# Rising Tides

Artifice: Episode Two

Smashwords Edition

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# Chapter 1

John rubbed at his sore shoulder.

“That was for scaring me half to death just now!” Sophia exclaimed, her fist still tightly clenched.

John didn’t even want to think about what Melissa’s reaction to the portal would have been. Chances are that it would have involved a heavy object and his head. He decided that it was best to count his blessings for now.

Sophia seemed to be gathering her wits as she plopped herself down on the nearby couch with a heavy sigh. Her eyes closed, she groaned, “You’ve got just under ten minutes to explain what’s going on before Mel gets back. Else, I’ll hold you down while she hits you with the frying pan.”

With a noticeable wince, John then took a deep breath, then tried his best to give her an extremely condensed and partially censored account of the past few days.

After about two minutes of non-stop talking, he could see that this attempt at an abbreviated explanation was a quest destined for failure. Plus, it looked like Sophia was constantly restraining herself from chiming in with questions. Just as he was realizing the futility of trying to finish his tale before Melissa returned, there was a beep from one of the desks in the living room.

Still with a look of mild bewilderment in her eyes, Sophia managed to say, “I… hang on a sec. Let me see what Carol wants.”

She got up and made her way to the desk. Pressing a button on the telephone, she spoke to her assistant, “Yes, Carol?”

The speaker on the device piped up, “A message from your sister, ma’am. They’ve requested her help down on the eighteenth floor. She says she may be there for a few hours, and that she’s asked Mr. McGarrett to handle the meeting with the Japanese contingent. She does request that you-”

“Sit in to make sure Pete doesn’t trade the company for some magic beans?” interrupted Sophia.

“Not her exact wording, ma’am,” replied Carol with a laugh.

“Very well, let Melissa know that I’ll be there,” said Sophia. “Also, give me a heads up about fifteen minutes before the meeting.”

“Will do.”

“Thanks, Carol.”

Pressing the button again, she turned to John. “Looks like you’ve got a reprieve, and I’ve got just over an hour. Start again. Now.”

Making a mental note to thank whichever deity was responsible for luck, he started again with a more detailed, but still partially censored, version of the story.

## Chapter 2

Director Rinard slouched in an effort to keep his head low. Despite the ever watchful eyes of the Nebar Cluster marines, he wasn't taking any chances. Unfortunately, that meant the back of his head would occasionally collide with the metal chair every time the small patrol boat crossed over a large wave.

More than once, he winced and wished he was travelling aboard the *Midnight Dawn*. However, the incredibly shallow area surrounding the swamps made it impossible to navigate even a small warship there. Besides, he was hoping that the presence of the *Midnight Dawn* in the harbour would fool any spies into thinking that he was still in the town.

Fleet Admiral Krane chuckled and said to him, "You might as well sit up. If they're after us, they'll probably try to blow the entire boat out of the water with those new weapons of theirs, rather than risk getting lucky with a single shot. In any case, considering how far out we are from shore right now, I doubt even their best marksman could make that shot. So, no sense in throwing your back out, or giving yourself brain damage. Not while we've still got that nice hike ahead of us."

The marines were well trained enough to pretend to not hear the conversation. None of them cracked a smile or pricked an ear.

Sitting up and sighing, Rinard replied, "Don't remind me. I guess I might as well try to get as comfortable as I can for the next little while."

Krane laughed, "Besides, no offense, I would think that I'm a more high profile target. Militarily speaking, of course."

That managed to get a laugh from Rinard, and he visibly relaxed.

He did start to look a little downcast as he commented, "Well, let's just hope the enemy's not near sighted."

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Rinard looked at the herd of orgots grazing. The semi-domesticated creatures were allowed free reign in the swamps, as there was no danger of them straying. Their sheer bulk made them at home when partially submerged in water, and nothing short of a nearby battle would encourage the apathetic creatures to wander off on to the surrounding plains. Furthermore, the swamp was

massively overgrown with kelweed. While a nuisance to fishermen, the incredibly prolific seaweed seemed to be a delicacy for orgots.

"They're pretty far north," he idly commented.

Krane replied, "You keep forgetting how many orgots there actually are. I'm sure Iathera's also supplying many of the neighbouring towns with meat as well."

"Who'd have thought a swamp to be a good real estate investment?" laughed Rinard.

"I'm sure it wasn't unintentional. It was probably designed to help grow the town as quickly as possible. At least, I assume that's what happened when the old man helped them plan the institute. Speaking of which, have you decided what you're going to tell him?"

"The truth. I don't think I'm in any position to offer advice at this point. On second thought, maybe I should have just sent a message with our large friend here," he said, gesturing to Garh, who had been lying asleep in the gunwale for the entire trip.

"I'm sure the old man would have loved that."

"Let's not forget I'm the only Director in history to have something even remotely close to this happen on their watch."

"Honestly, I wouldn't worry too much about that. I get the feeling there's something else at play here. The best we can do is to make sure he's fully briefed, and hope he's got a few tricks up his sleeve."

"You've a lot of faith in his abilities, Krane. Despite my respect for him, I'm not sure he'll be able to do anything."

"I'm sure there was a reason he chose to remain nearby to us," Krane said. "In any case, speculation about his capabilities is irrelevant right now."

"I understand. I just can't help but feel like a schoolchild on his way to the headmaster's office."

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Half of the marines jumped up on the rickety dock and ran to take defensive positions, while two others climbed out to secure the boat.

"Clear, sir!" shouted the marine furthest away.

"Here comes the fun part of the journey," groaned Rinard.

"Cheer up," said Krane. "At least it's not raining."

Garh opened his eyes, and with surprising nimbleness, sat up and hopped out of the boat.

"How does something that big move so fast?" commented Rinard.

"Well, at least he won't get slowed down carrying you if you twist your ankle this time," laughed Krane.

"You're never going to let me live that one down, are you? Is it my fault that I don't usually go traipsing through swamps?"

"Come on, let's get going before it starts getting dark," replied Krane.

As they walked to the end of the dock, the remaining marines also disembarked carrying several large bags of gear.

Like the well trained team they were, the marines immediately began construction of a small basecamp. Six marines were erecting a large canopy for shelter, while others began clearing the area of brush, foliage, and small trees. Small but sturdy barriers were strategically placed around the canopy to provide cover in the unlikely event of an ambush, while potential spots for pits were marked on the ground.

Krane watched their handiwork for a few minutes, then spoke to the leader, "Well, you know the drill by now, Commander. Keep the fires burning until we get back."

"Metaphorically speaking, of course," Rinard added quickly. "We don't need a beacon drawing any more trouble to us."

To his credit, Commander Nuretz didn't crack a smile when he answered, "Don't worry about us, Director. I'll make sure this lot's still alive to greet you when you get back."

"Are you sure you'd rather not accompany us?" asked Rinard, a slight note of eagerness in his voice.

"I appreciate the offer, sir, but I think I'd better stay here and keep an eye on things. I don't want you being welcomed by Kierdans when you get back. Besides," he added with a wink, "I doubt the old man would even remember me."

"I think he might just remember the only person to ever make it to his front door unaided," chuckled Krane.

"There is that," Nuretz admitted. "Plus, I do believe that I'm still technically under contract to kill him."

"Well, just make sure no Kierdans try to finish the job for you."

“We’ll keep a sharp eye on the coast. I’m sure the old man’s guard dogs have the interior covered. Just remember to signal if you run into any trouble.”

“Same goes for you,” replied Krane

“I just hope the flare can make it through that tree canopy,” commented Rinard.

“I’d be more worried about it starting a fire up there,” remarked Krane cheerfully. “Be a real ironic tragedy to burn to death in a swamp.”

“You’re a real bundle of joy and inspiration, you know that?”

Krane turned to Nuretz, “Well, you know what to do. If we don’t return by noon tomorrow, assume the worst and head back to Iathera. Report to the Intendant and follow her orders.”

“Will do, sir. Good luck in there.”

Turning back to Rinard, Krane asked, “Ready?”

Resigned to his fate, Rinard replied, “As much as I’ll ever be.”

Krane then turned his head to the silent giant, “Garh?”

Garh grunted what Krane assumed to be an affirmation.

With that, the three of them set out north into the Foggy Swamp. Though not a particularly original name, the moniker did a creditable job of describing the area.

While the Orgot Swamp to the south of the dock was mainly water and contained sparse above-ground vegetation, the Foggy Swamp seemed to be a strange hybrid somewhere between a rainforest and a marsh.

It contained similar vegetation to its southern neighbour, but it also played host to massive trees that resembled nothing more than enormously overgrown mangroves. Over time, the above-ground root systems allowed for large amounts of silt buildup, which ended up forming a series of natural passageways arched by the giant roots. Looking up, hundred foot canopies blotted out almost all sunlight that tried to make its way in.

The entire area was also perpetually blanketed in a layer of fog that only served to compound the visibility issue. Furthermore, the fog increased in density the further one went into the swamp, until one could barely see their hands in front of their face.

Kelweed wouldn’t even grow in the area due to reasons unknown, and no one particularly cared enough to bother investigating the matter. Fortunately, that meant no orgots ventured there, since not even the bravest of herders would care to venture far into the swamp to round up the creatures.

Also, on top of that, there were rumours of vicious half-man beasts that called the swamp their home. Every so often there would be a tale of some poor traveller who had wandered too far into the swamp and met their fate at the hands of these creatures. No one had ever produced decisive proof of such a creature though, so most folks blamed the disappearances on people simply getting lost.

As such, while most sane individuals still stayed clear of the area, such stories were relegated to the realm of tall tales told to children to keep them from idly wandering into the Foggy Swamp.

"I hate this place," Rinard said.

"Tell the old man. I'm sure he'll move on your account."

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Commander Nuretz surveyed the camp. Fourteen marines patrolled the area, while the remaining sixteen were essentially off-duty until their watch.

"Sir?"

The question had come from Captain Harker. Despite his rank, he was a relative newcomer to Director Rinard's personal retinue.

"Yes, Captain?"

"A question, sir."

"Don't be shy. Spit it out."

"With all due respect, why did we just let the two most important people in the Cluster wander blindly into a fog laden swamp? Shouldn't we have sent an escort with them?" Harker seemed genuinely perplexed and concerned.

Nuretz smiled. "Not as blindly as you might think. Besides, there are things in that swamp that don't welcome strangers. Which, by the way, is what you'll be if you go roaming around in there.

"Anyway," he continued, "from what I understand, if Garh can't keep them safe in there, we wouldn't stand a chance."

"I see…" Harker trailed off, hesitation still in his voice.

"I hate to pull rank, Captain, but let's just say it's above your pay grade. For now, our main concern is just to make sure that we're still here when they get back tomorrow morning.

Concentrate on your work, and maybe when this is over, we'll all get an explanation of what exactly happened."

## Chapter 3

"What do you think the chances are that they'll ever tell us what they're up to right now?" Athash wondered aloud, as he sat back in his tent, restless thoughts stopping sleep from taking hold.

"Judging from their past record, I'd say slim to none," Rush answered, without even looking up from the stack of papers he was reviewing. "Lazano seems to take particular pleasure in being as obtuse as possible."

"So, I'm guessing that you've still made no headway in finding out anything more about his organization?" Athash asked of his spymaster.

"None, and it's caused me no end of frustration. The few times that I thought I was on the verge of success ended up with me finding my agents' throats cut, and their bodies dumped where I was sure to find them. They even posed them."

Athash grimaced. "Well, if it's any consolation, I don't think anyone else will be able to infiltrate his organization if you can't."

"Scant consolation, sir. But, I'll keep trying."

"I know you will, Rush." Changing the topic, he continued, "Any worrying news regarding the blockade fleet?"

"None, so far. The last scout arrived a few hours ago, and reported no problems. If their plan failed, I would expect to see the first of the escaping ships returning here starting tomorrow."

"Possibly leading a very angry Cluster battle group behind them," Athash sighed.

"In all honesty, I wouldn't worry, sir," Rush assured him. "Despite my feelings about Lazano, I have to admit that it's a solid plan. Besides, he did mention having a contingency in place."

"Plans within plans within plans," Athash sighed again. "Give me a good straight forward battle any day."

"Give me a good plan, sir, and I can guarantee that you won't be needing a battle."

Athash laughed, "That's why I keep you around, old friend. Well, I'll let you get back to those reports of yours. Send for me on the hill if you need me."

"Will do, sir."

Athash left Rush in his command tent and began the short hike to the small hill overlooking the harbour. Strictly speaking, he was not a man given to the study and appreciation of art. However, he found the view from the top of the hill particularly tranquil, despite the constant movement of troops, supplies, and ships.

Even though they possessed a wealth of ships down in the harbour, Athash was doubtful of their effectiveness should the Cluster actually decide to show up. They had little to no coastal defenses, and certainly nothing on the level of a Cluster defense platform. A determined enemy fleet would have relatively no problems landing troops right next to their base.

He really wished that Lazano had allowed them time to grow more ships, but he had been insistent about the timing of the attack. *Blast it, if Lazano could only have waited two more weeks, we'd have over a thousand more ships to help defend us.*

Regardless, Lazano had been adamant about his employers' mysterious schedule.

As he walked, his main thoughts were centred around the fact that he hoped Lazano's contingencies were enough to prevent a very angry and vengeful Nebar Cluster from sweeping in and massacring them.

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"Are you insane? That's suicide!" Athash managed to say.

"No, it's not," Lazano calmly answered. "The risk to you is completely minimal."

"You're not the ones whose blood they'll be howling for, if this goes sideways," retorted Athash.

"Have faith," Lazano chuckled. "Besides, in all these years, have I ever steered you wrong? Believe me when I say that the Cluster will have much larger concerns than trekking across an entire ocean to find you."

"How so?"

"You'll just have to trust me on that. By the time they're able to mount any kind of counterattack, your position on this continent will be solidified. At the very worst, you'll have to send them a small tribute to placate them. Remember, they're businessmen, not a nation."

"And what's to stop you from leaving us to rot, once you've got what you need from them?"

"We're businessmen too, and that would be a bad investment. Rest assured, we didn't pour all these resources into you, only to essentially flush them down the toilet in the end."

Athash calmed down a little. “What exactly are you hoping to gain from this little excursion?”

Lazano grinned, “That would be telling. And, in any case, I don’t know. My employers-”

Athash cut him off, “I know. I know. Your mysterious employers work on a need to know basis. Though, it could be argued that I need to know how their goals are going to affect Kierd.”

The coyly frustrating reply was simply, “They’ll let you know what you need to know.”

Athash didn’t like taking orders from Lazano’s mysterious employers. But, remembering that fateful conversation with Lazano so many years ago, he acknowledged that didn’t really have a choice in the matter.

“Fine. But tell me how you’re going to handle the logistics of this. For example, where do you plan on magically getting a refugee fleet from?”

“Leave everything to us. Just make sure your patrols stay clear of the areas I’ve marked off, and you’ll be fine,” Lazano replied in that infuriatingly calm tone.

“You’re asking us to commit a lot of manpower to this fleet. Manpower that we could be using to fight this little war I’ve got going on.”

“You’ve got it, and more, to spare. Besides, we both know that you’re in a holding action until you get your invasion fleet ready.”

“Which might already have been on its way, if you had provided the necessary equipment in advance,” Athash retorted.

Lazano chuckled. “Timing, my friend. You’ll receive the full shipment as soon as this plan is put into action.”

“You’re holding the supplies hostage?” Athash asked with a raised eyebrow.

“Not me. My employers want to make sure you don’t get any funny ideas, and end up throwing their entire schedule off balance.”

“I see,” Athash responded flatly.

“Don’t take it personally,” laughed Lazano. He turned to look at Athash, and all humour faded from his face, “Believe me when I say that this little endeavour has been in the works for a very, very long time. Timing is everything at this point.”

“I guess I’ve no choice but to take your word for it.”

“Like I said so long ago, there’s always a choice,” Lazano replied, the familiar grin returning.

## Chapter 4

"Wow," was all that Sophia could say after John had finished his tale.

John stayed silent while she sat back and processed the information.

"Do you know why this dragon thing-," she began.

"Mag," John interjected.

"Why Mag," she continued with a scowl, "chose you for this… whatever you want to call this strange escapade of yours?"

"Well, I didn't really think to ask her. However, I'm assuming she wants our help-"

"*Our?*"

"You're starting to sound more and more like Melissa every time I see you," John said, shaking his head in mock dismay. "Soon you'll just need the horns and pitchfork."

Sophia tried to maintain her scowl, but failed and broke out in a peal of laughter.

"I'll give you that one. Honestly, I'm just trying to make sure they don't have any nefarious plans for you. I don't want to find out later that they tossed you into a volcano to get the crops to grow or something."

"I appreciate the concern, really, but you know me. Call me immodest, but there's a reason dad's buddies hated having me in on poker night. Believe me, we can trust them."

"Okay, but then there's also the flip side. Why do they think they can trust you?"

Remembering the previous night with Venarya, John shifted uncomfortably in his chair. *So much for censoring the story.*

"Er, let's just say that they have good reason to, and leave it at that. Next question."

Sophia raised an eyebrow, but let it pass. "Okay, then. Again, this is just for my peace of mind. You don't plan on running around here pretending to be a superhero or something idiotic like that?"

John laughed. "No, that thought hadn't even occurred to me. Besides, what could I do? Help old ladies cross busy roads safely?"

"Just keep it on the down low. Again, I don't want to find out that some gang kidnapped you to help them teleport into Fort Knox or something."

"No worries on that. Besides, how would they keep me prisoner?" he joked.

He saw her brow starting to crease, and quickly added, “Tell you what? I’ll make you a deal to put your mind at rest. I won’t use my ‘superpowers’ except to travel between my place and this penthouse. Deal?”

“Deal,” she replied with a note of relief in her voice. “Now, we need to deal with another matter.”

“Melissa?”

“Melissa.”

“I don’t suppose…” John trailed off, his eyebrow cocked in a query.

“Not for all the tea in China. You’ll explain it to her yourself.”

“I’ll be your friend,” he replied, a mock puppy-eyed expression on his face.

Sophia laughed as she replied, “Fine, I’ll handle it. But you owe me a favour for this. A *big* favour.”

“Which brings me back to that original favour I mentioned. Do you think you can arrange to pull out Ganz and Nolan for me?”

Sophia stayed silent in thought for a few seconds. She finally replied, “Not simultaneously. At least, not without it looking suspicious to any competitors that might be watching.”

She sighed, and continued, “But, tell you what, let me see what I can do. I believe Ganz’s conference is almost finished, anyways. I’ll arrange for him to fly straight to your place. Expect him tomorrow morning. As for Nolan, I’ll see if I can get a replacement for him sent out. Realistically, don’t expect him for the next few days.”

“Thanks,” John said in genuine appreciation. His face took on an amused look as he continued, “I know that look, though. What’s your price, li’l sis? My dessert portions for a week again?”

“You wish it was that easy this time,” she laughed. “No, I want to see this new world of yours.”

John gulped. He didn’t care much for putting his kid sister in potential danger. “You do realize that the place could potentially end up being under siege, right?”

“I’ll take the risk. Not that I don’t trust your judgment, but I’d like to see who we’re essentially allying ourselves with. Plus, I can’t say that I’m not a little curious about this strange world.”

"Well, I can't fault your reasoning," John said. "No wonder they've got you negotiating the big deals now."

"You taught me well. Now, make yourself scarce for the rest of the afternoon while I explain things to Mel. Head back here around dinner time to pick up *both* of us."

John winced at that last part, and Sophia giggled at his discomfort.

"Don't worry," she continued. "I'll make sure she calms down by then."

"I'll hold you to that, li'l sis."

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Deep in thought, John lay on the couch in his cabin.

He had thought to bring his mobile phone with him this time, though. *No sense in antagonizing either sister again.*

He didn't anticipate having this small amount of downtime, but he was glad for it. He had half expected that he would have had to spend most of the day explaining himself, but Sophia had been pragmatic enough about the whole ordeal. And, more importantly, she had opted to explain everything to Melissa.

Reflecting back on the whole adventure, he wondered what exactly he had got himself into. More so, he wondered what he had gotten Rheus and Venarya into. He wasn't sure whether to chuckle or grimace at the thought of the likely interrogation they would receive from Mel later that night.

He hoped, at the very least, Mel would appreciate the potential business upside to this whole adventure. For all John knew, gold may be as common as dirt over there. Heck, maybe that weird blue crystal could end up being as valuable as diamonds here.

He rethought that last point. No. He couldn't risk selling any unique items from that world over here. At least, not for the time being. *Besides*, he silently laughed to himself, *for all I know, that crystal could be radioactive.*

While not really believing that, he did remember that he had a chunk of similar crystal tied around his neck. Alone, and curious to examine it, he reached into his shirt and pulled the pendant out. He was a little startled by what he saw.

While the pendant still retained the same basic shape it initially had, the colour was now that of a dull and unpolished piece of onyx. There was no hint of it being a formerly translucent piece of jewelry, and no sign of that intricate design that had somehow been etched inside it.

Turning it over in his palm, he almost thought he saw a faint spot of purple that quickly disappeared. He turned it over again, but saw no traces of purple on the other side. He would have to remember to show this piece of tasrac to Rheus. *Hopefully, he can explain this why this happened.*

Remembering his previous joke about radioactivity and suddenly feeling a little paranoid, he quickly stuck his head into his shirt to have a look at his chest. *No red spots or rashes.* He was safe. Or, at least, every movie he remembered seeing in his childhood would tend to indicate that.

Replacing the pendant inside his shirt, he remembered the bag of assorted trinkets from the bazaar. Indeed, if it hadn't been for Venarya handing it to him just before he left, he would have forgotten to bring them along. Walking over to the closet, he picked up and opened the bag.

Pulling out a random piece, he examined it. It was a multi-coloured elastic wristband, with several pieces of blue tasrac attached to it. Rheus had said that it was the equivalent of a children's toy. With practice, he claimed that the pieces could be made to light up, though John still had no idea how exactly one even began to accomplish that. However, like his pendant, all the pieces of tasrac were pitch black. *So much for Sophia's and Melissa's souvenirs.*

Going through the bag, he found that every piece of tasrac was in the same state. He would definitely have to talk to Rheus about this.

Invigorated by his curiosity, he decided to not waste any more time. *I hope Rheus is in his workshop. I don't fancy walking in on their janitor and having to explain myself.*

The two dogs had been idly laying in front of the fire, but quickly perked up as John whistled for them.

"Ready for another adventure, girls?"

Tongues hanging out and tails wagging, John could almost swear that they seemed to nod their heads in agreement.

Laughing, he replied, "Okay, just try not to scare the janitor."

Standing in front of an empty portion of wall, he began to concentrate. The familiar whisping and whirling smoke crept up the wall and did its strange dance. Soon, the smoke

coalesced into a shimmering portal, and John gazed into the other side. Thankfully, there was no janitor running for his life. Instead, standing a few metres away was a smiling and waving Rheus.

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"But that's a good thing, right?" asked Rheus.

Both men sat in the courtyard just outside of Rheus's building, and watched on as Kail played with the dogs.

John had just spent the last little while explaining the events that had transpired between Sophia and himself. He had ended it by alerting him to the fact that both sisters would be coming over for dinner.

"I'll let you be the judge of that after you meet Melissa."

"Surely she can't be that hard to please?"

"I'll admit, I'm exaggerating a little," John conceded. "However, please don't wear a bathrobe to dinner," he quickly added.

Rheus winced a little, "No worries there. Venarya already warned me to be ready for any visitors through the portal."

Indeed, Rheus did look like he had put some effort into his appearance. Or, at the very least, Venarya had instructed his young assistant Kail to make sure that the strange man was appropriately dressed.

"Speaking of Venarya," Rheus continued, "we should probably head over to her place and let her know about dinner tonight."

"Especially seeing as how she'll probably be hosting it. I hope she's not too busy with all that's happening."

"Well, everyone is still on high alert. Krane's marines are helping patrol the outlying areas, but it looks pretty calm so far. The Intendant is handling most of the city defense details, anyway. I suspect Venarya won't have much to do until Rinard returns tomorrow."

"So, Iathera may not be Kierd's intended target after all?"

"It's a possibility. Their ships don't seem to be moving away from the blockade, but that doesn't discount the fact that they may have clandestinely planted forces here earlier."

"I still don't see what they hope to gain from all this," John commented.

Rheus laughed bitterly, “You mean besides the chance to sack one of the most technologically advanced cities, which, incidentally, is currently protected only by a token security force?”

“True, but the amount of time and resources they’ve expended on this venture doesn’t make any sense whatsoever. Something just doesn’t feel right here.”

“I know. Hopefully the old man can shed some light on this.”

“I meant to ask you more about him. Who exactly is he? Venarya had mentioned that he was the one that arranged for you to work here?”

“Yes. He was my, shall we say, previous employer. In a way, I guess I still work for him.”

“How so?”

“He was one of the original founders of the Institute.”

John whistled in amazement. The Institute was over five hundred years old.

“I guess ‘old man’ is an apt description of him. How old is he supposed to be?”

“I wish I knew,” Rheus admitted. “All I can say for sure is that he’s been around for a long, long time.”

“What about his actual name?”

“He’s had about a few dozen from what I understand,” laughed Rheus. “Hence, everyone just refers to him as the ‘old man’.”

“He can’t be human, though? Not with that lifespan?”

Rheus shrugged, “Who knows? Age aside, he certainly looks the part. Not like our good friend Venarya, at least.”

“Speaking of which, we’d better head over there before we get caught up in exposition again.”

“Quite true.”

John looked at Kail playing with the dogs. They certainly looked content enough. Might as well let them have some fun.

John turned back to Rheus, “Is it okay if we leave Kail here with Penny and Em?”

“Not a problem, my friend. I remember those days in my youth, as well. I sometimes lose track of the fact that he’s still a child. Best to let him enjoy the rest of the day.” With a sigh, he continued, “I think I almost envy them, in a way.”

John looked at Rheus and laughed, “I’m sure they’ll let you play with them if you ask nicely. Just make sure not to trip over that beard of yours.”

Rheus returned the laugh, “*Almost* being the key word in my statement. I doubt I could even keep up with those two beasts of yours for more than ten minutes without collapsing. A life of academia is not without its drawbacks.”

“Well, let’s both get some exercise,” replied John as he got up.

“Agreed, let’s get going.” Turning to Kail, Rheus shouted, “Kail, you can stay here with Penny and Em. If we’re not back in an hour or so, or if you need to leave, drop them off at Venarya’s office.”

Taking a quick break from his romp, Kail turned around and shouted back a reply, “Not a problem, sir! I’ll see you when you get back!”

“I don’t think we’ll be that long, in any case,” John said to Rheus, as they started walking. “I’m sure Venarya’s going to need time to prepare once I give her the good news about her unexpected dinner party.”

“You’re forgetting about those poor caterers under her command,” Rheus chuckled. “As long as no other world shattering events happen today, I think she’ll be fine.”

“Still, I probably shouldn’t dawdle too much,” John said, as he idly pulled his mobile phone out of his pocket to check the time. “That’s odd. I could have sworn this thing was charging the entire time I was gone.”

Rheus looked at the now defunct phone and queried, “What is that device?”

“It’s a, well, portable communications device. You don’t have anything equivalent in this world?”

“Communications devices? Yes. Portable? Not as such. Out of curiosity, who were you planning on contacting?”

John laughed, “No one. I wouldn’t expect it to work here, anyway. I was hoping to use it to check the time. You see, it’s sort of a multifunction device. It’s also capable of showing me the exact time of day, as there’s a… um… portable time keeping device built into it-”

“You mean it’s also a watch?” Rheus asked.

***

“It won’t be a problem, will it?” John asked tentatively. “Because, if it is…”

“It’s not a problem at all, John,” Venarya replied with a smile. “Truth be told, once I had made that request of you, I was more or less expecting a situation similar to this.”

“And that’s why she’s in charge,” Rheus commented in a low voice.

Ignoring Rheus, John continued, “Before I forget, I’ve arranged for Ganz to be here tomorrow morning. I’ll get the exact time once I talk to Sophia again this evening. Nolan, however, might take up a few more days to get here.”

Venarya thought for a second. “That may work out for the best. I think we’ll need Ganz’s expertise moreso in the days to come.”

“Agreed. At the least, he may be able to shed some light on those Kierdan weapons.”

“Or even the odds by helping us to build some ourselves,” Rheus helpfully supplied.

Venarya and John both turned to stare at him.

“What?” Rheus held up his hands defensively. “I’m sure we were all thinking about it.”

“Not satisfied with being the mad swamp bomber, I see?” Venarya asked with an arched eyebrow. “Don’t think I’ve forgotten about your little tasrac ‘experiments’. So, please don’t give me a reason to have you reassigned to the history department.”

“I think he might have a point, though,” John said in Rheus’s defense. “That option may end up being our only choice, if we can’t figure out what exactly they’re up to”.

Venarya didn’t look too happy, but let it pass, “You’re right. Hopefully, the old man can shed some light on their plans for us.”

“Contingencies are something you never want to use, but they’re usually a good thing to have,” John added, sagely. “And, speaking of shedding light, there’s something you need to know. I’m not sure exactly how much light you’ll be able to shed on it without Mag’s help, but it’s probably something you should know.”

John now had both Venarya’s and Rheus’s undivided attention.

“That stone that you, ah, gave me,” John continued, “is able to bridge locations in my world. Without the use of any kind of portal.”

Rheus looked a little wild-eyed, while Venarya appeared pensive.

“You neglected to mention that part of the story to me. That sort of transportation is… well… unheard of,” Rheus said first. Looking at Venarya, he asked, “But, then again, that stone is pretty much unheard of in itself. Are we absolutely sure that the stone can’t do the same here? If so-”

“It’s impossible,” Venarya spoke. “From what Mag had told me, I suspected that the stone would have that sort of power on John’s world.”

“Wha-,” began Rheus.

“You, or anyone else, don’t need to know the details of that conversation right now,” Venarya said flatly. With a softer tone, she added, “No offense, but Mag insisted on that.”

Rheus’s face showed that he would accept that condition for the time being.

Venarya continued, “I had known that it would be a possibility, but I didn’t expect John to start experimenting so recklessly so soon.”

She said the last part with a mock stern tone, but John still had the good grace to blush.

“I know it probably wasn’t the smartest idea,” John said, “but it did seem the fastest and simplest way to solve my dilemma at the time. I promise I won’t do any more experimenting without letting you know first, though.”

*Looks like Venarya was taking a page out of Sophia’s playbook,* John noticed. *They should get along famously at dinner.*

Venarya smiled, “Apology not necessary, but accepted. Just remember that almost anything you do involving items from our world is basically an untested experiment. I’d rather not have you disintegrated by accident.”

“Well, that makes two of us,” John said. “Also, speaking of experiments, I had meant to ask Rheus about this earlier, but got sidetracked. Have a look at this.”

Rheus and Venarya looked on curiously as John reached inside his shirt and pulled out the pendant that the Syrilo merchant had given him.

“Er, okay,” Rheus started, looking a little confused, “I guess it’s a pretty design, but-”

“I’m not sure what you’re referring to, John,” Venarya cut in, the same look of mild confusion on her face. “What experiment do you want to perform on it?”

“Huh?” was all John could say, his own face starting to sport the same confused look. Bringing the pendant higher, he looked at it and was even more confused by what he saw. It had returned to its original purple colour. Looking closely, John saw that even the intricate etched design was still there.

Taking a second to take stock of the situation, he then turned back to Rheus and Venarya, “Yep, it definitely is a pretty pendant. The point is, well, it wasn’t pretty on my world. It looked

like a dull black rock. In fact, the same thing happened with every piece of tasrac in that bag of souvenirs, as well."

Reaching into his pocket, John pulled out the wristband from the bazaar. The pieces of tasrac had returned to their former colour, as well.

"Yep," John continued, "this one's back to its original colour, too."

"Well," Rheus began, "the obvious explanation is that tasrac has different properties in each of our worlds-"

"And," Venarya cut off Rheus again, "because we know how volatile tasrac can be, let's not do any sort of experimenting. At least, not until this current crisis is over."

"Should I be wearing this pendant?" John asked bluntly. "Also, should I bring back that bag of souvenirs and leave it here?"

"I don't think we need to go that far," Venarya assured him. "I'm sure that Mag would have warned us, if that was the case. However, like I said, don't do any sort of experimenting for now."

"Agreed," John replied, "At the very least, I'd like Ganz to have a look at it first, anyway."

"Glad to see we're on the same page, then," Venarya smiled, a note of relief in her voice.

"Now, Rheus," Venarya said, "If you can promise not to indulge any of your pyrotechnic urges, perhaps you'd care to have a look at John's world? Assuming that he'll be able to effectively conceal you, of course?"

"That won't be a problem," John confirmed, as he turned to face Rheus.

Rheus had that wild-eyed look again, but quickly recovered and replied, "I'd be delighted."

"Perfect, then," she smiled. "I'll start making preparations for our guests, and I'll see you back here in a few hours."

# Chapter 5

"Have I mentioned how much I hate this place?" a miserable Rinard commented.

"Not in the last minute and a half, no," answered a slightly annoyed Krane.

