

Ripples from the Past

Chapter 15 - Miners for the Empire

“Crit Imada wasn’t good in the mornings, which was a problem, as the fate of several thousand people was in her hands. Actually hers and the hands of Hy Astar, but she liked to think that her role in the plan was much more crucial.”

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Chlo could have put the entire Sacred Water Resort into a stasis field, locking the twenty fake pilgrims into a moment in time, unable to detonate the bombs they carried inside their bodies. That would mean putting a lot of genuine tourists into stasis though and quite a few resort staff. The fakes could be harmlessly removed from the resort and fairly soon, everything would be back to normal. Sikush hadn’t liked that plan.

“It reeks of desperation.” He’d said. “And we can’t keep something like that quiet. It will look bad, very bad.”

Mendera had a good reputation as a safe destination for tourists and locking an entire resort in stasis, would undo millennia of hard work, building that reputation. Chlo was relying on Hy and Crit to separate the dangerous fakes from the genuine pilgrims. She watched them dress on her probes, still surprised at how uncomfortable Commander Yerli was with their nakedness. Both Hy and Crit, took at least two stimulants that were illegal on several empire planets. Not on Mendera though, where stims were a part of the morning routine for many.

“I didn’t know they took those.” Said Yerli. “I know quite a few people do, but still...”

“With the pressure of their work, I’d be more worried if they didn’t.” She replied.

Yerli gave her an odd look, but Chlo had gained a level of confidence in the two senior militia members. They’d done a good job the previous night and she trusted them to keep the genuine pilgrims alive and unharmed.

“They have until the tourists have had their breakfast.” She said. “Then the fun will begin.”

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Silky looked around while Rhian and Kerr coughed, while their lungs became used to the strange mixture of compounds in the air. She knew where they were from a map in her head. All chaos creatures had the same knowledge of the rifts, though Silky had added to hers by years of travelling while serving various demon rulers of Leng.

“We’re there, exactly the right spot.” She said, pointing. “Barely half a mile away, those are the ruins of the once great temple of Nara-Odil.”

“Which rift are we on?” Asked Rhian.

“The 1st rift, about three hundred miles or so from the mountains.” Silky replied.

“I thought you mentioned the 5th rift Mo, or maybe the 6th?” Asked Kerr.

Silky rested back on her tail, she always enjoyed Mo talking about his scheming, even for the 8th or 100th time.

“I’ve told lots of different stories about moving The Grimoire.” Said Mo. “Treasure hunters have dug up half the old temples on the rifts, right up to the edge of the 6th rift. In truth Silky and I only pulled it out of the ground and moved it a few hundred yards. It still lives in the old fortified mountaintop, built by Emperor Xanash the 34th.”

“It had to be on the 1st rift if you think about it.” Said Silky. “Only the 1st rift is unaffected by switches, the end of the multiverse.”

Everyone was quiet for a moment, even the coughing became less loud and regular.

"You mentioned three hundred miles. Are we walking all of that?" Asked Kerr.

"Maybe, most who travel the rifts, do it on foot." Said Mo. "There are more Farrag around than there used to be, the tribespeople use them to pull carts. There is a chance we might be able to steal a cart."

"What's a Farrag?" Asked Rhian.

"A four legged beast of burden." Said Silky. "Large, foul smelling and covered in thick fur. Bad tempered too, when it isn't trying to kick you, it spits at you."

"Still better than walking." Added Mo.

Silky led by simply walking in the direction of the ruins, which stood just high enough to be visible above the low vegetation. The 1st rift was greener than it had once been, allowing the tribespeople to grow in numbers, their small villages growing in number too.

"There is a track that leads all the way from Nara-Odil to the mountains." Said Mo. "All that remains of a once major demon roadway."

The walk to the ruined temple caused Rhian to cough again. Silky let her rest, using the opportunity to take a sword from her pack and a knife attached to a belt.

"Who is best with a knife?" She asked.

Kerr pointed at Rhian, who merely shrugged and buckled the belt round her waist. Silky handed the sword to Kerr.

"No scabbard I'm afraid, you'll either have to carry it, or push it down your belt." Said Silky.

"What sort of threat are we likely to face?" Asked Kerr.

