

Ripples from the Past

Chapter 2 – Old Friends

“The Imperial Guard, The Dark Angels, even the City Militia. Are all there as prison guards. The Empire itself, with its trillions of citizens, is purely a mechanism to protect the prison. A prison designed to hold the end of everything, the final eternal chaos !” – Grimoire of Nurigen

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Haan wasn't related to the president, yet everyone knew he was one of her favourites. Right through training college, she'd followed his progress, encouraging him to join her special guard. True the work could be bureaucratic and boring, but the commanders were always promoted from within her special guard. Cronyism of course, although he wasn't about to complain. He'd recently been promoted to 5th level Honour Guard, the youngest to ever achieve that rank. Haan had a good home and superb prospects. No, he wasn't about to complain or wonder why President Sveta thought so highly of him. He was just about to eat his evening meal, when he was informed that someone was outside his home and wishing to see him.

“Oh, did I forget someone coming to see me ?” He asked.

Not everyone on Erasmus Seven had a home service link to the central AI, but his rank had earned him a few privileges.

“The person wishing to see you does not have an appointment.”

There wasn't a screen in his dining area. He'd made a few changes to his new home and having stress free meals had been important to him. Getting up and using the screen in the hallway was a last resort, a sign that he was back to being on call round the clock.

“Tell them I'm not home, that I'll probably be here later.”

It was late and not even close friend turned up unexpected at such a late hour. Haan returned to eating his meal, almost all meat of course, though he was experimenting with a few vegetables. Few male dark angels would admit to knowing how their kitchen gadgets worked, but he took pride in eating well cooked food.

“She insists the matter is urgent Haan. Imperial business that can't wait.”

“Damn ! We're not an empire world.”

He slammed his fist down onto the table. Part annoyance, but it had also been a long day with a lot of frustrations.

“Tell her to wait while I look her over. Is she armed ?”

“No energy weapons, but my sensors are blind to certain ceramic blades.”

Wonderful, fucking wonderful ! President Sveta had negotiated a complete break for Erasmus Seven, from being an empire world. Dark Angels were mercenaries though and a good two thirds of their work was for the empire. Plus The Chalne had given them Erasmus Seven as their permanent home world. It might be a mined out hulk of a planet, but it suited their needs perfectly. Being rude to a visitor from Mendera was foolhardy and might lead to a fast demotion.

“I can't see her face.”

“She's looking towards the landing area and I have no camera link there.”

Small and dark haired, the familiar hair style of a female member of The Damned. Vine leaf markings on her neck too. No ordinary member of The Guard, if any immortal warrior could ever be called ordinary. One of the elite no less and on his doorstep.

"You never told me she was wearing the uniform of the Imperial Guard." He snapped.

"That is not part of my routine Haan. Shall I begin describing the clothing of all visitors?"

He was angry, which was silly. The system followed his instruction, so if it hadn't flagged up the uniform, it was his fault.

"No. Open the door for my visitor."

His home wasn't huge, but it still took him a minute to walk to the hallway. His visitor was just closing the front door and had her back to him. His eyes noted her uniform and the demon blade hanging from her belt. This was definitely no ordinary visitor.

"Welcome to my home." He said. "Sorry to keep you waiting but the lateness of the hour and....."

He knew her face and knew it well. A face from what the president referred to as the forbidden times. Kittara, long dead, was standing in his hallway.

"Sorry, but I see your picture every day." He said. "President Sventa has it on her office wall."

"That's nice. We didn't get on too well for a while, but were great friends towards the end."

If only his mind would stop yelling that he was seeing things. It couldn't be the person the president jokingly referred to her as her mother, yet there she stood, right in front of him. Dead so long that only the immortals now remembered her.

"You can't be her." He said.

"I do have many of her memories and emotions, but you're right. I'm not really her. I just chose to look like this to gain the attention of those I need to see."

"It worked. For a moment I thought you really were her."

She walked into his home without being invited, sitting on the sofa in his lounge. There was no perfume though, the familiar scent that female members of the guard usually wore.

"Stop gawping at me Haan. You need to do something very important."

He picked up his plate of cooling food and used a fork to pick at it. He wasn't going to sit with her though, until he knew more about the apparition who'd entered his home.