"Look, I'm just saying. Are we even sure we're on the right path? I can't see more than twenty feet ahead of me right now."

Garh grunted.

"I'm sure Garh knows where he's going. Yazril said that he's been here enough times already."

Before Rinard could answer, a blood curdling howl made him almost jump out of his skin.

Agitated and trembling, he sputtered, "I swear, I think they do that on purpose."

Krane smiled and replied, "It serves a purpose. If we *are* being followed by any Kierdans, it may give them second thoughts."

"Damned near gave me second thoughts."

Shaking his head, Krane replied, "Going by how thick the fog currently is, the good news is that we appear to be making remarkably good time. Garh here looks like he knows a few shortcuts through this maze of a swamp. Also, judging from those howls, I suspect we'll have an escort before too long."

"Assuming they don't try to give me a heart attack again."

Then, as if on some perverse cue, another howl emanated from somewhere within the mists. However, this one was accompanied by a dark shape hurtling down from high above in the treetops. With a resounding splash, the creature landed in a nearby shallow pool of water.

Rinard, by virtue of surprise, also ended up in a nearby puddle of water.

The creature got up from all fours and stood upright. While humanly proportioned, the creature topped out at over seven feet and resembled an enormously muscled anthropomorphic wolf. Jet black fur glistened as it tried to shake any residual water away.

"How've you been, Duba?" Krane asked, as he attempted to help Rinard up.

The creature did its approximation of a grin, and replied in a gravelly tone, "Full belly, Krane. Happy. You not worry, Rinard. For now."

"Ha ha, very funny," commented Rinard, as he tried to wipe the mud off his clothes.

"Did you see anyone following us?" asked Krane.

“None follow,” replied Duba in an almost disappointed tone.

“Don’t look so glum, friend,” Rinard sarcastically reassured the overgrown wolf. “I’m sure someone tasty will find their way here sooner or later.”

The creature’s mouth did its approximation of a grin again as it replied, “You funny, Rinard. Promise not eat you. Today.”

“You should probably send out more patrols in the outer areas. There’s a slight chance that Kierdan soldiers may be on their way here to try to attack either us or the old man.”

Duba’s lips curled into a fearsome grin. “Let them. Hope Kierdans not stringy.” He then lifted his muzzle and let out a series of howls.

They were shortly answered by other howls coming from a multitude of directions.

“Do try to keep them alive if possible, though,” Rinard said. “We’d like to interrogate them first.”

Seeing the corners of Duba’s muzzle starting to scowl, he quickly added, “But, of course, you know that already. Don’t worry, though. I’m sure the old man will let you eat them afterwards.”

Duba barked a harsh laugh, as Rinard silently let out a sigh of relief.

Krane just shook his head as the creature led them through the increasingly thick fog. While he would undoubtedly, unquestioningly and unmercifully continue to mock him over it, he did understand Rinard’s trepidations about having to traipse about in here.

As they wordlessly marched through the mists, Krane thought back to that first time he had been sent here.

***

Something was definitely odd about this entire situation.

A newly minted Admiral of the Eastern Fleet, Krane hadn’t even held the position for a month before this strange request had come down from the Fleet Admiral personally.

He looked at his surroundings. Between the fog and the lack of light, there wasn’t much to see. He took out the strange, ornate compass from his pocket and looked at the needle. From what little he could make out of the sun through the dense canopy, it looked like the device still wasn’t pointing North. However, it was still pointing in the same general direction he had been walking, so that was a good sign. He hoped.

While not one given to believing in wild rumours, he had heard numerous local stories regarding this swamp. Sane people did not spend their leisure time here. *Hell, even the crazy people avoided this place.*

With nothing else to do during his trek, he started taking stock of the situation. Here he was, one of the senior commanders of the Nebar Cluster, walking through a murky swamp to an unknown destination. All to deliver a small, sealed envelope to an unknown person.

He sincerely hoped this wasn't some sort of hazing ritual.

After about another half an hour of walking, he heard a blood chilling howl from somewhere close by, then took a few steps backward as a gigantic wolf like creature dropped down from the treetops a few metres away from him.

Startled, he looked at the creature. Running away did not appear to be an option. The beast appeared more than able to overtake him in a few strides without even breaking a sweat.

With nothing to lose, he followed his instructions and, holding up the compass so that the creature could see it, recited the odd passphrase he had been given.

"I ate three lunches today. They were full of rocks." Under normal circumstances, he would have felt a bit silly saying that.

The creature cocked its head and peered at him for a few moments. *Perhaps I* should *be trying to run away, instead of attempting to converse with the local wildlife.*

Another tense moment passed, and the creature replied, "Who you?"

Grateful that the creature did appear to be somewhat sentient, he figured that he may still come out of the whole ordeal alive. Cautiously, he replied, "I… I am Admiral Krane of the Nebar Cluster. I-"

The creature cut him off, "Why you here?"

Gulping, he answered, "I was sent here by the Fleet Admiral to deliver this message to-"

The creature cut him off again and simply said, "Come."

Turning around, the creature began walking away without even checking to see if he was following.

Figuring that he had no other choice, Krane allowed the creature to lead him through the swamp.

As they walked, he tried to make conversation with the creature, but the only responses he got were non-committal grunts. After a few minutes, he figured that the creature had been

ordered not to speak to intruders, or maybe the creature just didn't feel like talking. Either way, he gave up any hopes of conversation and wordlessly followed along.

# Chapter 6

"Sir?"

Athash opened his eyes and sat up. "How long?" he asked.

"A few hours," Rush replied. "I just figured you'd want to come in off the grass before sunset."

"A joke, Rush? Too bad there's no one around to witness this," Athash chuckled.

"An observation. Speaking of which, you're looking a lot better, now that you've finally managed to catch up on your sleep."

"I feel better," Athash commented, stretching.

"What do you say, Rush," Athash mused, gazing down into the harbour, "Let's commandeer one of those ships, set sail, and never look back. I bet we can make a fair living on the high seas."

"Besides the fact that the ship will be dead within a few months? I'd say that's a fairly good reason not to. Also, sea rations aren't the most appetizing of meals."

Athash laughed, "Practical, as always."

"Why the capricious mood? No longer worried about the Cluster issue?"

"Let's just say I've accepted it. I'm not going to pull out any more hairs over something we can't change. Plus, we've got other issues here that we do need to spend time on."

"True."

"Any news to report, good or bad?"

"Aside from the usual logistics reports, none. Incidentally, we've only had one bad cesoc in the batch, so far. Looks like Lazano's side might be perfecting their recipe."

"Perhaps, or maybe they were knowingly selling us larger batches of duds to start with. Either way, that's a bit of good news, at least. More ships are never a bad thing."

"Agreed."

The two of them walked back to the command tent in silence, Athash lost deep in thought.

"Rush," Athash said suddenly, "I need to you to answer plainly on a topic for me."

"I'll certainly try, sir."

"Do you believe that we did the right thing?"

"As in?"

“Everything.”

Rush sighed. “That’s a loaded question. Like you’ve always said, we weren’t exactly given a lot of good choices.”

“What if we had taken the bad choice? What if we had refused his offer?”

“Then I think we would either be dead, or in Narad’s shoes. King Garustet can’t be too happy at his nation’s current circumstances, I’d imagine.”

“Speaking of kings…”

“Regrets, sir?”

“No, not as such. We did what had to be done. I stand by that,” Athash affirmed. “I just hope history judges us that way.”

***

Athash sat back wordlessly, mouth agape.

“It’s a simple request,” Lazano said.

Athash collected his wits and responded, “I believe our definitions of ‘simple’ may differ slightly.”

“How so? You don’t actually have to do much.”

“You’re talking treason,” Athash stated plainly.

“No. I’m talking about you looking the other way, while we arrange a little accident for King Domich.”

“Why even tell me, then? Why not just go ahead and do it?”

“Because we need to make sure you’re not in the line of fire. My employers have too many resources invested in you to even consider placing you at risk. Consider yourself a VIP in their eyes. It’s quite an honour, actually.”

“Forgive me if I don’t fawn and gush over their reverence.”

“Fine, we’ll agree to disagree over that point. But, consider the following: what do you do now?”

Slightly confused, but intrigued by the question, Athash responded, “Go on.”

“Do you think, for even a second, that Domich has any ambitions beyond these meager borders?”

“Lack of ambitions is still no reason to assassinate him.”

“Really? Thanks to us, you now have a significantly larger and well-equipped army, along with the power to easily and quickly move large amount of troops anywhere on this continent.”

“I’m well aware of that. What’s your point?”

“Your situation is not self sustainable. If my employers were to stop backing you, do you think that your army would stay loyal while they were starving?”

Athash frowned, “So, you’ve skillfully maneuvered me into a den of sleeping wolves, and you’re now about to blow a horn?”

“Don’t look so forlorn. I’m just trying to drive home a point. We’ve given you the tools to do what every kingdom on this continent has been itching to do for ages. On top of that, your economy has improved exponentially. After all, didn’t we help you to get those trade routes to Narad established?”

“True, but I’m also guessing you didn’t do that out of the kindness of your heart.”

Lazano grinned, “You know us well. Yes, it’s all part of a grand plan. But, don’t lie to yourself and think that Kierd gained nothing from our relationship. Do you remember the rundown backwater that it used to be when we first met?”

“How exactly does Kierd’s prosperity and dominance over this continent help your employers?”

“As a minor example, manpower.”

“Come again?”

“As you well know, we have the capability to produce vast amount of ships, among other things. However, without crews to man them, we might as well use them for firewood.”

Despite already having a strong suspicion of what the answer would be, Athash still asked, “And how exactly do we help to supply you with crews?”

“Spoils of war.”

*Slaves. Even the crazy nomads out east supposedly stopped dealing in them ages ago.*

“Do you realize the political backlash that would cause? We’d have open rebellion in every street if word of that got out.”

“Only if word got out. In any war, there are always multitudes of refugees fleeing from one place to another. All we have to do is surreptitiously intercept some of those multitudes. If you’re smart about it, and don’t abduct too many from one place, they’ll be presumed dead and simply become casualties of war. Sure, they’ll be rumours afterwards, but there won’t be any evidence.”

“Fine,” Athash said, shaking his head in disbelief. “But, how exactly do you plan on convincing and training peasants to man your warships?”

“Let us worry about that.”

“Tell me this, though. Your employers are certainly not lacking for funds. Why not just try to, say, actually employ more people, instead of this grand plan designed to get you some slaves? After all, you seem to be a relatively happy employee. This all seems to be a very convoluted way for you to get some help in the shop.”

“First of all, that’s not all that this plan is designed to achieve, by half. Secondly, no sane person would willingly sign up for the… tasks that we need done. Thirdly, my employers want no trail linking us back to any of our… future employees.”

*Lazano certainly had a politician’s tongue.*

“Fine, I’ll accept your reasoning, if not your morality. But let’s leave this train of thought for a future conversation. Back to your original point-”

“Yes. Domich. My employers need him dead,” Lazano interrupted and stated bluntly. “If it’s any consolation, Domich’s death will leave a power vacuum that you and your own retainers will then fill. After you consolidate your power base, you can begin a campaign which will lead to your eventual conquest of this continent.”

“Or my own death.”

“Would you rather die attempting what no one else has been able to do, or peacefully as a powerless military commander of a backwater kingdom?”

“I’d rather not die at all, if that’s alright with you.”

“I’m just making a point,” Lazano continued. “Remember, we have a vested interest in you. You’ll have our support the entire way.”

“This whole conquest notion sounds like a doomed scheme. As soon as Kierd attacks anyone, the other nations will swoop in and put a stop to it. And to me. Permanently.”

“Not if you’re exacting justified revenge.”

“How so?”

“My employers will arrange for the blame for King Domich’s death to fall squarely in the lap of Narad. Retribution for the death of your king will be enough to stop the other nations from interfering while you move to occupy Narad. Once they realize what’s actually happening, it’ll be too late for them to effectively counter you.”

“Still, conquest of an entire continent is easier said than done.”

“Trust me.”

*As far as I can throw you.*

“Very well,” Athash grudgingly replied. “You do realize that I’ll have to tell Rush in advance about this entire plan?”

“As you should. You’ll want him by your side to bolster your chance of success, anyway.”

“Fair enough. Now, pray tell, how do I get him to betray the man whose grandfather was responsible for creating his entire spy network?”

“I’m sure you’ll think of something,” Lazano grinned.

“Wonderful advice. Thanks.”

# Chapter 7

John hesitated.

"What's wrong?" asked Rheus, though he seemed more engaged in examining the interior of John's cabin.

"Nothing, really," John replied, "Just thinking about the conversation that Sophia and Melissa are having right now. Hopefully, Mel didn't make arrangements for me to join Sophia at whichever mental institution she's had her forcibly confined to."

Seeing the expression on Rheus's face, he quickly added, "Again, just a joke."

With a relieved sigh, Rheus commented, "So, this is your house?"

Laughing, John replied, "More like a retreat to get away from the house. This is just a small cabin I had placed on the grounds a few years ago. Originally, it was just supposed to be an elaborate doghouse for Penny and Em to hang out in, but I also like the tranquility here, as well."

"I see," Rheus stated, though his expression still showed a little confusion.

*How's that for a change? The bathrobe-wearing mad professor thinks* I *might be crazy.*

Changing the topic, he pulled the pendant out of his shirt again and examined it. The stone was black again, except for one small purple spot that quickly followed suit. Rheus's face showed that he had seen it as well.

"That… I have no explanation," was all Rheus could say.

"Well, let's not dwell on it for now," John offered. "You've given me a tour of your city, but I'm afraid the nearest town's about fifteen miles away.

"On top of that, you may get a raised eyebrow or two with that beard," John chuckled, "and I suspect that Venarya wants us to remain inconspicuous for the time being. I do, however, believe I have a few things in the actual house that might pique your interest. In any case, it looks like we have a little time to kill."

***

John wished he had paid more attention in high school, as his knowledge of electricity began and ended at 'almost-magic, zappy thing that came out of the wall and powered everything'. There was moment of near panic when he caught Rheus about to stick his tongue in an electrical

outlet, though. After that, John made a mental note to have Ganz explain the concept of electricity to him later tomorrow.

Thankfully, John's lack of technical knowledge didn't seem to detract from the tour he had given Rheus. As expected, Rheus's world did seem to have counterparts for almost everything he had shown him.

John was a little disappointed when Rheus wasn't all that amazed by the television. He had not seen anything of the sort during his short stay in Iathera, and had assumed that it would be a novelty for Rheus. However, Rheus had explained that a similar device did exist. He was a little amazed by the fact that it received live broadcasts, though. Upon further discussion, John realized that the quasi-television sets in Iathera were probably little more than playback devices for whatever their equivalent of a DVD player was.

***

"I still don't understand," Rheus said, puzzled. "Why doesn't anyone rescue these people off this island? Why are they being forced to perform these tasks? Are they criminals?"

Once Rheus had learned how to work the remote control, and subsequently realized that John had access to a few thousand channels, he had become a permanent fixture on the couch. His taste in entertainment, however, seemed to be geared toward various reality television shows. John wished Rheus had settled for something simple like a news broadcast, as he now had the ponderous task of acting as a multipurpose general culture and language translator for him.

"It's a contest," John explained. "Like I said, I don't watch it myself, but I believe whoever performs the tasks the best gets some sort of prize at the end."

"Ah," was all that Rheus could say, his attention returning to the television show again.

John could only chuckle as he checked the charge on his phone. It looked like it was charging normally. *I must have forgotten to plug it in after the whole incident with Amelia.*

Still, he made a mental note to check it again once he returned to Iathera. Considering what was happening with the tasrac on this world, there was a chance that electricity had some weird properties on the other side.

"John," he heard Rheus call out. "I do believe that there's an almost naked woman on the television trying to tell me something about her soap?"

***

A little afraid that Melissa might pick up the phone, John had ended up sending a text message to Sophia. Her reply had simply said, “Come. Now.”

Still a little hesitant, he called for Rheus, who grudgingly turned off the television and came over.

“Ah, your communication device is working,” Rheus observed. “I take it that it’s time to pick up our guests?”

“Correct. Also, a maybe-quick question. I’m guessing from the fact that you didn’t understand the language on television, that Soph and Mel won’t be able to understand you?” John asked. “I mean, did you learn English from that box thing that you used on me?”

“I could have… I think. But, Mag said just to teach you our language,” he began. “I could have tried to use the device to teach myself, but I’m sure Mag must have had a reason for not letting me do it in the first place.

“In any case, that still leaves the problem of Venarya,” Rheus continued. “I’m assuming she doesn’t speak your language, unless of course you managed to give her a crash course last night,” he laughed. “It’s not a problem, though. I’ll simply teach Sophia and Melissa our language the same way as I did for-”

“Whoa, whoa, whoa,” John interrupted him. “Now, do you remember what happened last time you used that box thing? By the way, what’s it actually called?”

“Well, it doesn’t actually have a name,” Rheus admitted.

“But,” Rheus continued, a little sheepishly, “I do believe I might have been a tad nervous and maybe a little overzealous when I used the box on you. I’m almost positive it won’t have the same effect on your sisters.”

“Almost positive?”

“Well, it’s not like I do this sort of thing all the time,” he said, holding up his hands, “but I’m reasonably sure about it.”

“Well, I’ve guess we’ve got no choice in the matter. Which leads into another question I kept forgetting to ask you.”

“Go ahead.”

“When I’m talking to you, I’m speaking your language, right?”

“Yes, that’s correct. You’ll be speaking Risenian.”

"So, let's say, Sophia's in the room, and she sees me talking to you. Will she hear me speaking Risenian?"

"Well, yes. And if you were to turn back to her and speak, you'd be speaking your own language, I think.

"And," he continued, "before you ask, no, I have no idea how it works. It seems that the box somehow gives your brain the ability to switch your spoken language subconsciously. That's my theory, at least. For all I know, it probably *is* magic."

***

John nervously watched as the strange smoke danced and slowly coalesced into an image.

As the image focused, he could make out the figures of Sophia and Melissa. *Mel didn't look too mad. For the moment.*

Taking a deep breath, he stepped through, with Rheus and the two dogs following behind. *On second thought, bringing along someone who looks like a hobo might not help my cause with Mel.*

Before he could even say anything, Melissa piped up, "Well?"

The undertone spoke volumes. Hopefully, the presence of a houseguest might keep her anger in check.

Before he could even form a reply, Sophia came to his rescue, "I think what Mel means is," giving Melissa a sidelong glance, "glad to see you again."

Turning to Rheus, Sophia smiled and said, "And welcome to you, as well."

Rheus didn't understand the words, but returned the smile and bowed to both sisters.

***

Sophia watched as John and his guest emerged from the strange portal. She also hoped she could contain the situation, as Melissa was still slightly ticked at John for the whole Amelia fiasco.

"Rheus doesn't speak English," John was saying.

*He probably shouldn't have said that*, Sophia thought. *He had just given Mel free reign to say anything now*.

Before either sibling could say anything else, Sophia piped up, “Let’s not forget why we’re here. We can debate family issues later.”

That seemed to calm down Melissa a little.

“Now, John,” she began, “I believe you’re here to take us to dinner?”

“Yes, we can leave right away…”

He trailed off as he looked at what Melissa was doing.

Turning to look, Sophia exclaimed, “Mel! Wha… is that a Geiger counter?”

Without looking up, Melissa boldly walked up to John, Rheus and the still active portal. Without a trace of shame, she began running the device around them.

“Do you *want* radiation poisoning? Unlike your brother, I prefer taking precautions.”

*She’s never going to let this go. And why does she keep a Geiger counter around?*

“Judging from the fact that your little toy isn’t reacting at all, and the fact that John hasn’t grown two heads, I’d say we’re safe.”

“Maybe,” Melissa grudgingly replied, putting down the device.

“Now that we’ve completed all the formalities, perhaps we can head out to dinner now?” Sophia said to Melissa with a strained voice. *Happy thoughts. Happy thoughts.*

“And perhaps John can explain exactly how we’re going to communicate with these people?”

Sophia continued trying to calm her nerves. *Nice beach with palm trees. Cool surf and warm sand.*

“It’s been taken care of, Mel,” John replied, a little cautiously. “Rheus here has a device that can teach us his language almost instantly.”

“So, we’ll add possible brain damage to the list of risks, then. Too bad it’s impossible to tell if you’ve been affected.”

*Nice tropical sun. Ah… screw this.*

“Look,” Sophia said with uncharacteristic sternness, “You’re more than welcome to stay behind, while I go look at a *brand new world that our only brother has chosen to share with us*. If you want to continue your petty argument with John, you can do it when we come back.”

That seemed to take most of the steam out of Melissa. With both siblings staring at her and waiting for her reply, and with Rheus politely staring out a window, she held up her hands in

submission and replied, “Very well, you’re right. Let’s get going then. We’ll deal with our family issues when we get back.”

“Good, now that that’s settled,” Sophia said, “John, if you may?”

“Er, thanks,” John began, “I’ll go through first, and you can join me on the other side. We’ll stop off at my place first, then I’ll create the portal to Iathera from there. In case of anything, I won’t be able to hear you once I’m through. Use hand signals if you need to.”

While cautioning them, something else occurred to him.

“You should probably leave your phones, and anything else that can be used to track you, behind,” John continued. “Don’t want the phone company, or anyone else, seeing you travel a thousand miles in the blink of an eye.”

“And, perhaps, you’d like to teach us how to walk as well?” Melissa commented. “You seem to have forgotten that I was the one who thought to bring a Geiger counter along. Did you think that *I* wouldn’t have thought of that long before you did?”

“Okay, okay,” John said defensively. “I’ll go first with Rheus and the dogs, then you two follow.”

Sophia then saw John turn and say something to the bearded man in a strange language, who then proceeded to follow John through the portal. She also saw Melissa quietly slipping her mobile phone between the cushions of a nearby chair.

Once John, Rheus, and the dogs were through, Sophia turned to Melissa and said in a more gentle tone, “Now’s your chance to back out if you want to. I won’t hold it against you.”

“And let you have all the fun?”

“Fine, just do me a favour and keep the yelling at a minimum,” Sophia replied with a smile. “Treat it like another business meeting. Except with Martians this time.”

Melissa laughed and walked through the portal. *Thank heavens. It’s like living with a live nuclear bomb. Maybe that’s why she’s got the Geiger counter*.

With a giggle followed by a weary sigh, Sophia followed suit behind her siblings and stepped through the portal.

Still half expecting some sort of trick, Sophia looked around her new surroundings. *It really did appear to be John’s house*. She could only hang her mouth open in astonishment, and she saw that Melissa’s expression mirrored her own.

Looking at the speechless sisters, John grinned and said, “Now, here’s the fun part. Get ready to go where no woman has gone before.”

Both sisters groaned at the terrible joke.

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John waved his hand in front of the portal and said, “Deactivate,” then watched as the portal collapsed in on itself and winked out of existence. *I really hope it works this time. With my luck, the battery in this magic rock is probably low*, he thought.

“Everyone ready?” John asked, as he unplugged his mobile phone and placed it in his pocket.

“Yes,” replied Sophia, “but why are you bringing your phone?”

“Just an experiment,” said John, “In any case, I’ve removed the SIM card and activated airplane mode, so it shouldn’t be trackable.”

“I see,” Sopha replied, though her expression said otherwise.

“Okay, here goes nothing.”

Concentrating on the portal in Rheus’s workshop, he was pleased to see the dancing smoke appear.

Once the image solidified, both sisters gasped and unintentionally took a step back.

Sophia spoke first, “I take it that that’s Mag?”

Before John or Rheus could say anything, they all heard the response in their heads. -*Yes*-

John wasn’t sure why or how Mag had known to show up at that exact moment, but he suspected that she was there to oversee the operation of the strange boxlike device. Mag provided no explanation and said nothing more, as she patiently waited for them on the other side.

“I can see why you decided to bring the wacky professor, instead of her,” Sophia joked weakly. “She’s more than a bit noticeable.”

“I take it you girls would rather not enter the portal first?” John asked with a grin.

Silently and with uncharacteristic brazenness, Melissa walked forward and through the portal, surprising both of the other siblings in the process.

“Guess you get to be the second woman to walk through,” John quipped, as they watched Melissa walk over to Mag and turn to wait for the remainder of the group.

“Ha ha,” came the sarcastic reply, as she followed her sister though.

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John anxiously watched as Rheus used the box device on Sophia, readying himself to catch her, should she faint.

She didn’t seem to be in any discomfort, and it looked like it was taking longer than it did when he was in the hotseat. Perhaps Mag had shown up to give Rheus further instructions on how to use the device. It would explain her presence, and she had not seen fit to explain how, why or when she had known to meet them.

And, on the topic of mysteries, he still hadn’t puzzled out the silver pin that Rheus kept pinned on his lapel, and which now sat on top of the boxlike device. *I’ve got to remember to ask him about that someday.*

His mental meandering ended when Rheus took his hands off the device, and asked Sophia, “Do you understand me?”

She blinked a few times, but responded with a tentative, “Yes?”

“The light headedness will wear off shortly,” Rheus assured her with a smile. “As I’m sure John has already told you, I am Rheus. Welcome to my little workshop.”

“Thank you,” Sophia smiled back. Looking at Melissa, she asked, “Ready?”

“Sure.”

As Sophia vacated the chair for Melissa, John couldn’t help but notice that Rheus started to look a little nervous. He hoped that nothing unexpected had happened when he was implanting the language in Sophia’s head. *Perhaps*, he silently laughed, *Rheus had taken all of his comments to heart, and was now a little scared of her.*

Nevertheless, Melissa’s turn on the device went without incident, despite Rheus’s uncomfortable look.

Once a nervous Rheus had double-checked that the device had worked properly, the small group then headed outside.

As they walked into the courtyard, Sophia gasped at the sight of the blue, glowing palm trees that acted as street lighting.

“Wow, those are beautiful,” was all Sophia could say. Melissa idly nodded in agreement as she continued looking around.

A loud crack caused them to turn back just in time to see Mag launching herself into the air, and flying off to another destination.

"Wow," repeated Sophia.

"She's probably continuing her patrol of the harbour," Rheus surmised, "Still, it was nice of her to visit."

As they exited the courtyard, both sisters were dumbstruck upon looking into the sky and seeing both the large moon hanging high, and the Dark Sister rising on the horizon.

"Wow," was all Sophia could manage to say, again. And, once more, Melissa could only nod in silent agreement.

As they walked toward Venarya's home, John saw his sisters trying to observe and catalogue everything they saw, despite the minimal light. Remembering the mobile phone in his pocket, he figured now was as good a time as any to see if his theory had been right.

Seeing him pulling the phone out of his pocket, Sophia asked, "Who exactly are you planning on calling here?"

"Huh," John distractedly said, as he tried to turn on the phone. "No, no one. If my theory is right, there's a chance that phones may not work here."

Shaking her head, Melissa gave him a disconcerted look as she said, "No kidding, Sherlock? Okay, now I know you have some kind of brain damage."

John wisely and quickly expanded on his previous statement, before this turned into a full blown argument. "No, I meant that the battery seems to have been drained. This phone's been charging all afternoon. It looks like electricity doesn't work the same way in this world for some reason."

"See," Sophia interjected on John's behalf, "that's a pretty good observation. It probably won't win a Nobel prize, but it's information that may be useful to us in the future."

Outgunned, Melissa backed down. "Agreed. It is useful to know. Especially," she said, her tone rising slightly, "seeing that Nolan has a pacemaker from that little incident five years ago."

*Crap. Not good.*

"Well, even if Nolan can't go to the mountain," Sophia helpfully supplied, "we can still try to bring as much of the mountain to him as possible. Plus, for all we know, this could be because of us using a phone for testing. I say we have Ganz follow up on this in the morning. For now, let's just see if we can get to dinner without any sort of incident."

“I can live with that,” Melissa said. Shaking her head and letting out a sigh, she turned to John, her tone softening a little, “Johnny, I know I’m giving you a lot of flak, and you know exactly why I’m doing it too. However, putting that aside, just remember this isn’t a vacation. Remember that you’ve involved the company in what’s essentially a war. I’ll lay off on you for now, if you promise me that you’ll try to be careful.”

John briefly considered giving a sarcastic response, and apparently, Sophia had anticipated that as well, judging from the sidelong look she gave him.

Instead of potentially aggravating both sisters, John decided to take the prudent route and replied, “You’re right. I’ll be as cautious as I can.”

“That’s all I want,” Melissa replied.

*Phew.*

“This doesn’t mean we won’t be continuing our conversation regarding Amelia when we get back, though,” she continued, an evil glint in her eye.

*Crap.*

“Hey,” Rheus suddenly exclaimed. “I just realized something.”

“Huh? What is it?” asked John.

“Well, not to imply that I’m an eavesdropper by nature… I mean, I couldn’t help but-”

“Spit it out, Rheus.”

“I just realized that I understood your conversation.”

“Wasn’t that the point of that strange device?” asked Sophia.

“Well, yes. But, strictly speaking, I shouldn’t have been able to understand that conversation. You should only be speaking Risenian when actually talking to someone from here. At least, that’s how I think it’s always worked before.”

“Unless,” he continued, thinking about it for a few seconds. “Ah, that would explain Mag’s presence. She must have made some sort of modification to the device.”

Seeing the siblings all exhibiting the same blank stare, he backtracked, “Sorry, I’m getting ahead of myself again. The device allows you to switch spoken languages unconsciously at will, as required. However, you shouldn’t switch languages when you’re talking to each other. At least, that’s what I think happened the few times that we’ve actually used the device.

“But,” he continued, “I just realized that it would be extremely awkward during dinner if you kept flipping back and forth between languages, depending on who you were talking to.

Hence, Mag must have realized that, and made some sort of alteration to the device just now. That's probably why she was there in the workshop."

"It sounds like a good theory," John replied. "But, you're forgetting that I didn't use the machine a second time."

Rheus could only shrug, "Like you said, it's only a theory."

"All the same," Melissa asked with a slightly worried tone, "Will we end up speaking this crazy moon language to everyone else when we get back?"

"No," Rheus replied. "I'm pretty sure Mag would have considered that. Also, I don't think anyone lives on that moon."

Ignoring his confusion, she pointedly said, "*Pretty sure*?"

"Let it be, Mel," Sophia interjected. "No point getting worked up over something that's probably a non-issue."

Melissa said nothing more on the topic, but her face showed slight signs of concern.

John tried to distract her by changing the topic to more mundane matters, but he could see that it had little effect.

*Thank heavens she's not a conspiracy nut, or that entire penthouse might have been wallpapered in aluminum foil.*

As they got closer to Venarya's house, John spotted the outlines of two very different, but familiar, figures standing just outside.

"I guess she didn't head off to patrol the harbour after all," Rheus commented.

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"It's a pleasure to finally meet you," Venarya smiled. "I believe you've already met Mag."

"We have," Sophia replied, returning the smile. "This place is very beautiful at night."

"Thank you. You must come back and visit during the day sometime, though. I'm sure John's mentioned the sights around town to you."

"Thank you for the offer," Melissa said, before Sophia could reply. "We'll certainly take you up on it in the future, if we can. But, from what I understand, I do believe you have a somewhat precarious situation happening right now?"

*Straight to business*, thought John.

“Yes, I must confess that you’ve arrived at a rather strange time,” admitted Venarya. “However, the situation seems to be contained to the east for the time being. For now, we can still enjoy a dinner with friends without much worry.”

*She must have anticipated and practiced that reply. Good reply, though.*

“I thought Mag was heading back to the harbour to continue her patrol,” asked Rheus.

“She’s just leaving to do that now,” said Venarya. “Mag just needed to get something from me first.”

*Mag’s got no pockets*, was all that John could think.

Venarya didn’t offer any more details, and seeing that the rest of the group was too polite to ask, John didn’t bother prying further.

“Actually, just before she leaves,” Melissa piped up, “I do have a quick question. Just to put my mind at rest.”

*Oh boy.*

“Go ahead,” Venarya smiled.

“That thing that allowed us to speak your language-”

“The halosq, yes,” Venarya helpfully supplied.

“The halosq,” Melissa repeated. “Now, will we be back to ‘normal’ once we arrive back on our world, and start speaking to other people?”

Venarya looked at Mag, who then slightly nodded her head.

“Yes,” Venarya replied, turning back to the rest of the group. “The halosq itself doesn’t actually do what I believe that you’re probably theorizing that it does.

“Mag,” she continued, “as you may know, has an innate ability to project thoughts into the minds of others. A form of telepathy, if you may. All the device does is effectively open a limited conduit to Mag’s mind.”

“So,” Melissa interrupted, “we’re essentially sharing her mind, which then decides which language is necessary for which situation, and also does translation on the fly?”

“You catch on fast,” Venarya smiled. “Yes, but I believe it happens at almost a subconscious level for Mag.”

“How does it still work when I’m back on Earth, though?” John asked. “I was able to talk to Rheus with no problems this afternoon. I mean, there’s quite a distance involved there.”

Mag then turned to Venarya and took her hand.

After a few seconds, Venarya let go and, laughing, turned to John, “She says it’s your equivalent of a trade secret, and not to worry. Just be glad that it does.”

Mag then looked at Venarya and took her hand again.

