sleep.

"She thinks it's funny, you know," commented Rheus from the side room.

"The food? What do you mean?" queried John.

"No. You know… the whole weak at the knees thing."

"Was it that obvious? You didn't seem that affected by it, if I recall properly," accused John, suspecting himself to be the butt of an inside joke.

Rheus exited the room. He was almost dressed and was just fastening an intricate looking set of clasps on the front of his shirt. *I could make a fortune by inventing the button for these guys.*

"I'm somewhat used to it. Believe me, it was all I could do to keep from drooling like an imbecile the first time we met." He furrowed his brow, "By now, she's probably realized that I've mentioned this to you, so I wouldn't worry too much about her trying it again."

"She can turn it off and on at will?"

"Indeed. I'm not quite sure how she does it – I mean, other than the obvious, but there's more at play than mere beauty here."

"Can others of her race do that as well?"

"If you find one, you can ask them," laughed Rheus. "Venarya's the only one of her kind that I, or anyone else that I know, have ever met. They tend to keep to themselves. I don't even know the proper name of her race – most people just refer to them as 'green-hairs' for lack of anything else to call them.

"Though, I wouldn't advise using that term within earshot of her though," he chuckled. "In fact, all I really know is that she's from far to the northwest somewhere. Unfortunately, any travels I've made on this continent have all been to the south, so I'm probably not the best person to ask."

"How did she come to work here?"

"That I couldn't tell you. She was in charge when I started, and I've been here fifty six years. Rumour is that she was here when the institution was founded."

John was shocked. Rheus didn't look a day over forty, even with his crazy beard. "And, how long ago was the institution founded?"

"Five hundred and sixty two years ago."

John was doubly shocked. "She… looks incredibly good for her age."

Rheus laughed, "I would phrase it differently, if you feel the urge to tell her that. Come, we're due downstairs."

John finished off the last bite of cake, then signalled the dogs to follow along behind him. Being well behaved and trained, he had never bothered with leashes, and hope he wouldn't regret

that as they toured the city that day. As they walked out the door to Rheus's workshop, John glanced back at the door and saw a glass panel attached to the wood. Affixed to the panel was a set of polished stone knockers attached to a hanging cord. *Well, one mystery solved.*

As Rheus led John down a hallway and down what could only be described as a grand spiral stairway, John grew curious about the ages Rheus had previously mentioned, and wondered if the translation had simply been wonky. In fact, he was curious as to how this translation thing worked – *for example, why did Rheus's lips appear to be in sync with his words if he wasn't actually speaking English?*

Rheus explanation had been somewhat esoteric regarding time. He assured John that he had heard correctly. The translator, he admitted, had been of Mag's design and had been tested successfully on multiple occasions. He was still unsure on the specifics regarding how the device managed to work, but had a working rudimentary knowledge of its effects. Rather than trying to add another set of measurements to someone's memory, the device simply made your brain translate it into a set of known measurements.

"So," John inquired, "if I heard you say that someone is… say… over five hundred years old, those would be five hundred of my years?"

"Hah, yes," laughed Rheus. "If it helps, most of us don't share her longevity. In fact, other than trees, I don't know of any other living thing that compares with her allotted lifespan."

As for the lip-syncing, Rheus said it was a trick of the brain, in conjunction with the effects from the device. He instructed John to concentrate on his lip movement as intensely as he could, and as John did that, he noticed that the lip movements were not actually in sync. It also hurt his head to try, so he decided to file that trick away for later.

Glancing back at the dogs following behind, John remembered the strange dragon-like creature he had first seen, and which had since disappeared. Unsure how to broach the subject, John asked, "Mag, I take it, is not a…well…"

"Pet?" finished Rheus with a slight smile. "No, she's more of a permanent guest of the institution. She's been here longer than I have, as well. Any attempts I've made to get details about her past elicit nothing but silence from her. For all I know, she might be ten times older than Venarya."

*So, she wasn't really an elevated pet, but another sentient species.* "Her mode of speech seems a bit, forgive the term, simple."

Rheus laughed again, “Don’t be fooled. Her mind-speech is capable of conveying extremely complex thoughts, as well as projecting images directly into your head. However, the few times she had to have anything more than a simple conversation with me ended in a splitting headache, so I think she avoids doing it as a courtesy.”

“Speaking of pets, how will Penny and Em be seen here? I don’t want to cause a panic and have the townspeople running from monsters.”

“Not to worry, my new friend. There are quite a few dogs here, as well. They seem well behaved, so all should be fine,” assured Rheus.

*Why are there dogs here?*

Before he could further inquire about the dogs, though, Rheus had already started talking, continuing his train of thought with a slight smirk. “I’d be more concerned for the husbands in town. Venarya has quite a few admirers from afar, and more than one man may be eating rock soup for dinner tonight if his wife catches his eyes wandering for too long.”

“At least that’s one thing that’s the same over here,” laughed John.

“And here we are,” said Rheus as the finally finished descending the monumental staircase. *No wonder he built a magic portal to bypass all that climbing.*

The last part of the journey was now through a large hall with a vaulted ceiling, which culminated in two large and ornately decorated doors. As they walked through the hall, it occurred to John that he hadn’t seen any other people walking through the corridors of what he had assumed to be a relatively standard school.

He mentioned it to Rheus, who answered, “This building is mainly storage, with food preparation in the back of the first floor. Hence, the speed with which Kail managed to retrieve those items he delivered to us. I just wonder where he got these clothes from. This shirt’s a little too ornate for my taste. I would have preferred something with buttons.” *Darn, so much for that idea*. “Most of the students are usually boarded, and normally there would be more than a few of them wandering these halls. However, most have been returned to their homes for the time being due to some, ah, political issues happening to the north. Kail is one of the few who were born in Iathera.”

John assumed that to be the town’s name.

Rheus solemnly continued, “His father was a soldier posted in a town to the north when the troubles broke out a few months ago. He was killed as a direct result, unfortunately. I’ve since taken the boy under my wing and made sure he and his mother are cared for.”

“That’s very noble of you,” commented John. “He seems like a nice, well-adjusted boy, all things considered. Let me know if there’s anything I can do to help, as well.”

“A kind thought. I’ll keep it in mind.”

“These troubles sound a lot like war,” observed John. “Are we safe here?”

“Your insight is correct, my friend. Thankfully the fighting is, for the time, over twelve hundred miles away. We should have ample warning should circumstances take a dire turn.”

“Unless they use one of those crazy portals?”

“Almost all the portals linking our two regions were severed when the conflict began, thankfully. Only a few, heavily monitored portals still remain open. However, you do raise a good point. Your arrival should have been impossible, without having an actual portal on your side. Furthermore, that portal would also have been needed to be specifically tuned and linked to my portal, which is an extremely time consuming process. In addition, judging from everything you’ve described so far, I agree with your hypothesis that you did not come from elsewhere on this world. I have never heard of a portal being linked to another world before. In fact, I’ve never actually heard of another world before. The implications are mind boggling, and I’m still not sure how Mag did this, or for what purpose. I’m going to have to have a long talk with her when she gets back.” With a sardonic laugh, he added, “I just hope the headache will be worth it.”

John chuckled at his little joke, but still considered the ramifications of what he had said. “Still, there shouldn’t be any trouble getting me home, though, right?” John asked with a slight hint of worry in his voice.

“Not to fear, my friend. I trust Mag implicitly, and have confidence that she can get you home the same way you came,” said Rheus with a wave of his hand.

“Just out of idle curiosity, you’re sharing a lot with me regarding this war. From that, I gather that you don’t seem to think I’m some sort of spy. Why is that?”

“Aside from me having to teach you our language?” Rheus laughed. “And Mag personally bringing you here, and Venarya not having you immediately clasped in irons? Yes, I think I can trust you. But, enough of this. There are enough worries to go around without us creating new ones. For now, we’re tourists enjoying the sights of this fair city!”

And that was that, it seemed. With that pronouncement, Rheus now sported a wide grin, as they finally approached the large doors.

Each door was about fifteen feet high and eight feet across. John wondered if there was some mechanism to aid in opening the doors, and was amazed when Rheus turned the handle and effortlessly pushed the right side open. *Must be a counterbalance somewhere*, he thought.

As they walked through the door, John got his first good view of the outdoors. They had exited into the embedded courtyard of a large U-shaped building. Made of dark stone, it was an impressive and foreboding sight and must have measured at least a hundred feet in height. Remembering the stairs, John wondered which poor saps had ended up being relegated to the very top floors, but quietly decided not to mention anything to Rheus.

The plants that decorated the courtyard would not have looked out of place in his garden. Well, except for the palm trees that seemed to be planted everywhere. The *blue* palm trees. As they walked to the courtyard's exit, he looked up and took a glance at the sky. The clouds and the sun looked exactly like those back home, and the few birds in the sky didn't appear to look like flying cats or some other strange chimera. Well, he mentally appended, at least not from the distance from which he was looking at them.

"The sun and the birds look the same, at least," he idly commented.

As they exited the courtyard, the sides of the building stopped obscuring the remainder of the sky, so John was able to take a good perusal of the sky. As they rounded the massive structure, John snuck a glance to see what lay behind the building. However, when he turned his head and looked, he was more than a tiny bit startled to see a gigantic reddish moon embedded on the horizon.

The moon appeared to still be rising, and judging by its size, looked capable of obscuring over half of the sky when at its apex. At a loss for words, he could only gaze at it in awe.

Seeing his fascination, Rheus said, "If you think that's impressive, you should see this place after nightfall. If my suspicion is correct, you'll be in for quite a treat."

"In that case, I'll definitely try to stick around," affirmed John. "How long is a full day here, out of curiosity?"

"Just over twenty five and a half hours," replied Rheus.

"And how many of your days in a year?"

"Three hundred and sixty four."

"That's remarkable, and a bit odd."

"Why do you say that?"

"That sounds extremely close to our calendar year. We work with twenty four hours and three hundred and sixty five days. That's a difference of…" he trailed off, as he tried to mentally calculate. Math was never John's strong suit.

"Twenty one and three quarters extra of your days, each year, on this side. Or if you prefer, a difference of nearly six percent," supplied Rheus helpfully.

"Wow," said John with a low whistle of amazement. "I was still in the process of trying to figure out how exactly I was going to calculate that."

"Side effect of living in a school," laughed Rheus.

As they walked, John spied only a few people moving among the massive buildings. *Rheus was right. This place is a ghost town.* With few people to scrutinize, John decided to examine the buildings in the immediate area, as there were dozens of them scattered around the compound. While the design of the buildings was not particularly odd, he did notice that all of them did not seem to conform to one particular style of architecture.

As John looked closer, he thought he could make out at least two distinct styles, even though there appeared to be a fair number of other indistinct styles in use as well. There was the utilitarian, dark coloured, and almost blocky buildings such as the one in which he had arrived. He noticed that most of these were similarly monumental in size to Rheus's building, but only a few of them had that U-shape to them, with the majority of them being more cube-like. Then, there were the light coloured, circular buildings which seemed to be more windows than walls. These were not very tall compared to Rheus's building, as they appeared to top out at about four stories. However they were very wide, with a diameter of approximately seventy five feet for the smallest building. John tried to get a glimpse through one of the windows to perhaps determine their use, but all the windows appeared to be shuttered.

Before John could inquire about the building, Rheus piped up, "Ah, there is our esteemed tour guide in the distance, I believe."

Sure enough, John spied Venarya a short way off in the distance. Her building was relatively small compared to others he had seen so far, looking more like a large two storey manor home than an office building. Perhaps this was her actual house as well, John thought.

Venarya had her back to them, and appeared to be in the midst of tending a batch of flowers which lined the walkway to her building.

She must have heard them coming, for before they could get close enough to greet her, they heard her say, “Ah, I was just about to send out a search party, Rheus.”

“We got a bit side-tracked staring at the sky,” replied Rheus with a grin.

She returned the grin and gave the flowers she had been tending a playful pat and said to them, “Okay, I’ll see you later, little ones.”

With that, she stood up and walked over to join John and Rheus.

John noticed that, despite kneeling in the earth, not a speck of dirt was to be seen on her satiny white dress. Now, he seriously pondered the possibility of asking for some of that material to upholster his furniture.

John also noticed that that strange feeling was no longer felt in her presence. At least, no more so than was be expected by someone of her beauty.

As if in answer to his unspoken thought, Venarya asked, “I trust that Rheus decided to spoil my fun, and that he’s told you about my little secret?”

Rheus gave an exaggerated look of ‘who, me?’, then opted to try to look as innocent as possible, while staring at a far off spire.

Venarya laughed at Rheus’s comical expression, “I hope you weren’t too offended. It wasn’t meant to be a mean trick or anything of the sort. It was simply the most expedient way of lowering your defenses to determine if you were a threat to us or not.”

“Some sort of weird telepathic thing?”

“Nothing so complex, I’m afraid,” she smiled. “It basically amounted to making you slightly uncomfortable, and then gauging your actions and reactions.

“Which, by the way, you’ll be happy to hear that you don’t appear to be a threat,” she added with a smile. “Mag had already vouched for you, which is saying a lot. But, I would have done my job a disservice had I not double checked.”

“No apologies necessary, my lady. I probably would have done the same in your place,” replied John. “Rheus did make mention about a conflict to the north, so I suppose you can’t be too careful.”

“Thanks for understanding,” she replied. “Normally, I wouldn’t have even resorted to that, but these are stressed times and I had to make sure.”

“No worries, I completely understand…” he trailed off, as he reran the scenario in his mind. John may not have been a genius at math, but did have a knack for figuring out when he was being played.

“Though I suspect you had already arranged for Rheus to break the news gently to me, once you had left,” he deducted with a look of playful accusation. “Some sort of hidden signal at the beginning telling him to play along, then one at the end telling him to explain?”

Now, both Rheus and Venarya sported a look of exaggerated innocence.

Venarya broke into light laughter, “Indeed, and very clever. But, nothing as covert as that. Rheus knew enough to play along at the beginning. As for the after-the-fact explaining, I simply had a note placed in his pocket. I suspected it may have been easier to have him explain to you, considering the topic at hand.”

“And I’m delighted you decided to have me do it,” commented Rheus dryly.

“Though, I must say,” he appended with a slight note of accusation, “I don’t recall you going so easy on me when I first arrived,”

“Considering who your patron was, can you really blame me?” she asked with a sardonic smirk.

“True, enough,” he replied with a nervous laugh.

“Should I even ask?” John chimed in.

“That’s a story for another day,” Venarya said with a wicked chuckle. “Let’s leave the embarrassing history lessons here for now, and start your tour of Iathera.”

“In that case, let’s get started. Just promise me that I’ll get the full story later?” he grinned.

Venarya continued to laugh as Rheus’s face just kept redder with embarrassment.

With that, the five of them began walking down the cobbled path, and made their way toward the large gate in the distance.

# Chapter 4

As Athash sat back and tried to relax, he found sleep eluding him. His mind was flooded with what-if's and possible contingencies, now that he had tipped his hand with the recent departure of that fleet.

With that move played, he was now fully committed to this course of action. The other nations wouldn't remain ignorant of their true intentions for much longer now. They would soon begin to put the pieces together and begin to realize that this was no mere punitive expedition, but the beginnings of a grand design of conquest.

Sometimes, he felt like both a pawn and a player in this strange game.

He couldn't help but think of the circumstances that had brought him to this point in time. He had committed treason, participated in regicide, and enslaved thousands. All for what? Power? Wealth? No.

His intentions had, strangely enough, been noble and patriotic. Or, rather, they had been at the outset of this endeavour.

He thought back to that first meeting thirty four years ago.

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Athash sat back in the seat, enjoying the deceptively relaxing level of comfort it provided. A nice perk, he thought. He looked around the office, and examined the mounted hunting trophies. They would have to go. He was an accomplished hunter himself, but never understood that practice. He preferred for history to record his accomplishments, rather than broadcast them from his office walls. Also, he didn't really think that it was much of an accomplishment to kill something that never really stood a chance of winning. When he had learned to hunt as a child, it had been to put food on the table, not to acquire another story to brag to his compatriots about.

Still a little tipsy from the party following his promotion, he was taking this last chance to examine his new office in detail before he got swamped in paperwork tomorrow. It was large, with spacious work and meeting areas sectioned off for any staff he may decide to bring in. The furnishings were of the highest quality, for nothing else would be good enough for the palace.

He could still scarcely believe it. “I have an office in the palace,” he softly said aloud to himself. If, a year ago, his own mother had told him that this is where he would be today, he would have searched her house for signs of a drinking problem.

Athash had just been appointed to the rank of Lord General, and now reported only to King Domich himself. He was now in charge of managing the military might of the nation. At forty two years of age, he also had the honour of being the youngest person to hold that position. He was still not sure why he had been chosen. There were others ten years his senior who had been passed over. He himself had only been promoted to General less than a year ago. Regardless, his unique achievement now cast him in a spotlight, and he was sure that his every movement would be scrutinized.

Still, there had been extenuating circumstances that had made that promotion possible and necessary. After the accident, there had even been mutterings in court of having a joint committee in place, until such a time that a new Lord General could have been properly selected. The King, however, had seen fit to put a stop to that. Having a joint committee, rather than a clearly defined leader, he proclaimed, would imply to the neighbouring nations that Kierd was weak. He argued that it was best to have an untested leader, rather than to invite conflict.

*If only he had listened to them.*

The previous Lord General had set sail, along with numerous other high ranking officers, to what should have been a routine ceremony for the opening of a new naval shipyard. Their fleet had never arrived, nor were any of the crewmen or dignitaries heard from again. In one motion, the entire military structure had been decapitated. It was assumed that they had fallen victim to a freak storm, for no sane pirate would dare attack even a small military fleet.

*His benefactors had never outright admitted being behind that, but he had his suspicions.*

Kierd was mostly jungle, and despite having an extensive system of rivers, had never really sported a large navy. The bulk of their small fleet was relegated to patrolling the coast for pirates and other troublemakers, while local constabulary were given smaller patrol boats to try to maintain security on the rivers. However, complaints about brigands targeting cargo vessels on the rivers were on the rise. If they continued at this rate, trade would start to dry up. While Kierd wasn’t a starving country, it also wasn’t thriving. If trade took a deep enough hit, the effects would eventually be disastrous for the nation as a whole. Therefore, King Domich had authorized the expansion of the naval forces to offset the increased rate of piracy.

*Had that been part of their plan, too?*

The new shipyard was supposed to mass produce larger river craft for the military, and had been strategically placed in a poorer town in order to boost economic activity. It was hoped that disenfranchised young men would now be able to find work other than banditry. The King had hoped to show the populace that he saw everyone's plight, and that he sympathized.

*Though, that's easy enough to do when you're not the one starving.*

Then, there was a knock at the door.

"Enter," he said, expecting to see a fellow officer coming to congratulate him, and perhaps finagle a promotion before the dust settled.

Instead, in entered a man garbed in the livery of a palace courier. "My lord, a letter for you," he said with a bow of his head.

Strange that a palace courier would be working this late, he had thought. Perhaps one of the other invitees had seconded the poor man to deliver the letter, rather than letting him go home at a decent time.

"Thank you," said Athash. "I hope you don't have too many more deliveries to make before you head home tonight?"

"You're the last, sir, but your concern is appreciated. If there's nothing else?"

"Of course not. Go home and get some rest."

"Thank you, my lord," said the courier with a smart salute, as he turned to leave.

"What's your name, by the way?" asked Athash, as the courier approached the door.

"Rush, my lord."

"You seem a good sort. Hopefully we meet again, Rush."

"Thank you, again, my Lord General. I'm sure we will," he added with a strange smile as he closed the door behind him.

Athash examined the letter he had just been handed. The letter was not a fluff congratulatory statement from some random court flunky seeking a favour. This letter bore King Domich's seal.

Intrigued, he broke the seal on the envelope and saw two sheets of paper. He read the first sheet.

*'First, allow me to offer my own sincere congratulations on your promotion, my new Lord General. I have no doubts that you will be able to fulfill the roles and obligations of your new office. Know that I did not choose you at random. Out of all candidates, you were deemed the*

*most suited for the task. The man you have just met is the main reason for this letter. Rush is, in fact, the current head of our spy apparatus, and is now under your direct command. He is part of the reason that I was adamant on not splitting your duties amongst a committee. The less people that know about this, the better it works. Rush will report only to yourself, and not to me. I would, however, advise you to keep his identity and profession a secret. Three generations of my family have taken extraordinary measures to create an unrivalled intelligence network. Use it wisely. Remember, power without knowledge is unwieldy. Signed: Domich'*

Athash had been shocked to his core upon reading the letter. His opinion of Domich would have to be re-evaluated, for the man put on a good show of appearing unextraordinary.

