

Tales of the Eternals chapter 2: the vessel of wonders

Shern'aath gaped at the creature called Altallo

"How...how can you speak? You're not a raptor you're a...you're a...what are you?" he asks, scratching his head in thought.

"I can speak your language because I've run a simple biological scan over your body," says Altallo holding up his hand and showing it Shern'aath. "It means I looked at your mind and now you understand everything I say and I understand everything you say." he adds, noticing Shern'aaths still looking nonplussed.

"Oh...wait, you still haven't told me what you are. And why you're covered in these," he pulls at one of the strange gold coloured cloths that covers Altallo's body.

"Well you see I am from a species called-" Altallo begins, but then breaks off. A loud roar echoes around the area, and both of them look around in alarm.

"That was nearby!" Shern'aath whispered, just as they felt a hushed silence across the river and nearby trees, as though the whole world had drew its breath. Then they heard a nearby tremor.

"And something very big," adds Altallo "Come on, let's get out of here-"

He is cut off by a deafening roar! From out of the trees in beside them burst out a monstrous head, yellow eyes fixed on them and a gigantic mouth full of sharp deadly teeth. Shern'aath could only stare in horror, transfixed, and at first didn't realise he was moving.

"Hurry!" cried Altallo, who had grabbed the raptor and thrown him out of harm's way, just as the mouth of the monster had snapped shut where Shern'aath had been seconds before! Now Altallo was running, still holding Shern'aath's hand. Shern'aath finally found his feet and starting running himself. They darted among trees and undergrowth.

"Do you think we lost it?" asks Shern'aath, just as they heard another roar and saw the creature chasing them on two sturdy legs with clawed feet. It also has two arms which were strangely tiny.

"No, keep running!" Altallo replies. "Let's try and lose her through here."

They dive into some deeper undergrowth between two sturdy trees. Behind them they hear an enraged roar and the sound of pounding feet fading away.

"We lost it," gasps Shern'aath, breathing deeply, his chest rising and falling rapidly. Altallo meanwhile does not look tired at all, was peering through the bushes, a thoughtful look across his face.

"No we didn't, she's trying to find a way around us. I know somewhere safe, follow me." He says.

"Wait a moment, how do you know it's a she? And where are we going?" asks Shern'aath, looking concerned. On one of his feet a large killing claw starts twitching with agitation.

"Female Tyrannosaurs are a lot bigger than males," Altallo says, starting to push through some more vegetation "And I was trying to go back to my ship, the place where I live."

"You mean that big rock out near the nests? That thing isn't big enough to fit us both in-"

“Never judge by what something looks like” Altallo says sharply, interrupting Shern’aath, then noticing the raptor’s rather hurt expression he says, in a much more gentle voice “I’m sorry. I promise I’ll explain everything soon, but now I’d rather not end up as the meal of an angry Tyrannosaur.”

Shern’aath nods and then follows the little being through the undergrowth. Up in the canopy they can hear the calls of small forest-dwelling pterosaurs and small feathered creatures. Sunlight filtered through the leaves casting odd patches of light across the forest floor; larger patches created by spikey monkey-puzzles and smaller more fluid ones caused by large conifers and ginkoes. It was so quiet, but Shern’aath the forest felt as though it was closing around them, every tree looming in, cornering them. Then, they heard a distant, echoing roar.

“There it is again!” Shern’aath says, grabs Altallo’s shoulder again.

“Keep calm” the little creature replies, his voice calm and quiet. Looking at him, Shern’aath notices Altallo’s face showed no sign of fear at all. “We’re nearly to my ship. Keep calm and keep moving; we’ll be harder to track.”

After more trekking through undergrowth, they soon come across the open, rocky hillside and the pterosaur nests. They see the large boulder up ahead of them.

“We’re almost there,” says Shern’aath looking around “It’s all clear!” he cries out and confidently steps out of the cover of the trees...just as a giant familiar face appears out of the forest a few meters away; the Tyrannosaur! The giant turns its head, nostrils flaring as it spots Shern’aath. With a roar, it charges.

