Breached Gates

Artifice: Episode Four

Smashwords Edition

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Acknowledgements

Dedicated to two wonderful women in my life

Love you both

Chapter 1

"I say you've definitely got a screw loose. What else do you think the Kierdans could possibly be hiding up their sleeves?" Director Rinard protested, sleep deprivation obvious in his eyes and demeanor. "I mean, they only just attacked us with that giant pyramid thing! Which, by the way, we barely managed to incapacitate in time! By any measure, I'd say they've used their last ace-in-the-hole?"

"I'm going to give you the benefit of the doubt, and just say that you're optimistic," a similarly weary Fleet Admiral Krane responded.

"As opposed to?"

"I'd rather not say in front of the ladies."

"Focus, gentlemen," Venarya said, the corners of her lips betraying a slight smile, despite the circumstances. "We still have to consider what our next moves are going to be in response to this latest incursion."

"Indeed," Intendant Yazril agreed. "I have to admit that I agree with Krane. All my instincts are screaming to me that this whole business is far from done."

"If I could make an observation?" Nolan offered.

"Go right ahead. Everyone's input is valued here," Krane replied, giving a sidelong glance to Rinard.

"Whatever Kierd is up to," Nolan began, "there's absolutely no way that we'll be able to counter them effectively, not if we're working from a strictly defensive standpoint. All we're essentially doing right now, no matter how well we're doing it, is reacting to their moves. We're basically playing a game where we don't even know any of the rules beforehand!"

Taking a breath, Nolan continued, "I guess my point is that we absolutely *have* to get current intelligence on whatever their grand plan is."

"Well said, my friend. I'm one hundred percent behind you on that," former Fleet Admiral Petrarca agreed. "Or, to rephrase, I'm already ahead of you on that."

"How so?" Yazril asked, one eyebrow raised.

"As of approximately four hours ago, our home base deployed a small fleet of submarines to investigate the shores off of Narad."

"Good thinking, but are your Serpents built for that sort of job?" Krane asked, remember the relatively slow speed and large size of the vessels.

"Most definitely not," Petrarca laughed. "Which is why we're not using them. The ones I've sent are a new type we've had in development. They're much smaller and faster than our Serpents."

"Well armed?"

"Not as such," Petrarca replied. "Which is to say, well, not armed at all. I may need to speak with John and Nolan afterwards about that, but it's not relevant right now. They're strictly doing reconnaissance for this mission."

"How much will you be able to spot from out in the water, though?" Yazril asked.

"Well, we'll be able to ascertain quite a bit of their logistical support just from observing what's coming and going," Petrarch said. "But, we'll also be deploying some, shall we say, ground-based resources in order to gain some more solid intelligence.

"I see," Yazril said. "Just a fair warning, though. We've already tried to get spies inside their camp on more than one occasion."

"With no success, I take it?"

"You take it correctly," Yazril said. "Unfortunately, everyone I've sent to investigate is currently lying dead in a ditch."

"Well, that's never a good thing," Petrarca commented.

"Now, not to play the part of a pessimist," she continued, "but, what makes you so sure you'll be able to get a group of spies inside their base of operations?"

"Well, for one, we're not sending a group. We're only sending a single person. One of our best, which I guess goes without saying," he said with a chuckle. "I mean, wouldn't make sense sending over one of our trainees for something like this. Even I'm not that crazy."

"... I see," Yazril said with some hesitation. "And you think your agent will be able to effectively infiltrate them?"

"Well, I'll say this much, if they can't do the job, I don't know anyone else who can," Petrarca boldly stated. "I'll be receiving an update after they're deployed in a few hours, and I'll let you know in the morning how that went."

"Fair enough," Yazril said. "Now, to more immediate matters. What are our plans for this pyramid that's presently sitting out in the bay?"

"Well, to start," Nolan said, "I don't think they expected us to disable that thing quite so fast, if at all."

"So you think we've managed to get ahead of them?" Rinard asked.

"I'd love to say yes, but I doubt it," Nolan interjected. "To be perfectly blunt, all we've really done is park a potential invasion force just offshore from Iathera. Mind you, we *have* managed to stop them from deploying those forces at a time or place of their choosing. However, we still need to neutralize whoever, or whatever, may be holed up in there."

"Even if that storm wasn't howling outside right now, we can't do anything until those Ranger reinforcements from Freewater arrive," Yazril commented, "which won't be until dawn at the earliest."

"And that's where we come in," Krane said. "Once the Rangers get here and fortify the city, we'll ferry our marines over to that pyramid and try to capture it as fast as we can."

"What do you mean? *Try to*?" Rinard echoed. "I thought that this was basically a mop-up operation now?"

"It's like I said before," Krane explained patiently, "Simply put, we've really got no idea what we're dealing with here. To that end, I've got to entertain the thought that this operation may end somewhat catastrophically. That's another reason why we want those Rangers in place before beginning. If we lose our marines, they'll be the only thing standing between the city and whatever's lurking in that pyramid."

"Lose our marines?" Rinard sighed. "Well, if that happens, you might as kill me before the old man does."

"Speaking of which," Yazril interrupted, "I forgot to mention this earlier, but Garh's brought back another invitation for you, John. Seems like the old man's pretty insistent on having both you and Ganz over tomorrow."

"Well," John began, caught off guard, "I'm not sure if that's the best course of action right now, considering all that's happening?"

"I think it'll be okay for you to go," Petrarca assured him. "No slight intended, but I think your man Nolan will be more valuable to us tomorrow."

"I agree," Venarya concurred, nodding. "Plus, it's not often that the old man extends any sort of invitation. I can't say I'm not a little curious about this."

"Besides," Krane added, "as much as I like to poke fun at Rinard, it's probably for the best if you stay on the old man's good side. I've never known him to do anything on a whim, so chances are he's probably got a good reason for this."

"There's also this," Yazril said, pulling out a piece of paper and handing it to John. "His message instructed me to give this to you. It said that this note would explain everything."

"Er... ok," John said, grabbing the curious note and putting it away. "I'll take a look at it after this meeting."

"I think we're pretty much done for now," Krane admitted. "All that's really left is to coordinate the deployment and logistics of those Rangers, as well as create a battle plan for the attack on the pyramid. Unless, of course, anyone had anything else to add?"

Seeing a table full of shaking heads, Krane added, "Very well. If I may, would you care to join us, Nolan? I'd be a fool to discard any military advice I can get."

"Sure, I'd be more than happy to help," Nolan agreed.

"Don't stay up too late," John chided with a grin. "Remember, you old timers need your beauty sleep."

"I'm beginning to like this one more and more," Petrarca chuckled. "Remind me to thank Mag for inviting you over, John."

"Don't bother," Nolan said dryly. "The novelty will wear off soon enough, I'm sure."

'I'd best take a look at this," John said, opening the note from earlier.

The others having departed to make plans for the attack, only John, Venarya, and Yazril remained in the temporary headquarters.

Wordlessly, the other two watched on as he read the message.

Greetings, John.

Allow me to re-extend an invitation to both yourself and your associate Dr. Ganz. It would be most appreciated if you were to pay me a visit for a meal of your choosing tomorrow.

If all went according to plan, the devices I provided to Garh should have been sufficient to deter, disable or destroy Kierd's newest little toy.

If so, the pyramid has either fled back across the sea, or is sitting immobilized off the coast.

If the latter, I understand that you may be loath to leave. Rest assured, there is a greater need for you here. Let my military commanders handle securing the pyramid.

All the necessary questions will be answered to the best of my ability once you get here.

Should you need further convincing, this very letter should provide a measure of incentive once you've examined it a little more closely.

Sincerely,

Smiljan.

"That's... interesting," John said, slightly perplexed at the cryptic last statement in the message. What was the old man referring to? How exactly was John supposed to examine the letter? Not much else you could do, other than reading it?

"I'm not sure I understand," he muttered, turning the paper over to search for any other clues, but revealing only a completely blank underside.

The others had remained silent as John looked at the note. Yazril spoke up first, "Sorry, John, but I don't think we'll be of much use to you. To be truthful, I was hoping you'd be able to shed some light on that message. Personally, I speak quite a few languages, and still couldn't make heads or tails of that writing."

"Wait," John said, holding up the note in confusion. "You couldn't read this?"

"No," Yazril replied, her confusion mirroring John's. "Can you?"

"I... yes... hold on a second, please," John trailed off, a faint suspicion taking hold in his mind as he gave the note a closer inspection.

Narrowing his eyes and concentrating on the letters, he stared at the note.

Nothing happened.

Upon arriving on this new world, the eccentric Rheus had used an odd device to link his mind to that of the relatively diminutive dragon Mag. Had the message had been written in one of the languages of this world, the mind link would have allowed to effortlessly read it as if it were written in English.

However, the effects could be temporarily rendered null by the simple trick of intensely concentrating on the words being spoken or written.

He stared harder. Nothing was happening.

The note was written in English.

Understanding finally clicking in, John wasn't sure if he was now surprised or simply more confused.

Looking at the ladies, he saw faces that definitely expressed confusion.

"This... this is written in my language," John began to explain. "I didn't realize it until you had mentioned the writing. Seems that Mag's translation gimmick is pretty seamless, unless you deliberately try to peek behind the curtains, so to speak."

"How does the old man know your language?" Yazril asked.

"I couldn't even begin to speculate," John said. "I'll have to make a point of asking him that."

"I suspect that Mag may have had a hand in that," Venarya suggested. "She's the only one that could have allowed for him to learn your language."

"Where is she, by the way?" Yazril asked. "I was hoping she could provide some assistance with the battle tomorrow."

"I was hoping you knew," Venarya shrugged. "Then again, it's not the first time she's disappeared without notice."

"Considering the circumstances, should we be concerned?" John asked.

"I don't think so," Venarya said. "She's a tough girl. Moreover, if anything were to, well, happen to her, your mind link would instantly be severed. In other words-"

"-I'd stop seeing all the street signs in English, and you'd all be speaking gibberish?"

"To put it candidly, yes," Venarya smiled. "Still, I'd feel a little better if I knew where she was right now."

"Well, I'll try to remember to ask the old man if he's seen her for you."

"So, you are going then?" Yazril asked.

"To tell you the truth, I had already sort of decided to. But, this just cements it," John said. "Besides, from what everyone's said, I don't think I've got anything to worry about from him."

"Of course not," Venarya said. "Now, I had planned on accompanying you when you received the first invitation, but it does sound like he wants a private audience with you and Ganz. Yazril, would you be able to arrange for an escort?"

"Not a problem," Yazril said. "Let me know when you want to leave, and I'll have Garh take you there."

"Thanks. I'm sure Ganz is going to love that," John chuckled, remembering the scientist's discomfort at first encountering the fearsome looking creature. "Perhaps we can head out first thing in the morning?"

"Sure," Yazril said. "Meet me back here and I'll have some transportation to the edge of the swamp ready for you."

"Was that true?" John asked.

"Hmm? What's that?" Venarya replied, as they walked back to her manor house.

"That thing about me effectively becoming functionally illiterate, and having to resort to grunting and pointing if something were to happen to Mag."

"Crudely put, but yes," Venarya smiled. "Well, for the most part at least. You'll still have the pleasure of being able to chat with me."

"Really?" John asked, one brow raised. "I thought that crazy telepathic thing that you did only let you have a peek at my memories?"

"It did," Venarya said. "But, getting a frame of reference for many of those memories would have been troublesome if I didn't also learn your language in the process."

"Makes sense, I guess," John shrugged. Considering what he had seen so far in this world, he was almost willing to accept anything at this point. "But, judging from that last conversation with Yazril, I'm guessing that you didn't tell anyone else about that little detail?"

"A girl's got to have her secrets," Venarya smirked. "Worst case, if anything were to actually happen to Mag, I could still translate for you if needed."

"That's a little reassuring, then," John said. "We'll just have to hope that Mag's okay, whatever's she's up to."

"Like I said before, I wouldn't worry too much about her," Venarya softly laughed. "Mag's been around for a long time. She knows how to take care of herself, and the heavens help anyone insane enough to interfere with her."

Chapter 2

Jensen opened his eyes.

Only a combination of grogginess and numbness at all the strange happenings of the day stopped him from yelping out in alarm.

One of the strange little blue creatures sat perched on his chest and was staring directly into his face from only a few inches away.

"I do think he likes you," he heard Stelson chuckle from a few feet away.

Pulling its head back, the creature turned to look at Stelson, chirping and chattering at the Ranger. The slight shock wearing off, Jensen examined the little creature. This one was even smaller than the one currently piloting the giant demonic turtle creature that they were all riding in. *Must be a baby or something*.

"Is that why you've been sitting on him for over an hour?" he heard Stelson say to the creature in an amused tone. "Fine, I'll ask him for you."

How did the man learn to communicate with these creatures?

"What's that, Stelson?" a curious Jensen asked.

"This little guy's curious to find out what's in your shirt pocket," Stelson chuckled. "He seems convinced that it may be something particularly good to eat?"

"Huh? Okay," a still slightly groggy Jensen replied, patting his shirt.

Feeling a bulge, he realized what the creature must have been smelling. Unclipping his pocket and pulling out a small folded paper bag, Jensen said, "Must be this granola mix I picked up back home. Seeing as how I don't think I'm in danger of starving anytime soon, this little guy's welcome to it if he wants. He won't get poisoned or anything though, will he? I mean, they're not allergic to anything, are they?"

"Considering the variety of foods I've given to the raslin over the years, I seriously doubt anything can hurt them. Foodwise, at least."

"Well, in that case," Jensen replied, handing the small bag to the creature.

The strange creature took the bag being offered, quickly unfolded it, and peered inside. Taking a few loud sniffs, it proceeded to let out a series of happy chirps.

"Well, looks like he's pleased at the outcome of events," Stelson grinned.

Refolding the bag carefully, the raslin then moved closer to Jensen and gave him a quick nuzzle on his stomach. Letting out another series of happy chirps, he then ran to the front of the giant creature they were riding in, and disappeared down a small hole in the carapace.

"I just hope the poor guy doesn't get a sugar rush and tick off his parents," Jensen said, returning the grin.

"Considering I just gave his parents an entire satchel full of candy, I wouldn't worry too much about that," Stelson laughed.

"Was that what that was?" Jensen asked, remembering the backpack that Stelson had handed off to the first raslin they had encountered before boarding the gigantic sacra. "I have to admit, I thought there was something more esoteric in there?"

"Too mundane for you?" Stelson chuckled. "Expected a sack of precious stones?"

"Either that or a bag of souls for them to feed to this giant demon turtle we're riding in,"

Jensen laughed. "I'll admit it, I thought the sun was getting to me when I first saw this thing."

"You wouldn't be the first one to think that. Or the last, I'm guessing," Stelson said. "The sacras are actually surprisingly gentle, taking their fearsome appearance into account. As long as you don't threaten them or any of the raslin, you'll be fine."

"I've gotta' admit," Jensen said, "I can't even begin to imagine how those two managed to get together to form any kind of working relationship. Talk about an odd couple."

The banter was cut short as the creature reappeared and scampered toward Jensen, coming to a stop on his stomach again.

"I don't think he's got any more treats for you," Stelson laughed.

The young raslin chirped a response back, then extended a closed hand toward Jensen. Opening its palm, a small mass of fluffy green moss could be seen.

"Okay, sorry, my mistake," Stelson chuckled. "I'll tell him for you."

"Do I even want to know?" Jensen asked.

"It seems that he wants to thank you for the snack," Stelson said, trying to keep a straight face. "So, in return, he's offering you some of his own food."

"Er, thanks," Jensen replied, taking the green moss and moving to unclip his pocket.

"I, um, do believe he wants you to try it now."

"I... okay," a resigned Jensen said, looking at the earnest but eager look on the creature's face. He really hoped the creature wasn't trying to pass off the equivalent of brussels sprouts to him.

Steeling himself, and trusting Stelson to at least be somewhat concerned for his health, he put on a brave face, popped the moss into his mouth and started chewing.

He was more than a little surprised to find that, rather than feeling like he was chewing on a mouthful of tough grass, the odd moss was quite tender and actually seemed to be a little sweet.

"Boy, you should've seen your face," he heard low laughter coming from directly across him. The now awake Captain Harker of the Nebar Cluster continued, "Sorry, Jensen. I couldn't resist. You have to admit it's not half bad, considering what it looks like, eh? Just don't gobble down too much of it, though. Tends to back up the plumbing on the way out, if you get my drift?"

"I'll, er, have to remember that," Jensen said, distracted as he took a good look at the floor they were all resting on. "Say, is this the same moss that I just ate? Minus the layer of rainbow coloured dust."

"Yes, but this batch is used strictly for, well, carpeting. After all, a sacra's carapace isn't exactly the most plush of places," Stelson replied. "The raslin have little gardens secreted inside the shell. At least, that's what I'm assuming, seeing as how I'm nowhere small enough to fit inside one of those tunnels."

"Fair enough. Any more surprises I should know about?"

"What? And ruin our only source of entertainment?" Harker grinned. "Though, in all seriousness, I think that's about it. Unless you've changed anything since I was last here, Stelson?"

"I think we're tapped out on surprises for now," Stelson admitted. "I do apologize for the ribbing, Jensen, but it's not very often that we get a newcomer to Freewater."

"Apology accepted. And, speaking of Freewater," Jensen said, looking at the waning sunlight. "How long until we get there?"

"Not long, actually," Stelson replied. "See that mass of hills off in the distance?" "Yes."

"Freewater's nestled snug right there inside them. We should be arriving there in just over half an hour or so."

Chapter 3

"So, it's settled then?" Krane asked.

"Well, I've no problems with the plan, especially seeing that your boys will be managing all the heavy lifting," Petrarca chuckled. "All we'll be doing is keeping an eye out beneath the waves for any funny business."

"Don't get too comfortable on the sidelines," Krane cautioned. "If we need to back away from that thing in a hurry, we'll be needing your ships to provide covering fire for us."

"Don't you worry your pretty little head about that." Petrarca assured him. "Just remember everything I taught you and-"

"I know, I know," Krane interrupted him. "Keep those lessons of yours in mind and I'll be fine. Et cetera, et cetera."

"What?" Petrarca laughed. "Way off base on that one, my boy. I was actually about to caution you to forget all that naval jazz we pounded into your brain, and to also get used to thinking outside the box for the next little bit. After all, that is why I decided to hand-pick you for the job. Now, you've been doing a fine job dealing with the situation so far, but there's no telling what's waiting for us tomorrow."

"Or tonight," Nolan chimed in. "Mind you, I doubt they'll try anything in this weather. However, if I was a sneaky bastard and was holed up inside that pyramid with no other options, I'd at least try to make the best of a bad situation."

"Saboteurs?" Krane asked.

"Exactly," Nolan responded. "With nothing to lose, I wouldn't care if most of my forces drowned trying to make it to shore, or to your ships even. Considering the amount of troops that that thing can hold, we'll still be in a world of hurt if they catch us unaware. They probably all expect to die tomorrow one way or another, anyway. Plus, they may even have their own submersibles that they can deploy."

"Want a job?" Petrarca whistled. "I'm sure I can convince the old man to quadruple whatever John's paying you."

"I'm fairly sure I'm going to regret not taking that offer the next time John asks me to do him another favour." "I hadn't even considered that," a weary Krane said, ignoring the banter. "I'll make arrangements for extra lookouts and patrols along the shore."

"And I'll make sure my Serpents keep a tight watch on the pyramid itself."

"Appreciated, seeing as how our Bell submersibles will be nothing but a liability in this weather," Krane said. "But, it's also pitch black down there. How are you going to spot something as small as a diver?"

"Another trade secret, I'm afraid. Don't worry, though. They'll have to be some extra sneaky bastards to get past us," Petrarca assured him.

"When all this is said and done," Krane sighed, "we're going to sit down and have a nice long chat."

"I look forward to it," Petrarca grinned. "I'll handle arrangements with my boys. You pass on word to the patrols here, and go get some rest."

"That's one suggestion I won't argue with," Krane stood up, yawning. "Let me know if they try anything. Good night, gentlemen."

"Sweet dreams," Petrarca said.

"I'll see you tomorrow," Nolan said, packing up his pile of papers.

"Before you head out, Nolan," Petrarca motioned him to wait, "there is one thing I'd like to discuss with you."

"Go ahead."

"I'm assuming that you have access to metallurgy facilities on your world?"

"John actually owns quite a few of those, yes."

"Perfect," Petrarca said. "There is one proposition I'd like you to pass on to him?"

"I'm listening."

"Remember I spoke about that submarine that'll be deploying our agent in Kierd?"

"Yes."

"It's a new design that we've basically rushed out the door, due to the current circumstances," Petrarca explained. "Now, every time we've tried to get our platform-derived weapons to work on any submarine, we run into a world of trouble-"

"Which is why you've rigged those Serpent submarines to dump oil and set it on fire instead?"

"You catch on fast," Petrarca grinned. "This new class is supposed to be a far sight faster than a serpent, but has no space for even a small oil tank in the hull. So, we've experimented with the most basic of naval weapons-"

"Ramming, I assume?"

"Forget that last offer," Petrarca laughed. "I'll get the old man to give you ten times as much! But, you're right. These little beauties are designed to ram and hole enemy ships from beneath, sinking them before they even realized they're under attack.

"Unfortunately, our ramming tests seem to provide two casualties each time, rather than the expected singular. Now, we can lay more plating on the Sharks to offset that. But, our attempts at packing more armour on them only bogs them down to the point of uselessness."

"And you're hoping we might have a stronger, lighter alloy that you can use?"

"You read my mind."

"I'll see what I can do."

"Much appreciated," Petrarca said. Putting on a serious face for a second, he continued, "Now, I know John's not the type to ask for compensation, and that he'll probably be willing to do this for free just to help out. But, I'll make sure the old man knows about this."

Nolan wasn't exactly sure what the old man could possibly do to aid them back on earth, but politely nodded and replied, "Thanks. Considering the volume of business that we do, a relatively small order like this is a drop in the proverbial bucket. That's not to say that John's sisters won't appreciate the gesture, though. They tend to get caught in the minutiae-"

Catching himself in time, Nolan coughed delicately and continued, "You don't necessarily have to mention that last part if you ever meet them, though."

Petrarca barked a small laugh, "Not to worry, my friend. I've known my share of women, and I understand completely. Anything I can do to keep both our masters happy is my pleasure."

"Amen to that."

"For now, let's just hope that my little spy gambit pays off," Petrara said. Adding his trademark grin, he continued, "Or else I may be applying for asylum on your world real soon."

"Everyone strapped in and ready?" the Captain asked.

"Yes, sir," came the reply from the first mate, making one last look before buckling himself to the seat.

"How about you, Dalja?" the Captain repeated.

"Ready as I'll ever be," she replied.

"Just remember to vomit into that bin next to you. Bit of an enclosed space in here," he said, amused. Turning, he ordered the crewman next to him, "Okay, send the signal."

"Sending now," the first mate acknowledged.

Looking out the main window of the Shark submarine, Dalja waited, dreading the next few minutes.

"I don't know how you lot ever get used to this," she commented.

"You never really do," he laughed. "But, if I can't cope with a bout of nausea every now and then, I might as well go captain a desk back home."

"They're opening the gate now, sir," the first mate interjected.

"Hold on tight," the captain joked.

The onlookers in the Shark, currently afloat on the surface, watched on as the sea in front of them started churning, heralding a pair of much larger submarines breaking through the water.

Masts, folded down the length of each submarine, slowly started to rise. Once erect, Dalja could see a series of sparks shoot up each one, and her stomach instinctively tightened in anticipation.

There was a loud crack of thunder as the space between the two submarines erupted in a cascade of light, which dulled to a throbbing greyish glow.

"Comms reports that they have confirmation from the Gatesubs on the other side, sir," the first mate reported. "The gate's open."

"Let's get a move on, then."

A low humming heralded the engines kicking in, as the Shark started to move forward. Dalja could feel the dizziness increase the closer they got to the gate.

Her stomach protested as the Shark entered the portal, and it was all she could do to keep from retching. A spinning cavalcade of multi-coloured lights was all she could see through the window, which didn't do anything at all to help matters.

Closing her eyes and forcing herself to be calm, she was interrupted by the captain saying, "We're through. Tell the Gatesubs thanks, and have them go hide until we're ready to go back."

"Yes, sir."

"That wasn't so bad now, was it?" the captain asked.

A flat stare was her response.

"We'll be at the drop point in just over an hour or so," he laughed.

"I'm going to back to my quarters to try to grab a bit of rest," Dalja said, rising. "Let me know when we get there."

As she left the small bridge, the first mate turned to the captain and snickered, "She's certainly a jolly sort, isn't she?"

"Well, she's not here to entertain us, that's for sure."

"Kind of wish she was, if you catch my drift," the first mate chuckled. "She's pretty easy on the eyes."

"I'd advise you to keep it in your pants," the captain cautioned. "Or else you may not have *it* anymore. I've heard some stories about her I'd not care to repeat to polite company."

Chapter 4

"Careful getting down here," Harker called up. "That rope ladder's a little flimsy. Don't want to be bringing you back home with a broken leg, or worse."

Jensen wasn't sure what to expect when he arrived at Freewater. *Perhaps a shantytown style collection of makeshift tents? After all, this whole region just looked like a desolate wasteland.*

However, the place definitely appeared, well, civilized.

The first thing he had noticed was several dozen other sacra, some twice as large as the one that had transported his group. Rangers were scurrying back and forth loading them up with supplies.

The town itself was nestled in a fairly large area, surrounded on all sides by large hills, save for the passage they had entered through.

Hopping off the rope ladder, he also noticed that there was also grass under his feet.

"I don't know how, either," Harker said, sensing his confusion. "I was expecting a couple of mud huts when I first came here. And goodness only knows how they got grass to grow in the middle of a desert."

In the waning light, Jensen could make out the outlines of large houses, some as tall as four storeys, along with well ordered streets.

"Come along with me, Jensen," Stelson said, climbing off the ladder. "I promised you a meeting with my father, once we got here. He might be able to shed some light on some of your questions. We have a little time before all the other sacras arrive."

"Lead the way."

Jensen was a little startled to see himself being led toward a portal, similar to the ones in Iathera.

"I thought portals didn't work here?" he asked.

"Not to leave the town, no," Stelson explained. "Within the town they seem to work with no problems, though. As for the technical reasons behind that, you'd have to ask one of the bookworms back in Iathera, I'd imagine. The most I've been able to understand is that it's related to the shifting sands here in the desert. I remember some researchers from the Institute saying something about it being similar to the problems they encountered when attempting to use portals over large bodies of water."

"Ah, yes," Jensen said. "I'd heard some talk about that. Difficulties in reinforcing Iathera due to its location and all that jazz. Most of the technical stuff went over my head, I've got to admit."

"Don't worry, you're not alone on that one," Stelson admitted. "I was educated at the Institute, but I've got to confess that my aptitude tended more toward the martial disciplines."

"I hear you. My own mum wanted me to be a dentist," Jensen winced slightly at the memory. "Heaven help anyone that had me poking around inside their mouth with a sharp implement."

The small talk continued as they maneuvered their way through several different portals.

As they made their way closer to what appeared to the centre of town, he could make out a large section of land that appeared to be dedicated to agriculture, though Stelson informed him that it was more in the way of an emergency supply of food. Most of what they consumed was imported in as payment for Ranger services.

"Here we are," Stelson announced, as they arrived in front of a quite luxurious house, with more than a few guards patrolling it.

"I may have forgot to mention this," Stelson chuckled, "but my father also happens to be in charge of this little town here."

"Y'all head right in," the tiny lady said cheerfully. "The Marshall's been expecting you, Captain Stelson."

"Thanks, Martha," Stelson replied with a tip of his hat. "Give my best to the children." "I will."

With that, Stelson walked through the small reception area and opened the door on the far wall.

Following him, Jensen entered into a moderately sized office. The first thing he noticed was the lack of any windows. Judging from the path they had taken, the room must have been centrally located in the building.

Sitting behind an ornate desk was a man with the most glorious handlebar moustache that Jensen had ever seen. Though, should anyone decide to make any snide comments about it, they'd have to soon deal with the two Ranger guards flanking him on either side.

Either he doesn't care for a room with a view, or maybe he's paranoid about something?

"I knew I told you to visit more often," the moustached man said. "Gotta' admit that I didn't expect you to come back and depopulate the entire town."

"I decided that a trip to the beach would be good for them, dad."

The older man guffawed, "Now, who's this you've brought along here?"

"Dad, meet Jensen," Stelson explained. "He's a newcomer to Iathera, and currently under the employ of Intendant Yazril."

Jensen's father whistled, "That's quite an accomplishment there, son. She doesn't tend to be the trusting type. Name's Ambrose, by the way."

"Pleasure to meet you, Ambrose."

"Likewise. Now where y'all from?"

"That's the reason I brought him along," Stelson cut in. "Remember those stories you would tell me as a child?"

"Yes?" a curious and slightly puzzled Marshall Ambrose replied.

"So does he, in a manner of speaking."

The Marshall blinked and sat back. Taking a second to collect his thoughts, he looked directly at Jensen he asked, "Ever been to Texas?"

An even more startled Jensen replied, "I've flown there a few times, yes. But I didn't spend too much time there."

The other two Rangers, as well as Stelson, had watched this exchange with a peculiar look on their face. The Marshall turned to the two guards, "Give us some privacy, boys. See to it that we're not interrupted unless it's absolutely critical. Also, don't be telling anyone anything about what you might have thought you saw here."

After the two Rangers closed the door behind them, Jensen spoke up first, "With all due respect, who are you?"

"I should be asking you the same thing, son," Ambrose chuckled. "But, seeing as how Yazril trusts you, that also means that my old friend Mag does as well.

"I'm from the same place you are, my boy," Ambrose continued. "Though, I'm suspecting that there may be a slight time difference between us. Unless, judging from your peculiar answer to my question, we've suddenly discovered the secret to sprouting wings?"

"I suspect you're right," Jensen confirmed. Getting to the point, he continued, "I'm guessing you didn't arrive here during the early twenty-first century?"

Ambrose whistled, "That is quite a ways off from when I left. Made my way here during the early 1870's myself. I'm guessing that Mag, or one of the other Vrangs, brought you here too?"

"In an indirect way," Jensen explained. "Mag brought my employer here, and he brought me over to help out, considering all that's been happening."

"Yes, I heard about that. We're getting everyone mobilized to help as quickly as we can. Can't have Iathera falling into just anyone's hands now."

Something occurred to Jensen, "Just a quick question before we delve any deeper?" "Shoot."

"How do you know I wasn't just bluffing when I said I went to Texas?"

Ambrose looked puzzled for a second, then it clicked, "Ah, you may have noticed that my babysitters who just left, as well my boy here, looked a bit confused when I asked you that question?"

"Yes..." Jensen said, not sure where he was going with this.

"Considering the amount of time you've been here, and I'm assuming you future-folk don't have some special knack for languages, I'm guessing that Mag used that little device of hers on you?"

"That's right."

"Well," Ambrose said, "I asked you that question in English, son. The mere fact that you understood it at all confirmed your story."

"Clever."

"Thank you."

"How come you never mentioned that language to me, dad?" a curious Stelson asked.

"No point telling you about a language no one else here speaks, boy," Ambrose laughed.

"Might as well teach you to talk to rocks for all the good it'll do you on this world."

"That's true, I suppose."

Doing a quick calculation in his head, Jensen asked, "How long has this town been here?"

"Just over four hundred years."

"And you founded it?"

"Certainly did."

"But you left Earth just under a century and a half ago?"

"That's right. I thought about that too. Sad truth is that I've got no good explanation," Ambrose shrugged. "You'll have to ask Mag about that one I'm afraid. I'd be curious to know the answer as well, if you find out."

"I'll certainly let you know if I do," Jensen promised. "Also, not to sound too rude, but you're remarkably well preserved for someone more than four centuries old? It was mentioned to me that life spans were a bit longer here, but yours still seems to be a bit on the extended side?"

"Again, I've got no good answer for you on that one, son. I'm suspecting that our friend Mag may have tampered with the natural order of things. Can't say I've rightly got any complaints about it, though."

