

Ripples from the Past

Chapter 10 – The Ocean

“There was a saying among old timers that if you hadn’t been on a craft with half the warning lights flashing, you weren’t a real space traveller.”

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The sand was pure white, she’d forgotten how it glittered in the morning sunlight from the twin suns. The planet ran a strange orbit, but by some miracle it had survived for several billion years. One sun, the smaller of the two, gave out light towards the blue end of the spectrum. The larger sun gave out what most would consider to be normal sunlight. The effect of the lighting was beautiful, giving the ocean a surreal blueness. The sand too, glittered with tiny points of blue. It was a view to die for, yet the children ignored it all and splashed about in the ocean. There were baths in the temple, but it was the first ocean they had ever seen.

“What is the ocean called ?” Asked Seesha.

“It has no name.” Replied Hol. “We could call it the Sea of Seesha if you like ?”

“Silly ! It must have a name.” Said Mix.

Silly was fast becoming his favourite word.

“It’s the truth. No one lives on this planet, so nothing has a name.” Said Hol. “The planet itself has an imperial Ident code, but no name.”

Seesha was looking about, as if disbelieving that a whole planet might really have no people living on it. The imperial news links had given them a great deal of knowledge about the empire, but nothing beyond it. All the empire worlds were full of people, millions of them and everything had a name.

“No one, not a single person ?” Asked Seesha.

“The entire galaxy has no people, it’s all unnamed.” She replied. “And the next galaxy and the next. It’s not rare, huge areas of the multiverse have no intelligent life. I thought you’d like somewhere with no crowds, for your first trip away from the temple.”

“Silly.” Said Mix, laughing.

She’d have to introduce him to a few new words, before he drove her crazy.

“Yes, we’ll call it the Sea of Seesha,” Said Seesha, “largest ocean on the planet Mix.”

“Brilliant ! Planet Mix.” Shouted Mix.

They splashed about again, enjoying getting each other wet. Hol had done quite a lot of research, the beach shelved very gently and there were no dangerous creatures. Life was finding it hard to get going on planet Mix, twin suns tended to do that. There were plants and primitive insects on the land, but the real life was in the deep oceans, away from the shake and bake of orbiting the suns. To Hol, it just meant the kids were safe to have some fun.

“Hol galaxy !” Shouted Mix. “We’ll call it Hol galaxy.”

“Do you want to learn to swim ?” She asked them.

Two smiling happy heads, nodding furiously.

“Oh yes !”

It was something she’d been thinking about for a while, a skill impossible to learn inside the temple. Completely impractical of course, which was a huge part of the fun. The invoker they’d captured at the temple was now on their side. A nasty piece of work, yet Minraver insisted that the abomination was now loyal to Mendera. Hol had been given the job of taking the creature on a fishing trip, to gather information and make sure their new conscript could be trusted. It was going to be an

unpleasant mission. Teaching two kids how to swim in ridiculously blue water, was her way of preparing for it.

"We need to get further out." She said. "Don't worry, there's nothing in the water to bite you. Well, there probably isn't."

"Silly." Said Mix.

How to float without panicking was the first step, then she'd get them flailing their arms about. Like most kids, they'd teach themselves to swim, pulling old instinctive reflexes from somewhere in their minds. The instructor was really there to make it all safe and orderly.

"Bet I swim first." Said Seesha.

"No, girls are silly."

Hol actually found herself laughing, which was exactly what she needed.

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Mo found the Old One a little irritating, he always had. Too much paranoia and anxiety disorder, if an AI could ever really be said to suffer from such a thing Mo suspected it was learned behaviour, burned into the circuits of the computer's neural network. Chlo could easily fix it, but obviously hadn't, which really irritated him. It implied that Chlo liked the Old One's persona !

"The drones have found nothing." Said the Old One.

"Great ! So we can go down there now ?" Asked Mo.

The journey to the uninhabited planet had only taken a day, far less time than if they'd used the shuttle for the entire trip. Hiding from empire vessels, keeping out of the busier parts of the galaxy. It would have taken them a good five or six days to get to the Udaries Nebula, seven to reach the planet where their freighter was waiting. Mo had no logical reason to feel annoyed by the delay in getting down to the planet, he just didn't like hanging around.