"Hopefully Silky can deal with most things that might attack." Said Mo. "Creatures on the rifts have an instinctive fear of chaos creatures. There are a few low level dredger demon out there though and some very aggressive insect life."

"And some of the undead still roam the rifts." Added Silky. "The tribesmen are the real problem though. Some are friendly and some aren't."

"We'll avoid all of them, if we can." Said Mo. "The good thing is that the 1st rift is so huge, that we might get to where we're going, without having to fight anyone."

Rhian seemed to be in control of her breathing again, as Silky led them away from the old temple, towards the mountains in the distance. With no real horizon, the mountains looked quite close, though Silky knew it might take weeks of walking to reach them. Everyone had reached a comfortable pace, without too much coughing and wheezing.

"When does morning come?" Asked Rhian. "Or daylight, or whatever?"

"This is what passes for day on the rifts." Said Mo. "The light is shifted heavily over to the violet end of the spectrum."

"Great for growing crops." Added Silky.

"But I'm not a plant." Said Kerr. "Does it ever get any better than this?"

"No, just a little darker at what passes for night." Said Mo. "Your eyes will adapt though, as you spend more time here."

Rhian was trying to laugh and cough at the same time.

"In the same way that my lungs will get used to breathing in air full of strange compounds?" She asked.

Silky simply nodded at her and carried on walking.

"A month or so and you'll wonder why it worried you." Said Mo.

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Hol wasn't as fortunate as Mo, her current location looked unfamiliar to her and definitely not the part of the 6th rift, where she'd hoped the last rift gate would send them to.

"It seems nothing works as well as it should on the rifts, not even chaos invokers." Said Celli.

"Leave Mingal alone, he'll work out where we are." Said Hol.

The last thing Hol needed was an argument between the members of her small group, yet Celli did have a point. Some of the old ruined temples had been known to be unreliable, but never rift gates. It might be that Mingal had made an error, which was worrying. Mingal had his eyes closed, while he used his chaos creature side to feel where they'd ended up.

"We are on the 6th rift." Said Mingal. "Where we should be, yet no where we wanted to go. It is very confusing."

Celli looked angry, yet simply shrugged at Hol and took some rations out of her pack. Juno and Albas took her lead and decided to use the confusion as a chance to rest and eat. No use asking Mingal to elaborate on his words, he'd gone into a trance, eyes closed and muttering to himself. Hol didn't feel hungry or tired, so she stood on a rock and surveyed the barren land all around them.

"This is the 6th rift." She muttered. "I'm sure of it."

Mingal rose to his feet, pointing to their rear.

"The rift gate is there, a good day's walk away." He said. "The rift has changed, moved around, perhaps shrunk slightly. We are at the right co-ordinates, but the rift has moved."

Hol had no idea the rift gates worked like that, but she believed Mingal. Luckily the route from the 6th rift to the 7th wasn't via a rift gate. There was a fiery rift in reality, which took anyone stupid enough to want to go there, straight to the 7th rift.

"Shrinking rift my backside." Said Celli.

Hol let it go, Celli and Mingal were never going to be friends. They'd been sniping at each other for days and it looked likely to continue. If Mingal was right, she knew which direction to take them and how long it should take. It was a crude test of how reliable Mingal's information might be.

"Which direction do we go?" She asked. "And how long to get to the rift edge?"

Mingal didn't hesitate, pointing in the direction Hol had already worked out in her mind.

"Two weeks of walking at a fast pace during full light." He said. "It should really have taken us a little longer, but the rift is changing."

Celli was sneering, but the direction and time seemed accurate enough. It looked like the rifts were shrinking, the multiverse really was coming to an end. Not for billions of years of course, but the effects were already causing problems.

"We could fly." Said Juno. "Take turns in carrying Celli and Mingal."

"That would get us there much quicker." Added Albas.

"None of that!" Said Celli. "I intend to keep my feet firmly on the ground."

Not flying really, just levitating into the air and using various spells to create forward motion. She'd travelled that way with Kittara. There had been less flying creatures in the air above the rifts then, less potential enemies. Delmus had nearly caused the deaths of Nurigen and Alyz once, trying to carry them while flying across the rifts. Plus Celli was big, too big to be easy to carry.