"Can't say I would, either," Jensen agreed. "How did you end up here, if I may ask?"

"You certainly can, my boy. You certainly can. I can even provide a bit of a straight answer to this one for ya'," Ambrose said. "How much do you know about the War Between the States back home? Happened between 1861 and 1865, if I'm not mistaken."

"The American Civil War?" Jensen asked. "Truth be told, not too much. I'm originally from across the pond, myself."

"A Brit, you say?" Ambrose laughed. "I thought I picked up a trace of the accent, though you can never be sure with that infernal device of Mag's. Always wanted to visit London someday. You'd hear talk from sailors that'd put in every now and then, but you'd never believe their tales of underground trains and giant factories. Though, I'll admit that my enthusiasm waned a bit when they described the sorry state of the air over there. Sounded like most of them signed up on the nearest ship just to get away from it."

"Well, if you do get the chance, it's gotten a lot better now," Jensen said. "Can't say the same for the local food, I'm afraid."

"Still boiling everything over there, I take it?" Ambrose chuckled. "Well, back to my original point. Have you ever heard about a group of lawmen called the Texas Rangers?"

"Indeed I have," Jensen acknowledged. "Had a buddy work with them a few years ago. Excellent blokes, from what I heard."

"They're still around?" Ambrose asked, looking genuinely bemused at Jensen's statement. "Sure are," Jensen replied, looking a little puzzled himself.

"Strange," Ambrose said. "We were pretty much already disbanded when I joined up in 1859. The best description I ever heard was that we were a bunch of outlaw lawmen."

"Vigilantes?"

"I don't know if I'd go that far," Ambrose said. "We tried to play nice with all the local authorities, and did our best to help out whenever we could. When Texas seceded and the war happened, a lot of us ended up fighting for the losing side."

"Can't say I'd blame a man for fighting for his homeland."

"Thanks. Well, come the reconstruction after the war, we tried going back to what we were originally doing. However, word came down from up high in 1870 that we were officially being replaced with some new group called the Texas State Police, and got nicely told to get packing or else. Some of the other boys went to go sign up for this new outfit, but I figured my time was done. I'd pack my bags and head west for a new life.

"I'd made it as far as Arizona when my horse decided to collapse."

Jensen raised an eyebrow.

"No fault of the horse, mind you," Ambrose explained. "After untangling myself from it, I saw a nice bullet hole in the poor thing's side. Missed my leg by less than a foot. That's when another bullet hit the dirt about a few feet away from me, and I took off running.

"Never quite figured out who it was," Ambrose continued. "I got off the road, and made it to the edge of a little escarpment. Thought I'd lost the bastards, but started hearing horses only a couple minutes later when I stopped to rest."

"More than one gunman?"

"That's what I figured," Ambrose conjectured. "Safer for them that way. The lone wolves tend to buy the farm early on in their short careers, or else they would have been good enough to hit me instead of the horse on their first try. Well, I did the only thing I could think of doing. I was too tired to run, and didn't care to face off against a half dozen men. I decided to head down the escarpment."

"Sounds reasonable."

"That's what I thought, too," Ambrose said. "Right up until the point where I lost my footing, and must have tumbled another forty feet or so downhill."

"Ouch."

"That's what I probably would have been thinking, if I hadn't hit my head on some rock or something. Next thing I know, I'm waking up and it's night time already. I don't know why those bastards didn't bother finishing the job. Maybe they didn't want to end up the same way? Who knows?"

"Sounds like luck was on your side?"

"Well, if you'd been there, you wouldn't have thought so, son," Ambrose laughed. "I was out in the middle of nowhere with no horse, no supplies, and had no idea if any more bandits were out on the prowl. Decided to lay low for the rest of the night. Didn't even dare start a fire, in case it attracted any unwanted attention."

"Sometimes discretion can be the better part of valour."

"Can't argue with that," Ambrose said. "Now, I reckoned it must have been just after midnight when I heard someone calling out my name."

"Say what?"

"What was my first thought too," Ambrose said. "Thought I was starting to hear things, or maybe I'd just been lying unconscious in the sun for too long. Anyway, I wasn't about to take any chances, seeing as how we'd made a lot of enemies in my ol' Ranger days. For all I knew, maybe some old grudge had hired those guns to take me out, and had decided to come make sure the job was done."

"Prudent."

"That's what I was thinking when I ducked behind a bunch of large rocks," Ambrose said. "Figure I'd let this bugger pass me by. Next thing I know, I hear the voice call out again "Ambrose, I'm coming over to you. I'm unarmed. 'I'm still a bit wary at this point, so I grab my six shooter and point toward where I heard him. That's when I saw the funny man in the dress walking to where I was hiding."

"...What?"

"Well, not a dress exactly," Ambrose explained. "Some kind of robe. Still, I ain't never seen that sort of getup before. Not on a man, at least. He gets about twenty feet away from me peeking out at him from the side of the boulder, and says *'Hungry? I've got some apples.*"

"Are you sure about not lying out in the sun too long?"

"Hey, I was starting to wonder when the pink elephants were gonna' show up myself,"

Ambrose confessed. "I figured he knew where I was all along, and could've just gotten the job

done with a lot less fanfare if he wanted to see me dead. So, I did the only thing I could think of in my state. I got out from behind that rock, put away my gun, and said 'Sure'."

Jensen just blinked at the Marshall, not sure what sort of comment to make.

"Well," Ambrose continued, "true to his word, he reached into that pack he was carrying and tossed me an apple. Didn't realize how parched and hungry I was until I dug into it. All the time, he's patiently watching and waiting. Even tossed me another one after.

"I finally finished, and asked him 'Who are you?' He answered with a lopsided grin and said, and I quote, 'A friend. That is, assuming you haven't decided to shoot me. If you don't, I know someplace that could really use your help?"

Ambrose stared at the newcomer for a moment, wondering if this whole thing was some sort of bizarre mirage, and if he had in fact just eaten two rocks in his delirium.

He finally opened his mouth, "You need my help?"

"If you're willing to offer it," the strange man replied. "If not, I can point you to safety. There's a small town about three dozen miles away."

"But why do you need my help?"

"Because you're an honourable man."

Ambrose wasn't expecting that. "Why do I get the feeling that you're sweet talking me?"

"Because it's probably exactly what I'm doing," the strange man grinned. "But, nonetheless, true. Can I ask you a question?"

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"Well... sure."
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"Where are you going?"

He wasn't expecting that either. "I... don't know. West."

"Start a new life, I suppose."

"I don't know about that," Ambrose said. "I'm a bit long in the tooth to be running around like I used to."

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"Would you like one?"
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[&]quot;Why?"

[&]quot;A new adventure?"

[&]quot;Huh?"

"A new adventure?"

Ambrose pondered that question for a minute. "What are you offering?"

"There's a place, even further away than out west. A new land. A place someone can make a fresh start, and do a lot of good."

"Across the ocean?"

"Even further."

"Sounds like it's quite a ways off, and you don't even have horses for us?"

"We can be there faster than you'd imagine," the odd man grinned.

"Okay, I'll bite. How long?"

"If we start walking now, I'd say about half an hour."

"Are you sure you're not a hallucination? Or possibly an escapee from an asylum?"

The odd man just continued to silently grin.

"Okay, you know what?" Ambrose began. "I'm probably going to regret this, but I can't say I'm not curious. Let's go see this magical land of yours before I come to my senses."

"Perfect," the strange man smiled. "Follow me."

They had been walking for about twenty minutes, hugging the base of the escarpment. The odd man offered no more conversation, and Ambrose was too caught up in the utter surrealness of the situation to pose any more questions.

Reaching a small copse of trees, the man finally spoke again, "Almost there."

He walked through the small grove, still staying close to the escarpment wall, and finally pronounced, "And here we are."

Ambrose stared at the cave mouth that the strange man had led him to. "I... see... so, your new country is inside this cave? Or are you planning suicide-by-bear for both of us?"

"Nothing that fun," came the reply, as he ducked into the cave. "This is just a shortcut. Follow along. It's not far now."

They continued walking inside the narrow cave for another fifteen minutes or so, and soon Ambrose saw a light ahead.

"Where exactly do you think this shortcut is taking us?" Ambrose asked, more than a little perplexed. "We're probably just on the other side of this hill now."

"Possibly," came the reply. "Let's see."

Ambrose followed the robed man out of the exit, and looked around.

This was most definitely not the other side of the escarpment.

For one thing, it looked like it was the middle of the day here. Second, there was a giant red moon in the sky. Thirdly, there was a sharply dressed older gentleman standing straight off to one side, apparently waiting for them.

"I'll be taking my leave of you now," the odd man turned and said to Ambrose. "My old friend here will explain everything to you."

Ambrose turned to look at the well-dressed man, now walking toward them, then turned back to his strange companion in an attempt to get further clarification.

The odd man was gone.

Ambrose whipped around and looked around the area. The man had indeed vanished.

"Greetings," he heard from behind him.

He turned around to see the other man had now made his way to him.

The well-dressed continued, "I am Smiljan. Thank you for coming."

A knock interrupted the conversation.

"Yes? What is it?" the Marshall called out.

A Ranger poked his head in, "Sorry about this, sir. There's a couple of raslin out here, and they seem quite determined on seeing you."

"Not a problem, but undeniably bad timing," Ambrose sighed. "They probably just want an explanation of what the heck's going on. Which they definitely deserve, of course. Tell them I'll finish up here real quick, then I'll talk to them."

"Yes, sir," the Ranger acknowledged, closing the door behind him.

"Incredibly bad timing," Stelson echoed.

"True. But, considering the resources they're letting us use on such a short notice, they do deserve to know what's going on."

"Agreed," Stelson said. "Plus, we'll be needing them to double up their patrols. Just in case someone's lucky or crazy enough to make it here with the town virtually defenceless."

"Now, Jensen," Ambrose said, "I know both of us still have got a ton of questions for each other. But we just don't have the time, especially seeing as how that little caravan of ours should be heading out soon. You've got the bearing of a military man, so I'm sure you know how it is.

"I'll make you a deal, though. Head back here when all this nonsense is over and done with, and me and you can swap stories over a few drinks?"

A touch disappointed, but understanding, Jensen replied, "Sounds like you've got yourself a deal."

"Just do me a favour and keep yourself alive, son."

"I'll certainly try."

"That's my boy," Ambrose laughed. "One more thing?"

"Yes?"

"Would you be making a trip back home before you come back here?"

"I'd say there's a good chance of that."

"You wouldn't happen to still be able to procure tobacco in this future-world of yours, do you? Don't smell it on ya', so shooting in the dark here right now."

Knowing where this was going, Jensen smiled, "We certainly do."

"Praise the heavens! Bring me back a pouch or two, if you could? The damned stuff just doesn't exist here."

Chapter 5

There was a knock on the door.

"We're almost there, Dalja," the voice of the first mate said. "Meera and Suana say everything's clear. We're going to try getting you to shore shortly."

"I'll be there in a few minutes," she called back.

Still a little queasy from the passage through the gate, she steeled herself and started to change into her chosen attire for the mission.

She disrobed and put away her casual clothing, changing into an old, worn-looking set of hunter's leathers.

Looking into the small mirror on the wall, she adjusted the outfit. Still a little unsatisfied, she ripped off one of the top buttons from the tunic. *That should do it*.

Opening another box, she took out a watertight suit and squeezed herself into it, leathers and all. It was more than mildly uncomfortable, but, if all went well, she wouldn't be wearing it for long.

Grabbing another sealed watertight bag off the floor, she made one last visual check of the room, unlocked the door, and headed to the rear of the submarine.

"Suana's out there patrolling the area, just in case," the captain explained. "Meera should be back any second now to escort you to shore."

"The entire coast looks clear, at least for a half-dozen miles in each direction," the first officer added. "So you should be able to make your way inland without being spotted."

"Understood," Dalja replied.

"Now, you understand how this thing works?" the captain asked, holding out a small metal rod to her.

"I hit you over the head with it, and you stop asking me inane questions?"

The captain grinned in response, "Just making sure."

"I've used a breather before," Dalja said. "As long as it doesn't take me more than half an hour to get to shore, I should be fine."

"Meera will get you there way before you need to start worrying," the captain assured her. "She's an eager girl. And speaking of which, here she is."

Dalja watched as a shape broke through the water in the airlock hatch, accompanied by a peal of giggling squeaks.

She had no idea how or who had managed to train dolphins to help them navigate their submarines, but she was grateful for it. Tethered to Meera, she wouldn't have to exhaust herself swimming through a few miles of unknown waters.

"All clear?" the captain asked, giving Meera a friendly rub on the head.

The dolphin replied with an enthusiastic nod of its head.

"That's my girl," he said fondly. "Okay, Dalja, let's get you on the way. Also, we've got that special, er, package you requested. Just remember that you've probably not got more than a day or so before it starts stinking to high heaven."

"I'll try to remember that, seeing as how I'll be the one having to carry it."

Dalja hunched herself over and cautiously walked to the shore, with Meera still looking on. Satisfied that she was alone, she stripped off the watertight suit, and opened the small bag she had brought along.

Taking out the carefully selected equipment, she then proceeded to arm herself with a worn but still deadly longbow and quiver, two knives, a garrote concealed in an old ring, and a small variety of other devices which she secreted inside her garments.

Fully armed and feeling a bit less vulnerable, she still didn't hold any illusions as to what would happen if an unexpected patrol caught her out in the open. Turning her attention to the bag that the captain had kept in cold storage for her, she held her breath as she opened it.

Taking a small sniff, she was relieved to find that there was no visible smell coming off of the dead wolf.

Removing the carcass from the bag, she then wasted no time in balling together the leftover bags and skinsuit, and tossing them into the ocean.

On cue, the dolphin dashed the top of her torso out of the water and snatched it out the air. *That thing's well trained, I'll say that much.*

For a moment, she found her mind drifting, wondering if the creature had experienced as much discomfort as her when passing through the gate. Would almost count as animal cruelty if they did, she mused.

Putting aside such thoughts for now, she picked up the wolf carcass and headed for the treeline.

Perhaps a plan involving me carrying a dead mutt that's more than half my weight wasn't the smartest idea.

Dalja swore.

This blasted wolf was getting heavy. Who'd have thought finding a bloody patrol would have been such a difficult task in a war zone?

If she didn't find a group of Kierdan soldiers in short order, she'd have to dump this mangy carcass and would have to think up another plan. No matter, it wouldn't be the first time she'd been forced to improvise.

A loud screech interrupted her musing. Dropping to her stomach, she put down the wolf and drew her darts with one hand, the other wielding a wicked looking dagger.

Scanning the area, she saw and heard nothing. It was only by chance that she looked up and saw faint movement in the air.

What the hell kind of bird is flying around at this time of night? No owl I've ever heard ever made a sound like that.

Drawing a small spyglass, she focused it on the shape and could barely make it out as it sped away, the light from the Dark Sister faintly reflecting off the creature's pitch black scales.

Her eyes widened, startled beyond belief.

What the hell was a vrang doing out here? There hadn't been any recent reports of them being anywhere on this continent.

Even if that thing was in cahoots with the Kierdans, she had no intention of going anywhere near the beast. Fearful was not a word anyone would ever use to describe her, but she remembered the tales of the small dragon-like creatures facing off against and defeating whole armies singlehandedly.

She would stay put until that thing was far, far away.

-Follow-

Only discipline stopped Dalja from almost jumping out of her own skin.

Had the blasted thing just spoken to her?

-Yes-

Dalja swallowed hard and steeled herself.

Well, she was either going insane, or there actually was a small dragon trying to communicate telepathically with her.

If the former, she'd be dead soon enough. If the latter, unexpected help was almost never a bad thing.

Plus, there had been those wild stories. She never knew whether to believe them or not. Rumour had it that the mysterious head of her organization had some sort of arrangement with one or more of the creatures. If true, exhausted and frustrated as she was, she'd be a fool to refuse help at this point.

Taking a bearing, she started walking in the direction that the vrang had flown.

-Here-

On edge trying to keep an eye out for enemy scouts, she almost jumped out of her skin again.

Pulling out the spyglass, she saw the creature circling a spot about a half mile ahead.

As she approached the location, she smiled.

Well, it looked like hours of carrying that blasted wolf was about to pay off.

A patrol of three Kierdan soldiers were camped directly ahead.

They were all facing the fire, none of them apparently expecting to be attacked by errant foliage, as any opposition in the area had already been nullified by all reports.

None of them had noticed the vrang hovering high above and, judging from their banter, they also appeared to be less than sober.

Even better.

Cautiously, she took out three darts, uncapped the tips, hugged the ground, and crept forward.

Once satisfied with her range, Dalja steadied herself.

With one switch motion she threw the first dart.

It hit the middle soldier square in the back of the neck. The fast acting poison did its job, and he collapsed like a rock.

His two companions drunkenly started flailing about trying to pull their swords out of their scabbards, but were struck with the other two darts a few seconds later.

Running toward the encampment, she had to act fast. The poison would only keep them unconscious for about an hour.

Looking up, she saw that the vrang had disappeared. Shrugging, she silently thanked it. *Time to get started.*

Taking out her knives, she methodically started mangling the soon-to-be corpses of the latter two soldiers.

Chapter 6

"You've got to be kidding me," John groaned, rubbing his eyes. "They've got to be messing with us at this point. Either that, or you need to move to an unlisted address."

"It's probably important," Venarya replied, though her voice still carried a small tinge of irritation. "I'll go see who's at the door."

"If it's Ganz looking for a plushier pillow, I'll kill him."

"I doubt that's it," Venarya smiled, donning a robe and walking to the bedroom door. With a wicked giggle, she added, "But if it is, I'll help you."

Though tired, John sat up in bed, waiting for Venarya to see who was at the door this time.

A few minutes later, and almost about to doze off, he heard Venarya call out, "John! Sorry, but can you head downstairs, please!"

Wondering what was happening now, he quickly slipped on his clothes and made his way to the main floor. Expecting to find a messenger, or perhaps the talkative Ranger Kitam if he was really unlucky, he was surprised to see Yazril and Garh standing in the living room.

"John," Yazril acknowledged. "Apologies for the late hour. Again." Garh grunted.

"No worries, Yazril," John assured her. "What's happening?"

"We've just had another bit of bad news come in," Venarya explained. "Do you remember us talking about 'The Gates' before?"

"Yes, I believe so," John said, still a little groggy. "Some sort of fort off to the west somewhere, wasn't it?"

"The other side of the continent, in fact," Yazril clarified. "The full name is actually Erin's Gates, but that's almost never used. It's a dozen miles long, and it's used to fence off the only entrance to the Plaguelands. We have Rangers contracted to man it-"

"And we pulled some of them out to come to the city's defense," John finished her thought, remembering the previous conversation, and having a sinking feeling in his stomach that he knew where this present one was headed.

"Correct," Yazril said, her voice tired. "We also just lost contact with them."

"Come again?"

"They were due to check in with a nearby Ranger fort about half an hour ago, and never did," Venarya said. "We haven't been able to get in contact with them since. Also, the only portal there is from that same Ranger outpost, Fort Devine, and they're reporting that that's no longer functioning as well."

"What do we think happened?"

"We're still not sure," Yazril admitted. "Current speculation is that some of that nastier creatures living in the Plaguelands chose that window of opportunity to attack."

John could tell from her tone that she wasn't convinced by that explanation, "Sounds like you don't believe that?"

"I don't," she sighed. "By every account, the creatures living there are nothing more than brutish animals. There's no way they could have organized any kind of attack to breach the Gates. There were enough Rangers still stationed there to make sure that a distress signal would have been sent out, in any case."

"Plus," Venarya continued her thought, "the timing is more than a little suspicious. It's almost as if someone planned this."

"How so?" John asked.

"Between the war in the north, the attack on the Cluster, and today's attack, it's almost as if someone was banking on the fact that we'd eventually be forced to redeploy troops from the Gates over to this side of the continent."

"Then, once the Gates were vulnerable," John finished her train of thought, "someone hidden away in there could smash their way out?"

"Possible, but unlikely," Yazril shook her head. "You'd have to be certifiably insane to hide away indefinitely in there. As well, the Gates are heavily fortified on the side facing into the Plaguelands. The western side, however..."

"So you think the Gates were attacked from the other side?" John asked, puzzled. "Is there anything of any worth either there or in the Plaguelands themselves?"

"Other than basic supplies, or incredibly ferocious beasts, no," Yazril said.

"Well, if it's Kierd behind this, they must be after something," John mused.

"I think I'm starting to agree with Krane on this," Yazril said. "Kierd appears to be just another pawn here. There's no way they could get a significant force over to that side of the continent without being spotted. Someone else is behind all of this."

"It sounds like a definite possibility to me," John agreed. "How long would it take to get reinforcements over to the Gates to investigate?"

"That's the problem," Venarya explained. "There's more than ten miles of jungle separating the Gates from the nearest settlement, which is just a fishing village. Fort Devine, the only place in direct contact with it, is over two hundred miles to the south."

"We'd have to get to the coast by ship, then march on to the fort," Yazril said. "The city of Surth, just south of Fort Devine, is the only coastal town of note that we'd be able to hire any ships from."

"We'll need to rent ships?" John asked, a little surprised. "Isn't it in Surth's best interest to loan us a few? Or doesn't the Cluster have any nearby?"

"The Cluster does have a few ships stationed there, but they're just a handful of fast scouts. Certainly not enough to transport any significant number of troops, in any case," Yazril said. "As for loaning us some ships, well, you'd understand if you've ever had to deal with Surth bureaucrats before. By the time they actually agree to help us, it'll be too late."

"I've dealt with my share of obstructive pencil pushers," John admitted. "I think I understand."

"Admiral Krane's already sent over a contingent to try to get some ships," Venarya said.

"We should be hearing back from them shortly."

"What does this mean for our plans to deal with that pyramid in the morning?"

"Rinard's sent a dispatch to ferry over some emergency troops from the Cluster," Yazril said. "But, judging from the amount of soldiers that it would take to overrun the Gates, we'd have to deploy a significant portion of our current force over there, once we get those ships.

"Even with the Ranger reinforcements," she continued, "we may only have enough troops to bolster our defences in the city, and certainly not enough for a counterattack on that pyramid. Remember, that thing's the size of a small town. No telling how many enemy troops are in there."

"So, we'll maintain the blockade for now?"

"Correct," Yazril said. "Krane's gambling on the fact that the pyramid's permanently crippled, so it may be prudent to try to simply starve them into surrendering. At least until other forces can get here to help."

"Get up slowly," Dalja cautioned in a low growl, "and don't even think of trying anything again."

"Again? What are you talking about" the groggy Kierdan soldier sat up, rubbing an aching head and his eyes still closed. Realizing that an unknown voice was speaking, he groaned, "What's going on? Who are you?"

"I had to put a rock to your noggin to persuade you to keep still while I was patching you up. This time I won't be so gentle," she warned, levelling an arrow at him.

Opening his eyes and finally grasping the reality of what was happening, the soldier said, "So, I'm your prisoner?"

"No, you idiot," she said flatly. "I'm just telling you the lay of the land. Try to get too friendly again, and you'll find yourself with a hole in your brain."

"Why did you capture us...me?" the soldier said, looking around for his companions.

"Capture?" she exclaimed. "You lot must be as thick as fog! I just saved your sorry hide! You're welcome for that, by the way."

"What? Saved from what? And why is my shoulder killing me?"

"You seriously don't remember being attacked by that wolf?" she scowled. "I suppose not, considering the smell coming off your breath. Also, I don't recommend moving that shoulder around too much. Unless you want to tear out those stitches I apparently wasted my time with."

"Hold on. What wolf are you going on about?"

"That one right over there, you bloody idiot!" she motioned with the arrow point. "The same one that would have probably ripped your throat out! You're just lucky I was tracking it."

Noticing the animal corpse off to the side, the still confused soldier replied, "I... don't remember any wolf?"

"Be surprised if you did," she replied with an exasperated tone. "I'm guessing you got jumped from behind, and looks like you knocked your own fool self out on a rock or something. I don't suppose any of you ever heard of keeping a lookout posted? Appears that your half-drunk friends got torn to ribbons before getting their swords out their scabbards. Saved your life, though, they did. Delayed the wolf enough for me to catch up. Blasted thing had already started on your shoulder before I got an arrow through its heart."

"Er, thanks. I guess."

"You guess?" she sighed, exasperated. "Look, just grab something to eat before I lose my mind with you. That haunch should be finished cooking by now. Take it off the fire, and use that knife over there to carve it, but no funny business!"

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"... uh... okay..."
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"Look. Just eat."

She watched as the bemused soldier started eating, while keeping the same expression of exasperation on her face. She waited for him to open the next obvious line of questioning.

"This is, er, pretty good," he said, almost on cue. "Where did you find meat out here though? I thought the army had picked everything clean?"

"Are you that dense?"

"Huh?" the soldier began, before seeing that she was again gesturing to the direction of the dead wolf with her bow. He also noticed that the bloody corpse was also missing a leg. "I... uh..."

"Don't tell me you're going to be sick on me now?" she said. "What kind of delicate little flower are you?"

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"No... I just... I mean-"
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"Look, it's safe to eat, you fool. Unless you'd care to starve?" she replied, a menacing tone in her voice.

"No... I, uh... I think it's great," he replied, taking an exaggerated bite. Trying to change the subject, he asked, "Why were you out here? I mean, everyone's abandoned the area since we set up camp here."

"I'm looking for work."

"Wha-"

"What don't you understand? You have an army here. *With food*," she explained. "And I don't care to be hunting down wolves to fill my stomach for the foreseeable future."

"I, er, don't... er... think we have any openings for, well-"

"Finish that thought and I'll end you myself without benefit of this arrow," she scowled. "Does it seem like I'm looking for *that* kind of work? Or doesn't your delicate little flower army allow women in it?"

"What? No! That's not what I meant! I mean, we have plenty of women serving with us!"

"What the problem then?"

"I... aren't you looking to join up with the wrong side? I mean, aren't you from around here?"

"Your point being?"

"Don't you have any sort of loyalty to King Garustet?" the puzzled soldier asked, now a little cautious. "I mean, he is the ruler of Narad?"

"And a fat lot of good he's doing for me now, holed up in that palace of his," she spat. "What loyalty do I owe some berk who thinks he's better than me 'cause he had the right parents? Sod that nonsense!"

"I guess you've got a point there."

"I should also be asking you the same question. Why are you following your king here?" she asked, feigning ignorance. "Won't he just get you killed eventually - or already, I should say, if it hadn't been for me?"

"You don't know?"

"Know what?"

"There's no more king in Kierd. Domich is dead. Lord General Athash is in command now."

"Who's that now? And what happened?"

"Word is that King Garustet had him assassinated. The Lord General is here to see justice done."

"I see. That certainly puts a new spin on things."

"You thought we were just here to invade you?"

"I'll admit that the thought had crossed my mind," Dalja stated. "Still, what about the rumours?"

"What rumours?" the soldier asked, genuinely confused.

"You know the ones I'm talking about. People disappearing and being taken for slaves by Kierd?"

"You know how rumours are spread during war. Give it ten years, and I'm sure that us Kierdans will be green with two heads. Besides, who would we even sell these slaves to?"

"I suppose you're right. Didn't really make much sense to me either," she admitted. "How about it, then? Can you get me in?"

"I can try," he said. "I owe you that much at least, I guess."

"You guess?" she echoed, her face darkening.

"Sorry, bad choice of words again. I mean, it's not up to me," he admitted, holding up his hands. "But, I'll tell them how you handled yourself against that wolf, though. That should count for something, I'd imagine. However, I'd really appreciate it if you don't mention the drinking part of the story."

Nuretz growled.

Raising his fist, he pounded it again on the door.

"Hold your horses, you ninny!" a loud, sleepy-sounding voice complained from inside the building. "I'm coming, I'm coming!"

Nuretz heard someone fumbling with locks, and the door started to open, "This had better be good, you-"

As soon as the portly, pyjama clad man laid eyes on their uniforms, all protest ceased and he sobered right up.

"Nuretz?! What's going on? What in blazes are you doing here at this hour of the night?" he asked, eyes wide.

"What's going on, Craso, is that the Cluster needs you to throw some of that considerable weight of yours around. We need ships. Fast."

"Right now!? What for?"

"We believe the Gates are under attack," Nuretz calmly explained to the man, whose face started to take on a distinctly white pallor upon hearing the news. "I don't need to explain to you what that means to your town, much less to your little operation here. We need you to drag that bloody city council out of their beds, and get them to approve the loan of some warships so that we can transport some troops up to Presca."

"How many ships?"

"About four dozen."

"Are you loopy? I don't think our navy's anywhere near that large?"

"That's where you come into play again, friend Craso," Nuretz said. "The council can provide us with just over two dozen vessels, by our estimate. You'll provide the rest."

"What?! I need those ships!"

"For what? To ferry goods to a town that'll soon be overrun by a horde of bloodthirsty beasts?"

"Look, those aren't even warships! My ships are just cargo vessels!"

"Even better. You'll just be carrying a different type of cargo."

"I don't even have two dozen ships! I have maybe half a dozen out in the harbour right now."

"You have friends with ships though," Nuretz explained, his voice icy cold. "Friends who also depend on the Cluster for certain types of trade goods, as it so happens. I'm sure you can make a persuasive case to them as to why they should help us. Believe me, if this wasn't serious, do you think they would have sent me to your house in the middle of the night? If it's any comfort, you'll all be more than adequately compensated for this."

"Fine, fine. I'll see what I can do," a defeated Craso said. "I'll need some time to get my ships offloaded though."

"You have one hour to unload them, though we'd prefer you send them now if you could," Nuretz said. "Dispatch them to the Fort Devine docks as soon as possible. I trust we can leave you to handle the rest of the arrangements?"

"Yes, yes. You'll have your ships. Now leave me alone," Craso said, gears turning in his head as he tried to figure out how exactly he would pull off this strange request. "I've got quite a few messages to send out, and little time to send them, apparently."

"I'll leave some men here to act as messengers for you. You have our thanks."

"Thanks? Bah! You better tell Rinard that he owes me big time for this!"

Something was off.

Trusting his instincts, Clance whistled out a callsign.

No answer.

Strange. There should have been at least one Ranger awake and on guard at the camp.

His squad had been posted halfway between the Gates and Fresca, acting as rear scouts in the event that any of the creatures locked away in the Plaguelands managed to escape. It wasn't a common occurrence, but everyone agreed that it was best to be on the safe side. Even the smallest creature from the Plaguelands was a danger if it managed to find its way to civilization.

Other than a few errant squirrels and monkeys, they hadn't spied any other fauna of note, much less anything that actually posed a danger to anyone. To that end, Clance had drawn the short straw when his group had decided to send someone on a small side trip to a small grove of wild fruit trees two hours to the south, and he was only now returning to camp.

Creeping closer, he took out his spyglass and tried to make out the camp in the low light.

There was indeed a lone Ranger leaning against a tree, standing guard. The other three must have been asleep in the tent.

Clance whistled again.

There was not even a flinch, or any other sign of acknowledgement, from the Ranger.

He must have either went stone deaf within the last four hours, or had perhaps simply fallen asleep.

Still, Clance's instincts screamed out to him that something was definitely not right here.

He focused the spyglass back on the supposed camp watchman, and stared at him. Straining his eyes to cope with the darkness, Clance noticed something very odd indeed. His eyes were open, but they were unblinking.

There was a dead man standing guard.

Now, keenly aware of the fact that there was a likely ambush up ahead for him, and that there was a chance that he was probably being observed right now, he slinked back into the underbrush to gather his wits.

Doing a quick check, he determined that he had not been seen. However, if the enemy - whoever they were - were actively patrolling the area, his concealment would be short-lived.

First things first, he hid away the bag of fruit he had collected on patrol. It would only slow him down, and his compatriots wouldn't be needing food anytime soon. It was also highly unlikely that he'd be able to use it to bribe the enemy not to kill him. Not unless they had a serious sweet tooth, at least.

Reflecting on the situation, he realized his course was clear. Clance had to make his way back to the Gates to report this immediately.