"I'm not doing anything for you." He said. "I have no idea who or what you are?!"

"Who I am isn't important Haan. You need to stop eating and call the president. She trusts you, so call her and get her to come here, right now!"

"Don't be ridiculous!"

He was actually a little scared as she stood up and approached him, touching his hand with hers.

"I'm no phantom Haan and somewhere deep down you know you can trust me. I have other memories, some of your father's. Did you know he was Sventa's lover many years ago? No, of course you didn't, no one did. She sees part of him in your face, which is why she wants you around her. She loved your father a great deal, before he died."

"My mother always suspected, but I never....."

They sat on the sofa, watching the night sky through the window. For some reason he let her hold his hand, even though he had no idea who she was.

"Sventa will die soon, unless you call her." She said. "Get her to come here, she'll be safe here. I can give you something to say, but you need to call her right now."

He was still shocked at realising his mother's fears had been true. His father hadn't just been the president's chief of staff, he'd also been her lover. The woman who looked like Kittara handed him a crumpled piece of paper, with a few lines of nonsense in it.

"Say this to her and she will come."

"But it's nonsense."

"Trust me or your president will die tonight."

Why not ?! His visitor might turn out to be an assassin armed with a demon blade, but he really doubted it. For some reason he trusted her and besides, the president wasn't exactly harmless herself. Sventa was the toughest of the dark angels, born in an age when their creation out of darkness was a closely guarded secret. He called the president, or at least called the night time call handler.

"This is Haan. Please put me through to the president."

"I'm sorry, the president has asked not to be disturbed."

He recognised the voice, a female dark angel he'd known at the training academy. Never lovers, but there had been a lot of mild flirtation.

"Is that Elea ?" He asked.

"Yes, glad you still recognise my voice. It's been a long time since our basic training."

"A very long time. It's important that I speak to her Elea."

A bit of a pause. He knew his name was on the secure list, the list of those allowed to disturb her if it was really important.

"Is there serious trouble Haan ?"

"You know I can't tell you any details, but yes it's that important."

"I'll try, but she's in a bad mood. Trouble on Mendera always seems to upset her."

"I know, please try."

It was a full minute before he was connected to the president. Her voice didn't sound angry though, just her usual business like tone. She didn't sound like most dark angels, more of a human timbre to her voice.

"It's already been a long day Haan." Said Sventa. "Not more bad news I hope ?"

His guest was making the well-known whirling motion with her finger, telling him to speed things up.

"I'm sorry, this is going to sound crazy, but you need to come here. To my home I mean and right away."

"Why would I need to do that Haan ? Anyone else and I'd suspect the use of recreational substances."

"It is important my president. I have something I'd like to read to you, to convince you it's important."

He could hear her voice change slightly, annoyance rather than anger.

"Fine, read it to me. If this is a prank, we'll be having some serious words in the morning."

He flattened the paper against his knee and it looked like a nonsense rhyme. How could he read that to the president ? His guest smiled at him encouragingly, moving her lips to form 'Do it.'

"I know what was born in The City of the Lost God."

"The darkness from a whole city it took."

"Two dark icons it took and the heart from one unsullied."

"Add the heart of a full blood demon and almost done."

"Lastly the words Sident, Sident, margano, humenda, svegah."

As he said the words he heard Sventa gasp. The air in his home suddenly seemed much colder, which was supposed to be impossible. Like most homes on Erasmus Seven, his was air conditioned to cope with the constant desert heat. He heard president Sventa speak, her voice different in some way, almost fearful.

"Who dared to teach..... Never mind Haan, I'm on my way."

His guest, the woman who looked like Kittara was crying as she held his hand.

“Dear Brave Haan, those words once spoken, never go unnoticed. I may have cost you your life, but Sventa will be safe now.”

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Mo still had property on Mendera, several stores and a house in amongst the wealthy on the third circle. His stores had been through many changes of names over the years, but were now known as ‘Ixir Emporiums’. He preferred the term Emporium to store, it sounded grander, more upmarket. Nothing from Ixir of course, his home world was gone, the descendants of his people spread across the 1st rift. He liked the name for reasons of nostalgia and no modern day Menderan had a clue about its meaning.

“They’ll think you’re Mozim Ixir.” Said Silky.

