Oncoming Storm

Artifice: Episode Three

Smashwords Edition

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Acknowledgements

This book is dedicated to Isabella.

Love you.

&

Special thanks to M.B.

Couldn't have done this without you.

Love you too.

&

Thanks to Aaron Chua for the Cover Art

I, uh, guess I love you too, man.

Chapter 1

"Well, at least we weren't in the middle of anything this time," John groaned, sitting up and trying to rub the weariness out of his eyes. "Except for actually sleeping, that is. You're not expecting any more messengers with reports, are you?"

"No, and I'm not even sure what this could be about," Venarya replied, "The dispatch earlier tonight had said that the siege of the Nebar Cluster had been broken. The Kierdan fleet should now be in full retreat back across the ocean."

"Hopefully they didn't decide to turn back around and try a second time. What time is it, anyway?"

"About four hours to dawn," Venarya replied, donning her robe. "Also, I think you'd best start changing while I go see who's at the door. Unexpected news usually isn't good news."

"Hi there, Administrator Venarya. I'm really sorry to have to bother you again two nights in a row like this," Kitam apologized, "but Admiral Ancor just pulled into the harbour, and boy did he have a panicked look on his face. He met with Fleet Admiral Krane, then sailed right back out again. Now, Fleet Admiral Krane is requesting that you, John, Intendant Yazril, and Director Rinard head over at once. He's still on board Director Rinard's Flagship, the *Midnight Dawn*. I volunteered to go get you two. I figured you'd rather be pulled out of bed by a friendly face."

"Thanks, Kitam," Venarya said, smiling reassuringly at the talkative Ranger. "I do appreciate the sentiment, if not the circumstances. Give me a few minutes to change, and I'll go grab John as well."

"I'm not sure what's going on, but it can't be good," Kitam was chatting away as she escorted them. "I saw old Blarki before Admiral Ancor arrived. He was telling me about the other fishermen and himself seeing some strange flares in the sky. The last time that happened the Kierdans showed up, and now everyone near the fishing docks are all worked up again. Poor old Blarki. He was trying to lodge a complaint with the city watch as well. He said some rascal

had burnt his nets somehow. This is while they were still underwater, mind you. He said that what was left of the top part of his nets were all slick with some kind of gunky oil, plus there were a few floating patches of it nearby too. He says he thinks the Kierdans might have done it, but I don't see how or why. He wouldn't even tell me the exact location. Claims it's some sort of trade secret or something, but he did say that he was a little more than half a dozen miles west of the Cluster. Still too close to the Kierdans if you ask me, but I guess he's got a reputation to maintain."

"I see," John said, remembering Kitam mentioning the fisherman earlier.

Struggling to wake his mind up to engage Kitam in conversation, he was saved by Venarya saying, "Was Krane told about that? The burnt nets, I mean."

"Yep," Kitam replied. "I was there when Captain Stelson was talking to him earlier. I couldn't hear everything, but Fleet Admiral Krane didn't look too worried about it. More annoyed than anything, I'd say. I'm guessing that whatever caused it left with the Kierdans. Either way, poor old Blarki. I mean, he's got the best fish around..."

As the Ranger continued to chat, John whispered to Venarya, "Didn't that report earlier tonight mention something about us shooting flaming, oil-filled boats at the Kierdans?"

"Yes," Venarya whispered back. "I think you'd better not mention that part to her."

"Agreed," he replied. Raising his voice, he interrupted Kitam, "So, now old Blarki's got no fish to sell today?"

"Exactly!" Kitam replied. "And I don't know how long it'll take for him to get new nets. I guess I'll have to settle for young Blarki's fish for now. I mean, it's not bad fish, but it's just not the same. I do feel bad for old Blarki though-"

"Maybe you can see about getting them reconciled?" John quickly suggested. "This may just be a blessing in disguise for them."

"How true! I never thought of it that way. I mean I could-"

"John. Venarya," Krane nodded in greeting. "Sorry about the early hour. Thanks for making it here on such short notice."

"No need to apologize, Admiral," Venarya said, as they entered the Captain's cabin on the *Midnight Dawn*.

John looked around the room and saw that, save for a bearded man sitting at the table, they were the first ones to arrive. Unlike Rheus, however, the stranger's neatly trimmed beard didn't look like he just forgot that it existed a few decades ago.

"We're just waiting for Intendant Yazril and the good Director to arrive," Krane said. "In the meantime, I'll make the introductions. This is, er, Captain Cordova. He's in command of those ships that came to our aid and helped chase away those Kierdans."

"Nice to meet you," John said.

"You too, John," Cordova said. "I've heard good things about you from Krane here."

"Thanks, I hope I can live up to the legends," John joked.

"It's a pleasure to finally meet our saviour," Venarya said. "Though, I have to admit, you remind me of someone I used to know."

"You don't say, Lady Venarya?" the bearded man grinned in return.

"Indeed," Venarya replied, her eyes narrowing but her face betraying a faint look of amusement. "But, you couldn't be him, as I distinctly remember attending his funeral. Don't you agree, *Admiral Petrarca*?"

What in the world was going on now? His mind still foggy from lack of sleep, John kept silent.

"So much for your paper-thin disguise," Krane murmured.

"John," Venarya began, simultaneous notes of amusement and annoyance in her voice, "allow me to properly introduce you to Fleet Admiral Petrarca, Krane's predecessor. He's also supposed to be quite dead."

"Pleasure to meet you, John," the bearded man grinned. "I've heard good things about you from Krane here."

"Funny, Petrarca," Venarya said with a weary shake of her head. "Start explaining. Now."

"Wow," Petrarca laughed. "You used to be such a nice lady back in the old days. The truth of the matter is that I'm helping out with that little side project the old man has going on near the Tekavo Freehold."

"That much I figured," Venarya replied. "Now, before I arrange a real funeral for you, start explaining, Petrarca."

"Not my idea, Venarya, I swear," Petrarca laughed, his hands in the air. "The old man concocted this whole scheme, as you probably already suspect. It was part of one of his mad

gambits, but that's a long story for another less-stressed time. Just bask in relief at the fact that I'm still alive."

"For now," Venarya muttered. Shaking her head, she continued, "Fine, then. I'll get the full story from you later. I'm assuming that Yazril and Rinard don't know about you either?"

"Correct," Petrarca confirmed. "Though, I did, for want of a better word, *leave* before Yazril first arrived here, and Rinard only briefly met me a couple of times in meetings with then-Director Daressi. I doubt he'd recognize me after this long.

"Even so, I'm not planning on keeping them in the dark," he assured her with a grin. "I asked Krane to perform that little charade just in case you showed up first. I guess I'm sort of glad you remember me."

"Thanks," she said, her eyes speaking volumes, though Petrarca's grin didn't falter. "And, speaking of Daressi, I'm assuming her retirement involved heading up your little operation?"

"Correct again," Petrarca said. "Like I said, it's a long story, but I promise to get you up to speed as soon as this current crisis is over."

"Wait a second," Director Rinard said, a lack of sleep compounding his confusion. "Aren't you supposed to be dead?"

"You want to check my pulse to make sure?" Petrarca asked, chuckling.

"What? No, I mean, um..." Rinard trailed off.

"We know what you mean," Venarya said, throwing a semi-chiding look at Petrarca. "We can deal with his resurrection later. But, from what I understand, we've got another issue to deal with."

"From what Admiral Ancor's told me so far, *issue* might be a little bit of an understatement," Krane sighed.

"How so?" Intendant Yazril queried. "Kierd again?"

"Not exactly," Rinard began, "At least, it doesn't appear to look that way-"

"It's probably best I recount the story Ancor reported, then we can try to draw conclusions and theories," Krane interrupted, "Here's what he told me."

Chapter 2

"I swear, sir!" the flustered Captain blurted out. "It blasted Otelen's ship clear out of the water from a mile away!"

Admiral Ancor had encountered Captain Gepaco's ship making haste back to the Cluster. Together with Captain Otelen, his ship had been sent to scout the area to the south. Gepaco now stood on the deck of the *Cat's Eye*, while Ancor tried to extract any usable intelligence from the panicked officer.

"What exactly was it?" Admiral Ancor asked, trying to calm his subordinate.

"I have absolutely no idea, sir. It was still too dark to get a good look at it," Gepaco said, regaining some composure. "Whatever it was, it was the size of a mountain, though!"

"Larger than one of our Juggernauts?" Ancor asked, his tone indicating a waning supply of patience.

"That wasn't an exaggeration, sir! A Juggernaut might as well have been a flea compared to whatever that thing was."

If true, then that was more than a little disturbing to hear, Ancor thought.

"And it was equipped with weapons similar to our defense platforms?" Ancor prodded.

"Well, not quite, sir," Gepaco said, a look of mild consternation on his face. "It was more like a solid beam of light, not individual spheres like on our weapons. I've never seen anything like it before!"

"You're sure you weren't just looking at a spotlight, right?"

"If it was, that spotlight was pretty damned destructive... er, sir."

"I see..." Ancor trailed off, ignoring Gepaco's momentary lapse in discipline as he considered his course of action.

"There is one more thing, sir," Gepaco added a little meekly.

Ancor simply raised an eyebrow.

"I'm not exactly sure if they're headed for the Cluster," Gepaco explained, mild confusion starting to work its way back into his expression. "Whatever that thing is, it's almost due south of our position. But, it seems to be bearing slightly northwest. Mind you, we didn't stick around to get a good look at its wake before heading back. However, the only place of any note in that direction is-"

"What the hell is that thing?" Ancor murmured.

After unsuccessfully trying to get more pertinent information from Gepaco, Ancor had dispatched him back to the Cluster with instructions to have them alert Fleet Admiral Krane to the state of affairs. They were also to send another scout fleet to assess the situation, should Ancor fail.

Now, Ancor had no idea what he was looking at. The small amount of light put out by the Dark Sister highlighted a dark-coloured structure, which resembled nothing more than a titanic four sided pyramid. Each side had to have been at least a mile and a half long at the base. The peak of the pyramid appeared to have been truncated by about a third, culminating in a large platform at the top.

Still, its plateau loomed almost a mile above sea level. Ancor wasn't sure as to the purpose of the platform, but he could make out four large cylinders mounted to the corners. *Did Gepaco get his story garbled, and were those actually spotlights?* They certainly looked like no weapon he could recognize. Still, he couldn't chance risking his ships. *Best to maintain a safe distance for now.*

There was no crew of any kind visible anywhere, and it had made no hostile motions toward them. In fact, Ancor idly wondered if the thing was simply adrift.

However, he had opted to keep his fleet at a distance of almost two miles, just to make sure they didn't share Otelen's fate.

"No response to any of our signals, sir," his first officer Yalic reported. "It's as if no one's home."

"I expected as much," Ancor replied. "Keep trying, though."

Compounding everything was the fact that the bizarre floating behemoth seemed to be made entirely of stone. Despite the low light, their spyglasses had observed deformations, chips, and markings all seemingly consistent with stonework.

I'll have to try to get a better look at it in the morning, if I can, Krane thought. How in blazes did they get rocks to float, though?

"Sir?" he heard Yalic say.

"Yes, Lieutenant? Did you get a response from them?"

"No, sir. It's something else," Yalic began. "I could be mistaken on this, and it very well could be a trick of the light, but..."

"Go on."

"I could swear that thing's hovering just slightly above the water, sir. It doesn't appear to be cutting through the sea the way a normal craft would. Not that there's anything normal about whatever the blazes that thing is."

That certainly put a new spin on things.

Putting the spyglass back to his eye, Ancor strained his vision to try to get a clearer look. However, hampered by the large distance, the low light and the voluminous ocean swells, he couldn't tell for certain. The outer rim of the pyramid's base did appear to lie just above the water at times, but he couldn't tell if there was a hull recessed into the underside.

Getting an idea, he moved his spyglass to examine the sea behind the pyramid. Very little wake. As slow moving as the thing was, if a craft that size was cutting its way through the water, then it should be generating a much larger wake than that. Theoretically, at least.

"I believe you might be correct, Lieutenant. Send some ships to try to confirm, without getting too close."

"Yes. sir."

If that thing was floating, then this was even stranger than those Kierdan weapons, thought Ancor. Hovering modes of transportation did exist, but only worked over solid ground. Any attempt to get something to fly over water always ended in spectacular failure.

Assuming that this was another piece of Kierdan weapons technology, then that was extremely alarming turn of events. Though, he pondered, why didn't they deploy this thing in the first place? The attack on the Cluster must have been some sort of diversion to allow for this thing to make its way to Iathera unhindered. If that were true, then that would hint that the pyramid was not as formidable as Gepaco's initial report might have led them to believe. Still, best to not jump to conclusions. There was still the possibility that the timing of these two events was entirely uncalculated. Possible, but unlikely.

"Done, sir," Yalic reported, drawing Ancor out of his reverie. "Two ships are encircling the pyramid to try to get a better look."

"Good," Ancor replied, his spyglass still focused on the gigantic structure. "I'm thinking we try a little experiment."

"Sir?"

"Let's see if we can't get them to give us an impromptu weapons demonstration," Ancor explained. "Prep a dozen of our longboats for an unmanned one-way trip. Stuff them with enough flares so that they're visible enough, then point them at that thing, turn on their engines, and let them go."

"Excellent plan, sir," Yalic complimented him. "I'm on it."

As Yalic hurried away to coordinate the refitting of the longboats, Ancor could only wonder at the motives of their unknown enemy. Krane's theory was looking more and more correct. It was obvious that Kierd wasn't the true culprit behind that last attack. There was no way they could have stockpiled the resources to wage a war on their homeland, while still being able to mount such an expedition against the Cluster. *No, someone was else was definitely pulling the strings here*.

Assuming that was accurate, then then it was also obvious that this gigantic floating pyramid was somehow connected to whoever that was. It would have to be the height of coincidence for this thing to appear directly after the Kierdans left. And why was it apparently headed to Iathera? They had to figure out the enemy's goals, and soon.

"Longboats are prepped, aimed, and ready to go, sir," Yalic reported, interrupting his train of thought.

"Perfect. Have the crew keep an eye on what happens, in case they notice something we miss," instructed Ancor. "Launch the longboats when ready."

"Yes, sir."

Ancor watched as the crews started the engines on the longboats, set the throttles, then hopped back aboard the adjacent ships. Unless the crew in that floating pyramid was totally blind, they should have no trouble spotting the mass of ignited flares in each boat.

As the longboats sped toward their target, Ancor could see no movement from anywhere on the pyramid. However, just before he decided that nothing was going to happen, he saw the silhouettes of several humanoid shapes scampering about the top of the pyramid and racing toward the cylindrical objects in the corners.

"Sir?"

"I see them, Yalic," Ancor said. "Looks like they're manning their weapons. Did you get a good look at them?"

"No, sir," Yalic admitted. "Just dark shapes."

"Not a problem. We can try this again closer to dawn," Ancor said. "At least we now know that that thing is crewed, and not just drifting."

Looking for the longboats, Ancor saw that they were still about a mile and a half out. Turning his gaze back toward the pyramid, he observed a red glow beginning to emanate from one side of each of the cylinders.

At just over a mile out, Ancor could see the red glow moving slightly as the cylinders began moving, seemingly positioning themselves for a clear shot.

As the longboats drew closer, the red glow intensified, and a low humming noise was heard coming from the pyramid.

As the seconds progressed, so did the volume of the noise.

"Some kind of warning, you think, sir?" Yalic asked.

"Possible, but it seems too subtle for that," Ancor said. "Probably a part of that supposed weapons system."

His theory was proven a few seconds later.

With a concerted force, two cylinders nearest to Ancor erupted into life and long beams of red light shot out, each striking one of the longboats and instantly destroying them. The beams deactivated after about three seconds of destruction, though the cylinders still had that red glow.

"Wow," Ancor heard Yalic say.

About fifteen seconds later, a second volley shot out, destroying two more longboats. The process repeated itself four more times until all the longboats were sunk.

"Keep an eye focused on the top of that pyramid, everyone," Yalic called out. "Let's see if we can get a look at who or what's crewing that thing."

After about two minutes of dead silence, Yalic said, "Doesn't look like they're going to unman those weapons anytime soon, sir."

"Agreed," Ancor said. "We've got what we need, for now. Tell the fleet that I'm heading back. Have them give that thing a wide berth, and see if they can track its destination."

"Yes, sir. Also, the two ships we sent to examine the pyramid are reporting back. They say that they can't be certain if that thing is actually floating. They'll try again shortly when it starts to lighten."

"Very well. If they find anything, have them dispatch a ship immediately to Iathera and report in. Also, instruct the fleet to observe that thing and collect as much information as they can, then have them dispatch another ship back to the Cluster with a report in half an hour, regardless of what they find or don't find. Let's see if the NCI or our researchers can make head or tails out of this."

It was a longshot by every measure of the word, but the Nebar Cluster Intelligence might just have information on this monstrosity.

"Yes, sir."

"Also, send two ships to see if there's anything salvageable from the wreckage of Otelen's ship, or anything at all that can give us any clues as to that weapon. I got the distinct impression that Gepaco didn't stick around long enough to examine the debris. Tell our ships that we'll be back as soon as I give a report to Fleet Admiral Krane."

Chapter 3

"Don't all speak at once now," Petrarca chuckled, looking at the four dumbstruck guests.

Rinard broke the silence first. "Well, I can see why you decided to wake us up so early," he joked weakly.

"How sure are you that Iathera is their destination?" Yazril asked.

"Right now, not very. Though, judging from its bearing, it's the most probable destination for that thing," Krane admitted. "Ancor's back out there right now trying to verify exactly that. The first of his scouts should be returning in a few hours."

"How long do we have until it gets here?" Venarya asked.

"At its current speed, I'd say we have, at most, ten or eleven hours."

"So they'll be here around noon," Rinard commented. "Yazril, is that enough time to complete an evacuation of the city?"

"If I sounded the alarm right now, yes," Yazril said, sighing. "Evacuating the city is the easy part though. Coordinating logistics for that many refugees is another disaster waiting to happen."

"How many people live in the city?" John asked.

"Not including the outlying farming villages, over thirty five thousand."

John gave a low whistle. Despite walking around the city multiple times, he hadn't realized its population was that large.

"We may not need to evacuate the entire city," Krane offered. "From what we've seen of their weapons, we know that their maximum range is about a mile. Thanks to our alliance, you've got a set of defense platforms that are second only to the ones guarding the Cluster itself. Still, those platforms have an effective range of about a mile and a half. If we can hold them off with those, then we should be able to make do by only evacuating anyone close to the coast and moving them elsewhere."

"How do you know that the platforms will even be effective against that thing?" Rinard asked.

"I don't," Krane said bluntly. "However, if Ancor's correct about it being made out of stone, then it shouldn't be a problem. At the very least, we should be able to target their weapons and disarm them."

"You're assuming that the pyramid can only travel over water," John chimed in. "What if it is actually hovering, and capable of moving onto land?"

"It's a possibility. But, in any case, the entire city is ringed with defense platforms," Krane said. "If I can get confirmation on that from Ancor's fleet, then we can move to evacuate the outlying areas, plus whichever side of the city that thing ends up on."

"What if there's an invasion force tucked away inside that thing?" Rinard asked. "There could be tens of thousands of troops in something that size. Even if only a couple of squads manage to make it to shore..."

"I thought of that, and I've already sent away for more marines from the Cluster. However, between the twelve hundred troops we already have here, and the need to maintain a guard over all the Kierdan survivors and Naradian refugees, I don't know how many more we can spare. You may need to pull back some of your troops from the Citadel, Yazril?"

"That may be a lot easier said than done," Yazril said, more than a hint of exasperation in her voice. "From what I understand, they're engaged in heavy fighting up there. Up until yesterday I was getting *requests* from the Citadel's to send them more troops. There's no way I can ask them to send soldiers over here based on the assumption that we *might* be attacked, and *may* need the extra troops. At least, not without future diplomatic ramifications.

"At the most," she added, "I can ask them to place some soldiers on standby, in case that thing does try to invade. It shouldn't take too long for the Citadel to portal the troops over here, but, again, I'm not sure how many they can send."

"What about the neighbouring towns?" Rinard asked. "Or the Syrilo?"

"Any help from the neighbouring towns is going to be in the form of small, untrained militias. They won't do anything to turn the tide of any major battle, should one occur. As for the Syrilo, asking them for help is just opening another can of worms that we don't need right now," Yazril said, referencing the insectoid race that seemed to share this world with them, though she didn't go into any further details regarding what the difficulties in requesting help from them were exactly. Not wanting to interrupt the meeting for what could be a drawn out explanation regarding interspecies polities, John made a mental note to ask Venarya about that later.

"However," Yazril added, "I think I might have a temporary solution. There's close to two thousand Rangers stationed at The Gates. If things are quiet there, I can perhaps pull back a good number of them to assist here."

"Sorry for the derail, but what are The Gates?" John interjected, remembering Kitam mentioning that she had been previously stationed there, and curiosity overcoming his politeness.

"It's a twelve mile long fort located on the western side of the continent," Venarya said.

"The Rangers are contracted to man it."

"What are they guarding?"

"A way out," Venarya smiled. "The fort protects the only exit from the Plaguelands. In there, you'll find all manner of vicious beasts looking to run amok throughout any nearby towns if they could."

Looking at Yazril, Venarya added, "Are you sure you want to pull the Rangers away from there? Things could get hairy if even a few of those creatures manage to smash their way through."

"I wish I didn't have to, but I don't see another way. I'll contact them and have them send as many Rangers as they can comfortably spare. In the meantime, our only other real option is to send an emergency delegation to Freewater right away to request more help. Hopefully we're still here when they get back." Turning to John, she added, "I don't suppose you have any forces that can help out?"

"I'm afraid not," John said, shaking his head. "We do have some security contractors working for us. However, there's only about a hundred of them total, and the majority of them are already deployed elsewhere. In any case, none of them are familiar with your technology or weaponry. They'll just end up being more of a hindrance, I'd imagine."

"Not a problem, John," Yazril said with a weak smile. "Just making sure I examine all options."

"I understand," John replied. "I will, however, see if I can get my head security consultant here ahead of schedule. Nolan was supposed to arrive here tonight, but I'd say this warrants speeding up the timetable. Together with Ganz, he might be able to shed some light on how those Kierdan weapons work. If we can figure out how to duplicate the effect, then that might give us an edge."

"Appreciated, John," Yazril replied, gratitude in her voice.

"Speaking of those salvaged weapons," Krane said. "I hope you don't mind, but I took the liberty of evacuating the area around the north fishing docks, and had those ships carrying the salvaged weapons moved about fifty feet offshore from there. That should put them far enough

away from the pyramid's weapon range, but not close enough to shore to damage anything in case their cargo explodes."

"Good thinking," Yazril said. "Hopefully, we can learn something from them soon."

"Also, not that we've managed to get any kind of information out of her," Krane said, "but it looks like we've managed to capture what we're presuming to be a high ranking enemy agent.

She's being held aboard Petrarca's ship under guard."

"Is she from one of the sunk Kierdan warships?" Yazril asked.

"No," Rinard said, shaking his head slowly. "Anyone we managed to pull out of the water is still being processed back home, but this one was actually a Cluster researcher."

"What?" Venarya exclaimed. "I thought you thoroughly vetted anyone working there."

"We do," Rinard said weakly. "We're still not sure how she managed to get through. One of Petrarca's submarines intercepted her, as she tried to rendezvous with the Kierdans in a diving bell."

"You're welcome, by the way," Petrarca chuckled.

"Why was she meeting up with them?" Yazril asked.

"She was using the confusion to try to make off with some plans from one of the old man's personal labs," Krane said.

"Ouch," said Venarya. "Good thing you caught her, then."

"Again, you're welcome," Petrarca said.

"What sort of data was she trying to steal?" Yazril asked.

"That's the strange part," Rinard said. "Even I don't have full access to the goings-on in those labs, but I can guess at some of the stuff the old man might be looking into. However, she appeared to be stealing some fairly mundane medical research."

"And you haven't been able to get her to talk?" Venarya asked.

"All we've gotten are snide remarks and dirty looks," Krane admitted.

"I see," Venarya said, her face drowned in thought for a few moments, then followed by a resigned look. "I might be able to help with that. There are a few pharmacological agents that may help in loosening up her tongue. I'll need at least a few hours to prepare something, though."

"If you can get anything out of her, it'd be much appreciated," Krane said.

"There's no guarantee, though, but I'll do my best," Venarya said. "Make sure she doesn't get any food until I get there. The potion works best on an empty stomach."

"I'll let my boys know," Petrarca said.

"And how about yourself, my dear resurrected admiral?" Venarya said, looking at Petrarca. "You've been pretty quiet so far. Are your ships capable of intercepting that thing?"

"I wish they were," Petrarca admitted. "Truth is, my ships would probably be toast before we could even get in weapons range. Our cannons are quite similar to your platform weapons, except that they had to be scaled down quite a bit to get them to function efficiently on our ships. As a result, they only have a maximum effective range of three quarters of a mile. So, if we try to hit that thing outside its own weapons range, we won't even scorch it.

"However," he added with a wicked grin, "That doesn't mean I don't have a few more tricks up my sleeve. After all, the old man didn't hire me on a whim."