After scouring the immediate area one more time, he started slowly circling the camp, keeping both eyes peeled for the slightest thing out of the ordinary.

He must have been about two miles out from the Gates when he heard that familiar whistle. Not taking any chances, Clance stopped, crouched down, and returned the signal. Within minutes, he saw another Ranger moving towards him. Or, rather, hobbling toward him.

"Clance? Is that you?"

"Jamieson? What happened to you?"

"Sprained my foot on a damned rabbit hole."

"Listen," Clance started, "There's something strange happening. Came back from patrol to find everyone in my camp dead-"

"And why exactly do you think I'm fumbling around here in the dark?" Jamieson cut him off with a bitter tone. "We got surprise attacked by I-don't-know-who. Gotta' admit, whoever they were, they were pretty well efficient about the whole deal. Sneaked over the walls, killed everyone in the communications rooms and destroyed all the equipment, then they laid a full on siege to the place.

"There's no one there for you to make your report to, if that's what you were planning," Jamieson continued. "A handful of us managed to get out. We were hoping to get to Presca and get word out to Fort Devine on a fishing boat. Hopefully the other lads are further ahead than me."

"Do you know what they're after?" Clance asked. "And you didn't recognize any markings on them?"

"Not that I was admiring their finery, but no," Jamieson replied. "They were all dressed in black, with some kind of bizarre mask on. As to your first question, I have no idea."

"So, everyone's dead?"

"Either that, or I'm the victim of a really elaborate prank," Jamieson said. "Listen, I'll go find some cover to the south and lay low. Probably in that old hunting blind. You need to get to Presca and get word out. Chances are that Fort Devine already suspects something, seeing as how we didn't check in. But, it's also possible that they may just think it's a technical glitch."

"Best not take any chances."

"Exactly," Jamieson said. "Now, stop standing around and get a move on. The other lads that were with me were making a straight beeline to the west. But, from what you're telling me, there may be a few surprises waiting for them on the way. My advice is to loop around to the south for a bit.

"Also, come get me when you head back this way, before I starve to death or something."

"I don't suppose you have a way to get a fleet to the other side of the continent in a hurry?"

Krane asked.

"I'm not entirely sure what you're asking," Petrarca replied.

"Don't be coy," Krane said. "Now, I haven't said anything to anyone else about this. But, I do know that there's no possible way you could have come to our rescue that fast – at least not by normal means. Not that I didn't appreciate the help, mind you. But, be straight with me here for once."

"Fine," an amused Petrarca said. "Assuming that such a thing was possible, the truth of the matter is that it just wouldn't work in this case. You'll understand if I can't elaborate. The old man being what he is, and all?"

"I see," Krane said. "I don't suppose you've any more tricks up your sleeve, then?"

"As much as it pains me to admit it, I've really got nothing that could help us here this time," Petrarca said. "All I can do is send some of my boys to help with fortifying Iathera. I'm afraid I can't dispatch them along with your little expedition. That's the old man's rules, not mine, by the way."

"That's more than enough," Krane said. "We've managed to offload enough personnel from our ships to help bolster Iathera's defense as well. As long as no one tries to board our ships in

force, we should be fine. I've had Rinard request some more troops from home too, but they're stretched thin right now."

"Aren't we all, my friend?"

"Are you kidding me!" a disgusted Admiral Fescor exclaimed, handing the note off to the Syrilo.

Taking the note and quickly reading it, Admiral Skagant commented, "I will commence with the arrangements."

"How? We barely have enough staff here as it is! Between guarding those refugees, keeping an eye on the Kierdan sailors we captured, interrogating them, going over personnel records to check for any more potential spies, and just generally keeping the place running, we're barely managing! And he wants us to send more troops over there!"

"We'll have to manage."

"How?" Admiral Fescor asked. "I've already had to assign the janitorial staff to guard duty!"

"Leave it to me. I'll handle it," the Syrilo assured him. "You, I believe, are in need of rest. Go and get some sleep."

"And you?"

"I will be fine."

"Okay then, you old nursemaid. I could use a good eight hours of being unconscious anyway. Just wake me up if we get another disaster happening."

He had made it.

Clance could smell the ocean not too far away.

He had managed to avoid two groups of enemies by using stealth, but had been unable to get any kind of a good look at them. Like Jamieson, all Clance could make out was that they were clad all in black.

He had taken note of one thing though. In addition to the standard swords and other small blades, the enemy was also armed with long bladestaffs. A suicidal weapon to use at close range in any kind of heavily wooded area, it was really only effective at trying to keep mounted troops at bay.

Or keep a large, vicious beast at bay, the thought suddenly struck him. Maybe these guys were crazy enough to try heading into the Plaguelands?

The thought explained much, but left more questions unanswered in its wake. Answers that would have to wait.

Now, the real danger began.

He would have to scout around the village first before trying anything. If the enemy had come ashore here, chances were that they had left troops behind in case any Rangers escaped and tried to do what he was now about to attempt.

Slowing his pace, he made his way to the edge of the treeline and pulled out the spyglass.

All lights in the village had been extinguished, but he could make out several silhouettes patrolling the area, as well as several large ships offshore.

That would make things even more difficult now. Any attempt to commandeer a boat would be met with lethal force from the guards. If by some chance he was able to avoid them, then one of the ships would no doubt chase him down.

Clance hadn't seen any of the villagers, and hoped they had simply been placed under guard, rather than killed.

He also wondered what had happened to the Rangers that had been stationed here. He had whistled a few times while drawing near and while examining the perimeter, but had received no answer. Unfortunately, considering the amount of time that his roundabout route had cost him,

that also meant that none of the other Rangers from Jamieson's group had managed to make it back.

This was bad.

And, to be quite honest, he hadn't thought this far ahead.

Clance swore.

He had wasted another half an hour scouting the area trying to formulate a potential plan.

However, the enemy had the entire perimeter of the village covered. On top of that, the sun would be up in a few hours, and with it his chances of discovery would be greatly increased.

He was now crouched down inside a thicket poring over every conceivable idea that he could think of, and in turn discarding each of them.

A commotion from inside the village interrupted his train of thought. It sounded like an argument of some sort. Creeping closer, he pulled out the spyglass and took a look at what was happening.

Two of the villagers, a man and a woman, were in a semi-heated discussion with two members of an enemy patrol, but Clance couldn't make out what was being said. After about a few minutes of argument, the woman returned to one of the houses and the man departed and headed south into the treeline.

Clance wondered why this villager was being allowed to freely leave the village. Was he some sort of informant or enemy agent?

Only one way to find out.

Clance put away the spyglass and started making his way around the village, hoping to intercept the man, while making sure he avoided any patrols that might still be in the forest.

Fifteen minutes later found Clance covertly scrutinizing the stranger who had now entered a small clearing. Observing the man, he watched as the man undid a rope that was anchored to a tree trunk, and then carefully lowered a large sack to the ground.

Unsure of what was inside the bag, Clance had to think fast. Clance needed to capture this man alive if possible. He was also acutely aware of the amount of physical exertion and lack of sleep that he was currently under the influence of.

If the bag contained weapons of any sort, Clance might have a more difficult time subduing the man. The stranger might even be able to summon the other patrollers to come to his aid.

Not wasting time, he dashed across the clearing.

The other man noticed him too late, turning around in time only to have Clance's hand clasp tight across his mouth. Wasting no time, the Ranger immediately kicked him to his knees, while his other hand pulled a knife to the man's throat.

"Make even one sound and you're dead," Clance hissed. "Do you understand?"

Trembling, the man quickly nodded.

"Who are you?" Clance demanded, uncovering the man's mouth.

"I-I'm Kafari," he stuttered in a low voice. "Wha-what do you want-"

"I'm asking the questions!" Clance warned. "What are you doing here?"

"I'm j-just getting my nets to go f-fishing-"

"Tied to the top of a tree?!"

"It's the s-smell of the fish, kind sir. It's to stop animals from tearing at the nets and r-ruining them. If I leave them on the b-boat, the animals will g-get them, and my wife says they s-smell too much to keep indoors-"

"Okay, fine. Stop babbling," Clance said. "Why were you arguing with the enemy guards? And who are they?"

"I don't know who they are, I swear! They just showed up here and told us to stay inside or else!" Kafari explained. "But I have a large family to provide for, plus neighbours that barter with me! I told the strange men I need to go and get food."

"And they let you?"

"Eventually," Kafari said. "They said to keep far away from their ships, or I'll be sunk. I'll told them I'll avoid them and go fish to the south."

"You don't seem the type to try to challenge those guys?" Clance probed, thinking that this quivering pile of a man would surely have opted to stay put in his house, food or no food.

"Truth be told," an uneasy Kafari admitted, "my wife was the one insisting on me going out, and she did most of the talking to the guards. She told me that they wouldn't care if we sent out any fishing boats, as the nearest town of any significance is hundreds of miles away. I couldn't change her mind and just decided to go along with her. I'm a lot more afraid of her than those guards."

"I see," Clance said, brow furrowed in thought. "What happened to the Rangers that were stationed here?"

Kafari looked even more nervous than he did at first, "Th-they killed them, kind sir!"

"They died fighting?"

"No... not all of them," the fisherman explained. "Of the nine that were here, three of them died fighting the invaders. The other six were surrounded and outnumbered, so they surrendered."

"Then what happened?"

"They were ordered to disarm themselves," Kafari said. "They did as they were asked, then the enemy soldiers just went ahead and killed them!"

"And they left you lot alone?"

"Yes, but I don't know why, I swear!" the fisherman protested. "They told us they would be gone soon, and that if anyone fought back they would be killed like your friends."

"I see," Clance said, finally removing the knife from the man's throat. "Don't try to make a break for it."

"Never, kind sir."

Clance thought for a minute. "I need to get to Surth. Can your boat get me there?"

"I... yes, but that's a far way off."

"Do you enjoy having these guys in your village?"

"Well, no," Kafari said. "My boat is not the fastest though, and I'll have to hug the coast. It will take at least ten hours to get there."

"It's a damn sight better than me walking."

"How do you propose to get on the boat, kind sir? The guards know that it's only me out here."

"I'll run down the coast about three miles. Keep an eye out for me," Clance instructed. "I really wish I could have gotten a closer look at these guys though."

"You want to see them?"

"It would have been nice," Clance said idly, still pondering the situation in his mind. "I've no idea who these buggers are, and was hoping to get a nice peek at them up close."

"There might be a way," Kafari said tentatively. Looking thoughtful for a second, he added, "I'm certain it will work."

There was no way this was ever going to work.

Aside from wearing Kafari's ill-fitting, and incidentally quite smelly, spare set of clothes, Clance was now totally weaponless. All of his gear now sat in the large bag at the top of the fisherman's tree.

On top of that, this entire hare-brained plan depended on the meek man being able to muster the courage to bluff his way past the guards without having his wife there to lead the charge.

Yep. This is definitely going to end with me lying dead in a ditch, Clance thought.

As they approached the enemy guards, Clance looked to Kafari and whispered, "Now's the time to tell me to run if you're not up to this."

"I can do it, kind sir," Kafari assured him. "Now, remember to act like an imbecile."

Clance took a deep breath, and effected what he hoped was a vacant expression on his face.

"Who's there?" one of the guards demanded as they came into view.

"J-Just me!" Kafari stuttered. Clance really hoped the man was just acting, and wouldn't end up giving him up.

"Who's that with you?" the guard said, lowering his staff at them. "You went out there alone."

"This is my helper," Kafari said. "I found him when I was getting my nets."

"Why wasn't he in the village with the rest of you?"

"He got scared, kind sir," the fisherman explained. "I found him hiding up a tree."

"Up a tree?" the guard said, suspicion in his voice.

"He's... he's, well, a little slow," the fisherman said, sighing. Lowering his voice, he added, "Truth be told, he's more of a hindrance to me than anything. But, he's my wife's cousin and she makes me keep him. You've met her. You already know how she is."

This might actually work.

The guard's suspicion seemed to ease a little, "Very well. We'll escort you to your boat."

Under watchful eyes, Clance and his newfound friend maneuvered their way to the docks and found Kafari's boat.

It was only about twenty five feet long and ramshackle. The least of its apparent problems was that it needed a fresh coat of paint.

Well then. Looks like I'm destined to drown at sea if these guys don't kill me outright.

They loaded the nets and Clance took a seat near the bow. As prearranged, Kafari asked to return home under the guise that he was getting a lunch for Clance. In truth, he was going back to make sure his wife was up to date on the tale that had been told to the guards.

The enemy reluctantly agreed, with one guard escorting him back and the other keeping an eye on Clance.

Thankfully, the guard appeared bored, and paid little attention to him. At least, the Ranger assumed that he did under that strange mask. It concealed his entire face, with two large reflective discs covering his eyes. In fact, Clance couldn't see one iota of exposed skin on the guard, as everything was covered by that strange uniform. For all he knew, there was a possibility that the enemy wasn't even human.

His musing was interrupted by the return of Kafari.

"Thank you," Kafari said, trying to appear cheerful as he boarded the boat.

"Stay clear of our ships," the guard warned, not bothering with pleasantries.

"Of course, kind sir. Of course," the fisherman said, undoing the mooring rope nearest to him.

Assuming that he was supposed to be helping, Clance moved to undo the rope at the front of the boat. He really hoped the guards didn't notice him fumbling, as he had no clue about what sort of knots sailors used. Hell, he'd grown up in a desert.

"No! You stay there," Kafari chastised him, sounding exasperated. "I don't want you dropping the ropes in the water again!"

Clance smiled a vacant smile, nodded, and sat back down.

The guards had turned to see what was going on, but quickly ignored the scene and started talking to each other.

"Grandmaster Minardo should be sending an update on the attack soon," Clance heard one of the guards say. "Stay here and watch for the longboat to deliver it."

"Yes, but what about-"

The response from the other guard was interrupted by Kafari pushing off the boat and cheerfully calling out, "Thank you, kind sirs! I'll make sure to bring you back a prize catch!"

This man really needed to work on his timing.

The guards stared after the departing boat in silence, denying Clance the opportunity to eavesdrop further.

Still, he had managed to get one very key piece of information.

The name the guard had mentioned was familiar to him. Grandmaster Minardo was the self-proclaimed leader of a bizarre isolationist cult that had broken away from one of the Southern States over a hundred years ago. Rumour was that they had tried to settle in an area close to the Gates, but had been not-so-politely asked to leave by the Surth army. From what Clance could remember, they had sailed away and settled on some island far off to the west somewhere.

However, Clance couldn't figure out why they'd be attacking the Gates.

Revenge? Didn't make any sense. The Rangers had had nothing to do with them being exiled from the continent. Why not just attack Surth itself? Or, if they didn't have enough forces to attack the city, they could have raided any of the small number of Surth-claimed villages in the area. Including this one. On top of that, they had left all the civilians alive here. So, revenge didn't seem like the driving motive behind all this.

The whole thing just didn't make any sense to Clance.

Did they just want to destroy the Gates in order for the beasts caged within to do their bloody work for them? If so, they would have set fire to and demolished the giant fort, then made their way back immediately. Plus, if a simple assault was the plan, why would the Grandmaster himself lead the charge?

From what that guard had implied, it almost sounded like Minardo was looking for something, hence the message that he was apparently going to be sending to the troops in the village.

Also, Clance wasn't sure if he'd misheard what the guards were saying, but it had sounded like the message would be communicated from the Grandmaster directly to the ships, who would then relay it to the soldiers on the beach.

How was that even possible?

With a sigh, Clance knew that he'd never figure this one out by himself. All he had was conjecture and some knowledge he remembered from his classes as a child. He really hoped Kafari's boat would be able to make the trip. A simple drizzle might be enough to swamp this old tub.

As the boat puttered away, he tried to get a look at the enemy ships. He really wished he still had his spyglass. From what he could make out, the dark coloured ships seemed uniformly sleek, but there was no hint of any metal plating on them. *Must be built for speed*.

"Can you handle this boat by yourself, Kafari?"

"I always do, kind sir."

"Well then, I'm going to get some rest. Wake me up if you spot anything."

"Really? I didn't actually expect you to take me up on that offer," Admiral Fescor protested, trying in vain to rub the sleep out of his eyes. "Is a good night's rest too much to ask for around here now?"

"You were the one that asked me to wake you if it was important," Admiral Skagant countered.

"It better be," Fescor grumbled, slipping on his coat. "What exactly is it?"

"I think it would be better if you saw *it* for yourself," Skagant buzzed, indicating that he should follow.

"Can't be that strange, can it?" Fescor asked, before momentarily considering the events of the last few days. Sighing, he added, "But, then again..."

Despite the rain from the storm, Fescor could see a crowd gathered around the docks. As they neared the area, he saw what looked like a captured enemy ship, along with several Cluster sailors frantically tossing ropes around in what looked like an attempt to secure the vessel to the docks.

Recognizing the two admirals, the assembled crowd instantly made way for them, and Fescor could now see that the ship was straining against the ropes that were already fastening it to the dock.

Puzzled, but now a little more cogent, Fescor asked, "I thought these enemy ships were just half sunken hulks that we had to tow back? Aside from some scorch marks, this one looks pretty well intact?"

"It was half sunken," Skagant confirmed.

"And we fixed it?"

"Negative."

"What?" a confused Fescor asked.

"Negative."

Fescor held back the urge to scream.

Sensing his frustration, Skagant relented, "We fixed nothing. This vessel has been silently repairing itself."

Fescor gave him a look of absolute incredulity, took a deep breath, and asked, "What?! Have *you* been getting enough sleep?"

"I am quite rested, I assure you," the Syrilo replied. "Within the span of the last few hours, this... *ship* somehow managed to effect repairs on itself."

Fescor sighed, "Fine, I'll accept that. We now have a self-healing ship here, apparently. But, tell me this, why don't you just turn the engines off instead of trying to nail the bloody thing to the dock?"

"There are no engines."

"Have you got into the liquor stores again?"

"There are no engines on this craft," the Syrilo repeated. "I have had several tech teams thoroughly investigate it. Our divers say that it appears to be propelled by a series of movable fins underneath the craft itself."

"And what's moving them?"

"The craft itself."

"Why me?" Fescor shook his head. "Send word back to Fleet Admiral Krane in Iathera. Let's see if those brainiacs over there can shed any light on this."

"Already done."

"So I walked out into the rain for nothing?"

"Ouite refreshing, isn't it?"

Ignoring him, Fescor asked, "I'm assuming we've secured all the other so-called wrecks that we've towed in?"

"Correct."

"What about the ones already fully sunk? Are they going to come back to life on us?"

"I've had the diving bells keeping as good as an eye on them as they can, considering the weather. They appear to not be repairing themselves. Once the storm passes, we're going to try raising one to see if it becomes functional again."

"Let me know," Fescor said. Pausing, he added, "This storm's not passing before morning, is it?"

"I'm telling you," the injured Kierdan soldier was saying, "if she hadn't come along, all three of us would have been wolf meat."

"I see," one of the gate guards replied, smirking at Dalja. While he may not have been convinced of her martial prowess, he obviously seemed to appreciate her more feminine attributes.

"Go ahead. Try it," Dalja snarled, fed up by his leering, and shifting her cloak to one side to reveal a wicked-looking hunting knife.

"Hang on, he didn't mean anything by it," the other guard interjected, not caring to interrupt his currently uneventful watch with a fight. Turning to the offending guard, he said, "Go get his superior officer. Let them sort it out."

Shrugging, the other guard walked off.

Dalja looked at her unwitting accomplice. The fool truly believed that she had saved his life. On the long walk back to the main Kierdan base of operations, he had blabbed incessantly to her. However, once Dalja had realized that he wasn't aware of any information that she needed, she had tried in vain to get him to shut up.

Still, she had at least learned that his name was Harish. Turned out he was barely twenty years of age, which probably explained the ease with which she had been able to deceive him. Apparently, he had grown up one of the poorer villages, with a father who had been killed by bandits when he was younger. Harish had signed up with the Kierdan army to help provide income for his mother.

Too bad he'd be dead soon. Hopefully mama's not too old to try some alternate revenue streams. Even if she was, some people were into that sort of thing.

Once she had ferreted out any crucial information and made her escape, the Kierdans would no doubt realize what had happened. No doubt that Harish would be bearing the brunt of their wrath at that point.

She almost felt sorry for him.

Almost.

"So, there's no way to verify that you were actually the one that killed the wolf?" Harish's captain asked. "Seeing as how our young friend here was unconscious at the time? In fact, one could say it's equally plausible that you killed my soldiers?"

Did he know something?

No. If so, she'd already be dead.

Steeling herself with an angry look, she retorted, "Look, I'm sorry, but what exactly did you want me to do? Knock the sodding wolf out for you instead, and then wake up this incompetent to go slit its throat for me so I didn't break a nail? No offense, Harish."

"Er, none taken."

"Also," she continued, "that's the stupidest thing I ever heard, and I've known my share of morons! Why in the blazes would I kill your men? Tell me, Captain, do you also think I coerced a wolf into attacking them? Then, somehow convinced this wolf to only kill two of the bloody idiots? And, of course, I then politely asked the wolf to lie down while I shot an arrow through him?

"Look, I'm tired of this. Either give me a job, or else I'm going to head back into the woods to apparently commune with wolves."

"No need for that," the captain replied, unfazed. "I do have a little test for you. You claim that you're good with that bow?"

"If I wasn't, your boy here would be wolf dung by now," Dalja said. "Where I grew up, if you couldn't shoot, you didn't eat."

"I see," he said, standing up. "Follow me."

He was not as easily swayed as the dumb boy, but that was to be expected.

Not sure what the stoic captain had in store, she followed behind. As she exited the tent, Dalja saw her test.

The lady must have been about thirty or so, and had a look of hopelessness in her eyes. She was also manacled.

"Chain her to the post," the Captain instructed.

Dalja watched as they walked her to a large post some one hundred yards away and lashed her to it.

"You're smart, or so you claim," the captain said. "You know what you have to do."

"I've already told you. I'm not a murderer," Dalja countered in a low voice. "If you need someone to kill one of your camp followers in order to get your jollies off, you're barking up the wrong tree."

The Captain's eyes flashed with anger very briefly.

Good

"She's not a civilian," the captain patiently explained. "She's already admitted to being a spy."

"From where?"

"That's not your concern."

"Fine, then."

"You get two shots to prove your worth."

If she was a spy, she was dead either way. No point in both of them dying over something as arbitrarily incomprehensible as moral principles.

"I don't know if I can do this," Dalja said.

"Can't or won't?"

"Once my first arrow goes through her right eye, I may not be able to get a direct hit on the left one before her head flops down."

The assembled crowd laughed. Calling a shot like that was nothing short of ridiculous at such a range.

"You don't need two killshots," the Captain said with a flat tone. "The very definition of the word implies that one arrow is more than enough to finish her."

Concentrating on her target, she chose two arrows from the quiver, leaned one against the side of her leg, and notched the other.

She could see tears running down the cheeks of the lady.

That's what happens when you get caught. One of these day it may even be her chained up there.

But not bloody likely.

Satisfied with her aim, she released the arrow, then swiftly picked up the second and fired it with one efficient motion.

The prisoner sprouted two arrows, one from each eye.

The laughter turned into sharp gasps of astonishment.

At least it was a quick death.

Plus, she'll probably have some company in the afterlife when Harish enters early retirement.

She turned to the assembled crowd to see a moderately impressed Captain, the most expressive she had seen his face yet, and a lot of looks that said that they didn't believe what they had just seen.

"I'm also pretty good with this knife, if one of you berks decides to try anything."

"What do you mean, basic duty?" Dalja said, annoyed.

"I mean exactly that," the Captain said. "You'll share in all the duties of the other recruits. For now, you'll be alternating on guard duty, cleaning, and kitchen shifts."

"I didn't join up here to be anyone's sodding maid! You've seen my skill, and you want to waste it baking bloody pies?"

"You need discipline-" the Captain started.

"And cleaning the latrines will teach me this how exactly?"

"Look, in time, and if you've proven your worth, we'll maybe move you up to more specialized duties," the Captain said with a firm tone. "If you object, you can go complain to General Athash himself. I'm sure he'll be very sympathetic to your plight."

"Fine."

With that ultimatum, the Captain walked out, leaving Dalja and Harish alone.

Turning to Harish, Dalja asked, "Where do I find him?"

"Huh? What are you talking about?"

"What I just promised your generous friend there," Dalja said, "He suggested I see this General Athash bloke. Where do I find him?"

"Are you insane?!"

"I've been called worse. Look, I'm not asking you to come along with me."

"This is a crazy idea! I've got to go report to a medical tent. Just promise me you won't do anything stupid?"

"Fine."

Dalja watched him leave, and considered her plan.

The thing is, most spies try to be sneaky and that's what gets them caught. They'd never expect you to boldly walk up, sans protocol, and start an argument with your commanding officer. Of course, that's not without its own set of risks as well. Though, it does help when you're an attractive member of the opposite gender.

"Let me in, you sodding idiots!"

The shouting broke Athash's concentration, and he wondered what the commotion was outside his tent.

"I have important information for General Athash!"

Well, that answered that question.

Now to get the answer for the obvious follow-up question. Just as well, it was getting tiresome poring over these invasion plans for the umpteenth time.

"Send her in," he called out.

Rush looked up from his corner and raised an eyebrow.

"I'm getting tired and bored, and this might prove an interesting diversion," Athash explained to his spymaster.

They both watched as a quite attractive woman walked through the parted tent flaps. She wore what looked like homemade leather clothing and had hair like fire.

Whatever she wanted, she was certainly easy on the eyes.

"I've got some important information for you, sir!"

"Well then, spit it out? What's this piece of information that I absolutely must know?"

"One of your captains is a damned idiot, sir!"

That was... unexpected. To say the least.

Athash didn't know whether to kick her out, or just break out in laughter.

"That's certainly good to know," he said with a straight face. "Now, who exactly are you?"

"Name's Mirian," she said. "I just proved my bloody worth to one of your captains by saving the hide of one of your soldiers. Even executed that sorry spy for him to prove my loyalty! He finally let me join your merry little band, then the little bugger has the gall to assign me to *kitchen duty*!"

Executed? What was this about?

He glanced at Rush, who gave him the signal that he would explain later.

"And you thought that it was a good idea to bring this to me?"

"His suggestion," she explained, trying to keep a slight tone of flippancy in her voice. "Said I can take it up with General Athash if I didn't like where he put me."

That prompted a bellow of laughter from Athash, "You're a brave one, I'll give you that."

"Now," he continued. "Let's assume I'm willing to entertain your complaint, what would you have me do? Stake your friend the Captain over an anthill?"

"Why? I can do that myself later," she said, no trace of a smile. "Look, I can thread a needle with my bow at a hundred paces, track a cloud through fog, and outfight nearly any man in your army. I just want a more appropriate role."

"And you're quite modest, too. Let's not forget that," Athash added. "But, considering that you just joined up with us, what, an hour ago, I'm sure you can appreciate your Captain's hesitation in us trusting you implicitly."

"I could have chosen to let that wolf kill your man, rob his corpse, then leave it to rot with no one the wiser," she countered. "I *trusted* that you would reward the choice I made."

"A fair point," Athash said. "Tell you what? You've provided me with more amusement than I've had all month, and I'm feeling particularly generous right now. If you're as good as you say, I could perhaps find a position for you within my personal retinue?"

"Sounds interesting," Dalja admitted. "But, ask me to cook or clean for you even once, and I promise you that someone will end up with a black eye."

"I'm sure we can find something a little more appropriate to your talents. Rush?" Athash turned to the silent spymaster. He had spent enough time with the stoic man to recognise that he had more than a few reservations about this peculiar woman. "Care to conduct the job interview?"

Dalja forced herself not to betray any expressions. Her organization knew almost nothing about this man. What little intelligence they did have was enough for her to know that she'd have to be extremely cautious in any dealings with him. Reputably the reason for General Athash's rise to power, he controlled one of the most paramount spy networks known.

This was a dangerous man. She'd have to keep her story simple. Any complicated lies would certainly earn her a fate similar to the lady she had recently, and briefly, met.

Rush approached her and stared at her for a long moment. This wasn't the usual type of ogling her body normally attracted. Instead, this was the calculating scrutiny of an apex predator.

"Can you read and write?" was his first question.

"In four languages."

"Really?" Rush raised an eyebrow. "You're particularly well educated for the rustic sort?"

"My ma' was a teacher from one of the Southern States if you must know."

"Was?"

"Died when I was fifteen."

"How did she end up here, across an entire ocean?"

"She was a physician. Decided to leave civilization behind to try to do some good here."

"What happened?

"The usual sort of thing that happens to those types of people that are too idealistic," Dalja said, her eyes steely. "Bunch of villagers showed up one night. Said there'd been a hunting accident and that their friend needed help immediately. They found her body in the woods two days later."

"What did the local authorities do about it?"

"Nothing. The head of the local constabulary was one of the villagers that night," she said. "My pa' wanted to gut them, but was worried what would happen to me next. Decided to just leave the village with me that same week. Spent the next few years moving around from place to place with him."

"Why did you leave him?"

"He always felt that ma' was his fault. Started taking to drinking," Dalja explained. "One day, he got into a drunken argument with a bear and lost."

"I see," Rush said. "He taught you how to fight?"

"For the most part. Didn't want me sharing ma's fate."

"I didn't realize there were bears in these parts?" Athash interjected.

"There aren't," was her simple reply. "The village was almost to the north coast. Puttered my way down here over the years, hoping to make my way to the capital. Maybe find myself a real job even. Finally got here and found you lot had beat me to it."

"Strip."

"What?!" Dalja and Athash simultaneously exclaimed.

"I need to examine your clothing," Rush explained with a tone of clinical detachment.

"Why?"

"I have a feeling that you're smarter than you let on," Rush said. "You tell me."

Dalja looked at him for a few seconds. Playing coy at this point would only invite more trouble, she felt. "You want to check my clothes to make sure they're the real deal. In case I was a spy, you want to make sure they're not some costume I put together so that I could infiltrate you."

"Good."

"Can I ask a question?"

"You may," Rush replied. "Whether I answer it is uncertain."

"Fair point," Dalja said. "If I was a spy, wouldn't I try to make myself look the part? I know Narad's in a bad spot right now, but I'm sure they still have enough of a spy budget to afford some old leathers?"

"Perhaps," was Rush's answer. "Now, back to my original request?"

"Fine. You want me to do a little dance for you as well while I undress?"

"That won't be necessary."

"Okay, then," Athash said. *This was starting to feel a touch uncomfortable*. "I think I'm going to step out and get some air. I've been poring over those papers for too long anyhow, and a walk seems in order. I'll leave you two to it."

"As you wish, sir," Rush replied, not taking his gaze off of Dalja.

"Turn around," Rush instructed, running his eyes over every inch of her lithe body, but no trace of leering in his expresion.

Well, let's see if we can't fix that.

Dalja did as she was asked, taking a slow, deep breath that unfortunately didn't even seem to faze the stoic man. "Satisfied? Or you want another look at the goods?"

Rush picked up a nearby cloak and tossed it to her, "Put this on, and have a seat while I examine your clothing."

"Whatever you say."

Dalja pulled up a chair in front of the desk that Athash had been sitting behind. This was a chance she had to take. In his hasty departure, he had neglected to put away the papers he had been studying. Combined with the fact that Athash mentioned studying them intensely, that was a good indicator that these documents were somewhat important.

She hoped that Rush would be too preoccupied with her clothing to even suspect that someone might be brazen enough to try to spy on them literally in front of his own nose.

Plus, he wouldn't have any way of knowing that she could read upside down.

The few glances she managed to sneak in under the pretence of being bored and gazing around the room threw up a couple of red flags.

Those looked like invasion plans. And not for Narad.

Nesseris. That was the capital city of Sinjal. Why would Athash be trying to invade Sinjal? She closed her eyes under the guise of resting, while attempting to puzzle out what she had just read.