"We'll walk, but walk all day if we need to." She replied. "Come on, we should be moving."

"You're trusting his directions?" Asked Celli.

"I have been this way before Celli." She replied. "I do remember the way. Come on, no dawdling."

There was precipitation on most of the rifts, even mighty rivers on some. The 6th rift had no precipitation though, not one drop of rain, ever. There was water held in the air though, enough humidity to support some unique and very tough plant life. They had to almost fight their way

through dense foliage, to reach the bottom of the valley. Something didn't like their presence, hissing at them from the cover of a few boulders. There was a replying hiss from behind them.

"Growlers." Said Hol. "Bigger and far nastier than the ones we have on Mendera."

Spells could be a little erratic on the rifts, but Hol's fire spell incinerated one of the creatures. There seemed to be dozens of them though, closing in around them. Hungry probably, there wasn't that much of anything to eat on the 6th rift. They could take to the air, but Hol didn't want to risk that, unless it was a last resort. Mingal sent the growlers running, just by walking towards a few of them, his hand held up, finger pointing.

"I'm glad we brought him now." Said Celli.

The rifts seemed to change everything, making it meaner, nastier, far more likely to attack you on sight. The growlers were mindless insects on Mendera, but not on the rift. As Mingal approached, the creatures shared a chattering noise, almost like speech. Then they ran, as fast as they could.

"They knew what he is." Said Juno. "The damn bugs recognised a chaos creature, knew what he could do to them."

"The rifts do that, even the plants can be dangerous here." Said Hol. "Come on, we have a long way to travel."

She led, taking them along the valley floor, heading towards a place she'd promised herself never to visit again.

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Crit Imada wasn't good in the mornings, which was a problem, as the fate of several thousand people was in her hands. Actually hers and the hands of Hy Astar, but she liked to think that her role in the plan was much more crucial. Her augmentations had been quite cheap to buy, which really meant redundant old tech. A fivefold increase in strength, though her spine had needed some painful alterations to cope with the increased workload. The morning nagging pain in her back, was another reason for her not wanting to do anything that needed much thought, until the afternoon. Add a slight hangover to that..... No, she wasn't at her best.

"Wow, we don't usually see you looking after the morning departures."

"You won't see it too often. Are they all still having breakfast?"

A baggage handler, one of Jacek's friends. It was an open secret that most baggage handlers on Mendera were illegals, but no one else wanted the jobs. They were the eyes and ears of the spaceport, always knowing what was going on.

"Some damn fools offered them free everything, even the expensive confectionery to take with them. Fine, if you're not stuck here until the last bag has been loaded on a transport."

"Damn fool, right." She muttered.

The damn fool was Hy, who had a theory about the way the mind of one of the fakes would work. He was good to look at and pretty good in bed, but theories about fake humans were best left to the Tech Clerics. Crit walked towards the small group of ground transports, their drivers eager to be gone. Most were on a job and finish contract. The sooner they delivered the tourists to Mendera City, the sooner they were on their way home. One driver waved at her, the others just nodded.

"Some damn fool delayed them." She shouted.

"We heard."

Three ground transports to pick up about eighty tourists and their baggage. As each transport could seat sixty in comfort, none of them should be full. It was standard procedure to give the pilgrims plenty of space, no one likes to be crushed up with strangers. The transports were all closed up, mornings were cold on Mendera. The tourists travelled the bumpy road into the city in comfort, held

high above the road on eight large wheels and high tech suspension. It was all normal, going along the same route as previous diverted groups of tourists. Her earpiece came to life.

“First group coming out.” Said Hy. “All faces from the warning list, all fakes.”

“Ok, ok, your stupid plan worked. I’ll buy lunch.” She replied.

He wasn’t going away. Of course he wanted to rub it in quite a bit, she had treated his idea with quite a bit of derision.

“The genuine tourists couldn’t resist freebies, especially the chef’s famous sweets.” He said. “They hung back to get their greedy little hands on those goodies.”

“Yes Hy, you went through all this last night, several times.”

No good trying to escape, he had to push her face right into it. She owed him his moment, it looked like all twenty fakes were arriving at the transports.

“But the fake people are programmed to leave right after breakfast.” Said Hy.