Releasing it, Venarya said, “Mag apologizes, but she said that she needs to get back to her patrol. She also says that she’s not trying to be intentionally obtuse, but she will relay as much information to you as she thinks is prudent.”

With a bow of her head, Mag then stepped away from the group, and took off with a few beats of her powerful wings.

“Now, it’s a lovely night, but all of you must be famished,” Venarya said. “Follow me inside and let’s have some dinner.”

“Thanks, Venarya,” smiled Sophia. “That would be lovely.”

“You knew all along,” Rheus said, looking at Venarya as they walked inside.

“Pardon?” Venarya asked, a mischievous smile on her face.

“Don’t play coy. I’ve had that thing for years, and never even knew the name of it, much less how it actually worked!”

“Yes, Mag probably thought it was funnier that way.”

Even Melissa snickered a little at that one.

“But… you knew that…. I mean…,” was all that Rheus could stammer.

“You never actually bothered to ask me if I knew anything about the halosq,” Venarya emphatically insisted, still sporting the same smile.

“You two… I don’t know who’s worse,” Rheus said, defeat in his voice.

“Really, now? Does Mag give you leftover orgot pies to take home?”

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John was taken aback upon seeing the dinner table. He knew that Venarya probably had a lot of resources at her disposal, but what he saw was almost unbelievable.

On very short notice, it looked like Venarya had managed to assemble no less than two dozen assorted dishes. Each dish was immaculately arranged and laid out on one of several side tables. The main dinner table itself now sported several floral arrangements and lit candles along the center.

“This is incredible,” John commented. “You’ve certainly outdone yourself, Venarya.”

“I’d love to take the credit,” Venarya admitted, “but all the real work was all done by my catering staff.”

She pointedly looked at Rheus during the last part of that statement, who then suddenly decided that there might be something very interesting outside the nearest window.

“Still, this is quite the feast you’ve prepared. I hope you don’t take offense if we can’t finish all of this,” said John.

“Not at all,” smiled Venarya. “The catering staff’s usually more than happy to take home any leftovers.”

“Normally, I wouldn’t have such an abundance,” she continued, “But, considering your unfamiliarity with our cuisine, I wanted to make sure there would be at least a few dishes that pleased each of you. Also, Rheus?”

Caught off guard and unsure of what to expect, Rheus could only reply with, “Huh?”

“Please try to eat something other than orgot pies.”

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“That was a lovely meal, Venarya,” Melissa commented.

“Indeed. I’d go so far as to say that it was probably one of the best I’ve ever had,” Sophia added.

“I concur,” John appended. “And, if Penny and Em could talk, I’m sure they’d agree as well.”

Both dogs looked over upon hearing their names, and Penny let out a small bark, while canting her head.

“I’m pleased all of you enjoyed it,” Venarya said with a smile. “I’ll be sure to relay your praise to the cooks.”

“Now,” she added, “the night is still young. Would everyone care to retire to the patio for a drink, or perhaps a cup of tea?”

***

John had not seen the entirety of Venarya’s home as yet, and, upon exiting through a back door, found that it lay host to quite an impressive garden. A cornucopia of all manner of plants were impeccably arranged around a large central patio topped with a thatched roof.

Despite the hour, it was still fairly warm outside, leading to everyone opting for a glass of cold juice, rather than tea.

Upon tasting it, John noticed it was the same beverage that he had initially been offered when he first arrived.

Before he could get a chance to inquire further about the drink, Sophia had already started talking, “I feel like I should know what flavour this is, but I can’t place it for the life of me. It’s quite good, though. What fruit is it?”

“Not a fruit as such,” Venarya answered. “It’s actually made from the sap of the avera tree. Besides orgots, that’s the next thing that we have in abundance. There are more avera orchards than I can remember outside of town.”

“The name of your town is Iathera, correct?” asked Melissa.

“That’s right, though it was initially used as a moniker for the institute itself.”

“What’s the name of this world? It seems our inquisitive brother never bothered to find out.”

“Hey now,” John tried to defend himself, “it’s not like I was trained on what to do when a dragon in my closet yanks me away to another planet.”

Venarya smiled, “It all depends on who you ask. But, no one that you’re liable to run into will fault you if you refer to it as *Rilora*.”

“I take it that your… ah… race have a different name for it?” Sophia asked.

“*Dennash*. Though, that was more of a name for our homeland, as we very rarely ventured far away. To us, our home was our entire world,” she replied, a note of sadness in her tone. She had also deftly avoided any mention of her race’s name. The others sensed her reluctance to discuss the matter further, and Sophia changed the topic.

“John’s given us details on your recent problem. Do you really think that we’ll be of any help?”

“I believe so,” Venarya replied. “After John left this morning, I had all our available researchers meet to discuss the strange weapons Kierd possessed. If we can figure out a way to neutralize them, or even to duplicate the weapons, then Kierd has no advantage.”

“We arrived at a conclusion of absolutely nothing,” Rheus added, with some disgust in his voice. “The only place where such weapons are known to exist are on your world.”

“Hence,” Venarya said, cutting him off, “we’d really appreciate any expertise you can provide on the matter.”

“You realize, though, that we can’t force Ganz or anyone else to come here against their will? Any help that you receive will be on a strictly voluntary basis.” Melissa added.

“Understood, and I wouldn’t have it any other way,” Venarya assured her. “However, if Ganz is truly as good as John says, I believe that scientific curiosity alone will compel him to come here.”

“Also,” Venarya continued, “as a token of goodwill, I offer you unrestricted access to our records and archives buildings. In there you find one of the most complete repositories of knowledge on this planet.”

“That in itself should be enough to get Ganz to come,” John mused. “Hell, if he knew that right now, he’d probably just forget about his flight and start running here.”

Laughter in the air, the conversation then veered away into the realms of idle chatter.

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“Thank you for a lovely evening, Venarya,” Sophia said with a smile.

Venarya had accompanied the group back to Rheus’s workshop, and they were now in the process of saying their farewells.

“Indeed,” added Melissa, also sporting a slightly uncharacteristic smile. “The food and company were quite a few steps up from those events that I’m usually forced to endure for business.”

“I’m glad you enjoyed it,” said Venarya. “Whenever you wish to return, don’t hesitate to let John know. I’ll always be pleased to have you over.”

“We promise,” replied Sophia. “Also, thanks for these doggy bags.”

“No thanks necessary. It was my pleasure. Please make sure you visit again soon.” Venarya then hugged each of the two sisters in turn.

“I guess that’s it then,” John said, as he readied himself to activate the portal. “I can create a portal directly to the penthouse, if you’d like?”

“Sure,” Melissa replied. “It’ll cut our travel time down by a little bit.”

*That’s odd. She’s usually the overly cautious one*, thought John. *Maybe Venarya slipped some tranquilizers in her meal.*

“Okay. Here goes.”

The two sisters said nothing as they looked at the spectacle. John suddenly realized that they had not actually seen a portal being activated from this side.

As the image in the portal solidified, John said, “Ladies, I do believe this is your stop?”

“You’re not coming back too?” asked Sophia.

“I’m going to stay behind and go over what we’re going to tell Ganz tomorrow morning. Besides, you two have actual work tomorrow,” he grinned.

“Ha ha, I should dragoon you back into Pete’s position and see how you like it,” joked Sophia.

“Besides, I think our big sis here might have you hold me down while she looks for various heavy objects.”

“Don’t think I’ve forgotten about our inevitable talk, Johnny,” Melissa said. “But, tonight’s not the night for it. I’m headed straight to bed.”

“Again, it’s been a wonderful evening, Venarya,” Sophia said, walking toward the portal. “We’ll see you soon, hopefully.”

“We’ll see about returning the favour, once this situation’s with the Nebar Cluster is cleared up and behind us,” promised Melissa.

“I’ll have John hold you to that promise,” Venarya smiled.

With that, the two sisters stepped into the portal. Once on the other side, they turned around and looked at John, with Sophia giving a thumbs-up sign.

A sigh of relief emanating from his lips, John waved back at them, and then deactivated the portal.

“Rheus,” Venarya began, “I need you to find and compile anything that you think might be of use to Ganz tomorrow. I know that’s quite a task, so I’ll leave you to work in peace here. I’ll take John back to my place, so we can go over preparations for tomorrow. Now, don’t stay up all night working on this. I need you to be alert when Ganz gets here. So, even if you can’t find much, don’t worry about it and go get some rest. And, please try not to eat all those pies I gave you. I don’t want to run the risk of you being ill tomorrow.”

A look of guilt mixed with disappointment quickly flashed across Rheus’s face, as he replied, “Oh no, I’m full. Those were for… ah… breakfast… and lunch… tomorrow.”

Laughing, Venarya said, “Fine, I give up. Just don’t eat too many of them.”

***

Once John, Venarya and the dogs exited the courtyard of Rheus's building. As they walked, John became aware of the fact that Venarya's arm was interlocked with his own. It wasn't an altogether unpleasant feeling, so he let it be.

"So," Venarya began, "I do believe someone in our little group has a little crush on someone else."

Suddenly, and acutely, aware of the events of last night, as well as their interlocked arms, John could only stammer, "W…Wha?"

"I'll give you a one word hint, then. Rheus."

Completely taken off guard, and mildly bewildered, John could only stare at Venarya and repeat his previous phrase.

"You're not making this very fun. You're supposed to guess," she pouted, then smiled. "Here's a second hint: your sister."

Finally regaining some of his wits, and his speech, he blurted out, "Rheus has a crush on Sophia?"

Venarya laughed as she said, "Wrong sister."

John was slackjawed, and barely recovered enough composure to say, "I… He… Are you sure? Melissa? Why?!"

"Trust me," Venarya assured him. "I've got a nose for this sort of thing."

"But… Why?" blurted out John. "I mean, how would that even work?"

"The usual way, I'd imagine," Venarya said archly.

"I mean-"

"I know what you mean," Venarya giggled. "There's also one more slightly important thing you should know."

*What could be more significant than that?* In his current state, the worst thing that John could currently imagine was that he'd greatly misjudged her biology, and that *he* was now pregnant. *Nothing could top that.*

"Go on."

"I think Melissa might also like him."

*Topped.*

"I… Wow… Okay, now I know you're just messing with me."

"Scout's honour, as your world would say."

"Wow… If they do start going out, I think tradition, and every bad movie I've seen, dictates that I have a talk with Rheus about being nice to Melissa. However, it may be more apt to have that talk with Melissa instead."

"Very funny. Remember, despite her hard exterior, she's seems to be a very sweet person."

"Is this why you passed me that note after dinner, telling me to stay if possible?" asked John. Suddenly grinning, he could resist adding, "Also, for someone with psychic powers, you seem to rely an awful lot on notes."

"Very funny. You know full well the limitations of these so-called psychic powers. And to answer your first question, no. I figured you'd prefer spending the night in tropical weather, as opposed to a foot of snow."

"Well, that is true. Now, are you absolutely sure about Rheus and Melissa?"

Venarya laughed.

***

"I still can't believe it," John said, still on the topic of Rheus and Melissa despite the lengthy walk.

"Okay, as soon as we enter this house, no more talking about them," Venarya said.

Shaking his head, John said, "Fine, agreed. No more talking about the odd couple. By the way, would you like some help cleaning up?"

"That's thoughtful of you, but there's no need," Venarya replied as they entered the house.

John was amazed as he turned the corner. He was staring into the dining room, which was now in pristine condition, with no indication that it had been recently used.

*They couldn't have been gone more than forty five minutes, but the place was spotless.*

"You have the best maid service ever," John commented, as he walked back into the living room.

"Thank you," laughed Venarya, "I'll be sure to let them know."

Sitting down, John asked with a sincere face, "Do you really think Ganz will be able to help?"

Sitting down beside him, Venarya pondered the question for a few seconds, then replied, "I really don't know, but he's probably our best hope right now. I'm sure the old man will also have a few tricks up his sleeve, but I don't know if it will be enough to get us out of this in one piece."

“You think Kierd is that formidable of an opponent?”

“Not as such, but I do think that whoever is pulling their strings is. Yazril and I both agree that there’s no imaginable way Kierd could have developed such weapons, much less gathered enough resources to build such a fleet while in the middle of waging a war.”

“Who do you think could be helping them?”

“None of the usual suspects, that’s for sure. Hopefully, the NCI can figure something out.”

“NCI?”

“Sorry, that’s the Nebar Cluster Intelligence service.”

“Ah.”

“Anyways, that’s enough of this topic for now. No use worrying about anything until Krane and Rinard return in the morning.”

“Agreed. No use stressing ourselves out.”

“Indeed. What do you say to some stress relief?”

Caught off guard, and not quite sure what Venarya was leading up to, John eloquently stated, “… Eh?”

Not taking any notice of his bewilderment and speech pattern, Venarya simply stood up and said, “Follow me.”

Still not quite sure what she was hinting at, and acutely aware of the previous night’s activities, John mutely followed as Venarya led him to a wing of the manor that he had not yet visited.

# Chapter 8

Eventually, Rinard, Krane, Garh and Duba arrived at a rundown looking small stone jetty which haphazardly protruded into an unusually large nearby body of water. The jetty looked like it had abandoned and left to rot a long time ago.

The three of them watched as Duba let loose a howl and then pricked his ears up as he listened intently. Eventually he was answered by a number of distant howls coming from multiple directions.

The three of them had been through this enough times to know the routine by now. Making sure they were a little ways back from the shoreline, they watched as Duba nimbly scampered up a nearby tree.

They heard a faint click from up in the tree, followed by a mechanical grinding from somewhere under the water. Within a few seconds, a large raft broke through the surface of the water and came to rest next to the jetty.

"I hate this rickety thing. Why couldn't he have had a normal bridge instead?" moaned Rinard.

"Yes, and he could also supplement it with convenient signs pointing to his house."

"Point taken," Rinard said sheepishly.

Without further protest, the four of them boarded the raft, with Rinard staying as close to middle of it as he could. After making sure they were all aboard safely, Duba then let loose another howl. He was shortly answered by another howl from far across the water. The raft then abruptly started moving by itself.

Rinard remembered being amazed the first time he had been aboard the raft. No matter how much he examined it during the ride, he couldn't see any evidence of any sort of engine. He was just as quickly disappointed when he got closer to the other side and saw that the entire contraption was powered by means of an underwater rope and pulley system being operated by two of Duba's brethren.

As they neared the other side, Rinard couldn't help but comment, "Krane, even you must think this crazy moat is a bit over the top. I mean, who's even made it this far?"

Krane raised an eyebrow, "Besides Nuretz, you mean?"

"This moat didn't stop him though."

“Feel free to tell the old man how to remodel his swamp. Right after you make your report to him, that is,” Krane retorted with a slight smile.

“I really think you missed your calling by deciding not to be a comedian.”

The two wolves on the shore held the raft steady as they disembarked. Looking ahead, Rinard could barely make out a faint outline of a large building ahead.

“I leave now. You safe,” Duba said to them.

“Thanks for the escort, friend,” Krane replied.

“Yes, thanks for making sure nothing else ate us first,” said Rinard in a flat tone.

Duba grinned and replied, “Not worry, Rinard. Not have good recipe for you. Yet.”

With that, he walked back to the water’s edge and dived in. No trace of Duba broke the surface as he stayed submerged during his stealthy departure.

“We must be crazy, you know that?” was Rinard’s only comment as they walked to the large building.

Krane’s only response was laughter.

The mood, however, became more somber as they approached the large building. Both men knew that they would, more than likely, be intensely questioned regarding the morning’s events. Both of them envied Garh at the moment, and would have seriously considered trading positions with him.

The building itself was uninviting, which was probably an intentional feature. There were no windows to be seen anywhere. Not that there was much to be seen. The fog was so thick at this part of the swamp, it made it almost impossible to see one end of the building from another.

As they approached the door to the building, it opened before them. Outlined by the bright light emanating from the doorway was a tall figure. Getting closer, they could see that this was not one of Duba’s brethren, nor was it one of the few live-in employees. The fog revealed a sharply dressed older gentleman with piercing eyes and a look of no-nonsense.

“Gentlemen,” said the old man. “I gather that this isn’t a social call?”

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*The Fleet Admiral must have sent me here as some sort of joke*, was all that Krane could think about his current situation.

The bottom of his trousers were still a little wet as a result of standing too close to the stone jetty when the tethered raft had emerged from the bottom and broke through the surface. He wished the wolf creature had thought to warn him ahead of time, but wisely chose not to complain. Ignoring the trousers, Krane attempted to use all his senses to try to discern anything of use in the thick fog.

He almost jumped backward off the raft when he saw the two creatures on the other side pulling the rope. As they docked, Krane quickly disembarked and surreptitiously tried to avoid making eye contact with the two other creatures.

Wordlessly, the first creature began leading him again through the fog, and Krane wondered how much more of a trek he had ahead of him. Within a few minutes, however, he began to discern the outline of a large structure ahead of them. *I really hope this message I'm carrying doesn't say 'please eat this guy'.*

Pushing such nervous thoughts out of his mind, he noticed that the huge building had absolutely no visible windows of any kind. Not much point to it, he guessed, given the conditions outside.

Soon, the rough ground turned into a cobbled pathway leading up to the structure. The path ended at a large rectangular slab that must have been a door, but Krane saw no sign of hinges or a handle anywhere.

The creature then banged on the panel, followed by a long series of howls.

Nervousness returning, Krane wondered what manner of man or beast would answer from within the building.

*Maybe I should have turned down that promotion.*

Unsure of what to do, and not wanting to antagonize the strange creature, Krane silently waited for a few tense minutes. Suddenly, a loud crack sounded from the wall in front of him, causing him to jump back a step.

With a grinding noise, the rectangular piece of wall suddenly started sliding open, revealing a large figure outlined by the illuminated interior.

It was another wolf creature, except this one was even bigger and looked even meaner. The creature's head scanned the surrounding area. Once it was satisfied with whatever it saw, it leaned over and took a close look at Krane.

"Who you?" the creature growled.

Hoping for the best, Krane repeated his introduction, “I am Admiral Krane of the Nebar Clust-”

Like its compatriot, the creature cut him off, “Why you here?”

“I was sent here by Fleet Admiral Petrarca to deliver this message,” he explained, holding up the sealed envelope.

The creature then turned its head sideways to look at something inside the house. Unsure about what exactly was going on, Krane patiently waited.

Suddenly, the creature nodded its head then moved off to one side as a tall, well dressed older gentleman moved into his spot.

“Let me see the note, Admiral Krane,” the man asked.

Without hesitation, Krane handed the envelope over and waited as the old man opened and read it.

*He lives in a swamp. Why is he dressed as if he’s going to a grand ball?*

Krane wasn’t given much time to ponder the thought as the old man quickly finished reading the note, then placed it in his waistcoat pocket.

“Come inside. You must be tired,” the old man instructed.

*I really hope that note wasn’t instructions on how to best cook me.*

With no real choice in the matter, Krane simply responded, “Thank you, sir. I appreciate it.”

He followed the old man inside, as his initial guide turned and departed without a word. Once inside, the new creature then pressed a large button on the wall which started the door sliding shut again. Noticing a boot tray next to the strange door, he began to remove his shoes. If they didn’t plan on eating him, he might as well not antagonize his host by tracking mud through the house.

The old man laughed, “Such civility when faced with the unknown. That’s a rare trait.”

Krane was simultaneously taken aback and reassured, “Thank you again, sir. Though,” he added with a hopefully well calculated grin, “I was just making sure I remembered exactly where that button was if I needed to make an escape. This swamp does have a reputation, after all.”

The old man laughed again, “Don’t believe all the rumours, Admiral. My furred friends are all well fed on orgot meat. Their primary job is just to make sure no uninvited guests wander into this swamp.”

“I have to admit, that’s more than a little reassuring, sir.”

"No need for such formality. You may call me Smiljan," the old man replied as they entered a large sitting room. Gesturing to a nearby armchair, Smiljan took a seat opposite to it.

As Krane sat down, the old man started talking again, "Now, Krane – you don't mind if I call you that, do you? I find titles cumbersome."

Chuckling, Krane replied, "Not at all, Smiljan. I'm sure I won't forget I'm an admiral if you don't mention it for the next little while."

"An evolved sense of humour. Good. Now, chances are that you're probably bewildered at everything that's currently happening?"

"That's certainly one way to put it."

"Let's just say that this is a job interview," replied Smiljan, as he momentarily looked past Krane and said, "Ah, thank you Alisa. You can place them here on the table."

Turning slightly, he was surprised to see, not a wolf creature, but a smartly dressed younger woman holding a silver tray. Smiling at Krane, she placed the tray on the coffee table, then departed.

Gesturing to the table, Smiljan said, "Have a cup of tea, Krane. And make sure you try the biscuits. Those are Alisa's specialty."

Even more confused, Krane reached for the tea and grabbed a biscuit. Not expecting someone living in a swamp to be the best food critic, he was pleasantly surprised to find that it was incredibly delicious.

"You're right," was all Krane could say between bites. "These are amazing."

"I'll have her pack some to take with you when you leave."

*Leave. Good connotations right there.*

"Now, you had mentioned that this was a job interview?"

"That is correct."

Confused as to why the Fleet Admiral would want him to change careers, quite possibly as some sort of a live-in caretaker in the swamp, he replied, "Would it offend you to know that I'm happy with my posting in the Nebar Cluster?"

The old man smiled, "Would it surprise you to know that you'll still be employed by the Nebar Cluster?"

Caught off guard, his mind quickly began putting two and two together. The old man's cryptic statement could only mean one thing. It seemed that the enigmatic Smiljan was the

rumoured owner of the Nebar Cluster. Krane was currently having tea with his equivalent of a king.

He had never given much thought to the fact that the company did have an owner, especially one as eccentric as this. In retrospect, he realized that Smiljan probably preferred it this way.

He then processed the fact that Smiljan had said that this was a job interview. There were only two jobs ranked above his current position, and he was in no way qualified to be the Director.

"Fleet Admiral Petrarca is retiring?" he half stated to Smiljan.

The old man smiled in delight, "They told me you were a smart one. I'm glad they didn't waste my time. But, to answer your question, he's not retiring as such. He is being reassigned to another location, though."

*The Nebar Cluster had branch offices?*

"In response to that question you're silently thinking about," the old man continued, "yes, there are other… organizations under my control. Suffice to say, Petrarca's skills are needed elsewhere."

"I'm honoured that you're considering me, especially seeing as how I've the least seniority out of all the admirals."

"Bah with seniority," Smiljan said with a wave of his hand. "I reward talent. The other admirals are quite good at what they do, but they're not the correct candidates for the job."

"If I may ask, why?"

"You may," Smiljan replied. "Quite simply, and to be blunt, I need a sneaky bastard to handle things. I need someone who can think fast, and come up with impressive solutions to potentially difficult future problems."

"Thank you," Krane replied, still totally unsure of what to think, but taking the statement in the spirit that it was meant.

"In approximately one year," Smiljan continued, "Petrarca will leave. You will receive intense training from him during that time period. Pay close attention to what he teaches you."

*I guess that means I've got the job.*

"I will, Smiljan."

"Now, no doubt you still have more than a few questions?"

"Yes, though I sense a 'but' there."

“Correct,” grinned Smiljan. “Unfortunately, I need to complete work on something that you need to take back to the Cluster. Once you return, Petrarca will be able to answer almost any questions that you still have. Now, let’s get you some dinner, and find you a comfortable room for the night.”

# Chapter 9

General Dendrav paced the deck of his command ship.

Frustrated, he wondered how Eldnan could sleep at a time like this. The way Dendrav saw it, they were in an incredibly precarious situation.

Currently engaged in blockading the Nebar Cluster, they were in an effective stalemate. They had no way to actually attack the Cluster itself, as any attempt to bring a ship anywhere close to land would simply result in the Cluster defenses handing out free trips to the bottom of the ocean. Their supplies of the exotic weapons they had used to force the Cluster to retreat were also dangerously low, and Dendrav hoped they would be enough to cover their eventual retreat.

And then, of course, there was the issue of those ships that had managed to break through the blockade, and were now presumably in Iathera. Goodness only knew what types of reinforcements they could be returning with. Eldnan's declaration that they would be long gone before the Cluster could manage any sort of counterattack was scant reassurance.

Nevertheless, Eldnan had retired to his cabin, leaving orders to simply maintain the blockade until further notice.

*What was he waiting for? Was this all just some sort of diversion? Diversion from what, though? It wasn't like the Cluster had a dog in the race, with regards to the war back home.*

Even if he did figure out why they were attacking the Cluster, there was still Eldnan himself. The man was an enigma, to put it mildly. Dendrav wasn't sure about his involvement with Kierd, other than the fact that his associates were the ones apparently supplying them with ships. And, other than/aside from the fact that Athash had told Dendrav to follow any orders issued by Eldnan, he had no idea who the man was, much less what his agenda or eventual goals were.

Eldnan didn't even seem to care about his own well being. His participation in the suicide attack on the Cluster fleet was nothing short of… well… suicidal. Despite Dendrav's loyalty to Athash, he would have been seriously considering a career change if had he been ordered to participate in such a plan.

Still frustrated, General Dendrav continued to pace the deck.

"You're going to wear out the deck if you keep that up," he heard a voice off to one side.

*Great. Why did he have to wake up, and what did he want now?*

"I trust you slept well?" Dendrav asked with a hint of sarcasm.

“Like a baby,” Eldnan grinned. “You should try it sometime.”

“I’m assuming that you didn’t come out here just to annoy me?”

“Relax, General. You’ll be back home soon enough.”

“So you claim.”

“Worried about your mortality, I take it? If it helps, remember this: if you die, there’s a good possibility that I will lose my life, as well.”

“That’s scant comfort, coming from someone who just headed a suicide attack.”

“Smoke and mirrors,” Eldnan waved his hand dismissively. “Believe me when I say that the only risk to myself was hypothermia, if you hadn’t arrived in time.”

“Remind me not to do any more good deeds, then.”

“Patience, General. By this time tomorrow, we’ll be on our way back.”

“Leading an angry Cluster fleet behind us.”

“I don’t think so. In any case, it’s time to put the next phase of our plan into action.”

“And what, pray tell, is that?” Dendrav asked, still annoyed, but curiosity getting the better of him.

“Instruct your first officer to send this signal to the fleet,” Eldnan instructed, handing over a piece of paper.

Looking at the paper, Dendrav frowned, “What is this? This is just nonsense.”

“Nevertheless, please send it.”

With an exasperated sigh, Dendrav called for his first officer and instructed him to relay the nonsensical message.

Both Eldnan and Dendrav watched as the first officer shuttered and unshuttered the signal lanterns. Shortly afterwards, the officer called down, “It’s done, sir.”

Looking at Endnan, Dendrav dared to ask, “Okay, now what?”

“Watch.”

Whatever Eldnan was up to, he was sure that it would just add to the recently increasing number of grey hairs on his head. Straining to see anything in the low light, Dendrav peered out at his fleet, only to see two ships breaking away and heading toward the Cluster at high speed.

With a resigned sigh, he asked, “Are they about to do what I think they’re about to do?”

“Yes.”

“Let me guess: your ships and crew?”

“Correct,” Eldnan replied cheerfully.

Without protest, Dendrav watched as the two ships were shortly blown apart by the Cluster defense platforms.

“Trying for more paranoia?”

“Something like that,” replied Eldnan calmly.

“I still can’t make heads or tails of this crazy plan of yours.”

“As it should be. That means that the Nebar Cluster is even more in the dark than you are.”

“Whatever you’re up to, you’re either a genius or clinically insane. Possibly both.”

“Why, thank you, General.”

“That wasn’t a compliment,” Dendrav replied, a small note of exasperation in his voice. Silently, he wondered how Athash had managed to get saddled with this madman.

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“I believe you’re familiar with my associate Lazano,” the stranger said.

“After a fashion. Now, I’m in the middle of conducting a war, and I’m a little short on time. Am I going to have to go through a whole song and dance just to get your name, as well?” Athash replied, remembering his first conversation with Lazano.

The stranger had shown up outside Athash’s staging area in Narad, and had used Lazano’s password to gain a quick audience.

“Not at all, my Lord General,” the stranger replied calmly. “My name is Eldnan.”

“Why are you here instead of Lazano? Did he get demoted or something?”

“Lazano’s busy with… other duties at the moment. However, I do believe he briefed you on the next phase of our plan?”

“You mean the crazy suicide attack on the Nebar Cluster? Yes. Yes, he did indeed mention it,” Athash replied dryly.

“Not so crazy, my Lord General. Lazano must have stressed your importance to us. Believe me when I say that all my associates would prefer for your campaign to continue unimpeded.”

“Including impedances such as participating in crazy suicide attacks?”

“As I said, my Lord General, it’s not so crazy,” Eldnan assured him. “I, myself, will be leading the refugee fleet. So, believe me when I say that this will work.”

“And how exactly are you planning on convincing a group of terrified refugees to follow you, much less assemble a fleet?”

“Leave that to me.”

Athash had heard that line before from Lazano. Prompting for more information usually led to nowhere fast.

“Fine. Just remember to keep up your end of the deal.”

“Have we disappointed you yet, my Lord General?” Eldnan smiled.

“There’s always room for unpleasant surprises.”

“I guess it’s down to trust at this point then,” Eldnan countered, handing over a large envelope. “Here are the details for the attack. Study them, and pick a suitable commander to lead your fleet. Lazano will be back in six days to follow up with you.”

# Chapter 10

John let out a low whistle of amazement as he entered their destination. The door led to a large geodesic glass dome. Looking out, he could see the sky and the nearby scenery. John almost thought he had wandered into a treeless greenhouse. That was, until he looked down and noticed the in-ground swimming pool illuminated by an array of decorative lighting.

"Care for a swim before bed?" asked Venarya.

Never one to turn down an invitation to a pool, John replied, "Sure."

Looking for a locker or closet of some sort, he asked, "Where's the change room, and where do you keep the swimwear?"

However, upon turning back around, he noticed that Venarya was in the process of undoing her dress.

"Now, I'm pretty sure you've been skinny dipping before?" Venarya asked, a wicked glint in her eye.

"Well, yes, as you probably well know. But not really inside an upside down fishbowl for anyone passing by to gawk at."

With an initial mocking sigh, Venarya then laughed as she said, "How much of an exhibitionist do you think I am? Does it help if I tell you that it's the equivalent of your world's one way glass?"

"Ah," John said, a little shamefaced. "Sorry."

"Don't be," Venarya said, still laughing and already half undressed. "Just get in."

As he finished taking off his shirt, and started to undo his pants, something occurred to him, "Hold on. I thought one way glass only works if we're the ones in the darkened area?"

"Well, I guess it's better one way glass than what you have," Venarya said blandly, finally undressed and in the process of diving into the pool.

Her head emerged from the water, with her dark green hair glistening even more than usual as she said, "Now, stop dawdling and get in."

Throwing care to the wind, John finished undressing and dived straight in. Given the fact that it was night, the water was nowhere as cold as he had imagined it would be.

In fact, the water almost felt heated. Looking around, he realized that he was on the right track when he spied a small underwater grill covering a glinting piece of tasrac.

Noticing his curiosity, Venarya said, “I would stay away from that area. The water can get a little hot near there at night.”

“Yep, I figured as much,” John replied.

The water was soothing, and just the thing he needed to unwind after spending an evening with a certain sister.

“Tell me something, Venarya. How in the world did you end up here? You seem like the last person who would choose to herd a bunch of crazy professors for a living, much less for five hundred years."

*Though, for some reason, her antics did remind him of some of the parties he had attended at college. Waking up in a strange bed with no clear memory of the previous night? Check.*

“Do you really want to hear an old lady tell stories?” she laughed. Sidling up next to John, she grinned wickedly as she asked, “Tell me, is that what two people usually do on your world when they’re in this situation?”

“I think you’re avoiding the question.”

“And I think you’re avoiding mine,” she said, her arms encircling John. “So, tell me, what can two people skinny dipping in a pool do for fun?”

Mildly bemused, John said, “Not that I’m complaining, but I really thought we were done with… this. Unless you’re trying to pump me for information again?”

She pressed her lips to John’s for a moment, then said, “No tricks this time. I promise.”

“Again, not that I’m complaining, but why?”

“Why does Rheus apparently like Melissa, and vice versa?” she countered. “Besides, are you trying to say you don’t like me?” she added, trying to conceal a smile behind her pouting lips.

“Are you trying to say you like me?” John asked, his voice sounding more tentative than he intended.

“Let’s say I do. Now, assuming that’s true, I guess the real question would be: *is the feeling mutual*?”

“As my friend Ganz would say, I believe that’s theoretically possible.”

She removed her right arm from around him long enough to deliver a playful punch to his shoulder. “You deserved that.”

“Fair enough,” John laughed. “Now, I know I’ll probably kick myself later for mentioning this, but aren’t we forgetting about a certain someone that you yourself had mentioned to me?”

“Amelia?”

“Amelia,” John echoed, a hint of hesitation in his voice.

“I’ll make you a deal. If that train ever pulls into the station again, I’ll let you get off at the next stop with no hurt feelings either way. But, in the meantime,” she trailed off as she kissed him again.