“Quickly!” yells Altallo in alarm, grabbing Shern’aath’s arm again and running up the steep slope. The Pterosaurs take to the air in fright and confusion. The Tyrannosaur struggles up the hills, her legs scraping the rock, but her tiny arms scrabble feebly, barely even moving. She snaps her jaws at them, stretching her neck to try and catch them. Shern’aath jabs his spear at the monstrous head and the Tyrannosaur gives a scream of pain as the spearhead makes contact with the side of her face.

“We’re trapped!” Shern’aath exclaims

Altallo meanwhile presses his hand against the boulders surface. From his palm a series of intricate, luminous turquoise lines spread across the whole of the boulder, then disappear as a bright light engulfs the boulder, causing both the Tyrannosaur and Shern’aath to look around in bewilderment.

“Get in!” Altallo shouts at the stunned raptor, grabbing him and guiding him into the light.

As soon as the two had dived inside, the light disappeared. The lines reappeared quickly and then vanished again and the boulder stood, dull and unmarked once again. The Tyrannosaur blinked in confusion, before a Pterosaur swoops down and tries to peck at her eyes. She roars and snaps at the Pterosaurs, who continue to soar around her and dive bomb occasionally. Soon she slinks away back to the forest, looking rather defeated.

Shern’aath sighs in relief.

“That was a narrow escape, I’m so glad you decided to bring us here-“he stops abruptly and his mouth falls wide open and he dropped his spear, which clattered to the floor. He just realised where he was.

He was standing a large circular room, with scrystal-looking dark blue walls and a huge column in the centre. Around the base of the column is a large basin, which a strange turquoise light which

shone all over the walls. The column reached the ceiling with a large circle which looked as though it were made of different coloured pieces of glass in a abstract pattern surrounding it. He also noticed turquoise lines along the column like blood vessels, running from the column over the ceiling and walls, the exact shade and colour of the light. A huge doorway stood at the end of the room, with ornate carvings in abstract shapes across it and the frame. The whole room smelled like fresh air and there was a sort of weightless atmosphere to it.

Standing nearby the basin was Altallo, calmly looking into its depths, the turquoise light illuminating his face.

“Well that Tyrannosaur has just walked back to the forest and we’re all in one piece. I should think we were lucky and—are you ok?” he asks, noticing Shern’aath, who was still staring wide-eyed and open-mouthed at his surroundings.

Curiously, Altallo sidles up to the raptor, who keeps staring at column and basin, and gently places a hand on his jaw and lifts it up, closing his mouth. Altallo looks satisfied and removes his hand, but as soon as he does, Shern’aath’s jaw drops wide open again. Altallo then waves his hand in front of Shern’aath’s eyes and then pokes him in the chest.

“W-what?” says the raptor in a dazed expression. He then shakes his head. “Where am I?!”

“Don’t be scared! You’re safe. This is the ship I told you about, it’s my home,” Altallo calmly replies “What do you think of it?”

Shern’aath walks over to the basin and looks into its depths. Inside was bright turquoise liquid, rippling and swirling gently, causing the blue light across the walls.

“What is this?” he asks, scooping up some of the liquid, which settles into a perfect sphere in his hand. It feels light and smooth. For a moment it stays perfectly still and then slides over and between his fingers and back into the basin.

“It’s the power core of my ship. It only recognises my touch, so it’s not responding to you,” Altallo explains. “I remember you asked what I am, is that right?”

“Erm yes...I think I did...” says Shern’aath confused and slightly embarrassed. The Tyrannosaur chase had driven all other thoughts from his mind. “I forgot.”

“Nevermind,” says Altallo, and for the first time he smiles. His face became warmer looking and kinder. “Well, I am an Eternal.”

“Whats an Eternal?” asks Shern’aath scratching his head “Are you predator or prey? You don’t look like either. And what is that thing on your head?”

To the raptor’s astonishment, Altallo takes off the golden object on his head, revealing more red-brown hair.

“Eternals neither prey on other creatures, nor do we let ourselves fall prey to anything. We don’t live here on this land, or this world. This is my headdress,” he gives the object to Shern’aath “It’s traditional Eternal clothing. I wear it to show I’m an ambassador.”