“They’re here, I have to go.”

Crit promised herself that if Hy kept on about how good his plan had worked, right through dinner.... She’d give him a broken nose. Actually not just the bombs masquerading as people, had decided to forego the free sweets, even if they were created by a famous chef. Two real live pilgrims, were pulling their cases towards the transports. Still, two wasn’t bad, Chlo could handle two of the genuine article.

“Good morning.” Said Crit. “Plenty of room today, three transports when we really only needed one. If you can all get on the transport at the front of the parking area, you’ll be in Mendera City in no time at all.”

The genuine pilgrims began to arrive, some looking a bit tired, it was still quite early. No angry faces though, no one likely to report a bad satisfaction percentage for Mendera City. Crit gained a few odd looks from the transport drivers, as she helped several tourists with their luggage. Making sure they were all going to use the other two transports.

“Here, let me get that sir.”

“Yes, my body has been augmented.”

“No, we don’t often get serious storms in the city.”

It went on and on, the insatiable curiosity of the general population, bless them. Some of it was curiosity, but Crit wasn’t the dumb hulk she looked. She understood that much of the questioning was to allay fears and ease minds. She smiled and tried to make every answer sound positive. At last everyone was on the first transport and she waved the driver away. Hy arrived, just as the transport was a swirl of dust in the distance.

“How many real pilgrims on there with them ?” He asked.

“Just two, Chlo can handle pulling out two.”

“You definitely counted all twenty fake pilgrims onto the vehicle ?”

She wanted to snap at him, but didn’t. The mission was dangerous, he was just being thorough.

“Yes and looked at every face, twice.” She replied. “All twenty are on their way to the city.”

“Still.....” Said Hy, looking at her.

“It wouldn’t hurt to follow them.” She added. “At a distance.”

There were several vehicles parked outside the small militia outpost at Calmis-An. Most were the sort that hovered on a cushion of air. Great for not bouncing over every pothole, but they kicked up a cloud of dust that could be seen for miles. There was an elderly trike, with quite a few dents and a cracked front screen.

“It’s got the speed we need.” Said Hy. “And it doesn’t kick up huge amounts of dust.”

“Are you certified to drive these ?”

“Hmmm... sort of, my father had one.”

She got on the back, while he sat in front and put his hand on the control panel. Obviously Chlo thought that Hy’s father sort of teaching him was good enough, the powerful fuel cell motor began to hum.

“Hold on !” Said Hy.

She put her hands on a grab rail behind the seat, as the trike accelerated hard. The transport had a head start on them, but wouldn’t be travelling that fast. Tourists liked to arrive somewhere quickly, but they also wanted to arrive without having their spine jarred. Crit knew that they’d soon catch up with the transport.

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Yet another version of Chlo walked through the crowds in the market place, recognised by a few, yet left alone. One mother pointed Chlo out to her child, who waved at her with some vigour. Chlo waved back of course and carried on towards the central government building of Pineus 8. She liked to walk through the streets of empire worlds, getting a first-hand feel for how well the local people were doing.

“Half an hour in a market, will tell you more than thousands of official reports.”

Was one of Sikush’s favourite sayings and one she agreed with. There was plenty of fresh produce and smiling faces. Not one person had accosted her, to give her a piece of his or her mind. Not one moan about the empire, something of a record. The main government building had a vaguely colonial feel about, though why was hard to define. Made of stone, with some intricate carvings in all the right spots, it was a construction worthy of Mendera City. There was something missing though, a certain confidence of style that told you that Pineus 8 was merely an empire world, a colony of Mendera.

“Just another crappy mining planet.”

Delmus had told her, after recently spending some time there. Chlo quite liked the place though, it had an easy charm about it. She entered the side door of the government building and walked through into the annexe. It appeared to be full of miners and their families, which was good news. Linus Mosca the local hiring agent saw her and came over to meet her.

“Chlo, good to see you.” He said. “The generous pay being offered, has brought miners from all over the empire and a few unaligned worlds.”

“Any problems with the Pineus mine owners ?” She asked.

“No, they don’t have a need for deep cold miners.”