Sinjal was located in the centre of the continent, isolated from both Kierd and Narad by the Caldain Ridge mountain range. *Isolated except for one small pass. A pass that's located in Narad! Could that be the real reason they were invading Narad? To secure a clear path to Sinjal?*

Possibly, but to move that many troops through such a narrow pass was risky. The moment Sinjal suspected anything they would simply fortify their end of the pass. And that was assuming that they hadn't done so already. It would be like walking into a meat grinder for the Kierdans.

Thinking back, she did remember that the document indicated that Sinjal would be attacked from the North. However, to do that, the Kierdans would have to march through Rakavi, and Dalja sorely doubted that the Rakavians would allow such a flagrant violation of their borders. Athash would have to invade Rakavi first. And he would have to conquer it incredibly fast. Any amount of dawdling would alert the other nations, who might then unite to crush the Kierdans.

To overrun Rakavi at such a rapid pace, the Kierdans would need more men than their intelligence said they currently had. Therefore, one of two things were now true. The Kierdans were incredibly stupid, or they had a much greater force in reserve. Considering who she was now in the presence of, she opted to believe the latter.

It was starting to make sense. She remembered from her history lessons that Sinjal was once the seat of power for this entire continent, before one of the past rulers had decided to divide up his empire among his heirs for some reason or the other. While landlocked, Sinjal's river system made it an important trade hub and it still commanded great respect, particularly from the three eastern kingdoms.

And speaking of which, all three eastern kingdoms would never stand for Athash's plans for Sinjal. Athash would have to pacify them as well.

Then, as long as he's gone that far, he might as well finish the job and invade Jagada, down to the south, and actually bordering Kierd on the other side of the Caldain Ridge.

Throughout recent history, one ruler or the other would speak of reunification via either diplomacy or conflict, but nothing had ever come of it. It looks like Athash had even greater goals than even she had initially suspected.

There was one other detail that she had to fill in. To get to Rakavi, the Kierdans would have to sail there. They would need ships. Lots of ships. From what she had seen, they didn't have anywhere near the amount of ships to transport a large enough invasion force. *Perhaps hidden away somewhere back in Kierd?*

She still had a few pieces of the puzzle remaining. For example, why did they attack the Cluster? That part still made absolutely no sense. No matter, she was sure she would eventually piece everything together.

All in all, though, she was pretty pleased with herself.

"Are you about done sniffing my skivvies?" Dalja called out, her eyes still closed. "My legs are starting to get chilled."

"I'm satisfied," Rush replied. "For now."

"So, I'm in? No scrubbing latrines?"

"We'll see. Return to your quarters, and I'll be in contact with you shortly."

As she left, Dalja was fairly sure that the spymaster didn't suspect her of anything. But, knowing his reputation, best not to be complacent about it. She'd know soon enough if she passed muster if he returned with guards in tow to arrest her. *Or worse*.

Still, she was glad that she had the foresight to stash her gear in that hollow tree nearby Harish's old camp. Strangely enough, she still felt a bit naked without it.

"Look alive, everyone!"

Jensen opened his eyes. Muscles sore from sleeping on the hard carapace of the sacra's shell screamed out for him to walk around and stretch them, but he and the large contingent of Rangers on board were packed in like sardines.

Looking out in the dim light, he could see that the scores of sacras behind them had kicked up the equivalent of a small sandstorm. *I hope the guys in the back don't get black lung*, he joked to himself. *Or rainbow-lung*, he amended, remembering the vibrant colours that the sand reflected in the daytime.

"We'll be arriving at the Bridge in twenty minutes!" Stelson continued his announcement from the front of the sacra. "Get your gear together. We're going to try to make best time to Fort Tiarre."

"Ready for another fun climb up those stairs?" he heard Harker remark.

"Not especially. Maybe I'll just take a shortcut and run across the sand," Jensen joked.

"Good luck, but don't expect me to come get you if you trip and fall."

They both chuckled. No one in his right mind would dare walk alone on the sandy floor of the desert, as demonstrated by the attackers that had pursued them to the Bridge from Fort Tiarre. All of the enemy that had dared to venture there had been efficiently dispatched by some sort of tentacled horrors lurking beneath the surface. The only safe place to be in the desert was on the few rocky outcroppings scattered throughout.

"At least we won't be running for our lives this time," Jensen said. "Though, I suspect we'll probably still be in a bit of a hurry to get back to Iathera. No telling what's happening there now."

"What?!"

"We got word a short time ago from Fort Tiarre," the Ranger said. "All we know for sure is that Fort Devine lost contact with the Gates, and that the Cluster's sending out troops to investigate."

"Damn," Stelson swore. "Just our luck, too."

"Word is they're holding off the counter-attack on whatever that pyramid thing is. You're going to be reinforcing Iathera until the Cluster gets back."

"Can't disagree with that," Stelson admitted. "No point in waiting for us to return first, if what they're saying is correct, then time's critical. I just hope our boys at the Gates are okay."

"You and me both."

"Could it just be a technical problem?" Jensen cut in.

"It's possible," Stelson said. "But, given all that's happened so far..."

"True," Jensen said.

"If there is trouble, our troops should be able to handle it," Harker assured him. "If I know Admiral Krane, he'll be pulling out all the stops on this."

Stelson nodded, "Well, let's not dawdle too long here. We've got a city to go protect."

Wordlessly, Jensen and Harker followed Stelson along the narrow bridge, dissolving among the throng of Rangers also making the crossing.

"What's our status, Commander?"

"Last ship is pulling in now, Admiral," Nuretz replied. "We'll be on our way once the remaining troops get loaded up. Come to see us off?"

"Not exactly," Ancor said. "Change of plans. I'm to take your place here."

Nuretz raised an eyebrow.

From anyone else, Ancor would have seen that display of familiarity as near insubordination. However, Nuretz's unique position as commander of Director Rinard's personal guard also gave him the authority to command almost any military personnel as he saw fit. In effect, Ancor saw him an equal.

"New orders from Fleet Admiral Krane," Ancor explained. "A personal request from Lady Venarya herself, if I understand properly. Something about escorting someone to a swamp in a few hours? I was told you'd understand."

Nuretz took a moment to soak that in, then let go a deep sigh. "Indeed I do."

Realizing that no further explanation was forthcoming, Ancor added, "Anything I should know about this little expedition?"

"Nothing new to report," Nuretz said. "Which, unfortunately, means we're running on next to no intelligence for this whole operation."

"I'll have to manage," Ancor shrugged.

"Considering what I've heard about you through the grapevine, I'm sure you will," Nuretz chuckled uncharacteristically.

"Thanks, I think," Ancor returned the chuckle. Looking around at the remaining mass of personnel, he asked, "Where are all the Rangers that came through?"

"They were fairly upset about this whole business, and were itching to get going and well, do something. I figured that, rather than debate the issue with them, to just load them on the first two dozen or so ships, and get them out from underfoot."

"There were that many of them?" Ancor looked a little startled.

"Good grief, no," Nuretz replied. "I spaced them out equally among the other troops to avoid having them become mutineers and striking out on their own. No telling how long we were going to have to wait here to get the entire fleet loaded up. And, to be honest, I can't say I really

blame them for their over-eagerness to get going. They've got friends and family up there, and absolutely no clue as to what's happened."

"True," Ancor agreed.

"Though," Nuretz said in a low voice. "There were still about a few hundred of them. Not that many in grand scheme, considering how many troops we brought. Even so, I didn't think we were going to bring any of them along? I thought they were supposed to stay and help defend Iathera?"

"That was the initial plan," Ancor explained. "But, like probably every other half-baked idea that's been hatched in the middle of the night, it wasn't particularly ideal in retrospect. The good Intendant had planned on holding all the Rangers back in reserve at the city, but Director Rinard made a persuasive argument to her to make it more of a joint operation. Something about not having a small army of ticked-off killers roaming around the city with an axe to grind. Seeing as how the Rangers did have a pretty major stake in the game, she agreed."

"I think the sly old fox just wanted to share the risk," Nuretz commented

"Your words, not mine," Ancor tried to hide a smile.

"Still, it makes sense. If nothing else, they can help guide you through that bloody jungle up there," Nuretz said. "I'm sure most of them must have made the journey one time or another."

"Well, I can tell you right off the bat that half of them were deployed up there until earlier today."

Nuretz gave a low whistle, "That's going to be a lot of dogs to try to keep on a short leash."

Ancor barked a harsh laugh, "Could have been worse. The entire contingent of Rangers in the city wanted in on this. First time I've seen troops draw lots to see who *wouldn't* be able to go into battle."

"Well, I can't say I envy you," Nuretz said. Examining the ship that was now docking, he gave a low whistle, "Well now, that's interesting."

Ancor regarded him with a raised eyebrow.

"That's Craso himself standing there by the gangplank," Nuretz said, watching the sizeable man not wasting any time disembarking and making his way toward them. "He's our main trading partner in Surth, and pretty much the entire reason we managed to get all these ships together in such short order.

"Not that he won't be charging us out the nose for it, mind you," he added. "Didn't expect to see him here in the flesh, I'll admit. Wonder what he wants."

Nuretz curiosity was short-lived, as the portly trader finally made his way to them.

"Mister Craso, come to sing a farewell ballad for us as we pull out?" Nuretz started.

"Oh, stuff it," Craso puffed. "I should be back in bed now. I just came to bring this last ship for you. Consider it an investment."

"How so?"

"If half of what you told me was true, then you lot have no idea what you're going up against," Craso admitted. "Seeing as how your survival may be tied to my own in this case, I figure I'd pitch in with what I can. This ship doubles as my own personal transport whenever I leave the city. It's been retrofitted with some of that equipment the Cluster so happily sells to me, and I've had her hull reinforced a bit from the inside.

"Even compared to these so-called Surth warships, this one's the fastest in the fleet, barring your own scouts of course. She's got my best captain and crew manning her, as well. If you get into a jam, I figure this ship should give you a fighting chance of escape. Though, to be frank, I'd really appreciate it if you didn't get my entire cargo fleet sunk."

"So noted," Nuretz said, genuine gratitude in his voice. "However, there's been a change in plans. Admiral Ancor here will be commanding the operation."

Ancor nodded to him as way of greeting, "Pleasure to meet you."

"Likewise, I'm sure," Craso responded. "Now, if you don't mind, I'm going to take this infernal longboat back to the city and try to get some sleep. I'd appreciate an update if you get a chance?"

"I'll certainly try to send one your way if I can," Ancor said.

"Sleep well," Nuretz said.

As they watched the trader disappear, Nuretz said, "I'm guessing that you were planning to command from one of the scouts, seeing as how you also captain one of your own back home."

"I was considering it, though I think I hear a but in there."

"You heard correct, then," Nuretz confirmed. He gave Ancor a querying look, wanting to know if the Admiral wished him to elaborate further.

"I'm listening."

"Far be it from me to give seafaring advice to an admiral, but we lost a lot of good men with that little Kierdan refugee fiasco, and I'd rather we not lose our most recent admiral as well. I don't need to remind you that anything could be waiting for you on the trip up there. I'd highly recommend you use our smaller ships as forward and rear scouts, and setting up your command station on one of the larger Surth ships, preferably that ship Craso just gave us."

"Go on."

"Like I said, the scouts should give you plenty of advance warning of any unexpected surprises. Considering what Craso said, I'd suggest you use his personal ship. If the enemy comes gunning for the fleet commander, they're not going to expect to find him lurking on an old cargo ship. And, they definitely won't expect to find that old barge equipped with souped-up engines and light armour. Besides, Craso seemed to make a good case for using his ship."

"Indeed he did, and I'm not one to ignore any kind of sound advice, regardless of the source."

"Don't you worry, my boy," the salty old sea captain was saying. "I've been sailing these waters up and down since I was a wee lad. We'll be getting you there safe and sound. If someone's fool enough to tangle with us, well, both me and this old tub will be having some surprises in store for them."

"I've no doubt of it, Captain Lowell," came Ancor's reply. "How long before we arrive at Presca?"

"We'll be at the mercy of some of these slower buckets tagging along," Lowell explained. Sensing some slight impatience from Ancor, he continued, "It'll be a couple of hours, that's for sure. My advice to you, my boy, is go grab a bunk down below. I'm not sure what you're expecting to find when you get there, lad, but take some advice from an old timer and get yourself some rest. Pacing the deck won't be doing anyone any good. If someone's crazy enough to attack the *Lady Lois*, I'll be letting you know, that's for sure."

"Again?!" Clance asked, agitated. "What sort of ridiculous boat is this?"

"We must stop and rest the engines, my friend," Kafari appealed to him, as he steered the small craft into a small cove. "My small boat was never meant for such a trip."

"But this is the second time in an hour! Are you saying you have to stop this often when you go out fishing?" Clance asked, getting a touch suspicious. "Or are you setting me up for something?"

"What? No! Never, my friend!" Kafari protested. "We're running the engines at full speed, which drains them much faster than usual. When I'm fishing, I normally go much slower because of the nets trawling behind me. Once we're far enough away from those soldiers and the village, I will cut our speed a little to try to help our journey."

Well, Clance had grown up in a desert, he conceded to himself. There hadn't been much opportunity to learn the basics of sailing any type of boat. Perhaps the meek little man was telling the truth.

"Fine, I believe you. Just keep an eye out for any other ships in the area. And I'll also be keeping an eye on you, just in case."

"Yes, my friend, but unnecessary."

Chapter 15

"Are you sure?" Venarya asked.

"You're right on this one. Plus, better early than never. If things keep going at this rate, there's always going to be an excuse to delay this," John replied.

"As long as you're sure," Venarya said. "I'll send one of the Rangers to fetch Ganz."

"Are *you* sure that Smiljan won't mind me showing up at this hour of the morning though?" John asked. "I know he said to come over for a meal of my choosing, but I don't think he meant a midnight snack."

"Believe me, it'll be fine," she assured him. "Plus, I'd imagine that he wants to keep abreast of what's been going on. The Gates being attacked isn't exactly a minor matter by any measure."

"Speaking of which, how's that counterattack going?"

"We've already dispatched the ships from what I've heard," she said. "Admiral Ancor's leading over five thousand Cluster troops over there to try to reclaim and secure the area. We may not receive an update until later in the day though."

"Hopefully they're not walking into another trap?"

"The Admiral seems to have a good head on his shoulders. He did good when Kierd initially attacked them, and managed to save a lot of lives and ships. Now, you need to go and change."

John gave her a questioning look.

"You'll want to make a good first impression on the old man," she explained. "I've laid out some clothes on the bed upstairs for you."

John grinned, "This isn't some ploy to get me back into the bedroom, so you can work more of that weird hoodoo on me, is it?"

She punched him playfully in the arm, "No, you scamp. I'll be down here anyway. I've got to get messages out to Yazril as well."

"Fine," John said. "Though, I have to admit to being a touch disappointed."

She stuck her tongue out. "You'll live."

"Now, one question?"

"I'm not coming upstairs with you."

"Funny. I'm going into a swamp right?"

"That's correct."

"Won't anything I wear just get covered with muck by the time I get to the old man's place?"

Venarya exhaled an exaggerated sigh.

"Why do I always get saddled with the slow ones?" she teased. "First of all, that's two questions. Second of all, watch."

John silently looked on as she walked over to one of her many decorative potted plants. She scooped out a handful of dirt from the container and then deliberately smeared it against the side of her dress.

Or, rather, she tried to smear it. None of the dirt clung to her white dress, choosing instead to fall on to the ground.

John, in his defense, had been running on a reduced sleep cycle and blinked for a second, confused. Finally, he remembered that Venarya's dresses seemed to be made from some sort of strange silky material that, for some reason she'd never seen fit to explain yet, appeared to not pick up any sort of stains. Or dog hair.

"Ah..."

"Ah," Venarya echoed.

"Wait a second," John said. "When Rinard and Krane came back from the swamp, they were all over filthy?"

"Not every piece of cloth in this world is like this," she smiled. "It's actually quite rare, to be honest."

"And you just happen to have a set of this magical men's clothing lying around? Whatever for?"

"What's that saying on your world? Ah, yes: Be prepared," she said.

"This is an oddly specific set of circumstances to be prepared for, you've got to admit."

"And one which you should be grateful for," she said with a mock stern tone. "Now, go change while I finish making arrangements for you here. And while I get a dustpan as well, it seems."

It was quite a bit more extravagant than he was used to. If he didn't know better, he'd swear Venarya was pulling a prank on him.

Or was she?

The long sleeved, high collared white shirt had black and grey embroidering on it in some sort of intricate design on the chest and shoulders. Ornate metal clasps adorned the front, and it took him a minute to figure out how to fasten them properly. The pants were a simple black affair, and was neither dull to the point of looking too casual, nor too shiny to the point of looking ostentatious. The dark boots had neither clasp nor lace, but the soft leather-like material stretched just enough to allow his foot entry, then rebounded back to their original shape.

Maybe it was the lack of sleep, but the silky material of the shirt and pants felt luxurious over his bare skin. Even the boots felt a bit of a treat for feet that were still a little sore from the continuous walking over the last few days.

Walking.

He really hoped the trek through the swamp wouldn't be a long journey.

Venarya had also left the protective Cluster jacket that Yazril had acquired for John. He still wasn't sure how much protection it would actually offer, but Jensen had seemingly given it his seal of approval. Slipping it on, he groaned a little at the weight. Remembering that he was about to venture into a presumably muggy swamp, he thought to himself, *I really hope Venarya wasn't kidding about this thing temperature regulating itself*.

John almost jumped at feeling something touch his leg, but a downwards glance revealed it to be Penny.

"Hey, girl," John said fondly. "Did I wake you?"

Tongue lolling, the shaggy dog moved to nuzzle her head against John's pants leg.

His hand was halfway to her head in an attempt to block her from getting fur on the material before he remembered what he was wearing.

Looking at the pants after she moved her head away, he saw the dog hair harmlessly drop to the floor, refusing to stick to the cloth.

"Well, ain't that something," he whistled. "Go back to sleep, girl. Venarya here will take care of you for a bit. I'll be back soon, I promise."

As if understanding him, she nuzzled his leg once more before heading back to the spare room where she had been sleeping with her sister Em.

For something that Venarya supposedly had lying around, the clothes seemed to fit like a glove, almost as if they had been specifically tailored for him. In fact, he had worn enough

tailored suits to start having more than a small suspicion about the whole affair. Smiling to himself, he decided that he'd let Venarya have her little secret for now.

John was surprised to see a fully clothed Ganz waiting for him when he got downstairs. He was also wearing one of the Cluster protective jackets that Yazril had acquired for John.

Looks like Venarya's not taking any chances.

"Hey Ganz. How'd you get out of bed and ready so quick?" he asked, curious.

"Er," Ganz began sheepishly. "Rheus and I weren't actually asleep. We were up talking. He was curious about those explosives that we used on that pyramid, and we were still trying to puzzle out why tasrac tries to inhibit explosions of any kind."

"It's a couple hours to dawn, Ganz."

Venarya could only chuckle and shake her head, "I'm going to have to have a talk with that one before he inadvertently figures out how to blow up the entire institute."

"No danger of that anytime soon," Ganz assured her quickly. "Other than my previous theory about the electricity thing, we still haven't managed to make any kind of headway into this whole business. It's really curious, I have to say."

"Are you ready for your trip into the swamp, Ganz?" John asked, giving up on the line of questioning for the time being.

"Now?" Ganz looked surprised. "I thought we were going to try for lunch?"

"I thought you told him about that in the note?" John said, looking to Venarya.

"I learned long ago that, when dealing with Rheus, not to elaborate too much," Venarya said. "Last time I mentioned... well, it's not that important. What matters is that I judged that those two were like peas in a pod. And I apparently wasn't that far off."

"I'm standing right here, in case you didn't notice," Rheus commented dryly.

As they left Venarya's manor, John saw the Ranger escort approaching and recognized a few of the faces.

"Lady Venarya..." one of the Rangers approached them. "I know this isn't the best time, but we're all wondering about this. Is what we heard true? Have the Gates really been attacked?"

"We're not exactly sure," Venarya admitted, as they started to walk. "No details have come in as yet. All we really know for certain is that we've lost contact with the Gates. Admiral

Ancor's forces should be there soon, and we'll have a better picture of what's happening. For all we know, it could just be a technical problem."

"I see," the Ranger replied, though her worried tone showed she wasn't convinced of that theory. "Thank you, Lady Venarya."

"I promise I'll let all the Rangers know the minute we hear anything," Venarya smiled.

"It'll be much appreciated," she said, while several other Rangers also nodded their gratitude.

"Those damn well sound like bloody werewolves to me!" Ganz hissed, remembering just in time to keep his voice down. "And they like to drop down on you from the treetops for fun?!"

"Would you rather that Venarya didn't tell you about them beforehand?" John asked.

"Well, no, but..."

"Exactly," John said firmly, but with a slight smile. "Besides, I don't think they technically count as werewolves if they're always in furred form."

"Thanks. That really changes everything," a sarcastic Ganz commented.

"They won't bite," Venarya assured him. "They're there for your safety, as much as they are for the old man's."

"Besides, we'll also have Yazril's pet mutant sasquatch there to help protect us," John said cheerfully.

"I hate you."

There were some familiar faces waiting for them as they approached the docks.

"Good morning," Yazril greeted them as they drew closer to her. "All set, gentlemen?"

"Hi Yazril," John said. "As ready as I'll ever be."

"Er... Hi there," Ganz said, distracted by the sight of the monstrous Garh standing next to the Intendant. "I... ah, I'm ready too."

"Hello Yazril," Venarya greeted her, smiling at the look at Ganz's face. "Did you manage to get that little request of mine filled?"

"That I did," Yazril confirmed. "Rinard wasn't too happy with changing their plans, but then again, he's never happy until he's unhappy. Krane understood, though."

"What's this about?" John asked, curious.

"I've managed to secure a VIP escort to the edge of the swamp, in case there are any unanticipated surprises waiting for you," Venarya explained.

"Lovely," Ganz said, looking more crestfallen by the second.

"You rather not have any kind of escort?" John asked.

"I think I'd rather be back home with another kind of escort right now..." Ganz trailed off, remembering who else was present.

"Oh, do go on," John prompted, grinning.

Venarya had an arched eyebrow, while Yazril just look puzzled.

"Er, never mind," Ganz coughed delicately. "Are you sure you need me to go with you?"

"He did specifically request your presence," Venarya told him.

"And, from what I've heard, best not to disappoint him," John added.

"All right, all right," Ganz held up his hands in surrender. "I give up."

"Ah, here's your shepherd, gentlemen," Yazril said, spotting someone emerging from one of the moored Cluster ships.

As the figure drew near, she said, "John and Ganz, meet Commander Nuretz. He's head of Director Rinard's personal guard."

Nuretz spoke first, "Glad to finally meet you. Sorry to cut short the pleasantries, everyone, but we're burning moonlight. Are you all set to go?"

"That we are, and glad to meet you too," John said, offering his hand to the muscular man. "I've heard good things about you."

"Thanks. I'll try not to disappoint you," Nuretz said, gesturing for them to follow him on to the nearby ship.

Within the span of a few minutes, they were sailing away from the docks, and John was waving a last farewell to Venarya.

"How long to the swamp, Commander?" John asked, curious.

"This is the easy part of the trip. We'll be there before you know it." With an amused look, he added, "Admiral."

"Huh?" John asked, puzzled.

"That uniform jacket you're wearing," Nuretz indicated. "That insignia denotes the rank of admiral."

"What?" was all a confused John could say. "I didn't even realize... I thought you guys were just loaning me some body armour..."

"It's intentional on our end, I'm sure," Nuretz said, chuckling. "I guess no one explained that part to you, considering everything else that was happening yesterday. Certain *trusted* visiting dignitaries are afforded honorary ranks in case they ever needed to command Cluster troops. Just in the event of an emergency, mind you. Though, I have to admit, I've never seen anything above the rank of captain bestowed on anyone before. And even that was rare."

"Wow," John said, still startled. "Well, I'll try not to order any invasions or anything."

"I wouldn't worry too much about it," Nuretz said. "Like I said, it's really only for emergency situations."

"Say," Ganz said, looking at his own jacket. "What does my insignia mean? Head researcher? Scholar?"

"Ah, we don't really have military insignias for our research staff," Nuretz said. "Only a few of our essential civilian jobs are actually branded with those."

"Hmm, so this must mean something like ship engineer, then?"

"Not exactly."

"What else could it be then?"

"Uh, are you sure you want to know?"

Curiosity overcoming him, Ganz replied, "Yeah, sure. I mean, how bad could it be?" "Janitorial staff."

"I'm sure they didn't mean anything by it," John said, still trying to keep a straight face.

"Janitorial staff," came the flat, but slightly bitter reply.

"Come on. I'm sure Venarya just got a random jacket sent to her when she made the request. "Besides, it's not like I'm going to be leading a fleet into battle anytime soon."

"I suppose you're right."

"If it helps, I'll make sure they know you were the one responsible for downing that pyramid," John said. "Just enjoy the ride for now. I heard that we're docking in about fifteen minutes or so at the edge of the swamp."

"Admiral!" came the amused call from behind them. Turning they saw Nuretz approaching, carrying a small bag, "Got some toys here for you here."

"What is it?" John asked.

Nuretz reached into the bag and pulled out what looked like one of the strange guns he had seen the Rangers wielding. "Administrator Venarya asked me to make sure you've got a way of protecting yourself. Ever used one of these before?"

John's eyes widened a little, "Truthfully, can't say I have."

"Not much to it," Nuretz said. "Turn off the safety interlock here, then point the barrel at whatever's offending you and just pull the trigger. This here's one of the newer versions we've been working on for the Rangers. Still has to go into full production. You'll get about ten shots to a full charge, as compared to the six in the current version. Each shot should only take about fifteen minutes to recharge, so you're only looking at two and a half hours to get it back to full capacity after you empty it."

"... Recharge?" John asked, confused. Where were the bullets? Was this one of those ray gun things Jensen had mentioned in his note?

Nuretz was taken aback momentarily, then said in a low voice, "Where are you from? Not to pry, but I've heard some rumours."

Not sure how much to reveal, John simply said, "Somewhere where guns don't recharge themselves."

"I see..." Nuretz trailed off, thinking for a minute. "Well, I don't think this changes anything. Here, I'll give you a quick primer."

Nuretz then turned off the safety, pointed the gun at the water, and called out, "Firing a couple of test shots into the water. Stand down!"

John wasn't sure what to expect as Nuretz pulled the trigger. *A beam of light accompanied by a loud pew-pew sound?*

He was slightly disappointed to see only a small bolt of yellow light, which was supplemented only by a slight hissing noise.

Mind you, there was quite a bit of steam coming off the water where the shot had hit.

"You try firing a shot now," Nuretz said, handing the gun over.

John inhaled deeply, taking the strange weapon.

Steadying himself, he pointed the weapon at the water, held on tightly, and fired. *No kickback whatsoever*.

"Congratulations," Nuretz said. "You're now fully trained. Please don't shoot yourself in the foot."

"I'll certainly try not to."

"You can secure it on this strap here," Nuretz instructed, pulling a holstered belt from the bag.

"Thanks."

"Now, don't draw it once you get into the swamp itself. You're going to see some things in there that are, well, strange to say the least."

"Yep, Venarya already warned me about the giant man-wolf things in there."

"Good, but be aware that there's a little bit more than that in there. You may not see them, but you don't want to be offending any of the old man's guards. Don't draw the weapon unless Garh signals you."

"I'll remember that."

"Er," Ganz said, "I don't suppose you've got anything in that bag for me to defend myself with?"

"Sorry, only had the one gun," Nuretz shrugged. Grinning, he added, "We've got a few fairly large brooms on board, though?"

Chapter 16

"Ships straight ahead, my friend!"

"Have they spotted us?" Clance asked, staring to the south where Kafari was pointing, but unable to make out who exactly was approaching.

"We have no lights running," Kafari responded. "I do not think so."

"Good. Is there a nearby cove or something we can hide in?"

"Yes, just behind us."

"Turn us around and park us up out of sight then," Clance instructed. "Those ships are probably friendly, but I'm not taking any chances at this point."

"Good thinking, my friend."

Clance kept a close eye out as Kafari guided the small boat toward its hiding spot. He really wished he still had his spyglass. *It certainly wasn't doing that tree any good right about now*.

Squinting in the dim light, he could discern the makings of a relatively large fleet, although he still couldn't determine if they were friend or foe.

Clance lost sight of them as they entered the cove, and Kafari parked them behind a large outcropping of half-submerged boulders.

Well, they were now hidden from sight. However, that went both ways, and he wouldn't be able to see the ships as they passed. Clance needed to find out who was aboard the unknown ships. If they were a friendly fleet, he would save time travelling all the way back to Surth. On top of that, whoever was commanding the ships would most certainly want to know whatever little information he had regarding the attackers.

"Can you keep the boat here for a bit?" Clance asked.

"Certainly, my friend," a bemused Kafari responded. "Where are you going?"

"I'm going to swim up to those rocks and climb them to get a better look at those ships as they pass."

"Ah. Wise decision, my friend," Kafari said. With a cautioning tone, he added, "Be careful. Those rocks can get quite slippery. Especially in the dark."

"Thanks for the warning. I'll try to be careful."

Clance stripped off his shirt. *If those ships weren't friendly, no point in getting all my clothes wet for the long ride back to Surth.*

Hoping the water wasn't too cold, he took a breath and dived in. He wasn't the strongest swimmer, but the water in the secluded cove was fairly calm and he managed to eventually get to the sunken boulders. He had to try quite a few times to get a good handhold to climb up.

Kafari wasn't kidding about it being slippery, he thought.

Finally making it to the top of one of the smaller boulders, he laid low on it and waited for the ships to pass.

After quite a few long moments, the wind was starting to give him a chill and he was starting to wonder if they had hallucinated the ships.

He had seen stranger things back home in the desert.

The idle thoughts were pushed out of his head as he spotted a half dozen small ships zoom by him.

The good news was that he recognized them. Those were Cluster fast scouts.

The bad news was that they were Cluster fast scouts. He had no way to catch up to them using Kafari's small boat.

Thinking back to what little he knew of fleet tactics, he remembered that the smaller ships would usually be patrolling ahead of the main fleet, which was usually comprised of the larger and slower craft. *Usually*.

"Kafari!" he called out.

Kafari had probably been assuming that they would be waiting out the passing fleet, then continuing on their way. The startled expression on his face certainly betrayed it. He looked as though he thought the ships would overhear them and descend like a pack of hungry wolves.

With as low of a shout as he could manage, he replied, "Yes, my friend?

"I'm coming back! Those ships are friendly, and we need to get their attention!"

The relief on his face was apparent, as he called out in a more relaxed tone, "Yes, my friend!"

He moved the boat as close as he dared to the rocks, fearing any shallow reefs in the dim light. Clance half-climbed and half-slid down, landing on his rear at the last part. Not taking any time to nurse his bruises, he launched himself into the water and swam as fast as he could manage back to the small boat.

"Boat approaching, Cap'n!" the first mate of the Lady Lois called out.

"Thank you, Nate," Captain Lowell acknowledged. Not skipping a beat, he ordered, "Low flare, immediately! Have the forward scouts hold their position and bring the rest of the fleet to a stop!"

"Aye, sir," the phrase echoed around him as sailors scurried to carry out the orders.

"Hope you don't mind me giving orders to your ships, lad," Captain Lowell said, hearing footsteps behind him, but not needing to turn around to know who else would be rushing up from below deck, "but I figured you'd be giving the same ones."

"And you'd be right. No offense taken, Captain," Ancor confirmed. He'd only known Lowell for a few hours, but he had taken quite a liking to the old sea dog. *Maybe he'd even try to poach him from Craso once this whole business was done?* "Do we know who it is?"

"Not yet, my boy. Looks like a small fishing boat. No idea who's manning her, but they're headed directly for us," Lowell said, handing his spyglass off to Ancor.

Remembering the nasty business with the initial Kierdan attack on the Cluster, Ancor grew suspicious. "Do we have a bullhorn on board?" he asked, not taking his gaze off the small vessel.

"That we do, lad," Lowell confirmed, nodding to one of his crew who then scampered away.