"No." Said the Old One. "Next I'll have a few raptors run a grid close to the surface. See if they cause anything to attack or run."

"Do we need that, really ?" Asked Mo. "It's a lifeless rock, the life form detectors say there isn't a single bacteria down there."

"Leave him alone." Said Rhian. "After what we've been through, I want him to be thorough."

"I agree, see if the raptors flush anything out." Added Kerr.

Mo knew when he was beaten, even Silky wasn't giving him any words of support. He just threw his hands up and stared at the view screens.

"I appreciate the support." Said the Old One. "But I was going to finish the security checks anyway."

Carry on moaning and the ancient AI was likely to insist on more checks, maybe even getting one of the needle ships to scan the entire surface of the planet. He kept quiet and watched two imperial raptors, as they flew a grid, centred around his precious freighter. Three hours, three fucking hours, until the Old One seemed satisfied.

"It is never possible to be completely certain." Said the AI. "You should be safe to go down to the planet and enter the freighter. I will remain in orbit until you've safely entered the vessel."

For the first time in a while, Silky spoke, voicing something that had already been discussed on the way there.

"Can you take us all the way to Medrona ?" She asked. "It would be safer and quicker than using the freighter."

"Especially one painted up in pirate colours." Added Kerr.

The Old One wasn't a person, with the usual flip flop mind that could be persuaded. He was an ancient AI with anxiety disorder, there wasn't a chance that he'd change his mind.

“We have discussed this several times.” He said. “Mo has a reputation for getting into trouble and I might be damaged. My fleet is required by The Chalné and I will not be put it at risk. Let that be an end to the matter.”

Mo had a pretty good idea that the Old One could have taken them to Medrona without getting a chip on his paintwork, but knew he’d never persuade him.

“How dangerous can it be ?!” Asked Rhian.

“Thinking about it, I agree with him.” Said Mo.

He had their attention, lots of angry looking faces. Even Silky was glaring at him, never a good thing.

“Think about it ! We need to get back home from Medrona and the Old One isn’t going to wait for us, he has other duties. Plus..... Well you might not be worried about it now, but you will be. The freighter has a significant resale value in imperial credits, much of it coming your way.”

Kerr was nodding at him, though Rhian didn’t seem convinced. The Old One ended any further discussion.

“I need to return to Mendera.” He said. “One way or another, you will be leaving. I’m sure we’d all prefer it to be done amicably.”

“Can you land down there ?” Asked Mo. “And take my shuttle back to Mendera.”

“No, the terrain isn’t suitable. I will use one of my shuttles to take you down there though and return your shuttle to Mendera, if you wish ?”

“That’s perfect.” Said Mo.

No one looked happy, as they collected their kit from their shuttle and prepared to go down to the planet’s surface. They’d seen it down there, all shown on screens by the drones sent to flush out any enemies. Their freighter was at the bottom of a deep canyon, probably put there to protect it from the elements. What elements though ? Mo hadn’t a clue, it was just a lifeless rock to him. The canyon was probably a good idea as a hiding place, but getting the vessel out again was going to be hell. The Old One’s shuttle was designed for military use and lacked most of the comforts they’d been used to.

“No drinks.” Noted Kerr.

“And the inertial damping seems a bit choppy.” Added Rhian.

They were being bumped around a bit, as the shuttle began its descent through the atmosphere. The view screens worked well though, showing a rubble strewn landscape, with one or two deep canyons.

“Looks primitive down there.” Said Silky. “Almost like the rifts.”

It happened, just the wrong chemicals on the surface, something not quite right in the atmosphere. Life never gets a start on most planets. Life wasn’t rare, but about ninety percent of planets remained nothing but lifeless rocks. There was a little oxygen in the atmosphere and enough pressure and temperature to make suits unnecessary. Masks would be needed though and tanks on their backs, to reach the freighter.

“I’ll land you as close as I can.” Said the Old One. “Get to the freighter quickly, there is an electrical storm coming up from the south and it’s likely to last two or three hours.”

“We’ll need that kind of time to run pre-flight checks anyway.” Said Kerr.

“How bad is the storm ?” Asked Rhian.

“Bad ! Where do you think all the rubble comes from ?” Replied the Old One.