*She was definitely making a strong case for her argument.*

“So, John, tell me,” she continued, holding him close and sporting that libertine smile that got him in trouble last night. “What do you think we can do for fun right now?”

John really hoped she wasn’t joking about that one way glass.

# Chapter 11

"How long?" Admiral Fescor asked, rubbing the sleep from his eyes as he walked down the hallway leading to the tower.

"It happened just over ten minutes ago, sir," his aide replied. "Platform gunners are reporting no survivors in the water."

"Unless they're under the water," Fescor commented. "Have all reserve diving bells deployed, and instruct them to conduct a thorough search of the incident area. No heroics, though. Have them stay clear of any enemy ships."

"Affirmative, sir," his aide replied.

"Actually, you know what," Fescor said, rethinking the plan, "Given the total lack of predictability that Kierd seems to be adhering to, there's a possibility that those two ships might just be a distraction. Have the diving bells search the entire area around the islands."

"Good thought, sir."

Opening the door to the tower lift, they then entered and Fescor pressed a large red button. With a loud hum, the lift then began slowly ascending.

"Sometimes, Gadil, I think it'd be faster to walk up the stairs, rather than bother using this thing," remarked Fescor.

"It is a fair bit easier on the legs, sir," Gadil replied.

"True enough," laughed Fescor. "Though, whoever designed this probably never thought that we'd actually be having to use this tower to co-ordinate against an enemy siege. I just hope the senior officers aren't too mad that we temporarily appropriated their favourite makeout location."

"I… have absolutely no knowledge of that, sir."

Fescor laughed again, "One thing's for sure, though. When this is all over, I'm having them install something a little faster in here."

Eventually, the lift arrived at its destination, and a sharp click announced that it was secured and safe to exit.

"Finally," Fescor commented as he opened the door and emerged into the observation deck of the tower. He walked over to where Admiral Skagant was standing, as Gadil simultaneously hurried over to the communications area to relay the new orders.

Despite the late hour, the large area was swarming with personnel. Dozens of scouts armed with spyglasses and various other manner of devices maintained a constant vigil over the area, with many other support workers going about their business.

Skagant pivoted around before Fescor could even utter a greeting.

"Admiral," Skagant buzzed in a formal tone.

*He must have hidden eyes in the back of his head*, thought Fescor. *Actually, for all I know, he probably does.*

"Admiral," Fescor replied, returning the greeting. "I just got the news. Any updates on the situation?"

"None," replied the creature. Fescor had no idea how or why Skagant had ended up in that position, but the lone Syrilo in the Nebar Cluster Armed Forces had proven his worth many times over. "However, we did receive a darklight signal from Admiral Ancor's fleet. It appears that the Director and Fleet Admiral have arrived safely in Iathera. Their orders are to stand by and maintain a defensive stance."

"Not like we've got much choice," commented Fescor.

"That is true."

"Now, about those two ships?"

"They obviously want us to think that they've deployed saboteurs of some sort. Or, perhaps, they actually have done that, and they don't care if we realize it."

"Either way, we need to respond. I've deployed those diving bells that I was holding in reserve. I told them not to take any chances, though."

"A wise precaution. I've also taken the liberty of deploying more lights for your crews to work by."

Indeed, as Fescor looked out, he saw clusters of small, but powerful, lights being catapulted into the ocean. As he watched them sink to the ocean floor, he thought that they made the whole scene look almost festive.

"With some luck, maybe Kierd will keep sending more ships until we end up sinking all of them," laughed Fescor.

"Doubtful," Skagant replied, as he pored over a report that had been passed to him.

*How'd I end up paired with the one Syrilo with no sense of humour?*

“Another darklight message from Ancor,” Skagant announced. “It looks like the enemy fleet has received no resupply convoys, but his fleet did stumble across a lucky find. At the site of the previous battle, they discovered what they believe to be three of Kierd’s strange munitions floating in the water. Unexploded, of course.”

*Obviously.*

“Go on.”

“They’re currently transporting the weapons to one of the fishing docks north of the city,” continued Skagant. “They’re hoping someone at the Iatheran institute can shed some light on the explosives. However, they’re worried about them inadvertently exploding, so they’re avoiding bringing them inside the city itself.”

“Well now, that’s probably some of the best news we’ve heard all day,” remarked Fescor. “If we can figure out how to make these weapons ourselves, then we can chase Kierd back into the trees.”

“Even if we do manage to duplicate them, it may be some time before they’re ready for combat,” said Skagant. “In the event of the Director and Fleet Admiral failing to bring help, we still need to formulate a plan that makes use of our current resources.”

“I think our best plan may just involve waiting them out. Once our reserve ships are out of drydock, weapons or no weapons, they’re dead and they probably know it. Chances are they’ll be gone long before.”

“Perhaps,” the Syrilo replied. “However, they do have a goal, even if we don’t know it. We need to figure out what that is, and stop them from achieving it.”

“That much I agree with. They certainly didn’t dedicate this much time and resources to a lark.”

***

“Have them flush their drinking water reservoirs, and refill them with seawater. Once that’s done, have each of them place one of those weapons in the tank,” instructed Admiral Ancor. “I have no idea if seawater was the only thing that was keeping these things from exploding, so let’s not take any chances. Also, make sure they lash them properly so they don’t strike the sides of the tanks during transport.”

“Affirmative, sir,” replied Lieutenant Johana, as she left to signal the change in orders.

They had just lucked out and hit the proverbial jackpot, considering the circumstances. In their quest to stop the Kierdan fleet from being resupplied, they had passed over the site of the first battle. *Massacre, more like it*, thought Ancor. Regardless of his feelings about the initial encounter, he was elated upon finding out that they had spotted three of Kierd's strange weapons floating in the water.

The wooden casings looked a bit dented, so it was entirely possibly that these had been fired at one or more of his ships, but had failed to explode on impact.

When one of the scout ships had discovered the weapons in the water, Ancor had inherited the dubious task of figuring out how to get the weapons back to Iathera for study. There was so much to consider. It was quite possible that Kierd had intentionally left these behind as boobytraps. He also wasn't sure how volatile they were. If even one exploded, he would end up losing the ship transporting it, along with the two other munitions.

In the end, he had ended up evacuating three of his smaller ships, placing one of the weapons aboard each of them. Each ship would then be tethered to one of the larger ships, while they took a circuitous route to avoid encountering any potential Kierd patrols around the Cluster. This way, should any of the weapons explode, he would only lose a ship, and hopefully still retain at least one intact weapon by the time they arrived at their destination.

"Message sent and acknowledged, sir," Johana called down.

"Thank you, Lieutenant," Ancor said, "Also, signal the fleet and ask if they've managed to find any more weapons, intact or otherwise, floating around the area."

"Yes, sir."

The new addition to his crew appeared to be working out well. She appeared to be highly competent, and eager to please. She had been temporarily filling in for Yalic, who had been overseeing the salvage operation, and had done an admirable job thus far.

Ancor then moved to the bow of the Cat's Eye, arms on the railing, as he waited for the various ship crews to complete their tasks. As he stared at the Dark Sister, he hoped he had considered all probabilities. He knew that this could very well be a Kierdan trap, considering their past track record.

And, if it was a trap, now would be the perfect time to spring it. Over half of the ship crews were now occupied in making the captured weapons ready for transport. All it would take now was one fast raiding fleet to make his admiralty career the shortest one in Cluster history.

“Sir,” Johana called down to him.

*I knew this was too good to be true.*

“Yes, Lieutenant?”

“Incoming ship, sir. Too dark to get a visual confirmation yet, but they’ve used the *Black Sand’s* recognition signal. They report mission accomplished.”

Ancor relaxed slightly. That meant that they had managed to get a darklight signal to the Cluster, and done so without being spotted.

It was also highly doubtful that this was a ruse, but, given the situation, he couldn’t afford to be lax in security. Trager had demonstrated the consequences of that line of thinking when he ended up losing almost a third of their fleet.

Looking for the three closest and fastest ships, he was just about to order Johana to signal them to intercept and verify the identity of the incoming vessel, but Johana beat him to the punch, “Identity confirmed, sir. It’s the *Black Sand*.”

“Thank you, Lieutenant.”

Ancor took a deep breath. Paranoia could be as dangerous as Trager’s remiss attitude, he realized.

Looking out at the salvage operation, he said, “Signal the fleet. I need this wrapped up within twenty minutes. If this isn’t some kind of Kierdan trap or trick, then I don’t want them finding out that we were ever here.”

“Yes, sir.”

“Hopefully, we can break north and sneak around the blockade without any interference while they’re still asleep.”

# Chapter 12

Rinard was eating as if it was the last meal he would ever consume.

They had just finished giving an extensive report of the incident to the old man, who had then retired to parts unknown, but leaving them with a fully stocked dinner table.

"You may want to go easy on the food," commented Krane. "We've got another nice, long and early hike ahead of us in the morning."

"Assuming that Smiljan's not off deciding exactly how he's going to have me horribly executed."

"I doubt it. He wouldn't waste all this food on you, if that was the case."

"Ha ha," Rinard said dryly, between mouthfuls.

"Still, you may want to cut back a little. You're eating almost as much as Garh over there."

Garh, who had been sitting at the other end of the table with a mountain of food on his plate, looked up for a moment upon hearing his name before returning his attention to dinner.

"Hey, can I help it if Alisa's the best cook I've ever known?"

"Don't you have your own personal chef on board the *Midnight Dawn*?"

"Yes, and imagine how much better the food would be if I could get Alisa posted there."

"I see you really do want the old man to kill you."

***

All three heads turned to look at the door as they heard it open.

"Gentlemen," Smiljan said, as he walked in, "I trust that dinner was to your liking?"

"As good as I remember," remarked Krane. "My regards to Alisa."

"Even better than I remember it," Rinard commented. "Alisa really outdid herself, considering the short notice."

Garh grunted.

"Pleased to hear it, though you can let her know in person in a minute," replied Smiljan. "She'll be along shortly to show you to your rooms, and I'm sure she wouldn't mind the compliments."

"We definitely will," said Krane.

"Any news," Rinard began tentatively, "on the Cluster situation?"

Smiljan chuckled, “Relax, my friend. Let me first say that I don’t hold you responsible, since I’m pretty sure that that’s what you’ve been thinking this entire time. There’s not much you could have done, in view of the circumstances.”

His smile faded as he continued, “Now, as to the topic of Kierd’s objective, I’m still not sure precisely what they could be after. However, I’ve made arrangements to hopefully get rid of them tomorrow. With any luck, that should stop them from achieving whatever goal they have in mind.”

Both Rinard and Krane were wide eyed, as they weren’t expecting it to be this easy.

Rinard was the first to speak, “First, let me say thanks. Secondly, how?!”

“I’m afraid you’ll have to find out tomorrow before you leave. I’ve still got a few final preparations to make, and you need to get some rest.”

“Not a problem, Smiljan,” Krane replied. “We’ll get the details when you’re ready.”

“Garh,” the old man continued, “before you head to bed, I could use your strength for a short while, if you don’t mind. I’ve a few heavy items in my lab to move, and my muscles are not what they once were, I’m afraid.”

Garh grunted what seemed to be an affirmation, as he then got up and walked over to Smiljan.

“Thank you, Garh,” the old man finished, “I’ll see you two gentlemen in the morning.”

With that, Smiljan left with Garh trailing behind.

After the door closed, Krane turned to Rinard and said, “Okay, here’s some advice. The next time your mysterious boss magically manages to fix all our problems, don’t try to antagonize him by giving him the third degree.”

“Hey!” Rinard said defensively, “I was just caught off guard, that’s all. I mean, were you expecting that answer from him?”

“No, but I *did* manage to keep my mouth shut.”

“Fine. Fine. I’ll take your advice, but I can’t help it if I’ve been on edge all day.”

The conversation was cut short as the door opened again.

“Alisa, how’ve you been?” Krane smiled in greeting.

“Hi, Alisa,” Rinard said, “Thanks for whipping up that meal in short order. It was delicious.”

“Hi, boys,” Alisa smiled. “It was my pleasure. Seeing how we don’t get a lot of visitors passing through, it’s always nice to entertain guests.”

“If they only knew about your cooking, then you’d probably have a mob banging away at the door, haunted swamp or not,” joked Krane.

“Maybe that’s why Smiljan decided to keep me here, then,” laughed Alisa. “Now, follow me and I’ll show you to your rooms. You’ve got a very early wakeup call, I understand.”

Rinard groaned.

***

Smiljan led Garh down a long hallway with a locked door at the end. Pulling a key from his pocket, Smiljan then inserted it into an opening next to the door. After waiting a few seconds, he removed the key and opened the door. Both of them then walked into what appeared to be another sitting area.

As the door closed behind them, the old man said, “There we go. I’ve had this room prepared as well, Garh. No sound can escape.”

Looking at the old man, Garh chuckled, then replied in a deep, growling, but cultured tone, “Paranoid in the center of your own demesne, old friend?”

“Considering what’s happened, I’d say I’m somewhat justified,” Smiljan replied, taking a seat. “Any news from your people?”

Garh moved over to a seat opposite from Smiljan and sat down. “I’ve heard nothing. My operatives are as surprised as yours at this turn of events. As of this morning, I’ve told most of them to put all other tasks on hold, and to focus on this current crisis.”

“Though, I have to admit,” Garh continued, “I’m not expecting to receive any usable intelligence before this is all over. That is, if I’m correctly assuming that you did what I suspect you did?”

“Indeed, old friend,” Smiljan responded with a sigh, “you’re quite correct.”

“That must have been a difficult card to play?”

“It was. I hated tipping my hand this early, but it would be a far worse thing to risk having any of my secrets plundered from the Cluster.”

“Particularly that one secret that I’m thinking about.”

“I see Yazril’s been keeping you updated.”

“She has, though I suspect that she may not realize the full consequences of that particular project.”

“You’ve not enlightened her?”

“Not this time,” Garh said with a sad shake of his head. “I would prefer not to keep her in the dark, but something like that would only cause her to unnecessarily worry. In any event, I’ve made arrangements to get word to her in case anything happens to us.”

“Good thinking.”

“I must say I’m surprised that you wanted to keep knowledge of it away from Rinard and Krane.”

“To be perfectly truthful, I’m not even sure if the project has any sort of viability,” Smiljan admitted. “It’s still in the very preliminary stages of development, and it’ll be years before it’s even ready for testing. Besides, while Rinard and Krane are trustworthy, they’re also victims of my legacy.”

“Company men?”

“To the bone. I may have been a little narrow minded when I devised the Nebar Cluster,” Smiljan sighed. “If Krane and Rinard get wind of this research, they’ll inevitably find an excuse to put it to use. Any edge on the battlefield will be sought after by everyone, despite the costs.”

“Believe me when I say that nature is violent, Smiljan. Like it or not, we’re just an extension of it.”

“Don’t I know it, old friend,” Smiljan said. “In any case, there’s quite a bit of other technology I’ve got hidden away there that I prefer Kierd not get their hands on.”

Smiljan removed a piece of paper from the table next to him and continued, “To that end, can you find out if there’s been any discreet inquiries regarding anything similar to these?”

Garh perused the document, “I’m guessing that these are the items that only your research team knows about?”

“Correct.”

“I must say, a lot of these certainly look innocuous enough to not warrant a shelf in your personal lab.”

“Which is a good thing,” laughed Smiljan. “If you can’t figure them out, I’m hoping no one else will.”

“Thanks. I’ll get my people to work on these as soon as I return,” Garh replied, handing back the document.

“Much appreciated, old friend.”

***

“Glad to see they didn’t eat you, Krane,” laughed Fleet Admiral Petrarca, as Krane entered his office.

“A little advance warning would have been appreciated, sir,” Krane commented.

“And spoil the surprise?” Petrarca responded, still laughing. “In truth though, it wasn’t my idea. The old man wanted you in the dark until the last second.”

“Wanted to test my mettle?”

“Or maybe he got bored and wanted to have some fun. The swamp’s not a very exciting place, you know?”

“Ha ha… sir.”

“Relax, Krane. We’re alone here. And, in any case, I won’t be your superior for much longer.”

“I don’t suppose you can explain that part?”

“Er… I leave… you take over?”

“Funny. Where are you going? Smiljan mentioned a ‘branch office’ of sorts?”

“Something like that. Unfortunately for you, one of the reasons that I’ve been selected is my ability to keep my mouth shut when I need to. For the time being, you’ll have to make do with what knowledge you currently have.”

“Maybe the old man might fill you in later,” Petrarca continued. “But, that’s not my call.”

“Fair enough, I suppose.”

“I mean, you can go back in the swamp and ask him, if you want?” laughed Petrarca.

“I’ll pass, thanks,” responded Krane flatly.

“If it helps, I was terrified the first time one of those creatures dropped in on me from above. Plus, who ever heard of dogs climbing trees?” Petrarca laughed again, “Unnatural, I tell you.”

“I have to say that an aversion to their tree climbing abilities wasn’t high on my list of priorities at the time.”

“You need to learn to take these things in stride, Krane,” Petrarca said, clapping him on the back. “You’re almost as bad as that new guy they’re grooming for the role of director.”

“Director Daressi’s leaving as well?”

“It’s not public knowledge as yet, but yes. She’ll be leaving two years after I do. Her replacement doesn’t even know that he’s been selected.”

“I see.”

“Tell you what? If you impress me, I’ll let you take that new guy in to see Smiljan. Totally up to you if you want to warn him ahead of time.”

Krane couldn’t help but laugh at that.

“Now, did Smiljan send any correspondence for me?”

“Just these letters,” Krane replied, as he handed over them over. “There was also a delivery to a lab that I didn’t even know existed until half an hour ago. Smiljan had me deliver it personally.”

“Ah, yes. Smiljan’s own personal research department. I’m not sure what goes on there, but the old man’s made it very clear what’ll happen to anyone who goes prying, so don’t.”

“Wasn’t thinking about it… too seriously, at least.”

Petrarca’s face took on a stone cold sober expression, as he said, “I mean it, really. Even the workers down there don’t report through the normal channels. All kidding aside, don’t even think of going near there without the old man’s blessing.”

“In that case, what lab?”

“Good. I’d hate to have to go through all those dossiers again to find a replacement for you,” Petrarca said. “Now, head to Safro and grab some sun for a few days. You’ve earned it. We’ll start your training in earnest once you get back.”

# Chapter 13

"The technicians say that the new batch of ships look to be on schedule," Rush reported. "They should have them in the water in another fourteen days."

"And the troops?" Athash asked.

"We've started funnelling them in using the ships we have, as well as sending a few overland. We'll have them all here within twelve days."

"And if one of the other nations catches wind of this?" General Pavic asked.

"Nearly irrelevant at this point in time, but we've still taken precautions," Rush assured him.

"Besides, they're going to be keeping their eyes on Ling's Passage," Athash said. "We'll make enough noise there to keep them occupied, while you land the ships and strike from the north."

"Move fast and force a stream of Rakavian refugees into Sindjal. Don't bother stationing any troops to maintain sieges. Just burn everything in your path. They'll be too busy dealing with the aftermath to be able to come after you, once they realize you're just passing through."

"That's a bit harsh, isn't it?" Pavic commented.

"We've no choice. We'll lose too many troops and time if we try to capture their cities. Besides, Rakavi is relatively insignificant. We can fully pacify them after dealing with Sindjal."

"Understood."

"Once Sindjal's busy looking at you and trying to deal with the influx of refugees, we'll use some of our new toys to clear Ling's Passage. They'll split their forces to try to intercept us, and we'll pin down half their troops at their end of the corridor. That's when you start using your new toys to bulldoze your way to their capital, Nesseris. If they try to fall back from my position to reinforce it, we'll slaughter them as they try to retreat to their doomed capital city."

"Sounds simple enough so far, though we're hanging a lot on the hope that these new weapons of yours work," Pavic commented.

"We'll find out soon enough how good they are when that fleet returns."

"If everything goes to plan up to that point, how do you plan on capturing the capital?"

"We're not going to."

"No?" asked a surprised Pavic.

“No,” repeated Athash. “While Sindjal may field the bulk of the forces that we’ll be facing, if Jagada, Deso, and Malbis get their act together in time, they’ll have enough troops to come at us from behind while we’re sieging Nesseris. For this plan to work, we have to move fast and strike hard.”

“So, we put it to the torch?”

“Yes,” replied Athash, a touch of regret in his voice. “Once you get within sight of the capital, we’ll take care of the troops on our end, and move to reinforce you and cover your flanks. Once Nesseris is no longer an issue, we can move to deal with the remaining three nations before they can coordinate a proper counterattack.”

“Well, I can’t fault the plan,” admitted Pavic, “though the results do leave something to be desired.”

“Well, one bittersweet fact is that the need to rebuild will allow us to more easily establish control over the entire continent. Plus, whoever’s remaining after all this will be more occupied with trying to survive, than trying to rebel against us,” Rush supplied.

“I’ll follow you to the end, Athash. But, I fear that you’re going to end up being the king of nothing but ashes when this is all done,” Pavic said.

“That part may be true, old friend. We may grow old and die before we’ve managed to rebuild. However, we would have accomplished what every one of these kings has wanted to do, but was never able to achieve. If we succeed, we’ll have managed to put this once great nation back together again.”

***

“Yes, I met with him,” Athash said. “This strike against the Nebar Cluster sounds even more crazy now that I’ve gotten all the details from Eldnan.”

“Rest assured, it’s all been painstakingly examined for flaws,” Lazano replied calmly.

“Easy enough for you to say. You’re only putting one of your men at risk.”

“That one man, my Lord General,” Lazano stated, “is more valuable to our organization than your entire army.”

“Plus,” Lazano continued, “that’s not entirely true anymore. You’ll be joined by a small number of ships crewed by our own personnel.”

“Watchdogs?”

“Not as such,” said Lazano. “More like moths.”

“What?”

“Don’t worry about it.”

“Fine, I’ve got enough to worry about. Now, about this invasion fleet?”

“Yes.”

“How exactly am I going to besiege five more nations, without losing my entire army through attrition? Or, better yet, having the remaining nations pounce on me all at once, after I attack one of them?”

“You’re not exactly going to do that,” Lazano said, as he pulled out a small stack of papers and handed them to Athash. “I’ve taken the liberty of drawing out an invasion plan for you.”

Skimming through the pages, Athash became increasingly disturbed by what he saw. “Are you serious?”

“Deadly.”

“You’re talking about extermination, not war!”

“Don’t be so dramatic,” Lazano said with a wave of his hand. “Allow the refugees to leave, but destroy all the major cities. They’ll add to the chaos, which only helps you. At the end of it, you’ll have a single nation in need of rebuilding, yes. But, you *will* have a single nation. Once again.”

“There’s got to be another way to do this?”

“That plan’s only a suggestion. You’re welcome to try anything else that you think will work,” Lazano said with a smug grin.

Athash scowled. Lazano was right, and he knew it.

“How do I make sure that Sindjal doesn’t try to pre-emptively strike at us through Ling’s Passage.”

“Just keep the fortifications on your side strictly defensive, and they’ll assume that you’re just trying to stop them from interfering in your punishment of Narad. They won’t suspect that they’re a target, seeing as how you’re apparently having so much trouble just capturing Narad’s capital.”

“I hope you’re right about this wild gambit.”

“Like I’ve said before, have I led you wrong yet?”

# Chapter 14

The knocking at the front door was loud, almost frantic.

"If that's Rheus, I swear…" John trailed off.

"Don't bother, I'll kill him for you," Venarya joked.

"Didn't you tell him that we haven't got any more pies?"

"Funny, but it's probably something serious."

With a sigh and one last kiss, John and Venarya grudgingly stopped what they were doing. Venarya then reluctantly got out of bed and quickly donned a robe.

"I'll be back," Venarya said, leaning over to give John one more kiss. "I won't bother tying you up. This time."

John merely stuck out his tongue at Venarya.

"Save that for when I get back," she said with a wicked smile.

"Hilarious. Hurry back."

As Venarya descended the stairs, she wondered who could possibly be at the door at this hour. Given the recent situation, she wasn't expecting good news.

Opening the door, she was surprised to see four Rangers standing on her front porch.

Their leader took off her hat and greeted her, "Good evening, ma'am. We're sorry to wake you up, but there's been a situation down by one of the north docks."

"It's not a problem at all, Kitam. What's happened?" Venarya asked, expecting the worst.

"Admiral Ancor's flotilla just pulled in, and they requested yourself and the Intendant. They said it was extremely urgent, but also possibly good news."

*That was somewhat of a relief*, Venarya thought. *Though, these strange summons are getting earlier and earlier. They might not even wait for me to go to bed tomorrow night.*

"Well, that's somewhat intriguing," Venarya admitted. "Give me a few minutes to get ready, and I'll be right out."

"Not a problem, ma'am. Take your time."

"Thanks." Venarya furrowed her brow, "Did Ancor say anything about not bringing anyone else?"

"Well, not explicitly, ma'am-"

"Good enough for me, Kitam. I've got a houseguest that should know the details of what's going on, as he's going to be helping us with the Kierd situation tomorrow."

"I'll take your word for it, ma'am. But, if you're vouching for him, I don't see any harm in bringing him along."

"Perfect," smiled Venarya. "Give us a few minutes to get ready."

***

"I'm still not sure I understand. What do you mean, *don't make any comments about their uniforms*?" John asked, confused. "I'm pretty sure that it's not going to be the strangest thing I've seen so far."

"You'll know what I mean when you see them," Venarya obtusely replied. "I promise I'll try to get you an explanation later. For now, just don't mention anything about it. Trust me when I say that they won't have the answers you want."

*I wonder if they're wearing clown suits, or something*, John thought.

Still not sure what to expect when she opened the front door, John hesitatingly answered, "This all sounds even more strange than usual, but I promise."

"Good boy," Venarya smiled, as they approached the door. "Ready?"

"As much as I'll ever be. But, are you sure about leaving Penny and Em alone here?"

"If I was worried about my furniture getting chewed on, I wouldn't have given Rheus a key."

Venarya then proceeded to open the front door, and John got his first look at the mysterious guests.

Right away, John realized what she meant. Standing outside, complete with hat and dusters, were four cowboys straight from an old movie. *Well, three cowboys and one cowgirl to be precise.* They even had what appeared to be revolvers holstered to their hips. *Odd. I thought explosions didn't work in this world, and I'm pretty sure that's necessary for a gun to be able to operate.*

His train of thought went off track when he noticed their other armaments. Admittedly, John never watched a lot of westerns growing up, but he was sure that none of the old gunslingers ever carried two swords slung crosswise on their backs. *Definitely not standard fare for the old west.*

*The clown suits would have been easier to comprehend.*

"This is Captain Kitam of the Freewater Rangers, John," Venarya said by way of introduction.

"Pleasure to meet you, sir," the cowgirl replied with a smile and a tip of her hat.

"The pleasure's all mine," John smiled in return.

"They'll escort us to the north docks," Venarya explained. "We'll meet up with Ancor there, and see what he's found."

"Very well," replied John. "Lead the way."

As they walked out of the institute grounds, John saw Venarya give him a sidelong warning look. *Guess that means that answers will have to wait for now.*

***

As they exited the main gate of the institute, John was at a loss for words. The entire town appeared to be lit by a series of multicoloured streetlamps, which augmented the glowing palm trees he had previously observed. Together with the varied building colours, the whole place looked like it was in the midst of carnival.

As they walked through the city and made their way through various portals, John was surprised as to how many people were still up and about. In fact, many places of business still appeared to be open, despite the late hour.

"Believe it or not, it's like this all year round. Given the climate, the residents have taken to making the nights here quite lively," Venarya explained after being questioned about it.

"Your first visit to Iathera, I take it?" asked Kitam, who walked beside them.

"Yes, he just arrived here yesterday," Venarya replied for John.

"Which area are you originally from, if you don't mind me asking?" Kitam probed, looking directly at John.

"He's not a spy, Kitam," Venarya said bluntly, laughing. "He's a guest of Mag's, actually."

"Well, I didn't actually think that he was a spy," Kitam backtracked.

"And my hair's not green," Venarya smiled. "It's okay. You wouldn't be doing what we paid you for if you didn't have at least a few suspicions."

"That's a relief," Kitam sighed with a weak smile. "No offense meant to you, John."

“None taken. Given the circumstances and timing, even I would have thought that I was a spy, if Venarya hadn’t told me otherwise,” John grinned.

“So, where are you from? I’ve travelled a fair bit, but you don’t seem like you’re from anywhere I’ve been?”

“You’d be surprised-”

Venarya cut in, “I’m afraid that that’s going to have to remain our little secret for now. Mag’s orders. Sorry, Kitam.”

“Ah, not a problem, ma’am,” the Ranger replied. Turning to John, she asked, “What do you think of our little city so far, John?”

“It’s certainly festive, despite all the troubles,” John replied. Hoping to turn the conversation away from himself, he asked, “You’ve been here long yourself?”

“Only three years now. My last posting was at The Gates. It’s certainly a lot more pleasant here, I have to admit,” Kitam replied.

John made a mental note to remember to find out what ‘The Gates’ were, in order to avoid any future awkward conversations with displaced cowgirls.

Sneaking a quick look at Venarya, he saw her give him a surreptitious nod.

“I’m sure it is,” John agreed. Pushing his luck, he continued, “I’ve never been there myself, though. How was it?”

Kitam laughed, “It wasn’t a vacation, if that’s what you’re asking. But, it’s a job that needs getting done.”

Feeling a slight jab in the ribs from Venarya, he took that as encouragement to change the subject. “Definitely, and you have my respect for that. But, enough about the past. I want to know more about Iathera. I’m guessing that you must know this city pretty well? You must have some favourite spots that you enjoy frequenting?”

***

John was beginning to regret asking that question. Kitam had turned out to be quite the chatterbox, once she had ascertained that he wasn’t a Kierdan spy. The entire journey to the docks had been extensively annotated with directions and reviews of various nearby establishments. He wasn’t sure, but he thought he saw Venarya flash him a self-satisfied smile at one point.

"-and over there is where old Blarki has his fishmonger's stand. He's definitely got the best selection of fish, which is odd when you consider that all these fishermen are basically fishing in the same ocean. His fish used to be even better when his son used to help him, but they split up for some reason a while back."

"Really?"

*She really missed her calling as a tour guide.* John was also sure he saw the other Rangers trying to hide smiles.

"Yep. Now, young Blarki has his own fishstand a half block up. His fish is almost as good as his dad's, but a little bit cheaper. He does catch a lot more fish though, but I guess his dad goes for quality over quantity. I tell you, if they ever team back up again, I'll be there first thing in the morning each day to pick out the best of the catch."

*I guess she really likes fish.*

"Really?"

"Definitely. And, over here's the…"

Maybe it was the late hour, but John's mind started to wander, and, for some reason, he began to miss Rheus. He wondered why Venarya hadn't brought him along. She had claimed that he needed his rest, but he suspected that she had ulterior motives for leaving him behind.

"-right over there. We'll stand guard on the perimeter and wait for you," Kitam was saying.

John suddenly realized that they had arrived at their destination. He saw a number of what could only be warships out in the harbour. Venarya led him to a nearby dock where another warship was moored. He looked for a name printed on the bow, but it was too dark to make out any wording. *That must be Ancor's ship, the* Cat's Eye.

John wasn't sure what to expect when he saw the ship. In the back of his mind, he had pictured some sort of medieval sailing vessel, but this ship was far from that. The first thing he noticed was that there was no mast, indicating that the ship was somehow self-powered. If electricity and explosions didn't seem to work in this world, he was curious as to what they used to propel it. *A giant hamster wheel?* The ship itself was quite sleek and modern. He had initially thought it to be made of metal, but upon taking a closer glance, it appeared to be metal plating over a wooden hull.

"Thanks for the escort, Kitam," Venarya said.

"Indeed," John smiled, "and thanks for the tour. Now I feel like I've lived here all my life."

“It was a pleasure, John,” Kitam said, returning the smile. “If you’re still here when this situation with Kierd is done with, send a message to the Ranger office, and I’ll see about giving you a longer tour of Iathera.”

Now John was sure that he saw the other Rangers trying to stop from smiling.

“It would be my pleasure, Kitam,” John replied with a smile. “I’ll keep that offer in mind.”

With that, the Rangers walked off to join their compatriots patrolling the area.

“I think someone likes you,” Venarya giggled in a low voice.

“Don’t even joke about that.”

As they neared the ship, they saw a figure approaching from another part of the city.

As the figure came into view, John saw that it was another woman.

“Yazril,” Venarya said in greeting. “This is John. He’ll be helping us with deciphering the Kierdan weapons.”

“Hello,” said John. “It’s a pleasure to meet you.”

*So, this is the Intendant.* As he looked at the stern faced woman, John was a little perturbed. He couldn’t place it, but something just seemed odd about her.

“Hi, Venarya. It’s also a pleasure to meet you, John,” she responded, as she turned to look at John. “I’m guessing that you’re Mag’s newest associate?”

*Newest?*

“A conversation for another time,” Venarya said with a wave of her hand. “Let’s see what Ancor needed to tell us so desperately.”

“Very well,” responded Yazril.

*I’ve got to have a long talk with Venarya when we get back.*

As they walked toward the boarding ramp, Venarya asked, “Did you let Mag know? I’m surprised she’s not here.”

