

## Ripples from the Past

### Chapter 16 – Nitrogen Haze

**“I know at least five miners sat here today, who have an artificial hand.” Said Flip. “They make them well these days, not easy to spot. They’re the lucky ones, the others who touched something seriously cold, never survived.”**

∞

While Casto Yerli watched the flashes from thousands of energy weapons, Chlo was performing billions of calculations. Where the debris was likely to fall, how many communication drones were likely to be destroyed? Beating the attackers was a foregone conclusion, but battles always had unexpected consequences.

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

“It has happened before.” She answered. “Difficult to explain Casto. Our enemy seems to have access to the past, all of it. They also seem crippled by that knowledge, forced to follow the same patterns.”

Of course Yerli wouldn’t understand, it had taken her a long time to see the patterns, far too long. There had been a terrorist attack on Mendera, during a period now part of the forbidden knowledge. An attack by an enemy fleet had followed that attack. It was a pattern, like following the grooves formed by millions of feet on stone steps.

“We will win, won’t we Chlo?”

“Yes Casto, of course we will.”

Did he mean the battle or the war? The battle would be easy, but the war was something else entirely. Chlo’s calculations told her that no debris was likely to fall on any inhabited area of Mendera. Communication drones were the problem, they needed to be replaced quickly if damaged. The citizens of the empire might be upset for a few weeks, about a bomb in Mendera City. A significant cut to the empire entertainment link, might well destabilise the local population for months. Happy that she could handle any likely damage on the planet, Chlo told Alyz to let The Old One loose on their attackers.

~

~

Alyz watched the enemy vessels, firing on the attack wing and recognised the design. Everything shouted Pesallia Group, though she doubted if they were brave enough to attack Mendera themselves. Most likely they’d sold technology to a group hostile to the empire. Maybe even the Children of the Wilderness, who seemed to be growing in popularity and confidence.

“Those craft were built by Pesallia.” She said. “I’d bet your memory chips on it.”

“Knowing and proving are two different things entirely.” Replied The Old One.

He was right of course; there’d be no direct link back to the government of the Pesallia Group.

Technology sold and sold again, in a chain of ownership tortuously long, until the craft ended up in the hands of terrorists. Chlo would trace the craft back to their source eventually, though Mendera was unlikely to take revenge on Pesallia. Too many citizens of the empire loved the crappy tech they sold.

“How did they penetrate the outer defences.” Said The Old One. “That is the important question.”

“I suspect Chlo let them through, just so you could destroy them.”

“Oh yes, clever, if perhaps a little risky.”

Alyz had more confidence in him and the craft he controlled, than he seemed to have in himself. When Chlo gave the order to attack, Alyz only saw one outcome to the encounter. A lot of dead terrorists.

“Chlo says the time is now optimal.” She said. “Her way of saying attack the enemy.”

“Very well, all craft shutting down cloaking fields.”

The enemy craft were probably crewed by poorly trained fanatics. Military personnel would have wondered why the attack had been so easy, why the attack wing wasn't firing back. Really good crews would have recognised an ambush scenario and be halfway home by now. There wasn't panic, as The Old One and his alien looking fleet, appeared quite close to their craft. The panic began, when he opened fire. She heard The Old One sigh.

“They aren't very good.” He said.

Huge amounts of blaster fire being aimed in their general direction, little of it coming anywhere near them. A few hits on the outer shields, but nothing to be concerned about. They were amateurs, about to be given a masterclass in space warfare. Almost a pity that none of them would survive the lesson.

“I re-animated a few of the Aumashy Immortals.” He said. “They deserved a little fun and are better at firing my weapons...Well, than I am.”

The last major refit had given his outside hull a new layer of virtually impregnable alloy and several thousand Aumashy Ion weapons. He was good at using them, though Alyz knew the Immortals could outshoot his AI. There was something about their mental intensity, their desire to utterly destroy any enemy. They fired, leaving green trails in space, like impossible wisps of smoke.

“No mercy.” Said Alyz. “They mustn't stop until they're all destroyed.”

There had to be a demonstration of the power of the Menderan Empire, an obvious threat to any who might think of making the most of the current troubles. The Aumashy blasters melted titanium alloy hulls, destroyed invulnerable shields. The enemy craft were destroyed in their hundreds, their crews dying without knowing what had killed them. The needle craft and raptors created mayhem too, but it was The Old One, with his Aumashy blasters, who brought most death and destruction to their enemies.

“Most intelligent life creates weapons to kill their enemies, as efficiently as possible.” Chlo had once told her. “The Aumashy begin with the premise, of wanting a weapon that terrifies. For them, destructive ability is secondary.”

