

Chapter 10 – The Prehistorics

“The combined gnaris of the Council is a powerful weapon in the hands of the wise.”

– The Book of Karavec (35, 98)

The Great Savant did not suffer fools lightly; he liked it even less when someone made a fool of him.

Elena stood before Barrow, and trembled. He had taken her to a room in the back of the ship where he could interrogate her in private.

“Why did you spy on the Council?” Barrow spoke gently to start with, a tactic to make Elena feel a little less anxious about the consequences.

“Captain Forster said...”

“I told you before that you do not take your orders from Forster. Now, try a little harder to answer my question. Why did you spy on us?”

“One of our own killed the embryos and stole the blood. There is also some connection between this incident and Ziemia. The person who is doing these wicked things may be one of us here now on Ziemia, or even one of the Council. We did not know who we could trust, and ...”

“We ... we! ‘We’ means you and Forster, I suppose?” Barrow’s voice rose. “I warned you not to get too cosy with Forster.”

“Yes, we sought to gain an advantage over the traitor by knowing your plan, the plan of the Council, in advance.”

“It is an outrage that you could suspect one of the Council, but the greater crime that you have committed is invading the privacy, the sacredness of the Council itself. There is only one punishment appropriate for your crime. You will be a sacrificed to the gods.”

Elena snivelled.

“At sunset I will take you from the ship and find a place to kill you. You will be sacrificed in the same way that the Karavec embryos were killed – butchered. Do you understand?”

Elena tried to be brave. “Yes, Lord Barrow,” she said. “I understand.”

“In the meantime your hands will be tied, and you are not permitted to leave this room, or to communicate with the others.”

When evening came, Barrow led Elena from the ship, using a back entrance so that no one else would know what was happening, or ask any difficult questions. He needed to deal with Elena swiftly and efficiently.

He took her to the seclusion of the rocks, close to where Jim Forster had met with Jesse and the others the day before. She lay down on a flat rock, and awaited her fate. Barrow removed a knife from a sheaf on his belt, and held it poised above her prostrate body; then he began chanting the familiar prayer to the gods. He entered into a trance, a semi-conscious state that temporarily interrupted his ability to use his gnaris to observe his surroundings. “Oh, mighty gods,” he said, “hear us from across the great darkness. You dwell far away in another galaxy ...”

At that moment, Barrow felt a searing pain when something cracked into his skull. He tottered forwards, and landed in a heap on top of Elena.

“What the ...” Elena didn’t finish her sentence. She felt something being placed over her head. It felt quite soft, but was heavy and smelt vile – a mixture of stale lanolin and rotting animal flesh. She had difficulty breathing, and the stench almost made her vomit. She felt a pair of hands lift her up, and then she had the sensation of being carried on the bony shoulder of someone, or some two-legged animal.

The creature that had captured her walked for what seemed like an hour, but was probably much less, before tossing her body to the ground. She lay still for several minutes, not daring to move, every part of her body aching and bruised. When she finally found the courage to investigate where she was, she tossed the heavy smelly animal skin to one side. She could not see a thing. She used gnaris to feel her way around her prison. It seemed that its walls consisted of solid rock, and she could detect no way out except for one small crack that served as an entrance to her prison.

She felt another presence in the darkness. From her sitting position, she edged her way over to the unconscious form of the Great Savant. She heard his shallow breathing, and thanked the gods that he was not dead. Just a few minutes earlier he had been prepared to kill her, but she could not have borne the burden of knowing that he might die instead of her. He was the Great Savant. He could not die.

She shook him. "Lord Barrow, wake up," she whispered. He groaned, but did not stir.

She searched his belt to try to locate the knife that he had intended to use against her, but to no avail. She grappled on the rocky floor, and gathered together a few small stones that she might use as projectiles when her captors returned. She lay awake for several hours before fatigue took over, and she sunk into a restless sleep.

Many hours later, her captors returned. They brought with them flaming torches that cast an eerie shadow on the rock walls of the cave. The light stung Elena's sensitive eyes, and she wondered what had happened to her goggles.

There were three creatures, all male, unshaven and with long dishevelled hair. Their bodies were clothed in skins of animals, and they wore nothing on their feet.

By the light of the torches, Elena noticed that one wall of the cave was covered with a series of simple paintings depicting what appeared to be a group of primitive beings hunting some kind of animal. She resolved to take a closer look later.

She grabbed a stone and hurled it towards the nearest of the hairy creatures, but her eyes were blurred, and the stone missed its target. Before she could throw another, two of the men had grabbed her by the arms.

The third man kicked Barrow. When he didn't move, the man kicked Elena instead, making her howl out in pain. He grunted at her in some undecipherable language, a primitive means of communication. She cowered into a corner, and whimpered.

The man grabbed her with his large strong hands. and dragged her limp body towards the exit.