"I'm going to send Garh right away to the old man with this report," Yazril was saying, indicating the hirsute giant walking next to them.

"I'll include a polite note asking him to reschedule your lunch meeting today, John," Venarya added, hastily scribbling on a writing pad. "Considering our current situation, I'm sure he won't mind."

"Thanks, Venarya," John said.

The four of them had just left the meeting, and were walking back to their various Ranger escorts. Rinard had agreed to send a ship back to the Cluster immediately to see what assistance could be spared, while Petrarca had stayed behind to presumably go over potential battle plans.

"I'll get my own report drafted, then send it right away with Garh. I'll let you know what the old man says in his reply," Yazril sighed. "This is all I need right now. I just received a bizarre report from up north as well, and it doesn't look like I'll be able to look into it anytime soon."

"What was it?" Venarya asked.

"Nothing that makes any sort of sense," Yazril explained. "I had a few scouts poking around up there, with orders to see if they could get close to the enemy's base of operations, and try to discern anything useful for the war effort."

"What did they find?"

"They said, well," Yazril said with some hesitation, "They said that they finally managed to get close to the main encampment, and that they caught a glimpse of who they're presuming to be the enemy commander."

"Who was it?"

"Not who," Yazril said. "It's a what. They claimed they saw a large bear giving orders."

"Come again?" Venarya exclaimed, doing a double take.

"I know," Yazril replied with a weary shrug of her shoulders. "It makes absolutely no sense. Not that much about that war makes any sense, mind you."

"That is pretty strange," Venarya confirmed, a worried tone in her voice. "Can you send me a copy of the report? You'll probably have your hands full dealing with the coastal evacuation, and I can check the records at the institute to see if there's anything useful there."

"Thanks. That'd be much appreciated, Venarya," Yazril said, "I'll have it sent over as soon as I get back to the villa."

"I'll let you know what I find. Also, have you seen Mag around?" Venarya asked, referring to the small dragon-like being that was responsible for initially bringing John to this world. "Considering what's going on, I would have thought that she'd have made an appearance by now?"

"I agree," Yazril replied. "I haven't sensed her presence nearby since I was awoken. I can only assume she's flown out to take a look at whatever that pyramid thing is."

"Well, hopefully she comes back soon with something useful."

"That war up north you were talking about," John said. "Is that the same one where Rheus mentioned that you were fighting zombies?"

Venarya chuckled, "Well, we don't actually have a proper name for them. But, that's as good a description as any."

Back on the Institute campus, Venarya had ordered the Rangers to stand guard outside one of the large buildings. Entering the building, they made their way down a grand hallway, then up the stairs to Rheus's workshop. Once there, John would activate the portal and head back home to pick up Nolan.

"Also, I couldn't help but notice your reaction at that statement about the bear," John said. "That seemed like more than just a sense of startled curiosity? I might almost think that you knew something more about that?"

Venarya hesitated a second, then sighed, "And you'd be right. It's not something I care to talk about right now, though."

"More secrets?" John asked, a hint of a teasing tone in his voice, as he tried to lighten the mood. "I thought we had a strict no-secrets policy ever since you snagged all the memories from my head? Not that I'm complaining about the method you used to do it, mind you."

Venarya smiled a weak smile, "Let's just say it could be related to something from my very distant past. Old wounds. I just need to take a look at that report first to make sure I'm not worrying over nothing. I'll let you know more after you return with Nolan?"

"Fair enough," John reassured her. "Let Rheus and Ganz know I'll be back in a few hours, at the most."

"Also," he added as a quick afterthought, "make sure they don't start playing around with those weapons before we get back."

"I will," she smiled. "Believe me, I've been dealing with Rheus's antics for a while now."

"I won't leave you playing babysitter for too long," John laughed. "And, speaking of which, are you sure you're up to watching Penny and Em? I know you're running on less sleep than me for these past few days, and I could take them with me?"

"It's okay," Venarya smiled. "You need to move quickly, and, as dire as the situation is, I doubt I'll be able to do much until you return."

"In that case, I'll try to get back as soon as I can."

"I'll be waiting," Venarya said, giving him a quick goodbye kiss.

With a wave of his hand, the portal in front of him suddenly came alive, the image finally settling down to display a view of his darkened living room.

Walking through the portal, he chuckled as he wondered when this had started to feel routine. Traversing the gap between two worlds with a single thought wasn't something he could even imagine doing a week ago.

Turning around, he looked through the portal to see Venarya standing on the other side. With a smile and a wave, he deactivated the portal and started making his way over to his

computer, hoping to avoid any stray pieces of equipment Ganz may have left lying around the dark living room.

Lost in thought as to what he would tell Nolan, he was caught completely off guard as the room was suddenly bathed in light, and a gruff voice boomed out, "Stay where you are! Hands in the air, now!"

"What do you make of it, Garh?"

"I'm afraid I'm at a loss, my lady," the shaggy giant said. "None of the past reports from any of my operatives have ever mentioned anything similar to Admiral Ancor's strange pyramid."

Safely back at the Intendant's villa, Garh had dropped the guise of a mute bodyguard. Yazril was now in deep conversation with the head of her spy apparatus.

"Any chance Kierd could have built it?"

"It's always a possibility, though highly doubtful."

"Why so?" Yazril asked, puzzled.

"I've received multiple reports and updates regarding these so-called secret shipyards that the Kierdans have been operating. None of them mention anything even remotely similar to that being constructed," the giant replied. "Something as large as this pyramid would be particularly hard to miss."

"Where do you think it came from, then? One of the southern states?"

"Again, doubtful for the same reasons," Garh replied, furrowing his brow. "Plus, from what little Ancor could make out, his report indicates that the structure itself was more than a little weathered-looking. I suspect it's not of recent construction."

"Then that leaves the question..."

"Yes, it does," the giant agreed, "Where in the world could this pyramid have been hidden away for a period of time, and yet not managed to attract the attention of any of my operatives? Or, any attention for that matter?"

"What about the old man? You think he'll have any useful information?"

"Hard to say, my lady," Garh admitted. "I'm sure there's still a lot he hasn't shared, even with me. Though, I'd like to think that he would have warned me about something like this ahead of time, if he was aware of it.

"In any event," he added, "I agree with the notion of contacting The Gates immediately to see how many Rangers you can get reassigned here. If there is a ground battle, they could be extremely useful."

"My thoughts exactly," Yazril said, "though their neighbouring towns won't be too happy about that. I'll have to send a delegation to Freewater immediately to have them shore up The Gates, as well as trying to get them to send more Rangers to Iathera."

"Agreed. Although," Garh said, furrowing his brow in thought, "given what we've seen of the enemy so far, I would operate on the assumption that they're expecting you to do exactly that. Instead of a standard contingent of Rangers, I would advise you also send along a few Cluster marines, and some of our own soldiers. There's no telling what kind of ambush could be waiting for them."

"Good thinking."

"And speaking of our soldiers, you may also want to entertain the notion of sending along... that one," Garh said, rolling his eyes and sighing.

"You mean Kaney?" Yazril said, her expression clearly showing her discomfort at that idea. "I..."

"I know," Garh said. "Regardless of his, well, eccentricities, he is still remarkably good at combat."

"If I send him to Freewater, all the Rangers may decide to move to another continent just to get away from him," Yazril sighed.

"I doubt it'll come to that," Garh chuckled, a rare sight. "However, times are dire."

"Why not just send a few extra soldiers, instead of him?"

"You could," Garh said. "However, if it does come to a ground battle here in town, you'd probably prefer for him to not go off the rails and start slaughtering random merchants."

"You'd rather he slaughter the entire delegation instead? The last thing I need is for him to think they're all enemy trees or something and decide to chop them all down..."

"I doubt it'll come to that," Garh assured her. "Best to keep him in a small group where he can be monitored. Plus, you can have Venarya give him another dose of that potion of hers. That should keep him relatively sane until they get back."

"I suppose I've got no choice," sighed Yazril, "I'll make the arrangements. Head to the old man and see what he can do."

"Will do, my lady," the giant replied. "I should be able to make it back by mid-afternoon at the latest."

"I'll be here waiting. Hopefully."

Chapter 4

"I don't suppose you'd care to let us in on your grand plan, oh glorious leader?" Krane sardonically asked the bearded man.

"Why not? Plus, it's really not that grand," Petrarca said a mock sigh. "I've already sent two serpents to investigate this pyramid, and I'm hoping they'll get a good look at the underside of it. If it *is* floating above the water, then that might be a potential weak spot."

"And, after that?" Rinard asked.

"After that, my dear director, I'll be making it up as I go along."

"Great," Rinard said flatly. "And how exactly are you planning on attacking the bottom of it?"

"The same I way I pulled your rear ends out of the fire earlier tonight," laughed Petrarca. "Namely, by setting theirs on fire instead. My submarines will stay submerged beneath that thing, then release a few thousand gallons of flammable oil along with some igniters. It may not do anything to the structure itself, but it could damage whatever mechanism's propelling it."

"And once it's dead in the water, that buys us time to find a more permanent solution," Krane finished.

"You catch on fast," Petrarca grinned. "I knew there was a reason I promoted you."

"You guys use kerilac oil, right?" Krane asked. "Do you think that'll burn hot enough to damage that thing's engines?"

"It does produce some spectacular flames, which is part of the reason we like it," Petrarca said, "but, I doubt it."

"Hold on a second," Rinard interjected, "I'm confused now."

"And that makes this different from every other time how exactly?" Krane said, rolling his eyes. Turning back to Petrarca, he said, "Let me guess? You know about the tanker?"

"A little bird told me."

"Hold on," Rinard said, "What exactly is happening here? And what tanker?"

Krane turned his head and replied, "As soon as I heard about this pyramid, I sent back home for a tanker of pyrine oil. I figure it'll help bolster the defences here if it comes to a ground battle."

"Ah, okay."

Turning back to Petrarca, Krane asked, "So, I take it you want us to refill your submarines?"

"Considering we spent almost our entire stock of kerilac oil driving off your Kierdan friends, I figure it's the least you could do," Petrarca laughed. "Besides, we need something that burns hot, and there's nothing spicier than pyrine oil."

"Fine, then. I'll have them transfer some over when they get here," Krane said, returning the laugh.

"If you don't mind me asking," Rinard said, "what's the other reasons for you using kerilac oil? I'm sure the old man wouldn't have minded letting you have the recipe for pyrine?"

"Nothing like that, old boy," Petrarca said. "We have a production facility for it, and do use it for some of our conventional ship to ship weaponry. There's really only one big reason we like kerilac, and that's weight. It's much lighter than pyrine, and those Serpents move slow enough as it is when their tanks are chock full of it."

"Makes sense, I guess," Rinard said, "How soon before your submarines get back?"

"Those Serpents are running on dry tanks, so they should be on top of, or underneath, I should say, of that pyramid within two hours. Probably sooner. They'll keep shadowing it as it makes its way here."

"Still going to deny that you have advanced communication systems?" Krane said, shaking his head.

"And have the old man murder me for admitting it?" Petrarca grinned. "Let's just say that my Serpents can magically communicate with us, and leave it at that for now."

"Fine," Krane said, not sure whether to laugh or sigh.

Chapter 5

"Jensen?!" John exclaimed, his hands still in the air and trembling from adrenaline. "What in the name of all that's holy are you doing here?!"

"John?" Jensen exclaimed, equally surprised, but retaining enough wits to put away the pistol. "I thought you'd been kidnapped or something! Your sister Melissa asked me to keep an eye out for you, and your landline kept ringing out when I tried to check in this morning. On top of that, your mobile was completely off the grid, and my tracking device showed that your panic button was still in the house. I just assumed the worst."

Unable to get mad in the face of a man just doing what his sister had instructed him to do, John could simply say, "That I had been kidnapped?"

"In my line of work, best to assume the worst and be pleasantly surprised."

"You didn't check the outside camera feeds to see if anyone had tried to force their way into the house?"

"I did, as well as checking the motion sensors," Jensen explained. "Everything looked fine, but I just assumed that they might have been tampered with."

"You came here alone, though?"

"No. I've got some of the boys outside watching the exits just in case," Jensen said. "Which reminds me..."

Grabbing a radio from his pocket, Jensen hit a button and said, "False alarm, boys. Verification five-niner-eight. Go wait in the truck."

"Affirmative, sir. Verification six-three-five." came the reply.

"By the way, what time is it now here?" John asked.

"Er... just after eight in the morning," Jensen replied, confusion apparent in his face.

"I guess the days *are* longer over there," John mused to himself. "That'll take some getting used to."

"Er..." Jensen repeated, "If you don't mind me asking, sir, what's going on? And where did Ganz go?"

"I... see..." was all that Jensen could say, unable to express doubt in the face of what he had already experienced.

Thankfully, it had been a far sight easier explaining the state of affairs to Jensen, compared to the semi-fiasco with his sisters Sophia and Melissa. Still, John could see that his older sister's personal bodyguard still had no idea what to make of the situation.

"I mean..." Jensen started to say. "I guess... I don't really know what to say..."

"Don't worry about it," John laughed. "I was pretty much at a loss for words when I first got sucked into this whole thing."

"Well, at the least," Jensen said, finally managing a coherent sentence, "that explains why your sisters had me doing all that weird stuff over the last little while, and the rush."

"You want to see it?"

"Huh?" Jensen said, a little dazed by the revelations he had just heard. "What's that?"

"Want to see this new world? Goodness knows we could use your help with what's going on over there right now."

"It'd be a pleasure, sir," Jensen said, gratitude in his voice, though still a little wild-eyed. "Let me send the boys back home first though, with their marching orders."

Pulling out the radio again, Jensen said, "Verification four-three-niner. Head back home, boys. I'm going to be staying here with John, but I'll be out of contact indefinitely. J.P.'s in charge until I get back. Have someone posted to keep an eye on the external cameras at all times, and get back over here on the double if you see any sort of activity. Under no circumstances are you to enter the house, unless you're trying to apprehend an intruder. If you do run into any trouble, only report it to either one of John's sisters directly and immediately. Do not go through any of the normal channels, and definitely do not contact any authorities."

If Jensen's security team found any of this unusual, it wasn't apparent in the tone of voice as the reply simply came back with, "Affirmative, sir. Verification eight-seven-two."

"Do those verification codes actually mean anything?" John asked, a little curious. "Seems like you're just using random numbers each time?"

"They're rolling codes based off of a pneumonic and a predetermined pattern, sir. Just in case anyone overhears and tries to bluff us. It can also signal duress, among other things, if particular codes are given."

"Ah, I see," John replied, still not entirely sure what he was talking about, but taking it at face value as a secure method of communication.

"What? Another crisis?" Sophia groaned.

"Believe me, lil' sis, I wouldn't be asking if it wasn't important," John replied.

"Fine, fine," Sophia sighed. "Give Nolan a call on his satphone and arrange to pick him up. Just, for heaven's sake, make sure no one notices the two of you teleporting around!

"Now," she continued, "I'm going to go grab a cup of coffee and pretend that this is just another normal day over here."

"Wait, sis. Don't hang up just yet."

"Huh? What else could you possibly want?" Sophia said, sighing again. Muttering, she added, "I swear I should just have Carol forward my phone to Melissa's for the next time you call."

"Funny," John said. "I just wanted to let you know that I'll be taking Jensen along for the ride as well."

"Wait, what?!"

"Well, that went better than expected," John commented, glad to finally be off the phone.

"And I thought Melissa was the tough sister to work for," Jensen joked.

"Believe me, she is," John chuckled. "If I'd called her instead, we'd both be in the stocks right now. The only good news would be that she'd probably take a while to track down some peasants to throw rotten vegetables at us."

"I see," Jensen winced, "You're sure she's okay with me being involved in all this?"

"Don't worry." John assured him. "If she fires you, I'll re-hire you right back again."

"Er... thanks, sir."

"That brings up another point," John said. "Drop the *sir* thing, for now. I don't need some enemy spy kidnapping me because they think I'm some high-up general with a font of information just waiting to be tortured out of me."

"Er... sure, s-John."

"John?" the voice on the other end of the line said in a slightly puzzled, and slightly annoyed, tone. "What's going on? I thought I'd be meeting up with you tonight? I've still got a ton of stuff to finish off here before I leave."

"Good to hear from you too, Nolan," John chuckled. "By the way, I thought you'd be in line at the airport right now?"

"What are you talking about?" Nolan said. "Didn't your sister tell you?"

"Tell me what?"

"Melissa's got a chartered flight waiting for me. An entire jumbo jet, if I'm not mistaken."

Oh boy, Melissa's going to love this when she finds out, thought John. That charter probably cost a pretty penny.

"Well, I don't think we'd be needing that jet-" John began.

"What? You want me to stay here now?" Nolan asked, irritation growing in his voice.

"No, no. I still need your help," John assured him. "There's just been a slight change of plans."

"How so?"

"First, are you close to a safehouse?" John asked.

"Safehouse?!" Nolan barked. "John, you do realize I'm in Dubai, right? I'm pretty much in the middle of a giant tourist attraction! Just how dangerous do you think it is here? I'm consulting on corporate security, not battling through a warzone! So, if by *safehouse*, you mean the company suites, then yes. Yes, I am. I'm currently sitting right here in one, in fact."

"Ah," John began, not wanting to provoke another rant. *Though, the fact that he was in the corporate suites in Dubai just made things a whole lot easier*. "Okay, okay. Sophia didn't mention that part to me. Listen, there's not much time to explain. Is there anyone there that you can hand off the remainder of your work to?"

"Well, yes," Nolan confirmed, curiosity overcoming his irritation. "I can have one of the other boys finish this off, I suppose."

"Perfect," John said. "Get that arranged, then head to that suite that Sophia and I stayed in two years ago. It should be down the hall from yours-"

"Yes, I know the one," Nolan cut him off, but irritation was absent from his tone.

"Good. Call me back when you're there," John said. "Also, have them cancel your travel arrangements."

"Okay-"

"No, wait," John said, cutting off Nolan this time. "Do you have any other personnel over there that you can do without for a few days?"

"Well, sure. What are you thinking?"

"I don't want to raise any flags by chartering a last minute flight, then cancelling it for no apparent reason. Have a subordinate take your place on the plane, and have them courier over some sort of mundane information. Once they're here, have them head to my garage over in town."

"Jackie and Marko's place?"

"Exactly," John said. "There's a team camped out there already."

"Okay," Nolan said, intrigued. "I'll call you back in a few minutes."

"Talk to you in a bit," John said, hanging up. Turning back to the couch that Jensen was lying on, he commented, "I'm starting to remember why we try to keep him out of the country. Half the staff would probably up and quit if we stationed him at the main office all year round."

Jensen laughed, "He can be a little rough around the edges, but I'm sure that he's probably forgotten more than I've ever learnt."

"Well, who am I to argue with an old cliché," John chuckled. "Still, we've had nothing but praise from every client he's done work for, although I'm guessing they don't keep hiring him for his demeanour.

"Though, on the plus side, a lifetime of having to deal with my sisters has left me with a very thick skin."

"Okay, it's done," Nolan reported into the phone. "All the curtains are closed, and I've turned off all the internal surveillance. I've also moved that couch from in front of the north wall for you, for who knows what reason. Now, if you don't mind me asking, what in the hell are you trying to do, John?"

"Bear with me," John started explaining, "Trust me when I say that it'll all make sense in a few minutes. Stand about ten feet back from that north wall. And, whatever you do, don't panic.

Now, I'm going put down the handset and turn on the speakerphone, but try not to say anything until I'm done. I'm going to need to concentrate for this. Now, any questions before I start?"

Nolan only grunted in response.

"Okay, here goes."

Hoping this would work, John held out his hand and focused on the wall of the suite that Nolan was probably scowling at.

He heard a sharp intake of breath coming from Jensen's direction, as he saw the wisps of undulating smoke starting to make their way up the living room wall.

As the swirling smoke started to coalesce, John uttered a sigh of relief upon seeing Nolan on the other side of the portal. Nolan's expression was not one of relief.

They saw Nolan's lips move, along with a loud expletive which emanated from the speakerphone.

"It's all right, Nolan. It'll make sense in a few minutes, I promise," John tried to assure him. Under his breath, he added, "I hope."

"I must be dead. That's the only explanation. And, now the afterlife's decided to torment me with you," Nolan muttered. Turning to Jensen, he asked, "And just how do you figure into all of this nonsense?"

After bringing back a slightly panicked and reluctant Nolan through the portal, John had given the bewildered man an abbreviated account of the last few days.

He seemed to be taking it as well as could be expected.

"Hey, don't look at me, boss," Jensen shrugged. "I just found out about this half an hour ago, as well."

Facing John again, he said, "So, you want to drag me through that weird hole in the wall again? Only, this time we'll be off to some alien planet? An alien planet where electricity and explosions supposedly don't work? Then, you want me to go and figure out how to defuse some magic bomb that somehow still manages to function?"

"Well, technically speaking, we just need you to get the bomb open without having it blow up," John replied back with a straight face. "But, I'd say that about sums it up,"

Shaking his head in disbelief, he groaned, "Serves me right. This is what I get for telling your sisters that I was getting tired of pushing paperwork around."

"So," John said, trying to keep the note of disappointment out of his voice, "I take it you're not interested? Honestly, it's your choice. I won't hold-"

"Hold on a second," Nolan retorted, cutting him off. "When did I say that? Of course I'm in. The last thing I need is having you and Jensen blowing yourselves to bits on some alien planet somewhere.

"Besides," he said, shaking his head again, "I guess I did want one last jaunt before I get shipped off to the retirement home. And, now, it seems I've got it in spades."

"Glad to hear it," John grinned. "Now, ready to get started?"

Jensen and Nolan opted to stand at the far side of the room, watching as John started opening up the portal to Rheus's workshop in Iathera.

"Still time to bow out gracefully, boss," Jensen chuckled, as the wisps of smoke started their wild dance.

"Want a demotion to permanent latrine duty?" Nolan grumbled, the whirling smoke starting to coalesce into an image.

"If you're willing to take up the dog walking duties for Melissa, I'm all for it. In fact, it may end up being an upgrade."

The banter was cut short as John opened his eyes and said, "All done, gentlemen. Let's go."

Moving toward the portal, Nolan said, "Before we go on this crazy trip, am I right in assuming that you're my ticket home?"

"Well, sure," John replied, not sure where he was going with this.

Turning his head, Nolan said, "Jensen?"

"Yes, boss?"

"Give him your flak jacket."

"Huh-" was all that John managed to get out.

"Here's bit of wisdom, son," Nolan patiently said. "We're headed into a warzone. In warzones, people get injured and die. Now, I'll admit that there's a bit of self-preservation

involved in my logic, but I'd rather not have to explain to either of your sisters why you're coming back in a box. And, that's assuming that I'm even able to get back!

"So, please wear the vest."

Not wanting to get into a debate over the fact that guns probably didn't exist in the world of Rilora, John simply responded with, "Point taken. I'll wear it."

"Do you understand me?" Rheus asked. "Also, er, sorry about earlier."

"Yes... I... it's okay," Nolan grumbled. "No harm done, I guess."

At Venarya's direction, Rheus had been waiting for them on the other end of the portal, and had successfully managed to get the two new visitors to learn the new language. Unfortunately, he had also tripped, arms flailing, and somehow ended up braining Nolan with the boxlike device he had been using to teach them.

"Let's get going then," John said.

"I'll meet up with you later," Rheus said. "I have to collect a few books here and head back to Ganz. Venarya said you guys will meet up with me after to get working on the explosives. There're Rangers outside who'll take you to her, though."

"Fair enough, then," John said, "See you in a bit, old friend."

"Definitely."

John strongly suspected that Rheus didn't actually have to collect any books, and that his reluctance was stemming from the fact that he didn't want to spend any more time than necessary with the stern-faced Nolan. Particularly, not while walking down a large flight of stairs with an increased chance of *accidents* occurring.

Stifling back a chuckle, John simply said, "You heard him. Let's go, boys."

"How do you manage to walk around all day in this thing?" John complained. "I'm definitely not looking forward to walking back up all those stairs wearing this."

"You get used to it," Jensen replied, "Soon, it'll be no different than wearing a pair of socks."

"Either that, or I'll die of exhaustion," John said. "Or dehydration. My back feels like a river right now."

"Hence the sock analogy," Jensen chuckled. "You can hang on to that vest, by the way." "Thanks."

"Quit your complaining," Nolan interjected. "The exercise will do you good. Besides, you don't see me whining."

"You're not the one wearing a twenty pound sweat box," John retorted. The main doors now ahead of them, he changed the topic, "Here we are. Now, remember, don't do anything to raise any suspicions. Only a few people here know exactly who we are."

"Want to teach me to tie my shoelaces as well?" Nolan grumbled.

Still amazed at how easily the large door opened, John led the trio out of the building. Gone were the Rangers that had been there earlier, and they had been replaced with a familiar face.

"John!" Kitam exclaimed. "Nice to see you again. Administrator Venarya said to wait here for you to finish your work inside the building. I'm to escort you back to her place."

"Nice to see you again, Kitam," John said, hoping his smile didn't look too forced. "This is Jensen, and this handsome fella' here is Nolan. They're here to help us with the current problem."