“I told her, but she insisted that she had another more pressing task.”

“That’s odd. She didn’t mention anything to me.”

“I got the feeling that it was very last minute.”

“Ah,” Venarya replied as Cluster marines made way for them to ascend the ramp.

Halfway up the ramp, they saw a man emerge from a cabin and move to meet them at the top. Holding out his hand, he helped the ladies aboard as he introduced himself, “I apologize for the early hours, but I think you need to be briefed on this situation as soon as possible. I’m

Ancor. I won't waste your time on long introductions, as I'm sure the Director and Fleet Admiral must have mentioned me."

"They did," confirmed Venarya.

"Now, before I begin, I have a question," Ancor stated. "I apologize for any perceived rudeness in the following remark, but," he said, pointing at John, "who is he?"

Surprisingly, Venarya was not the one to come to his defence. Yazril immediately answered, "Not to worry. He's trustworthy."

Ancor seemed to accept that without question as he replied, "Very well. Follow me."

***

Sitting down in the captain's cabin, Ancor had just finished reporting on his recent adventure.

Yazril was the first to comment with, "Did you manage to recover anything else from the site?"

"Just scraps of what we believe were detonated weapons. We didn't manage to sink a single enemy in that encounter, so the bulk of the wreckage was from Cluster ships. We did find two half-sunken refugee ships though. Scouts found nothing on board, but we bailed them out and towed them in anyway."

"A safe distance away, I assume?" Yazril asked.

"They're at the far northeast end of the harbour, along with my other three floating death traps. I tried to put enough space between them to avoid any possible chain reactions, should one of them decide to explode. I've already left instructions with the dock patrols to let all departing craft know to avoid that area."

*I hope they're not parked in old Blarki's fishing spot. Else, Kitam might be a little disappointed today.*

"Well, it looks like we have something for your team to work on," Yazril said, looking at Venarya.

"Good timing, too," Venarya commented. "John has a specialist arriving here early in the morning. I'd rather he get here first, before anyone else looks at it though."

"Not a problem," Yazril replied. "I don't think you'll find a plethora of sleep deprived volunteers eager to examine them at this hour, anyway."

"Any other precautions you can think of, John?" Venarya asked.

"None. It looks like Ancor's done everything possible, so far."

"Thank you," Ancor said simply.

"How many pieces of already detonated weapons did you find?"

"About two dozen possible pieces, ranging from the size of my palm to about two feet across. Realistically, though, I don't know if they'll be any help to us. They just appear to be charred pieces of wood and metal."

"You'd be surprised at what they might be able to tell us. Can you have these transported to the institute? I'd like my specialist to have a look at those first."

Ancor briefly looked at Yazril, who nodded. "Not a problem. I'll make the arrangements with my men."

"What about yourself, Admiral?" Yazril asked. "Are you heading back out?"

"Immediately. Hence, the urgency with which I called this meeting. My squadron's going to return to the area to see if we can turn up anything else of use."

"I'll leave behind nine other ships to maintain a cordon over those five potential floating bombs," he continued. "Between those, your coastal defense platforms, and the six other ships in the main harbour, you should be prepared if Kierd decides to pay you a visit. And, if they do, chances are I'll be right behind them."

***

"Thanks for the escort, Kitam," John said with what he hoped wasn't a slightly manic smile.

"It wasn't anything, John," she replied, returning his smile. "Just remember to look me up when this is all over, and I'll give you a real tour of this place."

"I will," he promised.

"I'll let you two get back to sleep, then. See you around."

"Take care," Venarya smiled.

"Bye," called out John.

This time, as the Rangers walked away, one of them did turn around and flash John an amused grin.

As they walked into Venara's manor, she slyly commented, "Looks like you made a friend. I'll be sure to remind you about that offer when this Kierd business is all finished."

"You're hilarious," John groaned. "She does seem like a nice girl, though."

"She is, despite her knack at maintaining an entire conversation by herself."

"By the way, you *were* kidding when you said she liked me, right?"

Venarya just laughed as she walked up the stairs.

***

Half an hour later found John and Venarya snuggling close in bed.

"You should try to get some sleep, now," Venarya suggested with a soft kiss. "We've a busy day tomorrow."

"True," John agreed, returning the kiss, "but before we go to sleep-"

"Wow," Venarya giggled, cutting him off. "Does everyone on your world share your stamina?"

"Very funny. I'm referring to those answers that you promised me. First of all, why the heck are they dressed like cowboys with ninja swords? It can't be a weird coincidence, can it?"

After a short, but thoughtful pause, Venarya began, "I can tell you this much: it's not a coincidence. There's a reason, but it's not really for me to say."

"Who then?" asked John, even more perplexed.

"Mag," Venarya said simply. "If she gives me the go-ahead, I won't hesitate to tell you. But, it's Mag's secret to share, not mine."

*This makes even less sense now*, thought John. The only possible explanation he could think of in his tired state was that Mag had used that stone in the past to travel to Earth to watch westerns and old kung-fu movies, and then inexplicably created a police force based on a weird mish-mash of both concepts.

"Also, how come I didn't see any of them yesterday, when you gave me the tour?"

"I told them to go hide," she said with a mischievous look.

John gave her a flat stare.

"You're no fun," she said. "Normally, they just patrol the docks, as well as the outlying areas. However, Rinard and Krane brought us some marines to bolster our defenses, so Yazril decided to redeploy a few of the Rangers inside the city."

"I see. Though, I have to admit, I'm still not satisfied with all the answers."

Nuzzling her face into his neck, Venarya said, “Don’t be mad. I promise I’ll try to get you all the answers I can, once this current crisis is over.”

With a coy look, she continued, ‘In the meantime, I’m sure there’s something I can do to make it up to you?”

# Chapter 15

"It looks like everything's finally in place," Rush reported. "Everyone's been briefed, and they know what they have to do. All that's left now is for the latest batch of ships to finish growing."

"Perfect," Athash replied. "Though, I'm sure we're due for a few unexpected surprises."

"Which is why I'm hoping that Dendrav's fleet returns in one piece, more or less. I'm sure those ships and men will come in handy once we begin."

"I'm sure he'll try his best not to disappoint you," Athash laughed. "What about your agents? Any distressing news from them?"

"Nothing to report," Rush said, "It seems like the other nations don't suspect anything as yet. I even have one unconfirmed rumour of Sindjal contemplating stepping in to help negotiate a peace treaty between us and Narad. I'm trying to get confirmation on that. If it's true, then they're still in the dark."

"I guess they don't want to be without those grain shipments for too long more," Athash commented.

"That's what I figure as well," Rush said. "Otherwise, they couldn't care less about Narad's fate. If the rumour turns out to be true, we'll be hearing from them through official channels soon enough. I recommend sending a message to Sindjal, promising to maintain whatever trade agreements Narad had, once this conflict is over. That should keep them off their toes."

"Agreed. See if you can get verification on that rumour," Athash instructed. "If it's true, then it shouldn't be too long before they approach us. In the meantime, start drafting up some documents regarding the trade agreements."

"Already finished that, sir."

Athash grinned, "Sorry, no slight intended to your work ethic. Just a force of habit."

"None taken," Rush replied. "I'll leave these shipyard reports here with you, but everything looks normal, otherwise. I'll be back shortly. I've a few agents due to check in."

"Thanks. Let me know if they've picked up on anything interesting."

***

Athash sat back in his chair. Rush had been correct. While informative, the reports held nothing of note.

With both Pavic and Rush out attending to matters at hand, Athash had decided to occupy his time by reviewing the shipyard reports. But, like Rush had stated, the documents contained nothing of importance, save for tallies and estimates from the technicians.

His mind wandering, he thought back to that fateful day a few months ago.

***

The entire harbour seemed to be in chaos. Ships barely made room for Athash's flotilla to pass unhindered. Normally, civilian vessels would heave to and make way for any military craft, as a courtesy. These vessels looked like they just wanted to leave as soon as possible.

Even from the ship, Athash could see a column of smoke emanating from the direction of the palace. *Looks like Lazano wasn't joking*, he thought.

"Sir!" Captain Rinzan called to him, his voice flustered, "We're getting a signal from the harbourmaster. He's saying that the palace was… attacked somehow a few hours ago? King Domich, along with the entire council, appear to be dead."

"What? Get a verification on that, immediately."

"I did, sir. It's accurate," Rinzan said.

"If that's true, it looks like whoever did this wiped out the entire government in one shot, sir," Rush commented, playing along. "You might be the most senior official still left alive. I'd advise you to take precautions, just in case they decide to finish the job."

*Thanks.* He knew Rush wasn't entirely happy about the whole scheme, but he had recognized the importance of their long goal, and that today's incident was an unfortunate necessity.

"Signal them back, Captain," Athash ordered. "Have an escort squad meet me at the docks. Also, ask them why all these ships are being allowed to leave."

"Yes, sir."

After weaving through the harbour for a few moments, Rinzan reported back, "Sir, they said that the attackers were an overland delegation from Narad. All ships not from there are being permitted to leave, after a thorough search."

“Fair enough. Have them make sure that squad is there when we dock. I’m heading immediately to the palace to see this for myself.”

“Yes, sir.”

***

Instead of the formerly ornate ceiling, Athash could now see the sky upon entering the Grand Hall. The throne and council chairs at the far end were nothing more than a blasted pile of rubble.

“Is it safe to enter?” Athash asked.

“Yes, sir,” the guard replied. “We’ve cleared out most of the rubble, and the engineers put in some supports to stop the roof from collapsing further. The damage seems to be contained to the Grand Hall itself.”

“Any witnesses?”

“Quite a few, actually. They all describe the same thing, which still doesn’t make any sense to us.”

“Go on.”

“The Narad delegation had brought this giant statue to King Domich as a gift, and had insisted on presenting it to him personally. They all carried what appeared to be legitimate papers from King Garustet, so no one thought anything of it. They just assumed it was a goodwill gift as a result of the last trade negotiations.”

“And?”

“This is where it gets strange, sir. Witnesses report seeing one of the delegation put his hand on the statue. Then, a few seconds later, the explosion vaporized everything at that end of the Grand Hall.”

“This statue, was it made of tasrac?”

“No, sir. Most definitely not. We would have never allowed anything like that in here. It just looked like an ordinary stone statue,” the guard explained. “It didn’t even look like a tasrac explosion, sir. All the witnesses say that it just looked like a giant ball of fire.”

“Did anyone on the council manage to survive?”

“No, sir. The only person of any status to survive was Exchequer Linden. She was away at a meeting when it happened.”

“Where is she now?”

“Captain Jankov recommended she stay in her quarters until we have everything sorted out. He’s got a few guards there to make sure nothing happens to the Exchequer.”

“What about the royal family?”

The guard hung his head, “All dead as well, sir. They were standing next to the king when it all happened.”

“So, we effectively have no government?”

“Yes, sir.”

With what he hoped wasn’t too great of a theatrical sigh, Athash responded, “Very well. Make it known that I’m assuming temporary control. We’re now under martial law, until we’re sure that there aren’t any more Naradian surprises waiting for us.”

“Yes, sir.”

“Now, where can I find Captain Jankov?”

“He’s got a temporary headquarters set up in the empty office next to yours, sir. He’s been coordinating the rescue and cleanup efforts.”

“Perfect, I’ll go see him now, then,” Athash said. “Also, have any ranking military personnel report to me in my office immediately.”

“I will, sir.”

“Dismissed.”

As the guard saluted and went about his orders, Athash went in search of the Captain of the Guard.

# Chapter 16

John opened his eyes and turned his head to see a familiar sight.

*Not again. Did I dream it this time?* On closer inspection, the other pillow looked fresh and unused. *Crap.* Did *I dream it?*

As he made an attempt to rub his eyes, he was a little surprised to see a folded piece of paper falling out of his palm. Curious, he picked up the paper and opened it.

*'Dear John, Sorry, but I couldn't resist not using that opening line. Your world has so many fascinating expressions. You looked a little tired from last night, so I let you sleep in for a bit. If you wake up before I come get you, head downstairs. Director Rinard and Fleet Admiral Krane have just arrived back and are on their way here. -Venarya. P.S. Don't worry about Penny and Em. I already fed them.'*

*Well, I guess the good news is that I'm not going insane.*

John quickly got dressed, and headed for the stairs. Walking down, he heard the sound of conversation coming from the dining room.

Entering the room, he saw two gentlemen seated. They both stopped talking and looked at him as he came into view.

One was dressed in what looked like a military uniform, while the other was in smart, but casual attire. In any case, they looked like they had seen better days. Splotches of dirt and mud from the swamp now decorated their clothing. At the very least, John hoped that Venarya had upholstered her furniture in that strange fabric that her dresses were made of.

"You must be Director Rinard and Fleet Admiral Krane. I'm John, a guest of Mag and Venarya's," John announced.

"Ah, yes, I'm Rinard." the one in the casual clothing spoke first. "Venarya had mentioned you earlier. This is Krane."

"I'm pretty sure he's managed to deduce who I am via the process of elimination, Rinard," the uniformed man commented.

"Hey, I just finished trekking though a dark swamp on only four hours of sleep. Be glad that I can even make a coherent sentence."

"I'm just glad Garh didn't have to carry you out." Krane shook his head, and grinned, "How are you, John. Sorry about this one, but he's been a little frazzled lately."

“No little bit of it thanks to you, you old scoundrel. Don’t think I’ve forgotten the first time you took me into that blasted swamp,” Rinard countered. “In any case, John, it’s a pleasure to meet you. Any friend of Venarya’s is a friend of ours.”

“I’m guessing there’s more than a little backstory between you two?” John grinned.

“That’s a bit of an understatement,” said a familiar voice from the opposite doorway.

Venarya entered the room carrying a tray of refreshments, which she laid on the table.

“Dig in, gentlemen,” Venarya said with a smile. “I was just about to go get you, John. Glad to see you’re awake. We’ve got a big day ahead of us.”

“Don’t I know it,” John answered, grabbing a pastry from the tray. “I should be heading back soon to… er… meet up with Ganz.” He momentarily faltered, as he wasn’t sure how much the two guests were aware of.

“Not to worry,” Venarya assured him, not missing a beat, “You’ve still got close to an hour before he arrives, so stay for a little while longer. In any case, you need to know what the old man’s told us.”

Rinard looked a little startled by the last remark, but said nothing.

Noticing his reaction, Venarya said, “It’s okay, Rinard. John’s actually helping us with the investigation into the Kierdan weaponry that Ancor salvaged. The friend he’s meeting is a sort of specialist in that area.”

“I thought no one in the world had ever seen weapons like that before?”

“Correct,” Venarya replied, as she allowed time for that statement to sink in.

“Hold on a second, Venarya,” Krane interjected, the gears turning behind his eyes. “Are you saying what I think you’re saying?”

“I guess that all depends on what you think I’m saying,” she replied with a mischievous smile.

“How’s that even possible?”

“You’ll have to ask Mag that question.”

“Wait a second,” Rinard said, comprehension slowly, but finally, dawning on his tired face, “Are you saying that John is from another world?”

“Okay, after Yazril leaves, you really need to get some sleep,” remarked Krane, shaking his head.

The banter was interrupted by a knock at the door.

“Speaking of which, that’s probably her now,” Venarya said, getting up. “I’ll be right back, gentlemen.”

“So, John,” Rinard began, “when this is all over, we should meet. I’m sure there’s a business opportunity here somewhere.”

“We’re under attack, and you’re thinking about profit?” Krane commented.

“Hey, I’m just planning ahead.”

Laughing, John replied, “I don’t have a problem with that, as long as Mag approves. I definitely don’t want to tick off my ticket back home.” At the last minute, he decided against mentioning anything concerning his ability to control portals.

“Of course. Most definitely,” Rinard agreed. “Perhaps we-”

Rinard didn’t get to finish his sentence, as Venarya returned to the room with Garh and Yazril in tow.

John had to force himself not to jump out of his seat and run when he saw Garh. The enormous creature resembled nothing more than a sasquatch equipped with vicious looking tusks.

“John, you’ve met Yazril,” Venarya said, “and this is Garh, her bodyguard.”

“Pleasure to see you again, Yazril,” John replied a little nervously. “Nice to meet you, Garh.”

“You too, John,” replied Yazril, as she sat at the table.

Garh grunted.

“Don’t worry,” Rinard chuckled, seeing the white pallor in John’s face, “I almost ran for the hills the first time I saw him, too.”

Garh ignored the conversation and moved to sit at the table. *Forget the upholstery, I hope these chairs are strong,* was all that passed through John’s mind as the giant grabbed a fistful of pastries and started eating them directly across from him.

“Well, I can plainly see why you’d want him for a bodyguard,” John joked weakly.

“He’s quite useful, if only for the fact that people tend to get to the point a lot more quickly whenever they come to see me on official business,” Yazril smiled.

“And, speaking of business,” Yazril added, “the message I received back from the old man said that he’s arranging for the Kierdans to head back home?”

“Yes,” replied Rinard, “I have no idea how he’s managed this, but he assures me that the siege will be broken tonight.”

“How does he plan on accomplishing that?”

“He’s told us to expect naval reinforcements from the north shortly after dark. They’ll hit them hard, while Ancor’s squadron corrals them from the west. He intends to make sure that our Kierdan friends head back east, and don’t try to make landfall somewhere else on this continent.”

“Did he say where these reinforcements are coming from?” asked Yazril.

“That’s the strange part,” stated Rinard. “He said they’d be sailing in from the northeast, and wouldn’t go into any more details.”

With a sigh, he continued, “The only place of any note in that direction is the Tekavo Freehold, and I doubt the old man would depend on that bunch of isolationist lunatics to save us.”

“Who exactly are the Tekavo Freehold?” John tentatively interjected into the conversation.

“Sorry, John. I keep forgetting you’re not from around here,” Rinard apologized. “They’re a small backwater located on a large continent to the east.”

“Not the same continent as Kierd?”

“Oh no, this one is much larger,” Venarya explained. “The main body of the continent lies a few hundred miles east of the Kierdan continent. The Tevako Freehold is located at the tip of a long and fairly desolate peninsula that juts out from the northwest. Strictly speaking, they’re located slightly more west than Kierd, though a bit further north.”

“They’re also little more than pirates, preying on any cargo ship that gets too close,” Rinard said. “Though, you’d probably have to be if you lived there, seeing as how you can’t even grow dirt on that land with any kind of success.”

“So, they have a large navy?”

“Not really,” Krane admitted. “The NCI reports that I’ve seen estimate that they may have, at most, two dozen ships.”

“These must be pretty powerful ships then?”

“NCI says that none of them are a match for even the smallest Cluster warship.”

“I’m beginning to see a problem here,” John said flatly.

Krane laughed, “If you’ve known the old man as long as I have, you learn to read into what he doesn’t say. I’m betting that whoever shows up won’t be that ragtag group of pirates. He

wouldn't even be able to contact them, in any event. Instead, it'll be someone else who wants to remain anonymous for the time being, and who possibly owes the old man a favour or two."

"He didn't give any other hints or anything as to who they actually are, I'm guessing?" John asked.

"Nothing, and I wouldn't bother racking my brain trying to figure it out," Krane said. "As long as the old man trusts them, that'll have to be good enough for me. My main concern right now is coordinating our part in tonight's battle. We'll probably find out soon enough who our mysterious benefactors are, in any case."

The conversation paused as another knock was heard from the front door.

"Expecting someone else?" asked Rinard.

"Not as such," Venarya said, rising out of her chair, "but I did leave orders to alert me as soon as Admiral Ancor's squadron is spotted pulling into the harbour."

As Venarya went to check the door, John asked, "You said that the old man wouldn't even be able to contact the Tekavo Freehold. Why is that?"

"Communications," Yazril supplied. "They don't seem to work across large bodies of water."

"Ah."

"Believe me, it's one of the more frustrating things here. Any time I need to send a message to Dracsos, I have to wait for a ship to ferry any messages back and forth."

"Dracsos is another country there?"

"Actually, it's the name for the entire continent," Krane supplied.

Venarya walked back into the room and announced, "I was right, gentlemen. Your newly minted admiral is now pulling into the harbour. There are two Rangers outside with your marines. They'll escort you to the docks as quickly as possible."

"Thank you, Venarya," Rinard said, getting up. "Though, I think I'll let you handle that briefing, Krane. I'm going to head off to the *Midnight Dawn* and try to grab some sleep."

"That's not a problem. Though, you're assuming that some grumpy crewman hasn't already decided that your bed is more comfortable than his own hammock," Krane grinned.

"Funny."

"You're welcome to stay in one of the guest accommodations here at the institute," Venarya offered. "We've currently got a surplus of extra space."

"That may not be a bad idea," Krane replied.

"And, pray tell, why is that?" Rinard asked.

"Ancor's going to need every ship he can get his hands on for tonight. He's already down a few ships, due to that salvage mission, so I'm thinking of lending him the *Midnight Dawn*."

"… I see," was all that Rinard said.

"Relax," said Krane. "I'm sure he'll give it back when he's done with it."

"You're a barrel of laughs, you know that? But," Rinard grudgingly acknowledged, "you're right. I just need to grab some stuff from the *Midnight Dawn*, then I'll head back here and wait for him to bring back my ship."

"Okay, gentlemen," Venarya said, "now that that's settled, let's get you to the docks. I'll tell the Rangers to escort you and your guards to one of the more upscale guest rooms when you return, Rinard."

"As long as it doesn't involve walking through a swamp, any accommodation will be appreciated," Rinard joked. "I'll see you around, John. Don't forget about that meeting after this is all done."

"I won't," chuckled John.

"Don't let that face fool you," Krane jibed. "He's pretty shrewd once he gets enough sleep. I'll see you later then, John."

"Until next time, Krane."

After bidding goodbye to both Yazril and Garh, who responded with what seemed to be his only mode of communication, the two men were escorted by Venarya to the door.

Finding himself alone with Yazril and the giant, John tried to make conversation. "I haven't seen any more of Garh's kind around the city. I'm guessing he's not from around here?"

"No, but you'd be hard pressed to find a Thog wandering far from their homes in the Dimacius Mountains. Garh's a bit of a special case, though."

"More adventurous than the average Thog?" John asked with a grin.

That got a laugh from Yazril. "You could say that."

Sensing she didn't want to elaborate more on the subject of her displaced gigantic bodyguard, John changed the topic, "Do you think the old man will actually be able to get rid of the Kierdan blockade?"

“If anyone has the resources hidden away in his back pocket, it would be him,” she said. After pausing for a second, she asked, “Do you think your friend will be able to help us in figuring out those weapons?”

“If he can’t, I don’t think anyone else on my world can,” John answered solemnly. “That is, if I don’t include anyone who’s working at Area 51.”

“What’s that?”

“Sorry, just a local joke,” apologized John. “Just so I don’t give you false hope, Venarya did say that all her researchers couldn’t come up with anything. So, I wouldn’t hang too much hope on one man who’s never even been to this world yet.”

“Point taken, and thanks for being honest.”

“Like I said, I don’t want to get your hopes up for nothing. Who knows though, maybe Rheus can come up with a solution as to how they got these weapons to work.”

Venarya rounded the corner at that moment and interjected, “I’d rather not have that one playing with anything explosive at the moment, thank you very much.”

Yazril turned to Venarya and asked, “They’re on their way?”

“Yes,” confirmed Venarya. “Now, I’m assuming you realize who tonight’s cavalry are?”

“Yes,” echoed Yazril.

“Wait a second,” a confused John interrupted them. “You know who’s going to be helping the Cluster tonight? Why didn’t you tell Rinard and Krane?”

“It’s not our place to tell them, John,” Yazril explained. “If the old man had wanted them to know, he would have told them when he explained the plan. We have to operate on the assumption that the old man has a reason for what he did.”

*John had heard that song before. For all their friendliness, everyone he’d met so far seemed to harbour some sort of closely guarded secret.*

“It’s not that we don’t trust Rinard and Krane,” Venarya added. “However, like Yazril said, we need to trust the old man more than them at this point.”

“Well, can you enlighten me as to where this mysterious help is coming from?”

“The Tevako Freehold,” Venarya answered with a smile.

An even more confused John asked, “I thought Rinard and Krane said that they were just a bunch of ragtag pirates?”

“That they are,” Yazril said. “They also have an arrangement with the old man.”

John's face betrayed his total confusion.

"There's an atoll off the north coast of the Tekavo Freehold," Venarya supplied. "About eighty years ago, I helped the old man set up a small base there, just in case of contingencies like this. I'm not sure as to the exact details, as I mainly helped with getting the civil logistics in place. However, the desolate land in the area keeps any ambitious rulers away-"

"And the pirates keep away any ships from getting too close?" John completed her thought.

"You catch on fast," Yazril said.

"Thanks. Though, there seems to be quite an excessive amount of cloak and dagger type handiwork at play, don't you think?"

"They don't call him the old man for nothing," Venarya answered. "He's been around for a very long time. Enough time to gather plenty of enemies."

"Makes sense," John agreed. "Someone with his resources would be insane not to keep a few get-out-of-jail-free cards handy."

"What are those?" Yazril asked with a curious look.

"It's from a game in my world," John said.

"Breaking out of jail?" She looked even more confused.

"Er… it's a…," realizing that he had no idea how to explain Monopoly to someone who might have never even seen or heard of a board game, John simply said, "It's just a game that children or families play to pass the time."

"I see," Yazril said, letting the subject drop, though not sounding too sure of herself.

"Back to the topic of tonight's raid," John did some quick mental gymnastics, "if the reinforcements are coming from the Tevako Freehold, then they're even further away from here than Kierd is. How do they plan on getting here that fast?"

"Your guess is as good as mine on that," Venarya admitted. "I'm just assuming he has a really fast fleet hidden up there."

"That brings up another question," John said. "You said earlier that communications across bodies of water is impossible?"

"That part is true, but we're assuming the old man's found a way around it somehow. There were rumours that he was working on something like that."

"Why, though?" asked John. "Wouldn't it be easier to assume that he's got reinforcements coming from somewhere on this continent? By the way, what is the name of this continent?"

“It’s called Merosia,” Venarya said. “With the war up north, every inch of coastline is heavily patrolled. There’s no place at all to hide even a small fleet up there.”

“In any event, if you’re still curious, maybe you can ask him yourself tomorrow,” she added.

Yazril turned to face her, a little startled. John, caught off guard, could only say, “Come again?”

“Oh, did I forget to mention that?” Venarya said with a slight smile. “He sent a message back inviting Ganz and yourself over for lunch.”

“You’re not coming, I take it?” he asked.

“And get my dress all muddy?” she laughed. “Don’t be silly.”

“I thought your dress didn’t pick up dirt?”

“It doesn’t,” she said with a grin. “In all seriousness, the invitation was extended specifically to you two, and the old man can be a stickler for formality sometimes.”

“Garh will be heading over there to courier some messages, anyway, so he can escort you,” Yazril offered.

“That would be much appreciated. I don’t fancy getting lost in a swamp,” John said. “Do you have any idea what he wants? I’m assuming he’s not going to all this trouble just to greet a new neighbour?”

“No idea whatsoever,” admitted Venarya. “Now, you should probably get going. Ganz should be arriving at your place pretty soon.”

“Ah, yes. Of course,” John agreed. “Should I bring him back here first?”

“I’ve already made arrangements with Rheus,” Venarya explained. “He’ll take you to where the weapon fragments that Ancor recovered are being stored. I’ll meet you shortly afterwards, then we can head off to the harbour to examine the actual weapons, if Ganz judges it safe.”

“Sounds like a plan.”

“There’s a Ranger outside that’ll escort you and the dogs to Rheus’s workshop. It should be a safe walk, but I’m not taking any chances.”

“I appreciate that.” Looking around, he asked, “Where are Penny and Em, anyways?”

“They seemed a little restless,” Venarya said, “so I let them run around in the yard outside after breakfast. The Rangers are keeping an eye on them.”

“Good thinking. That means I won’t have to take them for a walk out in the cold when I get back. Yazril and Garh, it’s been a pleasure.”

"You too, John. Good luck with the investigation into the weapons."

Garh grunted.

As Venarya escorted him to the door, she said, "You and Ganz be careful when you get back. Remember what those weapons are capable of."

"Don't worry, Venarya. I won't be taking any unnecessary risks."

"Good," she smiled, "I'll see you when you return."

"I'll see you shortly then, Venarya," John said, returning the smile.

As John exited the front door and turned to face his escort, he had to force his smile to stay in place.

"Hi, John! Hope you slept well. I'm just finishing my shift after I take you to your friend's building, then I'm heading off for some sleep myself. Not that I'm that sleepy, of course. But, you know what they say, sleep is important for your health. They also say that pets are good for your health as well too. Just like these dogs. They are so cute! I've been playing with them since I got here. I was half hoping you'd stay in there for a bit longer so that these girls and I could have some more time together, but I know you've got important business to attend to. I mean, I don't really know what you're doing, but why else would you be meeting with both Administrator Venarya and the Intendant last night? Anyway, are you ready to head out?"

*Thank you, Venarya.*

Hoping his smile wasn't starting to look pained, John quickly replied, "Yep, I'm ready, Kitam. Let's head out."

"Great!" she smiled enthusiastically, as they started walking. "You know, I always wondered why they painted all these institute buildings such drab colours. They always look so dark and foreboding. I mean, I'm sure the students that come here wouldn't mind a splash of colour to liven up the area. For example, look at old lady Susin's house. Each and every wall has a different set of colours on it. Mind you, it's probably because she's losing her eyesight and decided to paint her house herself. Too bad about her eyes though, because she used to be a great seamstress. She did an outfit for my friend two years ago, and wow, was it pretty. Now, there was a story about someone a few months back who needed a black formal dress, and ended up getting a hot pink number. Not that hot pink is bad, mind you, but I'm sure it must've…"

*This was going to be a longer walk than usual.*

***

“Keep him safe, Nuretz,” Krane was saying, as both men watched Director Rinard board the *Midnight Dawn* to retrieve some paperwork.

“I always do, sir,” Commander Nuretz responded.

“I’ll be along in a few hours,” Krane explained, “as soon as I finish briefing and showing Admiral Ancor his new command ship.”

“I’ll leave behind half the squad with you, sir,” Nuretz said. “Even with the cordon in place, I can still think of a dozen ways to kill you here.”

“Thanks,” laughed Krane.

As they watched the *Cat’s Eye* making its way through the harbour, Rinard emerged from his flagship holding several large envelopes.

“Ready?” Krane called out.

“Yep, I’ve got everything I need,” Rinard said, walking down the gangplank.

“Good. I’ll meet you back at the institute in a few hours.”

“Just make sure I get this ship back intact.”

***

After leaving behind his loquacious guide, John gave Rheus an update on the night’s events.

“This is great!” had been Rheus’s reaction to hearing about the salvaged weapons.

His enthusiasm waned upon hearing that Ganz would more than likely be spending the majority of the day examining the weapon fragments first.

“He does need to know what he’s dealing with first, Rheus,” John had explained. “Hopefully, he can determine what type of explosive was used by examining any trace materials left behind on those fragments. I mean, do you really want to jump in headfirst with those weapons?”

“I guess it makes sense,” a disappointed Rheus admitted. “You seem particularly knowledgeable on the subject, though. How come you didn’t do that for him in advance?”

“That tiny bit of theory is about the limit of my expertise,” John laughed. “I’d have no idea where to even begin.”

“I see,” Rheus replied, though his expression showed otherwise. “How did you even learn about the need to do that, though?”

“Television.”

*Who'd have thought procedural crime shows would end up being useful?*

"Ah."

"Tell you what," John smiled. "I know you're curious. So, when this is all over, I'll give you and my television a few days together."

That seemed to perk him up.

"You've a deal, John."

*Maybe I should lock out a few of those channels, just to be safe.*

# Chapter 17

With Rheus making preparations for Ganz's arrival back at the institute, John emerged from the portal and found he still had a little time to kill.

Remembering the current state of his mobile phone, he quickly replaced the SIM card, and placed it back on the charger. After verifying that the phone appeared to be working properly, he decided to check his computer for any messages from either Sophia or Melissa. Hopefully, Sophia had left some sort of update on Nolan as well, John hoped.

There was one from Sophia, sent earlier that morning.

*'Hey, looks like your friends were a hit with M. No snarky comments from her afterwards. In fact, last night she sent out a few of N's friends to bunk out at your garage in town. I understand that they were working most of the night at your place. Take a look at your cameras and you'll see what I mean. They've also got some equipment with them that G might find useful. I don't even want to know how M managed to get all that stuff across the border that fast. And, speaking of G, I checked on him, and he's in the air and on time. Still waiting for confirmation on N.'*

*Now, that was a pleasant, if unexpected, surprise*, John thought. *Though, the cryptic style did suggest that she was having way too much fun with this. I hope there aren't any other surprises she hasn't told me about.*

Wondering what she meant about the cameras, John brought up the screen on his computer, and was a little shocked by what he saw. He formerly had eleven cameras covering the property, but the software now showed signals from forty seven different security camera feeds, and a small multitude of additional motion detectors.

*Wow*, was all John could think. *She really doesn't believe in half measures.*

***

"Hi, John. We're doing okay," the voice on the other end of the phone said. "Now, I'm guessing you want to speak to your guests here?"