He had not suspected that such a clandestine network might even exist. All espionage activities were strictly handled by the Foreign Affairs Office, and, from past experience, they wielded that dagger with a clumsy hand. They weren't totally incompetent, but he was glad that he wouldn't have to depend on them now. Rush, at first glance at least, appeared to be capable. He would have to be, Athash thought, to be able to conceal such a secret from everyone but Domich. At least, Athash hoped that that was the case.

He then opened the second piece of paper and began reading.

*'I apologize for the ruse, sir, but it is a peculiarity of my line of work. I will allow eight days for you to settle in and get things to your liking before I appear before you again. My only request is that I report to you, and you alone. Even the most trustworthy person has a price, my Lord General. Should you have need to contact me before the eight days are up, send an order to the quartermaster's office requesting a tally on emergency rations. Until then. Signed: Rush'*

Simple, straight to the point, and with contingency provisions. Yes, Rush would do just fine, he thought.

Wondering if his predecessor had left any additional surprises behind, Athash sat up in his chair and started to go through the desk drawers.

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After about an hour and a half of poring over reports and notes, Athash had found nothing of importance. His predecessor had been meticulous in his record-keeping, but did not appear to have any earth shattering secrets to impart to him.

The night was still fairly young, but Athash would have to get an early start in the morning. With a tired sigh, he replaced the last batch of papers into their drawer and got up to get his coat from the rack.

As he walked over to the coat rack, he heard another knock at the door.

*That second and fateful knock.*

"Enter," he called out, wondering who it could be this time.

In walked a palace guard. He had probably seen the light from outside whilst on his rounds.

"Everything all right here, sir?"

"Just finishing up for the day, soldier. No cause for concern."

"Not a problem, sir."

The guard made no motion to leave, but was staring intently at Athash, as if taking his measure.

Athash started to tense up, anticipating a potential fight. He had no weapons on his person, as he had come straight from the ceremony, but decades of training had made him proficient in unarmed combat. The palace guards were trained killers, but he was more than a match for one of them.

The guard was the first to break the silence. "I do believe I have an interesting proposition for you, sir."

Athash relaxed a little, but kept himself ready just in case. If the guard wasn't intending violence, he may just be misguided in his disregard for the chain of command. Athash doubted he had anything of value to offer, thinking that the guard was probably just trying to trade palace gossip to gain a promotion.

"Really, soldier. What makes you think that?" replied Athash.

*If only he had said 'No, thank you', and left it at that. Well, chances are he would probably be dead, and they would have just found another person to further their plans.*

The guard sat down on a chair on the visitor's side of Athash's desk and bade him to sit as well. Curiosity overcame his tolerance for the guard's coarse behaviour, and he sat down. This had better be good, Athash thought, or this guard would be chasing pickpockets on his next shift.

A raised eyebrow was the only sign of Athash's impatience, and was returned by a grin from the guard. This had better be really good, he thought.

“Your new shipyard in Graisav is in shambles,” the guard piped up. “It has no capability of producing truly seaworthy craft, and, at full capacity, can only produce a maximum of twelve small rivercraft each month. And that’s only if you work your staff to the bone.

“I offer you the opportunity,” the guard continued, “to be able to mass produce seaworthy craft of any size, at a fraction of the cost, and at an exponential rate of production compared to Graisav.”

“I take it you’re not actually a palace guard?” Athash responded flatly.

“What gave it away?” responded the fake guard with a grin.

“Any reason I shouldn’t call the real guards in here to haul you away?”

“Curiosity,” shrugged the fake guard, unshaken.

*He doesn’t rattle easily*, thought Athash. “I can extract information just as well from you in the dungeon.”

“That would be unwise, and unfortunate.”

Athash tensed. In response, the fake guard held up his hands in a gesture of submission.

“I don’t intend any violence to aid my escape, which is what you’re thinking. I’m simply referring to my superiors’ plans. Should I fail to reach an agreement with you, they will extend the same offer to the other nations.”

That got Athash’s attention. The Caldain Ridge separated Kierd from all but one of its neighbouring nations. While this left Kierd hurting from lack of lack of viable trade routes to the more prosperous eastern nations, it also meant that the only real invasion route was a nautical one.

“You seem to know a lot about our operation in Graisav?”

“Oh, please. It wasn’t difficult at all to ascertain that. We didn’t even need to resort to spying to gauge your capacity.”

“Why would that be?” asked Athash, and also wondering if Rush had any knowledge of these people.

“Building is our, well, one of our specialties. Let me put it this way: do you relish the thought of doing business again with a local company who’ll end up building you another Graisav?”

The fake guard and his employers seemed to know a lot about Graisav. Was he simply a spy for another nation? He could be trying to take advantage of the transitional period, gambling on a

bold bluff in order to ascertain the current status of their defenses. Luckily, Athash had a newly found ace-in-the-hole, who might be able to shed some light on the true identity of his visitor. He just needed to string his guest along until he could get a message to Rush tomorrow.

"How long do I have to consider this offer?"

"Approximately four minutes. That will give me another five minutes to leave before the real guard gets here. I know what you're thinking, and it's fruitless to ponder. Rush knows nothing about us. He won't be able to enlighten you further."

Athash's look of surprise betrayed him, and the fake guard smirked in response.

The fake guard continued, "Don't look so shocked. I saw him leave earlier, and put two and two together. Good man, that, by the way. Very thorough, but just not with regards to us. In any case, ours is a very tight knit group. I seriously doubt Rush would be able to penetrate us."

"He must have heard of you?"

"We make it our business to make sure we're not known. Aside from our actual business, that is. Incidentally, I wouldn't bother mentioning any of this to Rush. You may hurt his sense of pride."

"Then tell me, how do I know that you're not just a spy, or a just a fool with the right amount of wrong knowledge wasting my time?"

"You don't," his visitor replied bluntly.

"What do I call you? 'Fake guard', while descriptive in my mind, isn't the most practical of names."

"Names don't matter if you turn down the offer."

"Not much of an offer if there's no choice, is there?"

"There's always a choice. Just not always a good choice," retorted the fake guard with a grin.

"I'd want proof of your claims before I commit to anything."

"Of course. If we can't deliver to your satisfaction, the deal is void," replied the fake guard with an air of confidence.

"And how do I explain your presence to the King and the rest of the court? I take it that you're not based out of Kierd."

"Quite true, and leave that to us. Seeing as how you've all but stated that you agree to do business with us, I'll fill you in on the rest before the real guard gets here. We will make another

more public approach to your nation, in which you will be our inside man at court. You'll pore over the details, and after painstaking research, will vouch for us. However, you will want us to prove our claims. To accomplish that, we will provide a closed demonstration to a select few members of the court – trade secrets and all. That demonstration will prove that we are capable of backing up our claims. After that formality is completed, we can begin building you a fleet in earnest."

"And what do you get out of this?"

"Business. And perhaps a favour owed in the future."

Athash did not like that part. But, the fake guard had his measure, and knew that Athash could not afford to refuse.

"Very well, you have a deal."

The fake guard beamed and replied, "Good choice. Expect to hear from us through official channels shortly. I'll see myself out now."

As his unexpected guest approached the door, he turned around and said, "The name's Lazano, by the way." And like that, he was gone.

Still a little gobsmacked from the whole ordeal, Athash went over the details of what had just happened in his head, examining the strange conversation for any sign of possible subterfuge.

A few minutes later, he heard another knock on the door.

*Did he forget his hat or something*, thought Athash. So much for his dramatic exit.

"Enter," he called out for the third time that night.

Athash felt a sense of deja vu as another guard poked his head through the door. Ah, here was the real guard, Athash realized. At least, he hoped so. He couldn't see how he could pack more drama into one evening.

"Sorry to bother you, sir. Saw the lights on, and was just making sure all was okay here."

"Just heading home now, soldier. It's been a late night."

"Very well, sir. Have a safe trip," said the guard as he closed the door and continued his patrol.

Looks like I'll have to ask the quartermaster about the state of our emergency rations tomorrow, Athash sighed.

# Chapter 5

As they approached the large opened gate, John could see out into the city proper for the first time. It was certainly no small village.

While Venarya's institute was almost abandoned, the city outside was brimming with people.

The first thing he noticed were the colours. Unlike the institute, the buildings outside were a symphony of bright rainbows. In fact, he couldn't see a simple black or white coloured house no matter how hard he looked. Also unlike the institute, the buildings were much smaller, with only a few of them topping out at three stories. It seemed more like an enormous village, rather than a city proper.

*Seems a festive place. Quite a contrast to the institute itself though*, he thought.

There was a road that appeared to circumnavigate the entire institute like a moat, and was filled with pedestrians going about their business – well, except for the few who tried and failed to nonchalantly sneak a peek at Venarya.

Seeing him looking at the road, Venarya explained, "The Iatheran Institute sits at the very centre of the city. When we first built this place, there was only the institute and a small coastal village. In fact, the name Iathera used to refer only to the institute originally. Over time though, like all things, it grew."

She had mentioned a coastal village. John hadn't seen any sign of a coast so far. He was now seriously starting to reconsider this whole tour business. John was finally beginning to apprehend the size of the city, and sincerely hoped that they didn't intend to walk him around it. Hoping for at least the equivalent of a horse drawn carriage, he looked around. However, his enthusiasm started to wane as he noticed the narrow streets filled with only foot traffic.

John tentatively asked, "So… um… just out of curiosity, how large is the city now?"

Hearing the note of concern in his voice, Rheus and Venarya both laughed.

"Don't worry," Rheus said, still laughing. "We don't intend to wear your feet out. The city itself is roughly circular, save for the coastal part, with a diameter of roughly eighteen miles. But, fear not," he added with a grin. "We'll not have you walk the entire length of it. Don't forget, we do have more than one portal."

John indeed, had gotten so preoccupied looking around that he had forgotten about them. “Ah,” was all he could say, accompanied with a sheepish smile.

“An easy enough oversight to make,” Venarya soothed him with a smile. “Rheus’s portal is the only one I allow on the Institute’s grounds for security reasons, hence the walking around. Despite his whimsical behaviour at times, I do know him to be trustworthy – and, incidentally, it keeps him from romping around campus in a bathrobe.”

“Thank you, I think,” said Rheus in a flat tone.

“Follow along,” Venarya continued with a smile, “and we’ll take you to your first point of interest with little to no exercise involved.”

After taking a quick glance to make sure Penny and Em hadn’t gotten distracted and wandered away, John followed along, with Rheus and Venarya pointing out different things they thought he might find interesting, and occasionally waving to greet someone.

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Indeed, they only had to travel about one block before they rounded a corner to see a large open square filled with portals. Unlike the one in Rheus’s room, these were big enough to move a very large cart through, though John hadn’t spied anything of the sort yet.

As they walked to the square, John looked through the portals that were in his line of sight. It was a little disorienting to see the mishmash of different scenes, and he was glad that he no longer felt the effects from last night’s misadventure.

Venarya led them to one of the portals. “Here we are,” she announced. Once we step through, follow me and stick to the marked pathways until we clear the square.”

John looked down and saw sets of black painted lines leading away from each portal at an angle.

“Most don’t bother with the paths here, as we usually only get foot traffic, but once we’re through, it’ll be a different story,” added Rheus.

“And I’d prefer for you not to get crushed by a passing orgot just yet,” said Venarya.

Before John could inquire further regarding who or what an orgot was, Venarya had already stepped through the portal.

She looked back and mouthed the word, “Come.”

Or rather, as John suddenly realized, she had probably said the word. He couldn't hear any sounds emanating from the other side of any of the portals. They didn't appear to propagate sound, which could partly explain why Mag had used her mind speech to prompt him to enter the first portal, rather than have someone with a less startling appearance perform the task. Well, that and the fact that no one over here spoke English.

Putting aside the tangential insight, John snapped back to the present and started walking toward the portal.

As he passed through the portal itself, the tingling feeling was still there, but to a lesser extent than before. *Must be getting used to it.* Just like the first time, the feeling disappeared immediately after he had completed the transition.

He looked for the black lines, and moved to join Venarya, with the two dogs and Rheus following behind.

As Penny, Em and Rheus moved through to join them, he heard heavy footsteps moving to his right. As he turned to look for the cause of the disturbance, he saw a gigantic creature lumbering through a nearby portal and heading toward the street. It was nearly the size of an elephant and had the same colouration, but that was where the similarity stopped. The creature sported eight stubby legs, with a head similar to a hippo's. It also seemed disinclined to move unless constantly prodded by a small team of people whom John assumed to be the creature's handlers.

"That would be an orgot, and part of the reason you should be careful about venturing outside the lines around portals," commented Rheus.

"Where is it headed? It doesn't seem to be pulling any sort of cart or such," queried John.

"Those would make terrible draft animals," laughed Venarya. "Though, you can probably tell that from the near frustrated looks on its herders."

"They are quite delicious, though," added Rheus with a grin. "That one is most likely on its way to slaughter, unless, of course, they're just giving it a tour of the city."

Ignoring his joke, Venarya announced, "Our first stop is the bazaar. It's the largest marketplace in the city, and hosts a melting pot of cultures from all over. We'll see if we can't get you a few souvenirs, and perhaps some lunch, as I'm pretty sure that cake didn't fill you up. And, in any case, I'm sure Penny and Em must be getting hungry."

"She does that a lot," added Rheus. "When she's not doing… you know… that other thing."

Venarya gave Rheus a mock glare.

"You should see her dinner parties," Rheus continued, unfazed, "the only complaints are from the catering staff."

Even Venarya laughed at that.

"My lady," laughed John with an exaggerated bow, "I swoon at your thoughtfulness and graciousness.

"In truth," he continued, "I could do with some lunch in a little bit, as could Penny and Em, I'm sure."

They continued walking and bantering for a little bit. One thing John noticed was that the streets here were wider than the ones outside the institute, and as they rounded the corner, John could now see the bazaar. It was huge.

As they approached the bazaar, John tried to get a notion of its size, but he couldn't see the opposite side from where he stood. All John could see were rows of tents selling all manner of items. Like the houses in the city, even the tents were brightly coloured and decorated, John noticed, making it seem as if each shopkeeper was trying to outdo his neighbours in an attempt to attract customers. *Which they probably were*, he added as an afterthought.

As they walked through the isles separating the tents, John saw another curious sight. A few stalls down, he noticed a merchant selling what appeared to be jewelry crafted from a variety of different types of gems. However, it wasn't the jewelry that caught his attention.

He had almost thought the merchant was a statue, either for decoration or for sale. That opinion changed, and he almost jumped, when he saw the statue move. The merchant appeared to be nothing more than a gigantic green mantis.

Hoping that none of his companions had noticed him, he tried to play it off and decided to ask about the strange merchant later. However, Venarya had noticed him looking at the tent, and had misinterpreted his interest.

"Yes, that is some very fine craftsmanship," remarked Venarya. "Come, let's examine it more closely."

Before he realized what was happening, she was approaching the strange merchant.

"How are you today, Syrilo?" asked Venarya.

The creature bent its two front legs and extended its arms in a facsimile of a grand bow. Now that John had a closer view of the odd merchant, he saw humanlike hands at the end of its

arms, rather than the expected bladelike appendage of its supposedly smaller relative. Also, what he had initially thought was a multi-coloured cloak with padded shoulders turned out to be a part of the creature itself. It didn't seem to actually be wearing, or in need of, any sort of clothing. However, the rest of the creature's body mimicked its diminutive cousin, albeit a little stockier.

"Ah, Administrator Venarya," it remarked in a strange buzzing tone. "I am well, and honoured by your visit. How are you this fine day?"

*Did they know each other? Good thing prudence had stopped him from asking about 'the giant bug'.*

"I'm doing well. My friend, here," she said, pointing to John, "was just admiring your work."

"Ah, yes," the creature buzzed, "you'll not find better crafted pieces anywhere else in Iathera. Let me know what catches your interest."

Still a little unsure of the proper etiquette in addressing the creature, John simply smiled and replied, "Thank you. I will."

With that, the creature perked up and stared strangely at John. "Forgive me for prying," it queried, "I have travelled these lands extensively, but your accent and mode of dress are strange to me. You are a visitor?"

"Very astute, Syrilo," Venarya interjected with a smile. "Yes, John just arrived here today from quite far away. We're just showing him around the city now."

"Ah, in that case," the creature replied, "allow me to offer you my own welcome to Iathera, the shining jewel of the east. Even my own wares cannot hope to compare to our fine city."

"Thank you, again, friend," replied John with a smile.

"My pleasure. Allow me to show you something," said the creature, as it reached underneath the counter and retrieved a small wooden box.

The creature gently placed the box on the counter and opened it. Inside was a circular purple pendant, carved out of a precious stone that John could not identify. Gemology was not one of his strong suits.

*Probably one of those weird birthstone gems.*

As John looked closer at the gem, he saw the image of a mantis head imprinted inside the gem somehow. Impressive, he thought.

“This was a simple vanity piece I created a while ago,” the creature supplied. “Unfortunately, there is not much demand for pieces like this.”

Indeed, as John looked around, all of the other pieces on display were carved into intricate designs, with none of them being simple geometric shapes. None of them were purple, either. He also noticed that a lot of the pieces were blue, similar to the strange crystal that seemed to be the common element in almost all of the technology here. However, none of the pieces had that strange granite-like sparkle that the now-familiar crystal had.

“I was pondering what to do with this piece,” the creature continued, “but now I am sure. Friend John, I present you with this gift.”

John was taken aback. “Are you sure? It’s a very nice piece.”

With a simple nod of its head, the creature replied, “I am sure. Wear it in good health, and may it keep you safe.”

*Guess he was planning on marketing it as some sort of good luck trinket? Probably not a big seller if they actually* have *magic here.*

With that, the creature picked up the pendant and handed it to John.

It looked like the creature expected him to put it on right away, and John didn’t want to offend it. He desperately hoped that it wouldn’t turn out to be some sort of freaky mind control device, or something else just as strange. Seeing neither Rheus nor Venarya warning him off, or even looking concerned, he took the pendant and slipped it over his head.

“Thank you, again,” John told the merchant.

“Remember, should anyone ask you where you got it, mention Rizikh of Iathera by name,” buzzed the merchant, with a bow of his head. “Now, please forgive me, but I must tend to the other customers.”

“Not at all. You’re very kind,” smiled Venarya in farewell.

“Have a nice day,” said John, as they started to walk away.

When he was out of earshot, or at least he hoped the creature couldn’t hear him, John softly asked, “I thought the merchant’s name was Syrilo?”

Rheus laughed, “Syrilo is the name of his kind, which they also use as a form of greeting.”

“He seemed to know you though, Venarya?” asked John

“Everyone knows who she is,” interjected Rheus with another laugh, before Venarya could respond.

“You probably made that merchant’s day, though,” he continued with a grin. “I’m guessing that he was probably wondering how to get rid of that piece for a while. Now he’s done that, and also has you as a walking advertisement. He probably thought more people from your land might be visiting this city, and decided to get a head start on promoting his wares.

“Which is why he probably told you his name,” Rheus mused on, “which is strange for his kind - not that they’re secretive, mind you, it’s just that they don’t seem to bother with such identifiers. He probably wants you to be able to direct any of your fellow countrymen to him personally.”

“You’re a trusting font of idealistic hope, aren’t you?” John asked, returning his laugh.

“Which is why I try to keep him off the guest list at dinner parties,” Venarya said, joining in on the fun. “That, and the bathrobe.”

“Enough, enough, I give up” Rheus said, holding up his hands in mock surrender.

The three of them continued their idle banter as they walked through the bazaar.

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“Here we are,” Rheus suddenly interjected into the conversation.

“Huh-,” was all John could get out before Rheus started to shout at a nearby food vendor.

“Quinn!”

The vendor turned his head to look, and his eyes brightened,

“Rheus, you old rascal!” the portly vendor bellowed with a wide grin, “Where’ve you been all week? I was almost ready to hold a memorial service for you.”

“Out and about. Busy with work and that sort of thing,” Rheus replied.

“You mean cooped up in your workshop again in a bathrobe, don’t you?” the vendor added with a smirk.

Both John and Venarya couldn’t help themselves, and broke out in laughter.

“But where are my manners,” the vendor continued. “Lady Venarya, your reputation precedes you. Welcome to my humble stand of fine delicacies.”

“Thank you,” Venarya replied with an appreciate smile.

“And you, my new friend,” he said, pointing to John, “I’m not sure who you are, but any friend of Rheus’s is a friend of mine! But, only if you can eat as much as my bearded associate!

“Now, this is assuming that Rheus hasn’t finally lost all his marbles and decided to kidnap the both of you – and now, for some strange reason, has decide to add me to the collection. If so wink twice, and I’ll run away from here faster than you can think!” he added with another bellowing laugh.

“With that gut, I doubt it,” retorted Rheus. “This is John, a visitor. We’re just giving him an abbreviated tour of Iathera.”