Some of the miners recognised her and nodded in her direction. She recognised some of them too, a few were on her warning lists. Deep cold mining was dangerous, far more dangerous than even deep ocean mining. She led Linus away to a quiet area of the room.

“I can see at least three men and two women, who are on the warning lists.” She said. “We need miners, but not if they’re a little too fond of drink or stimulants.”

“I saw them too, we’re filtering them out and trying to say no, without causing any trouble. There is also the question of families Chlo. Deep cold miners consider accommodation for their family, as part of the deal.”

It was something she’d come across before and wasn’t a surprise. There were a lot of planets worth mining in the multiverse and a lot of them were nitrogen haze cold. That made miners with experience of working in close to absolute zero conditions, worth looking after.

“Families kept in shuttles that remain in orbit.” Said Chlo. “They’ll work ten standard length days on and five days off. They can see their loved ones when off duty.”

“I’ll tell them, but they won’t like that.”

“It’s standard procedure Linus.” She said. “Deep cold habitation can be dangerous and families are just more people to open the wrong valve on the wrong door and end up frozen solid. Tell them that, they know the dangers. My guess is that they’ll all sign up.”

Linus Mosca didn’t just work for the empire, he hired and head hunted skilled workers for most of the civilised worlds in the empire and beyond. Only those with hard currencies and a link to the imperial banking system of course. She liked him, but didn’t quite trust him.

“They all ask where the planet is, what’s it called. Does it even have an imperial ident ?”

“No further details Linus. Just offer the money we discussed and tell them it’s working in nitrogen haze temperatures.”

He gave her a slight bow and left. There was nothing for him to complain about, his commission on hiring the right people was ten times what any miner could earn in a year. Chlo walked among the miners, remembering faces, adding information to her database. She knew one face in the crowd rather well, even if the young woman had been dead for a very long time. A path opened in the crowd, as she walked up to the female in local clothing. Chlo leant in close, keeping her words to a whisper.

“Tanil again !” She hissed. “Luri’s dead lover seems.... Inappropriate.”

“This was never her home, but after using this form to see Delmus, it seemed right to carry on using it.”

The crowd of miners had become curious, there could be no private conversation in the government building. Chlo led the creature who looked like Tanil, out into the market place. The dozen or so different languages being shouted by market traders, gave them complete privacy.

“I love it here.” Said Tanil. “The market is so bustling, so energetic.”

“So do I, though I’m sure you had a real reason for coming here ?”

Chlo still found it hard to think of the creature as a vessel of the multiverse. Sventa chose to view all the borrowed physical appearances of long dead people, as emissaries from the Gods. Chlo could see the attraction of that kind of viewpoint.

“I can see why you’re arranging to have Boomers and Sessana dug up.” Said Tanil. “It wasn’t part of our agreed plan though.”

Boomers, she knew they were now calling the planet Boomers. Whose memories had she pulled that from ? It made Chlo feel slightly violated and angry, even if both emotions were irrational.

“Plan !” She yelled. “There was no plan. Mo going to fetch The Grimoire was the only activity likely to prove worthwhile. All that sending the fleet out to reassure the citizens of the empire... what a complete waste of time.”

Tanil was actually nodding at her.

“I agree, but sometimes an army has to be kept busy.” She said. “There is Hol’s mission, which is important and not just a waste of time.”

“I know she’s entered the rifts, but I can’t trace her there.” Said Chlo. “Was sending her there your idea ?”

“Hol hasn’t gone alone of course, she has two of The Damned with her and Mingal. She also took Celli, the Shelzak demon pretending to be from one of the outer worlds. But..... no it wasn’t my idea. Estrid sent Hol off on her journey to Gateway and beyond.”

“Leng ! Estrid sent her to Leng ! Why ?”

Tanil was actually looking guilty, a weird expression for a dead woman being used as vessel for the multiverse.

"If I tell you he will know, The Chaln ." Said Tanil. "If he knows he'll try to interfere, perhaps send an army of The Damned to Leng. He will know it's wrong, but may do it anyway. The effect on the balance would be disastrous."

"I find it hard to think of anything that would cause him to act so irrationally."

There was one thing, or one person. Chlo hid the thought from the part of her mind she shared with Sikush, pushing it away into a recess of her consciousness. She simply nodded at Tanil.