"Any friends of John are friends of mine!" Kitam beamed. "I didn't even realize that you had other people in there with you. I mean, now that I think about it, you must have. After all, what could you have been doing in there alone for so long. That's silly of me for not realizing that-"

"No harm done," John interjected, cutting her off before she picked up too much steam. "Glad to meet you," Jensen smiled.

"Er... pleasure to meet you, Miss Kitam," Nolan said, obviously a little distracted by the fact that he was now talking to someone straight out of an old western movie. "Why are you dressed like-"

"A guard?" Jensen said quickly. "That's probably because she is one, boss. Am I right, Kitam?"

"That's right," Kitam smiled, as she started walking. "Not just a guard, but a Freewater Ranger. We pride ourselves on..."

Following along, Nolan murmured, "Thanks for painting me with the misogyny brush, Jensen."

"Anytime, boss. It was either that or have you blow our cover right off the bat," Jensen chuckled. "Besides, I don't think she actually noticed."

Joining in on the fun, John couldn't help but add, "By the way, need me to help you with those shoelaces?"

"Funny. You've got a lot of explaining to do when we're alone," Nolan replied. "Also, how is she still talking?"

Chapter 6

Garh ran as best he could through the dark and foggy swamp.

After speeding along the coastline in a small boat, he had arrived at a small dock to the south of the swamp. There had been no time to put measures in place to make sure he wasn't followed, but that wouldn't matter soon.

After making sure that his ride home was safely moored, he had started sprinting.

After about twenty minutes, he heard the howls of the Old Man's watchdogs. *They'll be here soon enough*, he thought to himself. *Fortune help anyone stupid enough to be following me.*

A few minutes later, he heard a rustle from the treetops above, and, with incredible nimbleness for a creature his size, dashed off to one side almost mid stride.

A split second later, a dark shape hurtled down and slammed into the spot in which he would have been otherwise standing.

Momentarily halting his marathon, he watched as the large wolflike creature stood up, a grin on its face. "Almost get you this time, Garh!"

Garh chuckled, "Indeed you did, old friend. Though, I will admit to being a little distracted, Duba. Come, we can talk while we run."

"Okay," Duba replied, taking to loping along on all fours to keep pace with Garh. "Why you hurry?"

"Bad news, I'm afraid," Garh said. "Iathera is about to come under attack, and I need to get word to the Old Man as quickly as possible."

"That not good," Duba said, "I tell. I come back."

With that, Duba leapt up the nearest tree and scampered into the foliage. Garh soon heard a series of nearby howls, which were then answered by other howls from deep in the swamp.

That's interesting, Garh thought. He never realized that the howls were capable of communicating such a complex thought. Until now, he thought the most they could say was the rudimentary equivalent to 'Intruder here!' or 'Help!'.

Not a frequent occurrence, and usually irritating when it happened, this was one time that he was glad to be proven wrong.

Just as quickly as he had disappeared, the dark shape plummeted down next to Garh again. "Old man know soon," Duba reported. "Who attack? Kierdans again?"

"We're not sure, Duba," Garh responded. "Earlier, the Cluster spotted what appeared to be a gigantic pyramid-shaped object heading for Iathera. They've destroyed one ship already, so we're assuming their intentions aren't friendly. I doubt it's the Kierdans, though. Last we heard, they were running back home, metaphorical tails tucked between their legs."

"Ah," Duba said, sounding disappointed. "Rinard say Kierdans might come here. None come. Brothers and sisters all waiting, and now all Kierdans gone."

"I wouldn't worry too much about that, my friend," Garh assured him. "I have a feeling that what we're seeing is just the first few skirmishes in a much larger war. I fear you'll have your pound of flesh soon enough."

Chapter 7

"It's a pleasure to meet you gentlemen," Venarya smiled, greeting each man with a warm handshake. "Kitam, would you mind keeping watch with the other Rangers outside? Make sure we're not interrupted."

"Certainly, Lady Venarya. Let me know if you need anything else," Kitam replied, closing the door behind her.

"Follow me," Venarya said, as she led the trio to her living room. "Have a seat, and we'll go over what needs to get done."

"Well, not to dumb it down too much," Nolan said, taking a seat, "but it sounds like all you need is someone to safely open up one of those dud bombs you have, so that Ganz and your researchers can figure out what makes it tick?"

"Is that all?" Jensen chuckled. "Sounds like you'll be home in time for lunch, boss."

"What I'm getting at," Nolan stated, throwing a glaring look at Jensen, "is that, even if you manage to get at the innards of that bomb, do you think you'll be able to get any useful information to help you out with your current crisis? I understand you're on a pretty tight timeline?"

"I understand," Venarya smiled. "Ganz and Rheus, who I think you've already met, have come up with a theory as to how our enemies managed to get the explosives to work. If we can safely open up one of them, we can potentially get a verification on that theory.

"Now," she added, "that may or may not help us with the current situation. But, seeing how our enemies have managed to blindside us at every opportunity thus far, this may level the playing field the next time they try something."

"I see," Nolan said. "So, this is more of a contingency effort?"

"Yes," Venarya confirmed. "But an important one. We've already requested some troops be reassigned here from other locations on the continent. But, even those may not be enough. To that end, we're putting together an emergency, well, *delegation* to the town of Freewater to request more Rangers."

"Can't you just contact them, or use the portals?" John asked.

"Can't in this case," Venarya shook her head. "Freewater itself is about a day's ride straight into the middle of a desert. No communications or portals seem to work there."

"Ah, I see," John commented. "That's a little inconvenient. Considering all that's happening right now, I'm assuming this delegation of your is a well-armed one?"

"Correct," Venarya replied. "We're not sure what to expect, so we're putting together a squad of Rangers, Cluster Marines, and some of our own soldiers."

"Have room for one more?" Jensen spoke up.

"What?" Nolan sat up, staring straight at Jensen. "Are you insane?"

"I've been called worse," Jensen chuckled. "Let's face it. What little training I have in bomb disarmament will be more of a liability to you. I can, however, help these guys get where they're going."

"Besides," Jensen added, seeing Nolan about to voice another protest, but cutting him off, "John's got a whole squad of those ninja-cowboys protecting him."

"Fine, fine," Nolan sighed. "John, if you're okay with this, I'll sign off on it."

"Not a problem by me. Especially if it means I can give this confounded vest back to him."

"Don't worry, boss," Jensen said, "If I don't come back, you can ask Carol where the pooper scooper for Melissa's dogs are."

"Funny," Nolan grumbled, standing up. "Now that we're all set, let's get going."

"I'll have Kitam take you to Ganz and Rheus," Venarya said. "Yazril's already ordered the transfer of the bomb to the designated area, so you should be able to get started immediately.

John and I will get Jensen on his way, then we'll join up with you right after."

"Not a problem," Nolan replied.

"You sure you'll be alright interacting with the locals, boss?" Jensen asked. "Remember that I won't there to pull your fat out of the fire if you make another gaffe."

"I need your help like I need a brain tumour."

"Speaking of pooper scoopers," John said, interrupting the banter. "Where are Penny and Em?"

"In the back garden, playing with one of the rangers," Venarya said. "I'll have them brought to the front when we leave."

"Wait, you brought your dogs here?!" was all that a bug-eyed Nolan could exclaim.

"So, why'd you bring along the tea?" John asked. "Had to skip breakfast?"

With Nolan now safely on his way, the three of them, with the two dogs in tow, now made their way through a city that was certainly less festive than the last time John had seen it.

Everywhere he looked, he saw signs of people leaving or hastily packing.

John was certain that their travel time would have been easily doubled if people hadn't made way for their Ranger escort.

"The tea isn't for me," Venarya explained. "I got word from Yazril earlier about adding another person to the party. Let's just say that this will make him a little easier to deal with."

Well, that was enigmatic and didn't give him any answers, John thought. Par for the course with Venarya, though.

Changing the topic, he asked, "Where's Mag, by the way? I was a little surprised when I didn't see her waiting for me at the portal when I came back."

John could see the lines of worry in her face as she answered, "I'm not sure. No one's seen her since last night."

"No foul play suspected, though?"

"No, at least I hope not. Plus, it'd take a lot to incapacitate her," Venarya said. "She's disappeared before, and keeps to her own schedule. But, this is a little inconvenient. I can only assume that she had her reasons."

"I see. Hopefully, she gets back soon."

"Indeed," Venarya agreed. Looking ahead, she added, "And here we are."

Turning his gaze to follow Venarya's, John saw a large contingent of what could only be soldiers dressed in various types of uniforms.

He recognized the Ranger garb. They seemed to be dressed exactly the same as the Rangers currently escorting them, down to the brown dusters and cross-slung swords on their backs. *Though*, John wondered, *what else could they add to their outfit? A pirate hook, perhaps?*

The white-and-blue uniformed soldiers vaguely resembled the guards he had seen throughout the city, albeit with heavy metallic armour, rather than leather. The black-clad soldiers looked similar to the ones he had seen on board the Cluster ships, and he assumed that they must be the Cluster Marines.

In the midst of them was Intendant Yazril. Her personal sasquatch bodyguard seemed to be off on other business.

"Yazril," Venarya greeted her. "All ready?"

"Venarya. John," she nodded in reply, "Ready when you are."

"This is Jensen, by the way," Venarya added. "One of John's security personnel. He's volunteered to go along, as well."

"Anything to increase the chances of success for this mission," she said. "Glad to have you aboard, Jensen."

"My pleasure to help out, ma'am."

"By the way, Jensen," John said, "you can have this vest back. You'll probably have more use for it now."

"And I'm sure you're only thinking of my well-being," laughed Jensen.

"That, and my chiropractor bills," commented John, not wasting any time removing the heavy jacket.

"Well, let's get this over with, Venarya," Yazril said. "You have the serum?"

"I do," she replied. "Care to come along, John? I could use the moral support."

"Of course," he replied. "Jensen, wait here with the dogs until we get back."

"Okay, John."

"Maybe we should bring Penny and Em along, John?" Venarya said. "I think Kaney's fond of pets. They may help calm him down."

"If you think it'll help, sure."

Calm him down?

"Just so I'm not stumbling around in the dark, Venarya," John said. "Who exactly are we going to see?"

It was Yazril who answered, "Kaney. He was one of our best soldiers. Used to lead an elite squad called the Phae-Ghish, actually. An absolute terror on the battlefield for anyone crazy enough to face him. He was assigned to one of the villages up north. Strictly routine. Long story short is that he came back, but the rest of his squad didn't. No one's sure exactly what happened to him or them. We never managed to get the full story out of him, and we've given up trying. Suffice to say, he's never been the same since the incident."

We're about to dragoon a PTSD veteran. Fun times.

"Do you think it's a wise idea?" John cautiously asked.

"No," Yazril said flatly. "But, these are desperate times."

"And," Venarya added. "This serum I've brewed for him should restore his sensibilities for the duration of the mission. For the most part, at least."

"Why not keep him medicated with that permanently?"

"I see."

"It's not meant for long term use," Venarya explained. "I suspect it'll do more damage to him if he uses it on a constant basis. Though, I do give some to his wife for use occasionally."

"Believe me, I'd rather not do this," Venarya said, a downward cast to her face. "But, we do need to make sure those Ranger reinforcements get here."

"No need to justify yourselves," John said. "I'm not a stranger to necessity."

"Here it is," Yazril said, gesturing to the house in front of them.

It was a quite a nice house. However, the owner had decided to decorate the front yard with what appeared to be haphazardly placed black shrubs.

"I just hope his wife understands," Yazril muttered. "She still blames us for what happened to him."

"Who else is there to blame?" Venarya said sadly, as she knocked on the door.

The door opened after a brief wait, and John took a look at the occupant.

Now, John wasn't sure who he was expecting to answer, but it sure wasn't her. He was half-expecting a bedraggled hag, world weary with tired eyes.

The person who opened the door was not as such.

"Hello, Mika," Venarya greeted the voluptuous woman. "How are you?"

"Hi Venarya," Mika responded. "I'm doing fine. Hello, Intendant."

"Hello, Mika," Yazril acknowledged her.

"This is John," Venarya said, "a friend of mine."

"Pleasure to meet you," John smiled.

"You too, John," Mika smiled back.

Venarya spoke again, "You probably suspect why we're here, I suppose?"

"Something to do with all the bustle that's going on? Is it true? Are we about to be attacked?" Realizing what they were about to ask, a sudden tear came to her eye. In a sad tone, she added, "Do you really need him? He can't do it anymore..."

"Believe me, I wouldn't be here if it wasn't absolutely necessary, Mika," Venarya apologized. "We're extremely shorthanded, and need him to help escort a team to Freewater to get reinforcements-"

"Freewater!" Mika hissed. "You're sending him back north again? After what happened to him?!"

"Mika," Yazril spoke up, "I know we've never seen eye to eye after what happened. But, if we don't get those reinforcements soon, there may not be a town here anymore."

"Can't you get someone else to do it?" Tears streamed down both eyes now. "I can't lose what little I have left of him."

"Mika," Venarya said, taking her hand. "It's your choice. I promise you I won't try to coerce you, and that I'll respect whatever decision you make."

"No, I... I can't," Mika said, the tears slowing. "No, it's not my choice. It's... his."

With a sigh, she added, "He's in the back. I know what his answer will be, though. I'll... I'll get his things together."

"Thank you, Mika," Venarya said, as Mika closed the door.

"Thank you, Venarya," Yazril whispered.

"Let's get this over with," Venarya said softly, wiping a tear from her eye.

Not sure what else to do, John took Venarya's hand and gave it a squeeze as they walked to the back yard.

"I take it you just did what I think you did?"

Venarya could only nod.

John understood her unease now. When she had taken Mika's hand, she had used that strange power of hers to calm Mika. And it had worked. She had calmed her to the point where she would agree to send her husband on what could very well be a suicide mission.

The somber mood was interrupted by a loud exclamation, "FLUFFY! CUDDLES!"

Wondering what weirdness to expect next, he rounded the corner and saw a huge man getting out of a pool, and running to embrace the dogs who had scampered ahead.

"I take it that's Kaney?" he whispered.

To say the man was huge was an understatement. Now fully out of the pool, John wondered if they had simply shaved whatever passed for a gorilla in this world.

"Yes," Venarya replied in a low voice. "Let me do the talking first."

"Be my guest."

"YOU BROUGHT FLUFFY AND CUDDLES!" the dripping man yelled out, holding his arms out as the dogs ran to him.

Nolan certainly didn't need to worry about any uncomfortable silences during his walk with Kitam. In fact, he was lucky to get a word in edgewise. The upside to all this was that she didn't seem to have taken any offense to Jensen's previous comment.

He certainly hoped she managed to get her fish vendor situation resolved.

"-and here's Rheus's place," she was saying. "I'll wait out here and keep guard. I'll take you three to where the weapon's been transported to when you're ready. It's right by the old fishmarket, actually-"

"Ah, perfect, and thank you," Nolan forced himself to smile. "Let me get these two, and I'll be right out."

Moving as fast as he could up the walkway, he knocked on the door.

"Come in," a voice called out.

Opening the door, he walked in to a strange sight. Both men were hunched over on the floor in front of a carpet, and Ganz was furiously rubbing a piece of paper on it.

"Maybe you should try soap and water?" Nolan suggested, wondering what kind of madhouse he had just entered. "And an actual piece of cloth?"

"Eh? What?" a confused Ganz blurted out, apparently forgetting that a visitor had just walked in. "Oh! Hi, Nolan!"

"Hi, there," Rheus waved. "Sorry about earlier, again."

"Hi, gentlemen," Nolan said patiently. "Now, if it's not too much trouble, you mind telling me what in blazes you're doing? You're not going section eight on me, are you, boy?"

"Huh? Oh, that! Just testing out a theory," Ganz explained. "You see, I haven't been able to get a static charge on this piece of paper!"

"I see..." Nolan replied, obviously lost.

"It's a part of the theory regarding how those explosives work," Ganz said. "I'm not sure how much John's told you, but I suspect that they're using a massive jolt of electricity as a way of detonating them."

"And the paper and rug figure into this how exactly again?"

"My most recent theory was that they had a device capable of storing a large amount of static electricity, but that's now defunct," Ganz said, crestfallen. "I can't even get this paper to pick up a charge.

"However," Ganz continued, perking up, "the good news is that you're here now, and we can finally crack one of those things open to see how they work."

"John, what have you gotten me into?" Nolan muttered. Taking a deep breath, he said, "Okay, gentlemen, let's head out before we burn more daylight."

Chapter 8

Why in the world was he wearing leather swimming trunks? John wondered.

"Hi, Kaney," Venarya smiled. "How are you doing?"

"VENARYA!" the strange giant called out, grinning from ear to ear. "YAZRIL! NEW MAN!"

"Hello, Kaney," Yazril said.

Unsure of what to say, and not wanting to irritate the large man, he echoed Yazril's greeting. "I've brought some more tea for you, Kaney," Venarya said.

"TEA! I LIKE YOUR TEA, VENARYA," The giant boomed out.

John wasn't sure if that was his normal speaking voice, if he was just extremely excited to see Venarya, or if he was simply hard of hearing. In any case, he felt sorry for Jensen's group. He could just picture Kaney offering deafening narration every time he saw a butterfly. Or a shiny rock. Or any rock, for that mater.

"I KEEP TRYING TO MAKE MY OWN TEA," Kaney was saying, "IT'S NOT THE SAME, THOUGH! I THINK IT'S MY WHITE TEAPOTS! THEY DON'T LIKE MY BLACK TEA LEAVES! OR MAYBE IT'S THOSE BUSHES THAT MY NEIGHTBOUR HAS! I DON'T THINK THEY LIKE MY BLACK TEA LEAVES, TOO! I PLANTED THE BLACK TEA LEAVES IN THE FRONT, BUT I DON'T THINK THE BUSHES LIKE THEM!"

"It's all right, Kaney," Venarya said, still smiling. "Here. Sit down and drink some of this."

"OKAY, VENARYA," Kaney replied, taking a moment from petting the dogs to sit down.

"He seems to like dogs," John whispered to Yazril. "Does he have one? I hear they can be therapeutic."

"We gave him a dog once," Yazril replied in a flat tone. "It didn't end well."

"I see," John said, delicately dropping the topic.

"There it is," Kitam reported. "Doesn't look like much, but I heard they sunk over a quarter of the entire cluster fleet with these. I've never even seen..."

Nolan blocked out her voice as he stared at the device through the spyglass. As expected, the exterior certainly didn't resemble any ordnance that he was familiar with.

The entire thing just looked like an elongated wooden barrel, perhaps a dozen feet long. However, there was no nosecone or such to indicate which end was the base of the unit. He literally had no idea where to begin with it.

However, that wasn't the strangest part of the situation. The bomb was currently floating in what appeared to be a large glass case, tethers securing it from hitting the sides. And, to top it off, the whole contraption sat atop a large flatbed cart.

"Why did they put it in an aquarium?" Nolan asked.

"That's a water tank from one of the ships that salvaged it," Rheus explained. "They weren't sure if taking it out of the water would trigger an explosion."

Nolan couldn't fault that reasoning, "I see. Well, get me a ladder and I'll get to work examining that thing."

"I FEEL BETTER... I feel better," Kaney's voice started to achieve a more moderate level.

"I feel... strange."

"It's just the medicine, Kaney," Venarya smiled. "Remember? Your mind will clear in about half an hour. Just like always."

"I REMEMBER," he said. "I... remember."

"Kaney," Venarya started, "we need your help."

"HELP? Help. Help with what?"

"The town is about to come under attack-"

"YOU NEED ME TO FIGHT?" Kaney perked up, his eyes alight. "I CAN FIGHT REAL GOOD."

"I know, Kaney. I know you do," Venarya replied, taking his hand in an attempt to calm him. "But, we need you for something more important."

"NO FIGHTING?"

"Maybe," Venarya said. "We need to get a team to Freewater to secure some reinforcements, and we're not sure if there are any surprises in wait for us on the way. I'd appreciate it if you could escort them there?"

"I... I..." Kaney's eyes glazed over for a second, then refocused again, "When do we leave?"

"As soon as you're ready," Venarya said. "Mika's inside getting your stuff ready."

"Any luck?" Ganz called out. "Need any help up there?"

"You two just stay there," Nolan yelled back. Muttering, he added, "This definitely isn't the place for anyone to be clocking me in the head with equipment."

"Sorry, what was that?" Kitam asked.

"Oh, nothing. I don't need those two here while dealing with this."

"Ah," she replied, returning to the task at hand.

Both Kitam and Nolan were now perched on ladders, each examining one side of the explosive ordnance.

While Ganz and Rheus were eager to simply find the most expedient way to crack open the device, Nolan had patiently and graphically lectured them on the reality of the situation.

That had seemed to quiet them down for the time being.

After Nolan had finished outlining the necessary steps, Kitam had stepped up and offered her assistance with the first stage of visually assessing the device. Remembering that he was still a stranger to this world, and that she might recognize something of value that he could just as easily miss, he had reluctantly accepted.

She was all business now, Nolan had to admit to himself. He was half afraid that he'd be bombarded with chatter, but she seemed to be fully dedicated to her task. In fact, she hadn't spoken two words since they had started.

"Found something," she called out.

"What is it?" Nolan asked, never thinking that he'd actually be asking her to talk.

"There's a small crack almost on the underside here," she reported. "Looks like it's got a whole bunch of dark gunk in there."

"That'd be the black powder that Ganz mentioned," Nolan pondered. "I would've preferred to find a window to the detonator instead, but this can work too.

"Ganz! Rheus!" he called out. "Bring me those tools!"

"What are you planning on trying?" Kitam asked.

"Going to check for any booby-traps first, then I'm going to try to expand that crack a bit," Nolan explained. "Hopefully I'll be able to scoop all the black powder out of there. With all the

water that it looks like it's soaked up, this thing should be relatively inert already. However, I'm not taking any chances. Once all the powder's gone, then I can see about getting to the detonator itself."

"Well, there's no doubt that he's an intimidating sight," John said to Yazril in a low tone. "He definitely looks the part now."

"I'm just hoping that I don't regret doing this," Yazril replied.

"Like you said, desperate times."

They watched as a fully armed and armoured Kaney emerged from his house. His blue and white armour resembled the sets that John had seen on the guards down the road, but appropriately sized for the huge man.

Still, there was one other quite noticeable thing that caught John's eyes.

Thinking back, John remembered that the other guards were armed with a pair of maces that hung from either side of their waist. Kaney, however, was not. Not exactly.

"Yazril?" John began.

"Yes?"

"Are those... what I think they are?"

"Indeed. He had them custom made."

"I figured as much," John said in a resigned tone, yet still not quite believing what he was seeing. "Not much call for mass produced teapot-shaped maces, I'd assume."

"I promise that we'll try to get him back to you as soon as we can," Venarya was telling Mika. "I've improved the potion a little, and the effects should last for just over a week. If all goes well, he'll be back from Freewater in less than two days."

A teary eyed Mika could only hug Venarya in response.

Releasing Venarya, she latched on to her husband and half-sobbed, "Hurry back. Please."

"Looks like the last of the black powder's out," Nolan commented.

"Now, can we get to the business of the detonator?" Ganz asked, his tone betraying his eagerness.

Nolan had managed to safely enlarge the crack in the wooden casing, and there was now a five foot slit along the middle of the device. Then, he had methodically set to work removing the gunky black material from inside.

"Ganz, you do realize that detonators can also explode?"

"Not if my theory's correct-" Ganz began.

"And I'm not banking my retirement on the basis of one of your theories," Nolan cut him off. "I'm already cutting enough corners as is. We'll finish this my way."

"Fine. Fine," a disappointed Ganz said. "I suppose you do have a point. What's next, then?" "First off, you and ZZ Top are going to walk back way over there," Nolan began, "Then, I'm going to give it another thorough check for booby-traps."

"And then-"

"Yes," Nolan said, lack of patience starting to show, "Yes, then we can try to get to the detonator. It looks like it's in this sealed off section here, in what I'm assuming is the nose."

"Also, looks like your electricity theory might actually be correct," Nolan grudgingly added. "Look here. See those metal rods?"

"Ah, yes," Ganz said, looking at the weapon. Through the slit, he could make out a half dozen metal rods protruding though the sealed-off section, and extending about three feet into the main body. "Looks like they're being used as conductors for whatever's generating the electricity in the detonator section. I can't wait to see what they're using to generate the electricity."

"But, you're going to," Nolan interjected. "Now, get off the bloody ladder and let me get to work."

"I take it that's him?" Jensen asked. "Judging from his size, I can't see him being anything but helpful, to tell you the truth. I don't know what all the fuss was about?"

"I'll remind you later that you said that," John replied.

"I... wait a second..." Jensen trailed off, obviously distracted and doing a double take at Kaney. "Are those teapots?"

"HI EVERYONE. I'M GOING WITH YOU TOO. NO NEED TO WORRY WITH ME AROUND."

"Tell you what," John said, keeping a straight face. "Why don't you ask him all about that on your nice, long trip together."

"Thanks."

"Anytime."

"This is going to be a long couple of days, isn't it?" Jensen sighed.