Shern’aath starts sniffing it. It is hollow inside and surprisingly very light in his hands.

“You said you don’t come from this world?” he asks frowning “But there is only the world, from the seas to the West and East...unless if you came from the Sun or the moon.”

“Not quite. You see the lights in the sky? Each one of those is a sun and there are worlds like this one revolving around its sun. Some have things living on them, some don’t. Simple?”

Shern’aath stares at Altallo in disbelief and shakes his head.

“Oh,” says Altallo looking as though he had been slapped across the face “Um...well I guess its difficult to take in for some people. Well anyway, I don’t come from here; I come from a very long way from here.”

“And why are you here?” asks Shern’aath, studying the headdress.

“Come with me and I’ll show you,” says Altallo, pointing towards the doorway.

Shern’aath hesitates, staring at the doorway, his back arched slightly. Altallo places a warm hand on Shern’aath’s, causing the raptor to jump.

“I promise you, no harm will befall you in here, as long as you don’t try to damage anything.” He whispers kindly.

Without a hesitation, Shern’aath follows, still holding Altallo’s headdress. They walk through a long, bright, white-coloured corridor. Everything; the floors, walls and ceiling was made of some sort of white smooth stone. As his eyes adjusted to the brightness of the corridor he noticed tiny lines of flashing colour in the stone.

Altallo had walked on through the corridor to the end and had opened another door. He looked back to the raptor who was walking slowly up to him, gazing in all directions.

“What is this place?” the raptor asks in a whisper

“It’s a decontamination chamber. It kills of any illnesses that pass through it, otherwise it might be dangerous for anything that lives inside here.” The Eternal replies, pointing into another room.

Shern’aath steps in and gasps. The next room was huge and rectangular in shape, with a high clear ceiling that looked like a blue sky, from which bright light shone. Below lay a huge complex of square shaped areas full of plants, huge towering and hundreds of smaller plants around their trunks. Altallo leads Shern’aath down a set of steps made from what looked like stone. Looking closer around the room, he notices most of the floor and ceiling seems to be made of stone. They walk over to the nearest plots, Shern’aath notices a small stream twisting around the trees and even a few stones and rocks scatter around the leaf-strewn earth. It looked just like the forest outside; with graceful ginkoes, cycads with huge leaves surrounding a large strange yellow seed on top, spikey monkey-puzzles and conifers, with ferns and flowering bushes growing in clumps around the trunks.

Further on there were other, smaller patches of plants, these ones looking more specialised. In a big water filled trench grew tangled up mangroves and in a rocky patch grew tiny little mosses and flowers. At the far end of the room is another doorway.

“Wh-why are there all these plants here?” Shern’aath stammers, staring around.

“It’s all part of why am I here on this world. You see on my world, my original home, there are no plants.” says Altallo, who had sat down on a small dais in the centre of the room. “There are no animals either, except us Eternals and our sibling species. It’s a cold and lonely world and we want to see it alive and full of life. So we’ve left it and flew in ships like these to gather and learn about what lives on other worlds.”

“How many of you are there? Asks the raptor “And you have siblings? Do you have a brood mother and father who hatched you from eggs?”

Altallo laughs.

“It doesn’t work quite like that. We have no mother or father. From the moment we were aware, there was only use. And some others who are really tall and...I can’t remember what they look like now.”

The raptor, rubbing his head and trying to digest all the things he has been told. Giant smooth skins? A boulder that could fly and hold all this inside? It wasn’t adding up to him.

“And so these tall things, are there any here?” he asks, looking around, as though hoping to see a giant figure stride out from behind a tree.

“No, some live on our home, the others.....um...” Altallo stops and looks very thoughtful. After a pause he says “I can’t remember. It’s been so long ago.”

“Did they go somewhere else?” Shern’aath suggests, trying to be helpful.

“Maybe,” Altallo replies “I’m sure I’ll remember sometime. But anyway, I have more of the ship to show you.”

He gets up and leads Shern’aath through the doorway.

The next room is even larger than the previous. The two emerge onto a stone platform, with ramp leading downwards to the floor below. The room almost looked like it could be outside. Its floor was covered in earth and ferns. Trees also dotted the landscape. The ceiling was similar to the previous room, clear and held up by sturdy stone pillars, with ornate carvings.