"I see and I agree that such a thing should be kept a secret. Is there really a hope?"

"Yes." Said Tanil. "As long as the watcher has survived, which I believe she has."

She thought that Tanil would simply vanish, but she stood there for a while, as if uncertain whether to say something.

"He does care about other things, he's just not good at emotions." She said. "Get him alone, when his head isn't full of another hundred things and ask him?"

"Ask him what?"

"What he fights for Chlo? Ask him why he fights?"

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Hy Astar wasn't sure what they were looking for, as he followed the tourist transport at a cautious distance. Chlo would soon lock the eight wheeled ground transporter in a stasis field, before carefully removing the two genuine pilgrims. He had no idea what would happen to the twenty fakes, their fate fell outside the narrative running in his head. Hy had written the script for his heroic ride on the trike, or more accurately something in his unconscious mind had written it. He had no fear and Crit was no longer an augmented female with five times his strength. She was now a damsel in distress, in need of his aid. As he increased the speed of the trike, he was certain that it was the day when he'd become a famous hero. Crit thumped him on the shoulder.

"Not too close, or they might get suspicious." She yelled at him.

It was going to be a hot dry day near Mendera City; the sand storm had completely blown itself out. The dunes in the distance looked superb, as did the approaching five metre tall city walls. He did slow down though; nothing could be allowed to alarm the bombs masquerading as people. He wanted to talk to Crit, but the wind lashing his face made proper conversation impossible. When was Chlo going to do her thing?

"Chlo must do it soon." He yelled.

"Yeah!"

The road didn't just go to the city, it carried on west, terminating at the distant city of Surgal. Hy knew the road well, there was a mound of rocks before the turning north and the Mendera City gates. The rocks had always been known as Demon's Lookout for as long as anyone could remember. As the road turned, he saw the transport stopped by the side of the road, with a few warriors in the uniform of The Damned, looking it over. He slowed down and brought the trike to a standstill, near to the warrior who'd woken him from a deep sleep the previous night, Jen.

"Looks like everything went to plan." Said Crit.

"I don't know, I've had a bad feeling since I got up this morning."

"That'll be too much cheap booze Hy."

He had to admit, she might have been right, but his internal script was still running. He knew there was something wrong, despite the calm look on Jen's face.

“All twenty held in stasis.” Said Jen. “We’re not even going to remove them from the transport. Chlo wants the entire thing taken to the imperial store. Well done by the way, couldn’t have done it without you.”

Praise was always nice and Crit looked pleased. His mind was troubled though, with dark thoughts and possibilities.

“Did you count them all ?” He asked.

“They know how to do their job Hy.” Snapped Crit.

Jen too, had lost her smile.

“No offence meant, but this is still a militia operation.” He said. “I just want to be sure. Have they been checked over and counted.”

“Chlo has counted them, all twenty are here.” Said Jen.

“We should check every face.” He said.

“Crap Hy, leave it alone. You’ll get thrown out of the militia.” Warned Crit.

Jen turned her face away for a second or so, before looking at him and shrugging her shoulders.

“Chlo says it’s a good idea. You know their faces better than me, we’ll check them over together.”

It was a little eerie, to walk along the centre aisle of the transport, with the passengers either side, locked into shimmering green stasis fields. Transparent fields that allowed them to see that moment, when they’d been locked in time, perhaps forever. One couple were in the act of kissing, others eating. All the time the hero script was playing in his head.

“See, all there.” Said Jen. “Hard to count twenty fake pilgrims and miss one. No hard feelings though, you’re invited to the palace for a meal tonight.”

He liked his job. No actually he didn’t, not really. He liked the regular pay and being able to get into any decent place to eat, without having to book. The militia had a dubious reputation, which he enjoyed exploiting for all it was worth. Plus Crit was grinning like crazy, after the invite to the imperial palace. Still, his internal narrative kept running.

“Slower on the way back, look over every pilgrim.” He said. “Trust me, think of it as humouring the crazy guy if you have to.”

“Oh, crap Hy.” Said Crit.