"Venarya said that the medicine she gave him should fully kick in soon," John assured him. "The yelling should subside by the time you actually leave the city. I hope."

"I'll take this lot to the Ranger headquarters, and see them on their way," Yazril was telling Venarya. "I've had the area around the old fish market cleared out, and your people should be there now investigating the weapon."

"Excellent," Venarya replied. "I'll head over there with John."

"Are you going to be okay, Jensen?" John asked. "Also, last chance to back out."

"Not on your life. Even despite, well, you know," he said, sneaking a sidelong glance at Kaney.

"I'll see about getting you outfitted with some gear, as well," Yazril said to Jensen in a low voice. "I'm assuming you're from John's world?"

"You'd be correct, ma'am."

"You have training in close quarters fighting?"

"Extensive training."

"Perfect. I'll explain that you're an agent employed by me," Yazril said. "If anyone starts probing into your backstory, tell them that you're under orders not to divulge anything. If anyone has a problem with that, they can happily take it up with me personally."

"Works for me."

Turning to John and Venarya, she asked, "Any objections?"

"Sounds good to me," John said.

"I think you've got everything covered," Venarya concurred.

"I'll be off then," Yazril said. "If you need to contact me later, I'll be coordinating the coastal evacuations to the southwest. There should be a temporary Ranger station set up there."

"We'll find you after we get some more information on that weapon," Venarya promised. "With any luck, it'll give us an edge for the coming battle."

"Are you sure you've got no idea what it is?" Nolan asked.

"I don't think I've ever seen anything like that before," Rheus replied, perplexed.

To Ganz and Rheus's delight, Nolan had quickly finished his examination of the weapon. Satisfied that there weren't any nasty surprises in store, he had carefully cracked the side of the sealed compartment. Ganz had been expecting some sort of strange battery inside, but what they actually found was beyond weird.

The strange fish resembled a three-foot long eel, and sported a jaw filled with two-inch long razor sharp teeth. It was also quite dead. At least, it appeared to be. Regardless, Nolan had taken the precaution of tying the jaws shut, as well as gripping it with a pair of long tongs.

"Aren't we standing in the middle of what's usually a giant fish market?" Nolan asked. "You've never seen someone here selling something like this?"

"I don't usually get out this way," was all that a sheepish Rheus could say. "I mean, I don't really eat fish."

"Well, that's just great," Nolan grumbled.

"I need to head out, Nolan," Kitam was saying, as she walked up to them. "I've got to go help with the coastal evacuation. The other Rangers will stay here and continue keeping watch."

"That's fine, Kitam," Nolan said. "Thanks for your help."

"You're welcome," she replied. Spying the fish at the center of the conversation, she said, "Where'd you find that slapper? Was it inside that compartment you were talking about? That's a strange place for one of them to be hiding out in. Mind you, it's not like I've studied their behaviour or anything..."

After quickly throwing a quick glare Rheus's way for good measure, he turned back to Kitam and asked, "You recognize this fish?"

"Of course," Kitam said, stopping midsentence and answering Nolan's question without missing a beat.

"The fishermen call it a slapper," she continued. "You see them for sale here every so often, except only a handful of people ever bother to buy them. Goodness know why, though. They taste awful, and they're also a pain to catch. Those teeth can cut right through a fishing line, or shred a net. And, if the teeth weren't enough, they can whip their body around to get you with those barbs on the tails. I think that's why they got nicknamed slappers. Those barbs really hurt. Accidentally pricked myself once on a dead one. Didn't even go in all the way, but wow was it

painful. I wish they'd just dump them back overboard when they catch them. They really are horrible tasting. I mean, I've tried cooking them on three separate occasions, and had no luck-"

"Ah, I see," Ganz interrupted her. "Is there anything else special about this fish that you can tell me?"

"Well," she took a second to think. "The fishermen do claim that they've been stung by them. Except they don't really describe it as a sting. Most like a burn, if that makes any sense. A couple of them also swear that sometimes they can still sting them when wrapped up in a towel. I don't see how that's even possible though. Aside from those barbs, I don't really see any stingers on it. All I can really say is that I've never been stung by one.

"Also," she added, "That particular fish that you're holding does look a little different from the other ones I've seen. See those round bumps on its belly? I've never seen any of the other ones with that. It might be sick, I'm guessing. Does that help you out any?"

"I think it does," Ganz smiled. "Thank you, Kitam."

"Glad to help," Kitam beamed. Walking away, she said, "Good luck with whatever you're doing. I'll be over by the southeast coast helping with the evacuation, if anyone needs me."

"Well," Nolan said, sending another glare Rheus's way before turning to Ganz, "don't keep us in suspense. How does this dead fish help us?"

"That sting Kitam was talking about," Ganz began, "I don't believe it's a sting at all. I think it's a mild electric shock."

"So that thing is this world's version of an electric eel?" Nolan asked.

"Yes, but not quite," Ganz responded. "The sting that she described doesn't sound anywhere near as bad as what I'd imagine from a real electric eel. Plus, even an actual electric eel wouldn't be able to produce enough electricity to nullify the tasrac *and* set off the black powder."

"Sound like you're back to square one?" Nolan frowned. "That doesn't sound promising at all."

"I've got a theory," Ganz replied, a smug tone in his voice. "Pass me that knife, would you?"

"You're going to cut the dang thing open, aren't you?" Nolan asked, rolling his eyes. "Last I checked, you weren't a trained biologist. Are you even going to know what you're looking for in there?"

"If my theory's correct, it'll pretty much stand out," Ganz countered, donning a pair of heavy gloves. "Now, hold it steady for me, and watch out for those barbs."

"These should do," Jensen said, picking out a mace, a shortsword, and a bandolier of throwing daggers from the weapons locker. "Been a while since I've had to use melee weapons in actual combat, but it'll come back to me."

"I'm having some guns brought up for you as well," Yazril said. "They're locked up downstairs."

"I meant to ask you about that," Jensen mused. "John was saying something about being pretty sure that guns didn't work here? Though," he said, subtly gesturing to a nearby group of Rangers, "they seem to be packing oversized six-shooters?"

"I'm afraid I can't speak to that," Yazril replied in a low voice. "I can only assume that they work differently from the ones in your world. The ones you're being issued are used exclusively by Rangers, so it won't raise too many suspicions if I request that they give you a quick primer."

"Much appreciated."

"Here you go, Intendant," a Ranger said, walking up to them. Handing a belt with two large holstered guns in them to Jensen, he continued, "They're both fully loaded."

"Thank you, Stelson," Yazril said. "Jensen, this is Captain Stelson, head of the Ranger contingent in Iathera. He'll also be leading your team."

"Glad to meet you, Captain."

"Just Stelson's fine," the Ranger responded, "We're pretty informal around here. Now, you care for a quick run through on these guns? I'm just assuming you haven't used one of ours before?"

"That's correct. I haven't," Jensen concurred, unholstering and handing over one of the pistols.

Strange, he wondered. This looks like someone just tried to copy the design from a revolver. However, on second glance he noticed there were a few differences, the key ones being that it was quite a bit wider, and that it lacked any sort of external hammer mechanism. The chamber also appeared to be a part of the main chassis, and did not appear to be able to rotate. How did you reload this thing?

"You'll only get about six or seven shots out," Stelson explained, "but they'll deliver more of a punch than you're probably used to. In fact, only those fancy rifles used by the Cluster Marines pack more firepower, but you'll need special training to use those. In any case, it'll take about fifteen to twenty minutes to recharge each shot. So, if you empty the clip, you're going to need almost an hour and a half for it fully charge up again. The short of it is, basically, try to aim very carefully."

"Sounds simple enough," Jensen replied, placing the gun back in the holster. *Recharge?* What was this? Some kind of ray gun?

"Care for a quick demonstration?"

"Sure," Jensen replied, now more curious than ever.

"Follow me," Stelson said, walking over to a nearby door.

Jensen saw that it led into a small courtyard that looked to be set up as a target range.

"Stand behind me," Stelson instructed, pulling out one of his guns, then taking aim at a large piece of square leather about forty feet away.

Jensen complied, not sure what to expect from the unusual sidearm.

Expecting a loud bang, only a high-pitched hiss accompanied the bolt of blue light that shot out of the barrel of the gun. There was a small burst of flame as the shot made contact with the target, leaving a slight singe behind.

"Impressive," Jensen whistled. "What's the maximum range on it?"

"You're looking at it," chuckled Stelson. "Thirty feet is actually the suggested range. But, at that distance, you'd best have some close combat weapons readied as well."

"Not to criticize," Jensen said, "but aren't you at a severe disadvantage versus, say, bows?"

"That's why we wear these," Stelson said, loosening the two top buttons on his shirt to reveal body armour underneath. "These'll stop anything but a close-range arrow, and, if you're that near to the enemy already-"

"-just shoot them with the gun, before they can notch their arrow?" Jensen finished his thought.

"You catch on fast."

"What's that target made out of, by the way?"

"Oh, that's just a piece of tanned orgot hide," Stelson said. "It's been treated the same way as our coats."

"I see," Jensen said, though his expression betrayed a hint of confusion.

"No, I don't think you do," Stelson's eyes narrowed slightly, a calculating look on his face as he noticed Jensen's bemusement. Lowering his voice, he addressed both Yazril and Jensen, "You're not from around here, or anywhere near here, I'm guessing?"

Seeing the reticent look on Yazril's face, he added, "Don't worry. Your secret's safe with me. I've heard stories about Lady Venarya's new friend from the other Rangers. It seems that no one knows exactly where he came from."

"You're right," Yazril admitted, "I can't tell you the whole story, but you can work under the assumption that Jensen's not familiar with our technology."

"I *am* trained in combat, though," Jensen assured him. "However, your particular guns and armour are unfamiliar to me. The guns that I've used can fire small metal projectiles called bullets up to hundreds of yards away. We don't have anything like these ones you're using."

"I see," Stelson said, skepticism apparent in his face.

"It's true," Yazril confirmed. "Those guns he described don't work here, though."

"That's quite a story," Stelson whistled, "But I'll take your word for it."

"Those guns you mentioned," he added, lowering his voice even more. "Are you working on getting them to operate here at all?"

"I can't comment on that right now," Yazril said. "I'm afraid I might have already said too much."

"Well, I can't say I altogether like being kept in the dark, but I can accept that," Stelson said. "And don't worry about any rumours regarding your friends. I'll tell my Rangers to keep quiet about that, and I'll have them keep an ear out to listen for anyone asking too many questions."

"Thanks," Yazril said.

"Now, about that armour you're wearing," he said, looking at Jensen's flak jacket. "Has it been treated in any special way?"

"Not that I can think of," Jensen said, "It's just designed to mitigate damage from bullets and shrapnel. I don't know if it would do anything against your weapons."

"I don't think it would," Stelson said, walking off to one side. "Watch this."

Coming to a stop near a large wooden block, he picked it up, placed it on the ground next to the shooting target, then walked back to them.

"Keep an eye on that block of wood," he said, raising his weapon and firing it.

As the bolt hit the block, this time Jensen could see crackling bursts of energy erupt from the point of contact. Once they subsided, he saw that the gun had left a small crater burnt into the smouldering block. It was as if a burning fist had punched its way into the piece of wood.

"I take it that that happens to anything that's not 'treated'?" Jensen admitted.

"And you'd be correct."

"Remind me not to get myself shot by one of those things."

"Not to worry," Stelson said, "I'm going to see about getting a Ranger uniform for you.

"In the meantime," he added, handing both over his sidearms to Jensen, "Take a few practice shots at that target to familiarize yourself with the weapon. I'll be back in a few minutes to get you."

"I'll be leaving too, as well," Yazril said, reaching into her pocket and handing Stelson a letter. "Here's the authorization for more Rangers. Now, I'll leave Jensen in your capable hands, and I'll trust you to maintain the ruse?"

"Like I said, I may not like it," Stelson said. "But, considering all that's going on, I can accept the need for all the secrecy. You can count on me and my Rangers."

As promised, Stelson had returned with a set of armour for Jensen.

"Whatever you do, try to keep your skin from making prolonged direct contact with the coat," Stelson warned. "Or else you might end up with a really bad rash."

"Is it because of the type of hide used?" Jensen asked, puzzled.

"Not as such," Stelson explained. "It's because of the treatment that it's received to make it resistant to gunfire. You'll notice that the last four inches of the sleeves are stitched on. That part, along with the collar, isn't treated."

"So, no trying to stop gunfire with my wrists or neck?"

"Correct," Stelson chuckled. "Most new Rangers take to wearing a set of thick gloves at first, but they do hinder your dexterity. Considering that we don't know what kind of fight we'll be walking in to, you won't have that luxury."

"That's not a problem," Jensen said. "I'll figure out a way to cope with it. Now, about the actual body armour..."

"No similar problems with those," Stelson laughed. "Else, I'd have desertions by the drove. It just gets a mite warm sometimes, but that's it."

"That I can definitely cope with."

"Now, you're comfortable with the weapons?"

"Yep, other than the range thing, they're pretty similar in concept to the ones I've used," Jensen said. "I shouldn't have a problem with them."

"Perfect," Stelson said, his face betraying curiosity. "If I may, and I won't get offended if you can't answer, but I can ask you something? About those guns from where you come from?"

He was getting into cautious territory here, and would have to tread lightly. "Certainly. I'll answer as much as prudent."

"Those guns you described sound a lot like the ones in some of the stories I used to hear back as a child," Stelson explained. "Some say that the look of our guns were modelled after them."

"As strange as it sounds, I can't argue with that," Jensen said. "Your weapons do, superficially, resemble what we call a revolver."

"A what?!" Stelson's easy-going demeanour was replaced by a look of utter surprise.

"A revolver," Jensen repeated. "Have you heard the term before?"

"That's one of the old nicknames for our guns," Stelson said. "It's hardly used anymore, and I can't ever figure out where the term came from. There's nothing that turns inside these guns, as far as I know."

"That is strange," Jensen agreed. "I can't explain that."

"When we get to Freewater, would you mind speaking to my father?" Stelson asked. "I know he'd be interested in meeting you."

"He's the one that told you the stories, I gather?"

"Correct," Stelson said.

"Can't say that I'm not a tad curious about this, as well," Jensen agreed. "I'll speak with him, for as much as I'm allowed to say."

[&]quot;I'm assuming that it didn't swallow that?" Nolan asked.

"Oh, no. Definitely not," Ganz replied, absently staring at the strange object. "This wasn't even technically in its stomach. It was just sort of floating free under its skin."

"So, you're saying someone put it in here?"

"Huh? Oh, yes," Ganz replied. "No other way this could've gotten in there. Have you ever seen anything like this, Rheus?"

The object in question was a series of small metallic spheres. Each of the blue-tinted spheres was about half an inch in diameter, and they were all linked together with wire to form a ring.

"I have seen vaguely similar items at the jewellery vendors at the bazaar," Rheus replied. "But, I'm going to assume that someone didn't go to all that trouble to stuff a necklace in this fish. Sorry, but I'm just as lost as you are."

"Well," Ganz said, using a wooden rod to prod around inside the carcass, "there doesn't seem to be anything else strange in here. But, I do have a theory."

"Don't keep us in suspense," Nolan grumbled.

"As you know, the power source for any electrical device that we throw through the portal gets drained almost immediately-"

"Yes, yes. John covered that part already. Skip ahead."

"Okay. Well, it's basically the same theory that allows for your pacemaker to work here-" Ganz began.

"Hold on a second," Nolan spat out, sudden realization dawning on his face, "You bloody fools could have killed me by bringing me here through that portal! In fact, why aren't I dead?!"

"Huh? John didn't tell you?" a slightly confused Ganz said. "We ran a test to make sure your pacemaker's battery wouldn't get drained-"

"How, exactly?" Nolan asked, anger fading but still quite irritated. "Did you raid a nursing home, and kidnap one of the residents to use as a guinea pig?"

"You must've seen that penned-up raccoon outside the building that you arrived in?" Ganz explained. "He's got a pacemaker that's been going strong for a bit now."

"I thought that was just some weird pet or something," Nolan said, regaining his calm. "So, you brought it here through the portal?"

"Correct," Ganz said. "John's sister somehow managed to track down him down for us. I'm guessing he came from one of our medical research labs."

"I'm also guessing they don't come from the wild with pacemakers built into them," Nolan said. "Finish your theory."

"Okay, like I was saying," Ganz continued, "if the device is surrounded by living tissue, then it doesn't appears to be affected by the draining effect-"

"So, you think that that necklace thing is some sort of weird battery," Nolan cut him off, understanding where he was going, "and that they decided to keep it charged by hiding it in that fish. I understand that much. But, how did they trigger the electrical charge when the weapons made contact with their targets?"

"I was just getting to that," Ganz said. "That's where I think the type of fish comes into play. Like Kitam implied, this fish appears to have a rudimentary set of electric discharge organs. I'm guessing that, when those fire, they act as the trigger for that device."

"What's to stop the fish from firing off prematurely?"

"Who knows?" Ganz shrugged. Seeing the darkening expression on Nolan's face, he continued, "Maybe they tranquilized them to the point where only a jolt from a hard impact would affect them? Could be any number of things I can think of.

"One thing I'm really curious about though," he continued, "is that strange necklace thing. As far as I know, we don't have anything that small that's also able to generate or store that amount of electricity."

"I know what you're thinking," Nolan said. "And, before you decide to crack open one of those spheres, I'd advise you to wait until John can get you a proper hazmat suit. No telling what nasty stuff's in there."

"I wasn't thinking about doing that," Ganz said weakly. "Not seriously, at least."

"Doing what?" they heard a voice ask from behind them.

Turning around, the trio saw Venarya and John making their way to them.

"Er... nothing," Ganz said. "But, I believe we've figured out how they got these weapons to work."

"That's some good news, at least," John said. Sniffing the air, he added, "Phew, that's ripe. Why exactly do you have that old fish opened up?"

Chapter 9

"So, what you're saying," John stated, "is that this doesn't exactly help us?"

"If I can get a look at how they created that necklace thing, I can-"

"I don't think so, Ganz. Not now, at least," John said, shaking his head. "Even if you figure out how it works, or what it's even made of, you're not going to be able to duplicate the design in time to do any good."

"I'm sure if we get it to my lab-"

"You're not thinking of the consequences, Ganz," John countered again. "That thing is designed to push out electricity in a world that does everything to smother it. What if you bring that thing into New York, and it decides to go into overdrive? What if it takes out your lab?"

"Or half the city," Nolan grunted.

The five of them now sat in Venarya's living room, going over Ganz's findings. With time running out, John felt a sense of hopelessness come over him.

"I guess you're right," Ganz said in a despondent tone. "But, like you said, we're nowhere with this now."

"Maybe not," Nolan piped up.

"What are you thinking?" John asked.

"You remember Lawrence, the egghead that used to head up the applied biology department?"

"Ol' Lawsuit Larry?" John asked, a trace of a scowl on his face. "His name does ring a bell, yes."

"Did Melissa ever tell you what really happened to him?"

"Can't say I was ever curious enough to inquire," John replied. "All I heard was a piece of equipment malfunctioned and the poor guy got fried."

"You may recall that, around the same time, the military was shopping contracts to develop alternative sources of power for some of their mobile field stations?"

"Yep, I heard we were working on something for that, John said, "But, it never panned out, and we never ended up bidding. Wasn't cost effective, or something?"

"Lawrence was working on that project," Nolan explained.

"The applied biology department was working on that? That seems a little odd."

"That doesn't even begin to explain it," Nolan said. "They were into some really strange stuff, from what I understand. Something about creating a biological battery using genetically modified bacteria, or some such nonsense."

"Hmm," Ganz said, scratching his chin, and seeing where Nolan's train of thought was headed. "That's a clever solution. As long as the electricity is being produced by a living organism, it should be exempt to the draining effect of the tasrac."

"But, this is all still just theory, right?" John said. "I mean, how long would it take us to even finish a prototype?"

"And would it even produce the amount of electricity that we need?" Ganz added.

"Hold your horses. I'm getting to that," Nolan said. "After that whole lawsuit incident, Lawrence apparently decided to try to redeem his name. Figured he'd snag us this contract and make everything better. He took it upon himself to finish designing the device. Decided to hide his work in plain sight. Ordered enough parts and grew enough bacteria to build over two dozen prototypes.

"That lab accident you mentioned?" Nolan continued to explain, "That was caused by the fool getting electrocuted by one of the test devices."

"He was always known as being a little bit reckless," Ganz observed. "But I can't imagine him being that careless?"

"Turns out the design had a slight problem," Nolan said. "Later tests showed that you needed a critical mass of bacteria to get the ball rolling. After that, the bacteria would continue to generate electricity, and would only go dormant once their food supply had run out.

"However, later tests that we ran showed that if you dumped too much food in there, the end result was almost like a runaway nuclear reaction. The bacteria would start increasing their output exponentially, and burn through the food supply in a few minutes. I'm guessing that Lawrence didn't realize this at the time. All we know is that the other eggheads found him all toasty on the floor the next morning."

"It sounds like he was on to something, though," John said. "What other drawbacks did we find?"

"You know those large power transformers that you see on telephone poles?" Nolan asked. "Yes?" Ganz said tentatively.

"You needed to carry around something three times that size with you, just to keep the charge regulated. Plus, even that wasn't a guarantee. There was a good chance you'd end up frying whatever expensive device you had plugged into it. All in all, there were a lot less troublesome ways to generate electricity.

"In the end, your sister Melissa just decided to just hush the matter up, and had the research discontinued."

"So," Ganz mused, "you're saying that we can recommission one of these devices for use as a detonator?"

"Weren't you listening?" Nolan grumbled. "Yes. Yes, I believe you should be able to."

"This was years ago, Nolan," John said. "Would those things still work? Wouldn't the bacteria be dead by now, at least?"

"They were put into cold storage, from what I understand," Nolan said. "Should just be a matter of thawing them out, I'd imagine."

"Tell me they're being stored nearby to the head office?"

"At a warehouse in New Jersey," Nolan. "Worst case, we can get them choppered in."

"Then there's also the matter of getting actual explosives," John said. "I don't suppose you have a secret cache of gunpowder somewhere?"

"Not unless you want the company on a government watchlist," Nolan said. "However, we do have a new slurry explosive that we designed for demolition and mining. It can be triggered by electricity, if I remember correctly."

"And it'll be easy to get our hands on a bunch of this stuff?"

"Not really," Nolan said, one eyebrow raised. "But I'll see what I can do. I might be able to redirect a fair amount from a few of our nearby construction companies. I'll falsify some requisitions for 'training purposes', then get it lost in red tape until we can replace the explosives."

"Sounds like you've done this before," John chuckled.

"Hey, at the rate that some of your beancounters work," Nolan said, "that was sometimes the fastest way to get things moving."

"Before we get too off-track," Venarya spoke up. "Let's assume you're able to build these explosive devices with no problem. Am I right in assuming that you still have no way of triggering the detonation from a safe distance?"

"Not necessarily," Ganz said, "That'll should the easy part, actually. We might be able to rig up some sort of mechanical timer to start the reaction-"

"We'll do a quick test, once we get back with a few of the prototypes," Nolan cut in. "Good news is that we won't need to lug those giant transformers around. The actual bacteria tanks are fairly small. Maybe two feet on each side, if even. Should be relatively quick to transport all that stuff."

"Sounds fine to me," John said. "Venarya, do you have a nearby area we can test this? I can only imagine what Kitam would say if we blew up the fish market."

"I think so," she replied. "There's a small park just north of the city. Rheus, can you take some Rangers and secure the site for us?"

"Not a problem, Venarya," Rheus replied. "Give me a list of stuff that you need onsite, Ganz. I'll make sure it's waiting for you when you get there."

"Thanks, Rheus," Ganz said.

"Okay, gentlemen, if you're ready?" John said. "I'll take us back home, and transport you to my sisters' penthouse. Get the stuff either trucked or choppered in, but be quick about it."

"No kidding?" Nolan muttered. "Any more obvious advice?"

"Okay, okay," John said, arms up in mock-surrender, "Just needed to make sure we're all on the same page. How long do you think you'll need to get everything delivered?"

"Everything?" Nolan said. "More time than we've got. "

"What? You said it'd be quick to transport it?"

"I said it'd be *relatively* quick. But, hear me out," Nolan said, pacing. "Forget the trucks. They'll take too long, so we're going to have to use choppers. Even so, they'll have to make several trips to get everything transported. I'll try to get enough equipment delivered within an hour and a half to create at least a couple of bombs. The rest of it will wait for us there."

"Fair enough," John said. "I'll talk to my sisters and have them store the excess stuff over there for us. Boy, they're really gonna' love that."

"If you don't mind, John," Venarya spoke up. "After you drop off Nolan and Ganz, and finish talking to your sisters, could you return here to help me with a task? We should be done in plenty of time to pick them back up again."

"Sure thing, Venarya," John agreed. Turning to Nolan, he asked. "That work for you? I'll drop you and Ganz off, notify my sisters as to what's happening, then return to pick you up in an about an hour and a half?"

"You want to what?!" Sophia half-shrieked.

"You just need store it here temporarily," John defended himself. "Plus, all the explosives will be locked away with security."