The most amazing feature though are the animals. The whole room felt alive; herds of Ceratops and smaller horn-heads, a few armoured ankylosaurs gathered around pools and artificial rivers, small groups of pachycephalosaurs with armoured heads, herds of large hadrosaurs of all kinds and sounds and other smaller herbivores scampering around the undergrowth. High above were several holes in the pillars supporting the ceiling, where chirruping can be heard and small pterosaurs occasionally fly in or out from, squawking to each other or swooping around the larger animals.

They descend down the ramp and onto the earthy lower level. Shern’aath smelled the air, thick with the scent of so many animals. Altallo meanwhile walks up to one of the hadrosaurs, one with a rounded crest and long snout. The hadrosaur looks up and doesn’t seem scared or alarmed at his presence. Altallo extends a hand and the hadrosaur sniffs it and then starts rubbing its face against the Eternal’s hand.

Shern’aath joins Altallo shortly, staring in disbelief at the hadrosaur. “I’ve never seen one act like that before...they’re usually very timid animals.”

“The inside of this ship is an aurora, a sort of air or sound that calms the animals. They have simple minds and it works without hurting them.” Altallo explains

The hadrosaur notices Shern’aath and starts backing away slowly, giving sudden sharp alarm calls before trotting away on its back legs. Other hadrosaurs nearby turn their heads. A Ceratops started pawing at the ground and making a threatening series of bellows.

“Wish I kept my spear!” Shern’aath exclaims, backing away slowly.

“I’m glad you didn’t,” replies Altallo “Let’s get to the next chamber before they cause some real damage to you!”

And without another word, Altallo had grabbed Shern'aath by the shoulders and pushed him through a nearby doorway.

The next chamber at first seems smaller at first, a narrower corridor lies before them, widening out into a circular lower basin and then another corridor further along. The whole chamber was made of smooth dark rippled green stone.

Lining the walls are arch shaped windows, full of light and with intricate coloured carvings around it, in delicate colours. Shern'aath peers into a few. He spies a flowered bush inside, with the large purple winged insects he had seen Altallo carrying earlier before, with a few other plants and other winged insects. In the others he sees a group of bright colourful frogs clambering over sticks and leaves, spiders and beetles of many sizes, a few scorpions scuttling over sand and rocks, lizards both small and large, a few tiny furry animals with pointed snouts and long tails scurrying across dead leaves and in and out of burrows.

"These look tasty," Shern'aath thought out loud. Altallo, who was expecting the bright frogs, shot a glance to the raptor.

"I hope you don't eat them, they're very important for me."

"I still don't understand why you need all this." Shern'aath says "Oh and...here you might want this back" he adds, holding out Altallo's headdress.

Altallo smiles, takes it and puts it back on his head.

"Well we take a huge variety of animals and plants to create a stable system so they can live in harmony, like the ones outside. Those that are too dangerous will be kept in specific places. I even a few Tyrannosaurs on board and that is where they will reside." he explains, ignoring Shern'aath's horrified look at the thought of more Tyrannosaurs. "See each type of animal is dependent on each other for food and their all dependent on the plants and..."

Shern'aath simply stares at the Eternal, blank eyed and not taking in a word.

Altallo notices the raptor's blank stare and looks puzzled.

"You're not listening are you?" he asks

"Erm...no sorry." Shern'aath replies, "I've never been great at lessons on webs of life."

"Lessons? You mean someone taught you about ecosystems and life?" Altallo asks eagerly, a soft gleam in his eyes.

Shern'aath looks down at the hopeful face, shifting his clawed feet uncomfortably.

"Erm, well....oh look at these things over here!" Shern'aath replies, darting over to one of the windows.

Altallo watches him, looking a little concerned. Shern'aath pretends to be fascinated by the window, which contains a large, rather fat grey lizard with horns on its snout, resting on a branch and looking sleepy. The lizard could not distract Shern'aath though. He could see Altallo hovering close by.

"Shern'aath," Altallo begins slowly "Is there something wrong?"

