

The Lucius Chronicles

(The complete DATS trilogy in one volume)

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Chapter 11 – Escapes and Ideas

When Johnny opened his eyes, it was as if they were still closed. It took him some time to adjust to the darkness and when he had, all that he could see were ghostly outlines, illuminated by a few thin shafts of light that were peeking through the wall of rock that now covered the entrance to the caves.

“What happened?” asked Simon groggily, as he picked himself up from the floor of the cave.

“It looks like the lost souls dislodged the rocks that they were standing on and they collapsed onto the others, blocking us inside,” said one of the other Deaths, still staring at the wall of stone, as if expecting the lost souls to start clawing their way through at any moment.

“So, you mean we’re trapped?” said Simon, reaching out blindly in front of him.

“It looks that way,” replied Johnny, gently taking hold of Simon’s hand.

Simon fell silent, trying to control his rising terror. In the silence that followed, the only sounds that could be heard inside the cave were Trudy’s soft sobbing and the occasional murmur from one or other of the injured Deaths further away from the entrance. Outside the cave, it was a different matter and every now and then, the noise of the jeering lost souls would filter through the cracks, to remind the Deaths that they were still out there.

Using the pale light as a guide, Johnny and Simon cautiously joined Eddie, still sitting next to his parents, holding his mother’s hand.

“How is she?” asked Johnny. “And for that matter, how is your dad doing?”

“I’m alright. A bit battered, but I’ll be okay,” replied Eddie’s dad, without looking up.

“Mum’s alright too,” said Eddie, giving his mum’s hand a gentle stroke. “She’s tougher than she looks and I don’t think that she had any real idea about what was happening out there just now. At least I hope not,” he continued.

Just then, Brian approached the group and said: “Well, I’ve checked everyone out and most of us made it without getting too badly hurt. There are a few that are too weak to really carry on, but it could have been a lot worse.”

“What do you mean, carry on? We’re trapped in here. In case you hadn’t noticed, the only way out is over there and beyond it, the place is teeming with lost souls,” said Simon in exasperation, pointing to the rock covered cave mouth behind them.

“You don’t think that I would have led us here if there wasn’t another way out, did you?” said Eddie’s dad, giving him a weak grin that was all but lost in the gloom.

“So, what do we do now?” asked Johnny, looking at Eddie’s dad with even more respect than before.

“Well, the first thing we do is wait here for a while, at least until the lost souls have gone, and then we make our way out of the caves and back to the train station,” replied Eddie’s dad.

Waiting for the lost souls to depart seemed to take forever, but finally, the hideous noises outside the cave died away and after hanging back for a while longer, just to make sure that it wasn’t a trap, Eddie’s dad sent word around the group of Deaths that they would shortly be moving out. Then, after having advanced a little way further into the caves, more for concealment than anything else, he reached into his robe and pulled out a large, glowing object that illuminated the cave with a soft radiance, as it lay in his outstretched palm.

“The diamond rivet,” said Johnny, immediately recognising the artefact that Eddie’s dad had kept after building the Ghost Train and which had helped save him and Eddie, when they went into the void on his first journey to Deathville.

“The very same. And it’s going to help lead us out of here,” replied Eddie’s dad, before putting the diamond rivet back into his pocket and returning to the main group to supervise the exodus.

They made a sorry sight on their journey through the caves. Eddie’s dad took the lead, holding the diamond rivet high above his head, as if it was a religious artefact, its glow helping light the way and calm their fears as they ventured into the unknown. Behind him walked Johnny, Simon and Trudy, all trying to remain as close to the light as they possibly could. A short way behind them, but still bathed in the glow of the diamond rivet, were Eddie and his mum, accompanied by the injured, weak and frail, most of them doing their best to support one another, as they weaved unsteadily into the stygian gloom. And following them, came the rest of the Deaths, silently walking in single file, hand in hand, those at the far end totally relying on those in front, to guide them through the labyrinth of twists and turns that they were passing through. Occasionally, one or other of them would stumble, bringing the chain to a faltering standstill, as they picked themselves up and sent word to the front that the journey could begin again.

It was hard to tell how long they had been walking for, or just how deep in the caves they were, but Johnny’s feet were beginning to ache, when all of a sudden, the diamond rivet began to shine more brightly.