“Welcome to you, then, John,” bellowed Quinn. “You must be important to have one of the most powerful people in the city accompanying you,” he continued, smiling at Venarya. “I hope Rheus’s tour hasn’t been too boring. If so, come see me later. I’ll show you the more fun side of Iathera – can’t guarantee there won’t be a barfight or two involved in the process, though!”

“Er, thanks for the offer, but I might pass for now. I’ve had my barfight quota for the month already,” laughed John, though not sure if the strange man was entirely serious or not.

“Let me know if you reconsider. Now, what can I get for you? On the menu today is minced orgot pie.”

“And what’s on the menu tomorrow, pray tell?” asked Rheus with a flat tone.

“Minced orgot pie,” answered Quinn, with the same flat tone.

“And the day after that?”

“Minced orgot pie.”

“I guess we’ll have minced orgot pie, then,” answered Rheus dryly.

“Fine choice,” replied Quinn with his trademark laugh.

Following that exchange, Venarya had a curious look on her face, but didn’t say anything. She looked like someone on the verge of discovering something she’d rather not know. John noticed and hoped it wasn’t anything related to the taste of orgot, or to the cleanliness of Quinn’s operation.

After receiving a tray of the small round pies from Quinn, Rheus said, “As usual, send the bill to the institute.”

“Will do, my friend,” answered Quinn. “Remember to stop by more often. My children need new shoes!”

“Just make sure the husbands never find out,” jibed Rheus.

Quinn roared with laughter. “Good one, old friend!” Turning to John and Venarya, he said, “And as for you two - it’s a pleasure to finally meet you, Lady Venarya, and you too, friend John. I’ll keep some extra pies aside for you in case that one gorges himself on them!”

Venarya smiled in response, and John replied with a grin, “You have a good day too, Quinn. I’ll let you know about that offer.”

“Hah! I’ll be waiting. Hope you enjoy the finest minced orgot pies in Iathera!”

They waved goodbye to Quinn, and started walking over to a nearby courtyard packed with tables, chairs, and plenty of large trees for shade.

“So, this is why I keep getting mysterious bills for minced orgot pie?” asked Venarya, with crossed arms and a look of mock annoyance.

*Phew.*

“Hey, I probably spend less per year on pies than what Seltzi spends on one of her crazy hairdos,” Rheus retorted weakly.

“You realize those are wigs, right?”

“… Oh.” Quickly changing the subject, he added, “Ah, here’s a good spot with some nice shade.”

The conversation over lunch turned to idle chat, as John and Venarya were simultaneously distracted and flabbergasted by how many of the pies Rheus managed to eat. Out of the twenty small pies, John could barely finish three, Venarya had only eaten one, and each dog had polished off four. Rheus, though, had managed to single-handedly eat the remaining eight, and almost appeared to have a look of slight disappointment that no more pies were left. Indeed, the only time John had ever seen Venarya look genuinely surprised had been when she had seen him eating the last four pies with no help needed. No wonder Quinn had looked so happy at seeing Rheus.

John had to admit, though, that the pies were incredibly tasty. The meat was very similar in taste to beef, but, well, better somehow in a way John couldn’t properly express. He decided not to dwell on it. This place certainly offered more enticing mysteries, and probably best not to waste brainpower on trying to figure out the food.

They spent another few hours wandering around the bazaar, with John ending up carrying a bag full of souvenirs and trinkets. They then started to walk to what John assumed would be another portal plaza.

While at the bazaar, John had noticed quite a few more Syrilo merchants, selling all manner of wares ranging from pans, vegetables, and what he thought were doorstoppers.

"They're just the same as you and I, except a bit different on the outside," Rheus had explained. "They have jobs ranging from fishing to teaching. Mind you, that's not to say that they don't have specialty jobs that they excel in. For example-"

"We can tell John about that later," Venarya abruptly cut him off with a warning look.

"Ah, forgive me. I do tend to get carried away sometimes," Rheus apologized. "You're right, probably not my best idea to be discussing that sort of thing in an open marketplace."

John let the subject drop, and the conversation turned back to idle chatter, with no more mention of the Syrilo. As they continued to browse, John noticed that he hadn't seen any more of Mag's kind. He inquired about it, all the while hoping he wasn't broaching another taboo subject.

It was Venarya who answered. "Her kind is extremely rare. I've travelled quite a bit, and even I have only seen three different Vrangs in my lifetime. The fact that Mag is here on a more or less permanent basis is something of an oddity, but she was instrumental in creating this community, and seems to have decided to linger in order to monitor its progress."

"She was here when this place was built? So she's also over… um…," John trailed off, as prudence over discussing both ladies' ages made him hesitate.

"Over five hundred years old?" she finished his sentence with a smile, "I'm sure Rheus has made some mention of my age, and it doesn't bother me.

"It's all relative," she continued, with her expression now changing to a sad smile, "and to me, you're the short lived ones. It seems your kind is always expiring before you've had the chance to fully live."

"Well, this is a depressing turn," said Rheus with a biting laugh.

"Just out of curiosity," John finally decided to inquire, "how long does the average person live for here?

"I'd say about a hundred and sixty," he replied. "Maybe just over two hundred if they're really lucky."

"Well, this might cheer you up a bit, then. You've still got twice the expected lifespan of me."

"… Wow," was all the shocked Rheus could say.

“Like Venarya said, though, it’s all relative,” John replied with a slightly forced smile. “To me you’re just long-lived. Mind you, that’s not to say I wouldn’t enjoy having your lifespan,” he added with a genuine laugh.

And with that, the mood was lightened, and, as John’s tour of the city continued, the conversation turned to more happy and mundane topics.

## Chapter 6

Athash woke with a start. His hand was already reaching for a weapon, but he stopped mid-action as he realized who had interrupted his sleep.

"Sorry, sir," apologized Rush, "but you said to-"

"Wake me in an hour," Athash finished his sentence for him, as he tried in vain to wipe the weariness from his eyes. "I know. Any news to report?"

"Yes, sir. A fast scout just sailed in a few minutes ago. The captain reports that he's observed both fleets on their way out. From their current speeds, they should intersect within patrol distance of the Nebar Cluster early tomorrow morning. So far, it looks like all's going according to plan."

"Good. Hopefully, that'll make our friends happy. Though, I have to say, I still can't figure out their angle. This task they've asked of us still makes no sense to me. I've explored every possibility that I can think of, and I don't understand what they hope to gain from this."

Rheus shook his head in frustration and said, "Unfortunately, sir, I'm still at a loss with regards to that. I've had absolutely no luck penetrating their organization, or even at turning one of them. The lowliest deckhand on one of their cargo ships seems to be fanatically loyal to their cause, whatever it is. Even surveillance turns up nothing of use to us.

"However, I do have some good news. About half an hour ago, our friends pulled into the harbour. We're just finishing unloading the last of the supplies now. They must have been nearby waiting since the fleet departed, since none of our scouts reported seeing any other ships sailing toward us. Pavic thinks they may have been concealed in a hidden cove nearby."

"But…"

"I've had agents diligently patrolling the shorelines. If there had been any ships hidden away, I would have known about it."

"Something else to ponder, then."

"Yes, sir."

"I know that look, Rush. There's something else on your mind. Speak."

"With all due respect, sir, you look exhausted. It'll take a few hours to get that latest shipment unpacked and installed. I advise you to get some more rest. I'll wake you later in the evening to go over the results, or earlier should something unexpected happen."

“You’re supposed to be my spymaster, not nursemaid,” laughed Athash. “But, your point is well taken. If there’s no more news, wake me this evening.”

“No more news to report, sir,” replied Rush with a straight face. “I’ll wake you later this evening. Until then.”

“Thank you, Rush. See you later.”

As he left, Athash shook his head in silent amusement. The man seemed to be made of stone, and Athash could count on one hand the amount of times he had seen Rush laugh. Still, he was exceptional at his job, and, given the current circumstances, that was really all he could ask for.

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“I must admit, I didn’t expect you to use that contingency quite so soon.”

The next morning, Athash had promptly sent the necessary note to the quartermaster’s office, and Rush had showed up in short order, still dressed in the livery of a place courier.

“Still,” Rush continued, “I’m glad you did. I assume this is regarding the false guard who made a stop here last night after I left?”

“You’re incredibly well informed.”

“If I wasn’t, I would expect you to replace me, sir.”

“Well said. Now, just so I don’t repeat myself, what do you know?”

“With your instatement yesterday, I pulled my hidden spy out of your office as a courtesy. However, extrapolating from the circumstances involved, I can only assume that he made you an offer of some kind? And, furthermore, you wish me to vet that offer?”

Athash smiled, “Excellent, and spot on.”

After filling in Rush on the missing details, the spymaster paced for a minute as he considered potential options. Athash silently and patiently waited for him to break the silence.

“I am aware of his organization, and he knows it,” Rush admitted. “As for why he lied about it, the only sensible option is that he was simply having a bit of strange fun, given what you gathered about his character. He knows he stands to gain nothing but amusement from having you try to dance around me.

“But, he is right about one thing, I have been unable to get information on them other than ‘they exist’.” Rush paused for a few seconds, then said, “You should know this, just so you have full disclosure. Lazano tried to recruit me a long time ago.”

Athash could only sit back in silent shock. Even after taking a few seconds to regain his composure, he could only reply with, “He never mentioned that part.”

Rush laughed a bitter laugh.

“I pride myself on being a man obsessed with facts, and the making of decisions based solely on the information contained in those facts. However, when he approached me, there was no flaw to his logic. I stood only to gain from joining him.”

“What made you choose otherwise?”

“Instinct. Something inside me said not to trust his offer.”

“So, you think that I should just forget this whole business?”

“No,” replied Rush.

“Why not?” asked a slightly bemused Athash. “You’ve just told me that you don’t trust him.”

“That’s irrelevant. If he is correct in his claims, he has us painted into a corner, and he realizes it. Should he approach one of the other nations with the same offer, it would only be a matter of time before the ambitious monarch decided that re-unification of the continent was in order.

“Furthermore, even if he’s lying, and it turns out that he has given this technology to other nations, then at least we’ll be on a level playing field.

“Plus, if Lazano turns out to be an enemy, it wouldn’t hurt to try to keep him close for the time being.”

Athash took a few seconds to think it over. “I can’t say I find fault in your logic,” he admitted.

“That’s what I’m here for, sir.”

“Are you actually registered as a palace courier?”

“Yes, it’s one of the few disguises that allows me free roam here.”

“I have a feeling that your advice is going to be invaluable until this business is concluded. Rather than have the poor quartermaster thinking I’m obsessed with emergency rations, here’s a new disguise – as of right now, you are now my aide-de-camp.”

“Thank you, sir. That should make things a bit easier. It does get a bit tedious when I get pulled aside to deliver a message from some noble to her lover.”

“I thought you craved information?” Athash asked with a grin.

“I could easily find that out, with no walking involved, by simply stopping at the palace kitchens and listening to the gossip,” Rush replied with a straight face.

Athash laughed.

“You, my friend,” he remarked, “are going to work out just fine, I think.”

# Chapter 7

The sun looked like it was soon about to set, and despite having the enormous moon hanging high in the sky, no one around John seemed to pay it any mind. *See a wonder enough times, and even that'll become commonplace*, he thought.

They had visited various other parts of the city after leaving the bazaar, and John no longer felt any pangs of hesitation when using the portals. He was finally getting the hang of navigating the city, and had taken a while to realize that Rheus's translator machine thingy had also given him the ability to read this new language. He had been absently reading various street signs, when, it had dawned on him that they were probably not written in English.

Using the trick Rheus had shown him earlier that day, he squinted and concentrated at the next sign he saw. As if by magic, which it probably was, the lettering on the sign began to jumble itself into seemingly nonsensical characters. However, same as before, it had resulted in a minor headache forming behind his temple. Thankfully, as before again, the headache had stopped as soon as he had ceased trying to see the real lettering.

After they had passed through the final portal, on the way back to the institute, he wondered if he would ever come back to this place. That was, of course, assuming that he was able to make his way back to his own home tonight. Venarya had expressed some discomfort with sending him back without Mag's blessing, and had insisted on waiting for her to return from her mysterious task. Still, John took a final look around as they walked back, just in case this would be the last time he saw this place.

Venarya had invited both of them back to her home for dinner, and they had graciously accepted.

John saw that they were walking back to the same spot where they had met up with Venarya, so he assumed that his initial supposition had been correct. This manor home appeared to indeed double as both quarters and an office for her.

As they approached the front door, Venarya took a key from what looked like a small hidden pocket in her sleeve. However, John saw no keyhole in the doorknob. Curious, he looked on as Venarya inserted the key into a small slot in the wall next to the door. Instead of turning the key, though, she simply let it sit for a few seconds then removed it. John didn't hear a 'click' or

anything else of the sort, but Venarya then proceeded to turn the handle and open the door. A bit odd, but John could somewhat hypothesize how a system like that could work.

"Come in, and make yourselves at home," Venarya said in invitation, "Have a seat, and I'll check on the food."

Venarya headed into the kitchen, while John and Rheus sat themselves in her living room.

"Now, is it just me, or do you also think that she didn't have time to actually cook anything?" commented John.

"The poor caterers…" was all that Rheus managed to blurt out before he started giggling uncontrollably.

John couldn't help it. Perhaps it was all the walking, but he started giggling as well, and soon the two of them were laughing hysterically.

"Are you two boys enjoying yourselves?"

John looked up, and there was Venarya with a suspicious and questioning look on her face.

"Sorry," John apologized, pulling himself together. "Just a stupid joke, Venarya."

"Well, if you're finished, dinner is now served." Venarya didn't look convinced that she wasn't the butt of the joke, but looked like she would let it pass for now.

"My apologies, as well, Venarya," Rheus added with unconvincingly innocent look on his face. "Forgive the boisterousness, I pray, dear lady, and lead the way to dinner."

Even Venarya had to laugh at that. "Very well, I'll let it pass. I probably don't want to know anyways. Come, the food's getting cold."

Unsure of whether it would be appropriate for the dogs to follow as well, his quandary was resolved when Venarya also added, "I've got a special treat for you two, Penny and Em. You two behaved very well today."

The more talkative one of the two, Penny, barked and lolled her tongue as if she had understood.

"What about us?" Rheus asked, feigning a hurt tone. "We've behaved pretty well… mostly."

"I've got a treat for you as well," she laughed. "Come. Sit."

They walked into the dining room and saw a large table with numerous covered dishes scattered throughout it. On the floor were four large bowls. Two were filled with water, and two appeared to be filled with some sort of cooked meat dish. Whatever it was, it certainly didn't

smell like dog food. Heck, if Venarya had offered John that for dinner, he wouldn't have had any qualms about eating it.

Seeing him looking, Venarya smiled and said, "It's not the standard food we give the dogs here, but it's safe for them and they seem to love it. I'm sure Penny and Em will like it too."

As if in response, both dogs had also noticed the food bowls, and made a beeline straight to them.

"Looks like you're right," laughed John, as they left the dogs to their bowls and sat at the large table.

"First," Venarya said, as she removed one of the silver covers, "we have this. I had your friend Quinn send some over."

Staring at the platter of minced orgot pies, Rheus looked nothing but confused. He started stammering, "But… but, how did you… you didn't know…"

Venarya just sat laughing, "I've been waiting all afternoon to do that."

Rheus had managed to regain some of his composure, "Okay, how did you manage that? You never even talked to him after lunch! Come to think of it, you never even spoke with any of the catering staff after we left this morning?"

"A girl's got to have her secrets," she replied with a wink and a wicked smile. "Besides, do you really want to question it or eat it?"

"Fine," he laughed. "But help me, I'll figure out how you pulled this off."

The rest of dinner passed without incident, and the food was top notch. John tried to sample as many of the strange dishes as possible, and, while the flavours were unfamiliar, nothing disappointed.

After they had finished dinner, Rheus glanced out a nearby window, then announced, "Perfect timing with dinner. Now, I do believe there's something outside that John would love to see."

"You really try to pack as much into a day as possible, don't you?" laughed John. "I'll bite, as long as it's not some wandering nighttime food vendor – in which case, I won't bite, because I'm stuffed."

They all chuckled at that, as Rheus led them outside.

"Look at the sky," was all that Rheus said.

John looked up and surveyed the sky. The sun had now fully set, and was now out of sight. That gigantic moon was still in the sky, but, unlike the moon he knew, it seemed to reflect very little light. It seemed to give off just enough light to make it visible as a dark round shape, but no hint of its true colour. In fact, now that, he thought of it, why was he able to see the entire moon? Did he luck out and arrive on the night of a full moon? Regardless, he put such questions out of his mind, as he finally realized what Rheus was talking about. Slack-jawed, he stared at what he had initially thought to be a bright flickering light on the horizon opposite from the sunset.

In the sky, a second sun appeared to be rising.

*Well, sort of a sun,* he thought. Though it was bright white in colour, the light it emitted seemed barely brighter than a full moon. The strange sun was encircled by constantly undulating swirls and ribbons of light. Even the shape of the core seemed to constantly shift as white flares continuously erupted from it. John had no frame of reference to even be able to guess at what he was seeing.

"It's called the 'Dark Sister'. I'm not sure who coined that term, but they sure had a flair for the dramatic," supplied Rheus.

"Wow," was all John could say. "How did you know that I would find this to be so odd? Don't tell me you have latent psychic powers at night, or something?"

Rheus laughed, "Nothing so dramatic. Rather mundane, in fact. Earlier today, you had mentioned that 'the sun looked normal'. I simply extrapolated from that sentence. Glad to see I was right."

"I'm glad you thought of it," John thanked him. "What a sight!"

"Sometimes, we forget the wonders in the simplest things in life," added Venarya.

"Quite true," agreed Rheus.

John took another gander around the immediate area, and suddenly realized something else. The blue lampposts that he was seeing were not actually lampposts.

"Are those palm trees glowing?" John found himself asking.

*One of those questions you never think you'll have to ask in your lifetime.*

"Ah, I'd forgotten about those," Rheus replied. "Those are actually an Iatheran specialty in the region, as far as I know. I have no idea where they came from."

"I brought them here a long time ago," they both heard Venarya say.

"You never told me that," Rheus accused her.

"You never asked," Venarya countered with an exaggerated haughty look.

Rheus chuckled, "Fine, I deserved that."

"What do you call the other sun?" asked John.

"*Galleron*. It's a translation from an old language, meaning 'giver of light'," answered Rheus.

John suddenly squinted and looked more closely at the new sun. "Is… is there something else up there?"

"Well, theoretically speaking, I'm sure there is, but… oh… I see what you mean-," said Rheus, still a bit distracted from Venarya's previous revelation.

"What my long-winded friend is so eloquently trying to say is that that large speck in the sky is Mag approaching," Venarya interrupted.

Rheus gave her a mock glare as he said, "Excellent, now we can see about getting you back home safely, John."

As Mag flew closer, John was astounded as to the full size of her wings. She was simultaneously an impressive and terrifying sight, and one he would have instantly fled from, if he hadn't known better.

As she landed on silent wings, John idly wondered why she hadn't simply jumped out of Rheus's window, rather than using the door when she had left.

Mag waved in greeting to them, and then sauntered over at a brisk pace. She stood in front of Venarya and held out her right claw. Venarya took Mag's claw in her right hand, and closed her eyes.

*Now this* has *to be some kind of weird telepathic thing?*

After a few seconds, she opened her eyes and let go of Mag's claw.

"Mag expresses her regrets to you John, but she will not be able to send you home tonight," said Venarya.

John started to feel a slight feeling of panic set in.

"But," Venarya continued, "she does promise to send you back tomorrow morning. She bids you to remain within the institute's walls until she returns, as she may not be able to stay for long."

John relaxed.

*-Necessary-*

That was the longest word she had ever said to him, and Rheus was right, as he definitely felt a slight pang in his head. John took the statement in the spirit it was offered, and appreciated that she had been considerate enough to avoid giving a long apology.

"It's no problem, Mag," John assured her. "I'll wait here until you return."

Mag simply nodded in affirmation, then walked away a short distance and launched herself in the air.

After Mag had departed, Rheus wasted no time in asking, "How did you do that? And why have you never told me that you can do that? Every time she has a conversation with me, I end up almost bedridden from the headache."

Venarya smiled, "An old trick I learnt a long time ago. And, like I said, a girl's got to have some secrets."

"I think I might be starting to dislike you."

"I'll give you the leftover pies to take home?"

"Apology accepted."

Turning to John, Venarya said, "Looks like you'll be spending the night here in one of the guest suites."

"I've slept in worse," John said half-jokingly. "I'll try to make do."

"You can also bunk at my place, if you like?" offered Rheus.

"On your couch, you mean? That is, assuming you don't keep him up half the night with your chatter?" countered Venarya, with a hint of uncharacteristic sternness. "No, he needs his rest and his wits about him tomorrow for his return home. He stays here."