"What? No, no!" replies the raptor. "Look, I'll take you to someone who may tell you the things I can't, ok?"

Altallo looked up into the raptor's orange eyes of the raptor and then nods.

Shern'aath lets out a sigh of relief and then gives a toothy grin.

“So, how do you feed all these animals?” he asks, peering into more of the exhibits.

“Well for the plant-eaters, as you have seen, are kept with plants, to make them calm. The flesh-eaters however are frozen, that is to say they’re sleeping,” he says to Shern’aath “They’re in a state where they can breathe and are feed and watered. Some are too dangerous to be kept like the plant-eaters.”

Shern’aath nods and then notices yet another archway, through which a strange blue rippling light emanates.

“What’s through there?” he asks

“It is where I keep life that exits in the water,” says Altallo “They need specialised exhibits.”

Curious Shern’aath walks into the next chamber, looking unafraid and bolder since he entered the ship. Altallo follows, watching the raptor with interest.

Inside was easily the most beautiful and largest chamber. It was made of what blue stone, engraved with white ripples. A huge clear box-shaped container stood in front of them, full of clear water and with a small spiral ladder made of what looked like crystal carved into curves and stalactites under the rail. Moving closer he sees the base of the container several feet below the floor level. Inside are tangled weeds and sunken logs, where small colourful fish dart in and out from. In the middle section, larger, silvery fish swam slowly. Shern’aath recognised them as a type he usually ate. Among the fish, small shelled turtles with four flat clawed legs and a tiny scaly head wobble in the water, occasionally rising up to the surface and clambering on floating logs or on mounds of Earth.

All around the walls were more clear windows full of water, with beautiful carvings around their bases and arches. Inside were a huge variety of small fish of every colour and shape, colourful corals, water plants that looked so simple compared to the ones on land, crabs, crayfish and lobsters scuttling on the scuttle across the floors, strange creatures with curly tails fluttering around coral and holding on with their tails.

Shern’aath stared all around the walls in awe. There was so much to take in and he had no idea where to look first.

And then he saw it. Behind the container of turtles were two much larger containers. He stepped closer to them. They were much deeper than the previous one and mostly bare at the bottom save for a few rocky outcrops and coral. Swimming in them were creatures he thought only existed in hatchling stories.

In one tank were five huge creatures with long tails that ended in a paddle, a stout body with four flippers and a long snout with sharp teeth. They were patrolling in and around a rocky archway in their container, occasionally coming up to the surface for air. The only other animals in with them were a few miniscule fish swimming around the rocks, much too small for their interest.

The other contained a group of massive creatures with long necks, small heads and sleek bodies with four flippers and a small tail. They swam as a group, each co-ordinated with the other’s movements. They too sometimes swam up to the surface to breathe. Also in their container was a pair of huge turtles, dwarfing the ones in the tank. They were slow compared to the long necks, content on swimming around a growth of water plants. Amongst these giants, schools of glittering silver fish darted amongst rocks. A few gold colour fish with black stripes followed the turtles. Shern’aath walked up close to the container, placing a hand on its smooth wall. He felt tiny against the creatures.

Altallo meanwhile had climbed up the spiral ladder on the first container and was dropping food into the water. The larger fish and turtles swarm around the food, the leftovers floating to the bottom where the small fish darted forward to finish them off.

He looks over to Shern'aath, who was still mesmerized by the creatures.

"Wonderful aren't they?" he calls over to the raptor. "They were difficult to get into the ship though. Had to use a canal to get the giant predatory ones in, the long necked ones can actually go on land."

He climbs down the ladder and walks over to Shern'aath next to the tanks.

"Are you ok?" he asks Shern'aath

"Yes. Just never thought I'd ever see these mosasaurs and elasmosaurs. Our elders used to teach us about them. I used to think they didn't exist."

They watch the creatures for a few minutes, then Altallo moves off to the other containers to feed the other creatures. Shern'aath soon follows him and peers into the containers and their occupants. Up close he could see more details of these mysterious creatures. He never imagined he'd be able to see these tiny things up close. He was surprised to see how complex their colours and patterns could be, with spots, stripes and swirls. He also noticed in some of the tanks small odd creatures, some with five arm-like appendages in beautiful bright colours and a few creatures that looked more like round balls covered in spikes.