“I used the name of Hassan for years.” He answered. “The owner of the original emporium that I bought a very long time ago. I think he was from Ushong, but can’t be certain.”

“Ventella.” Said Silky. “He was a Ventellan. You told me about it once when you were intoxicated. You threatened to tell his family he was a Maran spy, unless he gave you a good price for his Emporium.”

“Did I ?” He asked. “Well, they do say drink can loosen the tongue and it seems, the long term memory. Yes, I remember that day now you’ve mentioned it.”

“Hassan’s Emporium has a ring to it.” Said Silky.

“Yes. I may well use it again one day.”

They stood arm in arm, just a little way from Market Square. A street for the more refined shopper, those with enough money and sense to avoid the market stalls. They looked up at the three top floors, which were to be their main residence while in Mendera City. No one stopped to stare at the hybrid hugging the converted chaos invoker. It was Mendera City, centre of the empire and by implication the multiverse. The local population had seen far stranger creatures than them.

“Do you think you’ll be happy living here ?” He asked.

“Yes Mo, very happy. The house was nice, but so quiet .”

Silky was fully clothed, with gaps in her clothing for her tiny residual wings and tail. They’d been on Mendera for several days and her wings had never stopped twitching, her tail curled around her middle. All signs of stress. Now her wings were still, her tails held proudly out straight behind her. They might be on Mendera for a while and there was nothing to do in the house. The emporium was different though, always new faces coming through the door, always something going on.

“I hated the idea of living here again.” He said. “Now I’m back, I can’t imagine living anywhere else.”

He took her up to their private floors, the furniture already in place. It was light and airy, the famous Mendera sunshine bringing out the colours in their ornaments.

“I’ll be happy here Mo, but you’re not going anywhere on your own.”

“The emperor may send me anywhere.” He replied. “I may have to go alone.”

“No !!”

Her wings fluttered as she grabbed hold of his jacket collar.

“We’re going to the palace for dinner tonight.” She said. “I’ll be telling Sikush that wherever you go, I also go. Besides Mo, I’m a better fighter than you !”

“I’m not going to argue about that.” He said, examining the holes her nails had left in his jacket.

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Sventa often flew her own personal shuttle, though this time she chose to use a military pilot. It gave her time to think, during the forty minute flight out to the new housing complex. Those words ! He’d been taught them by someone and had actually spoken them aloud. Did it link into what she’d been

hearing from Mendera ? Mo attacked and a dead woman talking to Chlo, warning her it was going to happen. She couldn't help smiling to herself, life had been getting a little quiet lately.

"Will you need me to wait my president ?" Asked her pilot.

"Yes and I may need to leave in a hurry. You'll have to sleep in the shuttle."

"Yes, of course my president."

He was young, probably had a wife and children waiting for him, meal getting cold. Or he might have a hot date getting cold, which could be worse. Sventa had once made a real effort to be more caring, but it just confused everyone. Her backroom team had phrased it very politely of course, telling her the citizens of Erasmus Seven quite liked her being a bitch. They were comfortable with her being that way and she got things done.

Sventa remembered being a Genova, angels most called them. An awful existence half in and half out of the world of corporeal beings. Kittara had changed her with the words Haan had used and other words of dark power. Demanded that the dark ones changed her into a dark angel. An audacious and foolhardy thing to do, but Sventa had effectively been reborn that day in The City of the Lost God. Kittara had taken Sventa the Genova and used the wickedness of an entire city to turn her into Sventa the immortal dark angel. There had been other ingredients, including the fresh heart of a full blood demon. A virgin's heart too, taken from the body of a human woman, unsullied by the pleasures of sexual intercourse.

"The Chaln  said the consequences would be long lived." She muttered.

Her pilot looked at her, just in case he'd failed to hear a direct order. Most of her people feared her, which was how she liked things to be.

"How long until we land ?" She asked.

"The electrical storms are bad my president. I have to fly around the large ones. We should be landing in just a few minutes."