Dropping the freighter into the canyon suddenly seemed a very sensible idea. Mo could see it on the screens now, a storm that filled the horizon to the south. Lightning was there in the clouds, some of

it striking the ground. They were ready as the shuttle touched down, masks on, bags already picked up. No use shouting while wearing a mask, but old habits die hard.

“Run for the airlock.” He shouted.

Someone had once unkindly said that freighters were designed to be crewed by idiots. Not a generalisation without a little truth. The profit margin on hauling freight wasn't huge and the large freight carriers hired cheap. Flower it up how you like, cheap staff aren't usually the brightest. The main airlock on the side of the freighters had large red signs in numerous languages around it, all saying 'Airlock.' And it had been painted in luminous yellow. All of it, every bit of the door glowed in the darkness of the approaching storm. A fool couldn't fail to see it, which of course, was the idea. There was a key pad on the airlock, which broke several strict laws, on just about every civilised planet. On Phlot it was actually an offence punishable by death. Fitting a key code was essential though, if you were parking an expensive freighter in the middle of nowhere. Mo was feeling stressed though and had entered the wrong code.

“Rorkath said 'neshbug86' I'm sure he did.” He muttered.

The others were waiting, muttering at him unintelligibly through their masks. The storm wasn't waiting, the wind was already tugging at his jacket. The problem was that he'd been intoxicated and so had Rorkath. Mo concentrated, pushing his face against the airlock door, so that he couldn't see the other watching him. Most keypads gave you a few chances to get it right, but how many ? 'neshbag86'

The door was still refusing to open. Silky was pulling at him, waving her arm at the sky. The storm was beyond anything seen on Mendera and its electrical storms were legendary. It was almost as dark as night, apart from the intense illumination of dozens of lightning bolts. There was dust in the approaching storm too and rubble far bigger than dust. If they didn't get into the freighter soon, things could get pretty bad, fairly quickly. He remembered a joke Rorkath had made about an Algarian they both knew, just before telling him the code for the keypad. One piece of information, led seamlessly into the other. Stupid, so easy to remember, now !

'neshbugmo86'

Little green lights illuminated the panel on the door, as the motors started up. The motors designed to move the heavy double doors to one side, slotting them inside the freighter's hull. No removing the masks until they were in clean filtered air, with just the right mixture of gasses to keep them alive. The airlock doors closed and there was the familiar hissing sound, as the crafts systems replaced the air with something breathable. Mo took off his mask, before using the code again, to open the inner lock.

“Just in time, that storm looked nasty.” Said Silky.

“You must give all of us the code to get in.” Said Kerr, while Rhian nodded furiously.

“I'm going to get an indelible marker and write it everywhere.” Said Mo.

The layout of the freighter was fairly standard, one long corridor that linked everywhere from the cargo hold at the rear, through to the command deck at the front. It was all designed to carry as much freight as possible, so there was little space for life's little comforts. They'd all have their own rooms though, with a few to spare; the freighter had been designed for a crew of eight.

“We might as well all claim a room and meet on the command deck after we've got settled.” He said.

Rhian simply opened the closest crew room door.

“This is mine; I'm desperate for a shower.” She said.

“I'll take the room next to hers.” Said Kerr.

It all went so easy, no arguing over who put their bag in the commander's quarters. Mo smiled at Silky and opened the door. Not exactly a palace, even the commander only occupied a room the size of the average hotel room. I did have a small cooking area though, with a fridge full of beer.

"Not bad, we've lived in a lot worse." Said Silky.

"It's clean; I thought it'd be full of old bottles and dirty underwear." Said Mo. "The Red-Tops aren't exactly famed for their housekeeping skills."

"Just be pleased it's clean and tidy."

They showered and checked everything over; even the sheets looked brand new and clean. Maybe a potential buyer had wanted to view the freighter? For whatever reason, it wasn't the boy's dormitory mess he'd been expecting. Eventually everyone ended up in the command room, looking at rows of dials and gauges, all in the green.

"It looks really good," said Kerr, "though Rhian and I will need to spend the next couple of hours, checking everything. We don't want to get stuck on Medrona, because we missed a minor fault."

"First thing is a name." Said Silky. "We have to give her a name, any ideas?"

"Mo's Revenge." Suggested Rhian.