All she could see was her invite to the palace being revoked, but Jen merely followed him, as he looked hard at every face, remembering what room they’d been in. Halfway back along the aisle, a woman’s face was partially obscured by a snack she was eating. The right size and hair colour though, but something was prodding him to look closer. He actually climbed over the man next to her, getting into a position, where he could see all of her.

“She’s had her throat cut.” He said. “This is one of the real pilgrims.”

They’d worked together, of course they had. The fake pilgrims might even have guessed they were being herded onto the same transport and formulated a quick plan, while on the road. It fitted in with the unease and his mind fitted it into his hero script with ease.

“You’re right .” Said Jen. “I’ll call for more of the guard to search the south of the city.”

“We’ll find her.” He said. “The trike will get us there quickly and we know her face.”

He looked at Crit, hoping she’d agree.

“Yeah, we’ll find her.”

“Fine, but find her quickly.” Said Jen. “There are a lot of targets for a lone bomber in the south of Mendera City.”

There were indeed, The Well of Souls, the entire main landing area for the traders and the housing for all sorts of traders of vaguely illicit services. The citizens of Mendera enjoyed their sellers of

stimulants and sex workers, as long as they kept to their own area of the city. Hy accelerated the trike, to the point where several red lights appeared on the control panel.

"You're over heating the trike !" Yelled Crit.

"I know !"

Of course he knew, he just didn't care. They were through the city gates and would soon discard the trike anyway. He saw a bundle by the side of the road and brought the trike to a screeching halt, beside it. It wasn't a surprise to find the other real pilgrim, dead by the side of the road. Crit got off the trike and pulled the body round, brushing dust of his face.

"It's him, I recognise him from breakfast." She said. "He looks to have been dead for a while, so why drag or carry him this far ?"

"I have no idea." He replied. "Drop a marker tag on him for a pickup and we'll carry on looking for the woman with the bomb."

Maybe the fake thought she needed a real pilgrim's body to get past the checks Chlo used at the city gates ? Maybe she'd been correct ? Chlo's security system was private, even from the militia. Not that Hy cared, a hero didn't concern himself with such trivia. He now had just one thing left to do as part of his internal script. Catch and disarm the bomb woman.

"She's going to blow up Trader Town." He said.

"How do you know ?"

"I just do."

Crit trusted him without further comment. His knowledge had been proven now, with his insistence on checking those held in stasis on the transport. His scripts ran in his head all the time though, they kept fear and self-doubt at bay and were less harm than booze or drugs. Never had they been so accurate though. He accelerated towards the area known to the locals as Trader Town and wondered who might be putting the hero script into his head.

"I'm just going fucking crazy." He muttered.

"What ?"

"Nothing Crit. We'll be there soon."

He stopped the trike and stood there, waiting for the script in his head to give him a nudge in the right direction. An outline of a woman appeared in his eye. More like something brought on by booze, than any guidance from on high, but he now knew the right direction.

"There, she'd heading towards Mo's emporium."

"I don't see her."

"She'd gone now, come on, we need to run."

Of course they'd have Mo's place as a secondary target. It was known to everyone in the militia, that Mo's home on the rifts had been destroyed by their new enemy. Even some of the outer worlds had been talking about it. Hy ran, Crit right behind him.

"Trouble ?" Called a trader, busy unloading a hover pallet.

"Nothing big, just keep the kids indoors today." Replied Hy.

Luck had saved Mo's home. The woman was looking down an alleyway between the various stores, waiting for a group of militia to move away. Hy set his Ion blaster to about half its maximum, enough to fry anyone not in full body armour.

"Stop !" He shouted. "City militia. You are ordered to stop, or we will fire."

"Yeah, this shit ends here lady." Yelled Crit.

The militia at the other end of the alley had heard him and drew their weapons. There was no way for the fake pilgrim to go. Hy smiled and walked closer, trying not to frighten her into do something desperate, like blowing them all to atoms.

“Relax, we don’t want to hurt you.” He said.

He was close enough to see her eyes roll up into her head. He knew what was going to happen, it was now a part of his hero script. Crit was faster though, easily getting to the woman before him. Crit Imada lay on top of the fake pilgrim, folding herself completely around her.

“No Crit, this is my heroic death, my destiny ! Not yours.” He yelled.