The whole Kierdan business had begun with Ancor's predecessor choosing to hide what had been thought to be a refugee convoy among their fleet, making a vain attempt to safeguard them from a pursuing Kierdan armada.

Unfortunately, the refugee fleet had turned out to be an incredibly convoluted ploy by the Kierdans themselves. Without warning, the refugee ships, which were tethered to most of the Cluster fleet, had inexplicably exploded. Admiral Trager had been one of the first ones killed.

It was only by sheer luck that Ancor had managed to take control of the situation, gathering up any survivors and rushing back to the Cluster.

It certainly wouldn't do to repeat the experience.

He noticed the crewman holding the bullhorn and took it from him with a simple, "Thank you, sailor."

As the craft drew nearer, he could make out two nondescript men sitting in it. One was manning the engine, while the other was frantically waving his hands at them. The waving stopped once they saw that the ships had stopped, but he still held his hands in the air as a gesture of submission. *Or a ploy. It could go either way at this point. Well, he'd soon find out.*

When the small fishing boat was about thirty metres out, he put the bullhorn to his lips and called out, "Cut your engines! Stay your distance or be sunk! Now, identify yourselves immediately!"

Ancor saw the man lower his hands and cup them around his mouth, "My name is Clance of the Freewater Rangers! May we approach?"

Ancor frowned. This was going to be bad news either way.

If the man was lying, they'd be getting bad intelligence from him at best, and actively working off of said bad intelligence at the worst.

If he was telling the truth, then that meant that the Gates were most likely under attack. Otherwise, why else would he be out here, out of uniform and in a flimsy fishing boat?

Regardless of the outcome, Ancor couldn't risk putting Captain Lowell's ship in danger.

"Can you swim?" he called out

Even from this distance, Ancor could see the look of surprise on the man's face. "Not in these waters at this distance! Can you throw me a rope?" came the reply.

Ancor looked at Lowell, who in turn nodded to a nearby crewman. The crewman then dashed off to the starboard side of the ship and unfastened a tarp. Underneath the tarp, Ancor was amused to see a small but functional ballista.

"You come across trouble a lot, Captain?" Ancor asked.

"Never had cause to use them yet," Lowell chuckled. "But, we keep them well-oiled and maintained just in case."

Ancor watched as the crewman carried a shortened bolt up to the weapon and tethered a rope through an eyelet at the front. Satisfied with the knot, he then inserted the bolt into the device, aimed it carefully, and gave the crank a few well calculated turns.

The crewman turned to Ancor, "Ready, sir."

Ancor picked up the bullhorn again and called out, "We're going to fire a rope across your bow! Keep your heads down!"

Wordlessly, the two men obeyed.

Perhaps it was a result of spending too much time around Lowell, but all Ancor did was give a nod to the crewman, who then proceeded to fire the ballista.

The bolt splashed into the water not five feet from the front of the fishing boat. Even a trained Cluster marksman couldn't be expected to do better than that.

Recognizing skill when he saw it, he turned to the crewman, "Excellent shot."

"Thank you, sir."

Maybe he'd have to see about poaching this entire crew.

Well, at least they hadn't managed to impale me with that blasted thing, Clance thought as he raised his head back up.

Looking for the end of the rope, he was surprised to see it floating just off the front of the boat. He had heard the nearby splash, but hadn't judged it to have landed quite that close.

Kafari had a look of near panic in his eyes, but Clance assured him, "Relax. If they had wanted us dead, we'd be dead. They're just being cautious. You wait here."

"If you say so, my friend," Kafari replied, the look of panic only slightly diminished.

He decided to forego stripping off his shirt this time, and unceremoniously jumped into the waves, grabbing on to the wooden bolt. A series of strong tugs on the rope quickly brought him to the side of the ship, where a rope ladder waited for him. Hopping on and ascending the ladder, he climbed over the deck rail to find no less than half a dozen weapons levelled at him.

"Where's your uniform?" he heard before he had even had a chance to catch his wits.

The question had come from a no-nonsense looking man, who was also wearing the insignia of a Cluster admiral no less.

"Had to stash it, sir," Clance replied. "It was the only way I could sneak out of Presca. I was hoping to get to Fort Devine to make my report, but luckily ran into your fleet."

"Sneak out? What's going on up there?"

"Truthfully, I don't have the whole picture, sir," Clance said. "My squad was in the forests on patrol. I was out by myself and made it back to camp to find them all dead. I rushed back to the Gates, but ran into another Ranger who said that they had come under attack, and only a few of them had made it out-"

"You know or trust this other Ranger?" Ancor interrupted him.

"Implicitly, sir. I trust Jamieson with my life. He was injured, though, and took refuge to the southwest while I went to get help."

"I see. Continue."

"I didn't know who else was in the forest, so I took an indirect route back to Presca. I think that was a good thing, because I didn't run into any of the other Rangers who had escaped with Jamieson. I don't think they made it out, sir."

"Yes."

Clance took that as an order to finish the story. "I got to the outskirts of Presca to find it occupied by a number of enemy soldiers-"

"Soldiers from where?"

"I didn't really know at the time, sir," Clance confessed. "The uniforms were nothing I had ever seen before. Black suits with some sort of full mask covering their heads. I later overheard them talking about Grandmaster Minardo, so I'm assuming they're from that crazy cult of his."

The admiral looked perplexed, "You're sure you heard that correctly?"

"Yes, sir."

"How did you escape the village?"

"Well, I snooped around the perimeter for a bit, then spotted a couple getting out of a house and arguing with an enemy soldier. I later found out that my fisherman friend over there," Clance said, gesturing to the small boat, "had a wife that wanted him to get to work, regardless of the circumstances. She apparently made a convincing case to the soldier."

A few of the crew chuckled at that, but the admiral's face remained stoic, and the weapons pointed at him didn't lower just yet.

"How did you run into him if you were outside the village? I'm assuming the docks were guarded as well?"

"Indeed they were, sir," Clance said. "Turns out that my friend Kafari over there stores his nets inside a bag up a tree-"

"And you thought this was somehow a normal thing for someone to do?" the admiral asked, his face both querying and suspicious.

"It didn't matter to me at the time. I just wanted to intercept him and find out who he was and what he knew," Clance shrugged. "Plus, the only water I ever saw growing up was at the bottom of a well. Who was I to judge the standard operating procedures for a fisherman? He claims that his wife hated the smell of the nets, and that animals would try to get at them if he left them in the boat."

"I see"

"Well, the short of it is," Clance tried to hurry his story along, as the chill was starting to seep through his damp clothing, "we got talking and I mentioned that I wanted to get a closer look at those bastards. He told me to act like a dimwit, and he would claim that I was his assistant who he found hiding in the woods. We walked back to his boat, where I overheard the guards mention the Grandmaster, headed out, and here we are."

"Interesting," the admiral said, suddenly looking to the deck rail behind Clance.

Turning around to see what was happening, he spotted another Ranger clambering on board.

Recognizing him, a tired Clance blurted out, "Kitam?"

The new arrival, paying more attention to not falling into the drink below than what was happening on the deck in front of her looked up, "Clance?! What's going on here?"

The admiral looked to her and chimed in at that point, "I'm assuming you recognize this man?"

"Yes, sir," a bemused Kitam said. "This is Clance. He was posted at the Gates."

"Can you vouch for him?"

"Of course, sir."

The admiral nodded to one of the Cluster soldiers and the weapons were no longer pointed at Clance. While Clance was sure this would all have been worked out in the end, he still breathed a sigh of relief.

The admiral walked to the front of the deck and didn't say anything for a long while.

Finally opening his mouth, he said, "What do you think these soldiers are after?"

"I can't even begin to guess, sir," Clance said. "There's nothing of value at the Gates. Well, nothing they couldn't get just from raiding Presca itself." Pausing a moment, he added, "I suspect they may be headed past the Gates into the Plaguelands, sir."

Ancor looked a touch startled at that. "What makes you say that?"

"It was the weapons they were carrying, sir," Clance said. "A lot of them seemed to be armed with bladestaffs, which are pretty useless in close quarters, or in the jungle for that matter. Assuming they weren't anything ceremonial or such, they-"

"Could be used to defend against the creatures in the Plaguelands," Ancor finished the thought for him.

"Exactly, sir," Clance confirmed. "Though, as to why or what exactly they're headed there for, I don't know."

"I see," Ancor said. "Well, now that you're here, what's your fisherman friend over there going to do?"

"Honestly, I hadn't thought that far ahead, sir," Clance admitted. "Presumably he'll continue fishing and head back a little bit later to avoid any suspicion. He'll probably concoct some story about his half-wit assistant jumping overboard and running off into the jungle again. I'm assuming by then we'll have arrived and chased off Minardo's little gang. I can go back to keep an eye on him if you want?"

"That won't be necessary. We could use someone else that knows the terrain," the admiral said. Turning to a nearby Cluster officer, he ordered, "Find me someone that looks reasonably similar to our young adventurer here. Inform them that they'll be spending the day fishing."

"Sir?" Clance blurted out without realizing it.

Turning back to face Clance, the admiral said plainly, "Do you trust this fisherman?"

"I'd be inclined to say yes. But, like I said, I just met him," Clance said, grasping the admiral's line of thought. "I can't say if he'd try to pull something to save his own skin if this operation goes south. I doubt it, though."

"Then you understand. Now, we'll be needing your clothes. Head downstairs and grab a spare uniform. I'm afraid we don't have any extra Ranger attire on hand, though. Unless your friend Kitam over here has another suit packed?"

"Sorry, Clance," Kitam shrugged with an apologetic smile. "I don't think any of the other Rangers here do, either."

"As long as it doesn't stink of fish, I'd be more than happy to wear a dress right now."

"Miss Johana?"

"Yes, Admiral?" the young officer attended him immediately.

"Find me the fastest tub in this fleet, and have them offload all their troops to the other ships immediately," Ancor ordered. "We'll need to get the information from our young Mister Clance here back to Fort Devine immediately."

"Yes, sir," she said, almost about to turn away before the admiral added one more question.

"Also, find out how our quest is going to find a lookalike for our Ranger friend."

"Pardon me for being blunt, lad, but you'll be sitting here forever if you do that," a voice said from the stairs.

Ancor turned to see Captain Lowell headed up the small stairway carrying a small bundle of what appeared to be Clance's former disguise.

Ancor raised an eyebrow in question, though his expression reflected curiosity rather than annoyance.

"Allow me to offer a suggestion," Lowell said. "I've got a crewman from second watch downstairs in his bunk who might be a right ringer for your friend?"

The hesitation must have been apparent in Ancor's face, because Captain Lowell appended, "I know you'll not be knowing me or my crew from a hole in the dirt, Admiral. But, I can vouch my life for any one of my boys. If all he has to do is play dumb, then I'm sure that anyone can be doing that job?"

"We're still not sure what we're going to encounter up there," Ancor said. "There is the small chance that he'll be required to infiltrate the village."

"Considering how creative these lads can be with their shore leave shenanigans, I don't think that's a problem we'll need to be losing any sleep on. He'll be smart enough to keep his head down and listen out for anything."

Ancor thought for a second, and Lowell volunteered nothing further. "You're sure?"

"I've already asked and he's right up for it, if you'd be willing?"

Ancor thought again for a moment. "Very well."

"I'll be taking these back downstairs again then," Lowell said, gesturing to the small pile of clothes.

"Where is Mister Clance, by the way? I thought he'd have finished changing by now?"

"Ah, sorry about that, Admiral. I must be getting right thick headed in my old age," Lowell said. "I figured you'd be needing time to send a message back, and that you'd probably not be requiring him for the next little bit, so I had him take a quick shower."

Ancor looked puzzled.

"Wouldn't be a fair thing if the enemy smells you coming from a hundred yards off now, would it? Not a lot of fish roaming around the jungle, if I recall correctly."

A faint smile touched Ancor's lips as he replied, "Good thinking, Lowell. And thank you."

"How are we doing, Miss Johana?" Clance heard the admiral ask as he ascended the stairs to the deck. The Cluster uniform, while a far sight better than fisherman's rags, felt a bit odd.

"The *Able Scryer* reports that all her troops have been unloaded to longboats, and are now being relocated to other ships, sir," the female officer replied.

"Good," Ancor said. "Inform the *Scryer* to make top speed to Fort Devine and damn the maintenance on her engines afterwards. She's not to stop for anything."

"Yes, sir."

Ancor watched as the ship acknowledged the message with a series of lights, then sped off in the direction that they had originally come from.

Ancor turned around, "Mister Clance, I trust all is in order?"

"Yes, sir," Clance said. "Thank you for the loan of the clothes."

Ancor nodded to the other side of the bow and said, "I'm about to send these two back out. Anything you feel they might need to know?"

Clance looked over and noticed Kafari standing there, looking more miserable than usual, as well as another person who was dressed in the clothes he had previously worn during his escape.

They wouldn't pass for twins or anything like that, that part was for sure. But, given the lack of light and his generally dishevelled appearance, Clance doubted the enemy had paid much attention to his face. In any case, the height and hair colour on his double matched, which, when combined with the smelly attire, should more than suffice.

"Be careful out there. Don't take any chances, and follow Kafari's lead," Clance said, looking his imposter straight in the face. "Remember to act simple and let Kafari do any talking, unless you're asked a question directly and can't avoid it."

"Play stupid then," the man said with a slight smile. "Shouldn't be too difficult, I'd imagine. Any more advice?"

"Well," Clance began, trying to hold a straight face, "you may have to spend some time living in a tree to sell your story."

Chapter 17

"Wait here until we secure the area," Nuretz instructed, his voice calm but with a tone of sheer business. "Keep your heads down."

"We will," John promised, watching the Cluster guards dash up the docks and swiftly securing a small clearing as a command post.

"Looks like they've done this before," Ganz idly commented.

A few minutes later, Nuretz looked back to the ship and gave John a come-here signal with his hand

"Let's go," John said.

Garh had already jumped past the gangplank and was halfway down the dock, and Ganz just groaned, "Looks like your big friend there's pretty eager. I just hope he doesn't try dragging us through the swamp at that speed."

John just laughed as he started walking.

As they got to the makings of a tent that was being constructed, Nuretz told them, "Now, you can get on your way immediately. This is as far as I'm supposed to take you. I'm going to go over a few obvious things now, so don't take any offense?"

"I'm all ears," John said.

"Follow Garh and watch where he walks. Remember that this *is* a swamp. There's no animals in there that will bother you, but you really don't want to lose your balance and end up in a pile of muck."

"No animals except for those werewolves," Ganz grumbled.

Nuretz gave him an amused look, "I wouldn't worry too much about them. Concern yourself more with keeping your footing. With the light already this low, that fog in there will be tricky to navigate. You'll be greeted by one of your werewolves soon enough though, so keep an eye out and don't panic. They'll help guide you to the old man.

"Now, before you leave, is there anything you need?"

"Ganz?"

"Yes, John?"

"Can I ask you a question?"

"Well, you just technically did," Ganz said. "But I suppose I can entertain a second one."

A bit into their journey, and certainly out of earshot of any Cluster personnel, John finally asked, "Why in the name of all that's holy did you bring that broom along for, Ganz?"

"You heard what he said about footing," Ganz said stiffly. "This is as good as a walking stick."

"True," John agreed. "But, isn't there something you may have neglected?"

"Like what?"

"Oh, I don't know. Maybe the fact that there's an ample abundance of deadwood and branches all over the place here?"

John was sure he saw an amused expression on Garh's face for a second.

Ganz answered only with a haughty look.

After a moment of silence, Ganz opened his mouth, "John?"

"Yes, Ganz?"

"What are we doing here?"

"You weren't listening to that whole prep spiel that we got?"

"No, not that," Ganz shook his head. "I mean, here on this world? We're off on *another planet*, fighting in an incomprehensible war for some unknown purpose."

"Having second thoughts?" John asked, one eyebrow raised. "You're the last one I'd have suspected would feel this way?"

"No, no. It's nothing like that," Ganz said, moving his hand as if waving the thought away absently. "Believe me, I'd do this all over again, given the choice. I'm just wondering what the grand plan is, assuming there is one."

"I'm not sure I understand?"

"Let's say that this war was over tomorrow," Ganz hypothesized. "What would we do then? Establish a trade route? Can't exactly do that without raising more than a few questions, not to mention that the probable main export, tasrac, doesn't seem to work back on Earth. I mean, what do we do? Do we sell vacation packages to here?"

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"Truth?"
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"Truth."

"I honestly don't know," John admitted. "I guess we can conduct more research, maybe find ways to use knowledge from here to improve the stuff back home? I can't see us opening any kind of public passage between here and home. There's no way I see that ending well."

"Can't say I disagree with you on that one," Ganz said. "Our history's not exactly a peaceful one, especially when dealing with new people, never mind new races."

"You're in a somber mood," John remarked. "That janitor jacket must really have you down."

"Funny," Ganz said dryly. "It's just that this whole trek sort of reminded me of that time back in Genoa."

"When we first met up?" John asked. Indicating the swamp with his hand, he continued, "Yep, I can definitely see how all this reminds you of Genoa."

"Well, agreed. But I was really thinking that I could have been in a nice clean bed back home right now, if you hadn't been there on vacation the same time I was at the conference. I still can't believe you offered me this job after chatting for like ten minutes."

"Ganz?"

"Yes?"

"Are you telling me, mister super genius, that you never figured that part out yet?"

"Huh? What are you on about?"

"Do you remember those two pretty little redheads that were with me on my vacation?"

"Yes, indeed I do."

"Imagine them with blonde hair."

"Er.. okay?"

John sighed, "Ganz, they're your bloody co-workers! They work right down the hall from your office!"

Ganz just stared at John, looking bewildered.

John sighed again, "The whole thing was a setup."

"So... you weren't on vacation?"

"No, Ganz. Sophia had mentioned to me that we had finally managed to, well, vacate your current position. Considering the difficulties we had with your predecessor, we figured not to go with a traditional job posting this time. Melissa actually had the bright idea to try to poach

someone from that conference that you were attending. Being the kind brother I am, I volunteered for this perilous journey."

"Such a sacrifice."

"Hey, I could have gotten a bad sunburn if I wasn't careful! Well, we also came up with the insidious plan to take your soon-to-be co-workers with us in disguise. When we got there, they'd take off their wigs and whatnot, go into the conference, and do an evaluation on a few of you that were presenting papers or whatever you eggheads do at those things."

"That seems rather... elaborate. Why'd you even bother to disguise them? Why not just, I don't know, actually just send them to the conference?"

"Because they looked incredible in those wigs," John winked. "Seriously, it was because they were going to have to sit in on the *job interview* that I would have to have with the final candidate, and it was their responsibility to give me a signal if they had any reason to believe that I shouldn't go ahead with the offer. I had my doubts that it would work. I mean, who wouldn't see through horrible disguises like that? But, they assured me otherwise, and they were apparently right."

"That was a job interview?"

"You think I just walk up to random scientists and start up conversations with them when I'm on vacation? Sorry to say this, Ganz, but half the time I was just smiling and nodding at the stuff you were saying. I was depending on my two friends to give me any warning signs."

"So, you weren't actually, er... with those two ladies?"

"Um... well, let's not dwell on the minutiae. It was a long time ago."

"I really hate you."

"If it helps, one of them did mention that she sort of took a liking to you."

"Really?" the little man perked up.

"She's also married with two kids now," John said, watching with some amusement as the scientist's face fell again.

"Well, I guess I should be happy that I was the prime candidate."

"Actually, about that..."

"What? I wasn't?"

"Well, there was one guy that was ahead of you. Can't remember his name now, but I ended up vetoing him about an hour before I was going to give him his interview."

"Dare I ask?"

"He didn't hold the elevator for me and the girls."

"Are you serious?"

"Are you complaining?"

"Point taken," Ganz relented.

They had been hearing the howls for quite some time now. Some far. Some sounding like they were entirely too close for comfort, causing Ganz to visibly twitch every time one echoed through the mists.

Garh seem entirely unperturbed by the whole experience.

As they walked along, John realized that he had lost all track of time, much less his bearings. Lost in thought on that, he almost followed Ganz by jumping out of his skin when a dark figure dropped out of the trees not fifteen feet ahead of them.

Composing himself quickly, he suspected that Ganz might be in need of a change of underwear. Staring at the new arrival, he saw the furred figure stand up and examine them for a few seconds.

The wolflike creature was huge, almost on par with Garh, though not as bulky. John wasn't sure if its muzzle was snarling at them, or if that was just its normal expression.

After another long pause, it looked at Garh and spoke with a growl, "Friend Garh. Good to see you."

That was a bit of a good sign, John thought. At least the creature was somewhat intelligent, and with it a good chance that they wouldn't be eaten. At least not right away. After all, most intelligent creatures usually tend to cook their food first. At least, so he thought.

Looking to John and then to Ganz, who had opted to take refuge just behind John, it spoke again, "Who you?"

Not trusting his voice to crack, John took a second to clear his throat and spoke, "My name is John, and this is my friend Ganz. Smiljan invited us to pay him a visit for a meal today."

The creature replied with a simple, "Come," and started walking off.

Garh wasted no time in following along, and the pair took step after him.

"Holy crap," was all that Ganz could say.

John wasn't sure how far they had walked so far, but, comfortable boots or not, his feet were killing him. He was also sure that the small scientist wasn't faring any better.

At least the small raft that they were currently aboard gave them a few moments of respite.

I just hope this isn't the halfway point.

As they pulled up to the shoreline, they saw two more of the wolves pulling on ropes. Apparently this wasn't a magic raft after all, just some sort of underwater rope and pulley system.

Disembarking, John glanced warily at the two wolves who seemed to pay him no notice, and didn't offer anything in the way of conversation.

Ready for another long bout of hiking, he was surprised to see the shadowy outline of a large building looming ahead in the fog.

A sigh of relief was heard from Ganz. "Finally," was all that the scientist said.

"Just remember that you've got to trudge back out of here," John reminded him.

"You should resign your position in the company and become a motivation speaker, you know that?"

"Well, I'm sure you'll be more than welcome to stay here and try to make a living foraging in the swamp?"

"Ha ha."

Getting closer to the building, John noticed that the building had no windows whatsoever. *No point I guess, given the view. But then again, where are the doors?*

Their escort scampered ahead and pounded on what John had assumed to just be a section of wall. A few seconds later, a loud click was hear. A rectangular crack of light appeared, as the section of wall began to slide open.

An even larger and meaner looking wolf, its fur black as night, blocked the entrance.

"Who you?" it growled with no preamble whatsoever, looking directly at John and Ganz.

John swallowed and said, "My name is John, and this is my associate Ganz. We were invited here by Smiljan for a meal."

The creature didn't reply, but turned to look at something off to its side, but not in John's line of sight.

Not bothering to look back at them, the huge wolf moved away and a smartly dressed man took its place. He was tall with a thin frame and piercing eyes. He also appeared to be wearing a quite distinguished set of evening wear for some odd reason.

"Gentlemen," he greeted them. "I am Smiljan. Please come in."

"Thank you, sir," John said.

"No formalities are necessary," the man informed them as they walked in. "Just *Smiljan* will do."

"Very well, Smiljan," John smiled, or at least tried to smile given the surrealism of the situation. "I do apologize for the early hour. But, given a recent development, both Venarya and Intendant Yazril decided that it was prudent."

"Well then, let's get you settled in for an early breakfast, and we can discuss it in detail," Smiljan said. Indicating a set of hooks on the wall, he continued, "I'm afraid I'll have to ask you to leave your weapon here."

"Of course," John said, hoping that he hadn't inadvertently offended him right off the bat by bringing the gun along, and quickly removing the belt.

"It's purely for your own safety," Smiljan explained, before John got too much more worried. "My, well, experiments tend to sometimes have unexpected effects. In fact, if you're carrying any type of tasrac-based technology, it would be best to leave it here."

"Ganz?" John asked, not sure if the strange scholar Rheus had given him anything.

"Nothing on me," came the reply.

"Well, there's just this," John said, showing Smiljan the pendant given to him by the Syrilo merchant at the bazaar.

John thought that the old man's eyes took on a strange look for just a fraction of a second, but all Smiljan said was, "That will be fine. There's no need to remove that."

Noticing that Ganz was in the process of removing a pair of muck covered boots, John did the same. However, he did notice that not even the soles of the odd boots seemed to retain any evidence of him even being in the swamp.

"This way, gentlemen," Smiljan said, interrupting John's musing.

Following behind, they were soon led into a fairly large and tastefully decorated dining room. Did they lug all this antique furniture through the swamp? Either that, or these wolves are incredibly handy carpenters.

"Have a seat," the old man said, indicating to the ornate chairs.

"Thank you," John said, seating himself on what turned out to be a deceptively comfortably chair.

The old man must have noticed, saying with a slight smile, "We may presently be in the middle of a swamp, but that's no reason to ignore the fundamental niceties of civilization."

"Agreed, Smiljan," was all John could think to say.

"Breakfast will be out shortly, but I suspect I should hear more about this event that prompted your early arrival?"

It was more a statement than a question, and John replied, "To be frank, I don't know much about the fine details, but I do have a full report from Iathera here that I'm supposed to give to you."

"Thank you, John. I'll review them right after we finish dining," Smiljan said. "What *do* you know, though?"

Maybe it was the lack of sleep catching up on him, but John wasn't expecting that. Taking a second to compose himself, he began, "A few hours ago, we received a message from Fort Devine. Apparently, they've lost all contact with the Gates, though they were unsure if it was simply a technical problem, or something worse. To be safe, Fleet Admiral Krane decided to send an expeditionary force immediately to investigate. As far as I know, they're still en route."

The wiry man was silent for a minute, gazing off into space.

Looking back at his guests, Smiljan said, "Looks like it's starting."

Ganz opened his mouth for the first time and asked, "What do you mean? What's starting?"

Smiljan gave a rueful smile and said, "I wish I knew exactly. Whatever it is, the only thing I can say is it's not good. I'm just more than a little certain that all these little emergencies over the past few days are not isolated events. What they add up to, though, I can't say right now."

"I see," Ganz said softly.

They were interrupted just then by a knock on the door, followed by the entrance of a striking young lady pushing a small serving cart.

John didn't know what other beings he had expected to find here, but it certainly wasn't her. Perhaps one of those wolves in a French maid uniform instead? It certainly wouldn't have made any of this any less surreal. Looks like this place had quite a few surprises in store for them.

"Ah, thank you, Alisa," Smiljan said, as Alisa smiled back in return. "These gentlemen are our guests, John and Ganz. You're already acquainted with our friend Garh."

"A pleasure to meet you two, and welcome back to you, Garh," she beamed, walking around the table to take their outstretched hands.

John noticed that Garh had also reached out his gigantic hand, which she also shook enthusiastically. *I guess even sasquatches can be polite*.

She efficiently set up several glasses and cutlery in front of the diners, then placed covered silver platters in front of each of them.

With a curt nod to the diners, she then left the room as quickly as she had entered. If Ganz hadn't been present, John would have seriously wondered if she had been some sort of inexplicable hallucination.

"Eat up, gentlemen," Smiljan said, raising the cover off his plate.

John did the same and was a little surprised to see a homemade meal of scrambled eggs, toast, sausages, and pancakes. He turned to Smiljan, but before he could say anything, Smiljan cut him off with a smile and said, "All in due time, John. Enjoy your meal while it's hot. Alisa's quite the cook, and she'd be more than a little disappointed if you didn't take in your meal to full effect."

John simply nodded and dug into his meal. For a relatively simple dish, it was mouth wateringly delicious.

They are wordlessly, and John suddenly noticed that Garh had been working away at his mountainous portion using the available utensils. *A polite* and *cultured sasquatch. Wonders never cease here.*

A few minutes passed, and John was enjoying the meal. Smiljan had been absolutely correct about Alisa's skills as a chef. Looking around the table idly, he noticed that Ganz had been taking furtive looks at Smiljan. Seeing John staring at him, he simply shrugged slightly and John let it drop.

A few minutes later, though, Ganz finally spoke up, "Forgive me, Smiljan. I know it's impossible, but I have the distinct impression that I've seen you somewhere before. Again, I know this sounds patently ridiculous, but have we ever met?"

"I'm sorry," Smiljan replied. "I'm afraid that I've never had the pleasure of your acquaintance before today.'

"Ah," Ganz said, though his expression said he was still somehow unconvinced. "It must be the lack of sleep."

"Of course," Smiljan said, getting back to the business of breakfast.

The remainder of the meal passed without incident, and upon completion, John commented, "That was an incredible meal, Smiljan. Please give my compliments to Alisa."

"You can tell her yourself," Smiljan chuckled as the door opened and the young lady entered with her trademark upbeat smile.

"Ah, Alisa," John caught himself. "That was truly a meal to die for. Especially considering how short a time you must have had to prepare it."

"Yes," Ganz added. "Thank you for the early morning effort, and we're sorry if we put you out."

She winked at him and said, "It was no trouble. You'll both have to stop by again. I'll see if I can't get something a little better done up for you."

"Swamp or no swamp, I'll certainly try to," John joked.

As she cleared away the dishes, Smiljan straightened up and said, "Well, gentlemen, you must be tired. Alisa will show you to some rooms where you can have a quick nap. I'll show our friend Garh here to his quarters."

"Thank you, but that's really not necessary-" John started to say, all the time wondering if the old man planned on enlightening them as to the actual purpose of the visit anytime soon.

"Nonsense," Smiljan cut him off. "You're both clearly tired, and this will give me some time to go over those reports of yours in more detail. Plus," he said with a twinkle in his eye," I'm sure you're wondering why I was adamant in my invitation. Stay a while longer and you'll have some of those answers."

"Indeed we were," John said. "I'll accept the offer then."

"Perfect," Smiljan said. "I'll send someone to wake you after you recover."

This was more a luxury suite than a room, John marvelled.

After thanking Alisa again, John and Ganz both looked around and found two large and well-furnished staterooms on either side of the spacious living room. *This is better than most hotels I've stayed in, and I've stayed in quite a few of the better ones.*

"Well?" Ganz said.

John just raised an eyebrow.

"Do you think we're being fattened up?"

John just laughed. If there had been a pillow close by, he would have thrown it at Ganz. "No, I don't, you ninny. By the way, what was that whole thing about at the table?"

"I don't know," Ganz shrugged. "I'd swear on my life that I've seen him somewhere before though."

"In town, perhaps?"

"No, I don't think so," Ganz said seriously. "I just can't quite put my finger on it."

"Well, if that genius intellect of yours ever figures it out, let me know," John yawned, walking toward one of the rooms. "Considering your track record with faces and names, I'm not holding out any hopes. The old man's right about the need for some rest, though. I'm going to take that nap he suggested."

"Well, my old friend," the old man said. "What do you know?"

"Apart from what you've read in the report," Garh said in a low rumble, "not much. There was no warning or any kind of red flags from my operatives in the area. Then again, there was nothing regarding any of the previous incidents we've suffered through."

"I wouldn't berate your skills over this. My own private network hasn't been of any greater help," Smiljan said. "Whoever's playing this little game with us appears to be more than a little talented at it, plus there's also the fact that no one but our unseen opponent would seem to know the rules."

"Endgame," Garh grumbled softly, staring off into space

"What's that?"

"Sorry, just thinking out loud," Garh said. "We need to discover what our unknown foe's endgame would be. These seemingly random attacks must have a certain design to them, even if we can't immediately comprehend it."

"So," Smiljan asked by way of clarification, "you're insinuating that while we may not be able to outrun our enemy while he's on his journey, we may be able to get to his goal ahead of him?"

"Yes," Garh said, then let out a sigh. "We're also assuming that there's only one goal." "What makes you suspect that?"

"Let's look at what they've accomplished so far," Garh said. "They've managed to eliminate a third of the Cluster fleet, destabilized the continent of Diurna with that Kierdan war, and forced you to tip your hand on two occasions. Plus, if we presume that they're behind that war to the north, then they've also managed to undermine the economic and political situation on the entire eastern half of this continent."

"You make a good case."

"True," Garh said with no hint of false modesty. "Though, I also suspect that you had such thoughts as well."