"Revenge against who though?" Asked Kerr.

"Himself of course, he's always been his own worst enemy." Said Silky.

Mo didn't like the way the conversation was heading. It was getting a little too deep, a bit too close to the way he often felt about himself. Kittara had often said he seemed hell bent on self-destruction.

"The Silky." He said. "A tribute for putting up with me so long."

"Yes, good name." Said Kerr.

"The Silky it is then." Said Rhian. "We need to drink to her new name; the Red-Tops must have left a bottle of Ushong somewhere."

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Cold had killed the vicious construct on Grey Walker, just as Chlo knew it would. She watched with her benign probes, as the clean-up crew put its body into a sealed container. Officially no one knew the origin of the creature, but she did. There were another three of them, kept in stasis in the vaults below the imperial palace. Useful for occasions when brute force assassinations were the order of the day, but good for little else. The construct programme had been dropped, as The Damned were already better fighters and far more intelligent. The strange looking primate chimeras had been forgotten, until The Chalne had remembered them and ordered one to be placed into the hold of Grey Walker.

"It'll take care of our problem and freeze to death within a few days." He'd told her.

It was standard protocol for all Menderan vessels employed in off world research. If the vessel's computer detected that all the crew were dead, it turned off all life support functions. Within a few days, the interior of the craft would drop to lower than minus two hundred, killing any infectious pathogen on board. The plan was perfect, until the crew of Destiny Forty Eight had decided to pop an airlock and take a look inside. Minus one fifty just made the construct a little lethargic, yet still able to kill the intruders with ease. All the bodies were being put in sealed containers, just in case. In case of what was unknown, which was why clean-up crews tended to be over cautious. Sikush felt her emotions and connected with her.

"I don't believe they went inside to offer aid." He said. "If that helps?"

"That's obvious and no, it doesn't help. It had to be done though, I accept that."

Of course they'd gone inside Grey Walker to loot the vessel. Parallax Mining were notoriously bad payers and there was this huge high tech spacecraft, drifting and almost begging to be looted. Of course they were there to thieve, but they didn't deserve to be ripped apart. She contacted the clean-up crew.

"No links to be shared with the news networks, understood?"

"Yes, of course."

In many ways Chlo had more power than The Chaln . True he could order someone's execution, but that was rare. Chlo's revenge on those that upset her, was often creative and highly disruptive to their life. A council member had once referred to her as a machine. His account with the imperial bank had played up for weeks afterwards, causing him a lot of problems. His children were unexpectedly moved to a school in Cana-Ohm and his wife found herself removed from all her local activity groups. It was all minor and rather petty, but the councillor had given her a public apology. No one wanted to upset Chlo, the pictures of Destiny Forty Eight's dead crew members, wouldn't be splashed over every news network in the empire. Chlo thought the empire owed them that. She wasn't sure if Sikush was still with her, until she felt him looking at the probe feeds.

"How long to get Grey Walker operational?" He asked.

"Intense cold causes damage, it's unavoidable. It'll be operational in three to four days, though I recommend an upgrade of a few systems, which pushes the time up to seven days."

"Seven days is fine, do what needs doing."

He'd gone, when something among the general chatter on the common channel, became something far more urgent. Sveta had run into trouble on Pesallia Two, which might begin to rapidly escalate. She found the incoming transmission from Sveta and homed in on the location. Her probes were there almost instantly, bringing up views of what had been, a rather pretty local park.

"No wars please Sveta, not today, we've enough problems already." She said.

"We were attacked by a creature I've never seen before." Said Sveta. "It might be a silicon based life form."

"Very rare, I need to see that."

"My thoughts too, but the local army had other ideas. They've got between us and our shuttle and want the creature we found. They're being quite insistent."

Sveta could use a portal of course, though she could understand her reluctance to abandon her warriors. Pesallia's troops weren't that good, but there were a lot of them in the park and Chlo could see more arriving every second. They had heavy weapons and although the dark angels were likely to win any battle, they might not all survive. Then there was the question of trade with the Pesallia Group and the empire was all about trade.

"I'm going to work through some scenarios." She told Sveta. "Stay put for a few minutes."

"Staying put is about all I can do."