At first, Johnny couldn't be sure whether or not it was his eyes playing tricks on him, but after a few minutes, he was certain that it was getting brighter. Glancing behind him, he could quite clearly see the procession of Deaths in the distance, where before there was only darkness.

Turning to point this out to Simon, Eddie's dad rounded a corner and the diamond rivet flared into life, shining more brightly than he'd ever seen it do before. Initially stunned by the intense light, he flung his arm across his eyes, trying to block it out, when he heard a collective gasp from the Deaths behind him. Lowering his arm slowly and squinting ferociously, he too gasped at the sight before him.

They had emerged into a vast cavern, its ceiling towering at least a hundred feet above them and its sides disappearing away into the distance. Running through the middle of it, like a thick silver ribbon, was an enormous underground river, twisting and turning until it drifted out of sight around a bend in the cavern. But it was not the size of the cathedral-like space that had caused the Deaths to exclaim their surprise. It was the fact that the entire space, with the exception of a small patch on the far side of the river, was covered in diamonds of all shapes and sizes. Some were no bigger than the head of a pin, while others would have dwarfed even Uncle Fergus. And what was more, they were all glowing in sympathy with the diamond rivet that Eddie's dad was still holding aloft.

Turning to address the stunned group that had gathered around him, Eddie's dad said with a warm smile: "Does anyone recognise where we are now?"

A few of the Deaths, including Brian, muttered or nodded that they did indeed know this place, although it was clear to Johnny that they hadn't been there for a very long time. To most of the others though, it was the first time that they had ever seen it, and their amazement was complete.

Bending down towards Johnny and his friends, he said softly: "This is where we got the diamonds to make the Ghost Train all those years ago and even now, they still call out to each other. Isn't it wonderful?" Although his words came out only a little above a whisper, they echoed around the vast space, building in volume as they did so, until even those at the back of the group could hear him quite clearly.

"It certainly is wonderful. I've never seen anything like it," replied Trudy quietly, while Johnny and Simon could only nod their heads in agreement.

"Few of us have. Until today, of course. We never kept it a secret, you understand. It was just that once we had completed the Ghost Train, there was no need for us to come back here anymore," continued Eddie's dad, sweeping his arm around in a wide arc. "Although I must admit, it is pretty magnificent. I just wish that I could have brought everyone here under happier circumstances," he added, gazing fondly at Mrs Death, now lying gently on the ground a few feet away from him.

"So, where to from here?" asked Johnny, forgetting to whisper and then wincing in pain, as his voice came screaming back from the depths of the cave, loud enough to wake the dead and their friends, not to mention any passing lost souls in the vicinity.

Once the din had faded away, Eddie's dad quietly replied: "We'll take a brief rest here, then continue across the river and make for that bare patch of rock on the other side. That was where we did our original mining and the exit to the surface is close by. Then, for

those of us who are willing and able to fight, it's back to the Ghost Train to try and head Lucius off, before he gets to the gateway to the afterlife."

While everyone was taking a well-deserved break, Simon, who had been deep in thought, suddenly jumped up and strode over to Eddie's dad. "What kind of mining equipment did you have down here, and did you keep it once you'd finished?" he blurted out, completely ignoring the fact that Eddie's dad was trying to tend to Mrs Death at the time.

"Eh, what? I don't know, Simon. You'll have to talk to Brian about that. He was our chief engineer down here at the time," replied Eddie's dad, with a dismissive wave of his hand.

Simon wandered over to where Brian was sitting and spent the next ten minutes talking to him in an animated fashion but keeping his voice so low that none of the others could hear what he was saying. For his part, Brian just sat there, at first saying nothing, then nodding his head slowly and finally, answering Simon's questions with as much enthusiasm as Simon was asking them. Once Simon had finished talking, Brian rose from the rocky ground of the cavern floor and with Simon in tow, began to approach other Deaths, talking to them in the same hushed tones that prevented eavesdropping.

"What's all that about?" asked Eddie, as he watched Simon bounding along behind Brian.

"I've no idea at all," replied Johnny, equally mystified by Simon's strange behaviour.