"And you'd be right," Smiljan said ruefully. "There are a few... resources I can call upon to aid us with the current situation at the Gates. But, like you said, I was wondering if at least part of their plan included an attempt to get us to waste all our trump cards early in the game."

Garh gave him an ever so slight questioning look.

Smiljan waved away his concerns, "My troops will be able to manage whatever's happening there, I'm sure of it. The only issue is the amount of time they'll need to sail there. Though, truth be told, I'm not sure if my own resources would be able to get there much faster."

"Why do you think they'll be able to handle the situation?"

"Because the timing's too convenient," Smiljan said. Adding a rare, but evil looking grin, he continued, "Furthermore, it's exactly what you or I would do, my old friend."

"I believe I follow you, but go on."

"The war to the north? The two sudden attacks on the Cluster and Iathera?" Smiljan began. "It all culminated in one predictable outcome. That is, we would eventually be compelled to reinforce Iathera. The north would be no help, especially seeing as how the bulk of Iathera's home forces are currently deployed there due to the mutual defense treaty. The Cluster would

also be otherwise occupied dealing with the aftermath of the first attack, and wouldn't be able to commit any significant number of resources.

"The only option would be to reach out to Freewater," the old man continued. "With the extended time that they would require to arrive, your mistress the Intendant would be forced to reach out to the next largest source of available troops as a temporary stopgap measure."

"Which would be the Gates," Gar nodded in affirmation. "Which would in turn leave it in a weakened state."

"Correct," Smiljan said. "Again, it's only a theory. But, if our enemy predicted that they would have had trouble besieging a fully manned fort, then I'm sure our little expeditionary force will be more than sufficient to deal with the matter."

"I don't see any fault in your reasoning," Garh agreed. "But, even you have to admit that that required some delicate timing on our enemy's part."

"Not necessarily," the old man countered. "It would be foolish for me to assume that I'm the only one with advanced communications technology. Now, our adversary may not have known when, or even if, we would have disabled that pyramid. But, a safe assumption would have been that it's very existence would have given our friends in Iathera a heightened sense of paranoia. As soon as they got word of it, it would be safe to presume that the Gates would be stripped of defenders that very day. And, assuming they do have some sort of advanced communications, once any halfway competent spies started seeing the new batch of Rangers emerging in the city, it would then be a simple matter to relay that information to whatever force was waiting to attack the Gates. The rest, as they say, is history."

Chapter 18

"What do you mean, gone?" Ancor asked.

"Scouts are relaying back that there are absolutely no ships in the vicinity of Presca, sir," Johana reported, looking at the flashing lights through the spyglass. "Furthermore, there's no sign of any activity in the village."

Overhearing the conversation, Clance rushed to stand next to them, "They left, sir?"

"So it would appear," Ancor said. "Do you have any light you can shed on this?"

"None, except for what I mentioned before," Clance said. "Still, you wouldn't think they'd be able to pack up this fast?"

"No," Ancor agreed. "Do you think this is a trap?"

"Possibly, but I doubt it, sir," Clance said.

"How so?"

"However many soldiers they have, I doubt they'll be able to stand up to our five thousand troops. My guess is they expected this, made sure that they'd be able to get what they wanted, then made a break for it."

"Makes sense. Order those scouts to head back to Presca, then deploy their troops and hold the village until we get there, Miss Johana," Ancor ordered. "Have them round up any survivors they can find and get a full report."

"Ave, sir."

If it was a trap, it was either a very good one, or an incredibly poorly planned one, Clance thought.

All of the other ships had disembarked their troops, and the entire village and surrounding area was filled with Cluster Marines and Freewater Rangers.

Their ship pulled alongside the dock and two deckhands hopped down nimbly to secure it to the dock. As soon as the gangplank was extended, a Cluster Captain ran up and gave a smart salute to the admiral.

"Report, Captain?"

"Village is secured, sir," came the reply. "All the villagers appear to be accounted for. At least, according to them. They were all huddled inside their homes. We've got them all contained in the village square for now. Seems the enemy told them to stay inside until the end of the day. After that, they're not sure what happened."

"I think it can be safely assumed that they left right around then?"

"Indeed, sir," the captain replied. "A few of the more brave villagers peeked at them through their windows and saw them packing up and heading back to their ships."

"How long ago?"

"Near as we can tell, almost right after our friend here," he said, indicating Clance, "made his daring escape."

"And the enemy detachment that attacked the Gates?"

"That's the part we can't figure out, sir," the captain admitted. "Everyone swears that they didn't come back this way. The ships left carrying only the troops that were guarding the village."

"How many attacked the Gates? Did they have an estimate?"

"Hard to get a reliable number from them, sir," the captain said. "Most of them were too scared for their lives. Some of the more reputable looking villagers swear it was around five hundred troops at the most."

"I see," Ancor said. Turning to Clance, he asked, "Would that have been enough to overwhelm the defenders there?"

"I hate to say it, sir, but probably yes," Clance said, downcast. "Considering that we were already shorthanded, most of the remaining Rangers would have been spaced out over the twelve mile wall, and they would've been keeping a keen eye out in the wrong direction. All it would take would be a fast strike at the communications room to disable the portal, then they could work their way up and down the walls in either direction. As sparse as we'd have been spaced out, we wouldn't have stood a chance."

"How would they breach the walls, though?"

"You've never been to the Gates, sir?"

"I haven't had much cause to go there in the past, no."

"Well, there's not much in the way of defences on this side of the Gates, sir," Clance said.

"The far side is fully reinforced with metal plating, but besieging this side basically involves

kicking in a set of sturdy wooden doors. They could even climb to the top if they had a mind, sir."

Ancor looked slightly incredulous at what the Ranger had just said.

"Remember, sir," Clance explained. "This fort is over twelve miles long, so some cost cutting measures were necessary. Plus, it was only intended to keep those creatures off the rest of the continent. The turrets don't even point in that direction, sir. No one even thought that anyone would be crazy enough to have a need to attack the Gates, much less try to get to the other side."

"You make a valid case," Ancor admitted, realizing the wisdom that only hindsight could bring. "Though, I suspect we'll be looking to improve these defences for the future."

"Of course, sir."

"Going to chase after these bastards, my boy?" a voice asked from behind Ancor.

He turned around to see that Captain Lowell had been listening to the conversation as well. Lowell continued, "Daylight's about to start burning. If you're going after them, you'll be needing to head off real soon."

"I suspect we will, Lowell," Ancor said. Turning back to the Cluster captain, he asked, "Does everything check out in the village?"

"So far, sir," came the answer. "We've examined all the buildings, as well as the surrounding perimeter, and we've found no booby-traps or anything similar. Looks like they just packed up and left."

"I see."

"We, well, did find one more thing, sir."

Ancor raised an eyebrow.

"The Rangers that were stationed here," the captain coughed delicately. "We found their... well, bodies stuffed inside one of the storehouses. Suffice to say that it's not sitting too well with the other Rangers. Can't say it's sitting too well with me either, to be quite frank, sir."

"Understood, captain," Ancor said. "Was anyone able to give us a good description of the ships?"

"Other than they were black ships at night, sorry," the captain replied. "But, from what little I've pieced together, it doesn't sound like the type of ships the Kierdans used against us."

"Interesting," Ancor said, lowering his head in thought for a moment. Coming out of his reverie, he added, "Make preparations to move out. I'll be joining you in a few minutes."

"You're coming with us, sir?" The captain looked a bit startled at that.

"If I'm not safe in the middle of five thousand troops, I'll never be safe, captain."

"Ah, yes, sir." With a quick salute, the captain departed into the throng of soldiers.

"That's my boy," Lowell grinned, stepping up next to Ancor. His voice a bit lower, he added, "Still, no one'll be faulting you for staying behind, if you do decide to do that."

"I don't think that will be necessary," Ancor replied, his voice also low. "I suspect we'll find nothing but corpses once we get to the Gates."

"Don't forget, that fort's sitting there for a reason, and there's no telling what those bastards did to it," Lowell said. "That whole forest might be rife with those bloody ferals."

"We should be able to hold them at bay," Ancor said. "Though, if I were you, I'd keep an eye out in case those ships decide to double back on you here. I can't go into details, but they might be packing some unexpected weaponry."

It was Lowell's turn to raise an eyebrow. "Well now, thanks for the fair warning, my boy. We'll be pulling back into the harbour once you lot are off deck, in either case. If they decide to come back, I think I'll be letting the warships handle it. The *Lady Lois* isn't exactly built for combat."

"I suspect you've got a few tricks up your sleeve, from what I've seen."

"That I do, my boy. That I do," Lowell grinned and offered his hand. "You take care of yourself now."

"I might almost think you were worried for my safety," Ancor said, a wry smile touching his lips as he shook the salty old captain's hand.

"I've gotta admit, my boy, it'd be a shame to lose you after just meeting," Lowell chuckled.

"All said, let's hope these buggers in the strange ships don't return with some friends, or else you might be having quite a long walk back home."

Chapter 19

"Well, well, well. What do we got here, fellas?"

Dalja opened her eyes and silently groaned. She had hoped to be able to get a spot of sleep before hearing back from Rush or one of his subordinates.

Looking over to the entrance of the barracks, she sized up the man who had just walked in. Big, meaty, and he looked like he barely had more brains in his head than she had in her big toe.

This man was definitely not one of Rush's, and she was starting to get cranky from the lack of sleep.

"Looks like the captain got us some fresh meat, boys," the newcomer said, an evil grin pasted on his face. "About bloody time, too. Anyone wanna' get in on the fun after I break her in?"

The other residents of the tent had been woken up by the soldier, and a few of them audibly gasped when they realized what he had insinuated to Dalja.

No one took him up on his offer. *Obviously, word had gotten around about her little escapade with the executed spy. But, it looked like this fool hadn't gotten the memo.*

If the newcomer thought the lack of enthusiasm from his comrades strange, he paid no heed. "What the matter, you lot? No iron in your swords? More for me, then!"

Tired and moody, Dalja decided to put a quick end to this.

"Sod off, berk," she mumbled loud enough for him to hear.

"Got some fight in you, huh? Don't you worry, woman. You'll enjoy this too."

She'd have to avoid killing him, of course. No sense attracting undue attention. *Plus, it could be a lot more fun that way*.

Years of mental discipline behind her, she put on the sweetest smile she could muster, slid gently out of bed, swished her way across the room and sidled up to the newcomer.

He seemed a little taken back from her apparent change in attitude, but still leered at her hungrily.

She raised one arm and rubbed it gently across his chest, "I'm sorry. Please forgive me and I'll make it worth your while."

"That's more like it, woman!"

"So, you up for it, big boy?"

The evil grin widened, "Belno's up for it anywhere, woman!"

She crooned, "You want to do it here, Belno, in front of everyone?"

"Damn right, woman!" came the reply, as he wrapped one arm around her shoulders.

"Okay, hun. I'll make sure you won't walk right for a week by the time I'm done with you. You ready?"

The evil grin still pasted on his face, he nodded to thin air.

In a fraction of a second, Dalja had expertly slipped out of his grasp and now stood behind the bewildered Belno. A swift knee to the small of his back brought a yelp of pain from the large man, and a leg sweep brought him facedown on to the hard ground.

He tried to reach around to grab her, but she effortlessly seized one arm and twisted the fingers back until the man roared in agony.

He stopped trying to grab at her.

"What's the matter, hun?" She asked sweetly. "You don't want to do this anymore?"

"You're crazy! You bi-"

The expletive was cut off as she slammed a boot into the back of his knee, eliciting another bellow from the man.

"What are you talking about?" The sweet voice asked. "You're the one that told me you didn't want to walk properly for a week."

The boot came down again on the other knee, and she let go of his hand, allowing him to curl up in a ball, his eyes wide with fear.

"Y-you're dead! You hear me?! When I get my hands on you bi-"

"Finish that sentence and you'll be dead right now," she said in a deathly chill tone.

Belno fell silent, save for the groans of pain.

"Get this idiot to the infirmary before he keeps me awake with his crying," she said, looking to the other slackjawed occupants of the tent. Seeing them not moving, she added, "Unless you want me to get really angry?"

That was enough to get a couple of them moving off their bunks, who then proceeded to haul the injured Belno off.

"You haven't heard the last of this," she heard the huge man roar as they dragged him off. "I'm going to report this to the captain!"

"Be my guest," she yawned, returning to her bunk. "Idiot."

Chapter 20

They were in the home stretch now.

Jensen looked at the walls of Fort Tiarre less than a mile ahead of them. Despite travelling at the head of an army, he couldn't help but wonder if there was anything nasty lying in wait for them.

Thankfully, the trip had passed without incident. Though, judging from the grumbles he had overheard from some of the other Rangers, most of them were itching for a fight after speculating about the fate of their comrades at the Gates.

Still, he was glad to be within the defensive perimeter of the fort's turrets, knowing that anything crazy enough to attack them now would meet a quick end. He still couldn't fathom how or why his allies possessed what appeared to be giant laser cannons on this strange world, but was grateful for their existence right about now.

Stelson had been quiet almost for the entire forced march, and both Jensen and Harker had the good sense to leave him alone to his thoughts.

For the first time in quite a few miles, Stelson finally opened his mouth, "I'll be speaking with Captain Mondan here for a bit. Fort Tiarre may have received more information about what's happened. Harker, can you manage to get my boys deployed in Iathera for me?"

"Not a problem, Stelson," Harker confirmed. "Take your time."

The rest of the walk was uneventful, with Stelson running ahead and making for Captain Mondan's office.

"Looks like everything's normal," Harker said to Jensen. "If it wasn't, I'm assuming we'd have seen enough flares in the sky on our approach here to illuminate the area for miles."

"In our line of work, no news is usually good news."

"That it is," laughed Harker. "Still, I'll send a recon squad through the portal before we head in en masse. No point in tempting fate."

"Can't argue with that logic. Still, seems a bit anti-climactic."

"Or the calm before the storm," Harker countered sagely. Looking up at the falling rain, he added, "Or during."

"Well, at least Kaney's not here to give us running commentary on any large rocks he may spot along the way," Jensen said, shaking his head at the memory of the bizarre giant of a man, wondering what had become of him.

The mood was somber as they entered the large communications room of the fort. If the crew manning the equipment thought it strange that Harker was in charge of a horde of their fellow Rangers, their expressions betrayed nothing.

"Report from Iathera?" Harker asked.

"All quiet over in Iathera, sir," one of the personnel replied. "We received a communication yesterday evening saying that they had neutralized the Pyramid structure that was threatening the city."

"Really?" Jensen spoke up. "It's destroyed?"

"Not as such, sir," came the reply. "Word is that they've managed to somewhat sink it."

"Somewhat?" Harker asked, hoping for clarification.

"From what they've said, the structure was huge. It's resting at the bottom, but the bulk of the thing is still above water, and not too far offshore. They're not entirely sure if there's an invasion force tucked away inside, so they've tried to blockade it as best they could, given the storm."

"And, let me guess, they've had to dispatch most of the city's defenders to deal with the issue at the Gates?"

"Correct. They need your reinforcements more than ever now," the Ranger said. "We were ordered to relay a message to them as soon as you got in sight."

"Any further word on what happened at the Gates?"

A sigh preceded, "No word from Admiral Ancor's fleet as yet, but we're not expecting to hear anything for at least a few more hours."

"Do we know any more about what actually happened?"

"None, sir," the Ranger shrugged, trying to appear nonchalant even though his expression indicated more than a little anxiety.

"I'm sure it'll be fine," Harker said, realizing too late that it sounded exactly like what it was. An empty platitude. He added, "And if it's not, whichever bastards are responsible for this won't be able to run fast enough to save their own sorry hides."

"That they won't, sir," the Ranger replied, giving a slight nod of appreciation to Harker.

"Is the portal ready?"

"Activating it now, sir," he said, holding a hand to the console in front of him and closing his eyes in concentration.

Jensen had almost jumped out of his skin the first time he had witnessed this and, incidentally, had almost shot at John out of blind panic. Only sheer discipline had managed to stay his finger off the trigger.

Even though he had used the portals often enough in his short stay, they were still enough of a novelty for him that he had to mentally remind himself not to gape.

As the portal activated, swirling masses of white light shimmered against the glowing blue designs in the arch. Within moments, the light started to coalesce and settle into an image of another similar looking room.

Despite seeing the Rangers on the other side, Harker erred on the side of caution and signalled his advance squad into the portal.

It only took a moment for them to make sure the other side held no nasty surprises, and quickly gave a thumbs-up signal to Harker through the portal.

"Looks like we're clear. Let's go," Harker said to Jensen. Turning back, he ordered, "Have everyone follow us through. Report straight to the marshalling yard for duty assignments and lodging."

The Rangers nodded their affirmation of the order and Jensen stepped through the portal immediately behind Harker. The now customary tingling on his skin departed as soon as he had crossed through the threshold.

"Reinforcements are coming through behind me," he heard Harker reporting to another Ranger. "Stelson will be through shortly."

"Thank you, captain. I'll get these boys where they need to be," the Ranger replied, moving off to direct the inflow of personnel from the portal.

"Took you long enough," he heard a familiar voice call out from across the room.

Both Jensen and Harker turned to the source of the comment. A bored looking Nolan leaned against the far wall, clad in a Cluster uniform and patiently waiting for them to amble over to him.

Jensen returned the remark with, "Hey, bossman. I thought old timers like you would still be in bed?"

Nolan just stared and waited.

"Is he one of yours?" Harker hissed to him, looking a bit confused as they maneuvered their way through the steady stream of Rangers.

"Yep," Jensen confirmed with the same low voice. "John's head of security, and technically my boss, in fact. What's the matter?"

"That explains it, I guess," Harker said with what seemed like a breath of relief. "That uniform he's wearing has the insignia of a Cluster High Commander. I was afraid I'd somehow missed the fact that Commander Nuretz had a peer hidden away somewhere."

"The suit's just a loaner, I figure," Jensen chuckled. "Probably spilt some gravy on the one he was wearing before."

"Don't be so sure," Harker said. "The mere fact that they gave him that particular insignia implies that he's actually got that honorary rank. I mean, they could have just as easily given him a janitorial uniform."

"Right up until someone pointed it out by handing him a broom."

Harker suppressed a grin, "Either way, he's technically the superior of any Cluster armed forces personnel while he's wearing that, save for Fleet Admiral Krane."

Jensen gave a low whistle, "Trust the chief to not take any half measures."

Finally making their way across the crowded room, Jensen said, "You shouldn't have waited up for us, bossman."

Harker gave a smart salute and simply said, "Sir."

Nolan gave Harker a wave indicating that he stand down, and turned to Jensen with a scowl, "Well, boy, what's your report?"

"Nice to see you too," Jensen said, grin unwavering. "We've got the reinforcements from Freewater, We had a little trouble on the way there, but managed to keep ahead of it."

"I heard," Nolan said. "Anyone know who they were?"

"Nope, but they were pretty damn brainless to a fault," Jensen said. "A whole mess of them ran like lemmings into what was basically something out of a horror movie. Only one of them seemed to have any wits about him. By the way, if you ever do decide to go to Freewater, keep your feet off the sand. You'll thank me later."

Ignoring the extraneous commentary, Nolan asked, "Really now? What happened to this genius of yours? I take it he was their commander?"

"Looked like it. He realized that his men were dead and took off like the wind. Good riddance, I say. Though, I'd be hard pressed to say I'd want to meet him in a one-on-one matchup. Bastard looked like he could fight like a demon," Jensen reported. "Speaking of geniuses, what happened to Kaney?"

"That lunatic you sent back?" Nolan's face took on a look of disgust. "I don't know why the blazes they decided to include him in all this. Took an hour to convince him to go home, from what I understand. Crazy numbskull wanted to run back and rejoin your squad."

Jensen winced, "Thanks for sparing us that. I don't think I could have taken him pointing out any more butterflies or pretty leaves. But, I have to admit that he did manage to inadvertently distract that enemy squad long enough for us to get away. Pretty brave of him."

"Don't confuse stupidity with bravery."

"True enough," Jensen agreed. "Now, did you come all the way here to discuss the finer points of gallantry?"

"I came here to make sure you didn't get lost on the way back."

"Glad to see you too, chief," Jensen smiled.

Nolan just shook in head, "Let's get a move on. We've got to get to the Intendant's office." "What's happening?"

"Nothing good," Nolan said. Looking to Harker, who didn't seem to know how to act in front of him, he said, "I believe Admiral Krane expects a report from you, young Mister Harker. Get your stomach filled, then go to the main docks and wait aboard the *Midnight Dawn*. He'll be along to meet with you within an hour or so."

"Yes, sir. I'll head over there right now," Harker said. With a quick nod at Jensen, he was gone.

Jensen gave a low chuckle, "Why do you always have to scare the help?"

Chapter 21

"Up ahead to the right!"

Before Ancor could aim his rifle, he saw half a dozen shots ringing out toward the designated location.

"It's dead! Stand down!" came the voice of the Ranger scout.

"That's three of them so far," Ancor heard a Cluster soldier comment.

"Are you sure you wouldn't prefer to stay in the centre of the column, sir?" a worried Clance asked Ancor. "There's no telling what else could have broken through."

"That's what I have you lot for," Ancor smiled grimly. Gesturing to his rifle and sword, he added, "If it should come to it, I'm quite capable of using these."

"If you say so, sir," Clance said, still nervous at having the senior commander at the van.

"I say so," Ancor said. As they approached the spot that was formerly the recipient of several well placed energy bolts, he looked at the mangled carcass on the ground. "Our villain, I presume?"

"Yes, sir," the scout responded.

"This one looks fairly harmless to me," Ancor commented. "Are you sure we're not just jumping at shadows at this point?"

Indeed, barring the scorch marks, the corpse appeared to be that of a simple white rabbit.

"Take a look, sir," the scout said, bending over the creature. Staring at the dead animal as if it might spontaneously resurrect itself, he drew his knife and used it to pry the creature's mouth open.

"Most rabbits generally don't have jaws like this, sir," he said, indicating a ferocious looking set of sharpened teeth. Removing the blade from the creature's maw, he tapped it over the fur, making a sharp rapping sound. Parting the fur with the knife, he revealed scaly hide underneath. "This one's still in the early stages, sir, but still pretty vicious and deadly if you give it a chance. Give it a few more weeks, and you'd not be mistaking it for a cute fluffy bunny."

"Very, well. I stand corrected," Ancor said. Looking at Clance, he said, "Am I to assume from all this excitement that there's quite a significant breach in the fort?"

"I'm not sure about that, sir," Clance replied. "Considering the number of creatures that we suspect to be in the Plaguelands, the few that we've encountered don't even count. But, keep in

mind that most of the beasts in there have learned to stay away from the Gates. Only a few of the more persistent ones end up giving us trouble. Or the ones that are recently changed and don't know any better," he added, indicating the corpse.

"So it's possible that our mysterious enemies may have just left your front door open?"

"Technically it's the back door, but it's possible, sir. But, again, I never got within sight of the fort to be able to get a good look at what kind of damage they may have inflicted."

"But your friend Jamieson might know?"

"He'd definitely have more information for us, sir," Clance confirmed. "That is, assuming he's still alive."

"How much of a detour is it for us to reach where he's holed up?"

"Once we get a few more miles in, there'll be a small game trail that leads south for about two miles, and will eventually take you to a hunting blind. He *should* be waiting for us there."

"Let me know when we get there," Ancor said. "We'll go get him."

"We, sir?" Clance was slightly taken aback. "I don't know if that little trail will handle this entire column?"

"Good thing it won't be the entire column then," Ancor said. "We'll only be taking a small squad with us."

"Us, sir?" Clance exclaimed, but calmed his voice to avoid showing any disrespect. "I don't mind going myself, but you're the senior commander here! We can't risk losing you to a stray shot or freak accident."

"Your concern is noted," Ancor said calmly. "But, I suspect our mysterious enemies have long since departed the area. I think the most we'll have to deal with is a few more of these insane rabbits."

"And if not, sir?"

"That's why I'll be relying on you to keep me safe."

"Yes, sir," Clance responded grimly, clearly not happy with the admiral's decision. "Why go at all, though? If what you're saying is right, there shouldn't be anyone waiting for us at the Gates?"

"I could be wrong. The sooner I hear your friend's account of the situation, the faster I can come up with a strategic plan, assuming we need one."

Clance couldn't think up any more counterarguments, and was starting to sense the admiral starting to lose his patience. "Very well, sir. I'll let you know when we reach the trail."

The only agreeable thing about this whole situation was that the admiral's idea of a *small* squad consisted of a combined force of sixty Rangers and Cluster Marines.

Clance had breathed a metaphorical sigh of relief when he realized that the admiral wasn't planning on bringing along only a handful of soldiers to protect him, but also wondered if any surprises waited for them as they moved along the trail. At the least, they hadn't encountered any of the beasts since the last encounter with the transmuted rabbit a few miles back from where the main column of the army now waited.

He hoped their luck would hold out long enough to find Jamieson alive, and that they would be able to bring him back with little hassle.

The Rangers had been whistling out callsigns every so often as they trekked down the trail, but Clance had expected no return answer so soon. Jamieson's injury hadn't appeared that serious, and barring being attacked by anything or anyone nasty, shouldn't have had any trouble being able to reach his destination. If the injured Ranger hadn't ended up at the hunting blind, then he'd surely be dead one way or another.

Another mile later, the callsign was returned. Clance held back the urge to let out a celebratory whoop, realizing that the hard part was only just beginning. Even after getting Jamieson back to the main column, they'd still have to deal with whatever the situation was at the Gates.

"Found him!" he heard one of the Rangers at the front call out.

Both Clance and Ancor unceremoniously rushed ahead to ascertain the situation, two flanking squads following along right behind them. Clance noticed carcasses from at least four more altered creatures littering the area, but paid them little mind for the time being.

They got there in time to see the injured Jamieson climbing down from a small tree blind with the assistance of another Ranger. Sitting down and spying Clance, he remarked, "Took you long enough. I was worried I'd run out of shots before these damned things finally decided to overwhelm me."

"Looks like you saw more action cooped up here than we saw for the entire march," Clance said.

"These things may be insanely vicious, but they're not exactly rabid," Jamieson suggested.

"The ones you guys encountered were probably trying to lay low, or maybe you're just particularly tasty."

"What precisely happened at the Gates?" Ancor cut in.

"Huh?" Jamieson blurted out, then looked closely at the uniform of the person questioning him and sobering right up. "Admiral, sir. Sorry. Here's what I can tell you. Earlier tonight, me and the other boys in my bunkhouse got woken up by a bunch of shouting. We thought it was just a load of those creatures making a nuisance of themselves again, and that the guys on patrol along the wall just needed some extra warm bodies to help man the turrets. We geared up right quick and ran out to find a bloody slaughter happening. A half dozen of our boys were trying to hold their own against about three dozen of those bastards."

"Did you know who they were at the time?" Ancor asked.

"Can't rightly say I did, sir," Jamieson admitted with a slight shrug. "Also can't say I know now. But, while we're on the subject, I've got a surprise for you tucked away in those bushes over there."

Ancor gave a nod to a nearby handful of Cluster soldiers, who ran over to the designated foliage to investigate. Both the admiral and Clance stared curiously at the dark object the soldiers dragged back behind them.

It was a body.

Garbed in black with no discernible markings, Clance was positive that this was the same uniform the soldiers in the village had been wearing. Well, save for that large burn mark dead centre in the chest. Plus, the chances weren't that good that there were two different sets of attackers in identical armour running around. That would be all they needed at this point.

Not able to examine the strange helmet in detail back at the village without drawing too much attention to himself, Clance made a closer inspection. Like the uniform, it carried no markings. It covered the entire head of the attacker, with two large mirrored lenses providing vision. Clance could see no openings for either the mouth or nose and, try as he might, he could discern no breathing openings of any kind. *Strange*, he thought. Looking at the neck of the helmet, it appeared sealed to the uniform itself. *How in the world did they breathe in this thing?*

"One of the invaders, I'm presuming?" Ancor asked, bending down to examine the lifeless figure and interrupting Clance's train of thought.

"That he is, sir," Jamieson confirmed. "These buggers fought something fierce back at the Gates. If I was out in the open, I'm sure I'd be dead right now. Lucky I was up in the blind and managed to get the drop on him. Blasted him a few times as he walked near to the tree, and down he went like a sack of onions."

"Where are his weapons?" Clance asked.

"Oh, right. Sorry, I'm getting right senile in my old age," Jamieson said. "Over in the other side by those bushes. Carried a pair of light blades, and a nasty looking bladestaff."

Clance watched on as another Cluster Marine went to investigate and returned with the dead soldier's weapons. "Looks like the same weapons I saw them wielding," he commented.

"No ranged weapons?" Ancor asked.

"No guns if that's what you're asking, sir. He did have these on him, though," Jamieson said, reaching into his coat and pulling out a set of throwing knives. "Thankfully, he didn't get a chance to use these, as there's not too much room to dodge when you're perched half-crippled in a tree. And, to be honest, I didn't notice any of the other ones we fought using any. I'm just glad they didn't have any guns. If they did, I doubt me and the other boys would have gotten away as clean as we did."

Jamieson's expression went a little grim as he asked, "What happened to them? Did they make it out with you, Clance?"

Ancor cut Clance off before he could reply, "We're not sure yet, but we'll find out soon enough. Can you walk?"

"Yes, sir," Jamieson said. "I'll need a strong shoulder to lean on, though."

"Very well," Ancor said. Turning to the nearest Cluster Marine, he said, "Help him. Get the stretcher we brought and secure that body on to it."

The Marine gave a smart salute and helped Jamieson to his feet, while four others tied the enemy corpse and weapons to the stretcher.

As they started the trek back, Ancor said, "Now, tell me what else happened and how you got away."

"Yes, sir," Jamieson said. "It happened like this. We had just run out of the bunkhouse, then dashed up the stairs on to the top of the wall, opened the door, and spotted those bastards fighting our boys..."

The attackers were moving and striking like lightning.

Another Ranger had fallen in the time that Jamieson had needed to take stock of the situation, and only five defenders stood against thirty unknown enemies, who were now moving to encircle them. A dozen black clad corpses further back demonstrated the fact that Rangers had tried to put up as well they had got. The fact that both sides were engaged in melee combat suggested that everyone had exhausted their guns.

Not wasting any more time, Jamieson shouted, "Lay down covering fire! Don't let our boys get surrounded! You lot over there! Pull back and get to these stairs now!"

The dozen Rangers that were with Jamieson ran ahead and took positions to lay down covering fire, in the process killing a few enemies that were still trying to outflank the defenders.

The path now relatively clear, the five defenders backed up to the stairs as fast as they could. A few of the more brave enemies tried to pursue, only to be mowed down by covering fire from Jamieson's company. Their compatriots pulled back to just out of range of the guns, though still poised for combat.

"Hold your fire," Jamieson ordered, just loud enough to not be overheard by the enemies. Or so he hoped. "Don't waste any shots unless they get stupid."

"Incoming!"

Jamieson heard the shout off to his right, just as a bright light illuminated the area and an explosion erupted in the midst of the massed group of enemies. Startled, he looked to the side to see one of his company manning a nearby defense turret.

Stupid me, he cursed himself. I should have thought of that myself.

Two more shots followed in quick succession, and the group of enemies were now reduced to a mere dozen.

One of the survivors signalled something, and the remaining enemies dashed off to the opposite wall of the Gates.

"These bastards are smart," Jamieson growled, realizing what the attackers were doing.

Positioned where they were now, the turret's range of motion didn't allow it to swivel enough to be able to take aim at them.

Of course, Jamieson sighed. Whoever designed and installed these things never figured that they would ever need to shoot in the other direction. Not that he could fault the designer. After all, the top of the fort spanned fifty feet across, making a ground shot in the opposite direction next to impossible, and thus unnecessary from that point of view. Still, it would have been more than helpful in clearing these bastards off the wall.

"No matter," he said. "We're more than a match for them now. Get ready to move forward!" "Hold up!" one of the Rangers off to the far right shouted, his face turned to the rear. "Look, Jamieson! More of them coming!"

He was right.