Hulls were melted, crews thrown into space by the escaping atmosphere inside. The near vacuum of space brought its own horror, as the blood of their enemies boiled, leaving wrecked bodies in orbit around the planet. Soon the surviving enemy vessels tried to run, only to be pursued and destroyed by imperial raptors. Celebrations were beginning in Mendera City, while their enemies were still being destroyed.

“You did well.” Said Alyz.

The Old One used to complain about being used as a weapon, often going into a depressed state. Something had happened at his last major refit though, adjustments had been made. It had been a necessary adjustment, but Alyz quite missed the version of The Old One, who'd agonised over every loss of life.

“That was most enjoyable.” He said.

~

~

Kerr Firass had visited a few strange worlds, while delivering containers full of everything from baby food, to high tech weaponry. One planet with a purple sky, where it seemed to rain continually. Rain with an unsettling yellow tinge to it.

"As if the Gods are peeing on us." One settler had told him.

A mining planet of course, people would put up with a lot if something of value needed to be dug out of the ground. He'd seen mining planets with gravity so high, that children were born deformed, or so low they were born with bones far too thin to survive going home with their parents.

Colonisation by proxy, there were numerous empire world populated by the descendants of miners. All that hadn't prepared Kerr for the rifts. His sense of distance was gone, as his brain refused to accept a world with no horizon. There was an end to the world of course, a shimmering orange band in the far distance. Only it didn't look distant ! More like just a mile away. He threw up again.

"It's like the worst travel sickness I've ever had." He moaned.

"Your mind will cope with it." Said Silky.

"Sooner than you think, Rhian is already feeling better." Said Mo.

Rhian was nodding at him, but she was a lot younger than him. Age had to be a factor and it wasn't working in his favour. Silky swung off the track, as they came within sight of yet another small settlement.

"How about looking for transport in this one ?" He asked.

Silky stopped and looked at the settlement for a moment, just a few yurts among the low scrub.

"There are probably thirty or so in the village." She said. "If they like us, we may be able to trade for a cart and maybe even a Farrag to pull it."

"Only we've nothing to trade, or at least nothing they'd want." Said Mo.

"So, friendly or hostile, we'll end up fighting them." Said Silky. "They'll be families, with lots of dependent children. Kill the adults and killing the children is a necessary mercy. They'd just starve to death, which is a nasty way to go."

"Do you still want to enter the village ?" Asked Mo.

Either he was fed up with their smug double act, or fed up with walking. Kerr's answer actually surprised himself.

"Yes, it's a long way to the mountains, too far. The war might not wait." He said.

"He's right." Said Rhian. "We might get back and find we've arrived too late."

Silky looked at Mo, who simply nodded at her.

"Just so long as you understand what we might have to do." She said.

At first it looked like the entire settlement had come out to attack them, even the old and young carried spears. There was a lot of shouting and gesturing, designed to intimidate. It worked, Kerr wondered if they should have given the village a wide berth. Then Silky began to beat her wings and wave her tail around.

"Creatures of dirt and filth, you dare attack me ?!" She yelled.

None of the tribal people had probably ever seen a real live chaos invoker. Old tales get passed down though and one old woman began to run away.

"Usshruku !" She yelled.

The call was taken up, until the entire village was running away from Silky, as though she was at the head of a vast army.

"Usshruku ! Usshruku ! Usshruku !"

Obviously their name for whatever creature of the darkness, they considered Silky to be. One large warrior did lift a spear and aim it at her. Silky pointed her index finger at him and he crumbled to

dust. That was the beginning and end of any resistance. The villagers became just dots in the distance, running for their lives.

"They'll watch us and regain some courage." Said Mo. "We need to look for a cart fairly quickly and a beast to pull it of course."

"Just follow the noise and stink." Said Silky.

Kerr had never heard a noise like it. The hairy beast seemed to be angry and in pain.

"What is wrong with it?" He asked.

"That is its happy noise." Said Silky. "Wait until you hear it on a bad day."

He'd seen the cattle most of the colonists bred, he'd even transported a few in specially designed containers. The hairy monster in a small fenced off area, looked wilder than those cattle. Two large horns and a mean disposition to go with it. It was stomping the ground, as though daring them to come closer.

"I was hoping a Farrag was more..... Domesticated." Said Rhian.

"We're stealing their most precious possession." Said Silky. "A Farrag can go for weeks without food or water and pull a heavy cart day and night, with almost no sleep."