"Perceptive as usual, Jackie," John laughed. "I hope they didn't scare you and Marko too bad when you opened up the place this morning?"

"Oh no," she explained, "Your sister Melissa called last night to let us know in advance. However, she was a little… well… ambiguous regarding the details. I'll tell you one thing though, your friends certainly don't travel light. I think they've almost filled up one of the back storage rooms."

So much for *'I'm going straight to bed'*.

"That sounds like Melissa, all right," laughed John. "Not to worry, Jackie. Those guys are from the company. They're just doing some security upgrades to my place, and they needed a safe area to store their equipment."

"Nothing serious, I hope?" Jackie asked, concern in her voice. "You didn't get broken into or anything?"

"Oh no, nothing like that," John said, thinking fast. "They're just using my place as a sort of guinea pig for some new equipment we've developed."

"Ah, okay. Also, before I forget, thanks for the gift," she gushed. "I didn't think you even knew when our anniversary was. Don't take that the wrong way, though. Sometimes, I don't think Marko even knows."

"No worries, Jackie," John laughed. "Besides, nothing's too good for my favourite girl."

*Crap. That's one more I owe Melissa.*

"Are you sure you'll want us to leave the garage for three weeks, though? Don't get me wrong, we'd absolutely love to go to the Mediterranean. But, these tickets are for tomorrow…"

*Thanks for the heads up, Sophia. Sometimes, I don't know which sister's worse.*

"Don't worry, Jackie," John assured her. "You and Marko head over there and have fun. Clear any backlog of clients that you have this morning, and tell Greg to take a paid vacation until you and Marko get back. My friends are going to need some privacy to test out their gear."

"That's incredibly generous, John. But, also, pretty bad for the bottom line," she said, a hint of worry in her tone. "Are you sure?"

"Absolutely. I can cover any losses," John laughed. "In any case, I've wanted to do some upgrades to the place for a while now. And, seeing how I've got my guys here already, this is the perfect opportunity. Tell Marko he'll have a new set of toys to play with when he gets back. You guys only worry about having fun, okay?"

"We will, John," Jackie said gratefully. "Thanks again. Hold on while I transfer you over."

"Thanks, Jackie."

*Right. Now I need to figure out what I need to do to make it look like I upgraded the garage.*

***

"This is Jensen," the voice at the other end said.

John recognized that voice. That was Melissa's personal bodyguard. She certainly didn't cut any corners on this one.

"John here," he replied. "I hope Melissa didn't drag you out of bed for this."

"Not to worry, sir," Jensen replied. "It's a refreshing change from the normal daily routine. If I was back there right now, I believe your sisters would currently have me walking their dogs," he chuckled.

"Glad to hear it, Jensen," John replied, amused. "Now, how much did Melissa explain to you?"

"To be honest, not much, sir," Jensen admitted. "I've got a few of my boys here with me, and I'm guessing you already know that we've finished outfitting your house with a new set of security gear?"

"Yep, and thanks for getting it done so quickly," John complimented him.

"Not a problem, sir. We've also got a stockroom full of assorted equipment here with us. There's a full manifest in an envelope on top of your fridge. Your sister told me to let you know to give that to Dr. Ganz. I'm guessing he's arriving at your place today?"

"Correct. Did Melissa say anything else?"

"Nothing, sir," replied Jensen. "She said you'd fill us in on what we need to know."

*Thanks, Melissa.*

"Well, for starters, you guys get some rest. That garage you're staying in will be vacated tomorrow for about three weeks, and there's some guest rooms upstairs. Let Jackie know that you'll be staying there for a while, and she'll show you where everything is."

"Will do, sir, and thanks."

"Also, do you have any more security equipment left over?"

"Tons, sir. Literally."

"After you guys get some sleep, see about setting up some surveillance there. Nothing overt, you understand? I don't want the place looking like Fort Knox."

"Understood, sir."

“Thanks, Jensen.”

“Sir?”

“Yes?”

“I know it’s not really my place, but can I ask a question?”

“Nonsense, ask away,” John assured him.

“Now, I’m all for covert ops and everything. I mean, it sure brings back memories of when I was in the service. But, why are we camped out at a mechanic’s? I mean, I never even knew about this place. It’s not on any company security profiles that I’ve seen.”

“Well, to answer the last question, it’s not really a company holding. It’s more a personal… well, hobby. The owners there did me a good turn a long time ago, when they didn’t really have to. A few years ago, they fell on some hard times, so I helped them out.”

“Understood, sir.”

“Now, as to your first question, I’m afraid I’m about to bring back some more memories when I tell you that it’s sort of classified. For now.”

“I understand completely, sir,” chuckled Jensen. “However, are you sure you don’t want me or one of my boys to stay there with you and keep watch?”

“I appreciate the thought, Jensen, but it’s unnecessary for now. However,” he continued, as an afterthought came to him, “there are two more things you can do for me.”

“What is it, sir?”

“First, can you get Jackie and Marko each a company phone for their trip? Tell them to call me or my sisters in case of anything. No matter how small. Also, can you see what I need to do to get that garage upgraded?”

***

Feeling pretty pleased with himself so far, John sat down on the couch next to the dogs to ponder how exactly he would even start to explain all of this to Ganz.

A bark from Penny heralded the sound of the doorbell ringing, and John got up to answer it.

John opened the door to see a short, haggard man standing there with a load of luggage.

“Wow,” John remarked, “How long were you expecting to stay in Germany? I thought your conference was only a few days.”

“Nice to see you again too, John,” the weary man replied. “All I had was this one bag. The rest of it was waiting for me at the airport.”

“My sisters?”

“Your sisters.”

“Well, come on in out of the cold, Meredith,” John said, not able to resist using his first name.

“You’re a barrel of laughs,” Ganz replied.

While Ganz took the ribbing in good sport, John’s unspoken theory was that he had pursued his many doctorates just to avoid having people using his first name.

“This isn’t even half the luggage. The rest is still in that truck,” Ganz continued, gesturing to the parked SUV. “Speaking of which, why did Melissa have me bring a caged raccoon over? Do you have a shortage of them here, or something?”

“Wait, what?” a surprised John asked.

“With a pacemaker, no less. I think it’s from one of the medical research divisions. Damned thing nearly scared me half to death when I got in the car. What kind of party are you planning here?”

*Again, thanks for the heads up, girls.*

“It’s okay,” John assured him. “I believe I know what it’s for. Now, let’s get you and your furry friend out of the cold.”

***

“You haven’t been drinking, have you?”

*I wish people would stop asking me that.*

“I’ll prove it to you. Here, watch,” John replied, as he gestured to an empty spot on the wall.

“Go right ahead,” a now curious Ganz replied, with just a hint of scepticism in his voice.

John started to open the portal, and saw the little wisps of dancing smoke making their journey up the wall.

“Don’t worry, the house isn’t on fire,” John assured Ganz.

“I… okay…”

As the portal finished coalescing and their destination appeared, John saw the familiar faces of Rheus and Mag. *How does she know when to show up?*

“F.Y.I., that’s a friendly dragon. Don’t run away or anything,” John commented.

Only strangled noises came out of Ganz’s open mouth.

“Need a minute to get your voice back?” John teased.

“… Funny. Can we go in?” Ganz asked, all traces of weariness gone from his voice.

“Well, I certainly didn’t bring you all this way just to look at it.”

***

“Can you understand me?” Rheus asked.

“Er… I… I mean, yes. Yes, I can,” a dazed Ganz answered, as he tried to get up from the chair.

“Whoa, cowboy,” John said, placing a hand on his shoulder. “Catch your breath before you get up. That thing knocked me flat when I used it.”

“I… I’m fine,” Ganz assured him. Looking at the small dragon, he remarked, “I take it that that’s Mag?”

-*Yes*- came the reply.

“Wow, I…”

“I know. I know. Long story short: magic or telepathy or something. We can get into it later.”

“Okay. Now, your sisters said you needed my help?”

“Well, first things first,” John said. “We need to get that raccoon over here. Just out of curiosity, do you know how to perform CPR on it?”

“What? No! Why?”

“Nevermind. I’m sure Melissa can send us another one if we need it.”

“Wait, why are bringing it here?”

“Oh, right. I’d forgotten to tell you that part,” John said. “Look at your phone.”

Pulling out his phone, Ganz remarked, “Sorry, John. It must have run out of juice during the plane ride.”

“No, it didn’t,” John corrected him. “The battery got drained when you crossed over.”

“Come again?”

“It doesn’t look like electricity works the same in this place.”

“Okay. Though, I have to admit, I still don’t see what this ultimately has to do with that raccoon,” a puzzled Ganz remarked.

“We also need Nolan’s help,” John supplied. “He has a pacemaker.”

Realization dawned on Ganz’s face, “Ah! Why didn’t you say so in the first place? Well, let’s give it a shot.”

“Okay. Wait here while I go get our furry friend,” said John. “Penny. Em. Wait here with Meredith.”

Ganz gave him a flat stare.

“Hey, they’re friendly dogs,” John remarked, an innocent look on his face. “They prefer first names.”

They all watched as John walked through the portal and disappeared for a few seconds. He popped back into view holding a caged raccoon.

Ganz saw his mouth move, but didn’t hear any sounds. “Speak up! We can’t hear you, John,” he called out.

“You won’t,” Rheus told him. “Sounds don’t seem to travel through the portals. I think he was talking to Mag. Her mind speech isn’t limited by it.”

“I see,” he said, glancing at Mag, who then nodded at him.

John then held up his hand in a silent countdown, and upon reaching one, walked through the portal. All eyes immediately jumped to the raccoon.

After a tense minute had passed, John said, “Frank looks fine to me?”

“You named it already?” Ganz said, shaking his head. “Fine, let’s take *Frank* back across and check the battery levels on the pacemaker.”

“Sounds good.”

As they walked toward the portal, they all heard the voice in their heads, -*Patrol*-, as Mag then walked out of the room.

“She does that a lot,” John explained.

***

“The battery level looks unchanged,” Ganz remarked, putting away the meter.

“How’s that possible?” asked John.

“Well, I have a theory. Just a theory, mind you.”

“No time for modesty, Ganz. Out with it.”

“Well, if Rheus’s world did drain all electricity from everything, then everyone would be dead.”

“What?” a surprised Rheus remarked.

“Yeah, I’m not sure I understand,” an equally surprised John said.

“The entire nervous system operates by way of electrical signals. Get rid of those, and you have a dead person.”

“We need this electricity thing to live?” Rheus asked.

“Apparently,” John replied. “Still, no licking the light sockets, Rheus. Why does it differentiate between the pacemaker and the phone, though?”

“Now, I’m just guessing here, but remember those trinkets you showed me?”

“Those pieces of black rock that proved nothing, you mean?” John asked with an impish grin.

“Yes,” Ganz said, coughing delicately. “I suspect that living tissue is immune to whatever force drains electricity there. I also suspect this force is somehow tied into this tasrac substance. That’s why you noticed that fading spot on your pendant where, I’m assuming, it had made contact with your skin.”

“It still ended up turning black, though?”

“I think that if you were to embed a piece of tasrac inside your body, it would stay the original colour.”

“That’s not a theory I’d want to test anytime soon, even on Frank here.”

“No, no, of course not. But, my theory is that whatever is stopping tasrac from deteriorating on our world, also stops any electric device from being drained on this world, as long as it’s surrounded by some sort of living tissue.”

“So, it might actually be possible for electric devices to work there?”

“Well, I don’t think you can duct tape a bunch of chickens to a computer and expect it to work, but I’m sure there’s a happy midpoint.”

“Funny,” John commented dryly. “So, you think Nolan will be okay?”

“It certainly looks that way.”

“Also, as an aside, why are Penny and Em’s collars still working? For the motion detectors in the house, I mean? Shouldn’t those have gotten drained of power too?”

“Oh, those are just passive RFID tags…,” Ganz began, who then started to see John’s eyes start to glaze over. “Um… there are no batteries in them, so nothing to get drained.”

“Okay, as long as you understand it, that’s good enough for me. I’ll go ahead and send a message to Sophia right now and let her know about Nolan,” John said, as he started typing on the computer. “I’d still like to have Frank spend a few hours over there, just in case.”

“Of course.”

“John?” Rheus began, “A quick question for you.”

Hoping Rheus hadn’t stumbled across some flaw in their plan, he hesitatingly answered, “Yep? What’s on your mind, Rheus?”

“What’s a chicken?”

## Chapter 18

"That won't be a problem, sir," Ancor replied.

"Good. Once you've managed to alert Fescor and Skagant to what's about to happen, fall back and wait for their signal. Once you see it, head in and stop the Kierdans from retreating west. Once the enemy lines start to break, the rest of our ships will leave the defensive rings and rendezvous with you," Krane instructed.

"I'll send them back with their tails between their legs, sir. Are you sure you don't want us to pursue them?"

"No, not for now," Krane replied, omitting any references to the old man. "For all we know, this entire attack could just be a ploy to pull our forces away from Merosia."

"Makes sense," Ancor agreed. "Who are the reinforcements, though?"

"Classified, for now, I'm afraid. Now, I understand you're down a few ships?" Krane asked, hoping to sidestep any follow up questions Ancor might have.

"Yes, sir," Ancor replied. "Three ships holding the captured weapons, and nine more ships guarding them."

"Leave the three ships as they are for now, but reduce the guard to only another four ships."

"Not a problem, sir."

"However, that still leaves you down seven ships," Krane said, "giving you a total of, what, thirty seven remaining?"

"Correct, sir."

"Well, you're going to need all the help you can get tonight. So, I'm giving you the six ships here in the harbour, including the *Midnight Dawn*."

"Sir?"

"Give your first officer temporary command of the *Cat's Eye*, and oversee all operations from the *Midnight Dawn*. Just make sure the director gets it back in one piece. He seems to be quite fond of his ship."

"Will do, and thank you, sir."

"Now, get everything sorted out on the *Cat's Eye*, then report back to me here on the *Midnight Dawn*. I'll head out with you for a few hours to help you familiarize yourself with her."

***

"Are you sure you'll be okay here, Kail?" Rheus asked.

"I'll be fine, sir," he responded.

"Remember, he's still a wild animal, so don't try to pet him or anything," John cautioned.

"I won't, sir," Kail said.

"And, if you notice him acting funny, let us know right away," Ganz added.

"I will, sir."

The four of them stood in the courtyard of Rheus's building, and were all gazing at a hastily constructed enclosure which now housed Frank the raccoon. Aside from initial mild curiosity at his new surroundings, he seemed to not be in any sort of distress. Once he had examined everything in his pen, he had been content to amble over to a corner of the fence and take a nap.

That last part had caused some consternation with Ganz, who thought Frank was in the midst of entering into a death throe. However, his eyes opened brightly as he gave a slight growl towards Ganz, who then retreated and left him to his rest.

"You can give him some of that food in an hour or so," John instructed Kail. "And I understand that Rheus has arranged for some orgot pies to be delivered to you for lunch, so you can give a few of those to Penny and Em as well."

"I will."

"Now, if we're not back from my world before you have to leave, you can drop the dogs off at Administrator Venarya's house."

"And Frank?"

"You can leave Frank where he is, for now. He'll be fine. Now, any more questions before we head out?"

"I think you've about covered it, sir," Kail replied, as he threw two balls for Penny and Em. "I'll come and get you if anything, I promise."

***

"Any luck?" John asked.

"Not really," replied Ganz. "I just wish I had a more powerful microscope, rather than this toy your sisters supplied."

“Hey, if you can figure out how to get electricity to work here, be my guest.”

“I think I should take one of these fragments back to your place for analysis. If you can get Jensen to bring over some of that equipment he’s got stored, it’d go a lot faster. Besides, I think I need to swab this thing and try to figure out what the actual explosive ingredient was.”

“Do you think it’s safe to transport it, or even a swab of it, over to your world?” Rheus asked.

“Yeah,” John appended. “What if it decides to explode or something?”

“Jensen should have a few reinforced cases for the equipment. We can package it in one of those, then open it once we’re sure it’s safe.”

“Okay, give me a minute to go grab the manifest, and then tell me what you need from it.”

“No need, I memorized it,” Ganz said, with an immodest wave of his hand. “Here, let me jot down a list for you.”

As Ganz scribbled away, John looked at his new surroundings, which was conveniently located right next door to Rheus’s original workshop. He couldn’t help but notice the overabundance of wooden reinforcing beams all over the suite.

“Rheus?”

“Yes, John?”

“Why is this place built like a bomb shelter?”

Rheus coughed delicately, “Er… you remember those… experiments I was working on out in the swamp?”

“Your brief excursion as the mad bomber?” John said with a raised eyebrow and a flat tone. “Yes. Yes I do remember you mentioning it.”

*Please tell me he wasn’t thinking of...*

“Well, when the troubles up north broke out a few months ago, we sent most of the students home. I had a bit of free time on my hands, and so did all the institute maintenance workers. So, I got them to reinforce this room for me.”

*He was.*

“You were planning on doing… your experiments here?”

“Well… I didn’t, in the end.”

“Why not, pray tell?”

Rheus coughed again, then said in a low voice, “Well, Kail suggested that, despite the building not being in danger of collapsing, being in an enclosed room with explosions might not be such a good idea.”

“I see. Also, remind me to keep an eye on you more.”

“Hey! It was important research!”

“I’m sure it was.”

“Okay, all done,” Ganz chimed in, who seemed to have zoned out for that entire conversation. “How soon before Jensen can get the stuff here?”

“He’s only about twenty minutes away, so that plus whatever time it takes to load the equipment.”

“Fair enough. I can keep working here until Jensen arrives, if you want?”

“Sounds good. I’ll be back shortly.”

***

“Sorry about that, Jensen,” John apologized. “I know you guys are probably exhausted from last night.”

“Don’t worry about it, sir,” the voice on the other end of the line replied. “They’re tough boys. They can handle it.”

“I appreciate that, Jensen.”

“Just part of the job, sir. Besides, they’re awake anyways.”

“Really?”

“Yep, having a barbeque in the back, if I’m not mistaken.”

“Jensen,” John said flatly, “it’s freezing outside.”

“A steak’s a steak.”

John chuckled, “Okay, just keep them from drawing too much attention to themselves.”

“Not a problem, sir. Do you need anything else from town?”

“Thanks, but I think we’re okay for now,” John replied. A sudden thought popping into his head, he quickly amended his last statement, “Actually, you know what? Can you grab me two buckets of fried chicken?”

## Chapter 19

"Where do you want them to unload all this kit?" Jensen asked, as he gestured to the large moving van.

"Have them put it in the living room," John instructed. "Wow, I didn't realize that it would be quite so much stuff. I thought Jackie was exaggerating when she said how much gear you guys brought."

"There's still over half a storeroom filled with equipment back at the garage, so let us know if you need anything else."

"Definitely. Here, let me help you move some of the furniture out of the way."

"Much appreciated, sir."

***

"Thanks again, Jensen," John said. "I know it's been a strange ride for you so far."

"Nothing I wasn't used to in the service, sir," Jensen replied. "Are you positive you wouldn't rather have me station one of my boys here?"

"Not right now," John assured him. "Also, I temporarily deactivated the cameras inside the house this morning. They're not on any sort of automatic timer, or anything like that, are they?"

"Nope, they're the same as the old system," Jensen confirmed. "Wouldn't you rather leave them on though, just in case of anything? I mean, I'd rather have a clear trail to follow in case you and Ganz end up getting kidnapped, or worse?"

"We'll be okay for the time being. You guys just worry about getting some well deserved rest."

"Will do, sir," Jensen said. "But, just in case, I'm giving you this."

He held out a small keychain sized device to John.

"What is it?"

"Panic button. Hold it down for three seconds, and the boys and I will drop everything and rush over. Just don't use it if you want me to walk the dogs, that's all."

"Thanks," John laughed, "though I hope I don't have to end up using it anytime soon."

"Me too, sir. Well, good luck with whatever you're doing here."

"Thanks, Jensen."

As the truck pulled away, John smiled to himself. He knew Jensen well enough to realize what was probably going through his mind. No doubt that Jensen would have a few of his men parked up not far from John's house, just in case John had cause to use that panic gadget. Making a mental note of its location, he placed the device under a pile of papers on a nearby desk.

Walking back into the living room, John shook his head at the sight before him. There was a cacophony of assorted crates, cases and bags scattered everywhere. Thank goodness they all appeared to be labelled. He just hoped Ganz would be able to put them to good use.

***

"Zombies?! Have *you* been drinking?" an astounded John asked Ganz.

"It's true, John," Rheus said. "Though, we don't actually have a name for them, as such. Though, I suppose 'zombies' is a good enough moniker."

"Hold on a second," John said, trying to get his wits together. "You're telling me that this war up north involves you guys fighting the undead?"

"Hey, that's an even better name! But, to answer your question, yes."

"You didn't think to mention this before?"

"It's pretty far away," Rheus said weakly. "Besides, I'm sure one of us would have said something to you if this whole Kierd business didn't happen."

"I'm going to have a long talk with Venarya later," John muttered.

"Well, she is from up north originally, but I don't know that she'd have more information for you. Now, you have these undead things in your world too?"

"What? No! No," John remarked. "I mean, they're just stories. Make-believe."

"Ah, I see," Rheus sounded almost disappointed.

"In any case," Ganz said, turning the conversation back to the current crisis, "let's deal with these weapons before we start talking about becoming monster hunters or something else equally silly."

"Of course, of course," Rheus said, "You've managed to get all the equipment for Ganz, John?"

"Yep, I just furnished my entire living room with it."

"Ah, yes, sorry about that," Ganz apologized. "I forgot how much stuff it actually was."

“Don’t worry about it,” John said, sighing. “As long as it can help us figure out what these explosives are made out of.”

“Well, no guarantees,” Ganz said, “but it’s our best shot. Are you ready?”

“As much as I’ll ever be,” John replied, opening the large and heavily reinforced case he had brought with him.

Ganz gently laid the fragment inside of it, and latched the case.

“Easy part’s done,” John commented. “Let’s go.”

***

The three men eagerly watched the case from a safe distance. From behind an overturned couch, in fact. The sight was almost comical.

“Well… I guess it’s safe,” Ganz said.

“Wait, let’s make sure,” said Rheus, crawling over and picking up a large book from a nearby shelf. “Is this something that’s valuable to you?” he asked John.

“Not really, but what are-”

John didn’t get to finish his sentence as Rheus then dashed the book with incredible accuracy at the case, while simultaneously covering his face with the other hand.

Thankfully, the only loud sound that followed was that of the book hitting the case.

“Are you insane?!” John sputtered.

“Well, it worked, didn’t it,” Rheus defended himself. “Or, didn’t work, depending on how you want to look at it.”

“Fine, fine,” John gave up, slumped against the overturned couch. “Let’s get started then. I’ve got some food for us in the kitchen. I’ll get it ready while you two begin setting up the equipment.”

***

“This is incredible, John!” Rheus exclaimed. “What did you say it was again?”

“Chicken,” John replied, a touch distracted by Rheus’s eating. He had seen the strange man gobble down multitudes of orgot pies in one sitting, but he had now managed to finish more than an entire bucket of fried chicken by himself. *He’s as thin as a rake. Does the fat go straight to his beard or something?*

“Are… are you sure you don’t want a drink of water or something?” an equally entranced Ganz asked.

“Oh no, I’m good. But, thanks,” an oblivious Rheus replied between bites.

Trying to change the unspoken subject, John asked, “So, Ganz, what’s the verdict on our mystery explosives?”

“Everything’s set up, and the spectroscope’s doing its initial scan at the moment. I figure that I’m probably going to need a few hours to complete the examination and go over the results,” Ganz stated.

“Anything we can do to help?” Rheus asked.

“Not as such,” replied Ganz. “It’s all just highly specialized grunt work now.”

“In that case…,” Rheus trailed off, as his head turned to the television.

“Fine,” laughed John. “But let’s use the one in the other room, so as not to bother Ganz.”

“Great. I can’t wait to see what strange task they now have to do on that island.”

“Wait, that’s not on now, is it?” a confused Ganz remarked.

“Not normally, I think. But, it looks like the channel’s running a marathon today,” John said a little reluctantly.

“In that case, don’t you dare go in the other room. I can multitask just fine from here.”

# Chapter 20

"Think you're ready to handle her on your own now?" Krane asked. "In any case, you shouldn't worry too much. Captain Rodric is more than familiar with her capabilities, so you can concentrate on the battle at hand."

"I don't think it'll be a problem, sir," Ancor replied. "I have to say, I didn't think some of those systems were ready for production yet?"

"They're not, but there are some benefits to being the director," Krane laughed, "Especially when it comes to upgrading your personal cruiser."

"I can imagine," Ancor said. "I've always wondered, sir, why was it you never claimed a ship as your own?"

"You mean, besides the fact that I'd never get to sail it, being stuck behind a desk all day and all?"

"Even as a status symbol?"

"As if I care what anyone else thinks," Krane said, still chuckling. "I figure it's the same reason why you never asked the quartermaster's office to build you a Juggernaut, rather than sticking with the *Cat's Eye*? Which, by the way, was one of the reasons that I took a closer look at you when creating my short list for Trager's possible replacements."

"Er… Thanks, sir," a slightly startled Ancor replied.

"Besides, any time I have to leave the Cluster, it's usually aboard this same ship with the Director in tow. Having to worry about my own ship is just time that I can't afford to waste on a vanity."

"I think I understand."

"I'm sure you do," said Krane. "Though," he added, a touch wistfully, "I did have my own ship once, you know?"

"What happened to her, sir?"

"Lost, a long time ago," Krane replied solemnly. "I was lucky to escape."

"I'm sorry, sir," Ancor said. "I didn't mean to bring up old memories like that."

"It's okay. Like I said, it was a long time ago."

"If I can just ask one follow up question, sir?"

"Sure, go ahead."

"I've studied our military history pretty intensively, but I've never heard mention of anything like that?"

"Our mission was highly secret. I'm afraid that I still can't elaborate too much more on it. Sorry, Ancor. I can tell you this much though, I lost quite a few friends on that trip, including my mentor."

Ancor realized he could only be talking about one man. In a low voice, he responded, "You mean Fleet Admiral Petrarca, sir? I thought he had retired?"

"That was the official story, as we couldn't publish any details on the mission," Krane answered in the same low voice.

"I see, sir. My condolences." Changing the topic, Ancor said, "Are you sure you'd rather not accompany us tonight?"

"Those days are behind me," Krane smiled. "Besides, too many cooks in the kitchen and all that. I'm sure you'll be better off without me there looking over your shoulder."

***

"Odd. Very odd."

"Huh? What is it?" John asked, gladly looking away from the television.

"Black powder…," Ganz trailed off, leafing through the stack of papers in front of him.

"Say what?"

"Huh? Oh, I just finished the analysis on the residue. The substance appears to be just plain old black powder."

"Gunpowder, you mean?"

"Not quite. Most modern firearms use a variant called smokeless powder, which is what you're probably thinking of. Black powder dates back more than a thousand years."

"I see. Now, you're positive about this?"

"Fairly, but it is a bit odd."

"How so?"

"While you were waiting for Jensen to bring the equipment, I had a talk with Rheus-"

"Yes, where you were apparently discussing zombies…"

Ganz coughed delicately, "Well, it just sort of came up. Anyhow, I was trying to gauge how technology works on that world. Or, more specifically, how explosions worked."

"And?"

"They don't. Other than the relatively small tasrac explosions that Rheus mentioned, there's never been a compound or mixture on record that's exhibited any type of explosive behaviour."

"And it's not for lack of trying, either," Rheus commented, his eyes never leaving the television.

"Okay, that much I know," John confirmed, shaking his head. "Go on."

"It's as if some substance is acting as a stabilizer."

"How is this substance getting into the explosives, though?" John asked, confused, "I mean, why not try to whip up a batch of gunpowder without whatever this thing is?"

"I don't think it's that simple."

"Why not?"

"My theory is that our mystery substance is tasrac."

"Say again?"

"I'll start from the beginning, but let me preface it first by saying that it is just a theory."

"Fine, fine. You've got the disclaimer out of the way," John said. "Now, explain."

"Ever wonder why your phone's battery gets drained every time you go there?"

"I'm a little curious, yes."

"First, you need to know that tasrac doesn't appear to just be some mineral that's mined out of the ground. It actually appears to grow, albeit slowly."

"Like a crystal?"

"Not exactly. Natural crystals such as quartz are, to simplify it greatly, usually formed by water depositing trace materials over a period of time. This stuff appears to grow like a tree."

"What? It's alive?"

"I… I don't think so. Well… I'm still working on that part of the theory. However, as the crystal expands, it continuously sheds its outer layer."

"Like a snake?"

"Funny. Rheus, you care to explain this one to him?"

"Sure," he replied, his eyes still glued to the television. "I'm not certain that *shedding* is even the right word. It's just the process of the outermost layer of the crystal disintegrating into dust. Normally, tasrac grows so slowly that you never notice this shedding. However, sometimes,

tasrac has what I guess you'd call a growth spurt. When this happens, you get noticeable cracks in the outer layer, which then separates and rapidly breaks down."

"Thanks, Rheus," Ganz said. "Now, John, this has been happening here since what I'm assuming to be the beginning of time. This tasrac dust is everywhere, and given the strange properties of its crystal form, it's quite possible that its presence in the atmosphere is what's causing the power drain. I suspect that, no matter what precautions you take, it'll find its way into anything here."

"What if you put a phone in an enclosed space, like the equivalent of one of your clean rooms?"

"Sure, that may work, but you're going to have to remove *all* the air from the room, and then pump uncontaminated air from earth into there. Besides, who knows how much of this substance is needed for it to work its… well, magic? For all I know, you may only need one atom of tasrac dust present to offset all our precautions. I am planning a quick experiment for when we go back, though."

"What is it?"

"I'm going to put a flashlight in one of those transparent airtight cases over there," Ganz stated, pointing to a corner of the room, "and see what happens when we take it over. I'm not holding out much hope for a clear finding though. Seeing as this entire area probably has a bit of tasrac dust scattered throughout it, it may be next to impossible to make sure that there's none in that case."

"Regardless, it sounds like a good idea. We'll give it a shot anyway. At the very least, we can see how long it takes for the battery to drain, when compared to a flashlight that's out in the open, so to speak."

"Not a bad idea. Knowledge of that possible variance may even end up being more helpful in the long run, anyway."

John, processing everything that Ganz had postured, then said. "So, I'm guessing you think that the substance that's stabilizing the explosives is also this tasrac dust?"

"Correct," Ganz said, "Now, assuming that I am right about all of this, there's still the question of the detonator. Usual practice back on earth is to use a smaller charge to ignite a larger one, such as a stick of dynamite."

"Ah, I think I see the problem."

"Indeed," Ganz agreed. "We're back to square one again. The only way, that I see, for those explosives to be detonated is for the tasrac dust to first be neutralized somehow."

"So, the question is, *what neutralizes tasrac*?" John pondered. "Any ideas, Rheus?"

Eyes still not moving away from the television, Rheus responded, "I couldn't even begin to guess, and we've done extensive research on tasrac back at the institute. Mind you, most of the research was regarding new uses for tasrac, not how to nullify it. However, I do believe that there are a few books back at the institute that might touch on the topic. At the very least, maybe they can point us in the right direction."

"I've no objections," Ganz said, looking at John. "I believe I've done all I can with this fragment. Now, while that I was working it, I did some preliminary tests on one of those souvenirs you brought back the first time."

"And?"

"Nothing conclusive, although the initial test runs indicate that it might be composed mainly of carbon. Remember, I was being really cautious, so that may not even be correct," Ganz explained. "However, it doesn't appear that it's in any danger of exploding inside the spectrograph or anything like that. So, while we're gone, I'll let it run its course. If we can figure out what exactly it is, or what it turns into when we bring it here, that might prove useful."

"Agreed, go ahead and get the test started. I'll repackage this fragment back inside the case for transport."

"Okay, I just need a few minutes for this," Ganz confirmed. "Even if we don't turn up anything in Rheus's books, an analysis of the actual weapons might give us a few insights?"

"You're almost as bad as this one," John said, pointing to the bearded couch potato. "I got a message back from Sophia, and she says that Nolan is due to arrive here tomorrow night. We'll let him coordinate any work on the Kierdan weapons. Besides, I don't think the company life insurance policy covers deaths on other planets."

"Well, if you put it that way…"

***

"I'll be…"

"Amazement aside, I don't suppose you have an explanation for why this happened, Ganz?" John asked.

The three of them had just crossed over the portal, and were now standing in Rheus's workshop staring at the two dead flashlights.

One flashlight sat inside a sealed glass case, while the second one was clipped to the case's handle. Upon moving through the portal, both bulbs had simultaneously faded away within a few seconds. There had been no noticeable delay between the two flashlights dying.

"Well, like I said before, the case itself could be contaminated from residual dust in your house," Ganz offered, "Or, perhaps, it doesn't matter how well we seal it. It could even be some weird type of radiation that's causing the drain. I can have the techs in my lab send over a new one, guaranteed clean, and we can see what happens then?"

"Sounds good," John replied. "Let's head back over and I'll make the arrangements with Sophia. After that, we can come back and hit the books here."