It should have been his name on the plaque at the militia headquarters, his name spoken about with awe, even if only for a few weeks. The explosion was muffled, but still knocked him off his feet. He looked up and saw the clear blue sky above Mendera City, until the back of his head connected with something solid.

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The original version of Chlo was still stood in the Militia control room, though Yerli was now sitting. They’d just witnessed Crit Imada being blown apart and it wasn’t a pleasant thing to witness. Commander Casto Yerli must have seen violent death before, but probably not close up and in high definition. Chlo marked the site for investigation and a clean-up, before unlinking from the probe above Crit’s remains.

“We can’t keep that quiet.” Said Yerli.

No they couldn’t, a dark cloud of dust and debris didn’t need to be looked at by her probes, it was visible through the control room window. She could control just about everything inside the city, but the murders and body substitutions on the road near Demon’s Lookout, had been invisible to her. The driver of the transport must have seen something though. Jen had taken him to the basement of the barracks, where just the reputation of the place was likely to make him talk. Money was likely to have been his motive for looking the other way.

“Now we do the opposite of keeping it between ourselves.” Said Chlo. “There has been a terrorist attack on Mendera City. I’m sure we can agree on one of the usual groups who threaten to carry out such acts.”

Yerli looked unhappy, but his look was cynical rather than rebellious.

“There are a few, but only one or two who might actually have the means to carry out a bomb attack on Mendera.” He said. “Top of the list is The Children of the Wilderness.”

“Perfect, a group against Transbio lifeforms.” Said Chlo. “The citizens of the empire already hate them. Crit will be given a posthumous award and Hy will have his face on posters all over the empire. We’ll make him a hero Casto.”

“Is he alive ?”

“Oh yes, a militia medical team already have him on his feet.”

There were the two dead pilgrims to weave into the story for the media, but that wouldn’t be hard. Yes, it was going to work out quite well. The empire needed heroes and Hy Astar had the looks and personality for the role. All that brooding and history of substance abuse, would just add to his charm. Soon there wouldn’t be an adolescent teenager who didn’t have his picture on their bedroom wall, girls and boys.

“You’ll need to brief him Casto.” She said. “Make sure Hy is word perfect, before the inevitable media circus.”

“Me.... I thought ?”

She gave him, what she hoped was a cheeky grin.

“Oh no, I’m keeping well away from your people.” She said. “This has always been a militia operation.”

She put out her hand for his, pulling him to his feet. Chlo actually kissed him on the cheek, he really deserved it for how well his people had performed and the media shit storm about to head his way. “It won’t be too bad Casto, the next event on Mendera, will grab the attention of the media for a very long time. We can go up on the roof to watch, because it will be above Mendera, rather than on it.”

Stairs up to the roof, several flights of hard stone steps. Poor Yerli was puffing a bit, as they walked out onto the roof of the militia headquarters. Other parts of the empire had gravity repelling elevators or other forms of lifting people effortlessly to such places. Mendera was the holy city though, where trudging up steps was almost considered to be good for one’s soul.

“This will all be a surprise to you, I’m sure you understand?”

“I do Chlo, another secret we never talk about.” He replied.

“Look up and slightly to the east Casto. Where Leviathan should be about now.”

She loved the confused look on his face. People really did, hardly ever look up. Leviathan orbited Mendera like another moon, its metal hull reflecting the sunlight, making it visible on even the brightest day.

“Leviathan has gone.”

“Yes, Minraver took Leviathan and everyone aboard, on a short trip around the gas giant planets of our solar system. They left hours ago and you’d be surprised how few of our citizens have noticed that fact.”

She looked up, hearing him gasp as the sky above them, was filled with flashes from energy weapons. Thousands of them probably, as another group of hired mercenaries, arrived to destroy an imperial attack wing and Leviathan. The attack wing was there in the role of sacrificial lamb, orbiting with no crews on any of the vessels. Maybe Red-Tops again, or another group who needed to settle a grudge with the empire, or had an urgent need for money.

“Don’t worry, the attack wing can be replaced and Leviathan is beyond their reach.” She said.

“You knew they were going to attack?” Asked Yerli.

“Yes, I began to listen to the ripples from the past. You’ll enjoy the next part Yerli, when every enemy craft above Mendera, is totally destroyed.”

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