"John, you want me to have a few helicopter loads of explosives transported into New York. I'm sure that won't kick up any red flags at all," Sophia hissed. "I'll get right on that. You better thank your lucky stars that Melissa wasn't around to hear that."

"Nolan will handle all the arrangements," John countered. "He knows his way around this stuff."

"Yes, if we're talking about bypassing procedure when requisitioning an extra weapon or two for his contractors! Not for something like this! All we need is for one overeager accountant to notice this, then we'll be in deep trouble!"

"Well, what if we cover it up as a factory recall?" John said, thinking quickly, a finger to his chin.

"How so?"

"State that we suspect that a bad batch went out to some of our subsidiaries," John said.
"Nothing serious, but we want to test it here at the main labs downstairs to make sure. You can even actually send some down there and have the eggheads examine it, just to make it seem on the level."

"You're still talking about enough explosives to level a couple of city blocks, John!"

"Believe me, I know," John said. "It is for a good cause, though?"

"Agh, fine," she said, no little trace of exasperation in her voice. "I want it out of here within two days, though!"

"It'll be gone," John promised.

[&]quot;Ready when you are, Venarya," John said.

"Perfect," she replied, gently stirring a kettle. "Let me finish with this, and we can get going."

"Brewing some more anti-psychotic tea?"

"Close," Venarya said. "We're off to interrogate the prisoner that Petrarca's got locked up on his ship."

"So the tea's that truth serum that you mentioned earlier?"

"That's what they think," Venarya said. "In reality, this is just a mild narcotic to relax her tongue."

"You think that'll work?"

"By itself, probably not," Venarya said. "I'm sure any enemy agents are well trained enough to recognize such tactics."

"Ah," John said, a touch confused. As realization quickly dawned on him, he added, "So, I take it you'll be, well..."

"Personally augmenting the effects of the narcotic?" Venarya finished the question for him. "In a word, yes."

"Fair enough," John said. "So you're going to use that fancy mojo of yours, and just pull the thoughts straight from her head?"

"That would be difficult, even with the narcotic," Venarya admitted. "The only reason that worked with you is that you were otherwise too preoccupied to notice. I don't think that particular tactic will work in this situation."

"Point taken," John said, trying to force back a blush.

"I doubt I'll be able to establish any kind of mind-link before she realizes what I'm doing," Venarya said. "However, between the narcotic and my own natural, well, talents, I should be able to disorient her enough to get her to hopefully reveal something of the enemy's plans."

"I see," John said. "Quick question, though. Where exactly do I fit into all of this?"

"Moral support," Venarya said, taking the kettle off the stove and emptying the contents into a flask. "By the way, Jensen sent something over for you. It's over there in the corner."

Looking over where Venarya had indicated, John saw a familiar sight. Picking up the flak jacket, he saw that there was a note attached.

John, I got a set of loaner armour from the Rangers, so here's this thing back. I swear I'm half tempted to not let you know that this thing's useless here, and just have you sweat it out.

Apparently, the laser guns that they have here will probably just punch through this thing like paper. I talked to Yazril about getting some armour for you as well, and she'll have some ready when you meet up with her later. In the meantime, please try not to get shot. -Jensen

"Venarya?

"Yes, John?"

"You guys have laser guns?"

"I'm not sure I understand?" John was saying. "How is a bear even capable of being in charge of anything? Other than stealing picnic baskets, of course."

Seeing Venarya's expression starting to darken, he added, "In all seriousness, where did it come from?"

"Before your kind moved to this continent, a large group of similar creatures lived on an island to the far north," Venarya explained, a touch of sadness in her voice.

"By lived, I'm assuming they're no longer here?"

"They went extinct, as far as I know."

"And they were sentient? Not just animals?"

"Most definitely not animals," Venarya said. "They were intelligent, but also fairly warlike."

"What happened to them?"

"They picked a fight with another neighbouring race. Both sides ended up losing in the end. It... it wasn't a pleasant period in history."

"You make it sound like you were there?"

"I tried to help broker a peace treaty to stop the fighting," Venarya said softly. "None of them would have any of it."

How old was she?, John wondered.

Wisely choosing not to voice that query, he instead asked, "So you think one, or a group of them, survived?"

"I've no other explanation," Venarya said. "But, considering everything that's happening, I wouldn't discount any other explanations."

"I take it that this is one of the reasons you volunteered to interrogate that prisoner?" John asked. "To see if she has any knowledge of that?"

- "Among other things," Venarya said.
- "I see," John said. "One more question, if I may?"
- "Go ahead."
- "Those, er, zombies that Rheus and Ganz mentioned. Where do they figure into all of this?"
- "I honestly wish I knew," Venarya sighed. "There are way too many unanswered questions right now."

Chapter 10

"What in the..." Ancor exclaimed, bewildered. "Are you seeing this, Yalic?"

"Please tell me I'm not going crazy," Ancor said, putting down the spyglass.

"You're not, sir," Yalic assured him. "Those are definitely... er... *cats* manning those weapons. Or, humanoid cats, rather."

With the rising sun, Ancor's fleet had finally managed to get a better look at the pyramid. It had turned out that the thing was actually hovering about twenty to thirty feet off the water.

Figuring that that would be the extent of any surprises from the pyramid, he had just been proven wrong.

"Incoming message from the *Sea Vulture*, sir," Yalic said, turning left to look at the signal lanterns from the other ship.

"What is it, now?" Ancor grumbled. "They found rabbits manning the other side of this thing?"

"No, sir," Yalic responded with a straight face. "They say they may have a bit of good news. They've been doing some calculations regarding the speed of that thing. It seems that every time it fires those strange weapons, it loses speed, then takes a while to build back up again. They estimate that, from our *attacks*, we've already added just over an hour to the enemy's travel time."

"Well, it makes sense when you think about it," Ancor said, scratching his chin. "That thing probably takes an incredible amount of power just to keep it hovering. Plus, I'm guessing that those weapons are quite a drain themselves, or else they'd have a lot more than four of them. Whatever tasrac power source they're using must be at its limits."

"A sound theory, sir."

"Dispatch the two fastest ships immediately," Ancor ordered. "Send the first one to Iathera and report what we've found. Tell them that we may be able to delay that thing from making shore until at least later this evening. That should give them a bit more time to prepare."

"Affirmative. And the second ship, sir?"

"Send it back to the Cluster. Have them load up a small fleet with lifeboats and flares as fast as they can, then rendezvous with us immediately."

[&]quot;Indeed, sir," came the response.

"Yes, sir."

"Now, load up a couple more of those lifeboats and press the attack."

Any sane man should have probably had a least a few reservations about doing this, Jensen thought. Strangely, he had none. *Perhaps it was just adrenaline*.

Or, perhaps, not. Feeling as calm and collected as he currently did definitely shoot that theory down. *Perhaps it was just simply him relishing the opportunity to once again put his skills to good use. Rather than, say, to bad use as a corporate dogsitter.*

Chuckling, he looked around the room. Everyone seemed eager to get started, as they waited for the portal to activate. He saw what appeared to be their version of a radio tech give a thumbs up sign to someone standing next to the portal.

Apparently, any attempted activation of the portal, without first letting the other side know, was met with a barrage of gunfire coming through the portal.

Also, from one of the conversations he was overhearing, he suspected that a few Rangers at the front of the group were also having a few reservations about the mission.

"I MAKE THE BEST STEW, I TELL YOU," a familiar voice was saying, though the booming tones were a bit more subdued now. "That's why they gave me that nickname! KANEY STEW! You guys all come over for dinner when this is done!"

Jensen's intuition told him that not many of those here would probably be taking him up on that offer.

A small flash of light heralded the portal finally opening, and he heard Stelson say, "Let's move out, folks."

Quickly, the mixed military force entered the portal, with Jensen being the last to pass through. He noticed that Kaney opted to be the first one through. No one bothered to argue with the huge man about it, it seemed.

He emerged into a walled courtyard that appeared to encircle a central building.

"Welcome back to Fort Tiarre, Stelson," a voice was saying. "Is it true what we're hearing about Iathera?"

"Thanks, and yes, Mondan," Stelson replied.

"Why all this song and dance over getting the reinforcements, though?" Mondan asked, confusion apparent. "You could have just sent me a message, and I'd have dispatched some of my Rangers back to Freewater for you? Instead, you've shown up here with a small army."

"It's no disrespect to you or your boys here," Stelson assured him. "That's still a twenty mile hike just to get to The Bridge, and we've no idea what kind of ambushes could be waiting for us."

"Makes sense what you're saying, but I'm sure at least one of our boys would have made it through?"

"Which brings up another point," Stelson said. "Our enemies seem to have been a few steps ahead of us the entire way. For all we know, this Iathera business could also be part of a ruse to get you to reduce your available manpower to the point where you could be successfully overrun. After all, you only got, what, about three dozen Rangers here?"

"Down to twenty six now," Mondan said. "Not even enough to man all the platforms on the wall. And, if Fort Tiarre falls-"

"The next closest portal is over forty miles away in the wrong direction," Stelson finished the thought for him.

"Well, speaking of ambushes, I have a feeling that you may be walking into one soon after you leave."

"How so?"

"I didn't think anything much of it until you brought up those last points," admitted Mondan. "But, over the last few days, we've noticed quite a few signs of other people in the area. More so than normal. Spotted a couple of them, but they were dressed like ragpickers, and fled when we saw them. At first we thought it was just more opportunists moving through here trying to head north-"

"To an active warzone? Why?"

"Like I said, they're opportunists," Mondan shrugged. "They're basically there to scavenge whatever they can find. Lately, there have been rumours of people striking it rich, just by going through one of those abandoned villages."

"Idiots," Stelson muttered. "Don't they know what's going on up there?"

"Greed beats self-preservation, I guess," Mondan shrugged. "We try to talk sense into them whenever we see them, but there's not much we can do in terms of forcing them to turn back.

"Regardless," he continued, "the point is that there could be quite a large number of enemy soldiers lying in wait for you, plus more still on the way."

"I see," Stelson said. "Well, all the more reason for us to head out now, then."

"Agreed," Mondan said. "Do you want one of the haulers?"

"I don't think so," Stelson replied, thinking. "The enemy might be anticipating that, and I'd rather not give them one large target. So, we'll forego the transport for now."

"I understand," Mondan said. "We'll provide platform cover during the first mile for you."

"Appreciated," Stelson said. Turning back to the group, he said, "Okay, you heard him! Let's move out."

Garh could see the decrepit looking stone dock in the distance, and he looked on as Duba raced on ahead and scampered up a nearby tree.

Getting to the dock, he heard a loud click, and watched as a raft broke through the dark water.

Hearing a slight noise from above him, he quickly sidestepped out of the way as Duba crashed into the spot he had just occupied.

"Ha!" Duba said, getting up. "You getting slower."

"Perhaps, old friend," Garh chuckled.

After boarding the raft, Duba let out a series of howls. A few seconds later, the raft started to move, pulled by two of Duba's brethren at the other side of the water.

"You friends with Duba, right?" Duba said earnestly.

"Undeniably," Garh replied.

"I ask question?" Duba said. "You not get upset?"

"Of course not. Ask away."

"You talk good," Duba said. "Much better than Duba. But you not talk to others? Why that?"

"Necessity, my friend," Garh replied, a tinge of sadness in his voice. "It's simply necessary."

"Duba like talk," the lupine creature said, puzzled. "Duba not see how it necessary to not talk?"

"It all comes down to one of the core facts of life," Garh explained. "People usually tend to ignore those that they think aren't as smart as them. Everyone sees me as an almost mindless brute, fit only to carry out basic instructions."

"That not nice."

"No, it's not. But, again, it's necessary," Garh said. "Because of that, they ignore me. In turn, that provides me with more leeway to carry out important tasks, without attracting much notice."

"Duba still think that strange."

"As any sane person should," Garh chuckled. "But, it's the wages I have to pay to ensure that the city stays safe."

"This is disturbing," Smiljan said, pacing.

"That's quite the understatement," Garh remarked. "The phrase I was thinking of was 'potentially catastrophic'."

Arriving at Smiljan's manor deep in the swamp, he had just finished explaining the situation to the old man.

"Regardless of the terminology," the old man said, "this is most definitely not a good thing."

"Agreed," Garh said. "Though, there is one advantage that we hold."

"I'm assuming you mean the defense platforms?"

"Correct, old friend," Garh said. "The weapons on the pyramid appear to have a maximum range of about a mile, whereas our platforms can reach about a mile and a half."

"Still too close a gap for my liking," Smiljan said, his brow furrowed.

"I'm hoping that we can hold that pyramid offshore with the platforms, rendering its weapons useless for attack," Garh said. "However, if they land enough troops nearby, this has the possibility of turning pretty nasty. I'm hoping Captain Stelson made it to Freewater with no issues. We're going to need those reinforcements."

"I don't like the fact that we're assuming that our platforms will be able to damage that thing," Smiljan said, pacing again.

"Ancor did mention that it appeared to be made out of some sort of stone," Garh said, "But, you could be right. However, those weapons should be quite vulnerable. If we can get a few lucky shots off, we may be able to disarm it."

"That's assuming that they don't already know the range of our platforms," Smiljan remarked. "Given everything that's happened in the last little while, it looks like, whoever our enemy is, they appear to be a few steps ahead of us."

"And, I've also seen that look on your face before," Garh replied. "You have some sort of trick up your sleeve, I'm guessing?"

"Not another fleet, if that's what you mean," Smiljan chuckled. "But, I have been researching a way to improve on the range of the current platforms."

"I don't think we'll have time to install new platforms, though?"

"No worries about that," Smiljan laughed. "We're nowhere near having a working prototype as yet. However, I *have* been applying some modifications to the platforms around the house to try to test out my theories. Now, this is a touch hard to judge with all the trees in the way, but I believe that I've managed to extend the range to nearly two and a half miles."

"Impressive. I'm guessing that these same modifications can be quickly repeated on the Iatheran platforms, as well?"

"Exactly," Smiljan said, "However, it will involve you having to lug a few hundred pounds of parts out of the swamp?"

"I can get Duba and a few others to help me," Garh assured him. "I've got a boat parked up at that old dock. With all the commotion going on down south, I wouldn't worry about anyone spotting us."

"Perfect. Keep in mind that I only have enough components to modify nine platforms, so you'll have to figure out which platforms you're going to adjust," Smiljan informed him. "Also, there may be a few drawbacks to the modifications."

"What kind of drawbacks are we talking about?"

"Keep in mind that this isn't even at the prototype stage as of yet, and I've been having some minor problems regulating the flow of power," Smiljan explained. "Basically, you'll only get about a dozen shots off before the safety kicks in, and stops the platform from destroying itself. Then, you'll be in a cooldown period."

"How long is this cooldown period?"

"That's the problem," Smiljan said. "It can range from a few minutes to over an hour."

"That's quite a range, I have to say."

"Remember that these components were never even meant to be used in these platforms," Smiljan said. "The design and construction of a platform capable of mounting this without any sort of problems will require at least six years."

"I understand," Garh said. "However, you've at least given us a bit more of a fighting chance now."

Chapter 11

Jensen looked ahead.

They were now leaving the protective radius of the fort's platform turrets, and still had a dozen and a half miles left to cover. That first mile had been pretty fast, as the entire area had been mostly deforested to provide less cover for any attackers, but Jensen could see the vegetation starting to thicken. Another half mile, and they would be travelling through wooded terrain.

The trail that they were now travelling on was hardly wider than a single lane roadway, and was rife with ambush possibilities. To that end, Stelson had dispatched four Rangers to scout ahead for potential traps.

Suddenly, there was a shout from one of the Cluster marines, "Look! A flare!" Indeed, off to the immediate left, there was a bright green flare in the sky.

"One of yours, Stelson?" The marine captain asked, readying his rifle.

"No," Stelson replied, sword in one hand and gun in the other. "We don't use that signal. I didn't think they'd attack us this early on! Prepare yourselves, everyone!"

As if on cue, the crashing of footsteps heralded a swarm of a few dozen soldiers erupting from a thicket about a hundred yards away. Readying himself for a fight, Jensen took a quick glance at the enemy. They looked like the ragpickers that Mondan had spoken about, but Jensen saw that they moved in formation and with purpose. These were trained soldiers. They didn't seem to be armed with any sort of guns or bows, but were decked out with a wide variety of melee weapons.

The Cluster Marines wasted no time, the bulk of them breaking off to the left and right in an attempt to take up forward flanking positions, and making ready to shoot as soon the enemy was in range.

As the Rangers and Iatheran soldiers moved to secure the centre ranks, Jensen took up position at the rear, per Stelson's orders.

"What the...!" was all he heard, as he turned around to see Kaney breaking off from the main group, running ahead to intercept the enemy by himself.

"Kaney, get back here!" Stelson yelled, but the huge man either didn't hear him or just plain ignored him.

Looks like we'll be bringing back at least one body bag with us, Jensen thought. A peripheral flash caught his attention, as he saw another group of soldiers charging at them from behind.

"Six more behind us!" he called out. They were still about thirty yards away, and closing fast. Not trusting himself to get a good shot off with a still-unfamiliar gun, he instead pulled out a throwing dagger with each hand and hurled them at the enemy.

Both daggers connected, and two men fell, blood gushing from the wounds in their necks. Unholstering his mace and sword, Jensen saw a blur to his left, and watched as two more enemy soldiers fell, also struck by daggers.

Thankful for the unknown assist, the remaining two men were now seconds away from being able to attack him. Taking a chance, and hoping to surprise them, he darted forward, holding the mace as a makeshift shield.

It worked. The two men were momentarily taken aback by the lone attacker. That was all that Jensen needed. Seizing the opportunity, he slid forward and dropped to one knee. Swinging his blade as savagely as he could, he severed both men's legs off at the knees.

He dashed between them, as both crippled enemies tumbled forward on to the ground. Turning around, he swiftly used his weapons to dispatch them.

Looking up quickly, he saw that the unexpected help had come from Captain Harker, head of the Cluster Marine contingent. He still held another dagger, ready to throw it if needed. Winking and flashing a grin at Jensen, he turned back to the situation at hand, tossing the readied dagger at the nearest enemy.

Jensen also noticed that Kaney was somehow still alive. There he was, about fifty feet ahead of the main group, fighting off five, no make that four now, enemies simultaneously. The remainder of their opponents were wisely veering around him, charging at the main group. However, only a few of them made it close enough to get dispatched by sword or mace, as the expert marksmanship of the Cluster Marines felled the majority of them.

Their rifles also seemed to have a bit more range than the Ranger guns, as he saw Harker fire a shot that felled the last enemy, who also happened to be one that Kaney was engaged in combat with.

"HEY! THAT ONE WAS MINE!"

"Why me?" Stelson muttered. "Kaney, come back to the main group! And, please don't run off like that again."

From the tone of the last statement, Jensen could tell that Stelson thought it was a fruitless gesture.

"Gotta say, though," one of the Rangers commented, "he was pretty effective."

"Don't encourage him," Stelson grumbled. "I don't need him pulling an even crazier stunt next time."

Jensen looked back to make sure there were no other stragglers on the way to join in on the attack. However, a flickering in the sky caught his attention, "Stelson, I've got some more flares to the south. The enemy again?"

"No," Stelson said. "Not this time. However, this isn't good. Those were sent up from Fort Tiarre. That signal means that they've spotted a large group headed toward us."

"How large is large?"

"That signal means that they think it's over a hundred enemies."

Harker whistled, "That explains the last flare that these guys sent up, then."

"Yes," Stelson agreed. "This lot was only a diversion. They only meant to keep us occupied so that their friends could catch up to us."

"What now?" Jensen asked.

"No choice," Stelson said. "We have to make a run for The Bridge, and hope there's no more ambushes in wait. We'll be safe if we can get there."

"I HAVE AN IDEA!" came the voice of non-reason, as the huge man started running back down the trail. "I'll hold them off! YOU KEEP GOING!"

"What the..." Stelson trailed off, not sure he had actually just witnessed that. "Kaney, get back over here!"

The huge man kept running, and didn't respond.

Stelson looked to the Iatheran captain, "Is he insane?"

"You really want an answer to that?" the captain shrugged, "And, I'm certainly not going after that nutcase."

"Fine," Stelson said, addressing the now bemused group. "Let's at least make the most of this, everyone. Forced run to The Bridge! Let's go!"

Jensen was glad that there were no more hills. Even more, he was wishing that Stelson had taken Mondan up on that offer of what had sounded like the equivalent of a truck to carry everyone.

Nevertheless, having caught up with their slightly confused forward scouts, the entire group had managed to navigate the trail without running into any more ambushes.

They were now in the last mile of the run, and the terrain had changed drastically. The woods had thinned out, and only a sparse tree or shrub dotted the rocky landscape.

Apparently, Kaney had also been successful in delaying their pursuers. They had spotted no one following them the entire time. What had become of Kaney himself was anyone's guess.

They had just finished crossing a series of hills, and Stelson had smartly left two of his fastest runners at the top of the last one. At the first sign of pursuers, their orders were to fire a flare, then bolt like the wind and rendezvous with the group.

So far, there had been no flare.

Jensen wondered what this Bridge was that they were referring to, and how could it possibly offer refuge from over a hundred possible enemy soldiers. It wasn't certainly from force of arms, as Stelson had said, between breaths, that there were only about a dozen Rangers there. The punishing pace of the run prevented him from asking any follow-up questions.

Wiping the sweat from his brow, he could make out some structures directly ahead. They appeared to be a pair of stone towers, perhaps about a hundred feet high.

"There it is, boys," Stelson said, reaching into his coat and pulling out some sort of tube. Holding it high above his head, he then pressed down on a release mechanism.

Jensen watched as the flare shot high into the air. *Impressive*, Jensen thought. *I can't believe it managed to get it that high up without any sort of propellant*.

Within a few seconds, there was an answering flare from the tower.

"That's it!" Stelson panted, "They're lowering The Bridge. We're almost home-free!" "Sir, behind us!"

Stelson took a glance behind and swore. There was that dreaded flare. "We should be okay," Stelson assured them. "The good thing is that they're over three miles behind us. The bad news is that so are our two boys. We'll try to keep it open as long as we can. Otherwise, they'll have to use the ropes."

Jensen could see that the far tower had begun to spout some sort of gantry into the sky, until it nearly doubled the height of the structure. Once it stopped growing, it slowly started to slant towards the other tower.

I guess that must be The Bridge then.

Still, Jensen was slightly confused by all this. All the surrounding terrain was desert, and he doubted there was any hint of a river nearby. Why exactly was that bridge there?

"Get up the tower as fast as you can, everyone," Stelson huffed.

Well, at least it's not another hill.

The first tower now less than a hundred yards away, Jensen could now see what lay in the space between the two.

It was just sand. Sand that seemed to go on forever past the second tower. Mind you, it was very colourful sand, as if someone had emptied a rainbow on to the ground. *Must be the light*, he thought. It certainly didn't look dangerous. *Though, considering that this coat can give me some sort of weird rash, that sand will probably give me ebola*.

Hearing a loud thud, he looked up to see that the tip of the mechanical bridge had made contact with the other tower.

Boy, am I gonna' have some questions for Stelson once we're safe on the other side.

Finally at the base of the tower, they filed inside and started trudging up the staircase as fast as they could. The entire tower seemed to exist to only be a housing for the stairs, as he saw no rooms or anything of the sort.

Once they had made the arduous trek to the top, Stelson said, "Quickly! To the other side!" Despite weariness from the sustained run, no one wasted any time in getting to the other tower.

"Stelson?" a surprised Ranger greeted Stelson. "You look absolutely winded. What's going on?"

"Iathera's about to come under attack, and we came to get reinforcements," Stelson explained between breaths. "There were a few people on the road that didn't want us getting here in one piece."

"I'll raise the bridge, and light the signal for you, then. You should have transportation to Freewater within half an hour."

"Thanks," Stelson said. "But, leave the bridge open for as long as you can. We've still got two more boys on the way here. Secure a rope out for them, as well."

"Will do," the other Ranger replied, giving a signal to two of his men. Quickly, they ran to the other side, trailing a rope behind them. After securing their end of the rope to the first tower, they tugged on it to make sure it was secure, then ran back.

Looking closer at it, Jensen saw that the near end of the rope wasn't affixed to the current tower, but to a large piece of lumber that jutted out, parallel to the bridge, for about twenty feet.

Stelson, noticing that the roof of the tower was getting slightly crowded, said, "Alright, everyone. No point in just standing around. Get downstairs and take a breather."

As the group filed down, Jensen asked, "Mind if I stick around?"

"Not at all," came the reply, "Feel free."

"I'll hang around as well," another voice said.

They both turned around to see Captain Harker still standing there.

"Up to you," shrugged Stelson, walking back to the railing to continue his vigil.

"I never thanked you for that assist back there," Jensen said to Harker.

"Anytime," Harker laughed. "I just thought I'd try to even up the odds a little. Though, I have to say, you looked like you had it well in hand. I was more than a little surprised at that move you pulled back there. That didn't look like standard Ranger tactics?"

"It wasn't," grinned Jensen. "I just borrowed this Ranger gear."

"Hah! I should have figured," said Harker. "I also suspect that you don't just pick up that kind of training out of the blue. Which outfit are you normally stationed with?"