"Well, I was going to take the couch," Rheus said weakly, "but you've got a point. Just make sure you come back for another visit before too long, John."

"I will, assuming Mag lets me return again," replied John.

"Hah, I'll talk her ears off until she relents," laughed Rheus. "Well, it's getting late, and I've apparently got my own bed to get to. Now, there's the slight matter of those pies?"

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After Rheus had departed with his pies, Venarya turned to John and said, "Come, I'll show you your room for the night."

She led him upstairs to a luxurious room, with a large and very comfortable looking bed. *Much better than last night's couch*, he thought.

"Through that side door is your washroom. There are towels in there, so you might as well grab a hot shower. I've got some extra sleepwear in the storage room. I'll lay a few of them out on the bed for you, and you can see which one fits. Call out if you need anything."

"Thanks, Venarya. I could do with a shower and some sleep."

She smiled as he walked through the side door and closed it behind him.

As John examined the washroom, he prayed he wouldn't run into a situation where he'd have to ask Venarya about how to properly operate something while in the middle of doing something potentially embarrassing. Thankfully, it all seemed perfectly simple.

The tap on the sink was ornate but easy to figure out. The toilet was a boxlike construct that enclosed a circular bowl, with a chain hanging next to it. Upon pulling the chain, a series of hidden jets sent a spiral of water gushing down the bowl. So far, so good. The shower had two levers, which, luckily, had markings as to their function. One appeared to control the temperature, and the other controlled the water pressure. Upon testing it, he found he was correct.

He quickly undressed, and then stepped into the large stall. Pulling the screen closed, he couldn't get the shower started fast enough. Muscles sore from the day of walking appreciated the warm, liquid pampering. The soap looked normal, but tingled for a bit when applied to his skin. It was an odd feeling, but soothing.

Finally finished with his shower, he towelled off the water and then wrapped another dry towel around his waist. Before opening the door, he noticed a bottle on the sink which was marked 'mouth cleaner'. *What are the odds that 'mouth' is actually slang for 'toilet' here?* Taking a calculated chance, he opened the bottle, took a swig, and began gargling. It was slightly minty and refreshing, without being overly harsh.

*If this isn't actually toilet cleaner, I should see about bringing some back with me. This is way better than what I've been using.*

About half a minute in, John realized that he wasn't sure if the proper protocol here was to spit it back out into the sink, or just to ingest it. There weren't any sort of instructions printed on the bottle. He opted for the cautious route, and spat it back out.

With that, he opened a tap for a few seconds to rinse the sink, then opened the door and walked back into the bedroom.

A single candle burnt on the dresser, which was odd, as John knew that Venarya had those strange blue-crystal probably-magical light things throughout the house.

He glanced over to the bed and, as promised, Venarya had laid out three different sets of pyjamas for him.

However, what he hadn't been expecting was that Venarya had also laid herself out on the bed. She was also now wearing a sheer, form-fitting nightgown that did absolutely nothing in terms of concealing anything.

"Did I get your measure correctly? See anything that looks comfortable?" she asked, with a giggle at his lack of composure. She then quite slowly and deliberately took a deep breath.

Staring at Venarya, John could barely speak. "I…"

"Okay, fine," Venarya said with the same wicked look, "No need to call out if you need anything. Just come to bed."

In the back of his mind, John knew that she was using that strange power of hers to influence this situation – not that she had really needed to resort to such tactics to achieve such a result. In the back of his mind, John knew he should be trying to figure out why she was doing this. Unfortunately for John, his brain was not the part of his body that was currently doing the thinking.

As he felt raw emotion overpower him, the single cogent thought that managed to pass though his mind was '*Good thing I used that mouthwash*'.

He found that he could not take his eyes off of Venarya as she lay there, still sporting that libertine smile. Then, with rational thought and the need to question this scenario rapidly losing importance, John made a beeline for the bed.

# Chapter 8

Athash felt much more collected when Rush woke him up later that evening.

Rush had no news to reports, other than that the recent delivery had been successfully unloaded, and that the techs were nearly finished setting up.

“Let’s go see what we’ve bought and paid for,” said Athash as he got up.

“Yes, sir.”

After a brisk walk to the adjacent shipyards, Rush led Athash to one of the numerous giant tents which had been erected on the grounds. Pulling back the entrance flap, he walked in to see two technicians working.

The first technician looked up to see who had entered, and immediately snapped to attention upon seeing his commanding officer. Seeing the sudden behaviour from his companion, the second technician glanced back toward the doorway and then immediately followed suit.

“At ease, gentlemen. Right now, your work is more important than my ego,” Athash assured them with a dismissing wave of his hands.

“Yes, sir,” replied the technicians, as they returned to work.

“This is one of the last few that they’re setting up now,” supplied Rush.

No matter how many countless times Athash had seen this previously, he could never get over this strange technology.

He watched as the technician took one end of a long tube from the large tank in one corner of the tent, and then connected it to the strange sphere in the centre of the room. After all these years, he still had no idea what to make of it. A *cesoc* was what Lazano had called it. *Ship-eggs* were what the technicians were calling them, as they looked like nothing more than large wooden spheres. But, once the contents from that tank were supplied to it, it would silently start growing and reshaping itself. In roughly fifteen days, the sphere would complete its metamorphosis, and would become a new warship for his growing armada.

Athash fervently hoped that the lack of traditional shipbuilding activities would make any spies think this was just a supply dump. He had no illusions that he could keep up the charade forever, but he hoped it would be too late for the other nations to respond properly once they realized what was happening.

It was too bad that they were still completely dependent on Lazano and his mysterious organization for their navy, thought Athash. Despite nearly three and a half decades of covert research, his best minds had had no luck in figuring out anything about the cesocs, much less how to create one themselves.

Even once the ships were complete, they were still reliant on Lazano. Each ship would die, its hull cracking and disintegrating within a matter of days if it was not constantly supplied with another tank of some other strange substance.

*They would die*, thought Athash. It was a strange concept to apply to something as seemingly inanimate as a ship, but Lazano had assured him that each ship was indeed a living thing, rather than a traditional construct of dead wood.

As with the cesocs, they had had no luck in synthesizing any suitable alternatives to that other substance. The viability of his naval strength lay solely in the hands of Lazano's organization. Lazano didn't even bother coming up with an odd name for the smelly liquid, opting simply, and probably humourously, to label the drums as '*boat food*'.

The benefits of such a fleet outweighed the potential setbacks, Lazano had assured him. For example, if a ship was damaged in any way, it would automatically repair itself given enough time. Drydocks and maintenance crews were a thing of the past, he had promised.

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Athash and the few other officials gathered to watch the closed demonstration. There was no legitimate reason for him to bring Rush, while denying others of much higher rank, so he was reluctantly forced to exclude him.

However, when he had informed Rush of the circumstances, he had simply smiled and told Athash not to worry. Given the resourcefulness he had displayed so far, Athash had no doubt either him or one of his agents would be covertly watching the entire proceedings.

So far, the plot had gone off without a hitch.

Eighteen days after first seeing him, Lazano had pulled into the harbour in one of the largest ships Athash had ever seen. It must have measured at least six hundred feet from bow to stern, and was bristling with a variety of weapons. Even the largest cargo ship in the region topped out at close to five hundred feet. Had he been forced to have the entirety of the Kierdan navy attack

the vessel, he would be hesitant of a favourable outcome. Indeed, only the juggernauts sported by the Nebar Cluster could possibly have a chance in a one-on-one fight against this ship.

Thankfully, the large ship had quickly established communications with the harbour patrol, identifying themselves as a trade delegation. The panic soon died down, and logistical issues then became a concern. The royal harbour didn't have any docks large enough to facilitate the ship, so they had been forced to launch a small cutter off the side of the warship. Upon disembarking, Athash was unsurprised to see Lazano at the head of the delegation.

Their grand entrance had guaranteed them a quick, unscheduled audience with King Domich himself. They entered the Grand Hall with hundreds of eyes upon them, curious as to what they intended. After multiple assurances of non-hostile intent, they had used the adage of national security to secure a private meeting with King Domich, Lord General Athash, and a handful of other high ranking officials that Rush had pre-vetted.

Lazano took point and had made an elegant case for himself. Even if Athash had not already pre-determined the end result of the negotiations, he would have been hard pressed to refuse Lazano. Athash had had Rush make up a list of any potential shortcomings as preparation, and Lazano had diplomatically countered all of them.

As the meeting neared its second hour, Athash finally asked the question that he knew Lazano had been waiting for.

"What you've offered us so far is very enticing, but we need to know that you can deliver. Would you be able to give us a tour of one of your existing shipyards?"

Lazano smiled the smile of a politician as he replied, "Just from your question alone, I can see that I haven't explained our process quite as well as I should have. There is no need for you to travel to one of our facilities. In fact, to put it bluntly, my superiors value their privacy to the extent where they would explicitly forbid such a request if I were to ask them.

"However, I can offer something better. If you can arrange for another meeting tomorrow morning, I will make preparations for a demonstration of our process. I can guarantee that all your questions will be answered," he concluded, still sporting that trademark smile.

The next morning found everyone from that meeting, including a curious King Domich, were now seating themselves in a small auditorium and eagerly awaiting a demonstration of Lazano's claims.

On the stage of the palace theatre was a large table with a black cloth draped over its contents. As soon as the last person was seated, Lazano walked onto the stage with a calm demeanor and gave a dramatic bow to his onlookers.

“Thank you for attending,” Lazano told the audience. “I won’t waste your time repeating myself from yesterday. I will commence the demonstration immediately.”

With the flair of a stage magician, he grandly uncovered the table to reveal a wooden sphere lying in the middle of the table, and a small container of liquid in one corner.

“This sphere is called a cesoc,” Lazano explained, “and it’s essentially what we will be selling to you.”

Not a few faces showed signs of puzzlement at that pronouncement, but Lazano offered no further explanation as he continued, “There are no tricks involved in what you are about to see. Keep your eyes on the sphere as I connect this tube to it.”

Bemused eyes watched as Lazano connected the tube. After about a half minute of nothing happening, Athash started to wonder if something had gone wrong. Lazano however, was still calmly smiling.

“Keep watching,” Lazano assured them. “The fun will begin in another few seconds.”

As if on cue, cracks start to appear on the sphere. As Athash looked closer, he saw that the apparent cracks were too uniform and symmetrical to be random.

The sphere suddenly starting shifting its form along the fault lines, as it simultaneously started to expand.

“Please note that what you are watching is a sped up version of the actual process,” Lazano reminded them, “Actual maturation time for a full sized ship will take weeks, at least. The current subject will not survive the day due to the alterations necessary for the demonstration.”

Athash looked around and chuckled. The attendees all looked like enrapt children watching a juggler for the first time, rather than the stern officials they were supposed to be.

Within another few minutes, the sphere had completely altered its form, and now resembled a small rowboat.

“Your warships will, of course, be much larger,” Lazano joked.

With that demonstration, Lazano had managed to secure the approval of almost all attending officials.

The Exchequer had been the only holdout, strictly from a budgetary standpoint. She questioned whether it would be a more efficient option to have Lazano's organization grow the ships, then deliver them upon completion, as they could then eliminate the costs of constructing new facilities.

*She definitely didn't want the possibility of another Graisav*, thought Athash.

Lazano smiled as if he had been anticipating that question for a while. "That is, unfortunately, not possible. These ships have a very unique characteristic. If left derelict and unanchored, they will automatically pilot themselves to the area where they were constructed."

He let that sink in, as a few of the onlookers widened their eyes in amazement.

"My superiors, while trusting, would not appreciate one of your ships leading an armada of your enemies back to us," he continued. "However, think of it as a potential feature, rather than a liability. Now, I say this with the utmost respect, but consider what might-have-been if your recent ceremonial delegation to Graisav had been ferried in one of our self-repairing ships, which was also capable of returning to its home port by itself?

Lazano was smooth, Athash gave him that. With that last statement, he now had all officials in agreement. None of them cared to suffer that fate. Even Domich had cancelled over a half dozen future appearances in the outlying coastal cities.

Now, as soon as they could finalize the contracts, they would immediately start ordering Lazano's ships.

That, however, only served to make Athash nervous. Lazano could have done all this without his meager help. There was absolutely no reason, other than an extreme necessity to create an affiliation with Athash, and why would they need that? What game was he playing at? Why did he wish to establish a direct relationship with Athash beforehand?

And exactly what favour would he demand down the road?

# Chapter 9

"Wake up, John," he heard Venarya say.

He opened his eyes, as vague and fragmented memories of last night came flooding into his mind. He turned to his right, expecting to see Venarya lying next to him, but she wasn't there.

"Over here," he heard her say.

Confused, he looked around the room, and saw Venarya standing by the door. She wasn't wearing that sheer nightgown anymore, and was now garbed in a dress similar in fashion to the one she wore yesterday.

"Back in the land of the living, are we? Sorry to intrude, but you slept through my knocking," she smiled.

Had he imagined the whole thing? Some fevered dream or bug he had picked up? Hallucinogenic mouthwash?

*One way to find out.*

"Venarya…" he started.

"Yes, John," she replied with a perfectly straight face.

"Last night…" he trailed off, now unsure of how to approach the situation.

Venarya suddenly laughed and walked over to his bedside. Sitting down, she said, "Sorry, John. I couldn't help doing that." She continued with a solemn face, "Last night, as you put it, is something you probably shouldn't mention to anyone else - particularly, Rheus, who's incidentally on his way over right now."

Confused, John could only say, "Huh?"

"I'll start at the beginning. The truth is that, yesterday evening, I didn't relay Mag's entire message to you.

"Okay…" said John, still confused.

"The last part of her message was that, when she returns this morning, she will give you the ability to control the portal between our worlds at will."

She paused and watched John's sleepy eyes start to widen, then continued, "For what purpose, though, she didn't say. I can only trust that she has important reasons, for I've never known her to do anything on a whim."

Momentarily forgetting about his encounter with Venarya and still a little groggy, John was shocked by this revelation. “I don’t understand. Why are you telling me now, then?”

Venarya continued, “To be perfectly blunt, John, you were an unknown quantity. The power to bridge our worlds, by force of will alone, has the potential to have staggering repercussions. Should the worst happen, Iathera will instantly become the bridgehead of any battle.

“As much as I liked you, I convinced Mag that we needed to be absolutely sure of your character before you could be entrusted with that kind of capability.”

“That’s understandable, so far.”

“You should know, as well, that your assumption after our first meeting was correct. As demonstrated by my meeting with Mag last night, I do have some small ability to probe minds - or ‘weird telepathic thing’, I believe you referred to it - but I would prefer for others not to know. I trust Rheus implicitly, but he does tend to get a little long winded at times, and may end up saying the wrong thing to the wrong person.”

John said nothing, but had the funny feeling he knew where this was going.

“Furthermore, my ability can be easily thwarted if the target’s mind is focused and alert. The fastest and most direct method to determine your trustworthiness was to put your mind in a state of pure emotion, rather than thought. I… don’t think I need to explain further, do I?”

John’s suspicion had been correct, but funnily enough, he wasn’t sure if to be relieved or disappointed. “So, there’s, well, nothing between us?”

“I wouldn’t say that,” she smiled. “You’ll always have my friendship. Besides, I don’t think Amelia would approve of us, if we were to continue on this path.”

“You know about her?”

“Forgot about the mind probe, already? I suspect I may have done some permanent damage,” she jokingly reminded him. Donning a more serious look, she continued, “I know everything about you now, John. I suspect that, despite everything, Amelia probably wouldn’t enjoy seeing you looking for solace at the bottom of a bottle. There may even still be a possible future for you two.”

John’s expression darkened slightly, but Venarya raised her palm and smiled, “But, I also know the subject is fresh and still troubles you, so let’s leave it be for now.”

“I appreciate that.” John suddenly thought of something. “You didn’t do this to Rheus as well, did you?”

Venarya laughed, “He probably wishes I had done that instead. No, I simply gave him a gruelling two hour ‘job interview’, then gauged his merits as I watched him stammer.”

John laughed, “Poor Rheus. Though, I must say I feel slightly used.”

“Would you have preferred the two hour interview?” Venarya smirked, “Besides, I’m pretty sure the whole experience wasn’t all that unenjoyable for you.”

“Point taken,” he laughed.

“All joking aside though, I do apologize for the ruse and breach of privacy. Unfortunately, it was a necessary evil.”

“I understand the necessity, and not much we can do to change the past. To that end, let’s leave it there,” John sighed, pragmatically. “So, you said Rheus is on his way over. Is he joining us for breakfast before I leave?”

“Not as such. As much as I’d like to join, you two will be dining alone, as I’ve just been summoned. There’s been some sort of disturbance by the docks, and the Intendant desires my presence. The messenger was a little unclear on the details, unfortunately.”

“Hopefully, it’s nothing serious.”

“Agreed. I don’t think I can wait for Rheus to get here, so fill him in on the situation for me, please.”

“I will.”

“I’ll try to return as soon as I can. With luck, I’ll get back before you leave. If not…”

Venarya paused, then suddenly grabbed John and gave him a passionate and lingering kiss. John was pretty glad that he wasn’t standing up, as he felt like his knees go weak. After what simultaneously felt like forever and yet not long enough to John, she pulled away and smiled.

“I… I thought we were done with that,” was all John could say when he regained his wits.

“Think of it as a partial apology. You were a bit, shall we say, under the influence last night, and I know your memories are a bit muddled as a result of the mind probing. At least, this way, you’ll have one clear memory as a keepsake,” she said with a wink, as she stood up. “Also, there’s a special breakfast waiting for you in the kitchen.

“Made by me, personally,” she added. “Not by the poor caterers.”

John winced.

Venarya eyes took on a twinkle of delight at his discomfort. “I’ll see you later this morning, hopefully,” she said as she exited the room.

***

John whistled in amazement at his breakfast. Venarya had outdone herself this time.

He didn't know what they ate here for breakfast normally, but he was pretty sure this wasn't standard fare. Upon lifting the cover, it had revealed a familiar sight. He wasn't sure how she had managed to procure such similar ingredients in such short order, but on the plate lay a reasonable facsimile of fried eggs, sausages, and pancakes with syrup. The taste wasn't exact, but it was the thought that counted. Besides, it was still delicious.

He had lifted the other cover and peeked at Rheus's plate to reveal a familiar sight. Laughing as he replaced the cover, he wondered how the man could eat so many of the darned pies and not get sick of them. He also wondered where Rheus was, as Venarya had said he was already on the way.

The question was answered in short order as he heard a loud knock on the door. "Venarya! John! Are you there?" Rheus sounded slightly frantic.

"I'm here," John called out. "Come in."

Rheus was looking a little wild-eyed when he came into the kitchen. "Where's Venarya? Is she still here?" he immediately asked with no preamble or greeting.

"No, she got a message and had to run to the docks. She was meeting with someone called the 'Intendant' there. She wasn't sure exactly what was happening when she left, though. Is something wrong?"

"I just received some of the same information, as well. The 'Intendant' is the administrator of the city, by the way, just to stress how important this is."

"Go on," prompted John, with a concerned look. "By the way, that's for you." He pointed at the other plate.

Sitting down and opening the cover, he barely acknowledged his favourite food as he started to eat. Between mouthfuls he said, "I suspect that I may have gotten a less concise report than was given to Venarya, so I'll tell you what I know so far.

"Early this morning, the Nebar Cluster came under attack from forces apparently loyal to Kierd-"

He saw John's confusion at the names and amended himself, "Forgive me, John, but I'm still a little flustered by all this. The Nebar Cluster is a group of small islands off of our eastern coast. It's not so much a country, as it is a giant company. Everyone who lives there is

essentially an employee, not a citizen. They manufacture the most cutting edge technology in this part of the world. They also do quite a bit of research, with a not miniscule amount of it being weapons and military research. We've got, shall we say, an understanding with them. In exchange for protecting our territorial waters, we help them in joint civil research projects. We also offer them access to low cost food supplies, as agricultural space on the Cluster is severely limited."

"Okay, I'm with you so far," John assured Rheus. "Now, who or what is Kierd?"

Taking a few more bites of the pie seemed have a pseudo-tranquilizing effect on Rheus. "This is good. Remind me to thank Venarya for this. Kierd is a nation located on a relatively small continent over fifteen hundred miles east of here. There are only seven nations there, and historically, they were always at each other's throats. The last few decades were pretty quiet though. That is, until fairly recently, when Kierd's northern neighbour somehow managed to attack them and kill their monarch. Kierd then launched a retaliatory expedition and, last we heard, were still in the middle of a protracted siege of Narad's capital."

"So you think they might have attacked the Cluster to get weapons?"