In the dim light, Jamieson could make out the outline of over twenty ropes draped over the side of the fort. The enemy appeared to be guarding them, and not making any effort to use them as an escape route. *That could only mean that there was trouble climbing up those ropes*.

"Everyone! Down the stairs, now!!" Jamieson ordered.

As the last Ranger filed down, he turned back to see that his suspicions were correct. A fresh batch of attackers were climbing over the wall, and goodness knew how many more were behind them on the ropes.

Not waiting to find out, he dashed into the small hut covering the stairs and barred the door.

Given the tenacity of their unknown enemies, Jamieson knew it wouldn't hold them for long. But, it might buy them enough extra time to figure out what was going on, and to also find out if anyone else was still alive here.

"What now, Jamieson?" another Ranger asked him as he reached the bottom of the stairwell.

"We get to the bunkhouse and clear every gun we can out of the arms lockers," he replied, leading the way. "The guys we were fighting may have been out of shots, but that new lot may have full loads. In any case, I believe we're all down to a few shots apiece after that last encounter."

"Actually," another Ranger called out, "they didn't have any kind of guns. Just blades."

Jamieson turned to look at him as they were running. He was one of the five they had saved.

"You're absolutely sure about that?"

"Positive. If they had any, you guys wouldn't have been able to get up there fast enough to do anything for us."

"Well, that gives us a slight advantage," Jamieson said, though he added in a low voice, "I hope."

Finally reaching the large room situated in the innards of the fort, Jamieson quickly said, "They won't be far behind us! Clear out these weapons quick!"

They could hear the attackers bashing at the door as they stripped the lockers of any useful armaments.

"What's the plan, Jamieson?" one of the others asked.

"We cut through the tunnels," he said simply. "Chances are that these guys don't know about them, and we need a quick path to the communications room."

"What tunnels are these?" Ancor asked, interrupting the recounting. "I've never heard mention of any kind of underground system there."

"It's not really a system as such, sir," Jamieson explained. "More like one long tunnel that runs the entire twelve miles of the fort."

"When was this put in? What was its purpose?"

"Began work on it about ten years ago and finished it off a few years later," Jamieson said. "Aside from the occasional patrol in the jungle, there's really not much to do up here except monotonously walking along that damned wall. Started off as a root cellar, to be perfectly honest, and it just kind of went from there."

"How do you know that the attackers didn't already find their way into the tunnels?"

"It was a chance, for sure, sir. But, we did take the precaution of disguising the entrances as best we could when we built them. If you didn't know what exactly what you were looking for, you'd walk right past them."

"I see," Ancor nodded. "Go on."

Jamieson opened the sliding wall as quickly as he could. He could still hear the enemy pounding away at the door three floors up. He was surprised it had held that long.

"Let's go!" he announced, the passageway finally open. "Hopefully these bastards think we ran down the corridor. Let them chase their tails for a while."

"No arguments here," one of the other Rangers said, hurrying through.

Jamieson slid the door shut once they were all through, making sure he heard the click of the latch. Satisfied, he also jammed the release mechanism, just in case one of them stumbled across the hidden control on the other side.

"Keep a sharp eye out," he instructed, once down the narrow stairs.

It was a relatively wide tunnel at eight feet across, but that still didn't allow for a lot of fighting room even in close quarters combat. On the upside, a group of several dozen enemies wouldn't be able to swarm and surround them. And, if the attackers indeed lacked guns, they should be able to easily pick them off before they got in striking range.

"Everyone grab an extra tasrac torch, but don't turn it on," Jamieson said, taking one from a nearby rack. "The service lights in the tunnel should be enough for us, and we don't want to announce ourselves a mile in advance. There's no telling if any of them managed to stumble their way in here."

The trek through the lengthy tunnel was arduous, but mercifully uneventful. There was a staircase with a similarly hidden access hatch every two hundred yards or so, and Jamieson had made a point of jamming the release mechanism on the first six they had passed.

"Just in case those bastards chasing us get lucky," he had said to the other Rangers. "They should double back after a half a mile of not spotting any sign of us."

"Let's just hope they didn't run the other way down the corridor and figure out how to use one of the hatches in that direction," one of the other Rangers joked.

"You're welcome to run back and lock them if you want," Jamieson chuckled, though he knew that the thought of the enemy actually doing that was certainly very real.

The remainder of the hike went without incident, and they group soon found its way at the base of the stairs leading to the communications room. Or, more specifically, to a closet just off of the communications room.

There had been no sign of any kind of pursuit, and the enemy appeared to still be unaware of the existence of the tunnels.

Jamieson looked to his comrades. They looked exhausted to a man, and he himself couldn't deny that he could use a spot of rest. He asked in a low voice, "Everyone ready for this?"

"As much as we'll ever be," came a reply, the rest of the Rangers nodding in agreement.

"Okay, I'll head up first and try to get into that closet without getting killed," Jamieson said. "If I'm still alive, I'll try to scout the room through the peepholes. With any luck, we can incapacitate any guards, then use the portal to get back to Fort Devine."

He gently ascended the staircase, careful to avoid any telltale creaks. After what seemed like forever, he finally arrived at the hatch. Not letting impatience overpower his sense of caution, he warily listened for any activity on the other side. Satisfied after another long moment, he meticulously undid the latch and slowly slid open the small door to the closet.

The small room that he now stared into was almost completely dark, which was a good sign. Creeping forward, he knelt down to peek through the small holes that had been intentionally cut into the walls for this very reason.

"Wait a second," Ancor asked. "You foresaw a situation like this happening, and decided to cut out those peepholes for this precise set of circumstances?"

"Well, not exactly, sir," Jamieson replied. "But, seeing as to how we were going all out with those tunnels already, we thought this only seemed prudent. Besides, if we ever did come under attack, the ability to keep a covert eye on our only communications room is something that we didn't want to cut any corners on."

"Personally, though," Jamieson continued, looking a little shamefaced, "I think the boys were just bored and may have gotten a little carried away. Can't say I'm not glad about it though, sir."

"Fair enough. Go on."

Well, the good news was that the room seemed to be devoid of any enemies. The bad news was that all the equipment appeared to be smashed or otherwise in a state of uselessness. The portal itself seemed to be intact, but the console that governed it was lying on its side on the floor. Even if it was salvageable, no one in his group had any knowledge on how to go about getting it repaired.

"Damn," he swore. Still not taking any chances, he slowly made his way back up the stairs to his comrades and described what he had observed.

"Damn," one of them echoed upon hearing the report. "What do we do now?"

"Only thing we can do," he said. "We head to Fort Devine the long way."

There were a few groans at that, not that he could fault them.

"I'll take five of you with me, and we'll make a break for the nearest gate, scatter, get to the treeline, and leg it to Presca as fast as you can. Whoever makes it, find a boat and don't stop until you get to Fort Devine."

"And the rest of us?"

"Stay put for now," Jamieson said. "If help doesn't arrive within two days, try as best you can to escape as a group, cut through the forest, and head south to the fort."

"That's over two hundred miles!"

"Got any better ideas?" Jamieson countered.

There was silence.

"Okay, let's decide who gets to go with me. Night's burning away as we speak."

"And that's right before Clance found me," Jamieson finished the story. "We ran out of the fort like the wind, got to the nearest gate, but didn't see or hear anyone else in the fort or on top of the wall luckily. I circled to the south, tripped on that bloody rabbit hole, and hobbled along until I ran into him."

Chapter 22

"All right," Dalja heard a tired and annoyed voice say. "Who assaulted you, Belno?"

Dalja smiled. It looks like the idiot Belno *was* indeed stupid enough to try to lodge a complaint about her.

"That'd be me, Captain," she said, opening her eyes and sitting up.

A hungry smile on her face, she looked at the man standing next to the Captain. Belno certainly didn't look like he'd be trying anything soon, at least not until he was off those crutches.

Looking around, she saw everyone else doing a good job of pretending to be asleep, obviously not wanting to get in the middle of anything involving her and Belno.

"What's the matter, dearie?" she said sweetly to Belno, an evil glint in her eyes. Stretching out her hands and flexing her fingers, she asked, "Didn't get enough excitement? Want me to leave you gasping for breath as well?"

She almost laughed with delight when she saw the large man flinch away.

"I should've known it was you," the Captain half-sighed as he put together what had transpired. With a stern tone, he turned to the half crippled man next to him and said, "Belno, I was already getting sick of your antics, but your sheer stupidity continues to amaze me. Next time you go looking for an easy target, don't come crying to me when you end up in a bloody pile. Get to your bunk, now! When you're healed up, you're going on latrine duty for a month and a half! The next time I hear the slightest hint of a complaint about you, I'll personally finish the job that your friend here started. *Am I understood?*"

"Y-Yes, sir," a shamed Belno murmured, hobbling to his bunk.

"My hero," Dalja said to the Captain, batting her eyes at him with a mocking smile.

"And, as for you..." he trailed off, biting back his frustration.

"Well, don't keep me in suspense, Captain."

"You... are no longer my problem. You're to report to Lord Athash's tent for reassignment immediately."

She heard a few of the supposedly sleeping bodies in the room emit low gasps.

"Thank you, Captain," she said in that same sweet tone. Winking, she added, "It's been a right pleasure working with you."

"Come in," a voice called out from inside the tent.

The guards made way for her as she parted the flaps and walked in.

Inside were two men, but neither were Athash himself. *Too bad*. She had been hoping he'd be careless again with whatever reading material he was engrossed in.

Behind Athash's desk sat Rush, his eyes sharp and alert. Things being what they were, she still had to admire Rush from a professional standpoint. She doubted he had had any sleep, and appreciated the mental discipline the man possessed.

The other man was a nondescript stranger. Unfortunately, those are the ones you usually have to watch out for. Unlike the stories, competent assassins didn't go around dressed in conspicuous black cloaks, skulking around in dark corners.

Medium height and with sandy blonde hair, the man wore simple clothes and carried only a belt knife as a weapon. If this was indeed one of Rush's men, she'd no doubt that he had quite a few other weapons secreted on him.

He gave her a slight smile. She tried not to scowl too hard at him.

Rush turned to her, "I've heard that you've been keeping busy in the short time you've been away?"

"He started it," was all she said.

"You're smarter than you let on," Rush said, "which is why I'm letting this pass for now. In the future, please be more circumspect if you wish to continue working for me."

"Working for you?"

"Yes, Mirian. Your first job is to get our friend Kesomi here," he indicated the stranger, "safely to his destination."

"You want me to babysit?"

"Hardly. Kesomi's more than capable of handling himself in combat," Rush said flatly.

"Then why do you need me?"

"You'll be entering enemy territory, and will need an appropriate cover."

"We'll be posing as a refugee couple," the stranger supplied, still smiling. "Also, pleasure to meet you, Mirian."

"Charmed, I'm sure," she said, still not returning the smile. Looking back at Rush, she said, "Fine. Where are we going?"

"Don't worry about that," Rush informed her. "Your job is to act the part. Considering your recent incident, are you capable of doing this?"

"As long as this berk doesn't get too frisky in trying to act his part, I'll be having no problems whatsoever."

"I'm guessing we should forego claiming we're newlyweds, and just say we're an old married couple," Kesomi grinned at her as they exited Athash's tent.

"Claim what you want," she stared nastily as him. "Just remember I can gut you anytime I want."

"Whoa! Down, girl," he said, holding up his hands in supplication. "I think we're getting off on the wrong foot here. I've got absolutely no intentions of any kind toward you, other than getting this job done. From what I gathered back there, I take it you received a less than thrilling welcome at the barracks?"

"What's it to you?"

"Nothing, other than to let you know that we're not all disgusting pigs," he said, the ever present grin still there. "That said, we've some time before we have to leave tonight. Meet me by that quartermaster's tent over there just after lunch, and we'll see about getting you some appropriate gear. I won't force you to wear a dress, but that outfit of yours, while flattering, is a touch conspicuous. Now, take some time for yourself and try to unwind a bit before we head out."

With a wink, he turned and walked away.

She trusted him even less now.

It wasn't because of that little I-feel-your-pain speech, though that didn't really help matters. He had, so far, given her two different high-signs that were supposed to only have been known to Iatheran and Cluster Intelligence operatives.

She had decided to not to bite, and hadn't acknowledged either of them.

If he truly was an operative for either of the two agencies, he should have known better than to flash signs about like that, even if he was relatively sure that she was a friendly.

Plus, given her special status, she was intimately familiar with any of the few other agents that might recognize her on sight, and her new friend Kesomi was most definitely not one of them.

Overall, chances were that Rush had finagled those gestures from a captured operative, and was actively using them to weed out any spies from their ranks.

Anyone stupid enough to respond to a signal like that, she thought, deserved whatever came to them.

Idly, Dalja's mind wandered back to that supposed agent she had killed, and wondered if she had managed to get caught out with such a simple trick.

Realizing that her feet had been wandering aimlessly, she cursed her inattentiveness and focused on the matters at hand.

On the chance that her new mission took her inland, this might be the last chance she'd get to make a report. She hoped that the blasted Shark captain had parked the submarine where he said he would.

"I take it you're still uncomfortable with having her as a member of our little gang?" Athash asked, emerging from a sectioned off room at the back of the tent.

"No," Rush said simply. "Something about her is definitely... offputting."

"No kidding?" Athash laughed. "She may not be the most tactful, but even you can't question her resourcefulness?"

"That's assuming her story is even true."

"If it isn't, then I can't see her endgame," Athash said. "If she's lying, then she's either the most incompetent, or perhaps the most creative spy I've ever seen."

"Which is what makes me uncomfortable about her," Rush said. "For now, I think I'd rather have her *not here*. This task I've set for her should keep her away for a bit, then I'll see what Kesomi has to say about the latest recruit to our cause."

"Do as you think best, old friend."

Chapter 23

Jensen didn't fancy the current uphill march. And *certainly not after that other nice long trek he had just finished*.

Yazril's manor stood nestled near the top of one of the few small hills within the city limits, and the nearest portal had only taken Nolan and himself to the base of the slope. In reality, it wasn't that much of a journey. But, with his sore legs protesting each step, each minute felt like an hour.

He understood perfectly the lack of a nearby portal. Yazril certainly didn't want to give easy access to an enemy, and there seemed to be a lot of those around these days. However, she certainly didn't make it easy for a neighbour to stop by for a cup of tea.

Nolan hadn't supplied any details on what the meeting was about, and Jensen hadn't bothered to press him. He'd find out soon enough.

He certainly hoped it wasn't just to actually go have a cup of tea. Nolan didn't exercise his sense of humour very often, but something like that would be right in line for his warped mind.

Arriving at the top of the hill, Jensen could finally get a good view of Yazril's manor. Unlike the rest of the town, the Intendant had foregone the bright festive colours that seemed to be the norm, and had instead opted for a simple light splash of yellow on the walls.

The fairly muted tones did nothing to detract from the immensity of the building itself. He remembered Venarya's building being relatively large, but this place dwarfed it. One of the very rare four storey buildings in the city, Yazril's manor was almost the size of a small hotel. *Probably also served as a town hall or such*, he thought.

After covering the last few yards of driveway, or rather walkway, and waiting for an answer to the ornate door knocker, Jensen idly glanced over his shoulder.

The alert-looking faces of their Cluster marine escort were still present, but Jensen let out a low whistle of appreciation as he gazed past them.

The sight was nothing short of breath-taking.

Even at this low of an elevation, he could see clear into the harbour. He had travelled enough to usually exhibit only a mild indifference when sightseeing, but the living postcard he now beheld could stir emotions in a rock, he thought.

From the colourful cascade of houses, to the ever-present blue glow of the organic street lighting, to the tiny dots of people going about their business, to the last of the storm spending its remaining few raindrops, to the setting Dark Sister in the sky, he almost got lost in rumination.

The elephant in the room, or rather in the harbour, brought him back to reality. The massive pyramid structure lay sunken in the bay, no sign of life from it, yet he had no doubt of its potential danger from what he had heard.

Despite it no longer having any mobility, what exactly lay lurking inside was an unknown, and Jensen realized that that was probably one of the key items on the agenda for the impending meeting with Yazril.

Well, that and the attack on the Gates. Jensen hoped that whatever incident had occurred there, that it hadn't been serious. Given the recent track record of events though, he held very little optimism.

The sound of the door opening caught his attention and he turned back around.

"Sir," a Cluster Marine saluted sharply from behind the threshold. "Come in. They're waiting for you."

They? Who else was going to be sitting in on this little shindig? Better yet, who else was crazy enough to voluntarily make that climb?

Jensen's question was soon answered as the Marine led them into the large building, their former escorts staying behind to presumably guard the perimeter from any assassins keen on exercising their cardiovascular systems.

As they walked into a sizeable sitting room, he spied Intendant Yazril and an unfamiliar man dressed in a Cluster military uniform.

"Welcome back, Nolan," Yazril stood up to greet them. "Apologies for the hike, but we've disabled some of the more critical portals for the time being."

Jensen almost sighed audibly, but caught himself in time.

"And welcome back to you, Jensen," Yazril turned to him. "How was the trip?"

"Didn't get time for much of a tan, but it was quite an experience," he replied.

"This gentleman is Fleet Admiral Krane of the Nebar Cluster," she explained, indicating the man moving to extend his hand to them. Turning back to Nolan, she added, "Petrarca sends his regrets, but he's dealing with some crucial intelligence reports right now."

"Welcome back, *Commander*," Krane grinned. "And a pleasure to meet you, Mister Jensen. Thanks for helping to get our boys to Freewater."

"All in a day's work, sir," Jensen replied, shaking his hand. "Just glad I could help out."

"If you ever need a favour, don't be afraid to ask," Krane said. "I mean it. Heck, I'd even offer you a job if it wasn't for professional ethics."

Jensen grinned a reply, "I appreciate the offer. I may even take you up on that depending on how well my next raise goes. By the way, where did John and Ganz get off to? Also, your... er... bodyguard as well, Yazril?"

"They're fine," Nolan said. "Had their own little meeting to get to. They should be back later today."

"Ah, okay," Jensen replied, as the group moved to take seats. "By the way, what's up with the uniform, Nolan?"

"Purely a pre-emptive measure," Krane cut in. "Just in case we need one of our employees to do something, we'd rather it be evident that they should follow his orders."

"Makes sense," Jensen said. With a wicked grin, he added, "Too bad they demoted you from General though, boss."

"If you want to get technical, it's actually a shortened form of *Supreme Field Commander*," Krane explained with a chuckle. "The official title tends to get a bit pompous-sounding at times, so we decided to chop it down a bit. In effect, he's the equal of any of the other Admirals, and I'm the only one that can supersede his orders."

"Wow, I take it back," Jensen whistled. "Looks like you win this time, boss."

Nolan didn't respond, but Jensen thought he saw a brief look of self-satisfaction pass across the man's face.

"It's not a commonplace event to do this sort of thing, if that's what you're wondering," Krane said. "Considering the, well, special circumstances involved, Director Rinard and myself thought it prudent and justified. The fact that Nolan already had experience commanding troops sealed the deal."

"Okay, okay. You've sold me on the idea of promoting our friend here," Jensen held out his hands in mock surrender. "Now, I'm assuming this meeting's been called to discuss what we're going to do with that giant pyramid thing out in the harbour?"

"Right you are, *Captain*," Krane said. "The Rangers at Fort Tiarre sent us back a report on that little ambush you managed to dodge. Did you notice anything out of the ordinary about your attackers?"

"Aside from them being insanely suicidal in their assault, not really," Jensen said.

"No odd weapons or such?"

"Just basic melee weapons."

"What the good Admiral's trying to get at," Nolan piped up, "is that our enemies seem to be using a lot of technology never before seen on this world. First we had bombs, and then laser turrets on that pyramid-"

"Hang on a second," Jensen said, confusion evident on his face as he looked down to his sidearm. "I thought they already had laser guns here. In fact, isn't this one right here strapped to my hip?"

"Not as such," Nolan said. "Yours is more like a brief pulse of energy, or even plasma. The ones that were on top of that pyramid were capable of a constant steady beam which pretty much incinerated anything it touched."

"Ouch," Jensen said. "Though, can't say I thought that you were the tech head type? How'd you know so much about this future-weapon stuff?"

"Retired General, remember?"

"Ah."

"So you didn't notice anything unusual then?" Krane asked.

"No-" Jensen started to say, then thought back to what he remembered about the attack. "Though, I have to admit, their attack was even more suicidal than any fanatic I've ever seen. You'd almost think they were mind-controlled or something. Come to think of it, judging from everything else I've seen over here, it wouldn't surprise me in the least if you did tell me that they had been."

"They were all acting like this?"

"Not all of them," Jensen explained. "There was one nasty bastard that I'd not care to run into in a dark alley. Not that he was any less intent on seeing us dead, mind you. Appeared to have his brain on straight though, seeing as how he was one the only one with enough sense to bug out when things went south on them."

"Would you recognize him again if you saw him?" Krane asked.

"Oh yeah. Believe me, that won't be a problem."

"The Rangers from Fort Tiarre are also bringing the remains of the dead attackers to one of the Institute buildings," Yazril said.

"Not the morgue?" Krane asked.

"They originally wanted to," Yazril said. "But there's nowhere near that amount of room available in there. Right now, they're in one of the medical buildings, seeing as how it's already got the facilities in there to keep them fresh. At the least, we're hoping that there's something we can learn from investigating the corpses."

"Wouldn't hurt," Nolan agreed. "If you guys and John are okay with it, I do have someone trustworthy back home that might be useful?"

"Doyle?" Jensen asked, an eyebrow raised.

"Yes," Nolan replied, not offering any further explanation.

"I'm certainly not against it, but let's see what Venarya and John say first," Yazril said.

"Of course," Nolan agreed. "Now, back to the matter at hand. What's the plan for that pyramid?"

"The initial plan was to wait for the Ranger reinforcements, then storm it by force," Krane said. "The Rangers would have fortified the town, while the Cluster and Iatheran troops would have tried to gain entry to the pyramid itself. If things had gone bad, and the enemy had managed an effective counterattack, we were counting on the Rangers to prevent them getting a foothold in the town. We would have attacked two hours before dark tonight."

Jensen gave a low whistle, "That's tight."

"Unfortunately, that's no longer an option," Krane said. "Over half of my Marines are at the Gates, and we have no idea how long they'll be needed there. We're trying to arrange to pull out more troops from home, but we're stretched razor thin right now. I'm open to ideas."

"The only entrances we've spotted are near the top of the pyramid, right?" Nolan asked.

"As far as we can tell," Krane replied. "What are you thinking?"

"If I know this sneaky bastard, he's thinking of making his own door," Jensen smirked.

Nolan shot him a dirty look, but said, "He's right. Chances are that the bulk of the defenders will be deployed to protect those doors and passageways around the top of the pyramid. If we use one of Ganz's new toys to blow a few holes closer to the bottom, maybe we can catch them with their pants down."

"Assuming they actually wear pants," Jensen added.

"That sounds promising," Krane said, scratching his chin idly. "We'll need a few squads near the exterior top as decoys, and so forth. But, I think we're onto something here-"

His thought was interrupted by a knock on the door.

"Yes?" Yazril called out.

"Sorry to disturb you," a Marine said, opening the door. "There's a lady here that's most insistent on speaking to you, Intendant."

"Administrator Venarya?" Yazril asked.

"No, ma'am. It looks like she's from the Sisterhood."

Krane raised an eyebrow at her, "Surprises never end. Are you expecting one of them?"

"No," Yazril replied. "I'm not sure what she wants, but I suspect it may have something to do with their temple that the pyramid destroyed on its way here."

"More than likely," Krane said, thoughtful. "Be careful with them, though. The old man never overtly criticised their organization, but he was always cautious with them for some reason."

"I'll remember that. Thanks."

"I think Nolan, Jensen and I can finish up this discussion back aboard the Midnight Dawn," Krane suggested. "We'll send a messenger when we have something more concrete."

"Thank you," Yazril said. "I'll deal with our new visitor and see what she wants."

Chapter 24

John didn't want to wake up. The bed was incredibly comfortable, and it only served to make him even more acutely aware of the lack of sleep over the past few days.

The knocking at the door, while polite, seemed to be quite insistent on receiving an answer.

"Yes?" He almost appended the word 'Venarya' before catching himself and remembering where he was.

"Hi, John. Hope you had a nice nap," he heard the vibrant tone of Alisa's voice. "Smiljan's waiting for you and your friend, and I expect you'll be leaving soon."

John had stayed at some of the finest hotels in his short life, but this bed was in its own league. It was even more comfortable than the ones in Venarya's home, and John really didn't want to have to leave it. John wondered how the old man had managed to lug this thing through the swamp, and again pondered the potential carpentry skills of the anthropomorphic wolves.

"I'll be right out," he replied, reluctantly sitting up.

"I've left some tea out for you and Ganz on the table in the sitting room. Come downstairs when you're ready."

"I will, and thank you, Alisa," John called out.

"You're welcome," came the cheerful reply. "I'll see you downstairs."

He heard light footsteps soon followed by the outer door closing, and got to work hauling himself out of bed.

Once on his feet, he grabbed his clothes from the nearby stand and started getting dressed.

John had been astounded by the material's inexplicable ability to repel dirt, but had absolutely no idea as to its wrinkle-resistant properties. He had opted for the safe route. Besides, it wasn't that cold in the middle of a tropical swamp.

Fully clothed again, he opened his bedroom door and shambled back into the sitting area.

He was a little surprised to see Ganz already in there, sipping on tea and looker chipper than ever.

"How on earth are you looking that lively?" was all that John could ask, shuffling over to the pot of tea.

"Oh, I, ah, didn't actually go to sleep," Ganz said, a little embarrassed. "Turns out that the bookshelf in my room had quite a few interesting volumes in there."

"I should have known," John chuckled. "Learn anything I should know about?"

"Nothing earth-shattering," Ganz shrugged. "Just some odds and ends, but they did help me expand out some theories I've been working on. I'll let you know when I have something more solid though."

"That'd be nice," John said, sipping some of the tea. It was quite good, and seemed to mollify some of the rough edges. "Ready to head on downstairs?"

"Sure thing, John."

As they headed out the door, John was a little surprised by the lack of any guards and the trust that implied on the part of the old man. Although, he was pretty sure that someone, or something, was more than likely keeping a covert eye on them. Smiljan was the height of civility, but he certainly wasn't stupid.

Still, John took the gesture in the manner that it was meant.

Reaching the bottom of the staircase, a smiling Alisa was waiting for them.

"Smiljan's waiting for you in the living room, John," she informed them. Her eyes focusing on Ganz, she continued, "I've been told that you may wish to investigate the library here while your friend meets with Smiljan?"

Slightly taken aback, Ganz quickly recovered, "Er... Sure thing... If it's okay, that is?"

"It is," she beamed. "Follow me, and I'll take you there. John, are you able to find your way to the living room?"

"I sure am," he replied. With a chuckle, he turned to Ganz, "Try not to get too much drool on the old man's collection."

"Funny."

Her ever-present smile still visible, Alisa led Ganz away, while John turned and walked to where the old man waited.

He must have been watching us somehow, John thought, more curious than piqued at the lack of privacy. But how did he know which room Ganz would choose?

The solution came to him rather quickly as he realized that his own room had also been equipped with a small bookshelf. In his dilapidated state, he had neglected to pay it more than a passing glance.

Clever, he thought. *Simple. But still clever*.

As he made his way down the long halls, he wondered what had happened to the gigantic wolf creature that had greeted them at the door and had now seemingly disappeared. In fact, aside from Alisa and Smiljan, the place seemed deserted.

His mental meandering stopped as he entered the living room to see the old man and Garh already seated.

"Come in, John," Smiljan said immediately. "Alisa's provided us with some refreshments."

And indeed she had. That hour of rest had evidently provided her enough time to prepare quite a selection of delectable-looking snacks. A small buffet table held all manner of appetizers ranging from mundane biscuits to a dish that held something that he swore resembled caviar.

John didn't need to be a psychic to sense that something was in the works here, and didn't dawdle long at the serving table. No doubt that the old man had intentionally arranged for Ganz to be absent during this meeting, and John's curiosity had been piqued.

The only reason for the scientist's absence would be if the Smiljan was about to impart some pretty significant information to John, and wanted to keep as few people in the loop as he felt appropriate.

While John didn't think that the old man necessarily judged Ganz untrustworthy, a burning need for secrecy seemed to be par for the course in this world.

Sitting down, John spoke, "From the circumstances, I'm inclined to say that you're about to share something earth-shattering with me?"

"And you'd be quite correct, my friend," Garh chuckled in his rumbling tone.

John could only turn his gaze over to the shaggy giant and blink in amazement.

"Now, now," Smiljan chided, the hints of a smile touching the edge of his lips.

"I do apologize, John, but that was quite literally a once in a lifetime opportunity," Garh said.

"... Er... No offense taken..."

"Our normally mute friend here," Smiljan explained, "is actually quite a bit smarter than he lets on. Garh is, in fact, the master of Intendant Yazril's spy apparatus, and one of my most trusted confidantes."

"... I... see," John said, still a little dazed by the revelation. His brain finally starting to kick back into gear, he turned to Garh and asked, "But how is it that no one else suspects this? Do the others of your kind not share your, er, eloquence?"

"In a word, no," Garh replied, and John thought that, just for a moment, he had detected a tinge of sadness in the tone. "I am somewhat of a unique case among the Thog."

"Garh's current state is," the old man supplied, "shall we say, the product of some of my research, among other things."

"Very well," John replied. "But, why tell me this?"

"I predict," Smiljan began, "that, eventually, you will need to know what resources you have at your disposal, and I'd rather not see you hampered by too much unnecessary secrecy."

"Go on."

"I wish I could," Smiljan said earnestly. "There's quite a lot more in play than you, or possibly even I, suspect. Now, I would tell you more about what I do know. But, to be perfectly frank, I am old and biased. I'd really rather not taint your views on the matter, and fresh eyes are a thing to be treasured. Rest assured that if there is information that I feel you need, you will have it in short order."

"I see," John replied, though he silently wished the old man would elaborate further. "Now, from what I inferred from your note, I suspect that there's something you want from me as well?"

"I would prefer to phrase it as a request for a favour," Smiljan said. "But you are quite right. There is something I greatly desire that you alone are in the unique position to supply for me."

"Which is?" John asked, waiting for the other shoe to drop, and hoping that the strange man wouldn't ask him to provide the still-beating hearts of orphaned children, or something else just as bizarre.

"I would like to request access to one of your laboratories back on Earth."

John blinked, again caught unawares.

"So it's true," John said, remembering the note written in English. "You're also from back home?"

"Indeed I am," Smiljan confirmed. "Though, I speculate that you're from a slightly later time period than myself."

John thought on that for a second. Rheus had mentioned that the old man had been around for the founding of the city of Iathera. That was five hundred years ago.

The old man appeared to be quite adept at technology, and it wasn't exactly like allowing a caveman access to the equipment back home, but there was a lot of room for something to go catastrophically wrong with the whole idea.

"I would, of course, expect you to provide me with an escort," Smiljan said, as if reading his mind. "Perhaps your associate Ganz would suffice?"

John chuckled. *Looks like the old man had thought this through very thoroughly*. Seeing no reason to refuse the request, John answered, "Very well. You have a deal." Smiljan replied simply, "Thank you, John."

"You're not planning on destroying the planet or anything like that, are you?"

"Nothing like that, my friend," Smiljan assured him. "As your resident genius Ganz has surmised, this... world has a few unique properties, some good and some bad. Unfortunately, some of those same qualities include an unpleasant tendency to disrupt some of my experiments requiring electricity."

"Ganz did mention that," John confirmed, a little shocked that the old man knew about the concept of electricity. "He's theorized that the tasrac in the atmosphere is the cause of that?"

"He's not far off base," the old man said. "I'm glad to see I didn't overestimate his ability to apply his knowledge under adverse conditions. Yes, he'll do quite nicely for my brief vacation back home."

"When did you leave Earth, if you don't mind me asking? And, not to offend, but would you be familiar with any of the new technology we use?"

"It's true, I did leave quite a few years ago," Smiljan replied, intentionally being vague. "However, I do have ways of returning, should I see fit."