A short while later, Eddie's dad, who had somehow become the group's unspoken leader, stood up and after briefly conferring with Brian, informed everyone that they would be crossing the river to the other side, where they would leave those that could not fight in the safety of the mine, while the others would leave to do battle against Lucius. As Simon drifted back over to the others, Johnny asked him what he was so excited about.

"Don't ask," replied Simon, giving his friend a strange look. "I've had an idea, that's all. I'm not sure if it will even work, but you'll find out soon enough," he continued, before lapsing into a stubborn silence, which even Trudy couldn't break, no matter how many dire threats she uttered against him.

As the Deaths resumed their journey across the vast cavern, Eddie's dad pocketed the diamond rivet, the light from the diamonds surrounding them, being more than enough for them to see by. Nearing the mighty river, Johnny was relieved to see a narrow wooden bridge spanning the water. They crossed it, two at a time, its boards squeaking alarmingly in protest at being suddenly pressed into service after so many years of disuse, and found an abandoned mining village of sorts, nestled on the far side.

No sooner had Simon and Brian set foot on the other side of the river, than they made their way into a large building, which had once been a warehouse, while the other Deaths that Brian had spoken to ran into the workshop next door.

Shortly afterwards, the cavern began to ring with the sound of hammering, sawing and general hard work. Occasionally, one or other of the Deaths would emerge and race from the workshop to the warehouse and back again, carrying all manner of strange bits of equipment slung over their shoulders.

While all of this was going on, Johnny, Eddie and Trudy busied themselves, by trying to make Eddie's mum as comfortable as possible, until finally, the doors to the workshop flew open with a crash and Simon, Brian and the other Deaths began to wheel several trolleys, covered with sacking, out into the cavern.

Without bothering to explain themselves, Brian just nodded towards Eddie's dad and they began to set off along a rough track carved into the floor, the heavily laden trolleys bumping and wobbling alarmingly as they went. Turning to the other Deaths, Eddie's dad told them to say their goodbyes, before kneeling down and resting his forehead gently against that of Mrs Death. Then he stood and turned to leave. As he did so, he said to Eddie: "Now, you, Johnny and Trudy need to stay here, where you'll be safe and help look after the others, okay?"

As one, three faces fell in shock and dismay, not believing what they were hearing. Trudy was the first to recover, her face darkening as she said: "Not okay. Now you listen to me. If you think that we're going to let Simon have all the fun, especially after what we've been through already, then you've got another thing coming!"

"Besides, it's not as if anywhere is safe with Lucius running around out there," added Johnny.

"And we're the only ones that have faced him before," cried Eddie. "And we beat him both times! I know that you want to try and keep us safe, Dad, but really, you need us! After all, wasn't it you and the others that agreed to bring Johnny, Simon and Trudy here to help in the first place?"

Eddie's dad shuffled from one foot to the other in embarrassment, looking from one pained expression of betrayal to another, before finally relenting.

"Okay, you've all got a point, I suppose," he sighed. "I only want to try and keep you as safe as I can, but I can see that there's no real way that I can stop you from coming. Knowing you lot, you'd only find some crazy way of following us, even if I tied you to a rock," he continued, his voice softening as he spoke. "Come on then," he said, turning and following the other Deaths, as they made their way along the bumpy mining track towards the surface.

Compared to the beginning of their trek, the journey to the surface was relatively quick and uneventful. Once they had left the diamond cavern behind, Eddie's dad once again took the lead and drew the diamond rivet from his pocket to light the way. As they ambled along the mining track, each lost deep in their own thoughts, the ground before them started to rise, slowing the convoy of trolleys ahead, until several of the Deaths ran forward to assist their colleagues. Then, in the distance, Johnny noticed a small speck of light, slightly brighter than the glow from the diamond rivet, which grew and grew, until he could quite clearly see that it was the entrance to the tunnel they were in.

As they approached the entrance to the mine, Eddie's dad put the diamond rivet away and signalled for silence. After a short discussion with Brian, he slowly crept towards the entrance, keeping his body low to the ground, like a tiger stalking its prey. Then, at the very edge of the entrance itself, he stopped, craning his head this way and that, listening for any sound that might indicate an ambush by the lost souls, before stepping into the daylight beyond and immediately vanishing from view.