"I'm not actually sure. This is where the details start to get vague. But, it would sort of make sense. However, from what I know of the Cluster, only a fool would attack them. They command one of the most powerful armadas I've ever seen. Rumour was that that Kierd had been constructing ships at a ferocious rate, but even so, I doubt they would be able to match the Cluster's war machine. Actually, the more I think about this, the less I think they attacked them to get weapons. The sheer amount of manpower and resources that they would lose in such a venture wouldn't come close to what they would hope to gain by way of looting. And, that's assuming they manage to plunder anything before the Cluster destroys everything of value."

"What other reason would they have to attack the Cluster?"

"I couldn't even begin to speculate. Perhaps to stop them from coming to Narad's assistance, but that's not in character for the Cluster. They don't hire themselves out like that, and especially not to the losing side in a conflict. It couldn't be a weapons shipment, because whatever remains of Narad's army is contained within the walls of their capital, with no hope of resupply. Besides, Kierd would simply have tried to intercept any weapons shipment, rather than perform an all-out attack. No, this makes absolutely no sense."

"What about as a diversion?"

“I don’t see how. What would they be trying to divert the Cluster’s attention from? Plus, that would be an impressive amount of resources to dedicate to such a task, particularly in a time of war.”

John thought about this for a bit, then asked, “You said they’d been constructing a lot of ships. What if this isn’t a relatively large part of their fleet that they’ve sent over?”

“That’s entirely possible,” Rheus conceded. “We were never given accurate numbers regarding the size of their navy, but there would be no need to distract the Cluster. They must have known that the Cluster simply didn’t care about their conflict, and had no desire to become involved. Besides, the Cluster is over a thousand miles away from them. I’m sure they must have had more immediate problems closer to home, rather than picking a fight across the ocean.”

“Well, there could be any amount of other reasons to explain this. And, of course, there’s always the possibility that it’s just a pointless attack by an inept or insane leader. I know my world’s seen its share of pointless wars throughout our history.”

“You’re right. No use speculating until we can get more facts. Hopefully, Venarya gets back soon with more details.”

“So do I,” John affirmed. “I just hope it doesn’t put a damper on the plans to get me home today.” He deliberately didn’t mention the previous conversation with Venarya to Rheus. “Last thing I’d want is to finally get back, and find out that I’ve been declared missing and presumed dead,” he morbidly joked.

Rheus laughed at the dark humour, and said, “I’m sure she’ll be able to send you back without delay. The entire process shouldn’t take long at all, assuming it’s anything like the first time Mag opened the portal to your world. I’m just surprised she wasn’t able to send you back last night, but she must have been really pressed for time.”

Harkening back to Venarya’s reason for not telling Rheus too much, John again decided not to enlighten him as to what was happening with regards to Mag.

Changing the subject, John said, “No use worrying about anything until either Venarya or Mag return. How about we take a walk to clear our heads while we wait for them to get back? I’m sure Penny and Em would enjoy the exercise even if we won’t.”

“I concur. Anything’s better than just sitting here and worrying,” Rheus agreed.

As they were walking out the door, John realized he had no idea how to lock the house, or how to get back in even if they did succeed in locking the door. Before he could mention it, Rheus had already pulled out a spare key out of his pocket, and was inserting it into the wall.

With that, they began to walk, and John pointedly steered the conversation to more mundane matters. He couldn't risk Rheus getting too curious and ending up figuring out more than Venarya or Mag wanted him to know.

# Chapter 10

As Venarya approached the docks, she could see the commotion ahead. Cluster soldiers had cordoned off a section of the docks, where a large ship lay moored. Dozens of other smaller ships were also laid out in a defensive formation in the harbour. She also noticed Mag flying above the harbour, presumably scouting for danger.

She passed a group of Rangers on patrol, and recognized their leader.

"Stelson," she nodded in greeting, "any news on what's happening?"

"Ma'am," he acknowledged, with a tip of his hat. "Sorry, but all I know is a bunch of Cluster ships arrived here with their undies in a bunch. We've just been making sure no one who's not supposed to be here gets too close."

"I'm starting to get the feeling I should have stayed in bed this morning," she said, glancing at the disturbance on the docks.

"I'm betting that, by day's end, you won't be the only one," Stelson replied with a worried look at the docks. "Well, I won't keep you. If anything, holler and we'll be there."

"Thanks, I'll keep that in mind," she smiled, as she started to walk away.

She saw Intendant Yazril waiting for her by the Cluster soldiers, and walked over to join her. As always, Yazril was accompanied by her personal bodyguard, Garh. Not that she needed one, thought Venarya. There was always a guard or other help usually within earshot. On the other hand, being escorted by your own personal nine foot tall, shaggy, and fearsome looking tusked guardian did provide that nice feeling of security.

Years ago, Venarya had inquired how a Thog came to be in her service, as they rarely left their nomadic family groups scattered throughout the Dimacius Mountains. The vague explanation Yazril had given was that she had saved his life a long time ago, and he had decided to repay his debt by trying to keep her safe in turn. Venarya recognized that she was deliberately being obtuse on the details, but respected Yazril's privacy despite her curiosity. Whatever personal secrets she carried were irrelevant, unless they affected the administration of the city.

"Yazril," acknowledged Venarya, "Garh, how are you?"

"Wishing I wasn't the Intendant right now is how I'm feeling."

Garh opted to respond with a grunt.

“What’s happening? The message I received was vague to the point of uselessness. I was expecting a break-in or something similar, not whatever seems to be happening here.”

“Sorry about that, Venarya,” the Intendant apologized, “but I couldn’t risk the message being intercepted. Come with me.”

A puzzled Venarya followed Yazril as she led her to the waiting ship.

“You’ve probably noticed Mag. She’s doing reconnaissance for us, just in case.”

“I noticed her. I’m also noticing the damage on this ship, which incidentally, appears to be the director’s personal cruiser. It looks like it was just recently in battle. Is the Cluster under attack? If so, by whom?”

“Correct on all counts. As for the aggressor, it appears to be Kierd.” Seeing the confused expression on Venarya’s face, she said, “I know, believe me. It makes no sense to me either. I’ll let our guests explain what happened.”

Yazril led Venarya about the ship, and into the captain’s cabin to find two men sitting at a table. One man was dressed in a Cluster Armed Forces uniform, while the other man was dressed in a casual, but smart outfit. They both stood up as the women entered.

The uniformed man removed his hat and bowed stiffly, “Administrator Venarya, good to see you again.”

The other man smiled and said, “Indeed, my fair lady, though I regret having to wait until such dire circumstances to see such beauty.”

“Charm will get you nowhere, Director Rinard, but don’t stop trying,” Venarya said as she returned his smile. Turning to the uniformed man, she said, “Fleet Admiral Krane, it’s good to see you too, considering the circumstances. I didn’t expect to see you playing at being a ferry captain for our good Director, though?”

“I’m afraid times are indeed dire, Administrator. This ship, along with the ones you saw in the harbour, are the only vessels we control that are not being currently contained by a blockade,” the admiral said gravely. “This morning, the Cluster came under a surprise attack by the Kierdan navy.”

Venarya’s eyes widened.

“And they managed to sink almost a third of our fleet while doing it,” groaned Rinard. “Over a hundred and fifty ships lost, and that includes seven of our juggernauts!”

Venarya's was momentarily taken aback. She couldn't imagine the firepower that was necessary to sink just one juggernaut. To sink seven of them was unfathomable.

"You'd best start at the beginning," said Venarya, after taking a moment to collect herself.

"Agreed," said Krane, "Here's what I know regarding the sequence of events."

***

Ancor, Captain of the fast cutter *Cat's Eye,* gazed out at the sea and took a deep breath. The sea air seemed to wake him up better than any stimulant. He looked out at the horizon and saw the Dark Sister about to set. The way its reflection danced and played on the water was a sight he could never grow sick of. Being this far out from land, the illumination on the large swells made for an almost hypnotic display. It was like looking at a living pillar of light, and he always woke up early to watch it.

It was an odd vice to have, but he was always regarded as a bit odd himself. As a class-five captain, he was allotted many job perks, as a result of being only one minor rank short of an admiral. The handful of captains that managed to get promoted that high were always given their pick of vessels to command, with the choice usually being a large cruiser or juggernaut.

Ancor, however, had chosen to keep the same ship he had initially been given command of when had first been promoted to captain. He didn't begrudge the other captains their choice, but he saw the whole thing as a pointless and unnecessary extension of their egos. The larger warships seemed to spend more time escorting cargo vessels and ferrying dignitaries than they did patrolling at sea. He hadn't dedicated forty years of his life to end up babysitting freighters, or to cater to the whims of some overbearing diplomat. Besides, he thought, it wasn't like there was anyone to actually fight.

Like always, Ancor was expecting just another normal day of routine patrolling. No smuggler or pirate was stupid enough to ply their trade in Cluster waters, which meant the only source of excitement was the occasionally stranded or lost civilian.

As the Dark Sister slowly disappeared and Galleron started to rise, he heard a shout from the starboard scout.

"Ships approaching, sir! Looks like a lot of them."

Ancor ran over, and indeed, did see the outlines of a large fleet highlighted by the rising sun. He cursed his luck, as he extended his spyglass for a closer look.

There must have been close to two hundred craft of all shapes and sizes there. Even from this distance, Ancor could see that not a few of them looked dilapidated, and wondered how some of them were even still afloat. Looking closely, he saw a few of the ships had shields pinned onto makeshift masts. This wasn't an armada primed for attack, Ancor realized, as that was a universal distress sign.

This was a refugee fleet. Judging from their direction and circumstances, the only possible place they could have set out from would be either Narad or Kierd. If that was true, Ancor admired their tenacity, for that meant travelling a vast distance in those rickety vessels. Unfortunately, the fact that they were leaving a warzone also meant that they may be leading a fleet of attack ships behind them.

Either way, one lone scout ship wasn't enough to deal with this type of situation.

"Launch emergency rendezvous flares," Captain Ancor called out.

Two crewmembers immediately began cranking the launcher. After about half a minute, they stopped and one of them hit a lever. Three bright blue flares shot far into the air and began a slow descent. Any other Cluster ships seeing that would repeat the signal, and then come immediately to his aid.

The ramshackle fleet looked like it was about an hour and a half away. Ancor decided to head back west about another half hour to allow for more reinforcements. At emergency speeds, that should allow for at least thirty to forty allied ships to congregate on his position.

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Fifty eight ships had shown up so far, and the refugee fleet slowed as they drew closer. They stopped just within weapons range, and sent a lone ship ahead to the awaiting Cluster fleet.

Admiral Trager of the *Tiger's Claw* moved to intercept the ship. The juggernaut was an intimidating sight, and was five hundred feet of armoured wrath, with enough firepower to hold off a small combat fleet by itself.

Trager felt it was a little bit of an overkill to have his ship handle the diplomacy, but he believed it to be his duty as the highest ranking officer present. As the ships drew close to each other, Trager had his pilot stop the engines. He then stepped toward the prow to initiate a conversation.

As the other ship drew closer, he wondered if he shouldn't have transferred to a smaller ship to meet this ragtag emissary. The deck of the *Tiger's Claw* stood close to fifty feet above the waterline, while the approaching sloop would be lucky if its deck was five feet out of the water. On top of that, no one onboard could locate a megaphone. This would be slightly awkward, he thought.

"I am Admiral Trager of the *Tiger's Claw*. Your vessels are in waters claimed by the Nebar Cluster," he yelled down, hoping they could hear him. "Stand to, and state your intentions."

The spokesman aboard the other ship craned his head and looked up. Surprisingly, he was dressed in very fine clothing. Trager was expecting him to be dressed in peasant's rags, going by the state of the fleet.

"I am Drasav, a grain trader from Narad," shouted the well-dressed refugee. "Thank the heavens that you've found us! We are non-combatants in the war between my homeland and Kierd, and are seeking asylum. Please help us!"

So, it was as they had suspected. "Unfortunately, we are not equipped to handle such a large amount of refugees," Trager yelled back. "You're only a short distance due east from Iathera, though. Perhaps, we can provide an escort there instead?"

"Any help would we appreciated, Admiral. But, before anything else, I must alert you to something. We've been using a few of our faster boats to keep an eye out behind us. Unfortunately, there seems to be a large fleet of Kierdan warships giving chase. Our makeshift scouts say that there appears to be close to four hundred vessels there. They can't be any more than three or four hours behind us. Honestly, I have no idea how they haven't managed to catch us yet. And, if we're as close as you say to the coast, they may decide to pull out all the stops in order to try to intercept us."

Trager whistled in amazement. That was quite the armada to send out after a group of penniless refugees. He had been fully prepared to point them in the right direction, while his fleet held their ground and scared off any pursuers, but that may not be the wisest course of action. Whoever or whatever Kierd was after would surely vanish once the refugees put in at Iathera. With that, the Cluster would probably never find out what this was all about. No, he needed to keep this fleet with them until he could sort this out.

*"Unfortunately, that turned out to be his first mistake," said Admiral Krane solemnly.*

*"His deductions seem to make sense. I would have probably arrived at the same conclusion," replied Venarya.*

*"Sad to say, Kierd had masterfully anticipated our response to their actions."*

*"Trager let his ambition get the better of him, and ended up playing right into their hands, you mean," interjected Director Rinard bitterly. "We paid him to anticipate situations like these. However, his talents appeared to lie in trying to figure out the fastest ways to score promotions."*

*"Perhaps, that may have indeed been the case," countered Krane. "But, I do stand by his actions. Anticipating a situation like this would have required a leap of twisted logic."*

*"Ancor made a good showing of himself, once all hell started to break loose. I can't help but think that this might have ended differently, had he been the one in charge of the situation."*

*"I believe you might be jumping ahead in the story," interrupted Venarya.*

*"Quite true. Sorry, my lady," apologized Rinard, calming down. "I'm letting my emotions get the better of me. Please continue, Admiral."*

*"Very well."*

"Have your ships take positions among our fleet, as we fall back and wait for reinforcements to join up," Trager ordered Drasav. "We'll provide a show of force that any sane fleet commander would run from."

"Our thanks, Admiral. But, won't we be a hindrance? Are you sure you'd rather not have us head straight to Iathera, while you cover us?"

"That wouldn't be a good idea. They may choose to outflank us, and we may never catch up to them in time to do you any good. Plus, there may be more than one fleet out there, and it may be lying in wait between us and the coast," Trager offered as an excuse.

"Good points. We'll take up positions within your fleet."

"If I may ask, why did they send out such a large force to intercept you? What are they after?"

"I honestly wish I knew. If I did, I would gladly give it to them, just to get them to go away."

The merchant seemed to be legitimately perplexed, and appeared to be telling the truth. "Fair enough. Stay in close to our ships and try not to lag behind as we pull back to join up with reinforcements."

"Yes, sir. Thank you again."

Watching Drasav's ship pull away to inform the rest of the refugees of the intended plan, Trager said to his second officer, "Lieutenant Johana, signal the rest of the fleet of what just happened. Have them widen their distance slightly to allow Drasav's ships to merge. Also, have the scouts keep an eye behind us."

Johana acknowledged the order, and she ran up to the control deck to inform the communications techs to start signalling immediately.

Trager signalled his pilot to return, and once Drasav's ship was clear, the huge ship turned and started to head back to the fleet.

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Two hundred and eighteen Nebar Cluster warships now escorted the refugee fleet.

Drasav had contacted them again, with another plea. He had stated that many of his ships' engines were on the verge of failing altogether due to the punishing pace. To that end, Drasav had requested that he be able to transfer the passengers to some of the warships, then quickly scuttle the refugee ships.

Trager, however, was faced with a quandary. Assuming that Kierd wasn't after one of the passengers, he was unsure whether the item they was seeking would be lost if he let the wrong ship sink to the bottom of the ocean. Trager's solution had been to apologetically cite the Cluster's general security policy, which prohibited any uncleared personnel aboard any of their ships, no matter the situation. Trager then suggested that the failing refugee ships be lashed to the sides of the Cluster warships. Barring any other available option, Drasav accepted the offer.

*"Right into their hands," moaned Rinard.*

*"Would you care to finish the story, sir?" asked Krane in a slightly annoyed voice.*

*"No, no, I apologize. Go ahead."*

Captain Ancor saw the signal lights flashing, and could scarcely believe what was being communicated. He peered through his spyglass as the fleet stopped to secure the ships, and then shook his head in disgust. They would lose more valuable time now. *Trager's so worried about dropping the ball, he might end up jeopardizing the fleet for nothing*, he thought. He had even lashed three of the confounded things to the *Tiger's Claw*. The refugee ships would slow down

the speed and maneuverability of the fleet, and were now in prime position to sabotage key systems such as rudders or propellers with something as simple as a grappling hook and rope.

The Kierdan armada was now in sight on the horizon, and must have started running their engines at redline, as they were now slowly drawing closer. It wouldn't be more than two hours before they would intercept the Cluster fleet. Ancor had convinced a reluctant Trager to let him take two squadrons of the smaller ships to secure the northern and southern flanks. Trager was still absolutely sure that the Kierdan fleet was just posturing, and was sure that they would turn back once they saw that the Cluster wouldn't abandon the refugees. *Save us from fools and politicians,* thought Ancor.

Ancor, obviously, didn't share Trager's optimism. Kierd still had superiority of numbers, and the technologically superior Cluster ships were now functionally hampered by their conjoined cargo. The enemy certainly didn't travel all that distance just to turn back without firing a shot. They would most certainly press some sort of attack. He only hoped his flank squadrons could provide enough of a distraction long enough for the bulk of the fleet to get to port safely.

He didn't care much for those odds. He had only managed to finagle sixteen ships for each flank squadron. The thirty two fast cutters were only about eighty feet each, and didn't pack enough weaponry for any kind of protracted fight. Most of the four hundred ships approaching them looked to be at least a hundred and fifty feet long, and were undoubtedly fully loaded with weapons and troops. He didn't care much for those odds, at all.

Then, as if on some perverse cue, he saw two detachments of about fifty ships each break away from the enemy fleet. It looked like they were attempting to go wide and try to out-flank his flanking attack. The bulk of the enemy fleet would be able to ignore his squadrons, and he himself would be forced to spend most of his time avoiding the enemy's own flanking fleets. Still, as long as his two squadrons could keep them occupied, that reduced the amount of ships available to attack the main Cluster fleet by a quarter. That is, for as long as his squadrons managed to stay afloat while faced with three to one odds.

Ancor immediately sent a signal to Trager requesting more ships, but received a denial, stating that he didn't wish to weaken the main fleet further. Ancor swore aloud. *This fool might get them all killed,* he thought.

He estimated only an hour and a half before the Kierdans would intercept the main fleet. At their current speed, that would still put them about forty miles out from the Nebar Cluster when the enemy caught up. Every ship in the area had already been rallied, and there would be no reinforcements available to perform a heroic rescue. *All that fool Trager had to do was collect the refugees, scuttle the ragtag ships, and then make way at full speed*, thought Ancor. Even if he didn't recover the theoretical item that Kierd was looking for, he could at least deny it to them.

Unfortunately, Ancor didn't get the chance to finish using his internal monologue to rant to himself. From the corner of his eye, he noticed a series of bright flashes coming from the direction of the Cluster fleet.

The sound of the explosions followed soon after. The entire fleet seemed to be aflame and sinking.

"What just happened?" demanded Ancor of his first officer.

"The refugee ships, sir. They… they exploded somehow, sir, taking our fleet with them…" Yalic trailed off.

*"Wait a second," Venarya interrupted with a puzzled look, "How is that even possible?"*

*"We're still trying to figure that out," admitted Krane. "You're right, though. Any explosive of that magnitude would be too unstable to transport, let alone on a ship."*

*"Do you realize what you're saying?" asked Yazril.*

*"Unfortunately, yes. If they've found a way to stabilize large charges, it gives them a leg up, technologically speaking, over even us."*

*"But how would a charge of that magnitude even fit on the refugee ships? Are we sure there wasn't some sort of trickery involved?" asked Rinard suspiciously.*

*"If you can figure out how, sir, I'll gladly listen," replied Krane.*

*"All right, all right, no need to get snippy."*

*"I believe we're getting off track again, gentlemen," interjected Yazril. "What happened next?"*

Captain Ancor didn't have enough swear words in his vocabulary to express his current feelings. With almost all the larger ships now crippled or in the process of sinking, it also appeared that he was probably now the seniormost officer still alive or conscious. With the fleet now at a dead stop, the Kierdans would soon be upon them.

“I’m assuming command of the fleet. Signal the other ships in our squadron to follow us while we try to collect as many survivors as possible. Have them avoid getting too close to any remaining refugee ships, in case those ones decide to explode as well. Order Captain Tuvalin to take the other flank squadron and provide cover for us,” commanded Ancor. “Signal to any ships in the fleet that are still mobile and relatively undamaged to assist with recovery of survivors. We have, at most, half an hour before the Kierdans get within attack range. I want us pointed toward home, and travelling at full speed in twenty minutes!”