There was a large four wheeled cart not far from the beast. It looked to have been made out of broken pieces of timber, tied together with thin branches. Silky assured them that tribal carts were far stronger than they looked. Mo strapped a harness on their newly acquired Farrag, tying him to the shafts on the front of the cart.

"What does it eat?" Kerr asked.

"Anything it can find on the rift." Said Silky. "Including your clothing and a mouthful of skin, if you aren't careful. Be careful until it gets to know your scent."

"We have to name it." Said Rhian. "It can't be an it, not all the way to the mountains. What sex is it?"

Mo lifted its tail, causing a different sound to come from their beast of burden. A harsher sound, from a creature who didn't appreciate being examined.

"It's a male." Said Mo. "Delmus and Luri travelled the rifts once, with a Farrag. They called it Stinky most days, but its official name was Pug."

"Stinky seems a good name and accurate." Said Kerr.

"No, I like Pug." Said Rhian.

The people of the village were coming back as they left and followed the track towards the mountains.

"They'll follow us." Said Silky. "We'll need to keep a careful watch when we stop anywhere for long."

Mo picked up the reins of the beast, driving it from inside the cart. He called out a few strange words and twitched the reins. Pug went from about five miles an hour, right up to a steady eight, maybe nine.

"Is that his top speed." Asked Kerr.

"Yes, but Pug will keep it up all day every day." Said Mo. "We can even sleep on the move, though being bumped over the rough terrain, might make sleep difficult."

They had transport and Kerr almost forgot about his motion sickness until he tried to look at the horizon again. He threw up over the side of the cart and felt miserable again.

~ ~

Like all members of The Damned, Albas had spent some time on the rifts. Those had been the relatively green and pleasant rifts though, with streams and thousands of square miles of grasslands.

The 6<sup>th</sup> rift was different, or at least it was now. He wiped growler blood off his sword, before putting it back in its scabbard.

"Growlers, all we ever seem to see are growlers." He said.

"They're hungry and we appear to be the only available food." Said Celli.

"It wasn't always like this." Said Hol. "Kittara and I camped by a waterfall near here, though that was a long time ago."

"We haven't seen a single demon warrior, not one patrol." Said Albas.

Mingal was stood on a boulder, looking as though he was meditating. They'd all begun to respect his skills as a navigator again, as he seemed to be finding the few landmarks there were on the 6<sup>th</sup> rift.

"There." Said Mingal, pointing. "The demon settlement of Unadaris. Quite close, we should approach with caution."

"Now you'll see demons Albas, probably too many." Said Hol. "Unadaris is the headquarters of their elite forces, the legendary Rift Guard."

"Be nice to see something alive that isn't a growler." Said Juno.

The only plants that appeared to be thriving, were ones Hol had said contained toxic sap. It was a grim, bleak world and every few yards, their footfalls brought more hungry growlers out holes in the ground. Albas had heard stories from Delmus about his battles against the Dracc. Insect lifeforms created by Sevril-Narge, the bug Goddess herself.

"They kept coming, millions of them." Delmus had told him. "My blaster overheated and I was left with just my sword arm, wielding a Nurigen blade."

Delmus had been known to exaggerate and embellish a good story, it was almost expected. The thought of Delmus fighting an endless tide of monstrous insects helped though. It made the few dozen growlers in front of him seem nothing, barely worth worrying about.

"I'll get these !" He yelled.

"What made him so keen ?" Asked Celli.

Albas ignored the comment and actually enjoyed hacking the creatures apart. He noticed that any still alive, instantly began to feed on those he'd already killed.

"So hungry they're eating each other." He said.

So it went on, hacking at growlers every few yards. There seemed to be an inexhaustible supply of the creatures. The 6<sup>th</sup> rift might now be a barren desert, but it had to be a recent change. The vast number of growlers must have had something to feed on, other than their own dead.

"Unadaris is in the next valley." Said Mingal.

"Quietly." Said Hol. "It would be nice to see them, without them hearing us."

They crawled the last few feet, their bellies rubbing over the dry ground. The valley below was full of demon dwellings, surrounded by a high wooden fence. There wasn't a sign of life, or the usual stink of a large demon encampment. Juno was actually sniffing the air.

"Not a trace of demon stink." She said. "I think the settlement is deserted."

"Hey, hey, less of the demon stink." Said Celli.

"Yes, but... You're a Shelzak." Said Juno. "I thought Shelzak hated all other demons."

"Not all, just most." She corrected her. "No more talk of demon stink though. Humans smell pretty weird to us too."