Outside, darkness prevailed. Elena surmised that a full night and day must have passed since her capture. A large group of creatures sat around an open fire, some eating meat from bones; others smoked a pipe, which they each dragged on before passing it to their neighbour. Elena felt several emotions at once. She felt scared, but she also suffered pangs of hunger. It was the Karavec way not to eat meals at regular times, but every so often they would gorge themselves with food and this would sate them for several days, if not weeks. She had not eaten since they had left Hikon, and the sight and smell of the food made her feel very hungry.

Then she found herself surrounded by a group of eight women dressed in skins and feathered headdresses. They prodded her and made grunting noises. She tried to push them away, but this made them draw closer and more excited.

Then, from the darkness, a drum began beating and others in the crowd started blowing whistles and flutes made from bone and wood. The women drew back a little, but kept close to Elena. The tall graceful women held their hands above their heads and began to dance. To the beat of the drum, they jumped and pranced around Elena, at the same time chanting in a low hum. Then the beat slowed, and they began swaying sensually. This continued for several minutes before the rhythm quickened again. The pace of the dance and

the women's chanting also increased while they worked themselves up into a frenzy. They seemed to be in a state of trance, and oblivious to their surroundings.

Then the drum stopped abruptly, and the women collapsed exhausted in a heap surrounding Elena. She screamed.

A burly man approached her. She saw the glint of a knife in his hand, and she cowered. She prepared herself for death once again. Then she noticed that the knife carried a chunk of meat. The man held the knife in front of her face, and said something in his guttural language.

Elena hesitated. The man repeated his invitation.

She reached out and grabbed the meat. She accepted this offering, not so much because it would satisfy her hunger, but more because the act showed signs that these creatures meant her no further harm.

She started gnawing on the meat and then, realising that everyone had their eyes set firmly on her, encouraging her to eat, she sunk her teeth into the flesh and started eating ravenously. When she had finished, they brought her more, which she gladly accepted.

Then they led her to the group sitting around the fire and prodded her, urging her to sit. They passed her the pipe, which she interpreted as a sign of acceptance. She placed it between her lips and drew on the smoke. When she spluttered a little but did not choke, the crowd broke out into a cheer.

Next they passed around cups of liquor. The cups they used were made from some kind of shell. When the woman on her right offered her the cup, Elena sniffed at the contents. It smelt of alcohol, but also had a pungent smell which reminded her of the odour of a vile-smelling plant that grows on Hikon. She shook her head, and passed the cup on to the next woman.

Elena thanked them, but knew that they would not understand. Then she pointed towards the mouth of the cave, indicating that her companion lay inside.

A tall imposing man, who wore a spotted skin from some animal that must have been highly prized, snapped his fingers. Two others stood and marched inside. They returned a few moments later with Barrow. The Great Savant was conscious, but very weak, so the two men supported him, one on either side. They sat him down next to Elena.

The chief snapped his fingers again, and a young man brought meat to Barrow. The Great Savant looked suspiciously at the strange creatures, and hesitated. Elena nodded in his direction, smiling faintly. Barrow accepted the meat, and devoured it.

When he had finished eating, a girl came up behind him and began massaging some kind of balm into the wound on his hairless head. He turned abruptly when he felt the cool ointment, then surrendered when he sensed the pain subsiding.

When they sat alone together in the cave later in the night, Barrow and Elena talked.

The cave was in darkness, but a torch placed by one of the Primitives in the entrance passage cast a dim glow across the wall of paintings.

“Who are these creatures?” Barrow asked.

“These must be the Prehistorics that Jesse spoke of to Forster,” she replied.

“Why have they brought us here, and what do they want?”

“I don’t know. They were very hostile when they first took us prisoner, but now they appear to be friendly.”

“Is it possible that they mistook us for someone or something else?”

“Yes, I believe they thought we were from the city. They must be afraid of the city people who probably do not understand them, and wish them harm. Then, when they examined me closely and discovered that I am different, their mood towards me changed.”

Barrow was more sceptical. "I am not comfortable being held by these creatures, even if they mean us no harm. We must get away from them as quickly as possible."

"But how? We are still their prisoners."

"I have the goggles," he said.

"Mine too?"

"Yes, when I began the ritual of sacrifice, I took your goggles and secured them with mine under my tunic."

"The goggles will certainly help us to survive in the daylight, but how can they help us escape?"

"Mine are different," he said. "They are the goggles I wore during the meeting of the Council. They have stored in them the combined gnaris from the members of the Council. This gives me great power that I can use against any hostiles that we might meet on Ziemia."

Elena nodded.

"But, how did the Primitives manage to overcome you, when we were at the rocks?"

"I was careless. My gnaris is disabled when I enter into a trance. In the safety of my chapel, that does not present a problem. At other times, I usually take guards with me to warn of any danger. On this occasion, I was so preoccupied with the need to keep your sacrifice secret that I neglected to call the guards."

"I see, but surely you do not mean to use the power of the goggles against these creatures. They are being friendly towards us."

"I will use them against whomever I wish," he said with a hint of anger.

