

Artifice: Episode One

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Chapter 1

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

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

With a tired motion he tossed the blanket to one side, got up, and stretched with a tired yawn. He then glanced at the corner of the room which, until recently, had contained a small stack of wood.

Shaking off the lingering remnants of sleep, he finally noticed the wind howling outside. Seeing the mid-morning sun obscured by the falling snow was sight enough to make him groan aloud.

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Quietly, Penny", he moaned with a hand going to the side of his head. "I'm still trying to gather my wits from last night", he added while sneaking a guilty glance at the near empty decanter on the table.

Penny cocked her head and looked quizzically at him.

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

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

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

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

Just my imagination, Rheus thought to himself.

"Wherever did you find this, Mag?" he asked.

-Far-, he heard her reply.

"I'm guessing this was the reason for your extended trip?"

-Part-.

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

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

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

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

Rheus watched on, confident that she wouldn't put him in any danger. Plus, his curiosity had gotten the better of him, mainly due to the fact that the portal she was attempting to open didn't require any strange rocks to activate, and, furthermore, that portal was supposed to only be coupled to his quarters. He continued watching as the portal slowly triggered; the outer arch glowing an incandescent blue, and the inside a swirling mass of white light. The swirling mass of light gradually dimmed and coalesced into a shimmering window, allowing Rheus to see the portal's destination.

It was most certainly not his quarters.

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

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

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

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

-*Safe*-

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

-*Safe*-, the voice repeated.

“Um... Hi?”

-*Yes*-

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

-*Yes*-

”Um... what do you want?”

-*Come*-

“Me?” John asked, pointing to himself again.

-Yes-

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

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

-Walk-

Reassured a little by the almost human joke, John nervously chuckled and murmured to himself, "I guess that would be logical. Well, as logical as listening to a dragon in my closet. Still, it's a more intriguing prospect than going out in that weather, and besides, I doubt I'll ever get an offer like this again."

While a bit shaken by the whole experience, he nevertheless tried to regain his wits. John took a deep breath, and before he could raise any self doubts as to what he was about to do, took a step forward.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Hello, can you hear me?"

The voice had a slightly worried tone to it.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"None taken at all! I do apologize for the whole unconsciousness thing. That's never happened before."

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

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

Chapter 2

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Yes, sir."

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Estimates say that the new batch of ships should be ready in approximately fifteen days, sir. Assuming minimum spoilage, then that should bring our total count to just over twelve hundred. As of an hour ago, we now have seven hundred and ninety three ships available for use,"

supplied Rush. “That’s not including the three hundred and eighty-five that we just sent out. But, from what I’ve seen, I’m not counting on those coming back anytime soon, if at all.”

“Excellent, but we need to be extra careful from here on out. If word gets out about this, we can expect the other nations to stop dawdling about whether to intervene,” cautioned Athash. “If they prematurely realize that this is a prelude to further invasion, this *will* end in disaster.”

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

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

“I’ll see to it.”

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

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

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

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

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

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

“Will do, my lord.”

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

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

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

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

Chapter 3

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

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

“I know the feeling,” replied John. “I still think I’m going to wake up any second now.”

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

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

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

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

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

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

“None taken,” replied John.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Rheus had the good grace to blush.

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

“Come in,” said Rheus.

The ornate handle turned and in entered another seemingly normal human. A boy, in fact. He was dressed simply, wearing just a pullover shirt and pants, and seemed to be about ten or eleven years old. He didn’t give John or Venarya’s appearance a second glance, simply a polite nod and smile. Nor was he surprised by Rheus being dressed in a bathrobe. He simply said, “Here you go, sir. Food and a change of clothes,” as he put down a covered tray and took off a bag that had been slung over his back. As he did so, both dogs, well trained enough to not disturb him when he was encumbered, moved over to his side with their tails wagging. As he noticed them, he smiled and reached out to rub their heads.

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

The boy’s eyes noticeably lighted up and smiled back at Rheus, “Thank you, sir!”

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

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

“Very well,” acknowledged Rheus. “We’ll be there shortly.”

“Until then,” John smiled.

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

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

“She thinks it’s funny, you know,” commented Rheus from the side room.

“The food? What do you mean?” queried John.

“No. You know... the whole weak at the knees thing.”

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

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

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

“She can turn it off and on at will?”

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

“Can others of her race do that as well?”

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

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

“How did she come to work here?”

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

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

“Five hundred and sixty two years ago.”

John was doubly shocked. “She... looks incredibly good for her age.”

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

John finished off the last bite of cake, then signaled the dogs to follow along behind him. Being well behaved and trained, he had never bothered with leashes, and hope he wouldn’t regret that as they toured the city that day. As they walked out the door to Rheus’s workshop, John glanced back at the door and saw a glass panel attached to the wood. Affixed to the panel was a set of polished stone knockers attached to a hanging cord. *Well, one mystery solved.*

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

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

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

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

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

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

“Pet?” finished Rheus with a slight smile. “No, she’s more of a permanent guest of the institution. She’s been here longer than I have, as well. Any attempts I’ve made to get details

about her past elicit nothing but silence from her. For all I know, she might be ten times older than Venarya.”

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

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

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

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

Why are there dogs here?

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

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

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

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

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

John assumed that to be the town’s name.

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

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

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

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

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

“Unless they use one of those crazy portals?”

“Almost all the portals linking our two regions were severed when the conflict began, thankfully. Only a few, heavily monitored portals still remain open. However, you do raise a good point. Your arrival should have been impossible, without having an actual portal on your

side. Furthermore, that portal would also have been needed to be specifically tuned and linked to my portal, which is an extremely time consuming process. In addition, judging from everything you've described so far, I agree with your hypothesis that you did not come from elsewhere on this world. I have never heard of a portal being linked to another world before. In fact, I've never actually heard of another world before. The implications are mind boggling, and I'm still not sure how Mag did this, or for what purpose. I'm going to have to have a long talk with her when she gets back." With a sardonic laugh, he added, "I just hope the headache will be worth it."

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

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

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

"Aside from me having to teach you our language?" Rheus laughed. "Trust me, I would know. But, enough of this. There are enough worries to go around without us creating new ones. For now, we're tourists enjoying the sights of this fair city!"

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“And how many of your days in a year?”

“Three hundred and sixty four.”

“That’s remarkable, and a bit odd.”

“Why do you say that?”

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

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

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

“Side effect of living in a school,” laughed Rheus.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Some sort of weird telepathic thing?"

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"And I'm delighted you decided to have me do it," commented Rheus dryly.

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

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

"True, enough," he replied with a nervous laugh.

"Should I even ask?" John chimed in.

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

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

Venarya laughed as Rheus's face just kept redder with embarrassment.

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

Chapter 4

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

If only he had listened to them.

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

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

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

Had that been part of their plan, too?

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

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

Then, there was a knock at the door.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Rush, my lord."

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

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

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

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

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

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