In one container he saw a rather scary looking animal with a long face, sharp teeth and wild looking eyes, poking out from a small cave.

Altallo soon finishes feeding the animals and joins Shern'aath, who was looking at a tiny orange and white fish darting around a strange thing that looked like an open flower with flowing colourful tentacles.

"I'm all done!" he says brightly "Do you like these exhibits?"

"Yes, it's so calming" replies the raptor "Do you just keep these things here forever?"

"No, I transfer them to a storage bank, a sort of container," he explains "They're frozen and won't age or grow hungry. I let them live in these exhibits," he gestures to a tank "For a few months to about a year, depending on the animal. These small fish will be in storage in a few months whereas the bigger animals will be kept for a year. It's to let them calm down and get used to life on-board. I also give them a special chemical in their food that increases their lifespans, so they can live on our home."

Shern'aath rubbed his neck with his paw, looking a little nervous.

"What about things that can talk? Like me. Would you lock me away?"

Altallo looked confused.

"I don't kidnap and lock away people. I ask them to come with me." He said, a little bluntly.

"I didn't mean to hurt you," Shern'aath said quickly, eyes widening "I'm sorry. It's just," he glances around the quite chamber "I'm still unsure of this place. It makes me feel small and scared and yet amazed."

He felt Altallo's hand, cold on his bare shoulder.

“It’s ok. The unknown is scary. I was scared when I met you. Let me show you the last room I have so far. Some chambers are closed right now until I need more space for different environments.”

The two left the aquatics chamber, back down the green hallway, through the huge animal enclosure and into the plant section, Shern’aath blinking in the bright sunlight after the darkness of the previous chambers. He follows Altallo to another smaller doorway he had not noticed before, this one closed and surrounded by climbing plants. Altallo pulled a little piece of metal from his robes and pressed it against the doorway, which slides away to reveal a room made of mostly black stone. Soft patches of light glow from clear cases, some small other huge and empty. Shern’aath peers into some of the smaller cases. Inside were mostly rocks of varying sizes and colours. Some were dull brown; a few were colourful such as a green stone covered in swirls or a bright blue one. In some cases were truly strange objects. They were in odd shapes like perfect squares or oblongs and bright colours too, in reds, blues, greens, purples and a few were completely clear or opaque.

“What are these things?” asks the raptor

“Some sort of stone. We have them on our homeworld, but they don’t look the same as those. I just found them rather beautiful in a way. This room is also used to store anything made by other people, anything that is old, that is lost or isn’t wanted anymore. I haven’t found anything yet, just those rocks.”

“Maybe you can find some things in my encampment?” Shern’aath suggests “I’ll be happy to take you there, but you must be careful, I don’t think they’d take well to some strange thing walking into their home.”

“I understand” Altallo replies, leading the way out of the room, the door sliding back shut behind them “I’m looking forward to seeing your settlement.”

“Why would you be?” asks the raptor “It’s small and rather dull.”

But Altallo swept past him and up the stairs back to the main room, evidently not hearing what Shern’aath had said. The raptor sighed and rolled his eyes before following.

He caught up with Altallo, who was opening the portal to the outside world.

“Hold on!” he grumbles. “You know you move fast for a little thing.”

“Sorry,” says Altallo, “I guess I can get a bit over excited.”

“A bit!” the raptor mumbles sarcastically to himself.

The two step out of the ship, back onto soil and rock and the cries of the nearby pterosaurs. Shern’aath looked around.

“No sign of danger. It feels odd after being inside there,” he says to Altallo pointing to the ship. “I feel like I’ve been in there for a whole season.”

“Maybe you’re not used to being inside?” says Altallo “We’d best be making a head start, it’ll be night soon. You lead on, you know the way.”

Shern’aath nods and the two make their way down the hill towards the forest. Looking back at the boulder, Shern’aath still felt unsure. But then looking at the small creature following him, he felt a warmth flood into his chest. He had a new friend and had been in a vessel of wonders.