The gasp of shock and surprise from Eddie and the others was so loud that it would have completely given their position away, so it was with some relief that they saw Eddie's dad appear again a few moments later, a sheepish grin on his face, as he said: "Sorry about that. I forgot there's a bit of a drop off on the other side. You'd better be careful with those trolleys, Brian."

"Dad," said Eddie in anger and admonishment, before rushing up to the entrance to check that he was all right.

One by one, they filed silently out of the caves, glad to be in the open air once again. Glancing around at the rocky hillside they were standing on, Johnny realised with a start that they had been trapped underground for almost the entire night. Looking behind him, he could just see the first rays of the grey dawn light, poking over the top of the hill. Running over to the others, he breathlessly explained that today was the day that Lucius and his army would reach the gateway to the afterlife.

Realising that there was no time to waste, Eddie's dad immediately sent several of the Deaths on ahead, to make sure that the way was clear and ordered everyone else to help Simon and Brian with the mysterious, covered trolleys. As they rushed towards Simon's trolley, Johnny couldn't help but be impressed once again by how much the assorted band of Deaths had changed. Completely focused on the task at hand and moving with a grim determination, they did indeed seem like soldiers going into battle, rather than the terrified and disorganised figures he'd met only a few days earlier.

Smiling to himself with newly found pride and feeling surprisingly optimistic about their chances in the coming encounter, he put his shoulder against Simon's heavily laden trolley and with the help of the others, began pushing it down the hillside towards Deathville and the station in the distance.

Chapter 12 – Full Steam Ahead!

They arrived at the station a short while later, tired from their exertions, but relieved that they hadn't met any lost souls along the way. Trudy was puzzled by this, especially given the previous day's attack in the gorge, until Eddie pointed out that they had probably all gone to join Lucius for the main assault on the gateway to the afterlife. Still, after everything that had happened, the silence in the station was eerie and more than once, one or other of the Deaths jumped up or span around with a shout, at some imagined threat or other.

As soon as they had reached the platform, Simon and Brian took charge of things, instructing their small team of engineering Deaths to begin unloading the covered trolleys into the dark, windowless carriages at the rear of the Ghost Train, which were normally used to carry reluctant, unwilling or just downright nasty souls to the afterlife. Having completed that task, they began cutting small, circular holes into each side of the carriages, before inserting a long, flexible tube, about as thick as a man's waist into each hole and securing it with some kind of sticky tape.

When they had finished, each of the carriages looked rather comical, like a sort of drunken metal spider with too many legs to control. Finally, they tied all of the tubes together on the roof, which made it look like the spider was worried that the sky might fall on its head, and joined the others inside the normal carriages. Then, with Brian at the controls of the locomotive and a defiant blast on the Ghost Train's whistle as it left the station, they were off and on their way into the void to do battle with Lucius and his army of lost souls.

They had been travelling for some time, the silence in the carriage becoming more and more oppressive with every passing minute, when Trudy could stand it no longer. Just as she was about to scream out loud with frustration, the door to the carriage opened and in walked Simon, with a large bag of wooden mallets, which he proceeded to give to his friends and the other Deaths.

Trudy looked at the mallet and asked: "So, is this what you've been working on then?"

"Part of it, yes," said Simon, swinging his own mallet happily around the carriage and nearly taking the head off the Death that was in the seat behind him.

"So, you want us to go into battle against Uncle Lucius and a million screaming lost souls, armed with wooden mallets. Is that correct?" continued Trudy, her voice starting to rise, as the anger built inside her.

"Save it for the lost souls," replied Simon casually, much to Trudy's surprise. "And sit down, so that I can explain," he continued, collapsing heavily into the seat behind him and then jumping up, apologising profusely to the Death that he had just squashed beneath him. Then, choosing another, thankfully unoccupied seat, he carried on talking:

"Back in the caves I did some thinking and I reckon that we've got it wrong about the lost souls."

"Go on," said Trudy, not immediately seeing the connection between large wooden mallets and lost souls.

"We've been thinking of them as if they were real, because they look like real people," said Simon. "But they're not real. Neither are we. For example, I only look like I do

at home, because that is how I imagine myself to look when I'm here. The same is true for all of us, even the Deaths. They only look like we imagine them to. In reality, they probably have no shape or form whatsoever... sorry about that, Eddie. Are you all following me?"

