

400 years ago ...

The farm boy sat on a stone wall, watching wagons trundle along the dusty road. There was a mixture of travellers; individuals and pairs, families, and several followers of different religious orders going by their coloured robes. They trudged on the roadside to allow the wagons to pass, then moved back to the middle where the walking was easier, coughing at the dust.

One old man hobbled onto the grass to rest. “Not goin’ in for the festival, lad?”

“What festival?” the boy asked.

Wiping sweat from his brow the man glanced across to the boy. “The Festival of the Moons. I can understand you not knowin’ it I guess. It only happens every fifty year or so.”

“Can’t. Me Da wouldna let me. Got too many chores to do.”

“Well ... no need to get to town to see the lunar eclipse, I guess. A shame for you to miss out on all the festivities though. I hear there’s goin’ to be powershapers showin’ us their new tricks. Ever seen a powershaper lad?”

Shaking his head, the boy looked over his shoulder to check on his flock of black-faced sheep.

“Well. If there’s one thing to see in your life, make it a powershaper. They can do extraordinary things; turn night into day and day into night, the ugly can become beautiful—”

“Can they shear the sheep, and set watch over ’em?”

“As to that, I couldn’t say. The more formidable shapers have helped build cities, and turned the tide in many battles.”

“Have you seen battles?” the boy asked eagerly.

“More than I care to say, lad.” The man stood up.

“Enjoy the festival.”

The traveller waved over his shoulder. “If I see you on the way back, I’ll tell you all about it.”

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Ix awoke from his stupor.

Acutely attuned to the hive’s environment, he realised something was wrong the moment he distinguished the permutations in the air. Ground tremors were a concern at

the best of times, but when combined with a rapid reduction in *fenk*, he tensed in alarm. He knew on rare occasions there were fluctuations; when storms swept the ground high above, he felt variations in the field, but this was a total void.

With antennae waving in front, he decided to investigate and began the long ascent of the main passage, his ten footpads clicking on the hardened surface. Knowing the downdrafts would eventually carry them to all the levels of the hive, he emitted potent pheromones to alert the others. He was aghast with the lack of warning from the upper levels. Considering he was halfway down the main shaft, others should have reported this catastrophe by now. True, he was gifted, able to sense miniscule fluctuations since he was a newt, but this loss of *fenk* should have been sensed by total *nuerks*.

His thoughts darkened when debris filtered down, bouncing harmlessly off his exoskeleton. Was the hive being invaded? If so, why no alarm? As soon as the thoughts occurred, he dispelled them. It was absurd to contemplate invaders without a warning or their scent permeating the passages of the hive. And how would it explain the *fenk* reduction? No, whatever was happening was far more serious.

Ix hesitated when his feelers picked up something approaching rapidly from above. Bracing himself by raising his forelegs and setting his rear legs firmly into the wall crevices, Ix prepared for attack. As the disturbance closed in, he recognised the form of a lith sentry. It was falling! Ix folded his antennae and ducked. Clinging to the shaft wall, he used his forelegs to fend it off.

Though smaller, the impact surprised the young guardian. The sentry cracked open like an old egg when it landed below; desiccated remains filtered to the hive's depths.

And there was something else.

It was fenkless!

Ix registered no aura radiating from the sentry's body. Or from the other body-parts that followed as more sentries and guardians rained down, bouncing off the walls and ledges; carapace, legs, thorax: all the same! Whatever was occurring above, it was the most dangerous threat to the hive he knew.

I must continue! Increasing the secretion of his pheromone warning, Ix began his ascent. *Perhaps the falling body-parts will be sufficient enticement for them to act?*

The passage continued shaking and his senses read a further reduction in *fenk*. When he came across an alcove, he climbed inside to check on any sentries to discern if

they had information about what happened. In a short time he came across another body. As with the others, it was *fenkless*.

The air cooled as he climbed.

Much too cold!

Long before he should have, Ix detected light. He should have just reached the lowest section of the upper level. He should have encountered many sentries. He should be able to sense some iota of aura from the ground.

But there was nothing.

No upper level. No living sentries. No aura. Where are the upper levels? Ix was looking at open sky! The two moons bathed the landscape in a white patina. Not trusting his eyesight alone, he concentrated on his antennae and scent.