Storms but little rain, a hell of a world The Chaln  had given her for her people. There were breakers yards to dismantle old space vessels from several galaxies. Those had been associated with several areas with extreme chemical toxicity. Then there were the natural high radiation zones. It suited the dark angels though, with their love of dry hot climates and natural resistance to radiation. Erasmus Seven was infamous throughout the empire, a place mothers threatened to send mischievous children. There was one gem though, lurking deep in the barrel of excreta. The breakers yards meant they were the largest source of titanium in their galaxy. It was a hell hole, but The Chaln  had given her a rich hell hole to rule.

"We're there." Said her pilot. "Starting landing procedures."

It wasn't sand, but a purple dust that became agitated by every storm. It covered everything, bringing down visibility to just a few feet. Her shuttle had flown above it, but needed every instrument to make a safe landing. Her pilot made a perfect landing in difficult conditions.

"Superb landing." She said.

"Thank you my president."

He was grinning to himself as she left the shuttle. Being touchy feely wasn't her way, it didn't suit her at all. Praise where it was due was different and the pilot would tell all his friends and family. Sventa pulled up the collar on her jacket and half closed her eyes. She'd been to Haan's house twice before, but not at night and never during a storm.

"You can see the landing zone from his door." She muttered.

His house had to be one of the four or so that looked to be in about the right place. Sventa pulled her jacket collar up and resigned herself to breathing in some of the ever present purple dust. By the time she recognised his house, she was coughing up mouthfuls of the foul stuff.

“Over here ! I saw the flare of your landing thrusters.”

Haan had come to find her, even bringing a cloak to throw over her already grubby clothing. She followed him, joining him in trying to rub the worst of the dust off, before entering his house.

“Damn storms !” She said. “Come out of nowhere and go just as quick.”

“My president.” Said Haan. “You must prepare yourself for a shock.”

My president, everyone had begun to call her that. It had started with a few of the media people and spread through the entire population. Sventa hadn't quite decided if she liked that form of address or not.

“I know Haan. A woman who looks like Kittara is sat in your home, after telling you some very private secrets. Am I right ?”

Poor Haan, looking at her, his jaw actually dropping.

“Yes.... But how.....?”

“No gift of premonition, she has appeared on the rifts. Warning a friend of mine that he was in danger.”

Sventa walked into his lounge, throwing her dusty jacket over a chair. She was there, the one who looked like Kittara. Sat quietly on a sofa, she really did look uncannily like a woman who'd been dead for many millennia. She sat opposite her, in front of Haan's now congealed meal.

“You really do look so much like her.” She said. “Though you wear the dagger at the wrong angle and there is..... Something about the eyes.”

“Her eyes had seen so much, even that which exists beyond Leng. As to the dagger ? It feels more comfortable like this.”

Haan was hovering, not knowing quite what to say or do. Sventa leant back into his comfortable sofa and decided to organise him a little.

“Please take away your plate of cold food Haan, and bring us refreshments. Something strong, anything will do. Oh, and three glasses, you may as well hear everything.”

Sventa waited for him, it gave her time to look over the woman sat opposite her. Like Haan, she noticed there was no scent or perfume associated with Haan's guest. Dark angels were predators, their sense of smell sharp and useful.

“You probably saved the life of my friend Mo.” She said. “That earns you a huge amount of gratitude and a little trust. So, why was it so important to get me here ?”

“Just getting you here was my main intention. You will want to leave once you find out what's happening. The storm is worse though and your pilot is tired. Just trying to take off would be dangerous.”

“What is going to happen ?”

The woman was making her wait for every reply, keeping her there. Sventa sensed that something awful was going to occur, yet she had no idea where or if it could be stopped.

“You will know soon, very soon. I know you can create portals, but they can detect and locate those. Spin up a portal and you'll put this whole area at risk. Trust me, I can reward your trust.”

Sventa always wondered why dark angels bought furniture that took no account of their wings and tail. She shifted sideways, allowing her tail to unfold. Rewards for trust eh ! She wasn't about to remain in Haan's home if her planet was under threat.

“Who are they, the ones who destroyed Mo's home ?” She asked.

“All in good time, the important thing is to keep you here, keep you safe. It is really important that you survive. They say that no one person is indispensable. That is a lie ! There are a few individuals who, for a time, are essential to the multiverse and you are one of them.”

Sventa’s hair had been white for quite some time. Not ageing, but a result of going too far into places best left unvisited. Vanity had led her to adding red streaks to her head of long white hair. She laughed and ran her sharp talons through her hair.