***

"Well, this one's the same as the last, what is it, twenty seven?' John commented, putting the book down in disgust.

They had just spent the better part of two hours skimming through stacks of books, and John had nothing to show for it.

"I'm starting to think that this is a lost cause," John continued. "Please tell me that one of you managed to find something?"

"Not as such, sorry," Rheus apologized.

"I think I may have found something tangential to our quest a few books ago," Ganz commented, still leafing through his current book.

"Well, don't keep us in suspense?" John said.

"What? Oh, sorry," Ganz replied, looking up from the dusty tome. "I was reading one of your books, *Tasrac: Its Artificial Uses and their Impact on Wildlife Ecology and Habitats*, I believe it was?"

"Ah, yes. By Professor Harzol, or Professor Waste-my-time, as I like to call him. Don't tell me he's actually produced some useful research?"

"He's not a reputable source?" John asked.

"No, no, he's got the knowledge. He just chooses to squander it by prancing about in the woods all day. He'll talk your head off about saving this species of animal, or that patch of grass,

if he manages to corner you. Incidentally, I wouldn't mention any of that to Venarya. She seems to like him."

"He's still alive and working here? I thought you said this batch of books was written over fifty years ago?" Ganz said, looking at Rheus.

"You didn't tell him about that?" Rheus said, looking at John.

"Tell me about what?"

"Human lifespan here is doubled. I'll give you a full rundown later. Just roll with it for now, and get back to your theory," John replied.

"Wait, what? Okay, here goes," a surprised and confused Ganz said. "He made mention, quite a long mention actually, about one of his trips into the woods, where he was forced to take shelter under a tree to get out of the rain."

"Okay…," John said.

"He then makes mention of something that had completely slipped my mind to check on," Ganz continued.

"Which is?"

"Lightning. He started talking about how beautiful the lightning was in the clouds, and then started sort of rambling on about using the light from it to watch different types of insects scurrying about. John, they have lightning here!"

John just looked at him blankly.

"Lightning means electricity, John!"

"Okay, I see where you're going with this," John said, comprehension slowly dawning on his face. "However, there's a slight issue. I don't recall hearing any mention of lightning bolts from the heavens being used to detonate the explosives."

"Lightning what, now?" Rheus interrupted.

"Huh?" said John, confusion returning.

"Um… what does lightning look like in this world, Rheus?" Ganz asked, stepping in.

"Pretty lights in the sky?" Rheus said, tentatively. "What is it supposed to look like?"

"Not bright, elongated strips of light that travel from the sky to the ground?"

"Er… not that I can remember, at least."

"I see…," Ganz replied, idly scratching his chin.

"Back to the drawing board, Ganz?" John asked.

“No, this actually sort of holds with my theory,” Ganz said. “It looks like they only have cloud to cloud lightning here, with no actual ground strikes. I’m guessing that the tasrac effect is too powerful to allow the electricity to travel such a distance.”

“Okay,” John said, “I guess it’s a good scientific observation, but what of it?”

“We’re assuming that whatever property of tasrac nullifies explosives, also causes the power drain that we’ve observed. However, the mere presence of lightning on this world shows that the tasrac effect does have its limits.”

“Lightning’s a pretty high limit.”

“True, but I’m thinking that a high enough application of electricity might momentarily cause any tasrac particles in the immediate area to temporarily lose their potency. Remember the issue with the detonator?”

“Yes.”

“Well, that burst of electricity is also capable of creating a jolt of heat and pressure. Enough to detonate any black powder that’s not currently under the stabilizing effect of tasrac.”

“I’ll be…,” John said, repeating one of Ganz’s favourite phrases. “That’s a clever solution.”

“There’s still one issue,” Ganz said.

“Which is?” Rheus asked.

“We need to figure out what kind of device they’re using to generate this electric charge.”

“Any ideas?”

“There’re a couple of things I can think of, but nothing that’ll generate the kind of charge we need without it first being drained and powerless at the onset.”

“I have an idea,” Rheus piped up.

“Stop right there, Rheus,” John sighed. “I know where this is going, and the answer’s still no. We wait for Nolan before trying to open up one of those things. I don’t fancy explaining to Venarya why you’re scattered across half a square mile.”

“Speaking of which,” Ganz said, “when do I get to meet this mysterious lady?”

“How about right now?” John asked.

“What about finishing these books?” Ganz asked, pointing to a nearby stack.

“You’re as bad as this one,” John said, pointing to Rheus. “If you look out the window, you’ll notice the waning light outside. That means it’s almost dinner time, Ganz. Plus, I’m sure Kail wants to go home.”

“Ah, okay,” Ganz sounded a little disappointed.

“Don’t worry about your reputation, Ganz,” laughed John. “You’ve managed to come up with a working theory for these explosives. I’ll be honest when I say that I didn’t expect us to accomplish anything significant until we got Nolan to crack open one of them.”

“Thanks… I think.”

“By the way, just out of curiosity, how long ago did you read that book?”

“It was the second book I skimmed.”

“And you didn’t think to mention this earlier? *Much* earlier?”

“Well, I was looking for corroborative evidence in any other books…,” Ganz started weakly.

“You mean, you wanted to try to go through as much of Rheus’s library as you could in one sitting?”

# Chapter 21

Eldnan was starting to look slightly impatient. Despite the best attempts to disguise his mood, Dendrav couldn't help but notice it. Furthermore, he couldn't help but feeling secretly pleased at the fact that Eldnan was seemingly 1annoyed.

*Good. Now he can get a taste of what I've been feeling for the last day.*

Turning around suddenly, Eldnan said to him, "Send that signal again."

"What?"

"The same signal from last night. Send it again."

Dendrav nodded to his first officer, who then ran to the signal lanterns.

Just like the previous night, Dendrav watched as two ships broke away from the fleet and started their suicidal journey.

"Is there a point to all this?" Dendrav asked. "What are you expecting to happen?"

"Concentrate on maintaining the blockade," Eldnan replied in that infuriatingly calm voice, though it was now speckled with a touch of irritation.

"You don't want to tell me. That's fine," Dendrav said. "But, you did promise that we'd be underway this evening?"

As they watched the turrets pick off the two sacrificial ships, Eldnan replied, "Relax, General. We will be."

***

"Well, that's interesting…," Yalic commented, looking through the spyglass.

"Trouble, sir?" the crewman manning the darklight asked.

"Not for us," Yalic responded, "but it looks like the defense platforms just opened fire on something. Ask for a status update as well, Jask."

"Yes, sir," Jask responded, as he started signalling with the darklight.

In a world where communications across water was impossible, the darklight was a wondrous piece of engineering. It was capable of sending out a high intensity light signal, which carried for miles. The light was also completely invisible to the naked eye. Only someone wearing a special set of goggles was able to observe it. Yalic wished that the entire fleet had

been equipped with them, but to get the Syrilo to sell them even a few of the devices had been a task in itself. To that end, only a select few command ships had been equipped with them.

Unfortunately, three of the precious devices now lay at the bottom of the ocean, thanks to the Kierdan attack. The one device Yalic had at his disposal had been taken from the *Midnight Dawn* the previous day, and he was taking great care to make sure nothing happened to it, or the special set of goggles.

"Any sign that we've been noticed?" he asked the other crew members, also equipped with spyglasses.

Thankfully, the response was a negative from all of them.

"Got the reply, sir," Jask reported after a few moments. "They say that the Kierdans just sent two more ships in again. They're deploying bells to check for divers in the water. Otherwise, they've also acknowledged the plan. They're prepping the fleet to support us later tonight. They also report that they've rigged up a few fireships to try and break up the enemy ranks. They'll be launched westward, so keep an eye out for them."

"Perfect," Yalic replied, "now, let's get out of here before they see us. We're already pressing our luck by trying this same stunt two nights in a row."

With the crew needing no further prompting, the lifeboat sprang into life and zipped away at high speed to rendezvous with the *Cat's Eye*.

***

Tasia ran down the stairs as swiftly as she could. This was her chance, and she had to get to the docks quickly, before other volunteers started to show up.

Since yesterday, all the diving bells had been on constant patrol. They hadn't found any sign of Kierdan intruders thus far, but Admiral Fescor had them performing a constant vigil.

Unfortunately, they lacked enough dedicated pilots to maintain continuous operation of the bells. With exhaustion finally becoming a factor, the command staff had announced a call for qualified volunteers. This was the chance she had been waiting for.

The Cluster had always tried to cross-train personnel where possible, enabling Tasia to learn how to pilot the small submersibles over the few years she had been stationed there. Now was the chance for her to put her training to use, and she doubted she would get another opportunity like this again anytime soon.

Approaching the dock, she saw an officer manning the station there.

Running up to him, she saluted and said, “Reporting for duty as a volunteer bell pilot, sir.”

The officer smiled and said, “At ease, *soldier*. We’re pretty informal here. It’s not like you’re volunteering to captain a Juggernaut. Now, your name and location?”

“Tasia. Special Research, Sub-level Nineteen.”

“Wow, I didn’t even realize we had labs that far down,” the officer whistled in amazement as he leafed through a stack of papers. “Are you sure you want to do this? You’re probably more valuable to us down there, rather than putting around in one of these rickety old things. We can easily find someone else to take your place, if you want?”

“I’m sure, sir.”

“Okay, then. Let me see your identification.”

Tasia silently handed the badge over, while the officer inspected it.

He handed it back to her and said, “Well, you’re marked down as trained here. You can take the bell in berth forty two. Now, again, are you sure you want to do this?”

“Positive.”

The officer sighed, “Very well, Tasia. There’ll be a map next to the control console, with an area marked out. Patrol that area, and don’t take any risks. If you spot anything, head back immediately to report in. Worst case, surface your bell near a platform and have the gunnery crew relay the message. Any questions?”

“None. I’m ready.”

“Okay, go ahead.”

“Thanks.”

Spirits high, Tasia ran over to the berth as fast as she could. Arriving there, she couldn’t get into the small craft fast enough.

Closing the hatch, she did a quick check on the systems. After verifying everything, she strapped herself in and powered on the lights and engines.

Slowly, she pulled out of the berth and started heading out toward open water.

Once she had cleared the outer ring of islets, she took a good look outside. The waters immediately around the Cluster had been saturated with lights that had been catapulted on to the ocean floor. Taking a calculated risk, she cut her lights as she descended to thirty feet.

She then swung the bell around to see if there were any other patrollers nearby that had noticed her odd behaviour. Spotting no one, she increased the throttle until she had left the patrol perimeter, and then began the arduous task of circumnavigating the Cluster.

Once she had arrived at the southernmost point, she began heading toward the blockade fleet.

*Eldnan better be where he said he would be*, she thought.

Subconsciously, she touched at the front of her jacket, making sure the packet was still in there. *She had done it.* She had managed to smuggle out one of the Cluster's highly guarded blueprints, and now just had to deliver it to her associates. Though, she had no idea why Eldnan had ordered her to retrieve this specific blueprint. Compared to the rest of the available research, this seemed fairly banal. Still, it was what Eldnan had insisted upon.

Thanks to the distraction provided by the blockade fleet, she had been able to bluff her way past the guard, who hadn't thought to search her belongings thoroughly on her way out of the lab.

She had insisted that she needed to hurry to reach the surface, in order to get a chance to pilot a bell. The guard, whom she had seen every day for the last few years, had wished her good luck, grinned, and sent her on her way. *Poor fool.* In a way, she hoped he didn't get reprimanded too badly for allowing the security breach. She had, after all, spent the last year flirting with him just for this occasion.

Tasia was brought back to reality when she saw a large dark shape swim by, just to the right of the diving bell. Once past the outer ring, sharks were abundant. Despite the protection offered by the submersible, she still felt a small tinge of fear.

Looking out the rear window, she saw the dark shape swimming in the distance. She hoped it didn't loop back around and try to charge the bell, as a solid impact was more than capable of shattering the glass windows. Still, she was now halfway to Eldnan's ship. With some luck, she may even be able to sneak back in to the Cluster and continue her espionage. *That is, assuming that one of Eldnan's stupid allies didn't see her first, and blast her out of the water when she surfaced.* Hoping Eldnan had some sort of control over his dogs, and no longer seeing the dark shape in her rear window, she returned to the task at hand.

Turning back around, she nearly screamed. She was headed right into what appeared to be the dark maw of a gigantic sea creature. The creature had to be no more than fifty feet away and

was closing fast. She hit the maneuvering controls wildly and tried to veer off to the left, but it was too little, too late.

Within seconds, her diving bell was enveloped by the creature's mouth.

# Chapter 22

After relieving Kail of his watch, the three men and the two dogs had walked over to Venarya's manor. Waiting there for them had been Rinard, who seemed justifiably preoccupied with the night's imminent activities. He did seem to relax a little, once they sat down and started eating dinner.

Ganz had been a little startled upon first seeing Venarya, and John secretly couldn't wait until he met Garh the next day.

"Are you sure your friends don't want to join us for dinner, Rinard?" Venarya asked. "I've more than enough food here."

"I'm sure more than a few of them would love to take you up on that offer, Venarya," Rinard said, "but Commander Nuretz is a thorough stickler when it comes to doing his job."

"I can send some food out for them?"

"Nuretz wouldn't be caught dead eating on the job, and I'm pretty sure he won't have kind words for any of his squad members that do it, either."

"Well, I can have some food packaged for them when you leave, then?"

"I think he'll allow that," Rinard chuckled.

"By the way, where's Krane?" she asked. "Did he decide to accompany the fleet after all?"

"Oh, no," Rinard replied. "He's camped out at the dockmaster's office, waiting for the fleet to return."

"You should have told me that earlier, Rinard," Venarya gently chided him. "I'll make sure he gets some food sent over."

"Remember, he loves incredibly hot peppers."

"Now, Ganz," Venarya said, ignoring Rinard and focusing her attention on him with a warm smile, "I have to say, I'm very impressed. I certainly didn't expect results like this so soon. You certainly don't disappoint."

"Er… thanks," Ganz replied, a little distracted. "Happy to be of… um… service."

John did his best to hide his smile. No doubt Venarya was using that strange ability of her's to evaluate Ganz for some reason, though John didn't sense any of the symptoms he had previously experienced from it. *Perhaps she can selectively target it,* John thought. *I'll have to remember to ask her later.*

It was also a bit odd that she would be targeting Ganz, but John couldn't mention anything without breaking her masquerade.

"Modest and a genius," Venarya teased. "Perhaps I should try to steal you out from under John? I'm sure I can offer a competitive work environment here?"

"Not if I snag him first," Rinard joined in with a smile. "Maybe I'll even throw in your very own private ship in the deal?"

"Go right ahead," John joked. "I'll even top up the deal with an exit bonus to entice him. I'm sure my soon-to-be gray hairs will appreciate it."

"By the way, John," Venarya said, "Rinard will be joining you and Ganz on your little hike tomorrow."

"Yes," Rinard supplied, "I'm going to head in to deliver a preliminary report of tonight's raid, while Krane mops up any stragglers and re-establishes control over the area."

"Glad to have you aboard. Always room for one more," John joked.

"I'm sorry?" Ganz said, confused. "Where are we going?"

"Oh, right. I'd forgotten to tell you about that," John said. "We'll be going into a foggy swamp with a sasquatch tomorrow."

"Wait, we're what now?"

John smiled, "Remember the old man I told you about? He invited us over for lunch."

"Okay, that much I got," Ganz replied, his eyes a little wide. "Now, about the sasquatch part?"

***

"I'll be…"

The light banter had continued over dinner, and the group now found themselves seated in the back patio, enjoying an after-dinner drink.

That is, most of the group was sitting. Ganz was standing at the railing, and couldn't tear his eyes away from the Dark Sister.

"Is there anything else you might have forgotten to tell me?" Ganz asked, still staring upwards.

"If I did, it's probably intentional and for my own amusement."

"Funny."

“What do you think it is? It’s obviously not bright enough to be an actual sun, right?”

“You’d be surprised,” Ganz responded. “A brown dwarf star, for example, can barely emit any visible light.”

“Like on that television show you used to keep talking about?”

“Huh, what? That was red, and no,” Ganz replied, taking the ribbing in good sport. “Anyhow, it looks like we’re in a binary star system. That is, a system with two stars-”

“I know what a binary system is, Ganz,” John said. “I don’t just watch reality television shows, you know?”

“I… ah, well, it doesn’t appear to be a typical binary system,” Ganz explained. “It looks like this planet is actually in an orbit between the two stars. Normally, I’d expect us to be in an orbit circling both of them.”

“Go on,” Rheus prodded.

“I can’t say much more at this point, but I’ve started to formulate a theory about that moon up there as well. I’ll let you know as soon as I have more, though, In any case, it looks like that thing up there might possibly be some sort of white dwarf star-”

“How many colours do these dwarfs have?” John muttered.

“As I was saying,” Ganz continued, ignoring John, “it’s possible that that might be a white dwarf up there. Binary systems containing those are fairly common. However, it doesn’t really look like what I would expect.”

“How so?”

“Those light trails emanating from it are usually caused by the white dwarf pulling stellar matter away from the companion star. But, those should just show up as a sort of a static spiral around it, and they definitely shouldn’t be moving that fast, or that randomly.”

“What could cause that?” Rheus asked.

“I honestly don’t know at this point,” Ganz admitted. “I’d have to study up more on its history. Then, there’s also the fact that I can’t really see any more stars up there?”

“I had assumed that it was because the Dark Sister was too bright, and just blotted them out?” John asked.

“Even so, we should have caught a few glimpses of something.”

“I’m sorry, what are you looking for?” Rheus asked.

“More suns, but extremely far away,” Ganz explained. “They’ll show up as little pinpricks of light in the night sky.”

The three locals looked at each other, no little bit of confusion in their eyes.

Rheus spoke first, “I’m fairly sure those don’t exist here.”

“I… ok, that’s odd,” Ganz admitted. “I’ll definitely have to do more research on that, as well.”

“You’re welcome to spend the night at my place, if you want?” Rheus offered. “I’ve got quite a large personal library.”

“And very little furniture,” Venarya said with a smile.

“Not anymore,” Rheus said triumphantly. “I had maintenance furnish the guest room for me yesterday.”

Shaking her head in defeat, Venarya said, “It’s your call, Ganz. Just don’t let this one keep you up all night.”

Without a spot of objection, Ganz replied, “In that case, I’d love to.”

“Don’t forget to get some rest, though,” John said. “We’ve still got that little nature hike tomorrow.”

“I don’t suppose you’ve got bug repellent back at your house?”

“Don’t worry,” Venarya said. “There’s something about the fog that deters insects from gathering in there.”

“Well, as long as it’s not ghosts that are causing it, I’m fine with that.”

“Ganz,” John started, “you said that these white dwarf binary systems are pretty common?”

“Fairly,” Ganz confirmed. “They’re a valuable tool for cosmology. The light created by the supernova is used to measure distances in space.”

“I see… wait, what supernova?”

“Oh sorry, I jumped ahead,” Ganz apologized, “When the white dwarf absorbs enough stellar matter from the companion star, it pretty much explodes.”

“I…,” was all John could say.

Rheus and Rinard were both wild-eyed.

Venarya spoke first, “Do you think that’s the case here?”

“I wish I could say for sure, but I wouldn’t worry about it for now,” Ganz assured her. “Like I said, the laws of physics here don’t seem to exactly jive with what I’m familiar with. Plus, I’m not even sure that that is a white dwarf up there.”

“So, have any more good news you neglected to mention to us, Ganz?” John asked, one brow arched.

***

Rinard had just left with his personal guards, and John had to hide his grin when he saw who would be escorting Rheus and Ganz back to their quarters for the night.

“Hi, Kitam,” he said, transforming his grin into a smile. “Slept well?”

“Hi, John! How are you? I slept like a baby today. That’s an odd saying though, isn’t it? My friend Neleem, she says her baby seems to be awake most of the time, and always wakes up through the night. It’s true, every time I go over there to visit, her baby’s always waking up. Anyways, who’s your friend?”

*She* must *drink an incredible amount of caffeine. That’s the* only *explanation.*

“This is Ganz,” John said. “He’s helping us with the Kierdan situation.”

“It’s a pleasure to meet you, Ganz,” Kitam beamed, shaking his hand vigorously.

Unfazed, Ganz smiled and replied, “You too, Kitam.”

“Well, I’ll let you three get on your way,” John said, hoping to avoid another verbal onslaught from the talkative Ranger, “Don’t forget to get some rest, Ganz. See you later, Kitam.”

“Bye, John. I’ll see you around soon, I hope.”

As they walked out of earshot, John shut the door and said, “You did that on purpose, didn’t you?”

Venarya just gave him an exaggerated *‘Who? Me?’* look.

“I’ll say one thing, if she fights like she talks, perhaps we should sic her on Kierd,” John commented with a grin.

“By the way, I’m still deciding if I should order her to accompany you to the swamp’s perimeter tomorrow,” Venarya said with a wicked smile.

“You wouldn’t!”

“Maybe. Maybe not,” she said, giving him a soft kiss. “Can you give me a reason not to?”

“I’ll be your friend,” he said, returning the kiss. “Now, I’m not complaining, but why the sudden kittenishness?”

“I figured you deserved a reward for the progress you and Ganz made today.”

“I sure hope you’re not planning on rewarding Ganz this way as well…”

“And why not?” she asked with a giggle.

“Ha ha,” John replied. “Speaking of Ganz, I meant to ask you about earlier. Why were you using your… power on him?”

“I wasn’t,” she said, appending a kiss to her reply.

“You didn’t?” John repeated, some surprise in his voice. “Why was he so flustered when first talking to you, then?”

“You know, John,” Venarya said, her lips hovering over his. “Some women might choose to take offense to that last statement. I strongly recommend you rephrase that.”

## Chapter 23

"They should be starting any time now," Krane said, leaning on the rail as he looked out into the harbour.

"Sir?" Captain Harker remarked, perking up.

"Huh? Oh, just talking to myself, Captain," Krane explained. "I was just thinking that the counterattack should be happening soon."

"I'm sure they'll succeed, sir."

"I certainly hope so," Krane chuckled. "Else, it's going to be a mite hard being a Fleet Admiral if I don't have a fleet."

"I… yes, sir."

"Perk up, my boy," laughed Krane. "There's no court-martial in store for you, in case you ever decide to disagree with me about the weather."

"Sorry, sir," he replied, obviously still a little nervous about candidly addressing the top ranking officer in the entire Cluster.

Shaking his head a little and chuckling, Krane decided to try another approach. "You're relatively new to Nuretz's little gang, right?"

"Yes, sir. Eight months now."

"Ah, yes. I remember Commander Nuretz forwarding me your recommendation. Captain Tuvalin's ship, right?"

"Yes, sir," Harker replied, his head a little downcast.

"You have my condolences on that. Tuvalin was a good man, and the *Storm Walker* was a fine ship. Want to know something?"

"I… sure, sir."

"Tuvalin actually served under me on my first command. He was just a lowly signal officer back then, but he made a good showing of himself. Very few people climbed the ranks as fast as he did."

"Sir?"

"What I'm saying, Harker, is that Tuvalin's recommendation carried a lot of weight with me. Believe me when I say that there were a lot of candidates for your position. You didn't get this job on a whim, Captain."

"I… I didn't know that. Thank you," Harker replied, then quickly adding, "sir."

Krane grinned, "I'm sure you must still be feeling out of place, being the new recruit in the squad and all, but remember that you're one of the most valuable assets that we have. We entrust Commander Nuretz's little band of cutthroats with Director Rinard's life. To that end, I'll say you've earned the right to carry on a conversation with me."

***

"Well? What's their report?" the bearded and grizzled looking man asked.

"They said your hunch was right, Captain," the first officer responded. "They've captured a diving bell on its way to meet up with the Kierdans."

"Now, we're absolutely sure that we didn't just interrupt some sort of strange reconnaissance mission, right?"

"Not unless that mission was strange enough to necessitate concealing top secret blueprints on your person."

"I see. Tell them good work, Lenchek. Have them wait for us to finish up here, but keep their ears open for any more bells trying to make a break for it. If anything happens to us during the fight, have them take the prisoner straight to the old man."

"Aye, Captain."

***

"Crews are reporting that they've completed work on the last of the fireships. All four waves are now ready to be deployed, sir," Gadil said.

"Excellent," Fescor replied. "Tell them to send the first wave out as soon as they see our signal."

"Yes, sir," Gadil replied, hurrying back to the edge of the tower to relay the message.

"I don't even know if I'd call those fire*ships*," chuckled Fescor. "They're barely bigger than dinghies."

"They'll accomplish the task," Skagant buzzed. "In any event, we don't actually need to hit any of their ships, just sow chaos."

"Well, that's true," Fescor said. "Though, it would have been nice if we could have just launched a few hundred of those to chase away the Kierdans."

“It wouldn’t matter if you sent out a thousand. The Kierdans would just avoid them, or sink them from a distance,” Skagant said. “Without a multi pronged attack to support such an action, there’s no point.”

“No kidding, Admiral Obvious? Is the fleet ready to deploy, once our unknown friends arrive?”

“They’ve been ready for quite some time, now,” Skagant replied. “I’ll have all chains, except for the eastern ones, dropped once the attack begins.”

“Good. Let’s just hope they can take a hint and go home.”

***

Captain Velios paced the deck of the *Hawk’s Talon* impatiently.

The order to sally forth and counterattack couldn’t come soon enough for him. He had lost a lot of good friends in the initial attack, and now it was time for some payback.

“The tower reports that phase one is in place, sir.”

“Good,” Velios responded, shaken out of his reverie. “That means Admiral Ancor’s fleet is waiting to the west. Signal our acknowledgement.”

“Yes, sir.”

“Confirm with our squad, then relay a message back to the tower that we’re on standby.”

***

Ancor examined the view through the spyglass. He could see the islands on the horizon outlined against the rising Dark Sister. It looked almost serene.

He still felt a bit strange, commanding the Director’s ship, but Krane had been thorough in making sure that he got a complete rundown on all her capabilities. Besides, if all went to plan, his squad shouldn’t be doing much fighting.

“It looks like everyone’s in place, sir,” Captain Rodric reported. “Well, as far as I can see, anyhow.”

The entire fleet was currently running with no lights, which had made for a slow journey. Aside from two near collisions, they had managed to make it to their designated holding area with no major incidents. Thankfully, it didn’t look like any of the Kierdan ships had spotted them yet.

“Hopefully, the cavalry gets here soon,” Ancor commented. “I don’t know how much longer we can keep this up without getting seen.”

“I couldn’t agree more, sir.”

***

“Doesn’t look like they’ve spotted us yet, Captain.”

“Probably all have their gazes turned inward, trying to see what the Cluster might try. What’s the word from the rest of the ships?”

“Everyone reports ready, Captain.”

“And us?”

“The *Dark Sun*’s ready for a fight, sir.”

“Good,” the bearded man grinned. “Well then, let’s do what we came here to do, Lenchek. Full power to the engines. Hit them hard!”

“Yes, sir!” Lencheck responded, as he flashed the go-ahead signal to the comms operator.

The fleet of seventy nine ships then roared in life, charging ahead at full speed.

“Tell the ships to make every shot count,” the bearded man instructed. “We don’t have enough to waste on warning shots.”

“Aye, sir.”

***

“Sir!”

“I see them, Gadil,” a puzzled Fescor said, putting down the spyglass for a moment. “There can’t be more than a hundred ships there. How are they planning on even scratching the Kierdans, much less winning?”

“I would assume they have some sort of advantage that’s not apparent,” Skagant commented.

“Again, no kidding?” Fescor said, shaking his head. “Gadil, send up Admiral Ancor’s signal immediately, and then tell all gunners in the outer ring platforms to open fire. That should grab their attention, and allow our friends to do as much damage as they can.”

“Yes, sir.”

Everyone in the tower watched as the platforms opened fire wildly. Because of the distance, anything that actually managed to get hit by the energy projectiles barely got scorched. Some confusion, however, was apparent in the enemy ranks as enemy ships started edging away from their established perimeter.

"Launch the first wave of fireships now, Gadil."

"Yes, sir."

Looking through his spyglass, Fescor could see dozens of the small unlit craft swiftly making their way west. At about a half a mile out, they suddenly turned into blazing comets.

"Looks like your makeshift timers worked, Skagant," Fescor commented.

"Was there any doubt?"

"Don't be so modest," Fescor said, as he watched the ships making their way closer to the blockade. "I just hope that burning oil doesn't end up killing their engines too soon. I don't want the current pushing them back toward us."

"I had them take precautions, just in case. There's a thick sheet of metal encasing the engine. They should not burn out until they reach a distance of around five miles."

"As long as we don't end up burning down Iathera by accident. Now, you're sure you had them rig those boats correctly, right?" Fescor asked. "I mean, they're not just going to bump into the Kierdan ships and zip away in another direction, are they?"

"I assure you, they're not."

"Fair enough, then," Fescor said, deciding not to belabour the point. "We'll drop the chains as soon as our friends begin firing, Gadil."

"Yes, sir."

***

"There's our signal!" Ancor called out. "Hit the lights and let's move into position!"

"Yes, sir! Launching the confirmation signal now," Rodric confirmed.

With the flare high in the night air, his small fleet erupted into life and started ploughing toward the Kierdan blockade's western perimeter.

About four miles out from the blockade, Ancor saw the fireships blazing into life, making wild runs at the western portion of the blockade.

Normally, the large Kierdan armada would have looked at Ancor's small fleet as easy pickings, but between avoiding both the platforms and the fireships, they weren't sure what to expect next. Indeed, Ancor saw signal lanterns flashing like crazy throughout the entire blockade fleet, as they tried to get definitive orders.

"Hold here," Ancor ordered, as they pulled up approximately three miles away from the blockade. "Fan out and make sure they see us. Let them know there's no safe haven in this direction."

"Yes, sir."

"Also, instruct the fleet to keep an eye out for rogue fireships. I don't fancy having to tell the Director that his ship got sunk by friendly fire."

***

"Spread out and prepare to open fire!"

"Aye, Captain," Lenchek acknowledged.

"Looks like the Cluster decided to give us a little diversion," the bearded man commented.

"Indeed."

"Well, let's not waste it. Open fire when we get to about three quarters of a mile out. Let's give these Kierdans the shock of their lives."

"Aye, sir," Lenchek said, sporting a wicked grin.

***

"It's almost pretty, isn't it?" Fescor said, taking in the lightshow below.

"I suppose so," Skagant buzzed. "If you're easily enthralled by bright and shiny things, that is."

"I think you missed your calling by not becoming a motivational speaker. Anyway, it looks like a few of our Kierdan guests were too busy looking at the platforms to bother getting out of the way in time." Fescor said, looking at the couple of fireships that had managed to hit their Kierdan targets. "Launch the second wave, Gadil."

"Yes, sir."

Laden with pyrine oil, the front hull of each fireship had been rigged to collapse upon impact. A large section of water to the west was now a floating conflagration as the burning oil

from the first wave gathered on the surface. Enemy ships that were still mobile hurried to escape the area.

Fescor then turned his spyglass northward, expecting to see the friendly ships about to start their seemingly suicidal attack. He almost dropped the delicate device when he saw what was happening.

"What the…" Fescor trailed off. "Quickly, Gadil, drop the chains! Signal the gunners to ease off and watch out for friendly fire!"

"Yes, sir!"

"Do you see this, Skagant?" Fescor exclaimed.

"Yes," came the simple reply. "Quite extraordinary."

The friendly ships had already opened fire on the Kierdans, and were now breaking off to regroup. That, in itself, was not that amazing. What was disconcerting was the fact that they appeared to be using energy projectiles similar to the Cluster's defense platforms. It looked like the friendly ships had already managed to sink a score of Kierdan warships, without even getting anywhere in range of the enemy's weapons.

"How's that possible?" Fescor puzzled. "Where'd they get that kind of weaponry?"

"We can ponder that at another time," Skagant said. "For now, let's just be grateful for the fact that they have them."

"I guess. Well, at least it looks like the Kierdan lines are starting to buckle, thanks to our friends down there."

***

"Looks like they weren't expecting that," the bearded man laughed, looking at the Kierdan ships attempting to flee, leaving their crippling compatriots sinking. "You'd think they would have at least tried to withstand more than a single charge, though."

"A truly shameful display, sir," Lenchek agreed.

"Well, let's see about getting the rest of these cowards on their way. Head to the western side of the islands," the bearded man ordered. "Looks like the Cluster made us a nice warm fire there. Tell all nearby Serpents to toss some extra wood on it."

"Aye sir," Lenchek replied with an evil grin, walking over to the comms operator.

***

With the crash of thunder, the enormous chains plunged into their respective causeways, permitting free passage. Simultaneously, the platform gunners stopped firing wildly, allowing for the friendly ships to join the fight.

"There's our signal," Velios said. "Let's go!"

"Moving out, sir," his first officer confirmed.

Like swarms of angry hornets, Cluster warships began streaming out of the causeways.

"Instruct our squad to stay wide, in case the Kierdans get off a lucky shot. Target that group of ships to the south," Velios ordered, seeing several Kierdan vessels moving to protect what appeared to be their command ship.