This sort of experience was beyond his years and training. Ix emerged from the remnants of what should have been the upper level. He had a job to do, and he wanted to make a complete report to his superiors. That meant a quick patrol. Hearing a noise, he scuttled around, thinking other guardians had sensed his distress and came to investigate, but then he realised it was his own mandibles clacking his nervousness.

A freezing wind washed over him. He shuddered as he scurried to the top of a pile of boulders. All around him lay broken rock and fragments of crystal, he noted several carapaces scattered and broken. Fallen comrades from the unwarranted attack, no doubt.

On the horizon he sensed movement. Zeroing in, he perceived horrible figures. He imagined them to be similar to what deformed pupae resembled; four limbs with under-developed thorax and head. Though grotesque, these creatures were very agile, as if these gross mutations were natural.

Walking on two legs? He approached with caution. Surely these posed no threat, but what caused the destruction of the upper levels?

A shadow passed overhead. Recalling lessons of flying attacks, Ix immediately spun around and dropped into a defensive posture; he lowered his thorax to the ground and raised his forelegs.

It took a while for him to register what he saw.

Great Hives! Surely this cannot be!

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The ground shaking stopped.

Peasants and scholars alike looked up; some in awe, some in fear and some averted their eyes in sheer terror.

In front of them, where there had been magnificent buildings and plazas, well-manicured gardens, undulating hills and evergreen forest lay a desolate valley full of rifts and dust. Fractured fingers of rock and crystal pointed to the roiling clouds. Above, huge chunks of land drifted, rising higher and higher in the air.

Their beloved city of Dromas was no more!

Even as they watched, two massive clumps of rock and crystal bumped into one another. The sound of earth grinding against earth reached their ears. Dirt, rock and crystal shards rained down onto the barren lands below. Dust and leaves were blown by the wind, whirlpooling around until the wind abated.

The wailing of the injured and dying came from every direction. Priests of Life, Spirit and Earth moved amongst the masses bestowing as much healing as possible. Following the white, green and brown robes came those dressed in red. They dealt with the unfortunates beyond the ability to heal.

There far too many dead. Far too were far too many injured. And far too few clerics to heal.

“Why did this happen?” a green-robed cleric asked, his voice rasping with weariness and dust.

“Greed,” a woman in white replied. “It always is. And power. They go hand in hand, and when it comes to powershapers, their greed sometimes exceeds their power. They want it so bad, they were willing to do whatever it takes to get it. And they lost everything.”

“So did we all.” He knelt down to examine another victim, a farmer from his sturdy and functional clothing.

“What on Yarnik is that?”

Wiping his eyes, the green-robed cleric followed his friend’s gaze. Down in the valley, a huge creature, similar to an ant but with too many legs, emerged from a new fissure.

At the same time, screaming from other survivors reached their ears. They had seen it too. It was a dark grey monstrosity, and moving in their direction.

Those survivors able to move did so, carrying or dragging others with them. A few clerics stood at the edge of the chasm to defend with the power, but their spells were useless. All the energy in the area had been drained by the recent battle. They gathered their robes and followed the injured, catching up and assisting where they

could. Furtive glances behind showed the creature climbing easily over the rim of the chasm. The refugees quickened their pace, disappearing over the rise of a small hill.

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Ix could not believe creatures on only two legs could move swiftly and maintain balance, especially on this rough and broken terrain. He rose on his hind legs, antennae waving in the frigid air to check for any possible threat. When he sensed no danger, he lowered himself and examined the mutations lying on the ground. It too was devoid of any *fenk*, but Ix was not sure if this was normal for this bizarre and unknown creature. When he touched it, the body disintegrated, much like the sentries encountered back in the main shaft of the hive. The other bodies near the rim were the same. Moving further away, he finally encountered one that didn't shatter.

The smell was so alien; like nothing encountered before. Prodding one with his foreleg, he shuddered when he realised how soft and spongy it was.

Like a larvae! Maybe these were undeveloped young. But if so, why leave them?

Once again, Ix realised how out-of-depth he was. He would take one back to show his superiors. Picking one up, it squished in his mandibles. Red liquid dripped everywhere. A sudden smell wafted from the thing hanging limply from his mouthparts. Overcome with an irrational urge, he consumed it. Whatever it was, it tasted delicious. He hadn't eaten for several *thnees*. And there were so many, just lying there ...

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"Hive Mother. It's a pleasure to meet you again." Daxit crossed his forelegs and antennae, lowering his mandibles until his bow almost reached ground level. "As always, you do me honour with this visit."