“Acknowledged, sir,” replied Yalic.

“I want all surviving refugees picked up, as well,” appended Ancor. “Chances are that most of them are probably actual refugees whose only crime was being used by Kierd. There’s also the slim chance that some of the Kierdan agents may still be alive, and I want answers.”

“I’ll relay it immediately, sir.”

Ancor examined the carnage as his squadron drew closer to the wrecked fleet. At least twenty Cluster warships were now in the final stages of sinking, and no less than a hundred more looked like they were about to join their doomed siblings. The sailors on board didn’t even bother wasting time with lifeboats, opting to simply jump in the water and swim to nearest undamaged ship. The occupants of the few ships remaining in the refugee fleet looked both confused and terrified.

The water itself was filled with motionless bodies, some probably unconscious, but the majority more than likely dead.

*So much waste,* thought Ancor.

Of the eight juggernauts that had joined the fleet, only one remained fairly intact and functional. Five of them were moderately damaged, but appeared to be partially mobile. Under normal circumstances, they could have limped back to port at a reduced speed, but the enemy would offer no such quarter. They would have to be evacuated and scuttled.

Ancor could only shake his head in disbelief. Five of the most powerful warships ever constructed were about to be casually discarded like garbage scows.

The remaining two juggernauts, which incidentally included the *Tiger’s Claw*, had sustained incredible damage and were sinking fast.

As his squadron fanned out to start collecting survivors, he ordered his pilot to head directly for the *Tiger's Claw*. *At least I can take Trager back, so they can hang him properly*, he thought bitterly.

Glancing back, he saw the rescue operation proceeding with haste, though some of the surviving refugees had to be forced to evacuate. Ancor didn't blame them. They probably thought that they would be the scapegoats for whatever just happened. He didn't even know why they were fleeing their homeland, but the refugees probably felt like they had left one hell behind, only to arrive in another.

The *Tiger's Claw* was already half sunk by the time they reached it. As her crew abandoned ship and swam to the *Cat's Eye*, he saw no sign of Trager among the survivors.

He inquired about Trager's whereabouts to the first group of survivors to arrive aboard.

"I'm not sure, sir," was the response. "He was standing at the stern when the explosions hit us."

"He's probably dead, sir. I was standing close by and saw what happened," chimed in another sailor, who had just climbed aboard the ship and overheard the conversation. "He was thrown overboard when the blasts hit us."

"You are?" questioned Ancor.

"Lieutenant Johana, sir. Former second officer on board the *Tiger's Claw*," she responded.

"You didn't go overboard to try to rescue him?"

"Negative, sir. If he hit the water wrong from that height, he was a dead man already. Otherwise, he would swim and wait for help," was the justification. "Besides, there were dozens of crew member trapped below decks that needed immediate help."

There was a certain trace of bitterness in that last statement. It looked like the lieutenant didn't care much for the situation the good admiral had placed them in.

Before Ancor could think further about it, he heard a shout from Yalic.

"Captain, look!"

Turning his head to look, Ancor could only stare in further disbelief as he saw what was happening.

Captain Tuvalin had engaged the enemy fleet, and were using hit and run tactics to buy them as much time as possible. However, two of the sixteen cutters now lay motionless as they burned to the waterline.

“They just blew those cutters right out of the water, captain!”

Ancor watched as the enemy continued to counter their attack. He had assumed that the enemy did not have a large stockpile of the impossible explosives, and thus had concocted this whole outlandish strategy with the refugee fleet.

However, it looked like he might be wrong.

*“Not more so than Trager. At least Ancor managed to get the survivors back in one piece, though,” said Rinard.*

*As all eyes turned to him, he could only say, “Sorry, carry on.”*

The enemy ships had appeared to only be armed with standard ballistae, catapults, and other similar weaponry. A hollowed out ballista missile could be filled with flammable oil and ignited just before it was launched. The Cluster used pyrine oil in their projectiles, a substance created by their researchers long before Ancor had been born. It burnt hotter than almost any other known substance, and was extremely difficult to extinguish. While such a weapon could be used to burn a ship, it was in no way explosive. Tuvalin’s squadron had been making good use of them, and had hit a few of the enemy ships, forcing them to retreat temporarily to try to extinguish the flames. Thankfully, the enemy had neglected to put plating over their wooden hulls, which made Tuvalin’s job a little easier.

Unfortunately, Tuvalin’s task was compounded by the fact that some of the projectiles that were being fired from the enemy ships were actually explosive.

Captain Ancor watched with horror as three enemy ships closed in and launched a fresh round of projectiles at Tuvalin’s command ship. A half dozen of the missiles struck the *Storm Walker* dead on, and Ancor could only watch as the ship exploded and started to sink.

*Damn. There was no sense sacrificing the rest of that squadron*, he thought. At this point, every Cluster warship was a precious commodity.

“Signal the other squadron to break, and join up with us!” ordered Ancor. “We’ve got ten minutes before Kierd gets within firing range. Have all ships redouble their efforts. I want all survivors picked up, and us gone before they get here!”

“Acknowledged, sir.”

“Noble Captain! I beg you, please help us!” Ancor heard a shout from off the starboard side.

Looking over, he saw the ship carrying the spokesman for the refugee fleet. Drasav looked wild eyed and panicked. “Noble Captain,” he repeated in a panicked voice, upon seeing Ancor.

“I beg of you, please do not leave us here. This massacre is not of my doing, I swear! There are women and children aboard this ship. We also took damage from the explosions, and we have no chance of outrunning those ships!”

That was true. There were a lot of women and children aboard all the refugee ships. *Were*, thought Ancor.

“Get them aboard, but keep them under guard.” Ancor told the nearby crew in a subdued tone. “Don’t let on that we were planning on rescuing them anyways. I want their spokesman to sweat a little before I question him.”

The enemy fleet drew nearer as the last of the visible survivors were retrieved. Ancor hoped that none of those floating bodies were simply unconscious. Saying a silent prayer for them, he ordered, “Signal the fleet to get under way at best speed.”

Once underway, Yalic had undertaken the task of tallying the remaining Cluster ships to see how many had managed to survive.

One hundred and sixty four ships friendly warships had been sunk or scuttled. Their fleet now only consisted of fifty four ships. Ancor cursed. They hadn’t managed to sink one enemy ship, and that fleet was now following them.

The pieces were now falling in place. The Cluster had been the objective all along, and this had all been one mad gambit by Kierd. But, it had worked. Ancor had no idea what their end objective was, but the Cluster had to be warned as soon as possible.

“Send up Priority Seven emergency flares every few minutes,” ordered Ancor. Other than the occasional drill, no captain had ever imagined that they would actually be using that signal. A Priority Seven flare signalled an imminent threat by an overwhelming force, and was a warning for all ships to return to base immediately.

Once back at base, the outer ring defenses should keep the invaders away. Their range was great enough to destroy any Kierdan ship before it got close enough to launch an explosive payload.

At least, that was the only plan he could conceive at the moment. Their coastal defenses could pinpoint and incinerate any ship up to a mile and a half away. That should give them enough breathing room to regroup, and come up with a strategy for a counter-attack. Of course, this was assuming that Kierd didn’t have another unexpected trick up its sleeve.

He cursed the researchers for neglecting developments on their ships. They had wrongly assumed that the fearsome juggernaut design would be enough to make any potential aggressors think twice about attacking the Nebar Cluster. Research into land-based technology and weapons had been the priority, as ships simply had too many limitations and not enough customers.

Then, there was the question of those impossible weapons that Kierd now wielded. How could a backwater nation develop that sort of ordnance, especially without Cluster Intelligence finding out?

*"That's actually a good question. Did the NCI know anything?" asked Yazril.*

*"Aside from the fact that Kierd was constructing a massive amount of ships somewhere in secret, no," answered Rinard.*

*"Except for the alleged explosion that killed King Domich," added Krane. "We had always assumed that that was bad information, because it made no sense at the time. But, if they had access to that sort of technology-"*

*"A false flag operation?" Yazril finished his thought for him.*

*"Really?" asked Venarya with a look of surprise. "You think they would resort to such tactics?"*

*"Considering the whole ploy with the refugee fleet, it wouldn't surprise me. Plus, it would make sense. Kierd then gets to start a war with its neighbour, under pretence of retaliation," said Krane.*

*"Except for one fact," said Rinard. "NCI reports no use of any type of explosive weapons during the conflict so far. In fact, they appear to be locked in a stalemated siege of Narad's capital."*

*"There are two possible explanations that I can think of," said Yazril. "First, Kierd has refrained from deploying these weapons in their war with Narad to avoid alerting and antagonizing their eastern neighbours. If Kierd intends to war with them as well, it would be in their best interest to appear as weak as possible – or at least until Narad is pacified."*

*"A definite possibility," said Rinard. "NCI reports that the Kierdan regent is the former leader of the military, so he may have a grand plan of conquest. What's the second option?"*

*"That they may only have a very limited stock of these weapons," replied Yazril. "For all we know, they may have exhausted most of their stock as a show of force to get you to hole up, while they complete their real goal."*

*"It's a possibility I've considered as well," said Krane, "But I can't imagine what their endgame would be." He sighed in frustration. "None of this makes sense strategically. I've run over this whole scenario with Rinard multiple times since leaving the Cluster this morning, and we still can't come up with anything logical."*

*"Let's hear the rest of the tale, then," said Venarya. "Perhaps two extra brains may lead you to success, where one and a half previously failed," she added with a sly wink at Rinard.*

*"Ha ha," replied Rinard dryly.*

"Why are you still alive?" demanded Ancor.

Drasav was already shellshocked, and the question just compounded his confusion. "... Our ship did not explode, sir?"

"I am well aware of that fact! That's pretty convenient for you though, isn't it?"

Awareness of the implied accusation dawned on Drasav's face. "I had nothing to do with this, I swear! The only reason that I was the one approaching your fleet was because I spoke your language, and was asked to speak to you."

"Who asked you to speak to us?"

"The camp leader, Eldnan, sir," replied Drasav fearfully. "Fleeing Narad was his idea. I had spoken with him a few times in camp, and had mentioned that I had learnt your language to try to aid in acquiring more business. He spoke to me just before we left, and asked me to address any ships that we might encounter, and plead for help."

"Why exactly were you fleeing?"

Drasav looked even more confused now. "You have not heard? The Kierdans have been rounding up civilians. Entire villages in the countryside are now empty. I barely managed to escape my own town with a few others."

"What are they doing with these civilians?"

"I honestly don't know. Some say they are pressing them into military service, while others say that they are being sold into slavery to pay for the war. Either way, it was a fate I wished to avoid."

"Where is this Eldnan now?" demanded Ancor

"Dead, I fear, sir," said Drasav. "I last saw the remains of his ship tethered to one of your warships, both sinking."

*So much for finding more answers*, thought Ancor. *Still, if he was indeed the mastermind behind this whole thing, he may have contrived a way to escape.*

"After I'm done questioning you, I want you to give a description of him to my officer here."

"I will comply, sir."

Ancor continued his questioning of the trader, but failed to gain anything else of value.

After leaving Yalic to get a detailed description of this Eldnan, he had sent another message to all ships. They were to try to question any refugee that spoke their language, and try to corroborate Drasav's story. If this Eldnan was a fiction concocted by Drasav, Ancor would have no qualms about keelhauling the man to find out the truth.

As they neared home, Ancor was glad to see that the Cluster had received his warning. Straight ahead from the prow of the ship, he saw a column of bright red light extending into the heavens. *Good*, he thought. *Though, the Cluster probably thought this was just an unscheduled drill.*

For all their ingenuity, they still had no way to relay communications over, or on, bodies of water. Even getting any type of non-archaic weapon to work on a ship seemed to have been a permanently shelved project. This was despite the fact that they weren't short of researchers, by any means. Silently, he knew his superiors probably wished it this way. This way, at least, should a spy somehow manage to make it past their intensive vetting process, they would have no way of relaying any information back to their handlers. *Still, even taking into account the recent events, sometimes paranoia can be taken too far*, he thought. *Especially if it cripples your options when a real emergency occurs.*

Shortly after, they were in sight of the Nebar Cluster itself. The Cluster primarily consisted of four main islands, which were surrounded by two concentric rings of smaller islets, some of them only a dozen metres across. More than once, Ancor had wondered how such an odd formation could have occurred naturally. However, given the sometimes bizarre technology the Cluster wielded, he wouldn't have put it past them to have somehow artificially constructed it long in the past.

Regardless of the origin of the strange islands, he was glad for their existence. Those two rings of islands were fortified by the very best defensive platforms the Cluster had ever developed. As long as Kierd didn't have any more tricks, the Dauntless class platforms would

easily obliterate them before they even got within a fraction of the required range for their explosives. And, should a ship somehow manage to sneak past the first ring somehow, it would find itself in a killing zone with no hope of escape.

Still, Kierd would have enough ships to effectively blockade the entire Cluster.

*"You said they had only sunk a third of your fleet," interjected Venarya. "With that emergency flare, all your ships would have pulled back to behind the coastal defenses, correct?"*

*"Yes, correct," replied Krane.*

*"Wouldn't that leave you with just over three hundred ships with which to mount a counterattack?"*

*"Actually, the count would be closer to four hundred, but-"*

*"But," interrupted Rinard, "Half those ships won't be seaworthy for another twelve days at least!"*

*"What? Why?" asked Yazril, confused.*

*"Policy," said Krane wryly. "We constantly cycle a third of the fleet into drydock for maintenance and upgrades. Even if we push the workers to exhaustion, we won't be able to get them ready for a minimum of twelve days."*

*"How did you manage to break through the blockade?" asked Venarya.*

*"Mainly luck, I'd say," said Krane.*

*"More like Ancor, I'd say," countered Rinard.*

*"Would like you like me to perform the marriage ceremony for you and him, Director?" asked Krane, with a hint of annoyance in his voice. "I can, you know. I'll arrange to send for him right now, if you want?"*

*Even Yazril couldn't help but snicker at that.*

*"Okay, okay," said Rinard defensively. "But, you have to admit, he was more than a little bit instrumental in our escape."*

*"Along with a hundred other captains who provided a diversion for us."*

*"Boys?" interjected Venarya. "I'm not too old to spank the both of you right now. Well, I might hold off on spanking you, Rinard. You might enjoy it too much."*

*Thankfully, that elicited a low chuckle from everyone, and seemed to diffuse the tension.*

*"Sorry, Rinard," apologized Krane. "I'm still a bit wound up. I'll admit that Ancor is more than gifted. But he's still only a cog in a larger machine."*

*"And I may have been a little, well, staunch in trying to find someone to blame. I'm sure Trager did what he thought was right."*

*While the two men were momentarily distracted, Yazril gave a knowing glance at Venarya, conveying a look of silent thanks for defusing that situation.*

*"Now that that's settled," commented Yazril, "let's hear the rest."*

Ancor signalled all ships to break formation, and make a dash for the safety of home. He also cautioned all other captains to keep the prisoners under guard and segregated, but well treated.

As they neared closer to the outer range of the defense platforms, he saw the enemy fleet starting to slow down and fan out. However, a few overzealous captains appeared to still be in pursuit.

"Looks like the fireworks are about to start, sir," commented Yalic, idly.

Sure enough, a minute later, a barrage of glowing spheres shot past them and toward the pursuing ships. Crashes of thunder were heard as the spheres impacted the enemy ships, and were accompanied by small explosions of light. The blasts immediately reduced the enemy prows to kindling, and they began to sink. Another volley then shot past them to finish the job.

"That's six less of the bastards for us to deal with, at least. Doesn't look like there are any survivors either," said Yalic.

Ancor, however, was still feeling very paranoid about the whole situation.

"There was no real reason for them to do that. The fact that the bulk of their fleet held back tells me that they knew about our defenses," replied Ancor in a puzzled tone.

"What are you thinking, sir?"

"Let's make sure those six ships were just fools, and not up to something. Signal the control tower to deploy reconnaissance diving bells immediately, and start intensive patrols."

"Good thought, sir."

The undercurrents outside the second ring were wild, unpredictable, and definitely not conducive to swimming. However, Ancor couldn't run the risk that those ships had dumped divers overboard. If even one in ten of those possible saboteurs made it ashore, they could potentially disable some of the defense platforms before being neutralized.

"Have them deploy additional patrol boats between the rings, as well," he added.

Ancor hoped that he was wrong. However, considering the situation, it didn't pay to simply hope for the best.

They were the last ship to enter, and upon passing the second ring of islands, Ancor glanced back to see a giant chain being raised to block the causeway.

"Signal from the control tower, sir. We're to head straight for the diplomatic docks," reported Yalic.

That made sense. Usually reserved for assorted dignitaries, those docks were the closest ones to the administrative offices.

"Signal acknowledgement, and take us there," ordered Ancor.

As they pulled into the main harbour, he saw that he wouldn't have to travel far once on shore. Standing on the dock with worried looks - and, incidentally, accompanied by a full retinue of Cluster marines - were Director Rinard and Fleet Admiral Krane.

*"Marines? Wouldn't it have been better to deploy them on patrol, Rinard?" asked Yazril.*

*"Says the lady with a giant scary monster for a bodyguard…" Rinard countered.*

*"I'd love to let him take the blame for that, Yazril," Krane piped up, "but the truth is that I actually forced him to wait while I rounded up a squad. He was ready to run down to the docks by himself."*

*"Even his compliments take a down turn," said Rinard dryly.*

*"I honestly couldn't risk it. With what little information we had managed to glean so far, we couldn't chance that* any *of the crews had been compromised. The last thing I needed was to have you lying dead on the docks, as well.*

*"Besides, the marines did come in useful once we realized that Ancor was carrying a boatload of refugees."*

*"What did you end up doing with the refugees?" asked Venarya.*

*"Don't look so suspicious, my lady," assured Krane. "Right now, they're enjoying all the comforts of Safro. Seeing as how none of the employees will have any time for rest and relaxation in the immediate future, it's a somewhat ideal situation."*

*"Still, that island will probably need a thorough cleanup once this is all done," lamented Rinard. "Assuming, of course, that we haven't inadvertently harboured a group of saboteurs hidden among them."*

*"They're people, not animals," replied Krane. "Besides, there are a few hundred guards there to make sure that no one leaves or gets up to any funny business. I've assigned personnel to question them as well, just in case there are any potential Kierdan agents hidden among them."*

*"How many refugees did you take in?" asked Venarya.*

*"Six hundred and thirty two," replied Rinard.*

*"And how many refugees do you think were there initially?"*

*Rinard looked a bit downcast as he said, "From what I've been told by Ancor, there must have been over seven thousand refugees in that fleet."*

*Venarya looked shocked, while Yazril could only shake her head.*

*"Well, for what it's worth, gentlemen," Venarya said in a low voice, "you weren't the instruments of their deaths. You can blame Kierd for that."*

*"True enough," answered Rinard. "They'll have a lot to answer for, once we get our hands on them."*

*"As sad as this situation is, we can dwell on regrets and promises of vengeance later," said Yazril firmly. "We need to be able to plan out said vengeance first."*

*"She's right," said Venarya. "Finish the tale."*

Everything was now being done at a frantic pace.

Ancor had briefed Rinard and Krane as best, and as quickly, as he could. As Ancor recounted the ordeal, their shared and growing look of worry would have been almost comical, if not for the situation.

"So, Admiral Trager's dead?" asked Rinard.

"As best as I can tell, Director. There wasn't much time to search for a body for confirmation."

Rinard thought about that for a second.

"In that case, Fleet Admiral," said Rinard in an official tone. "I think it best to promote Captain Ancor to the rank of Acting Admiral of the Eastern Fleet, effective immediately."

Neither Krane nor Ancor were expecting that remark, as evidenced by the look of surprise in their faces. This had to have been the fastest replacement of a senior commander in Cluster history.

"It's a valid request. Consider it done," said Krane, after regaining his composure. "No disrespect to Ancor here, but why?"

"He's a quick thinker. Given the nature of this whole encounter, that is exactly what we need right now. The promotion is just to ensure that there are no 'misunderstandings' regarding any orders given by him," Rinard explained, turning to Ancor. "If we manage to make it out of this in one piece, we'll see about removing the 'acting' part from your title."

"Thank you, sir," said Ancor. "I'll try not to disappoint."

"I'm sure you won't, *Admiral*."

With that, Rinard and Krane had immediately retired to an emergency meeting, with orders for Admiral Ancor to plan and make ready for any feasible action, ranging from a possible counterattack to a simple blockade run.

Ancor immediately instructed his officers to send for all class-four and five captains in order to formulate a plan.

As he waited for them to congregate, he looked over to see what was being done with the refugees. It looked like they were all being led across the bridge to the island of Safro.