"But ..."

"Elena, you should be grateful that you are still alive. Do not question my authority. When we get the chance, we're getting out of here. Understand?"

"Yes, Lord Barrow."

He continued in a more conciliatory tone. “Remember why we are here, Elena. We are not here to help these people, or to be sympathetic towards them. Our mission is to find the murderer and his accomplices. Anyone who stands in our way must be dealt with.”

“Yes,” she said with a nod. Then after a pause, she added, “What is to become of me?”

“By these circumstances that have delivered you from death, the gods have indicated that you are not to be sacrificed. But be warned, if you make another mistake, they will not be so tolerant next time. Now you have a job to do, and that is to support me.”

“Thank you, Great Savant,” she said.

When Barrow sunk into a restless sleep, Elena stood in order to take a closer look at the paintings she had noticed earlier on the cave wall.

There were six paintings in all that appeared to illustrate a series of events in the Prehistorics’ hunt.

The first painting showed a herd of large four-legged animals, each with a pair of sharp horns protruding from their heads. They were depicted running across an area of flat land and, by the clouds of dust swirling around, seemed to be charging across the plain towards some goal.

The second painting showed a group of eleven hunters who were hiding behind piles of rocks near the top of a near-vertical cliff. They had arranged the rocks in lines on either side of a track that made a kind of funnel, wide apart at the end of the plain, but getting closer together towards the cliff.

The third painting showed the animals inside the funnel, now charging headlong towards the cliff. The Prehistorics had appeared from behind the piles of rock and were waving animal skins to frighten the animals in order to keep them inside the funnel.

The fourth painting showed the animals, some teetering on the brink of the cliff, some careering from the cliff down towards their death, and piles of dead animals at the base of the cliff.

The fifth painting showed the group of Prehistorics at the top of the cliff, some with their arms held high, cheering the success of the hunt.

The final painting showed the Prehistorics at the base of the cliff, butchering some of the animals, and dragging large pieces of meat away on travois.

Elena lay down and thought about the paintings and the rituals she had witnessed earlier. She marvelled at the ingenuity of the Prehistorics, and speculated about their potential to learn and become more developed as a race. She regretted that Barrow was planning to harm these creatures. She drifted into a restless sleep.

When the Prehistorics returned to the inner cave the following morning with more food and water, Barrow was ready for them. He donned his goggles and concentrated his gnaris, preparing to use its power against their captors. Although they had shown some kindness towards him and Elena, the creatures still held them against their will. Barrow resolved to hurt the Prehistorics, but did not wish to kill them.

The first Prehistoric to enter carried food, and was not armed; but the two that followed carried clubs. Barrow did not doubt that they would use them if necessary. His still throbbing head was a reminder of the damage the Prehistorics' clubs could do.

So Barrow did not hesitate. He looked through his goggles at the first man, and concentrated his mind to direct the power stored in them towards him. A flash of power passed from the goggles towards the man's arms, causing him to drop the food and to howl with pain. Without waiting an instant, Barrow turned towards the second man and sent another flash of energy his way, knocking the club from his hand. The third man soon joined the other two, lying stunned and semiconscious on the hard rock floor.

“Come on Elena. Let’s get out of here,” he said.

Barrow took the lead, passing through the narrow passage that was the only way out, and easing his way around the corner that led to the outside. A fourth Prehistoric stood guard at the cave entrance. Barrow dealt a swift numbing blow to him also, before the two Karavec passed into the light.

Barrow looked up and saw the sun high in the sky. *It must be noon*, he thought. By now Elena had also put on her goggles for protection against the glaring sunlight.

Barrow looked around. He could see remnants of the previous evening’s ritual. The fire still burned, and was kept alight permanently to be used for cooking and to ward off dangerous animals. The pipe that had been used for smoking had been tossed on the ground, and the drinking cups lay scattered all around the area at the mouth of the cave. They saw no sign of any other Prehistorics.

“The men must have gone hunting,” whispered Barrow, “and the women are probably busying themselves with other chores that comprise part of their daily routine.”

“Which way back to the ship?” Elena asked.

“Barrow searched with his gnaris. “That way,” he said, pointing towards the south-west. “It’s quite far. I estimate it will take us at least an hour to get back.”

“Assuming we don’t come across any other Prehistorics,” she said.

They set off at a brisk pace whilst keeping vigilant. They didn’t want any more encounters with the Prehistorics, and above all didn’t want them to gang together against them.

“We could easily deal with them one at a time,” said Barrow, “and disarm them of their primitive weapons, but they might prove more difficult to deal with in large numbers.”

When they had walked for about half an hour, they began to relax, confident that they had managed to escape from the Prehistorics.

Their journey took them downhill from the cave towards a valley where a small river meandered through a copse of tree-like plants. They found a shallow spot where they could ford the river.

They had just reached the other side of the river when an arrow whistled past Barrow's ear and embedded itself into the trunk of one of the plants.