Sveta and her team needed to be extracted, before the local army worked up the courage to try and take the dead creature from her. Jen was the strategist and she was also likely to be given the job. The problem was that Jen was two hours into some well-earned sleep time. Chlo didn't like doing it, but she pushed everything to do with Sveta onto Jen's priority channel, before waking her up.

"Sorry to disturb your sleep cycle, but this is urgent."

Jen must have been tired and feeling irritable, yet she didn't show it. Jen was a professional, she knew that lack of sleep came with the job. Ask most soldiers what they care about and most will mention wanting better food and more sleep.

“Let me look Chlo..... Ahh Sventa causing havoc again. What do you need ?”

“An extraction for Sventa and her dark angels, that doesn’t leave anyone dead or wounded. We need it quite quickly too, before they decide to take the body of the dead creature from her.”

“Hmm, standard method would be a force dome over Sventa and her warriors. Some of the Pesallian troops will be caught inside it. Once they realise.....”

“We have a battle.” Said Chlo.

“Yes, you have a battle. There are another two dozen well known ways to get people out of hostage situations, all regular practised in simulation. They all end up with live hostages and dead hostage takers. Every option gives you a battle.”

“There must be something Jen ? Something a little creative perhaps ?”

“Something on Maran seventy four or maybe seventy five Chlo. So long ago it feels like someone else decided to take the risk, but it was me. Visiting dignitaries instead of dark angels, but a similar situation.”

Chlo dug through millions of years of data, finally finding the incident.

“It was Maran seventy four and you got lucky. Everyone might have died Jen.”

“They didn’t though, everyone survived and besides, it’s the only idea that might work.”

“Fine, fine, do it.”

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Jen felt for the common channel and began sending The Damned to Pesallia Two. Not in huge numbers, or carrying large and impressive weapons. They appeared in the trees round the edge of the park, looking curious rather than threatening. To the army down there they’d be an unknown, something to take their minds off attacking Sventa.

“Gradual, nice and gradual.” Muttered Jen.

She took an hour, to place a hundred of The Damned in the park, all well away from the army or Sventa. Attacking Sventa was one thing, but attacking a hundred of the best warriors in the multiverse ? No Pesallian army general was that brave, or that foolish. Jen moved herself to the treeline and began to walk towards the commander, the general who had to be feeling rather nervous. She walked slowly, gradually bringing the number of The Damned in the trees, up to two hundred. If she’d wanted to put the planet back into the Stone Age, two hundred was enough to get it done. Jen didn’t though, her plan was for everyone to leave in one piece. She approached the general, still not knowing his name or caring what it was.

“I believe you’ve had a few problems here ?” She asked. “A creature from another reality causing damage. Can we help in any way ?”

He was giving his orders from the back of truck, surrounded by quite a few runners and aides. The last thing he’d expected was an offer of help from the empire. He was confused, which was exactly what Jen had intended.

“The creature has gone.” He replied. “It appears to have been a Roruss, or so I’m led to believe.”

“Nasty things, almost indestructible.” Jen said. “You were lucky that the dark angels were nearby to take care of it.”

More confusion he was blinking and looking at a screen to his left. Chlo might know what was on that screen, but Jen couldn’t see it. Chlo was being quiet, obviously waiting and watching to see how the situation developed.

“Yes, we’re very grateful.” He said.

“The empire is always glad to be of assistance.” Said Jen. “The dark angels are a valued part of our military. They do have duties elsewhere though, if you no longer need them ?”

Either the general made up his own mind, or someone on the screen had made it up for him. He smiled at her, almost gushed. The atmosphere changed immediately, lots of Pesallian troopers, thinking they might see their loved ones again.

“Yes, yes, we can’t monopolise such a hard working unit of your forces.” He said. “We can tidy up, please give Sventa out gratitude for getting rid of the Roruss.”

It had worked, though Jen herself had thought the chances were only about even. She left the general and walked towards Sventa, who seemed to be having trouble standing. The dead creature, the cause of all the tension, was laid at her feet.

“I hear you killed a Roruss.” Said Jen. “That’ll get on tonight’s news feeds.”

“I don’t claim it’s dead, just gone.” Said Sventa.

“Still, just surviving the encounter will make you a legend. Can I see this creature you killed ?”