"Right now, none. Technically, I'm just a civilian doing work for Intendant Yazril," Jensen replied, as he added with a laugh, "and am under strict orders to keep my mouth shut about my employment terms. No offense intended."

Harker joined in on the laughter, "None taken. I've had to use that line a number of times, as well. Your first time going to Freewater?"

"Yep," Jensen said. "That rainbow sand kind of threw me for a loop, I have to admit."

"Just don't plan on getting close enough to examine it," Harker advised him. "I'd hate to lose you, and you seem a good sort. Good enough in a fight, at the least."

"Thanks. I take it that that was the reason we ended up climbing that mountain of stairs, instead of just climbing down the rocks and running across the sand to the other tower? And the reason that we're waiting for this mysterious transportation?"

"Correct," Harker said. "There's a reason that this second tower's built on this rock outcropping. Running out there wouldn't have been a very good idea at all."

"Why? What's in the sand? Does it paralyse you or something?"

"If only," Harker chuckled. "I won't ruin the surprise for you, but I'll ask one of the Rangers here to arrange a demonstration for you, if possible."

"Thanks, I think."

"There they are! But, looks like they have half a blasted army behind them," Stelson spat.

Jensen and Harker stopped their conversation, and moved over to the railing to get a better view.

Running like the wind were two Rangers, who were in turn being pursued by what appeared to be no less than four dozen enemies.

"I'd say they have about a half-mile gap between them," Harker observed. "It'll be a close call with the bridge."

"Agreed," Stelson said, "Raise the bridge!"

A loud clang was heard, followed by a mechanical whirring. Slowly, the bridge started to rise off of the far tower.

"Fortune forgive me," Stelson muttered.

"They can still use the rope?" Harker offered.

"Assuming they can get to it in time," Stelson said. "That gap looks like it's closing up."

Indeed, it was true. Seven of the faster enemies had sprinted ahead of their comrades and were now getting closer to the two Rangers.

As they approached the tower, the gap had dropped to maybe a hundred yards. Now dashing inside the tower, Jensen silently wished them luck.

Within a few minutes, they appeared at the top of the opposite tower, and wasted no time getting to the rope. Dangling upside down from hands and legs, they tried to crawl across as fast as they could.

They were only about twenty feet across when the first enemy appeared from the stairway. With an evil grin, he drew two swords and hopped on to the rope.

"The Kierdans are hiring acrobats for their army now?" Stelson grumbled.

Much faster than the two Rangers could move, the nimble enemy started walking to them. Not waiting to see what his intentions were, the closest Ranger grabbed his gun and shot at the enemy.

The shot was harmlessly absorbed by his long, dark-red coat. An evil grin still pasted on his face, the enemy started advancing again.

Desperation in his voice, the Ranger shouted something to his companion while quickly placing his gun back into its holster. The Ranger drew his sword, and Jensen could now see the grin fading from the enemy's face as he started to walk backwards.

Before the strange man could reach the safety of the tower, the Ranger slashed into the rope, severing it immediately.

Jensen swore, and Stelson echoed the sentiment.

The Rangers held on as the rope started its downward swing. Thankfully, the lumber to which the rope was attached provided a buffer which stopped them from slamming into the opposite tower at full speed.

"Pull them up!" Stelson ordered.

Unfortunately, the nimble enemy had fared just as well. Dropping his swords the second the rope had been cut, he had grabbed on to the rope as well, and was now climbing back up to join his comrades in the tower.

The rest of his soldiers had also just arrived at the base of the tower, and were now making a beeline toward the other tower at ground level. Climbing down the rocks, they stepped onto the sand and started running.

They all heard a scream of anguish from the nimble enemy, who had just climbed his way back onto the roof of the tower, and was now observing his troop movements below.

"Looks like someone wishes he had some soldiers with half a brain between them," Harker joked. "Well, here's an even better demonstration than the one I had planned for you, Jensen,"

Curious, Jensen watched on. All the soldiers, save for the seven in the tower were now running across the sand. Jensen still had no idea what he was looking for.

A loud rushing sound started to fill the air.

"Here we go," Harker said.

The sand that the soldiers were travelling on suddenly erupted, as an uncountable mass of snakelike creatures burst their way through the surface and grabbed on to their helpless prey.

"Whoa..." was all that Jensen could say.

The enemy tried to attack the creatures with their weapons. However, it seemed that every time they killed one creature, at least two more sprouted out of the sand to fill its place. The creatures didn't even bother attacking the men with tooth or claw, not that Jensen could see any. Once they grabbed on to a victim, they simply pulled him down into the sand which had become strangely fluidic.

Those aren't individual creatures! Jensen realized, eyes wide. They're appendages! How big is the actual creature or creatures underneath?

"And that's why we don't go frolicking around out there," Harker said.

"No kidding," Jensen said, still shocked at what he was seeing. "I'm guessing that our friend over there isn't too happy about this."

"I can live with disappointing him," Harker said. "Looks like he just realized that the tables have turned."

Indeed, the strange man yelled something at his remaining six soldiers, who then followed him as he disappeared down the stairwell. Emerging from the bottom of the tower a few minutes later, he gave the other tower one last glare, picked up his swords off the rocks, then ran off the way he had come.

"Hopefully that's the last we see of him," Jensen said. "That's one opponent I wouldn't care to face one-on-one."

"Agreed."

"Now, how are we supposed to cross this desert again?"

"Wait and see," Harker smiled. "Our transportation should be here fairly soon."

Chapter 12

"Are you sure?"

"Positive," came the reply. "Take a look for yourself."

The captain of the Serpent moved to the periscope, which was now aimed straight up. They had managed to sneak under the pyramid, and were now scouting around for any weak points in the structure.

"I'll be..." Captain Grau said, perplexed. Underneath the center of the pyramid, he was now looking at a gigantic square of latticed white crystal. It must have been at least three hundred yards on each side. "How can it be white? I've never seen tasrac with that colour before."

"Maybe it's not actually tasrac?" his first officer replied.

"Perhaps," Grau replied. "In any case, it's exposed and potentially vulnerable."

"True, and quite a large target."

"Too bad we're running on empty oil tanks," Grau said. "Can we get word out to the *Dark Sun*?"

"Negative," the first officer responded. "We're getting some kind of weird interference, and I'm guessing it's coming off of the pyramid itself. We can communicate with the *Warden's Bluff*, but that's about it. We'll have to move the *Grey Mistress* out from under this pyramid to report in."

"Do it," Grau ordered. "Tell the *Bluff* to keep searching for any more potential weak spots. Those Cluster ships are keeping it busy enough that they shouldn't notice us."

"Yes, sir."

"Even considering everything I've seen so far," John commented, "I have to admit that that's quite a strange looking ship."

"Mm hmm," Venarya absently agreed, lost in thought.

"Hey look, a flying saucer," John teased, hoping to at least elicit a smile.

"Huh?" Venarya mumbled. Seeing the mischievous look in John's face, she cracked a weak smile and said, "Sorry, I'm not all here, am I?"

"To put it mildly," John chuckled. "It's okay. I can only imagine how you're feeling."

"Thanks," she said, taking his hand and gently squeezing it. "What were you saying before?"

"Just commenting on Petr- I mean, Cordoba's ship," John said, quickly correcting himself.

"It's quite unusual looking."

Indeed it was. The *Dark Sun* was broad at the stern, and it looked nothing like the sleek Cluster warships. *Though, it must have been fast for them to come to the Cluster's aid as swiftly as they had.* Along the back half of the ship, gigantic fluted trumpet horns extended upwards and were slightly angled backwards.

"I'd say those look like fancy exhausts, except that so far I haven't seen anything that looks like an engine anywhere on this world?"

"We have them," Venarya corrected him, "Though they behave more like the electric motors on your world. I'm not sure what those protrusions are for, though. They are pretty odd looking, I'll admit."

"Looks like they don't want anyone getting too close a look at their toys," John chuckled, observing that mostly everything on deck was covered by heavy tarps.

As they approached the ship, they saw the former Admiral waiting at the top of the gangplank for them.

"Don't tell me you've been standing there this whole time just waiting for us?" Venarya joked.

"Ha ha," the bearded man said. "A couple of the boys spotted you walking here, and signalled me. I mean, it's not like you're not that hard to miss.

"Nice to see you again, John," he continued. "Lady Venarya been treating you all right?"

"I've no complaints," John chuckled, as he escorted Venarya up onto the ship.

"Glad to hear it," Petrarca said. Lowering his voice, he spoke to Venarya, "Are you sure you want to do this? That prisoner's been everything except cooperative, so far. You're probably just wasting your time."

"Under the circumstances, I'd say we have no choice," she replied. "It's worth a shot, at the least."

"As you wish. We've done what you requested," he explained. "She hasn't been given any food or drink so far today."

"Perfect. Let's get started, then."

Venarya looked at the prisoner.

Tasia, the former Cluster researcher, was now chained to the back wall of her cell, the other three sides made of a transparent material. The look of unbridled hatred on her face could curdle milk.

"I'll be inside the cell with her, alone," Venarya said, as a startled John and Petrarca both turned to look at her.

"It's the only way," she said. "The fumes from the potion may cause temporary undesired effects for you too."

"Are you sure about this?" Petrarca asked.

"Absolutely," she maintained. "In fact, it'd be better if none of you were here, but I need you and your guards here in case she tries anything. Now, if any of you start feeling strange or seeing things that aren't there, please head upstairs immediately and take in some fresh air."

"Er... sure," Petrarca replied.

"Let's begin, then," she said, opening the flask, and pouring some into a small cup. "Open the cell."

One of the guards moved to obey her.

As the door opened, the prisoner spoke. "You're going to interrogate me?" she said in a mocking tone. "What's wrong, you Cluster idiots? You run out of real people to talk to me?"

Venarya's face betrayed no emotion as she turned to the guards and handed the cup to one of them, "Make her drink this."

Realizing what was about to happen, Tasia shrank back into the wall, a defiant look on her face.

"One way or another," Venarya spoke to her, "you're going to drink that."

"Make me."

"Make her," she said to the guards.

Three guards entered the cell, forcefully restraining her and holding her steady. A fourth guard then approached, holding the cup as if it were a live rattlesnake.

One of the three guards grabbed her head and bent it back, while yanking her jaw open. The fourth guard wasted no time pouring the liquid down her throat, though most of it ended up down the front of her shirt and on the floor.

"Does she need another dose?" Petrarca asked.

"I anticipated her being uncooperative," Venarya said. "That's more than enough."

"Okay, boys. Leave the cell," Petrarca said to the guards, "and remember that warning about the fumes."

The guards hustled out, not needing to be told twice.

Wordlessly, Venarya walked in and closed the door behind her. Standing in front of the prisoner, she reached out, grabbed her chin, and stared into Tasia's eyes.

Even from a few yards away, John could tell that they were starting to glaze over.

"Wha... wha...," Tasia mumbled, trying to form a coherent sentence.

"Don't fight it," Venarya said, releasing her chin, and watching as she flopped down to her knees. "It'll just scramble your brains the more you struggle against it."

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"I... I... You... You're..."
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"Here, sit down," Venarya smiled, helping Tasia on to the small bench behind her. "You look tired."

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"I... I... tired... sit..."
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"Remind me not to go to any of Venarya's tea parties," Petrarca mumbled to John. "Plus, I think those fumes are starting to affect me, too."

John smiled. He could feel the effects, as well. But, he realized that they were the results of Venarya using that strange power of hers. *That was a pretty good cover story she cooked up*, he thought.

"There," Venarya said softly, still smiling and now gently stroking Tasia's hair. "Feel better, now?"

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"Ye... Yes... I... You... You're..."
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"That's right," Venarya said, "You know who I am."

"How... How are you here?" Tasia slurred, eyes unfocused.

"I'll always be here," Venarya gingerly whispered to her.

"Well, that's a... er, interesting interrogation technique," Petrarca commented under his breath.

"I... I... How'd you... How'd you find me?" Tasia spoke.

"It wasn't easy," Venarya said, still stroking her hair. "Where did you end up going again?"

"I was... I was sent to the Cluster... always wanted to work there... such amazing stuff there..."

"That's true. Now, you were supposed to take something from there?"

"Yes... Some old med research..."

"Why was that again?"

"They... didn't say why... just some old research... no use...I..."

"Who was it that sent you, again?" Venarya said, stroking her cheek now. "What was his name?"

"Who... Eldnan?... Where ... Where is he?..."

"It's okay. He's here, too. He had to leave, but he'll be back soon," Venarya assured her. "He wanted me to get details about the other plans."

"Other... Which other?... Many of them... Don't know all of them..."

"Which ones did he tell you about?"

"Just the... The Fort Tiarre ambush... Ambush anyone heading... heading to Freewater..."

A look of concern crossed the face of everyone that was observing. Petrarca quietly signalled one of his men, who dashed upstairs.

"What was the ambush?"

"Don't... Don't know... Just overheard... Lots of... Lots of soldiers though... I'm... I'm thirsty..."

"We'll get you a nice drink soon," Venarya said. "What was your favourite again?"

"Ice... Ice cold datso juice... You... you don't remember?..."

"Of course I do," Venarya said. "I'm just teasing. Do you remember him saying anything else about the ambush?"

"I... No... Just that he... he said he hoped... hoped everything went okay..."

"I'm sure it will go perfectly," Venarya said. "Did he mention any other plans to you?"

"No... nothing else... Just said to... to make sure I get the research... deliver it to him..."

"Was the research important to him?"

"I... I think so..."

"Did he tell you what he wanted it for?"

"No... No... Just told me to bring it..."

"Did you overhear anything else about any more attacks anywhere?"

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"No... Just Fort... Just Fort Tiarre..."
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John could see that her slurring was starting to recede, and hoped Venarya had noticed it too.

Indeed she did, as she gracefully untangled from the prisoner, and took a few steps back.

"I... What... What the... What have you done to me, you green witch?!" Tasia shrieked, her eyes refocusing and then leaping out of her chair to try and strike at Venarya.

Venarya calmly stood her ground and didn't have to move at all, as the chains stopped Tasia from getting any closer than a foot away.

"Answer me!" Tasia shrieked again. "I said answer me!"

Wordlessly, Venarya just watched her.

As sudden as the anger had set in, Tasia's eyes then went wide as she screamed and started to frantically look around. "What in the... Get them away from me!"

With that, she started screeching uncontrollably, moving every which way as if avoiding invisible assailants.

Ignoring her distress, Venarya walked out of the cell and re-locked the door.

"She'll be like that for the next half an hour or so, I'm afraid," Venarya said, "The delirious effects have worn off, and the hallucinations have started to take hold now. You won't get any more out of her."

"Er, sure," Petrarca replied. "For the amount of gabbing you got her to do, we can put up with a bit of screaming. I also sent word to Fort Tiarre, but I suspect it may be too late to warn them. Any ambush would probably have been sprung by now. We'll have to hope for the best."

"Yes," Venarya said, holding a hand to her forehead. "I'm feeling a little faint from those fumes, myself. Do you have a room I can sit down in for a few minutes?"

[&]quot;Did you hear anything about any kind of a floating pyramid?"

[&]quot;Floating... Floating pyramid?... No... I don't think so..."

[&]quot;Did he ever talk about a bear?

[&]quot;Bear?... No... No bears..."

[&]quot;Who did Eldnan work for again?"

[&]quot;I...You want to know... I... Who told..."

"Of course, Venarya. Follow me," Petrarca said, leading them up one level and halfway down a hallway. "These are the first officer's quarters. Take as much time as you need to recover. In the meantime, I'll relay what you found out to everyone."

"Thank you. Stay with me, John, in case I pass out," Venarya requested, sitting down on the side of the bed.

"Sure thing, Venarya."

Closing the door, John was about to ask her if she needed a drink of water or similar. But, before he could get a word out, she leapt off the bed and clutched at him in a tight embrace.

Not sure where this was going, he felt something wet against his neck, and heard the sound of muffled sobbing.

He realized the toll that that last encounter must have taken on Venarya, both physically and mentally. Aside from the fact that she must have been using that power of hers at full blast, she seemed by observation to be a gentle soul. Playing the part of a torturer, albeit one in name only, was probably one of the most distasteful things she had ever had to do.

John suddenly felt like he couldn't hold her close enough.

"It's okay," he gently said, "It's okay. I'm here. I'm not leaving."

"Feeling better, Venarya?" Petrarca asked.

"Much better," she smiled.

"We just got word from one of the Serpents I sent to check out that pyramid thing," Petrarca said. "It looks like there might be a vulnerable section on the underside."

"Might?" John said. "What's the catch?"

"They weren't exactly sure what they were looking at, to tell you the truth," Petrarca explained. "They described a huge latticework of what they think is tasrac in the center."

"Why aren't they sure?" Venarya asked.

"That's the weird thing," Petrarca said. "They said that the crystal that they were looking at was white in colour. I've seen a lot of weird stuff working for the old man, but I've never heard of tasrac being that colour. Or, well, no colour to be exact. Ever come across anything like that at the Institute?"

"Not to my knowledge," Venarya said. "But, then again, I've also never heard of anything being able to hover over water, either. I'll have someone check the archives, just in case."

"Thanks," Petrarca continued. "But, lacking any other leads, I think we can safely work under the assumption that that crystal is a power source for that pyramid. Or, at the least, it's doing something to help keep that thing above water."

"Makes sense," Venarya said. "But, how are you planning on attacking it?"

"Well, we've only got one option," Petrarca said. "When that thing gets closer to shore, I'm going to have a half dozen serpents dump their oil tanks underneath that thing. Then, I'm going to try barbequing it."

"You're planning on dumping several thousand gallons of pyrine oil just offshore?" Venarya asked, shaking her head. "The fishermen are going to have a field day with this."

"More like several dozen thousand gallons," Petrarca corrected her, "I agree that it's not a prime solution. But, at least those fishermen will still be alive at the end of the day."

"Well, we have to if we have to," Venarya lamented. "However, why can't you try this before it gets too close to shore?"

"Seas are too rough. Looks like there's a small storm on its way in," Petrarca explained.

"Plus, that thing is kicking up a lot of turbulence in the water just by itself. The oil will probably disperse too much to have any sort of useful effect. And, in any case, those Serpents are going to be slow as molasses with their tanks all full. Compounded with a close formation tactic like that, well, that's just asking for trouble if we try that in deep water. I'll coordinate with the Serpent captains once they're loaded and ready."

"How long do they need to get their tanks refilled?" John asked.

"That tanker that the Cluster's dispatching should be here within the hour."

"We're cutting this really tight," Venarya said. "What about any unforeseen setbacks?"

"Ah, yes. That's the other part of the message," Petrarca said. "Shortly, a Cluster ship is going to pull into this harbour. We suspect that one of the messages they're carrying will say that they've, somewhat inadvertently, managed to buy you some more time."

"What?" Venarya said. "How so?"

"It appears that every time that pyramid thing fires its weapons, it slows down, and takes a while to build back up speed again. I think they've bought you about two hours so far, but they're still continuing the attack. I've already alerted Yazril and Rinard about this."

"Why didn't they just have your Serpent relay the message?"

"They didn't know we were there," Petrarca explained, "and before you make any comments about secrecy just secrecy's sake, we couldn't risk revealing ourselves. I'm assuming that whoever's on board that pyramid doesn't know we have these submarines, so we need to keep it under wraps as long as we can."

"Especially if our entire attack plan depends on them," John commented.

"Exactly," Petrarca agreed. "The only weak point in the entire plan is that storm. If it churns up the water too much, the trick with the oil may not work."

"Well," John began, sneaking a peek at Venarya, who in turn nodded slightly, "speaking of secrets, we may have an alternative to the oil."

Petrarca raised an eyebrow, "What do you mean?"

"Remember those Kierdan weapons?"

"Of course," Petrarca replied. "Don't tell me you've found a way to get those salvaged weapons to work?"

"Not as such," John said. "From what I understand, those particular weapons are pretty much dead. However, we may have figured out a way to duplicate the effect."

"How?"

Venarya cut in with a smile, "That part's still a secret."

"Okay, fine," Petrarca laughed. "Are you sure it'll work though?"

"We're going to find out in just a little bit," Venarya said. "We're going to try testing one very shortly."

"Mind if I sit in and watch?"

"Sure," she said. "Meet us by the park just north of the city, by the shore. Rheus should be there already getting the area prepped for us. We'll return to the Institute, and escort the test device over."

"I'll be there," Petrarca confirmed. "One more question, though?"

"Ask away."

"How are you planning on delivering the device to the pyramid?"

"We're still working on that part," Venarya admitted. "Maybe try to float it over with some other wreckage, and hope they don't notice?"

"That's too many *maybe's* and *hopes* I'm hearing," Petrarca commented. "I'll see if I can't think up something for you. How large is the final device going to be?"

"We're not exactly sure about that part either," Venarya said.

"You don't make it easy, do you?" Petrarca laughed. "Okay, you two head out. I'll meet you at the park, and try to think up a solution."

Chapter 13

"Transport incoming!" Jensen heard a voice call out from upstairs.

"Alright, everyone," Stelson said, "Get your gear back on, and let's head on downstairs."

There were a few groans, as no one relished the thought of walking down that staircase. If anything, that short respite had only allowed sore muscles the chance to start developing even more aches.

"Calm down," Stelson assured them. "We're in the clear now, and you can relax for the next few hours while we're getting carted across the desert."

Getting up and pulling on his borrowed coat, Jensen started the trek down the circular staircase.

Unlike the other tower, this one had platforms with interior doors every so often. *Must be their living quarters*, Jensen figured. *Guess that other tower's just there to allow the bridge to do its thing*.

About thirty feet down from the top of the tower, Jensen noticed a window facing out into the desert, along with a bright green globe at the top of the opening. Thinking he was looking at some kind of strange searchlight, he remembered the other Ranger telling Stelson that he was lighting a beacon to signal the transport. *That's clever. Only someone in the desert would be able to see that light. Well, at least in the daytime.*

Finally reaching the bottom of the stairs, Jensen walked out and took a look at the surroundings.

Other than the endless expanse of multi-coloured sand, there wasn't much else to see. The island of rock that they were standing on was roughly oval shaped. It looked to be about two hundred yards in diameter, with the tower on one of the far ends. Looking to the other end, Jensen saw a few large wooden sheds. *Must be storage*, he figured.

Once everyone had arrived at the base of the pyramid, Stelson started leading the team to the other end. Once at the far end, he noticed that everyone stayed a good thirty feet from the edge.

Squinting out into the desert for any signs of the transport, he finally spotted something in the distance kicking up a rainbow of sand behind it.

A few minutes later, the transport was finally close enough for Jensen to make out details. It was all he could do to keep from swearing out loud in surprise. With wide eyes, he took another long, good look.

Holy crap.

It must have been about fifty or sixty feet long, and half again as high.

He had been picturing some sort of weird steampunk bus, or maybe even a tank in order to keep those weird creatures at bay. The thing that was approaching was definitely not that.

The only thing Jensen could think of was that it resembled nothing more than a massive, demonic-looking turtle.

Holy crap.

Looking around, no one else seemed to be up in arms about it, and some of them looked downright bored waiting for it to arrive.

Noticing him, Harker laughed, "It's okay, Jensen. Believe me, I almost peed myself when I first saw one of those things. You can go ahead ask that question that I know has to be burning on your mind."

Chuckling along, and feeling a little more at ease, he said, "Glad to hear that. Now, what in blazes is that thing?"

"It won't eat you, if that's what you're concerned about," Stelson said, joining in on the fun. "It's called a *sacra*, and it's the only safe way that we know to get across this desert."

"How in the world did you manage to tame something like that?"

"We didn't," Stelson replied. "You'll understand when it gets here."

Watching the enormous creature approaching, Jensen could make out more of its features. The skin was a stony greyish colour, with dark purple markings all along its body. The thing also had eight stocky legs. *Guess you need to distribute all that weight*.

The face was definitely unwelcoming, and was adorned with three rows of spiky horns running along the top, and two giant tusklike horns protruding forward from the bottom of its head. *I guess its mother probably thinks it's handsome*.

The top of the shell looked like it had been lopped off by whoever had designed this creature. Giant curves spikes protruded skyward from close to the top of the shell, and it looked like someone had secured a large tarp to them. Jensen figured that that was where they'd eventually be sitting. *Well, at least we'll be in the shade*.

The creature slowed down as it drew closer, and pulled up next to them. It had opted to have one set of legs on the sand, with the other row on the rocks.

Wondering what happened next, he saw a blue projectile hurtling out of the top of the creature and headed toward them. He almost had his hands to his weapons before he noticed that the 'attack' was just another smaller type of furry creature that had jumped out of the sacra and landed in front of them.

The newcomer was a strange one. It looked almost like one of those things I saw on that nature show the other week. What was it? Ah yes, a tarsier.

In truth, the foot-tall creature with the oversized eyes did resemble nothing more than a tarsier crossed with some sort of blue muppet.

"It's called a raslin," Harker murmured to him. "They're harmless."

Spotting Stelson, the creature scampered over to him and waved.

Kneeling down, Stelson said, "How are you, old friend?"

A series of chirps and hand gestures came from the creature.

"That's right. We need to get back to Freewater."