"Orders acknowledged," his first officer replied shortly.

With the enemy forces scattered around the blockade lines, Velios realized that this might be their one chance to deal with whoever was in charge. Once more Kierdan ships moved to reinforce their command ship, the cost in blood and ships would be too high.

"Signal the next closest squad to form up behind us and make a pass at them as well," Velios said. "That should hopefully double our chances to cut the head off this snake."

"Yes, sir."

As they sped forward, the first officer reported, "Sir, the tower reports that the northern line's been broken. The survivors are coming around the east side of the islands and trying to regroup with the rest of their fleet. Their western front looks like it's in disarray from the fireships, as well."

"Good," Velios responded, secretly a little disappointed that the battle might be over sooner than he expected. "And that backup squad?"

"They've acknowledged the orders and are moving into place on our starboard flank, sir."

"Have a few of our gunners aim some of the shots high if possible," Velios instructed. "Try and see if we can hit the ships on the far side of the group, assuming we can get the range. They're packed in pretty tight, so that should hamper their maneuverability a bit if they try to escape."

"Yes, sir."

***

“Looks like they left close to fifty ships there, Admiral,” Rodric observed, as he watched the Kierdans beginning to withdraw from the western side of the island.

“Possibly trying to buy time for the rest of their fleet to escape. Noble, but a waste. Tell our ships to move in,” Ancor ordered. “Let’s see about driving them back where they came from.”

“And maybe send a couple of the bastards to the bottom of the ocean,” Rodric commented, as he signalled the fleet.

“I’m sure you’ll get the chance, Captain,” Ancor commented. “Remember, though, we don’t want to put their backs to a corner. We just want them gone as quickly as possible. We’ve already lost a good portion of the fleet to them, and the longer they stay here, the more of our ships they may also sink.”

“I understand, sir,” Rodric replied. “Though, I can’t say that our boys don’t feel like bloodying a few Kierdan noses right now.”

“Like I said, I’m sure you’ll get your chance before this is all over,” Ancor said. “Just remember that our primary orders are to make sure Kierd leaves before accomplishing whatever their objective is.”

“Yes, sir,” Rodric responded. “Wait, what the…”

“What’s happening?”

“The friendly ships just signalled us, sir.”

“Are you sure they were talking to us?”

“Positive, sir. They mention the *Midnight Dawn* by name. They say to halt our advance until afterwards.”

“After what?”

“They didn’t say, sir.”

While not happy being given strange orders by an unknown faction, Ancor still decided to take the prudent course.

“Signal the fleet to stop.”

“Yes, sir.”

Ancor’s fleet ground to a halt about a mile and a half from the remaining blockade ships, while tense crew members wondered what the friendly ships had planned.

“Looks like a second wave of fireships are on the way over, sir,” Rodric said. “That might be what the message was referring to.”

“Perhaps…”

“Still, those fireships wouldn’t be much of a danger to-,” Rodric didn’t get a chance to finish his sentence.

The ocean close to the remaining Kierdan ships was still partially aflame due to the pyrine oil from the first wave of fireships. However, the flames no longer posed an immediate threat, and the enemy was able to easily maneuver around them.

Then, with a bright flash, an enormous floating inferno erupted around much of the remaining Kierdan ships.

The enemy ships were barely visible as twenty foot high flames surrounded them. Mass confusion became apparent as ships moved in every which direction to try to escape the blazing ocean. Crews that managed to escape frantically tried to extinguish their vessels.

“Was that from the second wave of fireships, Captain?” Ancor asked, confusion apparent in his voice as well.

“No, sir,” Rodric replied. “The fireships are still about a minute out. Though, I don’t know how much more damage they can do on top of whatever just happened.”

Rodric’s statement was punctuated by several of the Kierdan ships exploding.

“Looks like their own weapon stores just exploded, sir,” Rodric said, a note of self satisfaction in his voice.

***

“What the hell was that?” Fescor said, surprise in his eyes.

“I’m assuming our new allies were the cause of that.”

“Really, now?” Fescor said, sarcasm in his voice. “Because I was thinking that the Kierdans just got depressed and decided to self-immolate themselves.”

***

“I’d say that worked out pretty well, Lenchek?”

“You’ll get no argument from me, sir.”

The Serpents had stealthily and superbly completed their underwater mission. Thousands of gallons of kerilac oil had been released from their reservoirs. They didn’t even need to use any igniters, as the burning remnants of the fireships had managed to set the oil aflame.

Kerilac oil didn't burn as hot as the Cluster's pyrine oil, nor was it as difficult to extinguish. However, it did produce tremendous and dramatic flames which served to terrify any enemy.

***

"Well, let's see if we can't bloody a few burning noses for you," Ancor said. "Tell the fleet to move forward and fire at will."

"Yes, sir," Rodric replied. "With the state those Kierdans are in, this'll be easier than target practice."

"Indeed," Ancor agreed. "Let's make this a little more interesting, and do some field testing while we're at it. Signal all nearby friendlies to watch out, and prep a volley of blinders."

"With pleasure, sir," Rodric confirmed, an evil grin on his face.

While blinding flares were common enough in ground warfare, they tended to pose a hazard in naval battles. Due to being fired at long range, their height when ignited usually meant that more than a few nearby friendly ships could inadvertently be affected as well. Overall, they were liable to impact both sides equally, limiting their effectiveness.

On top of that, the flares were not much different from standard Cluster signal flares, but with their tasrac cores overcharged to a certain degree. While this made the devices easy to construct, the charge tended to drain over time, rendering them useless on long voyages. Although they didn't drain as fast as tasrac explosives, the short lifespan on the devices still rendered them useless on even local patrol ships, which could stay out at sea for several weeks at a time. Hence, ships didn't bother wasting valuable space on them.

That was, until the Cluster engineers had created their own take on the devices. Carefully weighted to arch downwards during flight, they were also encased in cylinders which restricted the area affected by the light, creating a shotgun-like effect from the flares. Also, because of the low weight of the devices, their effective range was greater than standard weaponry. The idea was to use the devices to blind the enemy, then swoop in and finish them off before they could collect their senses.

"We're sure that they're still charged, right?" Ancor asked, as they pulled into firing range of the blinders.

"Double-checked them myself before we left, sir."

"In that case, Captain, fire at will."

***

"Are you sure?" Fescor asked.

"Yes, sir," Gadil replied. "They say they're about to test it right now. I'm having it relayed to all other squadrons to make sure they're aware of it."

"Good work, Gadil. Now then, let's get a front row seat to this," Fescor replied, quickly walking over to the western part of the tower.

"Bearing in mind what they're about to do, you may want to reconsider that course of action," Skagant said, walking over to his side.

"I've got faith in our engineers. Besides, if you're so worried, why are you next to me?"

"I'm in no danger," was all that the Syrilo said. "If you do insist on watching, I would advise you to at least keep one eye closed."

"That's… ah, fine," Fescor relented, feeling a tad silly, but following the suggestion. Taking one last look around the tower, he saw the nearby staff also following suit.

***

"Firing now, sir!" Rodric said, pulling the lever.

Out of the launcher, a mass of flares shot forward, arcing down toward the burning Kierdan ships.

"Let's hope this works," Ancor replied, closing his eyes.

***

The onlookers in the tower saw the flares heading toward their targets.

"Looks like a swarm of fireflies," Fescor mused.

Getting close to the enemy ships, the flares burst into life, bathing the flaming sea around the Kierdans in a bright spotlight. A few of the flares had fallen off course, but only ended up illuminating nearby empty areas of ocean. None of them had managed to affect any friendly ships.

It looked like the Kierdans were definitely not expecting that, as blinded crews caused several of the ships to collide with each other in their mad dash to escape the flames.

“Well now,” Fescor said, opening his closed eye, “it looks like we can begin mass production on that blinder system.”

***

“Isn’t that a beautiful sight?”

“Aye, sir,” Lenchek replied, turning around to look at the mass of confused, burnt, and now half-blind Kierdans.

“We may not even have anything to do when we get there,” laughed the bearded man. “Between their own weapons and Ancor’s fleet, I don’t think that particular group’s going to have a fun time.”

“Well, we can only hope, sir.”

“How many shots do you figure we have left?”

“I’d say no more than eight apiece, sir.”

“In that case, let Ancor’s fleet have fun with those burning Kierdans. Go around them, and bring us around on the southwest corner of the blockade. Let’s see if we can help them withdraw a little faster. Also, tell the Serpents to spread more joy around, if they can.”

***

“Tell the entire squad to max their speed,” Velios ordered. “Break and turn at three hundred metres, fire broadside, then run like hell while we reload.”

“Yes, sir.”

Speeding up, the six lightest ships in his squad moved ahead and started their attack run. With the grace of trained dancers, they split and banked off in two different directions. Quickly, they unloaded a large volley of pyrine oil missiles at the enemy. Most of the projectiles managed to impact an enemy vessel, but none had managed to hit the apparent command ship.

In response, the Kierdans also unleashed their own volley of missiles. Two of the three ships that had banked east caught the brunt of them and were blown apart.

“Damn,” Velios swore. “That’s two more ships they owe us. Let’s go collect our due. Prepare to bank and fire.”

“Yes, sir.”

Before they could start turning, the ocean around the slow moving cluster of Kierdan ships erupted in enormous flames.

"What the-" Velios started. Catching himself, he quickly took advantage of the opportunity and ordered, "Bank and fire, now! Let's at least make sure their command ship goes down."

The Kierdans were occupied with escaping their blazing prison, and were making wild maneuvers to try to escape. A few of the tightly packed ships ended up colliding, causing even more confusion for their companions.

The missiles from the rest of Velios's squad had no difficulties hitting their targets. At the end, all but two enemy ships remained afloat, and they were still trying to escape the sea of fire surrounding them.

"Looks like we got their command ship, sir. The backup squad can take care of those two."

As they pulled away, Velios saw similar conflagrations happening in several other spots in the Kierdan ranks.

Staring at the strange ships off to the west, he said, "I don't know who these guys are, or how they did that, but I'm glad they're on our side."

***

"The tower says not to worry about those," Rodric said. "They'll burn out and sink by themselves within a few miles."

Most of the second wave of fireships had simply zipped by, due to the depleted amount of available targets. Ancor had inquired about intercepting them, but the tower had just assured him that that was not necessary.

"Good enough," Ancor said, "Tell our squad to pull back half a mile, and keep an eye out for anyone trying to make a break for the mainland."

"Yes, sir. I'll say one thing, the salvage crews are going to be one unhappy lot for the next few weeks."

***

"Damn," Fescor commented.

"What is it?" Skagant queried.

"I've still got close to seventy more fireships left, and no one to shoot them at."

“My hearts bleed for you.”

“How safe is it to move those things, anyways?”

“Reasonably safe, provided that you’re careful,” Skagant assured him. “I assume that you intend to reposition them on the eastern side, then launch them at the soon-to-be retreating fleet?”

“Well, I was actually thinking of using them for a quick victory display for the troops afterwards, but your idea might be slightly better.”

***

“Looks like some of them decided to make a break for it early.”

“Quite the lack of discipline, sir,” Lencheck responded.

They watched as a few dozen ships from various locations turned tail and started to unceremoniously flee from the battle. The good news was that close to half of the Kierdan fleet had retreated or been sunk so far. However, that still left close to two hundred enemy ships to contend with.

Recovering from the shock attack, all remaining enemy ships now lay in a tight defensive group south of the Cluster. They were now making fair use of their explosive weapons, and the Cluster ships were keeping their distance.

“How are we for kerilac oil, Lenchek?”

“I’m afraid all but one of the Serpents are dry, sir.”

“Pity. We could have roasted most of those bastards right then and there. Keep that Serpent in reserve, and tell her captain to stay nearby in case the Kierdans get up to any funny business,” the bearded man said. “Well, looks like we’ll have to do this one the old fashioned way. Send a message to our ships. Have everyone make ready for one more charge at that group.”

“Aye, sir.”

***

“Maybe I should have had the ground crews point the fireboats towards that nice collection of targets to the south instead,” Fescor pondered.

“Perhaps,” Skagant said. “Either way, it looks like our mysterious friends are about to attack them.”

“Indeed. Well, this should prove entertaining,” Fescor commented. “I’m still wondering where they got those weapons, and how they got them to work while mounted to a ship.”

“I don’t believe that asking nicely will get them to reveal what I’m assuming to be one of their top secrets.”

“You never know until you try, Skagant.”

“Then I invite you to try to fly off of this tower.”

“Only if you join me on the way down. Well, looks like our Kierdan friends see those ships heading their way, as well.”

The remaining half of the Kierdan armada had indeed turned their ships eastward and were starting to pick up speed.

“Looks like they know what’s coming,” Fescor added. “I almost feel sorry for them.”

“I’m pretty sure that you’re the only one here experiencing that sentiment.”

“Hey, I did say *almost*.”

Everyone in the tower watched as the friendly ships closed in on the retreating Kierdans. Try as they might, the Kierdan ships could not escape their pursuers. The allied ships closed to half a mile, then opened fire.

Hundreds of energy projectiles hurtled toward the Kierdan ships. Through his spyglass, Fescor could see scared crew members jumping off the sides of soon-to-be doomed ships. Scant seconds later, the projectiles impacted and dozens of warships were sent to the bottom of the ocean.

“It looks like they’ve about had it,” Fescor commented with delight. “Good riddance.”

***

‘That’s about it, sir,” Lenchek reported. “Gunnery reports that they might be able to get three or four more shots out. Otherwise, we’re down to conventional weapons now.”

“Just as well,” the bearded man reported. “Let the Kierdans assume that was just a parting shot, and that we’re letting them escape.”

***

Captain Velios watched in disgust as the Kierdans started what appeared to be a general withdrawal from the area. Following the last attack by the mystery ships, the Kierdans had collectively decided to turn tail and run.

They were now pulling away to the east, and he had just received orders from the tower to reinforce Admiral Ancor's fleet to the west. Velios's thirst for vengeance would have to wait for another day.

As he was about to give his squad the order to head west, a lookout shouted, "Sir, they're jettisoning something into the water."

Turning around, he put his spyglass to his eye and saw what his crewman had been referring to. As they pulled away, each surviving enemy ship was now in the process of dumping several good-sized crates into the water behind them.

He assumed that they were jettisoning supplies, in order to escape at best speed.

Very quickly, his theory was proven wrong. One of the very crates that he had just seen dumped in the water a few moments ago suddenly and violently exploded.

"Damn," he muttered. Calling his first mate over, he said, "Quickly, signal the control tower with what we've just seen. Afterwards, try to tell as many ships as you can. Have them destroy any crate they see floating from a safe distance. Otherwise, instruct them to try and avoid the eastern side of the islands for now."

"Damn," he muttered again, as he watched the stern of the enemy ships sailing away.

***

"Well now, that's a clever trick."

"Indeed, sir," Lenchek agreed.

"Swing us around wide to avoid those crates. Tell our boys not to waste any shots on them. Kierd still has enough ships to cause us some problems if they decide to regroup and attack. Signal the Cluster and have them clear those things out before they drift ashore, or worse."

"Aye, sir."

"Hold position once we get to the southeastern corner."

"We're not going to pursue them, sir?" Lencheck looked a little surprised.

“No. We’ve gotten this far without losing any of our ships. Plus, I estimate around a hundred and fifty enemy ships still afloat. If those Kierdans realize we’ve got limited ammo, we could be in a spot of trouble.”

“Wise choice, sir.”

“In any case, if that signal we saw turns out to be correct, it looks like the Kierdans may be down one senior commander. No sense in chasing after the little fish now.”

***

“Bah, this is annoying,” Fescor said, “Why couldn’t they just leave in peace?”

“You wish for me to ask them?” Skagant buzzed. “Though, I sense your irritation moreso stems from the fact that you’re unable to use your fireships now.”

“Well, can you blame me? These fireships are useless with our own ships currently combing the east for those floating bombs. I can’t risk hitting one of them, especially if their maneuverability’s being hindered by a nearby crate.”

“Well, I do have half the ships on the lookout for those crates. We should be able to rid ourselves of them before too long. You might still get the chance to use your little toys.”

“The platform crews are keeping an eye out for them as well, though only a handful seemed to have made it anywhere within range as yet. However…,” Fescor trailed off, staring into space.

“Yes?” Skagant buzzed, a note of curiosity in his tone.

“Huh? Oh, I’ve just been pondering the possibility of trying to capture a few of those crates. Or, at the very least, immobilize them until we can figure out a way to safely retrieve them.”

“How do you plan on accomplishing that?”

“Anchored nets. I going to send a message to the engineers and have them rig up a few of those, then transport them over to a few of the faster ships.”

“It sounds promising,” Skagant agreed. “I’ll have the search ships mark the location of a few of the crates.”

“Appreciated. Now, there’s the question of looking for survivors,” Fescor said. “I think it’s safe at this point to have Ancor pull his fleet back. Doesn’t look like any of the Kierdans are in a hurry to turn back around.”

“Agreed. I’ll signal and ask him to do a quick sweep of the west to check for survivors, or any other surprises that Kierd might have left for us.”

# Chapter 24

"Okay, tomorrow night we're definitely staying at my place," John commented, as Venarya got out of bed and quickly donned a bathrobe.

Just like the previous night, the knocking at the front door had come at a most inconvenient time.

"Unless something went catastrophically wrong with the plan, I don't think this is heralding another midnight excursion for us," Venarya assured him with a chuckle. "Chances are that it's just Krane sending an update on their victory."

"See, now you've just jinxed us."

"Funny," she said, giving him a quick kiss on the lips. "I'll be back in a minute."

"I'll start changing," John joked.

***

"Well, aren't you going to tell me what that was about?" John said, returning the kiss.

"Really? I thought you had other… priorities on your mind?" she softly whispered, an evil smile on her face. "Unless, of course, you'd care to admit that I was right?"

"Alright, I give up," John laughed. "I take it that, judging from the fact that we're not rushing out in the middle of the night, the plan was successful?"

"Correct," she said, "Ancor just pulled into the harbour and gave a preliminary report to Krane. It appears that Kierd's now on the run."

"And those ships that the old man sent?"

"That's where things get a little strange," Venarya admitted. "Shortly before Ancor departed, he received a message from them. It implied that there was more at play here, and that they would dispatch an envoy to Iathera to meet with Krane."

"That sounds vaguely ominous," John said. "Plus, it sounds like we might end up on that midnight excursion after all, when that envoy arrives?"

"It's possible, but I doubt it," Venarya said, wrapping her arms around him. "Chances are that it's an internal security matter for the Cluster. In the worst case, I only see Yazril being summoned."

"I'll hold you to that," John said.

***

"Are you sure about that?" Krane asked.

"Positive, sir," Ancor replied. "I saw no signal lights being used to communicate between their ships. Either they're really coordinated, or they're all equipped with some sort of darklight."

"Some sort?"

"It's definitely nothing like what we're using," Ancor said. "I had a few people wearing goggles, and no one reports seeing even a flicker in that fleet. It's either that, or they figured out how to make comms work on water."

"Well, I suppose I'll have the chance to ask them about that when they get here."

"Are you sure that's a wise idea, sir? I know they saved us and all, but still…"

"Your concern's noted, Admiral, but I don't believe we have anything to worry about. Not from them, at least."

"You think the Kierdans are part of a larger problem too, then?"

"Glad to see that the Director's decision to promote you was a wise one," Krane grinned. "Your assumption's correct. We think someone's pulling the Kierdans' strings. There's no way they'd have the resources to be able to send that sort of fleet on a side trip, while in the middle of waging a war."

"Unfortunately," Krane's grin vanished, "that means that we've been targeted for an unknown purpose by an unknown enemy. We need to figure out who they are and what their goal is, and I'm hoping our mysterious friends can shed some light on that."

***

"They're approaching the mouth of the harbour, and should arrive at the dock shortly, sir," Harker reported.

"Perfect. Thank you, Harker." Krane replied. "I'll be out soon. Keep an eye on things for me."

"Yes, sir," Harker replied, as he closed the door behind him.

"Are you sure you'd rather not take Director Rinard with you, sir?" Ancor asked.

"No, just in the unlikely event that our friends are up to something," Krane replied. "I'd rather not give anyone the chance to kill both of us at the same time. In any event, I've already sent updates to him, the Intendant, and Administrator Venarya, so they know what's happening."

"And you're also sure you'd rather not have me stay here until this meeting's finished?"

"Absolutely, these new orders need to get to Skagant and Fescor as soon as possible, and I can't risk them being intercepted," Krane assured him. "Plus, I want to get a preliminary report on the salvage operations."

"I'll try to hurry then."

"Take the *Cat's Eye* and a dozen of the other fast cutters," Krane said. "I want you as mobile as possible, in case of any other surprises."

***

After taking one last glance at the *Cat's Eye* preparing to make its way out of the harbour, Krane said to Harker, "Spyglass please, Captain."

"Here you go, sir," Harker replied, handing over the device.

Pointing the spyglass towards toward the approaching ships, he was momentarily taken aback.

The ships were of no design he had ever seen. Their beams were wide, much wider than any warship craving maneuverability should ever be. They almost resembled cargo ships. Almost. The ships seemed to be made entirely of metal, unlike the mainly metalclad ships of the Cluster. Strange fluted designs also adorned the hull, which culminated in a number of large protrusions extending into the air. These protrusions resembled nothing more than his old grandma's ear trumpet, but on a much grander scale. He couldn't even begin to fathom what their function was.

Trying to get a glimpse of these weapons he had heard so much about, he was disappointed to find that all weapon placements had been covered by large tarps.

However, his initial amazement had nothing to do with the ships themselves. Standing proudly on the bow of the lead ship was a face he had not seen in years. A face that by all accounts, including his own, was dead.

"Harker."

"Yes, sir?"

“Slight change of plans,” Krane said. “I’ll be meeting with them alone. No guards. Cordon the area around their dock, and clear out anyone in earshot.”

“Er… yes, sir,” Harker replied, hesitation obvious in his voice.

“I know this seems like a strange request, Harker, but trust me on this one,” Krane assured him. “I’ll be fine. I just need you to make sure we’re not interrupted, or spied on.”

***

Krane solemnly walked up the gangplank.

“Welcome aboard, Admiral Krane. I’m Lieutenant Lenchek, First Officer on board the *Dark Sun*,” the man introduced himself. “The Captain’s waiting for you in his quarters. Straight through that door, sir.”

“Thank you, Lieutenant,” Krane replied, as he began walking to the door.

He silently chuckled as he imagined what was going through Harker’s head right now, and was glad that Nuretz wasn’t around. The overly protective Commander would probably fall over of a heart attack if he ever saw this current scenario.

Opening the door, he saw the bearded man sitting calmly behind a desk. Wordlessly, Krane walked in and closed the door behind him.

“Surprised to see me?” the man asked with a grin. “Or did the beard manage to fool you?”

“You realize I gave a eulogy at your funeral, right?”

“Yes, yes. I heard about that. It was quite touching. What was that one part again? Ah, yes. *If we all strived to be half the officer he was, we’d all be heroes.*”

“Now, is there any reason whatsoever that I shouldn’t just deck you one right now?”

“Aside from the regulations against striking a superior officer?”

“Last I checked, we’re now the same rank, Fleet Admiral Petrarca.”

“Right you are, Fleet Admiral Krane,” Petrarca laughed. “Believe me, the whole dying thing wasn’t my idea. Sorry about your old ship, by the way.”

“And those dead crew members?”

“Gads, Krane. Just how heartless do you think I am? They’re perfectly fine, and enjoying positions of power within our little organization.”

“You dragooned them into your little pirate fleet?”

“Pirate?” Petrarca remarked, a look of mock-hurt on his face. “You’ve misjudged us. This operation is entirely sanctioned and funded by the old man. Besides, all of them volunteered to join up with me. I do apologize for poaching them, though.”

“Also, what’s all this *Captain* business about? You demote yourself?”

“Like you said, Fleet Admiral Petrarca is dead. In his place is Captain Cordova, dashing sea rogue.”

“I’m sure the ladies all swoon over that beard. Why did the old man set all… this up?”

“You mean besides giving me an opportunity to come out of retirement to save your sorry hide?” laughed Petrarca. “In truth, though, we conduct sensitive and advanced research for him, while the eyes of the world stay focused on you guys.”

“I’m assuming that research involved advanced communications systems?”

“Possibly. I’m afraid I can’t confirm or deny that. Not without the old man’s permission.”

“And those weapons of yours?”

“Can’t confirm or deny that those exist either.”

“Funny. In any case, you’ve got my newest admiral thinking that you’ve got some sort of advanced darklight system.”

Petrarca laughed, “I suspected that something like that might happen. I’d rather have them thinking that, instead of having them guess the truth. I trust that you’ll do your part in keeping our good admiral in the dark, so to speak?”

“He’ll hear nothing from me, but he’s a quick one.”

“So I gather. What happened to Trager, by the way? I only heard bits and pieces of what took place.”

“Missing and presumed killed in the initial attack,” Krane said, as he went over the story in detail for Petrarca’s benefit.

***

“Sounds like your newest admiral made a good first showing for himself,” Petrarca commented, having heard the entire tale.

“That he did,” Krane agreed.

“Where is he, by the way?”

“I just sent him back to the Cluster on some busy work to get a status report, while I try to figure out what exactly’s going on,” Krane admitted. “I have to say, I wasn’t quite expecting a ghost to show up.”

“You’re welcome to try to deck me, to see if I’m ethereal or not,” suggested Petrarca.

“Hey, I may decide to punch a superior officer, but I draw the line at assaulting the elderly.”

“Good one,” Petrarca laughed. “By the way, you should know that we’ve captured a prisoner.”

Krane perked up. “A Kierdan?”

“A Cluster researcher, actually.”

“What?” a bewildered Krane asked.

“Let’s just say that when Ancor returns, that report he’s ferrying is likely to mention a missing diving bell.”

“Wait,” Krane said, regaining his composure. “How did you manage to capture a diving bell with a ship?”

“We didn’t use a ship,” the bearded man grinned. “I’ll explain it all later, but for now we’ve got the prisoner locked up in the lower deck.”

“Also,” Petrarca continued, “to add a twist, it appears she was assigned to one of the old man’s personal labs, going by her identification. I can’t believe she managed to beat the vetting process.”

“The old man’s not going to be too happy when he hears about this.”

“Can’t argue with you on that, but he’s going to want to know about this sooner rather than later.”

“Agreed.”

***

“Even considering the circumstances, don’t you think this is a bit much?” Krane asked, looking at the shackled woman in the glass cell. “And why is she bleeding?”

“Before you get too self-righteous, that wound was self inflicted,” Petrarca said. “She had some sort of thin blade secreted under the skin of her arm. Almost sliced open one of my men’s necks when they tried to get her out of the bell.”

“Where is the bell, by the way?”

"You'll get it back in one piece," Petrarca said. "Tell your bean counters not to worry. We're just checking it over for any more surprises our little friend here might have left behind."

"What was she trying to smuggle?"

"That's the even more strange part. I know about some of the research the old man's got going on down there. But, out of all those, this is what she chose to steal," Petrarca said, handing over a large bundle of papers.

Krane skimmed through the sheets, and an increasing look of puzzlement showed on his face. "This doesn't make sense. Are you sure this is all she took?"

"Like I said, we're checking the bell again, but I don't think there's anything else to find in there."

"Have you managed to get anything at all from her?"

"Just hateful looks, if that counts. Care to have a shot?"

"Sure."

"I'll leave you to it then," Petrarca said. "Open that little hatch, and she'll be able to hear you. I'll leave the guards here in case she tries anything else funny. Meet me back upstairs when you're done."

"Much obliged. I'll see you shortly."

***

Thus far, Krane's might as well have been questioning a pumpkin for all the answers he had gotten. Every query had been answered with the same mocking glare.

Remembering the information that Ancor had gotten from the Naradian refugee merchant during the initial attack, he decided to play a bluff.

"Fine, then. Hold your tongue for now, Tasia. We'll see if your boss Eldnan is more forthcoming during his interrogation."

Her glare remained, but, for a brief second, her eyes flashed a hint of worry.

*Perfect. I'll let that bit of knowledge stew for a while before I try again.*

"You didn't know about that, did you?" Krane chuckled. "I'll make you the same deal that I'm going to offer him. Whoever tells me what I want to know first doesn't get to rot in the Isle of Qasar. I'll leave you to think it over. But, know this. One way or another, we'll get what we need from one of you."

As he was about to close the hatch and head back upstairs, the prisoner finally opened her mouth and spoke with a smirk, “So you think, Admiral. You have no idea what you’re up against. Want some free advice? Run. Run and find a nice rock to hide underneath.”

With that, the prisoner closed her eyes, and refused to acknowledge any more questions.

***

“Well, let’s head back to Iathera, Yalic.”

“Yes, sir.”

The first leg of the journey had been uneventful, and Ancor had just finished delivering the new orders to his fellow admirals, as well as picking up the initial reports from the salvage teams.

As the squad passed through one of the western causeways into the open water, he heard a crewman shout, “Sir! To the south!”

Turning his head, he groaned when he saw what the crewman was referring to. There, far up in the sky, a set of Priority Seven emergency flares started their slow descent into the ocean.

There was no mistaking it. He himself had been forced to use the same signal just a few days ago to warn all ships of the overwhelming Kierdan force, and to have them retreat behind the inner ring of islets.

*What could it be this time*, he thought in exasperation. There was no way the Kierdans could have regrouped in time to be able to swing around that far south for a second attack. Besides, unless this was a fresh fleet, they didn’t have that many ships left.

“Signal the tower,” Ancor ordered. “Tell them that we’re on our way to investigate.”

“Yes, sir.”

# Chapter 25

"I'm seriously starting to regret the day that the Lord General mentioned your name to me," Dendrav bitterly said.

"Will you relax?" Eldnan retorted. "We got away didn't we?"

"First of all, I barely classify that as *getting away*," Dendrav growled. "Secondly, you sacrificed well over a hundred ships just to cover our escape. And, this time, those weren't even your ships! Rest assured that the Lord General's going to receive a full and *accurate* report of what happened tonight. All this could have been avoided if you had just left an hour earlier!"

"Listen to me, General," Eldnan calmly said. "I would have sacrificed those ships a dozen times over if it would have meant accomplishing my goal. A goal which, by the way, would have greatly benefitted Athash. Besides, like I said, did you want to escape or not?"

"You had another ship pretend to be us, and then had us run like cowards."

"You're welcome."

Exasperated, Dendrav could only say, "And those explosive crates? That was your big plan to make sure they didn't come after us? They'll just sink them at a distance and then make a beeline straight for us! Besides, what if they manage to capture a few of them and figure out how they work?"

"Those crates were just to make sure we got a few hours head start on them. Once we're that far out, they have no way of catching up to us before we reach home. Plus, it doesn't matter if they capture any of those crates."

"Why not, pray tell?"

"Because, save for the one that conveniently exploded, they're all just half-filled with sand. They're quite welcome to that little bit of technology."

"So, once they sink your boxes of sand, they'll have no reason not to come after us?"

"But they won't," Eldnan calmly said.

"Again, enlighten me as to why not."

"First, they have a large part of their fleet in drydock, which won't be seaworthy for at least another week."

"Yes, that part I know. Except you seem to be forgetting about those new ships that attacked us."

“I have my suspicions about those ships. But, either way, you don’t just send a fleet across an ocean into hostile territory on a whim. Trust me on that,” Eldnan chuckled. “They’ll need time to organize supplies, as well as making sure that no one else is primed to attack while they’re gone. By the time they’re anywhere close to ready, they’ll have a much larger problem to worry about.”

“So you say.”

“Trust me.”

*To be continued in Artifice: Episode Three…*

## About the Author

Thanks for hopping aboard this ride, ladies and gents. There are an awful lot of books out there, and I'm sincerely grateful that you've chosen to read two of mine. I do hope you'll be here for the next part of our tale.

Now, I've been advised by my editor to actually put some information about myself in the "About the Author" section this time, instead of just ranting and raving like a crazy person. But, to be perfectly frank, I'm nothing special. I'm just someone who had a story that they wanted to share.

To my delight, I've received a few emails from others wishing to be authors as well, and asking for any advice I can impart to them. I also realize that there may be others with similar aspirations who haven't acted on it for various reasons. Now, while I don't consider myself a professional by any stretch of the imagination, I'll offer you the same general life advice I gave the others: *If you really want to, then go ahead and do it. To paraphrase Tennyson, better to have tried and failed, than never to have tried at all, right?* Unless you're skydiving or bungee jumping, of course. That piece of advice definitely doesn't apply in that scenario.

I also just realized that I only need eighty six more words to make this an even fifty four thousand word book. So, time for some padding. Take it away, Kitam:

"Oh, wow! This is so exciting! I can't believe I'm getting the chance to do this. Although, my-"

Just kidding, folks. I won't subject you to that. Sorry, Kitam.

In all seriousness, I really am grateful for everyone that's decided to give my books a shot, and I'm hoping I've created a world that's managed to put a smile on your face at least once.

Until next time.

*Learn more about me at the following places:*

*Blog & Homepage: www.kpalexander.com*

*Facebook: www.facebook.com/KPAlexanderAuthor*

*Twitter: @KPA_Author*