

Chapter 10 – The Prehistorics

Elena 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.