"Don't ask me how he knows how to talk to them though," Harker added.

After another series of chirps and gestures, Stelson smiled and said, "Of course. I wouldn't forget something like that."

One of the other Rangers then took off a backpack that he had been carrying, and handed it off to Stelson.

"Here you go," Stelson said, holding the backpack out for the creature.

Payment for the ride, I guess. But, what the heck type of recompense was this thing expecting? A bag of souls to feed to its pet demon turtle?

Whatever the contents of the bag were, they must have been incredibly light, or the creature must have been deceptively strong. In one swift movement, the diminutive creature grabbed it with one hand, then scampered back up the side of the sacra.

A few moments later, two rope ladders were lowered down.

"All aboard," Stelson said, turning to face the group. "Next stop, Freewater."

A few days ago, I was dogsitting. I wonder what John's up to? Can't be crazier than this.

"Apparently, most construction companies start to freak out when you mention the words 'recall' and 'explosive' in the same sentence. Who'd have thought?" Nolan said, giving him a flat stare. "Now, remind me whose idea that was again?"

"I told you to just let me do it my way," he continued, rolling his eyes. "You're lucky that this stuff was only distributed internally so far, or you'd probably have a class action lawsuit on your hands!"

"Fine, fine. Point taken. Besides, it was either this or have both Sophia and Melissa throw us off the top of the building," John said. "But, point taken for next time."

"Next time?!"

"Okay, okay. Calm down," John said. "But, how in blazes are the three of us going to transfer four thousand pounds of explosives by ourselves? I figured you'd get a few hundred pounds, at most. There's no way security will be able to store all this excess for us."

"Leave that to me," Nolan sighed. "Unless, of course, you want to ask Sophia's advice again?"

"Fine. Just don't get us arrested."

"I guess this is a bad time to mention that there's also another twenty thousand pounds or so on its way to one of our warehouses?

"Put some muscle into it," Nolan barked. "You're holding up traffic!"

For the last ten minutes, the three men had been using handcarts to move as many boxes of explosives as they could into the elevator.

Grunting, John took out the last box from his cart, and moved away from the doors. "Looks like we might only get a couple more boxes in there. I don't think it'll hold anymore after you guys empty your carts. As it is already, it'll probably be a tight fit for Ganz."

"Wait, say what?" Ganz piped up from behind Nolan. "I get to ride the death elevator?"

"You're the smallest," John said. "Plus, if that thing does blow, it'll probably take down the entire building with it."

"That makes me feel so much better."

"Anytime," John said cheerily. "I wonder how much explosives we have in here now?"

"Just a bit over sixteen hundred pounds, I think" Ganz supplied.

"You were keeping track?"

"Nope," Ganz said, "but the caution light in the elevator just came on."

"We should have more than enough for now, I figure," Nolan said, finished with his unloading and moving his cart out of the way for Ganz.

"Question for you, John," a wheezing Ganz said.

"I'll say you've earned the right to ask at least one question."

"Funny," Ganz puffed. "Are we going to have to unload these off the elevator, then reunload them from their new spot back into the portal?"

"There's a reason I picked this particular elevator," John said. "This one cuts right through the penthouse foyer. I'll open a portal right next to the elevator, and we'll just move it straight into Rheus's workshop. Sophia's made sure that her assistant Carol's gone on some errand, and that the security cameras are in maintenance mode. So, no witnesses."

"What about the rest of this pile of explosives here?" Ganz asked.

"I'll call my boys in a second, and have them take care of it," Nolan said.

"Well, let's not waste any time then," a resigned Ganz said, squeezing into the elevator. "I'll see you at the penthouse."

"Isn't anyone going to be curious about that painting?" Nolan asked.

"I'll just replace it before we... ah, I see your point," John replied, placing the box he'd been carrying on the floor of Rheus's workshop.

The wall opposite the elevator had been perfect for creating the portal. Unfortunately, it has been home to a rather cumbersome, and probably expensive, painting.

"I guess I'll have to close off the portal, put the painting back, then open the portal on another empty wall," John said.

"You think?" Nolan muttered, shaking his head. "Glad to know that Ganz is supposed be the brains in this operation."

"Er... thanks?" Ganz said, his head just poking over the top of the box he was carrying.

"By the way, you ought to know about this," John said, changing the subject. "One of our submarines found a potential weak spot under the pyramid. Some sort of gigantic crystal array

that's being used to power it, or get it to fly, or something. Do either of you have any idea how to turn your test prototype into an actual weapon that we can use against that thing?"

"I've been thinking about that," Ganz said. "I was actually toying around with the idea of turning it into a floating mine, of sorts."

"And just what kind of trigger were you planning on using to detonate the mine?" Nolan asked.

"Well, I'm still working on that part," Ganz admitted. "I still can't think of anything other than a mechanical timer."

"It could work," Nolan said. "The thing's big and slow moving, so predicting its location shouldn't be too difficult."

"True, though I'd prefer something a little more technical," Ganz said. "What's this other pile of cases, by the way? I didn't think six bacteria tanks would have had that many components?"

"I made some calls," Nolan said, "and got us some gear which could be useful over there."

"Like what?"

"Pneumatic spear guns, for example," Nolan replied. "Plus a couple more toys."

"My poor back," Ganz groaned.

"Hey, be glad that my boys brought it up here for you," Nolan said. "You've only got to carry it twenty feet."

Venarya had been waiting outside of Rheus's building along with a dozen Rangers. Behind them were a number of carts.

"Please tell me they're here to help us move all that stuff?" John asked.

"Correct," Venarya smiled. "And there's another fifty Rangers patrolling around the building as well."

Indeed, at the end of the U-shaped building's courtyard, John could see several of them standing guard.

"Wow, you really pulled out all the stops."

"We can't afford to take any chances with this," she explained. "For now, no one's allowed in that building except for us."

"Makes sense," John said, "Can we spare the manpower, though?"

"For the moment, at least," Venarya said. "A small Cluster fleet just pulled in with some reinforcements for us. I had Yazril redeploy those, and pulled back some of the Rangers for myself."

"Well, I'm glad you did, as there's a ton of stuff up there," John explained, leading the way back in. "But, I think we'll only need a fraction of it for the test."

"Not a problem," Venarya said. "If the test is successful, we can come back afterwards to get more equipment."

"By the way," she added, "you should know this. I just got word from the Ranger Headquarters. It looks like Kaney's back."

John's throat constricted a little at her intentional omission, "And the others?"

"We think they're okay," she explained. "From what we were able to piece together, it looks like they had already repelled one ambush, when Fort Tiarre spotted a large force moving in their direction, and signalled them with a warning flare. It looks like Kaney took it upon himself to attack them singlehandedly."

"That sounds like him, all right."

"Long story short, they spotted him and started giving pursuit. He ran in the opposite direction from the team, which, incidentally, led him straight back toward Fort Tiarre. We're still not sure why, but they continued to follow him. The Rangers then opened fire with their platforms and managed to kill a good portion of the attackers. They estimate only about fifty of them made it out of the killing zone."

"Those enemy soldiers don't sound too intelligent?"

"I know, but they were relentless, apparently," Venarya said. "After the sortie, Fort Tiarre sent out a recon force to check for any signs of the worst. But, all they found were a few dozen more dead enemies, along with signs that a large group of people had been running fast."

"So, they probably made it then?" John breathed in relief.

"I'm inclined to believe so," she said. "Fort Tiarre's still waiting for their scouts to get back from The Bridge, so we should know pretty soon."

Chapter 14

"I was starting to think you weren't coming," Petrarca laughed.

"It took a bit longer than we expected to get the equipment together," John said. "Plus, even with the portals, the streets are a mess right now."

"How are we doing on time?" Venarya asked.

"Got some good news there for you," Petrarca said. "Last report from my Serpents said that, at the rate that Ancor's going, he may be able to delay them until evening. So, that gives us a good window to get this together."

"It's a bit of breathing room, for sure," John said. "Ganz, how long do you need to rig this up?"

"Give us half an hour to get everything set up."

"Okay, that sounds fair," John said. "Please just avoid blowing yourself up in the process." "I'll try not to disappoint you," Ganz said dryly.

"That's it?" John asked.

"What, you wanted us to decorate it with some pretty flowers for you?" Nolan asked.

"I mean," John started, "It's just, well, not very bomby-looking. This looks more like something that the covote would use to try to catch the roadrunner."

Indeed, the whole rig was just a cylindrical fish tank on top of a wooden box. *A disgusting-looking fish tank*, John thought. *Guess you just can't find pretty bacteria these days*.

Above the tank was a small makeshift platform, with a light rope attached to it and running the length of the test area to where the rest of John's group now stood.

"It'll work," Ganz assured him. "When we pull the other end of this rope, it'll dump that bacteria food into the tank. The electricity from the tank will travel down those heavy wires and into the box, which should trigger the explosives."

"Makes sense," John said, picking up one of the unused explosive gel packs. "How much explosive did you end up using?"

"I played it safe, and only used six pounds," Nolan said. "That should be more than enough for us to evaluate its effectiveness. Also, please put that down."

"Fine, fine," John said, replacing the gel pack back into the case. "I really hope they didn't mess up and send us the wrong thing. This looks more like a giant keyboard wristpad than an explosive."

"It's just water-gel explosives, John," Nolan said, putting away the last of the equipment.

"I've never even seen this before. I thought we were getting C4 or something, like in the movies," John said. "Did we invent this stuff?"

"Huh... what?" Nolan said, only half-listening to John as he latched the case. "What are you talking about? This type of explosive has been kicking around for ages. This is just our take on it. Patents and all other that fancy stuff."

"Hey, I'm no explosives expert."

"No kidding. Blasted children, all of you," Nolan muttered. "Here, make yourself useful and carry this."

"Are you sure we need to be this far away?" John asked, looking at the device through the spyglass. *This is safety overkill*, John thought. *The thing had to be like a hundred and fifty feet away*.

"You think you'll enjoy getting your head blown off by shrapnel?" Nolan retorted.

"Well, no, but-"

"Exactly."

John let the matter drop.

"Okay, everyone," Nolan said. "Duck down behind these barriers, and we can get started."

As the small crowd took their places, Petrarca crouched down alongside John and chuckled, "If this works, I might have a business proposition for you."

"Why not?" John replied, amused. "I've apparently got a warehouse full of this stuff now."

"Everyone ready?" Nolan called out, looking around for stragglers. Satisfied, he said, "Here goes. Plug your ears, everyone."

John did as he was told, and peeked over the top of the barrier. Unable to use the spyglass, he could only faintly make out what was happening.

Nolan had pulled the rope, causing the small platform to collapse, and dumping the food into the tank. John started counting away the seconds in his head.

At about fifteen seconds, nothing looked like it was happening.

At about thirty seconds, John could swear that he saw small flashes of light from the device.

At about forty seconds, there was a substantial explosion.

Expecting a giant fireball, John instead saw only large plumes of smoke. *Guess the movies lied to me again*.

But, even from the distance they were at, John could still feel the shockwave generated by the blast.

"I'd say that worked out pretty well," Rheus commented.

"Too well, as a matter of fact," Nolan said. "For the amount of explosive that we used, that blast was about three times larger than it should have been."

"I'll say that that's not a bad thing," Petrarca commented, "Especially considering the circumstances."

"Regardless," Ganz chimed in, "now we need to find a way to build an actual weapon of it. Too bad we can't just shoot it at the pyramid. And building a mine is out of the question, I think."

"How so?" John asked.

"You mean aside from the need to string a rope from the middle of the ocean, all the way back to shore?" Nolan said.

"Well, I was thinking of some sort of a timer, but there's just nothing reliable enough," Ganz said. "Plus, we'd have to predict the exact location of the pyramid, then move the mine into place, start the timer, and run away without getting killed. And, the whole time we'd be hoping that they don't just shoot the mine, and that the seas are calm enough so that the bacteria tank stays stable... It's just too many variables to account for."

"Well, you can forget about that calm sea part," Petrarca informed them. "That pyramid stirs up any nearby water like a fiend. Plus, there's a small storm on its way here. It should make landfall just before dark."

"Well, looks like we're dead in the water, so to speak," John sighed.

"Not necessarily," Petrarca smiled. "There's another option. We can shoot it at them from under the water."

"What do you mean? How so?"

"This," Petrarca said, signalling one of his men, who then pulled a tube from his coat and fired a flare into the air.

"Look over there," Petrarca added, directing their attention to a spot about a hundred yards offshore.

Looking out over the water, John could see a strange set of pipes protruding from the surface. Before he could even fathom what Petrarca was talking about, the pipes seemed to grow taller. Curious, he then watched as a gigantic black form started to break through the surface of the water.

The submarine must have been at least a hundred feet long, and about forty feet across. Rather than the round missile-like silhouette that he was used to seeing on television, this one was only slightly curved along the top, giving it a wide oval shape.

"Congratulations," Petrarca told the crowd. "You're among the few who've actually seen a Serpent and lived to tell about it."

"Impressive," Nolan whistled. "What's your plan?"

"See the front of the Serpent? The four corners open up like a set of jaws. That's how we managed to intercept that diving bell that Tasia was aboard," Petrarca explained. "Now, keep in mind that we still have that bell here..."

"Ah!" Nolan said, intrigued. "That could very well work."

"Huh?" Ganz said, confused.

"Keep up, Ganz," Nolan muttered. "We're going to rig that diving bell up as a makeshift torpedo, then fire it at the pyramid."

"Correct," Petrarca confirmed. "The currents under the surface here aren't enough to upset the balance on the bell. So, if you can rig up a sturdy enough timer mechanism, then we can point the Serpent at that thing, open its jaws, start the timer, then release the clamps on the bell."

"What's to keep it on course, though?"

"According to my intel, the target area is a square, roughly three hundred yards on each side," Petrarca supplied. "Be pretty hard to miss that."

"Hmm," Nolan said, furrowing his brow. "It has promise. John, I think we're going to need *all* the explosives for this one."

"Not a problem," John said. "We can get them carted over from the Institute-"

"You're misunderstanding me," Nolan said. "We'll also need the supply from the office."

"Are you kidding me?"

"I wish," Nolan said.

"Fine," John sighed. "Come on, Rheus. You're with me and Nolan. Ganz, you stay here and start figuring out how to rig up that timer."

"Okay," Ganz said. "I should be able to put something together... I think."

"I might have a workable solution for you," Venarya spoke up. "I'll walk you boys back to the Institute, pick up some goodies, then head back here."

"Thanks, Venarya," John said, wondering what on earth she could have that could possibly help them.

"Give us about half an hour to get everything together," Nolan said to Petrarca.

"We'll bring the bell over and start stripping out all the non-essentials," Petrarca responded. With a chuckle, he added, "And I'll let Rinard know that they're not going to get that bell back. At least not in one piece."

"Where are we going?" Rheus asked, innocently.

"My poor back," Rheus complained. "I don't even think I really hit Nolan that hard when we first met."

"Relax," John laughed. "It's over. The Rangers will cart it over to the test site for us."

"That's the last of it," Nolan said, walking out of the building. "Let's get back to work."

"And that wasn't?" Rheus grumbled.

Chapter 15

"How'd they get here so quickly?" Ancor mused out loud.

"I'm just glad that they're here, sir," Yalic said. "We're starting to run a little thin on lifeboats."

Bearing down on them at full speed was a small flotilla of Cluster warships. Through his spyglass, Ancor could make out that their decks were stacked full of small boats.

"Well, no matter," Ancor said. "Looks like we can keep pressing the attack for a while longer now."

"John! You're back!" Ganz called out in an excited tone, "You've got to see this!"

"Huh?" John said, walking over to where Ganz and Venarya were standing. "What is it?"

"Take a look at this!" he said, holding up a potted plant. "This is amazing!"

"Er..." John began, unsure what to make of this, "You haven't been smoking that plant, have you?"

"Huh?... What! No!" Ganz blurted out, semi-indignantly. "Here, let me show you. Try to tear this leaf here in half."

"Okay," John said, still a little puzzled.

Giving the plant a quick once over, the first thing he noticed was that the leaves were huge. Nearly two feet across, they resembled yellow lily pads. Each individual leaf was attached to a stumpy base via a very long stalk.

Grabbing a random leaf, John half-heartedly made an attempt to tear the seemingly fragile item. He was quite a bit surprised when, despite its thinness, it felt like trying to tear a piece of heavy leather.

"What the..."

"I know!" Ganz exclaimed. "This is perfect!"

"Ganz, are you sure you didn't smoke some of this?" John said. "What does this have to do with the bomb?"

"Here, John," Venarya said, a slight smile on her face. "I'll demonstrate what's got him so excited."

Picking up a jar, she handed it to John. "Hold this right here."

Complying, John watched as she moved one of the leaves so that it covered the mouth of the jar. Satisfied with the placement, she then put a small rock on top of the leaf.

"Ready?" she asked.

"Er, sure," John replied.

Taking a pair of shears, she then cut the stalk close to the leaf.

"Watch," she instructed.

Still a little lost, John kept his eyes peeled on the jar. Then, he noticed it. He thought it had been a trick of the light, but the leaf was slowly losing its colour and becoming an increasingly darker shade of grey.

"That's pretty neat," John mused.

"That's not it, yet," Ganz said. "Keep looking."

About a minute and a half after Venarya had cut the stem, the rock broke through the leaf and hit the bottom of the jar.

"That's..."

"Go ahead and touch the leaf," Ganz urged.

As John tried to pick up the now dark grey leaf, it crumbled in his hand. It was like trying to pick up a thin layer of ash.

"John," Ganz said. "Pretend that the jar was a bacteria tank, and that the rock was food for them."

"Ah!" John said, finally understanding. "That's a clever solution, I have to admit."

"You're telling me," Ganz. "I can't wait to a take good look at those archives back at the Institute. I can only imagine what other wonders are hiding out in there."

"You don't say?" John asked, a raised eyebrow at Venarya.

"I promised him a little vacation in there, once all this business is over," she smiled.

"Best have a long leash ready for him," John joked, "or he'll run off, get lost, and end up starving in there."

"Funny," Ganz commented dryly. "Though, being perfectly honest, I still can't believe that I'm the only researcher you've brought over, John. I really do appreciate it."

"Well, Lawsuit Larry was dead, so..."

"Ha ha," Ganz retorted. "Say, I know you want to keep this under wraps, and that you're trying to keep this little secret world strictly in the family, so to speak-"

"Ganz, I'm not going to start inviting your entire research team over here anytime soon," John said, rolling his eyes. "So don't even bother asking."

"What? Oh no, it's nothing like that," Ganz said. "It's just that when Venarya was showing me this plant, I thought that your girlfriend Amelia might have appreciated it as well. I mean, with her being a botanist and all."

"Er," John said, his face darkening, "That's not a good idea. She's over in Sao Paolo right now."

"That shouldn't matter though," Ganz continued. "We could just open a portal to there for her?"

"It's really not a good idea, Ganz."

"Huh, why?" Ganz pressed, not taking the hint. "I don't think she's the type to go blabbing to the tabloids?"

"Ganz," John said, taking a deep breath. "Let's just say that, right now, she's not *in* the family, so to speak."

"Wha... oh, I see... er..." Ganz, stammered, tugging at his collar and looking remarkably uncomfortable.

"Forget it," John said. Changing the topic, he asked, "Is it reliable? This plant, I mean? What if we choose a dud leaf by accident?"

"It's okay. I've already marked out a few potential candidates for Ganz," Venarya said, keeping a straight face. "As for reliability, it's remarkably consistent. Depending on how far down the stalk you make the cut, you can extend the decay time up to ten minutes."

"That's clever," John said. "Well, at least that solves that little issue. How's the work going on the bell?"

"They've just about finished stripping it down," Ganz said, pointing to the diminutive bubble-shaped submarine moored to the dock. Once that's done, they'll secure it inside of the Serpent, and we'll continue the work in there."

"Is the water at the end of that dock deep enough for the submarine?"

"It was originally part of an old freighter port that we had dredged out years ago," Venarya said. "There's probably a little silt build-up at the bottom, but it should still be plenty deep."

"Perfect," John said. "Nolan, do you have everything you need? Now's the time to speak up."

"I think we're good," Nolan said. "Now, leave me alone and let me get to work."

"Looks like Petrarca and his team have got everything well in hand, John," Venarya said. "I'm going to check up on Yazril and see how the evacuation's going. Care to come along?" "Well, sure," John shrugged. "I don't think I'll be much use just watching them here."

"Yep, we sent Kaney back to his wife after trying to piece together what happened," Yazril was saying. "It was a wildly reckless move on his part, but it may have ultimately saved the rest of the team."

"We've heard back from them?" Venarya asked.

"Yes. We just got word from Fort Tiarre not too long ago," Yazril said. "Their scouts reached The Bridge and got confirmation that Stelson's group is now on the way to Freewater."

"Thank goodness," John said. "How soon before the reinforcements get here?"

"They won't arrive at Freewater until after dark, so I don't expect anyone to show up before dawn tomorrow," Yazril said. "In the meantime, we've pulled away as many troops as was reasonable from The Wall. They should receive a fresh complement of Rangers tomorrow, as well."

"Nothing more we can do about that," Venarya said. "We'll have to hope that there's no unexpected surprises before they get here."

"True," Yazril said. "By the way, John, your friend Jensen arranged to get some armour for you. That's it over there."

Looking where she was pointing, John saw a Cluster Marine jacket. As he picked it up, he realized that it was deceptively heavy. Despite its flexibility, it sure wasn't made of stuffed fabric.

"Wow, this thing must weigh like twenty five pounds," John groaned.

"You'll also have to wear those," Yazril said, indicating the gloves that had been next to it.

"We're doing formal dress, now?" John joked weakly.

"The exterior of the jacket can cause skin irritation over a period of time," Yazril explained.

"That's even better," John said, donning the gloves and examining the jacket. "How do these guys wear this thing in this type of weather? I'm pretty sure I'm going to start boiling as soon as I put it on."

"They're temperature regulated on the inside," Venarya smiled. "So, you'll be okay. Heatwise, at least."

"Remind me to, er, thank Jensen for this."

Even Yazril couldn't help but smile at that.

"How's the coastal evacuation going?" Venarya asked.

"As well as I thought it would," Yazril sighed. "I've had to forcibly relocate more people to the shelters than I would have liked. We've never had any sort of major conflict in this city, and it looks like everyone's either too complacent, or in denial. Even the bakers that were in this building didn't want to leave."

"I was wondering about that smell," John said, realizing that he hadn't eaten all day. "And, speaking of food?"

"Go ahead," Yazril said, "There's more than enough charbroiled bread in the back for everyone here. Some of the more salvageable pieces are under that covered platter over there."

"Er, thanks," John said, lifting the cover to reveal an assortment of half-burnt pastries and buns. Grabbing one, he asked, "How's Ancor doing with his delaying action?"

"From his last message, he's estimating that the pyramid will get here just before dark," Yazril said. "But, there's another interesting titbit that he mentioned. It's, well, odd."

"Go on," Venarya prompted.

"He claims that the pyramid is being manned by giant cats."

"What?" John almost spat out his pastry. "You mean like lions and tigers?"

"Not as such. More like humanoid-sized, anthropomorphic housecats." Sighing, she continued, "First bears, and now this. I can't wait to see which animal decides to make an appearance next.

"I don't suppose you've ever heard of anything like this?" she asked Venarya.

"Can't say that I have, Yazril. Sorry."

"Well, it was a longshot."

"Technically, I don't think it'll matter even if they were badgers," John said. "As long as we can destroy or cripple that pyramid before it makes landfall, we should hold the advantage."

"Speaking of which," Yazril said, "I received an update from Admiral Petrarca regarding your plan. Do you think it'll work?"

"I believe so," John said. "Nolan said he's got full confidence in it, and that's always been good enough for me."

At that moment, there was a knock at the door.

"Come in," Yazril said.

In entered a Ranger, "Ma'am, the Cluster technicians said that they've finished with the platforms. They wanted to know if you wished to test them?"

"Unfortunately, we can't afford that luxury," Yazril said. "We still have no idea if there are any enemy spies in, or outside, the city. We just can't afford to tip our hand right now."

"Understood, ma'am," the Ranger replied. "I'll let them know."

"What was that about?" Venarya asked, after the Ranger had left.

"Garh returned with a bit of good news from the old man," Yazril explained. "He helped us extend the range on a couple of the platforms to nearly two and a half miles. Unfortunately, the firing rate is also going to be drastically reduced, so I'm having Cluster marksmen crew those ones."

"How many platforms were upgraded?" John asked.

"Nine," she replied. "Out of seventy five."

"That's playing the odds a little," John commented.

"I'm running under the assumption that they'll probably come at us from the water, so I've placed five of them along the coast. The other four are equally spaced out around the city. I'm hoping that we'll only need it as a contingency, in case the explosives don't work. Hopefully, we'll be able to disarm that thing, then Petrarca's and Krane's ships can help to finish it off."

"Sensible," John said.

"Like you said, we've still got the odds stacked against us, regardless," Yazril sighed. "Here's hoping that fortune's on our side today."

"Who'd have thought we'd have had so much trouble finding an open restaurant in the middle of a city-wide emergency?" John joked. "Even the bazaar's almost deserted here. Well, I hope Petrarca's technicians like burnt bread."