“It seems you intend to keep me here by flattery.” She said.

“I can offer you more than that if you stay here until I say it’s safe to leave. I have most of Kittara’s memories and she had a rather unique relationship with reality and the time lines. Any question, any secret she had that you’ve ever wanted to know..... Ask me and I’ll tell you. Nothing held back, no restraint. Just for the price of staying safely out of harm’s way.”

Such an offer, but Sventa could only think of what might be about to happen to her people, her planet. Questions did fill her mind, secrets she often wondered about. Knowledge too, Kittara had visited some very strange and dangerous places. One question kept resurfacing into her mind.

“Why Haan ?” She asked. “You must realise that he’ll need constant protection now, just to survive. Why tell him those words ? Was it so important to get me here ?”

For once the one who looked like Kittara seemed to lose her confidence. They both looked at poor Haan, who had no idea what horrors the darkness was likely to send to seek him out.

“Yes, I’m sorry but it was ! You wouldn’t have come here if he hadn’t spoken those words.”

Her communicator made the low murmur she hated, it invariable meant trouble. Haan’s made a shrill sound a few seconds later. Whatever was going to happen, had obviously begun.

“They will stop once your palace is destroyed. Loss of life will be minimal.” Said the woman.

Strange how everyone seemed to think a minimal loss of life was acceptable, unless it was their friends and family being killed. Sventa pressed accept connection, on her communicator. She recognised the face of the young female dark angel on the night security desk, but couldn’t put a name to the face.

“My president, we are under attack.”

Bad news yet still calm, that was what she expected from her people.

“Where are they attacking ?”

“So far just your palace. An air attack, craft similar to imperial raptors, but far slower.”

She could see the female’s eye shifting to an update screen, not liking what she was seeing.

“You must stay here !” Whispered the one like Kittara.

“How many craft are attacking us ?” Asked Sventa.

“Many my president, close to a hundred. Our air defences are destroying them, but they don’t try to avoid our missiles. They just seem intent on destroying your palace.”

“Keep me informed, especially if they attack anywhere else.”

“Yes my president.”

Sventa hadn’t touched her drink. She took a large gulp of the strong liquor, she needed it. Haan had left the bottle on the table, Ushong 48 it said on the label. Crap of course, Ushong was long gone and its entire galaxy. Dead planets didn’t litigate for brand infringement though and the liquid in her glass tasted just fine.

“I will remain here as long as nowhere else is attacked.” She said. “In return I want the answer to just one question. Not from Kittara’s memories, but from Mo’s. Chlo told me you have the memories of quite a few people.”

“Mo is alive, you can ask him yourself.”

"I have and he refuses to tell me."

"Then maybe the question is one you shouldn't be asking?"

Sventa finished her drink and wondered if she really did want to have the knowledge she'd once almost begged Mo to tell her. It was the key though, to so many things....

"We have a deal, whoever you really are. I sit here while someone bombs my home to atoms and you answer my questions. You set the terms and I only have one question."

"Then ask your question?"

"Where did Mo hide The Grimoire, the famous Chronicles of Nurigen? I know they're almost legendary now, but we both know they really exist."

"I've heard of that" Added Haan. "A book containing pages of forbidden knowledge."

She'd almost forgotten he was there, but why shouldn't he know the truth?

"Not a book in the way you mean." She said. "Hundreds of metal pages, etched with tiny writing. All put in a crate before the last multiverse ended and placed somewhere safe by Mo. Legend says he tricked an entire Demon army into helping him move that crate, but I've never believed that legend."

"Its location is dangerous knowledge." Said the woman. "Nurigen once talked to the old Gods themselves and etched their words onto those sheets of metal."

"I don't want to use the knowledge." Replied Sventa. "I have no intention of going there. I just want to know the location in case the Grimoire is needed."

"Oh Sventa! You're not that naïve. Of course you'll go there. You'll find a need to go and brood on it for a million years. You will go there though, that is the nature of such secret knowledge."

"You set the terms of our deal.... Tell me?"