“I killed it, with a rock.”

A grubby looking man, who’d she’d heard shouting about something when she’d been walking over.

“This is Arran.” Said Seren. “Our reformed Red-Top and expert on local criminals.”

“And might be dinner if he doesn’t shut up.” Added Itzel.

“They owe me !” Shouted Arran.

“I don’t.” Said Jen. “And I sometimes get a taste for fresh meat, so shut up !”

He didn’t look as though he knew whether it was a joke or not, but he did shut up. Jen pulled back the jacket, someone had wrapped the dead body in.

“Crap ! I’ve seen a few things, but this !” She said. “You need to get it back to Chlo. She can probably heal up your leg at the same time and whatever is causing you to hold your guts in.”

“Are the army going to be awkward ?” Asked Sventa.

“No, you can leave. They even gave you their gratitude for taking care of the Roruss.”

She helped Sventa to get inside the shuttle, but didn’t really relax until it was nothing but a dot in the sky. She then removed herself and The Damned from Pesallia Two.

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Delmus hadn’t told her what to expect when they penetrated the wall, just that it probably wasn’t what she imagined. The wall itself was much thicker than she’d thought and their craft continued to move at a glacial pace. There was no glass or covering on any of the windows, just oval holes in the side of their craft. For some reason the hell outside didn’t enter. Lightning bolts, plumes of purple fire, swirls of plasma that had to be heated to thousands of degrees. It was like the surface of an angry sun outside, yet none of it entered their flimsy craft.

“There has to be some kind of defence screen round us.” She said.

Delmus merely shrugged.

“Perhaps,” he said, “it’s always like this.”

Alyz couldn’t imagine ever getting used to it and she’d seen some amazing sights. As a barrier it had to be impenetrable, yet the Lummel and their craft seemed to fly through it with ease.

“Wait until we’re through the wall.” Said Delmus.

“Why ?”

“Just you wait and see.”

There was no warning, no apparent thinning of the wall. One moment they were surrounded by purple fire, the next they seemed to be in the empty darkness of space. The craft looked different too, longer, more comfortable, with long slender wings on either side.

“It’s changed.” She said. “The craft and the Lummel, they’re different too.”

Gone was the constant scowl, the aura of ugliness that seemed draped over them. Still only two crew, but they were smiling at her.

“Luri said they don’t change.” Said Delmus. “They’re always like this once they enter this world. We’re there Alyz, the reality we were never supposed to enter. Everything is different here, nothing can be taken for granted. Look out of the windows.”

It really did look like space, their version of space. In the distance there were twinkling points of light, some far brighter than others.

“Those aren’t suns or galaxies.” Said Delmus. “Those are entry points back to our world, lots of them. Soon they will come to look us over, the creatures, the things that inhabit whatever it is outside. I believe we look as hideous to them as they do to us. Luri said we can’t comprehend how they look, our minds aren’t capable of seeing them properly. The Lummel might be able to tell us more, but they won’t.”

They came, the churning mass of arms and legs, which turned into tentacles as she watched. Heads with faces, which became beaks, hands turning into claws and then back again. They looked desperate to see her, writhing over each other to get a glimpse through the window. Legs and arms was the main thing Alyz could see, legs turning into tentacles, long black tentacles. She looked away, to see Delmus grinning at her.

“I stopped looking at them after about my third trip.” He said. “We’ll be there soon and arriving is another shock. Worlds here are just darkness against the background darkness. There is no warning before you arrive, we’ll just be there.”

“Are they real ?” She asked. “Is any of this real ?”

“I think so. Call it an act of faith if you like, but I think they see themselves differently and think of us as the writhing monsters.”

Soon was an idea Delmus had to brush up on, it was an hour before they went from a place of darkness, to one of light. There was a sun in the sky, trees, plants and a hillside below them. Delmus looked out of a window, pointing at a stone building in the distance.

“We’re going there; it’s a temple style of building with a few bedrooms.” He said. “All designed to look and feel like Mendera, you’ll like it.”

“Luri created this ?” She asked.

“Yes, she is a deity now, quite a powerful one. This is our place, created for when we meet. The nice thing is that Luri is everywhere at all times in the worlds beyond the wall. That means she’s always here when I arrive.”