Seeing John about to say something, he held up his hand and continued, "I'm afraid I can't go into too much detail about that, but suffice to say that the method you employ is a much faster and safer way of traversing the void. I have returned every so often to keep tabs, so to speak, on events. I do find your 'internet' to be quite an achievement, I must admit."

Well, so much for the caveman thing.

"When would you want to leave?"

"Within the hour, should you agree," Smiljan said.

John blinked again, "That's quite an accelerated schedule."

"Needs must, my friend," the old man commented. "Normally, I would be able to complete my research right here, albeit at a much slower pace. However, I strongly suspect that the results of these experiments will be necessary sometime within the immediate future."

"Understood," John said. "Can you shed any light as to the nature of this research though?"

"Not right now, I'm afraid," the old man said. "It's still in a very preliminary stage, and may not even end up being completely viable. If not, best to discount it early and move on to other prospects. Plus, it may not seem like it, but it is for your own safety. There may be... repercussions in the future, and I'd rather not see you get caught up in them."

"I see," John said, starting to wonder what he was getting himself into, but choosing not to say anything. "Is there anything else you might need?"

"Some specialized equipment, but I'm sure your friend can see to it once we arrive. The technical side is extremely tedious, unfortunately," Smiljan answered, getting out of the chair. "Speaking of which, shall we pay Ganz a visit right now? If he's as smart as I expect, he may have deduced a piece of information that may have given him a bit of a startle."

Puzzled at that, John got up and followed behind.

"I'll see to the equipment, and meet you back at the communications room," Garh rumbled, also standing up. In an approximation of an earnest tone, he asked, "John, I trust that you can maintain my pretence?"

"It won't be a problem," John said.

"Thank you, my friend."

Leaving the room, John followed silently behind Smiljan. The old man didn't volunteer any more information, and seemed to actually be lost in thought, so John didn't bother to interrupt. Instead, he examined the furnishings that they passed. Everything was in impeccable taste and demonstrated an incredible level of workmanship. Even the few paintings on the wall were of a quality John would expect to find in a high-end art gallery back home.

All in all, this really wasn't what one expected to find in a house in the middle of a murky swamp.

The musing came to an end as they approached an ornate door and the old man reached to turn the handle.

They walked into a spacious room filled with stacks of shelves, each shelf loaded with books and manuscripts. In the centre of the room was a single desk, in which Ganz had taken up residence.

John had to clear his throat quite loudly to get the scientist's attention, who hadn't even noticed them walk in. The old man looked on with some amusement as the scientist almost fell backwards out of the chair as he sat up straight with a start.

"What!... Ah, John-" Ganz started to say, before noticing the old man also standing there. "You! Holy smokes! John, do you realize who this is?!"

"Yes," John said, not comprehending in the slightest what was going on, and wondering if Ganz had finally lost it. "This is the nice man who we're visiting."

"Funny," Ganz said, regaining some semblance of wits. Looking back at Smiljan, he started talking again, "But how are you here? And alive to boot? This doesn't make any sense?!"

"Well, my new friend," the old man said. "The answers to those questions entirely depend on who you believe me to be?"

"Ganz, hold on a second," John cut in. "What's going on here? This is crazy talk even for you."

"John, do you remember me telling you that something about Smiljan here was familiar."

"Yes, and I chalked it up to your usual antics," John said, still not sure what Ganz was getting at. "Ganz, you have trouble remembering names at a party!"

"Hey, everyone does!"

"It was your office Christmas social," John said flatly. "You saw those same people at work every single day."

"Look, this is beside the point," Ganz said. "This man is one of the greatest geniuses who ever lived!"

"... Okay..."

"John, you have him to thank for the fact that you have electricity in your home!"

"What? This is Thomas Edison?"

Both the old man and Ganz gave John a flat stare at that comment.

"John, you recently bought a car named after him," Ganz hinted.

"Ah... um... pleased to meet you then, Mister... er... Cherokee..."

"For heaven's sakes, John! This is Nikola Tesla!"

"What?" John blinked. "How do you figure that?"

"So you have heard of him?"

"Of course, Ganz. I'm not a total idiot."

"I should have figured it out earlier!" Ganz muttered to himself. "I did a science project on you back in school. I should have known! The physical description! The fact that your name was *Smiljan*."

"What about his name?" John asked.

"Smiljan was the village where Tesla was born."

"Looks like you're picking up some of Doyle's skills," John commented.

"Well, there was the other thing."

"What other thing?"

"There's a pen on that table. A really nice pen too. Anyway, it's got his name engraved on it in English."

"I see," John said dryly. "You're a regular Sherlock Holmes."

"I just can't figure out how he's alive."

"Perhaps you could try asking him," Smiljan suggested from across the room. Closing the book he had been idly leafing through, he walked over to them.

"This was your big puzzle for Ganz?" John asked the old man.

"I'll admit, it may have been more for my amusement than anything else," the old man shrugged. "Besides, when am I ever going to get the chance to do this to someone from Earth again? Much less a colleague."

"Colleague?" John laughed. "Careful with that. I don't think his head can swell anymore without causing permanent damage."

"Funny," Ganz said.

"He's right on one count though," John said. "How are you still alive?"

"Yep, there are records of your death back on Earth?" Ganz added. "And, for that matter, how did you get here?"

"Well, your friend John can testify that he saw me walk down the hallway to this room," Smiljan said. "But, I suspect that's not what you're referring to. Unfortunately, it's one of a few things that I can't reveal to you at the current time.

"As for how I'm not dead, it's quite simple. Once I... discovered this world, it was a simple matter to hire a similar looking actor that had fallen on hard times to take my place. I instructed him to act the part of the crazy inventor, and to live out his life in obscurity. He had no family to speak of, and would be taken care of for the rest of his days, so it was a relatively good deal for him.

"Though, he may have taken the *crazy* part a little too literally," the old man shook his head in slight dismay. "I read those stories about the pigeons."

"What's that-" John asked.

"Long story," Ganz cut him off. "I'll explain to you later, John. Go on, please."

"Well, there's not much else to tell, really," the old man said. "I ensured that any research that could potentially be used for nefarious purposes was either destroyed or altered to never work, then packed up and left. Like I said, I've returned a few times to check on our progress."

"How did you manage that?" Ganz asked.

"Not important right now," the old man waved away the question. "But, I do believe our friend John has a question for you?"

"Okay..." Ganz said, confusion evident as he looked to his friend.

"So, Ganz," John started. "How would you like to take our new friend back to your labs so he can run some experiments?"

Ganz's mouth hung open for a full ten seconds before he said anything, "Wha..."

"I'll take that as a yes," John said. "When do you want to head back to Iathera, Smiljan? I'm ready to leave right away if needed."

"It's appreciated, but not necessary," the old man said. "Follow me."

Curious, John and a still wide-eyed Ganz made their way behind the old man into yet another wing of the exquisitely decorated house.

As they walked, John realized that he hadn't really taken notice of the fact that there were no windows anywhere. The decor of the house somehow seemed to suffice, and one didn't really notice the lack of a view to the outside.

Plus, even if there had been a window, what was there to see? A dark foggy swamp?

After another long hallway, they stopped just outside another door.

Unlike the other elegant doors, this one was blatantly utilitarian. It looked to be made of a solid chunk of metal, with a large wheel mounted on it, presumably a hatch release mechanism.

Smiljan then placed his hand against what John had thought to be a decorative spot of paint on the wall. A soft blue glow started to emanate from the spot, then a loud clanking noise was heard.

John's previous guess about the hatch release was correct, as the old man removed his hand and spun the wheel around, culminating in another loud clunk.

As the door opened up and light from inside escaped into the hallway, John noticed that the spot appeared to be a piece of blue tasrac, but not like any of the others he had seen before.

All the previous pieces of strange technology that he had encountered on this world had been powered by the strange crystal, and all the examples of the crystal he had seen had uniformly carried that granite-like speckled look when examined.

This piece was just as polished as any he had seen, but was of a uniform clarity and contained no traces of any sparkly specks.

If anything, it resembled the jewellery he had seen being touted by a Syrilo trader on his first visit to the Iatheran bazaar. Idly, he wondered about the strange pendant that the same merchant had gifted to him. *Was there more to that pendant than it being a simple trinket?*

Unfortunately, he was forced to file that thought away for later as the group walked into the now open room.

The room was extraordinarily tiny, measuring at most twelve feet on each side. With no furnishings anywhere in sight, he wondered what the old man was up to. He almost yelped in alarm as a metal panel slid down from the ceiling, covering the open doorway and effectively sealing the small room.

Ganz gave him an equally nonplussed look, and John was just about to question Smiljan when he saw the old man placing his hand on another tasrac spot on the inside wall and decided to let events play out.

Still thoroughly puzzled, it wasn't until he heard a rumbling sound and started feeling motion in his inner ear that he realized he wasn't trapped in a boxlike room. He was actually travelling in a fairly spacious elevator.

From what his senses told him, they were travelling downwards.

He really likes to protect whatever's in his basement, I guess.

About a minute later, the elevator was still moving.

Did he put his basement at the bottom of a well or something?

The elevator came to a rest a few seconds later, just as John was wondering if they'd be travelling to the far side of the planet.

The door slid up with a metallic hiss, and they followed the old man out. The lighting in the room outside was subdued, and John could only make out some dark shapes in the dimness.

Truthfully, John wasn't sure what he expected to find buried so deep under the swamp. As his eyes adjusted to the light level, he drew a sharp intake of breath. Whatever scenario his mind had imagined, it certainly hadn't been this.

The room they had entered was huge. *No, cavernous. Literally*. The walls, floor and ceiling were carved into the rock bed, and each side must have been at least a hundred feet long. The ceiling itself must have been about thirty feet high. Silently, he gazed at what appeared to be a massive command and control area manned by a few dozen wolves. *Well, that explains the security door*, was all that passed through John's mind.

"This way, gentlemen," the old man announced with no further explanation, as he started walking to the far side of the chamber.

Halfway across, John could make out the form of Alisa. He also noticed Garh standing next to her, idly staring off into space. He had almost mistaken the giant for one of the many wolves roaming around.

Ganz had also noticed her, and was staring in her direction as well. However, he wasn't looking at Alisa.

"Wait a second... you had a portal here the whole time?!" he claimed, opening his mouth for the first time since leaving the library and staring at the portal up ahead. "Why did we trek through that entire swamp?!"

"It wasn't a cruel joke, or anything of the sort, I assure you," the old man chuckled. "That portal currently leads nowhere that's convenient for you."

Seeing Ganz about to open his mouth again, he held up his hand, "Its current destination is unimportant for the time being, and of no use to our current situation. However, I do believe that our friend John here will be able to use it to expedite our journey back to Earth."

John was momentarily taken aback, "I can do that? Are you sure? I thought I had to use that portal back in Rheus's workshop to return home? Didn't Mag have to tinker with it to allow me to use it to travel?"

"Your data is correct, but your conclusion is wrong," the old man said. "Mag wasn't working on the portal. If that stone is what I suspect it is, then she was attenuating it to our portals."

"So I can use this... ability to control any portal?"

"I wouldn't say *control*," Smiljan explained. "Think of the process more as tapping into the portal temporarily, and utilizing its power to create a stable threshold on this world."

"Okay, that makes sense, I guess," John conceded. "But why can I use it back on Earth, seeing as how there aren't any portals there?"

The old man smiled, "All in good time, I assure you."

John was starting to think that the old man enjoyed keeping secrets just for kicks, but wasn't able to probe further as Alisa greeted them warmly, "Hello again, gentlemen. I forgot to ask if your naps had been comfortable?"

"Ganz opted to spend his naptime ploughing away at the bookshelf in his room, as I suspect you're already aware," John chuckled. "Personally, mine wasn't as long as I would have liked, but it helped. That tea also perked me up a bit, I have to admit."

"Glad to hear it," she said. "I promised to send a large batch to Lady Venarya next harvest, but I've got some extra that you can take back, if you wish?"

"Thanks. The way my sleep cycle's been these last few nights, it'd be much appreciated."

"I'll make sure you have it before you leave here," she smiled. "Now, I do believe we have a trip to arrange?"

"Ah, yes," John said, wondering how he was going to explain this one to his sisters. "I'll pop over first and give Mel and Sophia a heads-up, then I'll come back and get you two."

"Sounds good," Ganz said, looking this way and then at the equipment in the room, obviously fascinated by the whole thing, and probably not paying attention to the fact that John was leaving him in a room full of werewolves and a sasquatch.

"I'll be back," John chuckled, staring intently at the portal and concentrating. He had to admit that he was a bit surprised to see that it was actually working. The tasrac embedded in the stone portal began to glow, and a cascade of light swirled in the centre. John also noticed that the tasrac appeared to be the more pure variety he had recently seen in the elevator control.

Within seconds, the light settled to form a portrait of the inside of John's house.

"I'll be damned," he muttered. "It actually worked."

"Faith, my friend," Smiljan said softly, overhearing him.

"I'll be back," John repeated, stepping into the portal.

"You found who?! And you left Ganz where?! And what on Earth are you wearing?"

Even with the volume on the computer turned down, Sophia's shrieks still echoed throughout the room.

"Easy sis," John held a hand. "First, this outfit's not from Earth. Second, Ganz is perfectly fine. And third, this is a once in a lifetime opportunity."

"I've heard that line before," she said dryly, regaining her composure. "Quite a few times in the last couple of days, actually."

"Can I help it if I'm good at sussing out interesting stuff?" John said, giving his best impression of puppy dog eyes.

"Fine, you old snake," she shook her head in defeat. "You owe me for this."

"Put it on my tab," he retorted.

"Just make sure no one sees them," she cautioned. "I don't need any tabloids breathing down my neck, or worse."

"I'll make sure Ganz knows to use an empty lab," John assured her. "I'll even drop them off at your place, so you can meet our living legend."

"Gosh, thanks..."

"Anytime. Also, um, can I convince you to explain this to Mel for me?"

"Okay, so you guys are clear on the plan? Any objections?"

"Sounds good to me," Ganz shrugged.

"I concur," Smiljan said.

Garh grunted.

"Good, I'll start opening the portal now," John said, turning and concentrating on the stone arch.

As the portal finished forming, they now gazed into John's sisters' penthouse, and could see Sophia staring back at them.

Ganz gave a merry wave to her, and she returned the gesture hesitantly, her eyes wide open.

"That's odd," Ganz said. "I thought you said she had used these portals before?"

"I think she just noticed our shaggy friend here," John chuckled, pointing to Garh.

"Ah."

"Okay, you guys ready? Got all your equipment?"

"Yep," Ganz replied, picking up two of the cases that had been waiting for them with Alisa and Garh.

"I'm afraid you won't be able to use the portal to return quickly to Iathera, John," Smiljan said, as he and Ganz approached the threshold to the portal.

"Why is that?" John asked.

"Not for any technical reason," the old man explained. "I'd just rather not have anyone else know of the existence of this portal, even my friends back in town. I do apologize. Should anyone ask, inform them that Ganz is still here aiding me."

"Well, looks like you're walking out of the swamp by yourself, John," Ganz chuckled. Indicating Garh, he added, "But, at least you'll have some company from our silent companion over there."

"I was about to suggest," the old man interrupted him, the edges of his lips flickering with the hint of a smile, "that you can take one of my personal submarines back, John. I've already sent word to Commander Nuretz to expect you."

"Wait, what?!" Ganz started to say, but the old man pushed him forward through the portal. John was sure he saw a brief smirk pass across Smiljan's face.

With no sound propagating through the portal, all Ganz could do was stare incredulously at the old man, then at John.

With a laugh, John gave him a slight wave, then deactivated the portal.

"Now, gentlemen, shall I show you the quick way out?" Alisa asked with a twinkle in her eye, clearly amused by the whole situation.

John was a little surprised to hear Garh answer her, "Certainly, my dear. Please lead the way."

Nuretz sighed.

He was just getting used to the boredom, and had in fact just finished polishing his boots. He had, in fact, managed to get them to quite a nice shine.

Then, they had heard the howl emanating from within the swamp.

Some of his men looked uneasy, but none of them said anything.

The good news was that that particular howl only signalled that there was a message for him, so that fortunately meant that no one was in any immediate danger.

The bad news was that he was going to have to go trudge into the swamp in order to go collect the message.

With another sigh, he looked down to his shiny boots, then said, "Wait here, everyone. I'll be back shortly."

Nuretz looked at the creature that had just dropped from the treetops, and now stood in the spot he had occupied just a second earlier.

"You still good, Noo-retz," the wolf said in an approximation of a toothy grin. "I catch you soon."

"But not tonight," Nuretz chuckled.

"Soon," the creature promised. "I have message for you."

"I gathered as much. Go on."

"Your friends come back with under-water boat. You go meet him and pick him up."

Nuretz was startled at that. He didn't even remotely suspect that the old man had submarines at his disposal, nor could he imagine how in the world it was possible for one of them to maneuver in the thick swamp. Still, considering what he knew of Smiljan, it shouldn't have come as a complete surprise.

"I... see. Where am I supposed to pick him up?"

"You take boat by self. Go north to big broken tree. You watch water for him."

Nuretz remembered the spot. He'd scouted the area enough times in the past, and knew the fallen tree the wolf was referring to. It had strategically collapsed in such a way to turn a small

cove into an enclosed lagoon. Nuretz now suspected that the tree might have had some help during its demise.

"Very well. Thank you for telling me."

"You welcome. Also stay live so I catch you one day."

"I'll certainly try, my friend. Take care of yourself, too."

Dalja tried to think of someplace she could acquire a fishing pole.

With a smirk, she remembered the one place where she knew she had seen one. *This was going to be fun*.

"Is there really no way for me to get rid of you?" the near-exasperated Captain asked, seeing her stride into his tent and looking up from his paperwork.

"Easy there, big boy," Dalja said. "I'm just here to borrow your fishing pole."

"What?"

"That thing hanging on your wall," she pointed. "You can use it to catch fish."

"You're not planning on stabbing anyone with it are you?" the Captain asked, shoulders slumping and ignoring the jibe. "I'm quite fond of it."

"Of course not," she said. "That thing's way too flimsy to do any real damage with."

With a sigh, the Captain said, "I'm probably going to regret this, but go right ahead if it'll get you out of my hair."

"Thank you," she said, a note of rare sincerity in her voice.

"Where are you planning on fishing, anyways?"

"This camp's located right next to a large body of water, if you hadn't noticed?"

"Exactly. And this same camp is staffed by quite a large number of troops, along with the assorted refuse that goes along with that."

"I'm not completely stupid, you know? I have no intention of fishing in your slit trench runoff"

"Just checking," he shrugged, giving up. "Though I don't know why I even bother. Good luck, and please take as long as you want."

Dalja would have to be extremely careful now. No doubt Rush had someone covertly keeping an eye on her.

If he didn't, well, then he was an idiot.

She had been sitting on the pile of rocks, intently looking out for some sign of the Shark, all the while making sure that it looked like she was purposelessly fishing to blow off steam.

She hated fishing.

Her task was compounded by the difficulty of blindly scratching a message into a small rock using an extra hook.

After what seemed like hours, but had in fact only been just less than half an hour, she spotted the shape of a dolphin briefly breaking the surface to breathe.

She really hoped that that wasn't some stray that had happened to pass by at the wrong time. She couldn't see any sign of a periscope from where she sat, but they had assured her that they'd have no trouble spotting her signals, and that she could start communicating to them once she saw the creature near the surface.

She got to work and started off with a series of seemingly random blinks and idle hand gestures, which actually translated into a complex message which was to be relayed back to headquarters.

Done, she picked up the rock she had been etching and casually hefted it into the air a few times. In reality, she was double checking the writing, making sure it was fairly legible. She was also judging its weight.

With a swift toss, she pelted it into the ocean almost as an afterthought.

The stone contained no extra message, but had a set of keywords scrawled into it, just in case there had been any ambiguity in her gestures. The dolphin would retrieve it from the sea bottom and return it to the submarine.

Her real work completed, she still had the unfortunate task of staying there to make it look like she was avidly fishing.

Dalja hated fishing.

"It's empty, sir," the Cluster Marine reported. "Looks like no one's home, friendly or otherwise."

"Good, but make another sweep just in case," Ancor ordered. "Start fortifying the area, and man both sides of the wall, including those turrets. There's a chance that they may still be in the Plaguelands, and won't be too happy when they realize they've been cut off. Also, check the outer walls for any holes that these blasted creatures might be coming through."

"Yes, sir," came the reply, and the Marine hustled away.

"That last part might be a fool's errand, you know?" Jamieson said from behind him.

"How so?" Ancor turned around and raised an eyebrow at him.

"Those possessed rabbit-things burrow underneath us all the time," Jamieson explained. "That's part of the reason we patrol the jungle. We even had an unfortunate incident in the tunnels once. They seem to have learned, though, and dig even deeper now. We try to collapse their bolt-holes whenever we find them, but that in itself almost seems like a fool's errand half the time."

"I see."

"Not that you shouldn't check for gaps in the wall, sir," Jameison backtracked a little, fearing he may have overstepped his bounds with the Admiral. "There was a higher than usual amount of those blasted things running around on the way here. No telling what damage those bastards caused when they attacked. And, speaking of which, I've got some guys stuck in a basement. I'd better go see about getting them out. Clance, come give me a hand getting down there."

"You're sure?"

"As sure as we can be, Jamieson," the Ranger replied. "Maybe about two hours after we stopped hearing movement upstairs, we heard them start up again for a few minutes. Seemed like they were on their way back out again. We spied a few of them walking out through the communications room. Since then, we haven't heard anything until you lot showed up."

"Did you see if they were carrying anything?"

"If they were, we didn't spot it. Mind you, they were probably flooding through quite a few exits, so no telling who was carrying the booty. Assuming they had any, that is."

"And speaking of which," another Ranger piped up, "what in the name of all that's holy would they be looking for in the Plaguelands?"

"Other than a fast way to commit suicide, damned if I know," Jamieson replied. "Admiral Ancor's looking into that now. Frankly, I don't know how much luck he'll have. What's odd though, is that we didn't see anyone on the way here. They must have left using another route."

"Couldn't have gone south to rendezvous with their ships," the Ranger suggested, "or else you would have spotted their fleet. Had to be north."

"We figured as much when we got to Presca. Ancor sent a couple of fast scouts to investigate. We'll see what they report back."

"One moment, gentlemen," Alisa said, stepping up to the new door.

John, Garh, and Alisa had exited the communications room the same way they had entered, and had walked to another wing of the house. They now stood in front of another large metal door, similar to the first one.

Or, hell, maybe it was the same door, John chuckled silently to himself. *Maybe she decided to have a bit of fun and walked us around in a circle.*

Alisa duplicated Smiljan's ritual and placed her hand on the blue spot next to the entry, and soon had the door open.

"I believe you know the procedure by now," she said, indicating that they enter the elevator. Indeed, it even looked like the same elevator to John.

This trip, however, was considerably shorter than the previous one. After about twenty seconds, Alisa opened the door and they emerged into another dimly lit chamber carved into the bedrock. This one appeared even to be even bigger than the communications room, and John could make out some large objects toward the far end.

"Mind your steps up there," Alisa warned. "Don't want you falling into the water."

John realized what she was talking about as his eyes started to adjust. The objects ahead were submarines, sitting in a large pool of water that occupied the entirety of the far half of the room.

"This way," Alisa instructed, and they fell into step behind her.

She guided them down the length of the room, and John noticed copious amounts of crates stacked on both walls to either side of him. There wasn't any trace of another soul though, human or wolf.

Alisa eventually led them to one of the submarines that was docked to a pier, gangplank already extended.

"Here's your ride back, gentlemen. You'll be one of the lucky few to enjoy the austere luxury of travelling in one of our new Shark class submarines," Alisa said. "We've already made arrangements with Commander Nuretz. He'll be waiting for you at the drop-off point, and will be taking you back to rendezvous with your ship."

John was a little puzzled by that. He wondered if the submarine wasn't capable of leaving the swamp, or if the old man just didn't want anyone else learning about them. *Knowing Smiljan, it was probably the latter*.

"Thank you, Alisa," Garh was the first to speak. "You wouldn't believe how long it takes to get all that mud off of my fur."

John chuckled a bit at that, "I can't say the same for this outfit that Venarya loaned me, but I appreciate you saving me the walk back. If you need to get hold of Smiljan for anything, send me a message and I'll zip back over to Earth and find him."

"I doubt that it'll be necessary, but thank you for the offer," Alisa said. "Also, there's that little present I mentioned waiting for you inside on your seat."

John had thought she was joking earlier, but replied, "Thanks for that. I have a feeling it'll be quite useful the way my little vacation's been going."

"Remember not to take too much of it, though," she cautioned. "Your body will still need its rest."

"I'll keep that in mind."

"Now, if there's no more questions, you'd better get on your way," she smiled. "If I remember Commander Nuretz, he's not the type you'd want to keep waiting."

"Can't say I know him that well, but I'll go on your recommendation," John grinned back, starting up the gangplank.

There were quite a few questions that John did want to ask her, such as how she ended up working in the middle of a swamp with a temporally dislocated mad scientist and a pack of anthropomorphic wolves, but it seemed impolite.

With a final wave to her, he descended the ladder into the depths of the submarine.

Once at the bottom, he almost yelped in surprise, and had to swallow it down. Standing at one of the hatches in the small room was another one of the wolves.

In fact, it was the extremely large wolf that had been acting as Smiljan's doorman. *So that's where he went off to.*

As Garh got off the ladder, the wolf spoke, "This way. Come sit. We leave now."

"As you wish, Radin," Garh responded.

"Ah... I'm right behind you," John managed to get out.

As he followed the two large creatures through the narrow doorway, John emerged into a small cockpit with six seats. One of the chairs in the second row held a small, neatly wrapped parcel, and he assumed that that was Alisa's parting gift of tea waiting for him.

John had almost forgotten about that within the last few minutes.

Taking the seat, he saw a belt and buckled himself in, not sure what kind of ride he was in for.

The small, round glass viewports afforded a line of sight immediately ahead and to the sides, and John could see that the cockpit wasn't in fact located at the front of the submarine. Looking ahead, he could see the hull protruding for at least another ten meters, ending in a slim taper.

"Ever ridden in one of these before, Garh?" he asked his new companion in a low voice.

"I can't say that I have, my friend," came the answer. "It should prove to be an interesting experience."

"I'd settle for *boring*, myself," John chuckled. "I think I'm about tapped out on excitement for now."

"You ready?" Radin turned to look at them from the pilot's seat.

"Indeed we are, old friend," Garh replied. "You may proceed."

"Right there, sir!"

Acting Captain Yalic turned his spyglass to where the lookout was pointing, "I see them."

First officer on board Admiral Ancor's ship, the *Cat's Eye*, he had been given a temporarily field promotion due to his familiarity with the new Kierdan tactics and weapons. Currently commanding the *Iron Cloud*, a Cluster scout based out of Surth, its former officers had been temporarily reassigned to Ancor's expeditionary force for the duration of the mission.

"Signal the others to fall behind us," Yalic ordered.

As he watched the other two scouts take up flanking positions, he put the spyglass back to his eye.

It had to be them. There couldn't be any doubt. Not unless there were two squadrons of giant black ships roaming these waters.

Judging by their vector, they must have come from a spot on the coast further east, and may have left something of value behind.

"Have the *Red Dusk* break off and backtrack them," Yalic said. "Tell them to investigate and find out what they can, but not to take any unnecessary risks."

"Aye, sir."

"Accelerate and bring us closer to their main fleet, but be careful," he ordered.

Yalic took the time to closely examine the enemy ships in the low light. There were seventeen of them, and they were big. They must have been at least two hundred feet from bow to stern, and were painted pitch black.

Even if he had the full fleet from Surth with him, he wasn't sure that he would care to engage them in full-on combat. *Not after that mess back home, at least.*

Getting closer enough to make out the silhouettes of the crew on the decks, his stomach dropped as he saw them in the process of handling and dumping large crates off the back of their ships.

He remembered the Kierdans using the same trick to cover their escape, except it had turned out that all but one crate was filled with nothing but sand. The sole exception had exploded as a sort of decoy, forcing the Cluster to dedicate resources to clearing the area of them, rather than pursuing the Kierdan fleet.

Still, he wasn't taking any chances.

"Slow down and bring us to just within ballista range of the nearest crate," he ordered. "I want a firing solution on it immediately."

His crew scampered about to fulfil the orders, and as the Iron Cloud neared the crate, the first mate reported, "All ready to fire, sir."

"By all means, go right ahead."

"Aye, sir," came the reply as the order was relayed.

The iron bolt shot out with unrestrained ferocity for a few seconds and made impact with its target.

It exploded.

Even from this distance, Yalic could feel the force of the blast.

"Pull back!" he spat in disgust. "Turn us around and rendezvous with the *Red Dusk*!"

Still, he thought, if that's all they have in the way of weapons, we should be able to devise a strategy to counter them.

As if in answer to his musing, he saw massive tongues of flame erupt from the ships at the rear of the formation toward his general direction.

While the flames looked like they carried on for about a hundred yards, they were nowhere near close enough to scorch Yalic's ships.

But, they had succeeded in making their point crystal clear.

Run away. Now.

Epilogue

"I do sympathize with you," Yazril was saying, "but now's really not the ideal time for this."

The Iatheran Intendant didn't care much for strange religious types, even the ones that didn't travel the land proselytizing their faith.

Fanatics in their own way, all of them.

"Would you rather wait until you have a *real* crisis on your hands?" the woman robed in black countered. "All I ask is for a few minutes of your time to explain myself. Believe me when I say that whatever problems you currently have will be as a minnow, compared to the whale of a problem currently awaiting you if you fail to heed me."

"A threat?" Yazril's eyes narrowed.

"Yes. But not from us."

"Very well," Yazril sighed in resignation and relaxed her stance. "Go on."

"As you may know, your recent unwanted visitor," she said, waving her hand in the general direction of the pyramid lying fallow in the bay outside, "managed to lay waste to our shrine to the south"

"And you have our condolences on that," Yazril said, sincere in her words. "From your presence here, I'm assuming that the Sisterhood managed to evacuate it in time?"

"Not quite," the visitor said. "But that's irrelevant."

Yazril raised an eyebrow at that.

"Allow me to start from the beginning," the lady entreated. "Our most sacred scriptures, sealed away from outsiders, contain accounts of a war that occurred on the old continent of Dracsos."

"How exactly does this matter of ancient history come into play now?"

"This war was with a great enemy from the distant past," the visitor patiently continued.

"The details of this enemy are lost to time."

"Of course they are," Yazril forced herself not to roll her eyes.

"The scriptures are explicit about one thing. Had that enemy won, every living person on this world would have ceased to be. In fact, we were losing badly to whoever, or whatever, it was."

"And let me guess, you lot turned out to be mankind's glorious saviour in this tale?"

I really hope this isn't some convoluted scheme to try to solicit donations for their organization.

"No," the lady declared patiently. "The Sisterhood wasn't formed until after the war was over and the enemy had already been banished."

"Banished?"

"The enemy was not of this world."

Yazril was all ears at that bit of info.

"You have my attention. Go on..."

The adventure continues in...

Artifice: Episode Five

Message From The Author

Here we are, folks!

Plots within plots, and monkey wrenches being tossed into the works at every turn. What

lies in wait for our intrepid young explorer from another world, and his cadre of trusted friends?

After all, things couldn't possibly get any more strange for them, could it?

Of course not.

Now, if you believe that, I've got some prime real estate in Florida for you. Watch as the

plot unfolds further in Artifice: Episode Five.

I sincerely hope you've enjoyed reading these first four episodes, and that you continue to

read my work. Goodness knows that it's not entirely all fun and games writing these, but it's a

truly good feeling to know that strangers/friends-I-haven't-met-yet all over the world are

appreciative of something that I've created.

If you haven't already, I urge you to please post reviews of my work at the retailer from

which you purchased this book. It may not seem like much, but it does help with promoting book

sales. Plus, I really enjoy reading them. If you've already left reviews, you have my heartfelt

thanks.

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