"Very well. Mo found the place by chance, though I suspect he may have been guided by someone. Emperor Xanash the 34th, last great Demon emperor built the place. A vast fortified mountain top, on the 1st rift. He knew something strange was happening, the rifts shrinking, whole worlds boiling away to nothing, evaporating. He and several thousand of his most trusted warriors survived the switch, the end of everything. Mo found the ruins of the fortifications while looking for his own safe place to survive yet another apocalypse."

"Where is it? What is it called?" Asked Sventa.

"Its name had vanished with history. Mo never knew it, so I have no memory of a name. It is a long way from any rift gate or town. The nearest landmark is the ruined temple of Nara-Odil and it's a good three month's walk from there. There is an ancient pathway, created by some long dead demon army. Follow it into the mountains and carry on following the narrow trail the path becomes."

Haan's communicator had made its shrill noise, interrupting the woman's answer.

"I'm ordered back to base." He said.

"Ignore it." Said Sventa.

"But..... My president..... it's a direct order."

"I said..... Ignore it!!"

Sventa calmed herself, it wasn't Haan's fault, none of it was his fault.

"Carry on." She said.

"Even flying it will take you weeks to reach the mountains and then the tracks are trapped in places. Eventually you'll come to the fortifications and they cover a huge area. You want the part Mo repaired and made comfortable for himself and Silky. In the largest room is a mosaic of the bug

goddess herself, Sevril-Narge. In a hole under that mosaic, you'll find the crate containing Nurigen's famous archives."

Finally she knew ! Sventa relaxed and refilled her glass with more of the fake Ushong.

"Thank you."

"Don't thank me. One day you'll go there are probably die in the mountains."

"That attack is over." Said Haan. "They're getting everyone in to dig through the rubble for survivors."

"What ? Why didn't they....."

Her communicator was showing over a dozen attempts to contact her. She'd obviously missed it all while listening to the story of Nurigen's Grimoire.

"What now ?" She asked.

"You go to Mendera of course. No portals, use a scheduled shuttle, safer than your presidential planet hopper."

"Mendera of course, all problems seem to originate on Mendera. Pack a few things Haan, you might as well come too."

He actually looked pleased.

"Really ? Come with you....."

"For the best, you'll be unlikely to survive more than a few days if you stay here. On the way I'll tell you about what might be looking for you."

~ ~

Pineus eight was yet another crappy mining planet under the protection of the Menderan Empire. It was possible to synthesise or duplicate just about anything, but that ruined trade and the empire was all about trade. So, large numbers of miners worked at a dozen or so mines, digging a rare mineral out of the ground. A germanium compound that most people had never heard of, though nearly all of their gadgets needed some of it to work.

"Slow down, you're making me look bad." Said Flip. "I think you enjoy this."

Flip was an Algerian, who'd learned his mining skills on at least twenty empire mining planets. He was huge, ugly and muscular and Delmus wondered why his parents had named him Filippo, which meant pretty flower in Algerian. Maybe he'd been a good looking baby ?

"Come on Flip, one more good shove will free her up." Said Delmus.

A robotic mining machine the size of a small shuttle and it had jammed itself into a side tunnel. Delmus had seen it all over the empire. No matter how high tech mining became, it always needed a few strong backs to shove and pull the bots out of trouble. Together they pushed the machine into one of the wide ore galleries. The bot had an official license number, but someone had painted 'Lois' on the front in bright yellow, reflective paint. Probably named affectionately after someone's wife or girlfriend.

"Crap ! Lois has bent two cutter blades." Said Delmus. "I only brought one."

"Design fault, been saying it for years." Replied Flip. "Bent cutter always jams up their drive."

The blades were huge and heavy, Delmus had a spare slung across his back on a sling. Fitting them was delicate work though, which was why the mines only employed skilled engineers. Everyone knew a lot of grunt work was part of the deal though. Delmus had yet to meet a puny mining engineer. He put the blade carefully down in front of the jammed bot.

"My turn to trudge back to Tech Ops for another." He said.

"No, I'll go. I need to crap anyway. The damn food here does terrible things to my guts."

Delmus pulled the keycard out of Lois's control panel. No one wanted a bot's drilling arm to begin spinning while they were working on it. Undoing the bolts that held the blade was hard work and the air in the mine was well above a comfortable temperature. Delmus was one of The Damned though, a member of the Imperial Guard. He could work comfortably in the heat, without forming a single bead of sweat on his brow.