"I don't think it'll come to that," Venarya smiled, pointing. "Look over there."

Seeing who she was referring to, John had to force back a laugh, "Looks like Rheus won't be going hungry, at least."

"Lady Venarya, and my newest friend John!" Quinn bellowed, spotting them. "Just the people I wanted to see!"

"Hello, Quinn," Venarya smiled.

"Hi, Quinn," John chuckled. "Now, why exactly were you hoping to see us?"

"Did you, by chance, stop by to purchase some minced orgot pies?" the portly food vendor asked.

"Yes, as a matter of fact."

"Then that'd be why!" Quinn laughed.

"I see," John said, laughing along. "Why did you bother opening up at all though? Almost every other vendor in the bazaar is closed today."

"Quinn never closes!" the jolly man said, mock surprise on his face. "Although, Quinn wouldn't mind going home early, truth be told. Hardly anyone in the bazaar here to talk to. Too bad that friend Rheus isn't here. I'd be able to pack up right here and now."

"You're in luck, then," John said. "We're picking up some pies for him as well. How many do you have left?"

"If only," Quinn laughed. "I doubt even friend Rheus could wolf this many down. I've still got eleven trays left. Over two hundred pies might be too much even for him!"

"I don't know about that," John said, flashing Venarya a sidelong glance. "He's been up since pretty early this morning, and I don't think he's eaten much. What do you think?"

"I'd say that sounds about right," Venarya replied, going along with the joke. "Package them up for us, Quinn."

"I, ah, say again?"

"Package up all eleven trays for us," Venarya repeated with the same sweet smile.

"Er, you sure about this, Lady Venarya?"

"Of course. Rheus needs his nourishment," Venarya replied with a straight face.

"... Ah, okay, then," a now confused Quinn responded, as he started to pack away the pies for them.

"Send the bill to the Institute, as usual," Venarya said, motioning for their Ranger escorts to help carry the pies.

"You did what to him?" Rheus laughed. "Poor Quinn."

"Just make sure that you leave enough pies for everyone else," Venarya warned. "They're probably starving as well."

"How's the work coming along?" John asked. "Run into any snags?"

"None so far. The diving bell's been moved inside the serpent," Rheus motioned to the submarine that was now tied up at the end of the dock. "Nolan and Ganz are also in there with Petrarca's crew getting everything together.

"I see Ganz finished rigging up the bacteria tanks," John said, spying the devices on the ground nearby. "Why'd he make two though? Did we find another diving bell hidden away somewhere?"

"I'm not sure exactly," Rheus replied. "Our friend Nolan instructed him to assemble two of them. I'm guessing he just wanted a backup device. Makes sense, seeing as how we had two of these plants."

"That sounds like Nolan, all right," John chuckled, walking over to inspect the tanks.

The whole contraption looked like a lunatic had tried to create a food processor from scratch. The tank itself sat on the ground, with a plant next to it. Two smaller cylinders were stacked at the top, with one of the plant leaves wedged fast between the two.

"My understanding is that they'll dump the food in the top at the last minute, close the lid, then cut the stem. After the leaf decays, the food then drops into the tank. By then, the bell should be directly below the target area."

"Looks foolproof enough," John said.

"Then you haven't seen some of the fools I know," Rheus snickered. "But, you're right. I don't foresee any problems from this device, at least."

"Well, all that's left is the work on the bell itself, I guess," John said. "I'll go check on them."

"I wouldn't, if I were you," Rheus cautioned. "It's pretty cramped in there, and there's not much room to work. I think they've still got a couple of hours, anyways."

"Also," Rheus added, coughing delicately and shifting his feet, "When we were loading the last batch of stuff into the Serpent, I, er, may have slipped off the ladder and, incidentally, landed on Nolan's head. He may not be in the best of moods right now."

"Probably not, and point taken," John laughed, giving Venarya an inquisitive look, "We'll leave them alone until they're done."

"John and I will head back at my place," Venarya said. "Have someone come and get us when you're finished."

"I've never seen the harbour this empty before," Director Rinard commented.

"Well, it's going to be even emptier pretty soon," Krane said, "As soon as that pyramid gets in spitting range, we're leaving to join up with Petrarca's squadron."

"You never explained to me why we're not meeting up with our own fleet?" Rinard queried. "They're not too far away, either."

"Do you want to join in on any potential battle?"

"Well, no, but-"

"Exactly," Krane cut him off, "Petrarca's already assigned a few of his ships to the Cluster fleet. If we need to get any urgent messages out to our ships, he'll be able to relay it to them."

"I still can't believe that the old man figured out how to get communications to work over water, and never bothered to tell us."

"Probably because you wouldn't be able to keep your mouth shut about it," Krane sniped.

"Hey!" Rinard complained, "I'm still technically your superior."

"Not here. While aboard ship, Regulations say that the senior military officer is in charge." "But it's my ship!"

Chapter 16

"Thanks for the update," Venarya said, closing the door.

"Looks like they've finished the modifications to the diving bell," she said, turning to John. "They're about to try a few test runs now."

And with the usual bad timing," John chuckled, re-buttoning his shirt. "Makes me wish we hadn't decided to take that quick nap first. Well, we might as go and find out if this mad plan has any chance of working."

"Of course," she replied, a coy smile on her face. "But, I'm sure they won't miss us if we take a few minutes extra."

"Ma'am?"

Yazril looked up at the Ranger who had just walked in, "Yes, what is it?"

"Bad news, I'm afraid," the Ranger said. "We've finally received word from the Citadel up north. There's been a fresh offensive against them, and the enemy's apparently throwing everything they've got at them. They say that they won't be able to provide any sort of assistance until the fighting breaks, which probably won't be for a few days. In fact, they're even asking us if we have any more troops to spare."

"This is just what I need," she sighed. "Inform that that we're about to come under heavy attack as well. We won't be able to spare anything until after dark today at the earliest."

"Yes, ma'am," the Ranger replied as he left.

"This couldn't be just a coincidence," she said in a low, frustrated tone. "The war up north has to be connected to everything else that's been happening."

"I agree," a voice replied from the shadows. "The question is how?"

"No disrespect to the work you've done already, but we must have missed something," she said.

"It's always a possibility," Garh replied, walking out of the darkened corner. "We still have some time before that pyramid arrives, so I'm going to try to get word to a few of my agents and have them start looking into this more closely. I'll be back in an hour."

- "There you are," Rheus said, spotting John and Venarya approaching. "You're just in time-"
- "Perfect," John said, "Looks like we made it, Venarya."
- "-to watch the third test,' Rheus said flatly, finishing his sentence.
- "What took you so long?" Nolan asked, turning around.
- "Sorry, but it's my fault," Venarya said, thinking fast. "I needed to check on something first."
 - "Ah," Nolan grunted, "Well, let's see how this one goes."

Looking around the water, John spied a dark shape heading out to sea. "Is the Serpent starting from all the way over there?"

"No, our modified Serpent is underwater right now. That's the *Grey Mistress*," Petrarca spoke up, "Her skipper, Captain Grau, happens to be our most experienced Serpent captain, so I had them switch crews. The *Mistress* will rendezvous with the Cluster fleet, and get her oil tanks refilled for the fight ahead."

"I see. Makes sense," John said. "I'm assuming that buoy out there represents the target?"

"Correct," Petrarca said. "We need to get the bell within fifty yards of it."

"How've we been doing so far?"

"The first test ended up with the bell about a quarter of a mile away," Nolan grumbled. "The second one wasn't much better."

"They'll iron it out, I'm sure," Petrarca assured him. "They've still got more than enough time to get it right."

"I hope so."

"There it is," Ganz spoke up, pointing.

John watched as the bell broke the surface not more than twenty yards from the buoy.

"I'd say that one was a pretty good run," he commented.

"Probably a fluke," Nolan mumbled.

"Maybe," laughed Petrarca. "We'll do it a few more times to make certain, though."

"Here, watch this, John," Ganz said. "This next part's really neat."

"Er, okay," John said, returning his gaze to the water.

After about fifteen seconds, John saw the Serpent break through the surface of the water.

As the front of it started to open up, he knew Ganz was probably picturing it as some sort of scifi-ish quad-jawed leviathan opening its maw. However, as for John, he really couldn't picture it as anything other than some giant grey flower blooming.

He chose not to mention that last part.

Watching as the Serpent maneuvered to face the diving bell, he did feel a slight tinge of nervousness as it moved to envelop its smaller counterpart. He knew that one small accident at this point could spell potential disaster.

Thankfully, it looked like the recovery operation on the bell went off without any hitches, as he spied personnel emerging into the Serpent's mouth, and presumably reattaching the clamps to the bell. Quickly finishing and returning into the main chamber of the submarine, the Serpent's maw then started to shut, and it began its descent into the harbour for yet another test run.

Chapter 17

John could see the storm clouds rolling in from the west, and the seas were starting to get increasingly choppy.

However, it seemed that the repeated test runs had paid off, as the now unsettled water had done little to dull Captain Grau's aim.

"I think we'll make this one the last trial run," Petrarca said. "That storm's churning up the water too much for my liking, and I don't want the bell getting damaged during the recovery operation."

"Agreed," Nolan said.

As they observed the final test, John spied one of Petrarca's men entering the area, and making a beeline for them.

"Captain!"

Turning around, Petrarca replied, "Yes? What's wrong?"

"We've just received a message from the *Warden's Bluff*," the man said. "They estimate that the pyramid is just under two hours away now. We've already alerted the Intendant and Admiral Krane."

"Good work," Petrarca said. Turning back to face the group, he said, "Well, looks like this would have been the last test, anyway. After this run, we'll start getting everyone in position."

"I see it," John said, looking at the pyramid through the spyglass. "Seems like that last report was right, unfortunately. It's possible that they're trying to make landfall right now, instead of trying to besiege us from the water."

"Looks like we might have done all that work on the diving bell for nothing," Nolan swore. "So much for our plans with that Serpent."

After leaving Petrarca's team, John's group had met up with Yazril, and all of them were now standing on a small tower on the southern coastal seawall of Iathera.

"Why are they trying to make landfall that far south, though?" Ganz asked. "That looks like it's still about ten miles out, as least. Why not get closer to the city first, rather than try to maneuver over potentially uneven terrain?"

"Probably that storm," John said.

"I doubt it," Nolan said. "That storm's not really that strong, plus I'm sure that thing could probably weather a hurricane."

"True, but I can't think of another reason why they'd be going inland."

"Wait a second," Nolan said. "This doesn't make any sense."

"You're telling me," Ganz commented.

"No, look at where it's headed," Nolan instructed. "See that large hill? They're going to run right into it, if they don't turn or slow down."

"Maybe they fell asleep at the wheel?" Ganz joked.

Another tense few minutes passed, and it became obvious that the pyramid was starting to slow its already tenuous speed.

"Okay, it's definitely stopping," John said. "Is there anything at all on that hill that we should know of?"

"Nothing strategic," Yazril replied. "There aren't even any farmhouses down there.

However, the Sisterhood does have one of their Sanctuaries located about halfway up that same hill."

"It's basically just a shrine," Venarya explained. "I can't imagine that they would be any sort of target for whatever that thing is."

After another few minutes, the pyramid had finally come to a complete stop, and was now parked less than a mile from the hill.

"At least we have confirmation that it's capable of travelling on land now," John said wryly. "What are they trying to do, though? Land troops or-"

John's conjecture was cut off, as the pyramid demonstrated what it had in mind.

Intense beams of red light illuminated the surrounding air, and the pyramid commenced pummelling the hillside with its weapons.

"I guess it was a target, then," John said, eyes wide at the destruction. "Was there anyone in there?"

"I sent runners to alert everyone in the area," Yazril said. "I hope they heeded the warning."

"Not much we can do about it now," Nolan said, as the barrage of light continued to tear into the hillside.

The destructive lightshow ceased after another few minutes, and a rising plume of smoke coming off the hillside was all the evidence that remained.

Seeing the pyramid not moving, Ganz asked, "Is it possible that, for whatever reasons, the shrine was their target all along? Perhaps they may even leave now?"

"You're quite the optimist," Nolan grumbled.

"If Ancor's right, they'll need a little bit to build back up their speed after a show like that," John said. "But, like Ganz said, the question is whether they'll continue here, or go back the way they came."

"And, if they do come at us," Nolan added, "are they going to try to hit us from the land?"

They got their answer another couple of minutes later, as the pyramid began to move again.

"Well, the good news is that it's headed back out into the water," John reported. "The bad news is that it's still coming our way."

"Well, the mystery of why they attacked that shrine looks like it'll have to wait," Nolan said. "It could have simply been a weapons test, or a show of force meant to frighten us. In any case, it's time to put our plans into action."

"What's next?" John asked.

"We wait for it to get closer, then Admiral Ancor will start hitting it from the back with those decoy lifeboats. Krane left us a nice supply of lifeboats, so we'll start hitting them from the front, as well," Nolan explained. "Our hope is get the pyramid to waste power firing those weapons, forcing it to slow down. Once we get it to lose enough speed, we'll then be able to try using that diving bell."

"But, what if they don't take the bait?" Ganz asked. "What if they just start ignoring those decoy boats?"

"Then we'll start using some not-so-decoy boats," Nolan said with a wicked grin. "Krane brought in a supply of specially modified lifeboats that they used against the Kierdans last night."

"Modified how?" Ganz asked.

"These ones are filled with oil, and are basically miniature fireships," Nolan said. "I doubt they'll ignore a flaming torpedo coming straight at them."

"Wow," whistled Ganz. "That's big."

The pyramid had headed seaward, and had made an arc-shaped journey from its last stop at the shrine. It was now coming at lathera from almost due west, and was almost three and a half miles offshore. Every half a minute or so, a beam of light would erupt from the pyramid to incinerate a flare-filled lifeboat.

"Looks like your gamble with those platforms might have paid off, Yazril," John said. "From this approach, we should be able to get a few of those modified cannons to bear at it. Once it gets into range, that is."

"Speaking of which," Nolan said. "Now's as good a time as any to have those normal platforms open fire."

"I believe you're right," she replied. "Turning to one of the nearby Rangers, she said, "Send the signal."

"Yes, ma'am," came the reply, as the Ranger hit the release crank and launched a series of flares into the sky.

Almost immediately, a cornucopia of lights erupted from the shores of the city and made their way towards the pyramid. However, as expected, the golden globes started to fizzle out and disappear after surpassing their maximum range.

"I still don't understand why there's a hard maximum range on those platforms," John commented. "I mean, why isn't there a gradual dissipation in the power of the shots? They just seem to pop out of existence? Shouldn't we be able to hit a target at two miles out, but with a little less stopping power?"

"Actually, I was talking to one of the other technicians about that this afternoon," Ganz replied. "It appears that the maximum range isn't a function of distance, but of time."

"What? Please use normal words, Ganz."

"There's a maximum amount of time that the, er, energy projectiles can stay tangible," Ganz explained. "After that, whatever holds them together starts breaking down extremely rapidly. They also travel at a constant speed. The furthest that they can travel, before they break down, is approximately one and a half miles."

"Makes sense, I think," John said. "But how did the old man manage to extend the range?" "Well, I'm no expert, but I just figured that he found a way to extend the time before the shots start to break down."

"If you two are finished babbling," Nolan interjected, "you may want to turn your attention back to the situation at hand. It looks like they've taken our bait, and they're slowing down. I estimate that they'll come to a stop about two miles out."

"Then we deploy the bell?" John asked.

"Yes," Nolan confirmed. "Can't say I like the weather, though. I just hope those waves don't push the bell too much out of position before it blows."

"Why not try sniping off those turrets first?" Ganz asked.

"Because they'll probably start moving, and then we'll never be able to position the bell properly, you dimwit," Nolan said. "I'd rather they be immobilized before we try to shoot at them."

"You didn't drop anything on his head too, did you?" Rheus murmured to Ganz.

"Here we go," John said a few minutes later. "Looks like they've stopped."

"I'd keep the fireships in reserve, for now," Nolan advised Yazril. "Looks like they're being plenty occupied with our decoy lifeboats. No need to waste any actual weaponry on them."

"Agreed."

"Grau should be lining up for his attack run now," Nolan said. "Expect detonation within three minutes."

After wordlessly continuing to observe the pyramid, Nolan swore, "It's starting to move again! Blast!"

It was true. The pyramid was now slowly starting to creep north.

"Maybe it's just repositioning itself quickly?" Ganz suggested optimistically.

"I just hope Grau didn't fire that bell off yet," Nolan said.

"Why n-"

Ganz didn't finish his thought as a massive flash of light erupted from underneath the southern portion of the pyramid. The pyramid wobbled, but quickly stabilized and continued on its way.

"What just happened?" John asked.

"What I was afraid of," Nolan said. "When that thing started moving, it basically created a fast current, pushing the water underneath to the south. The bell probably ended up just taking a chunk of stone out of the bottom, instead of destroying that lattice structure."

"What now?" John asked.

"I've no choice," Yazril said. "I need to try to disarm that thing now, while it's still in range."

"No, wait," Nolan said, waving away the Ranger from the flare launcher. "There's still one more option."

"What is it?" John asked.

"The backup plan," Nolan said, removing a tube from his coat and holding it high over his head. Pressing a release, everyone watched as the flare made a slow arc over the water.

"What sort of backup plan?"

"One I would have preferred not to have to use," Nolan said, a tinge of regret in his voice.

"Drat! The blasted thing moved out of the way."

"Let me see," Captain Grau said, taking position at the periscope.

It was true. The blast looked like it had been nowhere close to that giant white crystal. Knowing what was coming, he turned the periscope towards land and watched.

He saw the signal.

"Evacuate the ship, everyone," Grau ordered, "Get to the escape module, and don't surface until you're at least a mile away from that thing."

"Nolan?"

"Yes, John?

"That bell that you modified," John began, gears moving in his head. "It was designed to only carry one person, right?"

"Correct," Nolan replied in a resigned tone.

"So, even if you stripped everything but the kitchen sink out of there," John continued, a horrible realization coming to him, "I'm assuming that there's no way that you can actually stuff four thousand pounds of explosives in there?"

"Correct again, John," Nolan said. "There was only about six hundred pounds in there."

"I... wow..." John said, realizing that the Serpent was now about to embark on a suicide run, using the remaining detonator and explosives.

"If it's all the same to you," Nolan said, "We did try to figure out a way to do this without sacrificing anyone. However, we realized that if the bell failed, it would be because it needed someone in there to try to maintain station until the very last second."

"It was at that point that Grau volunteered," Nolan continued. "That's part of the reason why we switched the crews on the Serpents."

"Wait a second. You must have known about this too, Ganz?" John asked. "And you didn't think to mention anything?"

"Not his fault, John," Nolan said. "I threatened to bash his head in if he said anything to you."

"I do regret not telling you, John" Nolan explained. "But, I couldn't risk a few hours of debate just to arrive at the same conclusion.

"Remember, John, this is war. See all those boys fighting out there? They certainly didn't sign up for this because they wanted to live forever."

"Crew's all tucked away in the escape module."

"See them safely to shore, Yance," Grau said.

"I've already told them to leave. You're going to need a spotter to help you make navigational corrections."

Taken aback, Grau moved his eyes off the periscope and noticed that his first officer was also dressed in the same outfit that he was wearing.

Handing Grau a helmet, Yance said, "Looks like we'll find out if these suits work."

"I guess we will," Grau sighed, putting on the helmet. "Either way, though, we won't be alive to know it. What did that short man call these? Farday suits or something?"

"Faraday suits, I think," Yance corrected him. "Let's hope they'll protect us from whatever magic comes out of that green tank. At least, long enough for these explosives to work."

"We're directly underneath now," Yance reported. "Slow down by a quarter."

"Done," Grau said, "How's it look up there?"

"Looks like you're going to get dragged by that same southern current that hit the bell," Yance said. "I can see some flotsam heading off in that direction. Looks like you'll need to increase by a third once we surface."

"Here goes," Grau said, surfacing the Serpent.

"Perfect. Looks like we're smack in the middle."

"Care to do the honours?"

"This is your show, sir. I'm just helping out a little."

"Thank you. It's been a true pleasure, Yance," Grau said, reaching over to the adjacent tank and cutting the leaf off at the stem. Almost immediately, both men could see the leaf turning grey.

Grau chuckled.

"Sir?"

"I'm just thinking," Grau said, still amused. "What if we get bored waiting for this thing?"

The explosion was colossal, with shockwaves propagating out from underneath the pyramid and racing across the water.

There was another huge splash as the pyramid itself dropped into the sea.

"Any chance of that becoming a tsunami, Ganz?" John asked, a little nervous.

"Between the storm and the seawall, I don't think anyone'll notice," Ganz replied, still spellbound by what they were seeing.

As the pyramid started to sink to the ocean floor, Yazril gave the order, "Order the platforms to stand down. When that thing hits the bottom, signal the Cluster gunners to destroy those two turrets."

"How deep is the ocean out there?" John asked.

"About three hundred feet," Venarya answered.

"Too bad that thing's nearly a mile high," Nolan said.

Putting the spyglass back to his eye, John could see the feline-like crew scrambling away from the turrets, and making their way inside.

"Looks like the turrets might be dead, anyway," John said.

"Either way, let's not give them a chance to do any repairs," Nolan said. "Taking out those two turrets permanently will give us an angle of attack where they can't hit us. If we need to end up storming that thing, we're going to need that advantage."

A few moments later, the pyramid stopped its downward journey, shuddering as it settled on the ocean floor.

The Ranger wasted no time in launching the signal flare.

Within seconds, three platforms opened fire, and the northmost turret was destroyed almost immediately.

About a minute later, two platforms opened fire on the other turret and reduced it to a smoking pile of burnt metal.

"Looks like the old man was right," Ganz said. "The safety override must have kicked in on that third platform."

"What now?" John asked.

"Now Ancor and Petrarca's fleets are going to blockade them until those reinforcements get here in the morning," Nolan said. "Plus, coordinating a naval battle in this weather is just asking for trouble."

"Why not try to land troops on that thing right now?"

"Because it means that we'd have to strip all the defenders away from the city, just to go and storm something that size. For all we know, that's exactly what they want us to do.

"Regardless, that thing's not going anywhere anytime soon."

Chapter 18

"Are you sure the Nebar Cluster's not pursuing you?" Athash asked again.

"For the last time, no," Eldnan responded. "Believe me, they have other issues to worry about right now."

The fleet that had besieged the Cluster the previous night had just returned from across the sea, and had pulled in to Athash's base of operations in Narad. Upon mooring, Eldnan had wasted little time getting to Athash.

"Like what?"

"You'd have to see it to believe it," Eldnan chuckled. "Just take my word for it."

Athash really hated dealing with Eldnan. Despite his usual irritation when dealing with Lazano, Eldnan could manage to take it up to whole new levels of aggravation.

"Fine. Now, about the fact that that fleet looks decidedly smaller than the one I initially gave you?"

"We had a minor setback at the end," Eldnan said. Grinning, he added, "The good news is that I'm alive, though!"

"Besides," Eldnan said, his face turning deadly serious, "let's not forget who gave you those ships to begin with."

"I'm assuming that you didn't want to meet with me just to remind me of the obvious?"

"Correct," Eldnan said, the grin returning. "I'm going to need another three hundred volunteer employees from you."

The man wanted even more slaves, Athash thought.

"Again?" Athash spat out. "Are you eating them or something? Actually, don't answer that."

"I'm going to need them in two days."

"Where am I supposed to find them?" Athash asked. "You've virtually depopulated the surrounding region already."

"You'll find a way, I'm sure," Eldnan said, the obnoxious smile still on his face. "Unless, you'd care to volunteer some of your own troops?"

"Fine," Athash scowled. "I'll figure something out."

"I have the utmost confidence that you will."

"Was there something else you wanted?" Athash asked, seeing the annoying man not

making any attempt to leave.

"How nice of you to ask. As a matter of fact, I do," Eldnan said. "I need to know that you've

completed that checklist that we gave you a few days ago."

"You mean that set of ridiculous and nonsensical instructions?" Athash asked. "Yes, it's

done."

"Good," Eldnan said, turning around to leave.

"Hold on, you scoundrel," Athash said, not believing that he'd ever be asking the irritating

man to stay longer than was absolutely necessary. "Aren't you at least going to tell me what that

confounded list was about?"

"No," Eldnan grinned.

The Adventure Continues in

Artifice: Episode Four

Message from the Author

First off, I'd like to sincerely thank each and every one of you for supporting me by reading

this book. It really does mean quite a lot to me.

Secondly, if you liked this book, it would be greatly appreciated it if you were to leave a

review at the site that you purchased it from.

When I'm hacking away at the keyboard at three in the morning, wondering what my life

has come to, seeing a new review from a satisfied fan always does wonders. Knowing that there

is another person out there reading and appreciating my work makes all the long hours

worthwhile.

Thirdly, it's now actually a few hours past midnight, and I need to get some sleep after I

click this big shiny *Publish* button. So, I'm going to keep this message short and sweet. In the

meantime, why don't you check out my homepage at the link below? If you're hungry for more

of my writing, well, you never know what you might find there.

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