"This fawning should be left for the drones and others of that ilk, not such a worthy as yourself," the queen said.

Daxit wanted to say something to hide his delight but could think of no adequate reply.

"Get up and stop dithering." She clacked her mouthparts in impatience. "Can you explain why my rest was disturbed so early? Why is it so cold? How long before I can

once again fly in the glorious heat and open air, instead of scuttling around in these tunnels like a hatchling!”

Daxit the Elder, rose and considered his sovereign before answering. Though still elated at her praise, he was concerned. Many before had been present when she was in this mood, and few survived the ordeal. This impromptu visit without her retinue was a sure sign of her growing impatience.

He ushered her into his chambers, their claws clicking in rhythm on the hard ground. “As you may be aware, Hive Mother, the upper levels have been destroyed,” he said. “The guardians — those that survived, tell me there was a huge drain of *fenk*. Some died due to their extreme sensitivity to its fluctuations—”

“What was the cause of this draining?”

“Hive Mother,” Daxit’s voice quivered as did his antennae. He emitted tones and pheromones of placation in a vain effort to calm his queen. “It is believed we have been invaded, though we are uncertain. One of our guardians went to investigate. He claims to have seen strange beings; soft bodied, some walking on only two legs, some on four.”

“From where? Have we had any news from other hives?”

“Others are working on that as we speak, but we do not know where they came from. A young guardian saw these strange creatures. They ran away when he approached. No doubt they are cowards, which is why they attacked during our hibernation. He gave chase to question them, but given the freezing conditions, they proved too swift and nimble for him. However, it seems many of them also died during the attack of our hive, so it was decided to bring one back for examination. They are so fragile. A great discovery though is these creatures are very appetising. If there are enough of them, we may be able to keep our food-stocks up.

“The hives to the south are still in hibernation. It will be at least another dozen cycles before they begin Emergence.” Daxit escorted the queen to a wall engraving showing several planets orbiting two suns. The scholar pointed to the fourth world. “As you can see, Hive Mother, we have a vastly eccentric orbit. Our seasons are extremely long, which is why we hibernate. With the freezing conditions above, food would be scarce, certainly not enough to sustain the entire colony during *meroch*. We are slowly getting closer to the sun so it can only get warmer. Ix, the young guardian I mentioned, informs me the twin moons had just completed an eclipse; given that and the current climate, I estimate we are in the last stages of *erigy*. Another four eclipses must occur

before it will be hot enough for you to comfortably grace the surface with your presence.”

“Four *zentirs*! I am surely vexed by this news.” Her antennae quivered in agitation.

“You have my humblest apologies.” Daxit bowed in submission, more annoyed at himself for getting carried away with his studies. *Surely my queen needs no lectures.*

“So there is nothing more you can say? No good news?”

“No my queen. I abase myself. I only wish—”

“Then you’re of no use.”

Those were the last words Daxit ever heard. His queen swiftly reared up and crushed his head with her forelegs. Before she tossed his body to the far side of the chamber, she sucked out the white juice of his brain. It did little to calm her though, and before she reached her chambers, two drones and a hapless guard also faced the brunt of her wrath.

The queen strode into her chambers, legs clicking on the hard surface.

“Things didn’t go to well it seems.” Her newest concubine noted residue of her feeding frenzy on her forelegs and breastplates. “A shame really. I was beginning to like old Dax.”

“I don’t care. I’m loath to remain here longer. I want to be outside again!”

“But it’s still too cold. Surely the warmth of the hive for a bit longer—”

“My hive has been destroyed!”

Slaart casually moved a few paces away to pick at some food on the trestle, putting some distance between himself and his discontented superior. “Even so, we have our guardians to defend us. You should stay safe, here. It is far better than risking the loss of a couple of appendages from the cold.”

“They’ll grow back.” Her mandibles snapped.

“True enough, but then your royal countenance would be marred, and we wouldn’t want that to happen.”

She paced the room back and forth, her legs drumming on the compacted earth as Slaart continued to soothe her from a distance. Calmness oozed from his pores, along with a few other intoxicating pheromones. “So then, my queen, I understand many sentries and guardians were lost. I’m thinking all this energy you have could be directed into more ‘fruitful’ pursuits.” He arched his body suggestively. “I see it as a

duty to replace our losses, and I dare say it could also increase the temperature. In this chamber at least.”

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“The avian scouts are returnin’,” the farm boy panted.