A nearby official confirmed it for him. They were to house them there until further notice, adding that a group from the personnel department would be there to question them shortly.

Despite the circumstances, Ancor chuckled. This would be the most well-stocked refugee camp in history, as Safro was an island dedicated entirely to employee leisure and recreation, while also catering to the occasional visiting dignitary.

As the captains started to assemble around him, he started on the seemingly impossible task of formulating a plan to get them out of their current bind.

*"Wait a second," interrupted Venarya again. "Even I think that that promotion might have been a bit hasty. Is that why you've been on the defensive regarding our former captain, Rinard?"*

*Before Rinard could open his mouth, Krane had already piped up, "Again, I'll have to take some of the blame for that, my lady. Truth be told, he was one of three candidates I had already selected to potentially replace Trager, in the event of anything happening."*

*"What about the other two candidates?" asked Yazril.*

*Krane sighed. "Dead in the attack, I'm afraid."*

*"Hold on," said Rinard, with a look of a man who had just realized he'd been conned for his last cent. "If you had already selected him as Trager's replacement, why did you make me justify the choice? And why have you been beating me over the head with it ever since?"*

*Krane chuckled. "I must admit, it was partially for my own amusement. But, before you get mad, I also needed to make sure you were promoting him for the right reasons. If anything were to happen to me, I need to be certain that you wouldn't surround yourself with incompetents."*

*"Your confidence in me fills me with joy. I'll also trust that you haven't hired any incompetents for me to promote. But, your point's valid. And, in retrospect, it is a little funny," said Rinard. "But, enough with this sidetrack. Let's get to the end of this sordid tale."*

"Are you sure about this?" asked newly promoted Admiral Ancor.

"Absolutely," answered Rinard. "Once there, I need to put an emergency plan into motion. Sorry to say, though, the details are classified even beyond your rank."

Upon returning from their meeting, Rinard had announced the necessity to reach the mainland with due haste, and Krane had adapted one of the plans Ancor had concocted.

"There are contingencies in place in case we fail," explained Krane. "I'll need to accompany the Director, once we reach Iathera. While we're gone, Admiral Fescor will take temporary control of Cluster ground operations, while Admiral Skagant will oversee whatever ships remain here."

Ancor hoped he warranted their confidence. By all rights, Fescor or Skagant should have overseen the escort fleet. Instead, he was being entrusted with the safety of the two most important people in the Cluster.

"The plan is relatively simple anyways," Krane continued. "Fescor will direct all platforms to open fire on the enemy. We won't even scorch their hulls at that distance, but it will provide cover for Skagant to sally his ships for a series of hit and run attacks. With luck, that should be enough to disrupt their formations, and open a few holes in their lines. Once they're engaged, Ancor's fleet of fast cutters will deploy. The enemy will think they're trying to run the blockade, and will send whatever ships they've been holding in reserve to stop you.

"Once you're in play on the board, Admiral, you need to make sure the enemy takes the bait. We need to open a large enough hole on the eastern side of the islands. When that's done, I'll lead the *Midnight Dawn* and her escorts out through the blockade. We'll swing around, once

clear, and make a break for Iathera. As soon as we start heading west, I'll need your squad to join up and guard our rear."

The plan appeared sound, but Ancor wasn't sure about Krane's choice of ship. The *Midnight Dawn* was a top of the line ship, as it was the Director's personal craft. However, the fact that it was also over two hundred feet long could seriously hamper efforts to maneuver through the blockade.

"Are you sure the *Midnight Dawn* is up to the task, sir?"

Rinard laughed, "Don't worry about her. We had the engines fully overhauled two months ago. I've been told that she'll be almost as fast as the *Cat's Eye* now. They even installed a secondary set of maneuvering engines, as well."

"I don't remember you being so happy about the upgrades when I initially suggested them?" queried Krane, with a raised eyebrow.

"Well, I didn't think I would be needing to run blockades with it! Besides, I was more worried about a mutiny. They had to rip out almost half of the crew quarters just to get the damned engines to fit. Now, I've got one of the few ships in the fleet where the crew sleeps in hammocks!"

"I'm sure they'll manage," laughed Krane. "If nothing else, the fact that your personal chef is on board balances it out.

"But, back to business. Any more concerns or questions before we start, Admiral?"

"Well, I'm still a little unclear on how we're going to get back. Trying to break our way back in through the blockade is going to be next to impossible."

"A non-issue, for now. They don't have supplies to last forever. You'll also be taking an extra two dozen cutters with you. Once we arrive at Iathera, dispatch that squadron east of the Cluster to scout for resupply convoys. If they spot any, have them try to sink the enemy without losing any more ships, if possible.

"I doubt they'll find anything though," Krane continued. "That fleet knows their situation is untenable. Judging from what they already seem to know about us, they must have recognized that we wouldn't have been able to field the entire fleet at once, hence the sneak attack. They wanted us to hole up, but they would also realize that we would put everything into getting the entire fleet in the water for an effective counterattack."

"Which means they'll try to do whatever they came for within a few days," said Ancor. "And you're implying that we may not have even been their true objective?"

"Yes. Since we patrol this entire region, they may have just wanted us out of the way," confirmed Krane. "I've already got the NCI investigating all of their possible objectives. There's nothing apparent that they're found so far, but whatever their mission is, our job is to make sure it ends in failure."

With that, preparations for the blockade run began, with crews racing to get their ships stocked and ready.

*"You're suggesting that we're a possible target?" asked Yazril.*

*"I've always told you that you should have a larger contingent of soldiers stationed here," replied Rinard.*

*"This is a place of learning, not a military encampment," countered Venarya.*

*"Despite my respect for what you're doing here, I have to agree with Rinard," said Krane. "Your little town is becoming very noticeable, and with the knowledge your school possesses…"*

*"Perhaps you're right," admitted Yazril. "This couldn't have happened at a worse time though. We're even more short-staffed than normal due to the war."*

*She sighed and continued, "The only ones benefitting from this mutual defense treaty seems to be the Citadel. I can't ask them to send soldiers over, based solely on the assumption that we might possibly be attacked."*

*"Still, if the Citadel falls, then you're only a hop, a skip, and a jump away from being invaded, yourself. Best to keep the fighting contained up north, for now," Rinard reminded her.*

*"Perhaps an accommodation could be reached with the Syrilo?" suggested Venarya.*

*"That… that may be possible," said Yazril, with an apprehensive look, "But, unless we're absolutely sure that we're the target, I'd rather not resort to such an extreme measure. I can see about getting more Rangers, but Freewater's not the most accessible of places. I doubt they'll be able to make it here in time."*

*"In that case," said Krane, with a barely concealed smile. "You'll probably be glad to know that I've brought an extra twelve hundred marines with me, just in case."*

*Yazril looked like she couldn't decide whether to be angry or relieved. "While I do appreciate the troops, you could have mentioned them sooner!"*

*"Sorry, Yazril. Really. I couldn't help myself," Krane laughed. "But, it helped to prove a point. You really do need to station more troops here. You may not think it, but, that fact that you're an important part of our economy also makes you an important part of the entire continent's economy."*

*"I thought those marines were going to be used to repel any potential boarders, should our ships come under attack?" asked a puzzled Rinard.*

*"I've been thinking about that. With the enemy outnumbering us by such a large factor, any ship unlucky enough to get boarded is a write-off, marines or no marines," explained Krane. "Besides, they seemed to be much more interested in just torching our ships. It's best to put the marines in a position where they'll do the most good."*

*"I suppose you're right."*

*"I wouldn't go that far. It's just the best choice out of a few bad options."*

"Tell the other ships to hold steady, and have them wait for my signal," ordered Ancor.

"Yes, sir," replied Johana.

With the loss of her previous posting, Ancor had used his new rank to second her to the *Cat's Eye*, as she seemed capable. However, he knew that as soon as the story regarding her failure to try to save Trager got out, no other captain would want her as an officer. They would understand the justification for her actions, no doubt. But, unofficially, her career would be over. Ancor wasn't one for charity, but he absolutely hated to see potential resources wasted.

He watched as the ships weighed anchor, and took up their positions for their risky gambit. The plan had been discussed, examined, and refined to the point where Krane was sure that they at least had a moderate chance of success.

Ancor looked on as a signal flare was launched, and the defense platforms opened fire wildly on the attackers. As predicted by Admiral Krane, any shots that reached their targets ended up barely leaving a mark on their hulls.

As the Cluster had anticipated, the Kierdans moved to withdraw their ships slightly. As soon as their sterns were facing the island, Admiral Skagant sent up another flare to signal the attack. The enormous chains blocking the entrances were dropped, and nearly one hundred and fifty ships raced out to meet the enemy.

The gunners in the platforms adjusted their targeting to allow makeshift passages for the friendly ships. As the fleet reached the halfway point, they start to disperse. Platform gunners were now forced to selectively target their shots, to prevent any friendly fire incidents.

The larger cluster ships held back, while the faster ones moved to try to draw in the enemy. As fire was exchanged, Ancor again saw the enemy using the explosive projectiles, though at a dramatically reduced rate. *Perhaps they were running out*, he thought. *Or, maybe, they realized that this wasn't a real attack, and they were simply saving them for later*.

Regardless, the melee continued, and ships were being lost on both sides.

The enemy fleet pulled back even more. But, this wasn't a retreat. Ancor realized that this would allow the enemy to finish off the pursuing smaller ships by simple power of numbers. After that, the greatly outnumbered larger ships would be forced to retreat back to the relative safety of the island ring.

He had to make his move now.

"Go, full speed!" he ordered.

As one, his group accelerated and made a break westward. The enemy soon spotted them, and began redeploying ships to intercept. As holes started to open up on the eastward front, he ordered, "Signal Admiral Krane to go now!"

Krane's group, which had been stationed at one of the east lochs, started moving immediately. Upon sighting them, some confusion became apparent in the enemy ranks, as ships that were initially on their way to intercept Ancor were now turning back to intercept Krane.

"Flare, now!"

The *Cat's Eye* then launched a flare which would signal all of Skagant's ships to move to provide cover for them as they made their break. As Skagant's fleet moved into position to intercept reinforcements from the north and south, Ancor felt a surge of exhilaration. *They might make it after all*, he thought.

Thanks to the platform gunners and Skagant's attack, the Kierdans had withdrawn too far, and were now dispersed too widely to properly intercept them. That only left a few enemy ships between them and escape.

"All gunners, fire at will!" Ancor ordered.

His group began firing toward the approaching ships. Several veered away evasively, while a few others maintained their direct course.

"Signal our intercept squadron to take care of those."

In answer, several ships broke off from his group and headed toward the attackers. As they drew within firing range, they turned broadside and fired a devastating volley at the attackers. The pyrine oil projectiles might not have had the same punch as the Kierdan weaponry, but the fire it produced was extremely difficult to extinguish, as water would only serve to spread the flames. The only effective way to stop the conflagration was to dump sand on the fire, and most warships didn't have the extra room to carry a stockpile of sand. After the intercept squadron had fired off a round of broadside shots, the two enemy ships that survived the encounter unscathed wisely chose to veer away and wait for reinforcements.

As the intercept squadron turned to join back up with them, Ancor felt only relief. They had made it through the blockade, and the Kierdans would have no chance of catching up to them. Now, he hoped that Krane had had the same luck.

His thought was answered by five bright orange flares from the island. Krane had made it, as well. Now, Skagant's fleet would start pulling back to safety, with the platforms providing covering fire.

The battle effectively over, he finally gave the order he had been yearning to say since the start. "Break north and join up with the *Midnight Dawn*."

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"And here we are," concluded Krane.

"And here you are," echoed Yazril. "You've told quite a tale, but seemed to have left out a few details. For example, why did you decide to make the trip here in person?"

"I suspect, Director," Venarya said coyly, "that you didn't risk your own life and limb getting here just to warn us."

"You've caught me out, my lady," admitted Rinard with a grin. "The simple truth is that I just couldn't bear to be apart from you at such a difficult time."

"Ha ha," said Venarya. "Let me guess. You need to go see you-know-who?"

"Got it on the first try, Venarya," said Rinard.

"You could have just opted to send a messenger instead?" suggested Yazril.

"I could have, but I suspect that he'll want to kill me personally, once he hears my report," Rinard said with a resigned sigh.

“I doubt he’ll kill you. He’s usually more creative than that,” replied Venarya with a cheerful grin.

“Laugh all you want, but I’ll probably end up being dog food.”

“Those poor dogs,” said Venarya, with a look of mock sympathy.

“When were you planning on heading into the swamps?” Yazril interjected,

“I was hoping to leave immediately, if possible,” replied Rinard.

“Well, we haven’t had any reports of trouble from that area recently. However, that doesn’t mean that Kierd hasn’t prepared an ambush, or some other surprise, for you. Bearing in mind all that’s happened, you should assume that they may know about your connection to him, as well. If I were you, I would probably consider taking a sizeable escort along,” said Yazril.

“I would if I could, but you know the old man’s rules just as well as I do. I doubt he’ll bend them, even for something like this.”

“In that case, I’m sending Garh along with you for protection. The old man knows him, and I’ve been using him to carry dispatches when necessary. You can have a contingent of marines escort you to the boundary, then Garh can keep watch the rest of the way.”

“Agreed, and thanks,” said a slightly nervous Rinard, as he glanced at Garh, who had been idly sitting in the corner, and now perked up upon hearing his name. Rinard cringed a little as Garh’s fearsome visage returned his gaze.

Venarya smiled as earnestly as she could. “You seem a bit off, Director. Something you ate, perhaps? Or something that you’re afraid might eat you?”

“Very funny. I’m just glad he’s on our side.”

“Don’t worry about Garh, Rinard,” Yazril assured him. “Worry about the potential ambush that might be waiting for you.”

“I feel so much better, now,” Rinard said dryly.

“Well, we’ve all got preparations to make,” Yazril said. “Garh will meet you at the north gate in an hour. With luck, you should arrive not too long after sunset.”

“Just when I thought this couldn’t get any better.”

“Of course, if you want to add an explanation for why you waited until tomorrow morning before going to see him,” said Venarya, “I’m sure he’ll understand.”

“I should have listened to my mother,” Rinard groaned. “Farming’s a nice, stress-free occupation compared to this.”

Krane, who had been silently suppressing a laugh the whole time, piped up, “Don’t worry, Rinard. I’m sure we’ll be fine. We’ll let you ladies go now, as I’m sure you’ve got your own preparations, as well as messages to send to the old man.

“Besides,” he added, grinning at Rinard, “I’m sure you’ll have the opportunity to explore becoming a farmer once he hears the report.”

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“They’re worse than an old married couple,” commented Yazril, as they walked away from the docks.

Venarya laughed, “True enough. Though, for all their banter, they do make an effective team.”

“Which reminds me, good job on calming down the situation in there.”

“I’m just glad it worked without them noticing,” said Venarya . “I must admit that I was a bit hesitant, as I wasn’t sure how it would affect Garh.”

Garh looked over and grunted upon hearing his name.

“One second,” said Yazril, as she looked up at the sky for a moment. “Mag says she’ll join you shortly after you get back to the institute. Something about helping your friend.”

“Ah, perfect.” Seeing Yazril’s inquiring look, she appended, “It’s a long story, and probably best to wait until the current crisis is over before I tell you.”

“As you wish,” Yazril said patiently, as they approached the portal square. “Remember, send a messenger to the north gate with any dispatches that you need to get to the old man.”

# Chapter 11

"Hang on a moment," John interrupted. "Why exactly were these explosives so strange?"

Upon returning to the institute, Venarya had encountered John and Rheus sitting on a bench, idly chatting as they watched Kail play with the dogs. She had instructed them to meet her back at Rheus's workshop, while she headed back to her office to quickly compile a few messages for Rinard to deliver.

With the messenger safely on his way, Venarya presently sat with them in Rheus's workshop, and they now waited for Mag to return.

Rheus had been champing at the bit for more information regarding the incident between Kierd and the Cluster, and Venarya was now attempting to update both Rheus and John as to what exactly had happened.

Rheus looked confused by John's question, and Venarya attempted to step in and clarify the question for him. "I'm guessing explosives work differently in John's world?" she said, giving a John a look that beckoned him to play along.

"Ah, well, I'm not an expert, by any means," he started, "but, here's what I know. In a nutshell, most explosives are just different substances which are mixed together to produce a bang when you expose them to fire. Is that more or less how it works here?"

Rheus looked even more confused now. "Wow. I've never heard of anything like that. The most violent reactions we can expect to get from mixing different compounds are just flames, without the blast. No offense, John, but that sounds almost as crazy as those sailors that report seeing fish-people in the middle of the ocean."

John chuckled as he said, "None taken. If I had to explain this place to someone in my world, they'd probably wonder if I was playing with a full deck. How do explosions normally work here?"

"Well," Rheus attempted to explain, "a skilled artisan can imbue a piece of tasrac in such a way that-"

"Wait a second," John interrupted, "What's a 'tasrac'?"

"You never explained that to him, Rheus?" Venarya asked, with a look consisting of both amusement and bewilderment. "You've been chatting with him for all of yesterday and this morning, and that never came up?"

“Hey, it’s not every day that I meet someone from another world,” Rheus said weakly. “I can’t be blamed for forgetting to explain some of the minor details.”

“It’s that blue crystal you see in *everything*,” Venarya explained to John, then turning slightly to glare at Rheus. “It’s also pretty much the cornerstone of our society.”

“Ah, actually, now that I think about it,” said John, “I think we were actually talking about that when I first arrived-”

“And then you showed up,” Rheus announced to Venarya in a triumphant tone.

“And?” prompted Venarya.

“And… I never got back to explaining it to him, I guess,” Rheus admitted, with a downtrodden look.

Kail, who had been silent the whole time, snickered in the corner.

“I’d love to jump on the ‘blame Rheus’ bandwagon, as well,” said John, “but the truth is that I should have probably remembered to ask, as well.”

“Thank you,” said Rheus, gathering what was left of his ego for a haughty look at Venarya. “Anyways, the short version is that tasrac is a sort of crystal that’s mined from deep underground. It can also be mined closer to the surface, but those pieces tend to be of lesser quality than-”

Noticing Venarya’s slightly impatient look, he cut his explanation short, and continued, “I’ll leave that part for later. Anyone with sufficient training can, well, ‘teach’ a piece of tasrac to act in a certain way.”

“Research into new uses for tasrac is also one of the primary reasons for the existence of this institute,” said Venarya.

“So, this tasrac can be ‘taught’ to explode?” asked John.

“Not quite,” explained Rheus. “The explosion is usually the result of an unskilled tasrac artisan getting in over his head. However, you can imbue a piece of tasrac with enough energy to cause it to explode, given a particular trigger. However, the amount of tasrac that you need just for any kind of explosion is restrictive. For example, for an explosion the size of this table, I would need a piece of tasrac about a quarter of its size.”

“That would still produce a decent sized explosion,” said John.

"True, but tasrac doesn't seem to like being used as an explosive. The longest I've been able to maintain a charge in one is just under half an hour. And that's under ideal conditions that you can't expect to find normally. After that, the explosive energy just seems to dissipate."

"You've been experimenting with explosives?" asked Venarya, with a raised brow.

"Under safe conditions!" protested Rheus. "I was out near the swamps just in case I set fire to anything. The only thing way something could have gotten damaged was if a stray orgot wandered by."

Venarya could only shake her head.

"What sort of trigger do you use to set off the explosive?" asked John curiously.

"It usually involved a well-aimed rock, sir," Kail chimed in.

"You took Kail with you on these reckless excursions?!" Venarya exclaimed. "That's… I'm… I don't even know what to say…"

"It's not as bad as you're thinking, Venarya," Rheus defended himself, weakly. "I made sure he stayed at least a safe distance away. His job was simply to run back and get help, just in case anything went wrong."

"I'm going to talk to you later regarding this," Venarya said, still shaking her head.

Rheus winced, as he continued, "As I was saying, there's no way they could maintain the explosives for the duration of even a short sea voyage."

"What if they charged them up just before attacking?" asked John.

"Impossible," Rheus shook his head. "Tasrac simply can't be worked with while on water. We're still not sure exactly why, but it always has to be directly over a large body of land to be 'charged up', as you put it."

"The explosions themselves were supposed to be impossible, as well," John reminded him.

"Quite true," Rheus admitted, "But, there's also the fact that any attempt to create an explosive from a piece of tasrac larger than, say, this table is extremely dangerous. Imbuing a crystal of that size with that amount of energy renders it extremely unstable. Even if you manage to do it without killing yourself, any attempts to then transport the crystal will inevitably cause it to prematurely explode."

"Plus," Venarya added, "Tasrac explosives have a very distinctive appearance, and they are always accompanied by these strange discharges of energy that I've never seen anywhere else. Krane said that the Kierdan explosions simply looked like giant plumes of flame and smoke.