The row of three blank faces staring back at Simon told him that they were still totally in the dark, yet he carried on regardless, in the hope that they would eventually catch up.

"Anyway, Eddie's dad said something when we first met him about the problem they faced with the lost souls. How do you kill something that is already dead? Well, I started thinking about that and realised that although you can't kill them, because they're already dead, you might be able to turn them into something that can't hurt you, by removing their physical form. Hence, the wooden mallets," he continued brightly. "Does it make sense now?"

"No!" called out Johnny, Eddie and Trudy at the same time, causing the other Deaths to turn around in surprise.

"Oh, just look at it this way then," said Simon in exasperation. "You just hit the lost souls with the mallet and I think that they will lose their shape and be unable to hurt us. I can't put it any more simply than that."

"What, you mean you want us to play 'Whack-a-Soul' with Lucius' army?" said Trudy in total disbelief. "You want us to squash the lost souls out of existence?"

"Not out of existence as such. But just so that they can't hurt us. I think that it will work. At least I'm fairly sure that it will," continued Simon, his voice wavering ever so slightly, as he finished talking.

"Hmm," said Trudy, still having a hard time believing what Simon was asking of them. "And what about the other stuff? You said that this was only part of it," she continued, tossing her mallet menacingly up and down in front of her.

"Ah, well, that's a surprise. I wouldn't want to spoil all the fun for you now," said Simon with a knowing smile, adding quietly to himself: "Especially if it goes wrong when we're out there."

As the four of them drifted back into silence, the Ghost Train sped on across the void, crossing hundreds, if not thousands of miles each second, but still seeming to get no closer to its goal. Staring out of the window, Eddie was surprised to see a brief flicker of light as the train sped by. As he told the others, the door to the carriage opened and Brian came in, saying: "It looks like we just passed the lost souls that attacked us in the gorge. I'm pretty sure that they weren't friendly, anyway. In my experience, the friendly ones don't tend to raise their fists in anger and try to chase after you."

"At least we've left them behind and it should take them ages to catch up with us," replied Eddie's dad. "Which reminds me, how far away is the gateway?"

"I'm not sure, to be honest," replied Brian, scratching his head. "It's so hard to tell when you're out here, but I reckon that we've gone more than halfway by now. And don't worry, I'll be the first one to tell you as soon as I spot Lucius' army, you can count on that!" he continued, as he walked back to the driver's compartment.

Once again, silence descended on the carriage, as the four friends waited uneasily for the journey to end and the inevitable battle to begin. Trudy, having long since become bored of tossing the mallet up into the air, was juggling it idly back and forth between her hands, when suddenly, she stopped and hit Simon, who was gazing into the void, hard on the leg.

“Ouch! What did you do that for?” cried Simon, rubbing his leg and checking for broken bones.

“I was just curious. I wanted to see if I could make you wink out of existence. And you didn’t, so how come you think that it’s going to work on the lost souls?” replied Trudy, giving Simon a quizzical look.

“Well, first of all, it’s not very nice to know that you want to knock me out of existence and second, it won’t work on me because I thought of it. I’m expecting it, if you know what I mean, so I don’t react like I think the lost souls will,” replied Simon, still smarting at the blow from Trudy’s mallet.

“Well, you didn’t look as if you expected it when I hit you just now, so I don’t know how you can think that the lost souls will react any differently,” said Trudy indignantly, making to hit Simon again with the mallet, but stopping just short of his other leg.

“I don’t know. It’s just a feeling that I have, that’s all,” said Simon, visibly flinching away from Trudy’s mallet. “It just popped into my head when I was thinking back in the caves. I mean, I just wanted to do something to help. I feel so useless here and after all, the three of you have fought Lucius before, so you kind of know what to expect, whereas I’ve never even seen him, apart from fleetingly when we were on our way to visit the Guardians of the Gateway the other day.”