Luri an omnipotent goddess, it took a little getting used to. The idea had been pretty strange and the reality of her being omnipresent, was giving Alyz a headache.

“They’ve slowed down again !” She said.

“That is annoying and often seems random, but we will get there.”

The Lummel craft with its long delicate wings seemed to settle on the grass, rather than land. She followed Delmus, as he left the vessel. Would it wait for them ? Alyz assumed it would, this was a regular trip for Delmus. The stone building in front of them looked far larger close up and could have been built by Thrax. The simple construction out of blocks of brown stone looked typical Menderan. A woman was coming down the stair to meet them, dressed in a simple robe. Wearing sandals too, with long blonde hair flowing out behind her. Luri, looking the same as she had the last time Alyz had seen her, which had been a long time ago.

“Oh Alyz, it’s been far too long.”

They hugged for quite a while, Delmus waiting patiently. Eventually Luri led them up the stairs and into a large airy reception room, which looked remarkably like a part of the imperial palace in Mendera City.

“Yes, before you ask.” Said Luri. “I did copy this all from Sikush’s palace. We’ll eat and drink, probably drink quite a bit. You can tell me about your gossip and what everyone I know has been getting up to. Then and only then, you can tell me what you want me to do.”

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On a lifeless rock of a planet, that no one had thought worthy of a name, Kerr Firass was firing all the lift thrusters of The Silky. Mo had been warned that freighters were designed to carry freight.

“The clue is in the name Mo.” Rhian had told him. “The main hold is empty, we’ll be out of balance on take-off.”

“What does that mean, exactly ?” He’d asked.

“Vibration and we might bounce about a bit.”

They were vibrating quite a bit, shaking loose the rubble and dust the storm had deposited on the hull. Freighters were built to be tough though, a few bits of rock rattling over the hull weren’t going to harm it.

“She wants to fly !” Shouted Kerr. “That hole in the ground wasn’t her natural habitat. Fly baby, fly !” How much had Kerr drunk that morning ? He did seem to start the day with two shots of Ushong in his herbal tea.

“Easy Kerr,” he said, “just get us out of this canyon in one piece.”

“He’s alright,” said Rhian, “damn good pilot. He just gets a bit too attached to whatever he flies.”

“Too right I do !” Yelled Kerr. “Fly Silky, take to the air !”

They were rising, the side of the canyon going past on the view screens. Mo was happy that no warning lights were flashing, everything was a nice solid row of green lights. He’d flown on a few craft that always had a few flashing red lights. Sometimes the fault wasn’t that major, but sometimes the parts needed were too expensive. There was a saying among old timers that if you hadn’t been on a craft with half the warning lights flashing, you weren’t a real space traveller. Mo didn’t agree, he loved to see a solid row of green. There was a loud clang and more vibration, Rhian was looking at the screens.

“What was that ?” Asked Mo.

“Just a rock hitting a rear fin.” Said Rhian. “Nothing to worry about, didn’t even chip the red paint.”

The red paint was something else to worry about. Being painted in the colours of a Red-Top pirate, wasn’t going to win them any friends, if they were spotted. The craft rose, the vibration increasing.

“How bad does the vibration get ?” Asked Silky.

“We’re a freighter, not a fucking cruise ship !” Snapped Kerr.

Mo hadn’t thought about comfort, and was now dreading the long trip to Medrona. There was light showing on the screens, they were above the canyon and still rising. Rhian pressed a switch and Mo felt the artificial gravity under his feet. Slightly higher than the gravity of the planet below, usually fixed at the standard G where the vessel was built.

“Fly Silky !” Yelled Kerr.

The craft moved to an angle of about thirty degrees, before Kerr used the main thrusters. The forwards motion hit suddenly, making everyone grab onto something. The craft had inertial damping, but they were on a freighter, where the comfort of the crew wasn’t a high priority.

“You’re a damn good pilot.” Said Mo.

“I told you !” Said Rhian.

The rear thrusters accelerated them forwards and up towards the clouds. The forward view screen showed the swirling vortex of the storm, now ripping up rubble several hundred miles away.

“I’m not going to miss this planet.” He muttered.

It was a routine launch in many ways, but they all cheered, as The Silky entered the darkness of space and began its long journey to Medrona.

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