"Ok Lois, let's get you ready to dance again." He muttered.

Delmuninager, known to everyone simply as Delmus. Once he'd been a demon hybrid, living out on the 1st rift. Reddish skin, but his second set of arms hadn't developed, so he could pass for full human. That had been before being recruited by the empire and converted into one of The Damned. It was rumoured that they'd left quite a bit of demon anger and aggression in him during the conversion. The cutter spun half a turn as he undid the bolt, narrowly missing his fingers.

"Hey, play nice Lois, play nice."

The mining companies paid their engineers well, they had to if they wanted the machinery to run round the clock. Delmus actually enjoyed the work, though it was just a cover for his real assignment.

The empire turned a blind eye to a certain amount of corruption. Local rulers had needs and men to pay and the empire wasn't exactly poor. Pineus Eight was different though, the corruption appeared to be something far more organised and greedy than usual. Demand was high, the mines employing more men, buying many more bots. Yet the money paid to the imperial purse was lower each year. It was corruption on a grand scale, huge money. Enough cash to buy planets, hire mercenary and influence on other empire worlds.

"The rot must be stopped." The Chaln  had told him. "Find out who is syphoning off the money and leave the local militia to deal with them."

There was always a local militia of one kind or another. Usually loyal to the empire, because Mendera had the deepest pockets. He'd quickly identified the idiots spending money too freely and followed them up the chain of command. The ringleader was a son of the ruler, though that wouldn't stop the militia from snapping his back and putting his head on a pole. Delmus was being thorough though, collecting a little more solid evidence.

He took the broken blade out of the cutting arm and put the new one in place. This bit was delicate, it had to be positioned just right, or the cutter would vibrate and shake itself apart. As he reached for the calibration tool, he noticed a woman not far away.

"Hello ! It's dangerous down here !" He called.

There were women miners, but they didn't wear the kind of clothes the young woman was wearing. She looked as though she'd just finished her shopping in the market place on Mendera. Skimpy clothing was fine in the heat, but offered no protection for her skin. She was walking towards him, smiling at him.

"Good to meet you again Delmus."

He knew her, though Chlo informing him about recent events had made him alert for such an encounter. A long dead courtesan from Mendera City, a specialist in keeping clerics happy at night. Luri had known her very well, built up a genuine affection for the girl.

"Tanil." He said. "I did think I might be on your list. I remember that face, Luri cried for days after you were killed."

"Did she ? Yes, I suppose they were that close. Killed because of information she never realised she knew. A very sad end for poor Tanil."

"Luri paid for her to have a proper burial." He said. "At least she never went into the storm drains."

“At least you expected me, saves going through the whole ‘you can’t be her’ routine.”

Chlo was right, there was something about the eyes, something unsettling. She walked towards him, stopping well inside his personal space.

“Does this mean Pineus Eight will soon be attacked ?” He asked.

She leant forward and went up on her toes to kiss him. Not a quick chased peck on the lips, a full prolonged kiss with an open mouth.

“I have her memories you see, her emotions. Why did you never pay for some of her time ? You often went with other courtesans.”

“Luri thought a lot of her..... It well.... Just didn’t seem right.”

“But you wanted to ?”

“I suppose.... Look, aren’t we supposed to run away or something ?”

His constant link to Chlo was open and he was sure he could hear her chuckling.

“Your cover is safe for now Delmus, though they are looking for you.” Said the one who looked like Tanil. “Get back to Mendera today though, you’re needed.”

This time he kissed her, though she seemed quite keen on the idea too. Someone pretending to be a dead working girl. That was a first, even for him.

“I have to finish my assignment.” He said. “Then I’ll go straight back to Mendera.”

“Nonsense, you know who the ringleader is. Give his name to the militia so they can kill him in a particularly unpleasant way. Then you can leave. Only you don’t want to, it’s a weird kind of vacation for you, isn’t it ?”

No mistaking the sound of Chlo, laughing at his expense. He was enjoying life in the mines.

Sometimes it just felt good to do something that just required a lot of brute force.

“Fine, fine.” He said. “But not until after I’ve helped Flip repair Lois. It’s a two man job to get it done right.”

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