“Which leads up to something you mentioned last night, John,” she continued, with a straight face. “Perhaps, it would be a good idea to get in contact with Sophia and Melissa when you get back. Maybe they’ll agree to let Ganz and Nolan accompany you when you return? From what you’ve mentioned, they might be able to help us determine how Kierd was able to accomplish this.”

Before John could answer, Rheus piped up, “First, I’m going to ignore the fact that you appeared to have kept him up all night talking, despite admonishing me for the same thing. Secondly, if you do have any friends that could shed light on this, John, I’d be more than glad for the help.”

John tried his hardest to mimic Venarya’s look of nonchalance, and said, “Well, it’s a thought. If there’s anyone I know that could help, it would definitely be those two. I can’t say I’m looking forward to that conversation though. Sophia’s always nice enough to me, but Melissa seems to have that frown permanently planted on her face.

“I’ll talk to them, though,” he assured them. “But, are you sure it’s safe to bring to bring Ganz and Nolan here?”

“If you’re referring to their safety, I’d imagine that they would be fine,” said Venarya. “If you’re referring to our safety, don’t worry about us. “

“What about a need for secrecy?” asked Rheus, rethinking the idea for a moment. “First, believe me when I say that I would love any help regarding this matter. I also understand that John is trustworthy, and I realize that, eventually, we would get more visitors from his world. However, these are troubled times, and we don’t want to invite trouble from yet another front.”

“That shouldn’t be an issue – at least not with them,” John assured him. “Both of them have livelihoods which depend on their ability to keep their mouths shut when necessary. I’ve also known them for quite a few years, and can vouch for their characters.”

“Besides,” Venarya added, “From what you’ve told me about your world, I’m guessing that they would be laughed away by anyone they tried telling their story to.”

“That’s also quite true,” confirmed John. “I can’t imagine telling anyone this tale, and not having them think that I have some sort of mental problem.”

“Well, in that case,” said Rheus, with a sigh of relief, “get them here as fast as you can.”

# Chapter 12

"There's the signal, men!" General Dendrav yelled down to his officers. "Instruct the flanking fleets to break off, immediately."

Dendrav still couldn't fathom exactly why Athash had ordered this attack. As far as he was concerned, the only thing that this operation would succeed in accomplishing would only be to agitate the Nebar Cluster. The former Lord General had personally assured him that the entire undertaking was an important piece of a grand strategy, but Dendrav couldn't see how. In fact, if it wasn't for Athash's past record, he would have serious doubts about the sanity of this entire plan.

Still, he had his orders, and he intended to complete them.

As the two squadrons veered away from his main armada, he stared at the enemy fleet. On cue, he saw the explosions. Though wary of the strange weapons they had been gifted, his mind was partially eased by the fact that they had worked. Despite the strength of numbers being in his favour, he did not care to go up against an entire Cluster battle group. The eight juggernauts in that fleet alone were likely capable of holding a good portion of his armada at bay.

Examining the ensuing chaos through his spyglass, he could see the enemy scrambling to pick up the survivors before he got in weapons range. Spotting a small squadron attempting to buy time for the rest, he ordered, "Green flag on those ships. Use the new weapons."

He had to make it look like they were armed to the teeth with the exotic projectiles. If the enemy realized how few they actually had, the remainder of the Cluster forces would rally, and the planned blockade would have to be aborted.

Dendrav watched as the engagement began, and thankfully, the ruse appeared to work. With the destruction of several of the enemy ships, the rest of them were now abandoning the diversion and pulling back.

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"It took you long enough to pick me up," Eldnan complained, as Dendrav walked over.

"You're welcome," Dendrav replied sarcastically. "We had to hang back and make sure that we weren't being observed."

"Did you pick up any other survivors?"

"Quite a few, though many don't look like they'll make it past the day."

"Remember our deal. Any prisoners belong to us."

"As I've been reminded countless times before. What do you intend on doing with them, anyway?"

Eldnan grinned wickedly, "You can join them if you wish to find out. Otherwise…"

"Fine, I don't think I want to know, anyhow. There is one notable among the prisoners, though. One of their senior commanders – an Admiral Trager."

"Ah, this is turning out even better than we had predicted. Is he expected to survive?"

"Aside from a few bruises and some water in the lungs, he looks fine."

"Keep him segregated from everyone else. I'll deal with him once we get back," Eldnan ordered. "How's the rest of the plan going?"

"The bulk of our fleet is now chasing the remnants of the Cluster battle group. I ordered our ships to reduce their speed until we reform with them."

"Good, we need those ships to escape. There's nothing better than firsthand accounts of a losing battle to dishearten your enemy."

"Glad to see you're so cheerful about it."

"Relax, Dendrav. By the time the Cluster is able to mount a counterattack, we'll be long gone."

***

"What are they doing?" exclaimed Dendrav. "Order those ships to pull back immediately!"

"Belay that order," commanded Eldnan, walking up to him. "This is just another part of the plan."

"No one told me anything about this."

"A late modification, but necessary."

Eldnan watched calmly as the six ships were picked apart by the defensive platforms, while Dendrav looked on in horror.

"You've just wasted six ships!"

"Let's not forget that you wouldn't have any ships, if not for us," countered Eldnan. "And, if it puts your mind at rest, you've not lost any soldiers. Those ships were crewed by my own people."

“But, why?” pressed Dendrav. “What have you accomplished by doing that?”

“Paranoia.”

***

“I thought you said they wouldn’t be in a position to counterattack, yet,” accused Dendrav.

“This isn’t an attack,” Eldnan explained calmly, as he put the spyglass to his eye. “This is a diversion to allow those ships,” he said, gesturing to the east and west portions of the islands, “to run the blockade.”

“What do we do, now? We don’t have enough of your fancy weapons to hold them off. Once they realize that, this whole plan goes to pieces.”

Eldnan scowled at him, “Calm down, we’ve accounted for this.”

“How, pray tell?”

“It doesn’t matter if those ships escape or not. Signal our ships to fall back, and widen the gaps. To start with, they’ll most likely send a large amount of fast ships at you, trying to draw you in range of the platforms. Ignore them. At that point, pull a few ships from the east and west and send them to join up with the northern and southern elements. Open up a few holes for them to escape through. Don’t make it too obvious, or they’ll start to suspect something. Once you’ve redeployed, engage them at will, but use the new weapons sparingly. Make it look like you realize this is just a diversion, and that you’ve decided to conserve ammunition.”

“I hope you know what you’re doing.”

“Trust me.”

# Chapter 13

"Mag says she's ready when you are," said Venarya.

Shortly after Venarya's recounting of events leading up to the Cluster blockade, Mag had shown up at Rheus's workshop. She had inclined her head in greetings to John, Rheus and Kail, but had opted for the more efficient method of communicating via Venarya.

With a sigh of nervousness, John replied, "I'm as ready as I'll ever be."

Venarya smiled, "She assures me that the whole experience will be rather painless. First, have a seat in this chair."

John felt a sense of deja vu. "This time, someone please catch me if I pass out," he joked.

Venarya had already explained Mag's intentions to Rheus, but he couldn't help but ask, "I must say, I'm still a little apprehensive about this. John has - no offense intended, John - no training or known aptitude for tasrac manipulation. This could end up being dangerous to him. Are you absolutely sure about this, Mag?"

They all heard Mag's reply.

-*Safe*-

Mag then walked over to Venarya and took her hand for a moment, as they both closed their eyes.

Upon opening her eyes, Venarya said, "I'm not sure I understand the technical aspects of this fully, but Mag says that this process requires no training in tasrac manipulation. John's mind will simply function as a toggle for a device that he'll have with him."

John chimed in, "That actually brings up another point. I don't mind carrying around this device, but that always leaves open the opportunity for theft or loss."

"A valid worry, but not in this case," Venarya said. "The device will be, well, a part of you."

John's eyes widened. "Okay, now that sounds painful, to say the least."

Mag grabbed Venarya's hand again. Afterwards, Venarya smiled and translated, "She said the entire process would have been over by now, if it wasn't for all the talking. She says to just sit down and don't worry."

John sighed again, "Very well. I'm going to take your word on this, Venarya."

"Just relax," she assured him with a sly wink. "Concentrate on a recent memory, such as last night."

"Ah, yes," Rheus commented, trying to help. "There's nothing like a good meal and the company of friends to relax the mind."

Thankfully, Rheus's unintentional joke was just the distraction John needed to set his mind at ease. It did take some doing not to laugh out loud though, but he managed to keep it contained within what he hoped looked like a relaxed smile.

Mag extended her claw to John, and opened it to reveal a strange looking stone.

"Take the stone, and press it against your temple with your left hand," instructed Venarya.

John did as he was told. He took a glance at the stone while grabbing it, and realized that he couldn't read any of the apparent inscriptions on it. *Odd*, he thought. *Must be in some other strange language.*

With the stone pressed firmly against his forehead, Mag then moved closer and placed her claw over his hand. Almost immediately, he could feel the stone warming slightly. *No tingling or paralysis, yet.* A few seconds later, he could see little beams of bright white light escaping from the gaps between fingers and talons. John really hoped that the effect was temporary, as trying to explain why his forehead doubled as a miner's helmet would be a little difficult to explain to his friends.

Thankfully, a few seconds later, the light dissipated. Mag removed her claw, and examined his eyes carefully. Satisfied with whatever she was looking for, she nodded at Venarya.

"Remove your hand, John," Venarya instructed.

Upon removing his hand, he realized that he shouldn't have been startled to see that he was no longer grasping the stone. A horrifying theory also occurred to him.

As if reading his thoughts, Venarya had already picked up a mirror, and was handing it to John. "Just to put your mind at ease," she smiled.

Looking at the mirror, he was relieved to see that he did not, in fact, have a stone or any other weird markings on his forehead.

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"Just look at the portal and concentrate on your home," said Venarya.

"Do I need to make any magical gestures, or click my heels?"

"Very funny. No, just concentrate."

John did as he was instructed, and after a few seconds of sporting a furrowed brow and pursed lips, he saw a swirling mass of light appear within the arch. Shortly after, the light starting to dim and John started to see the makings of a familiar place.

Granted, his coat closet was not the most exciting of places, but the sight of it was enough to make him feel giddy. He realized that, until now, he wasn't entirely sure if he would really be able to make it back home.

"Perfect," said Venarya. "But you probably don't need to concentrate quite so hard," she added with a laugh. "You looked like someone in desperate need of a bathroom."

John laughed. "Very well. Should I try a few more times, just to make sure I've got the hang of it?"

"That wouldn't be a bad idea," said Rheus. Turning to Mag, he asked, "Is there any danger of 'using up' the stone's power, so to speak?"

-*No*-

"Well, then. Go ahead and give it another shot, John."

"How do I turn off the portal?"

"Just tell it to deactivate," supplied Venarya.

"Just like that?" asked John, with a suspicious look. Knowing Venarya's sense of humour, he wasn't entirely sure that this wasn't a joke.

"You think it won't bother listening to you?" she said with a smile. "It's just a rock, and you're a man. Go ahead and try."

Still not sure if he was being set up as the butt of a joke, he looked at the portal and said, "Deactivate!"

The swirling light momentarily appeared in the portal, then flared out of existence, taking with it the image of John's coat closet.

"It worked?" exclaimed a confused Rheus.

"Wait, what now?" said a now equally confused John.

"That's not how you turn off a portal. I thought Venarya was just setting you up for a prank."

"And you decided to say nothing," accused John.

"Hey, she's my boss."

“Who’s apparently employs a mad bomber to devastate the countryside. Don’t think I’ve forgotten about that, Rheus,” chided Venarya. “John, as you’ve said before, has no training in tasrac manipulation. The stone is doing all the work for him.”

“So he’s just telling that weird stone what to do?”

-*Yes*-, they all heard Mag say.

“Which brings up another point, you never told me anything else about that stone, Mag,” said Rheus.

-*No*-, said Mag in a flat tone.

“Shouldn’t we at least have tried to study it, and maybe try to make a few duplicates, if possible?”

-*No*-

“What Mag is trying to tell you, Rheus,” Venarya helpfully supplied, “is that that stone was never here, and you never saw it. Understand?”

“I… ah, okay… I see… I think.”

“Don’t worry too much about it. I’m sure Mag has good reasons for her secrecy, and she’ll probably give you the whole story eventually, just not now. Besides, we have bigger problems to worry about right now.”

“I can live with that, I guess.”

“Which leads me up to another point. Now, while John practices using the portal, I do believe that you, Kail and myself need to have a little talk.”

Rheus winced.

***

“Are you sure you understand how to trigger it from the other side?” Rheus asked, a hint of concern in his voice.

“For the third time, yes,” replied John.

After making sure that John was capable of commanding his newfound power, Mag had returned to her patrol of the harbour. However, following her departure, Rheus was becoming increasingly neurotic with trying to predict potential problems.

“Sorry for the repetition, but it *is* fairly important,” apologized Rheus.

“Find a large enough flat surface, and then just visualize this portal in my head?” said John, with a small amount of exasperation finding its way into his voice. “It’s not the most complicated of directions, and I’m pretty sure I’ve got it down pat.”

“I’m sure he’ll be fine, Rheus,” Venarya cut in. “Remember to try to re-open the portal for a few seconds after you’ve crossed over, John, just to put Rheus’s mind, and mouth, at ease.”

“Will do, Venarya. I’m sure getting back won’t pose any issues. Else, I’m going to turn into one of those fish-that-got-away stories for poor Rheus,” he said with a laugh.

“Ha ha. I’m just trying to make sure we’ve got everything covered.”

“I don’t think there’s a blanket big enough for this type of situation,” Venarya said, “but I also don’t think there’s anything else we can do. If you’re ready, John?”

“I think so,” he replied. He looked around, trying to take in every detail of this strange world, just in case this was the last time that he would be able to do so.

Sensing his apprehension, Rheus uncharacteristically put aside his anxiety to say, “Don’t worry, John. Despite everything I’ve said, I don’t think you’ll have any problems.”

That broke the tension, and brought a smile to John’s face. “I appreciate the sentiment, even though I know you don’t believe a word of it.”

Rheus could only grin sheepishly in return.

John took one last look around, then said, “Here goes nothing.”

He then stared at the portal, and thought of home. The portal flared into life, and John could see the now familiar sight of the inside of his coat closet.

“Girls, come,” he called out. “Thank you for watching them, Kail.”

As the two dogs moved to join him at either side, Kail said, “It’s been my pleasure, sir. You will bring them back with you when you return?”

“I promise,” John smiled.

# Chapter 14

As John stood standing in front of his closet door, and with the portal now inactive, he almost wondered if perhaps he was going crazy.

With slight hesitation, he stared at the rear closet wall and thought of Rheus's portal. He wasn't sure what sort of pyrotechnic display to expect, assuming this worked at all. For all he knew, maybe the stone didn't work in this world. Perhaps the only legacy he would have from this experience was a perplexed surgeon.

However, his worries were put to rest as a mist started to collect on the floor of the closet. At least, it looked like mist. The mist then started to work its way up the wall and started to spin like a hurricane placed on its side. It then started to slowly fade, and revealed the portal in the wall. Seeing Venarya, Kail and Rheus staring back the portal at him, he smiled and waved at them. They returned the gesture, and John almost laughed at the barely concealed relief in Rheus's face.

"Deactivate," he commanded, and the portal faded out of existence.

Staring at the back of his closet, he thought about Venarya's request for aid. He wasn't looking forward to that conversation with Melissa. No doubt that Amelia had filled her in with her version of the story before leaving, and he knew that he was in for an earful. Sophia would be more understanding, he hoped.

*Might as well get it over with*, he thought. *At the very least, I need to make sure no one stopped by while I was gone.*

With that, he finally used the coat closet for its intended purpose. Donning a warm jacket, he whistled for the dogs and stepped outside.

The snow had stopped, but the walkway was covered with at least a few inches. He would have to care of that, as well. For now, though, he had more immediate matters to handle.

He started trudging down the walkway, and walked toward the large building at the end. Arriving at the high fence surrounding the building, he removed his right glove and placed his bare hand on a fencepost. He quickly removed his hand from the cold post as soon as he saw the hidden green light flash. It was accompanied by the click of the concealed gate unlatching itself. He quickly entered, pulling the gate shut behind the dogs, and then started walking toward the back door of the building.

John repeated the business with his hand upon reaching the door, and didn't tarry getting inside.

He quickly removed his outerwear and boots on entering the warm building, as the two trained dogs moved to wipe their feet on a large blanket that had been spread nearby. Walking to his study, he spied two half-filled wine glasses still sitting in the dining room, but put the memory out of his head for now.

On reaching the study, he first checked to see if anyone had visited, but the security cameras reported no activity. He then picked up the mobile phone that he had left on the desk. *Eighteen missed calls, and eighteen voicemails*. None of the calls were from Amelia. In fact, fifteen of them were from Melissa, and three were from Sophia. He didn't need to listen to them to know what they said. Melissa's would be an ever increasing tirade, while Sophia's would probably be concerned warnings regarding Melissa. Well, he now knew who he would be calling first.

He pulled the laptop toward him, and started the instant messenger program. As he suspected, there was another long log of offline messages from both of them.

Before he could even start reviewing the messages, he saw a window pop up stating that he had an incoming video call from Sophia.

He felt both trepidation and relief at the same time.

He quickly clicked to answer the call.

"Where have you been?!" Sophia hissed, with uncharacteristic harshness in her voice. "Do you have any idea how worried we've been?"

"I love you too, li'l sis."

"This isn't funny, Johnny. First we get that call from Amy, then you disappear off the face of the planet! Another twelve hours, and Mel was going to file a missing persons' report on you! If you think I'm mad right now, you should see Melissa! Now, where have you been?"

"Believe me, Soph, I've got a very good excuse for being out of touch."

"It had better be good, Johnny. Once Mel starts in on you…"

"I know," he winced. "Trust me, it's a very good reason. By the way, where is she?"

"At a lunch meeting downstairs. Good thing you called when you did, though. She's due back in about ten minutes."

"Listen, Soph, there's actually another reason I called. I need to get hold of Ganz and Nolan. In fact, I need to borrow them for a short while."

“Okay, let’s forget the fact that Ganz is currently in Germany, and that Nolan is somewhere in the Middle East. You want me to pull one of our head researchers and our chief security consultant away from their assigned duties with zero notice, and for an undisclosed reason. Have you been drinking?”

*And this was the nice sister.*

John realized that he hadn’t fully thought this through. He had no way of proving his story, and in about ten minutes, would have an even more angry big sister to deal with.

An idea suddenly hit him. He wasn’t sure if it would work, but it was worth a shot.

He took a look at Sophia’s surroundings on the screen. “Soph, you’re in the living room, right?”

“Yes, why?”

“I have no idea if this is going to work, but keep an eye on the wall to your left. Whatever you see, don’t panic. Also, point the camera toward that spot for me, please.”

“Seriously, have you been drinking?”

“No time to explain, just trust me.”

She reluctantly complied, and John could see his target. He prayed that the stone would work. Theoretically, if the stone could bridge the large gap between worlds, why not bridge the smaller gap within one world?

Thankfully, he had spent more than enough time in their penthouse to remember the layout. He prayed that if this did work, that he didn’t accidentally open a portal over the streets of New York instead.

He stared at an empty section of wall in his study, and concentrated on the east wall of Sophia’s living room.

Thankfully, the mist started to appear on the floor, and began working its way up the wall.

“John!” he heard Sophia exclaim from the computer.

Looking at the image on the screen, he saw the same mist doing its strange dance on the wall.

“Don’t worry,” he called out. “It’s not a fire or anything. It’ll disappear in a few seconds.”

And, just like that, the mist faded and the image in the wall gained clarity. John now found himself looking at Sophia through the portal, as she similarly stared back at him with an open mouth and a look of unbelieving shock.

## Message From The Author

K. P. Alexander, although a lifelong avid reader, is a newcomer to the world of writing. K. P. Alexander is also now going to stop referring to himself in the third person, as it seems a bit silly.

I hoped you enjoyed reading Artifice: Episode One. If you did, remember that Episode Two is also available for free from your favourite e-book retailer. If you didn't, no hard feelings, and thanks for giving it a try.

The story you just read was based off of a set of notes I intermittently worked on over the course of almost a decade. It was one of those things that started off simply as an exercise to pass the time, but grew into a fleshed out world rife with conflict, beauty and mystery.

If you're a little confused about the format of this series, think of it like a television series. The first two episodes are analogous to a two-hour series premiere, setting the tone for the rest of the series. Each follow-up episode will contain another semi-self-contained piece of the story, as well as a hook leading into the next episode.

Well, I won't blabber on for too much longer, so let me say thanks again for giving my book a read!

If you're interested in finding out more about me or my writing (or even if you just want to take part in any of the contests I occasionally run), you can find me online at the following places:

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