“What do you mean you feel useless just because you haven’t had to face Uncle Lucius before?” said Eddie, sitting bolt upright in disbelief. “You were the one that stopped the countdown that would have destroyed the world back at the MalCorp tower, not to mention being the one that defeated Lucius’ henchman, Sneeds. You almost single-handedly saved the entire world, Simon, whereas we were lucky to be able to push Lucius out of the boardroom window. So, don’t you go telling me that you feel useless. You’re a hero!” he continued, reaching over to give Simon a reassuring pat on his knee.

“Ouch!” said Simon, rubbing his leg again. “That was the one which Trudy hit.”

“Sorry, but you’re still a hero, nonetheless,” replied Eddie with a smile.

Just then, the Ghost Train lurched as if it was slowing down and Brian came back into the carriage, his face looking grim. “We’re nearly there, but I think that you’d all better take a look out of the window, just to see what we’re up against.”

As one, they rushed over to the side of the carriage and stared outside. Sure enough, there was the portal in the distance, still shimmering bright white against the blackness of the void. However, lying between it and the Ghost Train, and stretching for as far as the eye could see, was Lucius’ army of the damned. It was still some distance from the gateway itself but was nonetheless rapidly approaching its goal.

Johnny and the others scanned the void around Lucius’ army, looking for the cluster of friendly souls that they had left behind, but could see no sign of them. I hope that they got

away safely, thought Johnny, as he suddenly realised that they would more than likely be facing Lucius on their own.

“So, what do you want to do?” asked Brian, casting his gaze around the carriage. “By that I mean there’s no way around them, so do we stand here and fight, trying to draw them away from the gateway, or do we try and break through their line and reach the guardians?”

The carriage fell silent, as all eyes turned to face Eddie’s dad. After a few moments spent deep in thought, he spoke. “We go through to the gateway... if we can. If we try to fight them here, all Lucius will do is send some of his lost souls to overwhelm us and we will have achieved nothing. No, we push on forward and do our best to defend the gateway for as long as we can.”

“So, it’s full speed ahead, then?” said Brian.

“Indeed, Brian. Let’s push this train faster than it’s ever gone before and see what damage we can do to Lucius’s forces along the way,” replied Eddie’s dad, nodding sagely to his friend.

“Aye, aye, captain!” said Brian, giving him a snappy salute and trying his best to smile as he did so. Then, turning to the others, he said: “Right, hold on everyone, this is going to be a bumpy ride!”

Moments later, the Ghost Train began to pick up speed, as Brian threw the lever beyond even the point that Uncle Fergus had got it to, the metal handle bending and threatening to snap in two, as he pushed it further and further forwards. Back in the carriage, everyone could tell that they were approaching hitherto unknown speeds, as the void took on an oily appearance, never seen before, as it flashed past the windows.

Suddenly, there was a loud thump and the train slowed slightly, wobbling dangerously from side to side, as it ploughed into Uncle Lucius’ unsuspecting army. Johnny, Eddie and the others looked on in absolute silence, as thousands of lost souls streamed past the carriages, lighting up the void with a silvery blur, as they were tossed mercilessly aside by the speeding train.

Almost as quickly as it had begun, the thumping sound stopped, and the Ghost Train began to pick up speed once again. Realising that they had indeed broken through Lucius’ army, a mighty cheer went up inside the carriage, as Johnny, Eddie, Simon and Trudy, not to mention all of the other Deaths, began jumping up and down, hugging each other wildly with joy. When he entered the carriage a few minutes later, Brian was almost overwhelmed by the reception that he received; the number of congratulatory slaps on the back he got, threatening to dislocate his ribs and make him useless for the fight ahead.

Finally, Eddie’s dad decided to calm things down. Standing on the tips of his toes, he roared: “Enough, Enough! We’ve had one small success, it’s true, but the main battle is ahead of us and that won’t be anywhere near as easy. Now, you all know what to do when we arrive, so I suggest that we stop celebrating and start concentrating on the next few hours ahead.”

With that, Brian went back to the driver’s cabin and stopped the Ghost Train a little way from the gateway, the absolute silence of the void unnerving Johnny and the others, as they disembarked and began taking up their positions around the train, putting themselves between the gateway and Uncle Lucius’ advancing army.

As Johnny stared into the void, watching the glowing mass of lost souls get closer and closer, he said to no one in particular: “So, what do we do now?”

“We wait,” came the reply from Eddie’s dad...