“Good news, lad. Bring ’em straight in when they land.” The old man turned back to the clerics. “We’ll soon know of any other survivors.” They were on a small rise sitting on rocks. Scrawled in the dirt between them was a crude map showing what they knew of the area.

“And then what? Go and rescue them? We have enough difficulty looking after what we have here,” a young cleric pointed out. Wendt was just out of his acolyte tunic and eager to make himself heard. “I went to heal an old woman today — she refused. She thought using the power was evil. Others felt the same. They say it was the cause of all this devastation.”

“Understandable, considerin’ what happened back in Dromas. It’ll take time to get the people’s trust back again.”

“In the meantime, I say we continue to Plenari,” another said, studying the map. “We’ll have a hard time pushing through the Central Ranges, but it is the nearest city.”

“I agree, but it be better knowin’ if there are others out there. We can send help from the nearest town. A shame none of us are telepath trained, we could send word.”

“There may be shapers out there listening.”

“From what I know of powershapers, none will be in a fit state to do anythin’. I reckon they’re worse off than us.”

“How do you know this?” Wendt asked.

“When they use too much energy, it makes them very sick. Weak. We’d be more a threat to them than they to us. Assumin’ they survived.”

“But they were so strong.”

“I believe the eclipse allowed greater access to the power,” the old man said. All questions stopped when three glins’ool strode up to the group. The avians were of similar colouring, indicating they were of the same breed.

“Well met. Diop ni Urrl at your service. My fellow wingmen have just scouted the southern sector.”

“We are all pleased to see you safely arrive. Please be seated and help yourself to what refreshments we have.”

The trio moved to the small boulders used as seats. As they ate the meagre offerings, they related what they had seen.

“There are other groups of survivors scattered to the south. We counted about two hundred, in groups ranging from five to thirty. We spoke to some of them, sharing what we knew of other groups. They said they would be heading south, into Lyhosa.”

“Did you see any ... strange creatures in your travels? Like huge ants.” The old man described the creature he had seen crawl out of the ground.

“Not on the ground, no. But we ventured close to one of these new sky islands; many are small — no bigger than these boulders, others are very large. This is all that remains of Dromas. What buildings we saw were in ruins—”

“On the ground?”

“No. On the sky islands. That is how big some of them are. There were bodies scattered about in the ruined streets. When I touched them they ... they broke like old eggshells.”

“We had similar effects nearer the rim. It’s the effect of total power drain,” Wendt said.

Diop nodded. “But no creatures such as you describe were seen. What are they? Where are they from?”

“I hope to Mimmis I’m wrong, but I can only imagine them as ants, livin’ under the ground. The shaking ground must have stirred them up.”

“It is a surprise not to see any of them. Our flock would be greatly annoyed if our nest was shaken like that,” Diop said. His wingmen nodded in agreement.

“That’s what I’m afraid of. Ever seen an ant swarm?”

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“Describe this place above us?”

“A vast valley my queen, surrounded by mountains of great height. As you would expect, the air is still frigid beyond imagining. The land is broken, and there is abundant crystal for us to harvest,” Roqi said.

“How long before the new levels could be ready?”

“Two *zentrīs* your majesty ... given enough drones.”

“You will have your workers. I want no delays. Go and see Hrttp. He will supply what you need.”

Before the explorer-engineer left, Slaart asked a question of him. “Roqi, how is it you knew of this valley?”

“I went outside a couple of *thnees* ago.”

“You what?” They both looked at him incredulously, antennae upright and rigid.

“Yes. I covered myself with *ilnofrud* to help insulate from the cold air; my experimentation with a mixture of *smere* and *lop*. It made moving more difficult, but as you can see, I survived unscathed. And it was much colder then than now.”

“Roqi, your first task is to ensure we have ample suits of ...”

“*Ilnofrud*, my queen,” the engineer said. “I will get to it immediately.”

“Slaart, I want messengers in these suits to travel to the nearest hives and awaken them. They must know of these invaders. I also want a *wern* of sentries, each with an experienced guardian, to comb the surrounding area. If there are any more of these two-legged creatures, I want them brought here.”

“It shall be as you command my queen. Now, relax and let nature take its course; you have a hive to repopulate.”

Slaart and Roqi backed out of the birthing chambers.

The queen silently watched as workers gathered around her for the egg laying.

I have more than My hive to repopulate, I have My revenge to plan as well. I will eradicate the land of these foul creatures.

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