"No smells at all." Said Hol. "No fires to prepare food, no shouts from their children. Plus the growlers are being allowed to wander around the settlement. For some reason they've abandoned Unadaris."

Hol stood up and began to walk towards the demon settlement.

“Come on, there might be something worth taking.” She said.

Weapons held ready, they walked through the now deserted streets of the demon town. The abandonment of the settlement had been deliberate and well planned. There were still packing cases in front of some of the larger buildings and heaps of belongings considered not worth taking. Deep ruts in the ground, spoke of heavily laden carts, being pulled through the streets.

“Why abandon one of their major outposts ?” Asked Juno.

“Perhaps they needed reinforcements for the city beyond gateway.” Said Celli.

Still that hesitancy to mention Leng by name. Albas knew it wasn’t just the demons who’d held onto that superstition. There were some on Mendera who referred to Leng as the place beyond gateway. There were rumours, old legends really. They spoke of listeners, waiting throughout eternity for any disrespectful or threatening words about Leng. Nonsense of course, though even some of The Damned, chose not to test the legend.

“Maybe.” Said Hol. “Aelfraed never mentioned anything when she came to Mendera City, but I noticed she rarely mentioned affairs in Leng.”

“Would we tell anyone if the war was going badly on Mendera ?” Asked Albas.

“Probably not.” Said Juno.

A few demon dead in front of one building, badly decomposed. Growlers too, had done their damage, eating a lot of the soft tissues. It did at least give them an idea of a timescale for the evacuation of the settlement.

“Low level workers, killed by some kind of accident.” Said Celli. “Left to rot on the streets. Now you see why we Shelzak hate most other demons.”

Mingal sniffed one of the bodies and tasted one with his tongue. Albas had seen the trick before. Disgusting, but there was something in the taste, a bitterness, that gave an accurate age for the corpse.

“Normally even the labouring class would be buried.” Said Mingal. “They obviously left in a hurry, about six months ago in Menderan time.”

Hol followed the main road through the settlement, the others following her. The gate that led to the rift edge was still open, a broken cart abandoned, still full of someone’s precious things.

“This is the first sign we’ve seen of a rout.” Said Juno. “But who were they running away from ?”

“More bodies, though the growlers have left little but bone.” Said Celli.

Mingal knelt and examined what was left of the bodies, a little too thoroughly for his liking. Albas had seen a lot of battles, but there were at least a hundred demon bodies and they seemed to have been crushed, in some kind of stampede.

“They died in panic, running from something.” Said Mingal. “Something terrified the elite, the legendary Rift Guard.”

“Running from what ?” Asked Albas. “There are no signs of an enemy. No tracks, no bodies, no destroyed buildings. What terrified these demon warriors ?”

“Whatever it was has obviously moved on.” Said Hol. “Come on, we’re still some distance from the rift edge.”

There were fewer growlers on the road that led towards the fissure in reality, which gave access to the 7th rift.

~ ~

Chlo was dressed in just the clothing she wore to bed, which didn’t give her bottom much protection from the hard stone floor. There was also a cold breeze blowing through the corridor, Mendera City could be cold at night. So easy for her to place a cushion under her bottom and warm up the air a

little, yet she didn't do either of those things. Getting back into bed with Sikush would warm her up and be far more comfortable, but she didn't do that either. She sat on the hard floor, with her back against the wall and realised;

"I allowed her to get into my head." She muttered.

Angst always seemed to arrive at night, when the noise and confusion of the day, no longer required all her attention. There was time for her mind's eye to turn inwards, time for introspection.

Sometimes she walked around the palace, enjoying the sound her feet made, slapping against the ancient stone floors. Not this time though, she curled herself up into an almost foetal position and carried on sitting on the floor.

"Of course I know him." She muttered. "I know him better than anyone."

Of course she did, they even shared a level of consciousness, part of each other's minds. There had been others he'd been closer to for longer, but most of them were dead. Hol had found her, given her an idea of what physical form to take. To think, she'd almost killed Hol that day.

"I will not let her do this to me again."

He was there next to her, sitting on the floor beside her. Any words would have been wrong at that moment, he knew that. Sikush put his fingers through hers and held her hand. Chlo pulled his hand towards her mouth and gently bit his skin.

"Ouch !"

"Just making sure you're real."

He always came looking for her when she felt lost, usually lost in her own thoughts. She kissed the back of his hand and began to cry. Still he said nothing, knowing the right moment hadn't yet arrived.

"I let her disturb my thoughts." She said. "The one Sventa calls an emissary of the Gods."

"A good description." He replied. "If the eternal multiverse isn't God, then who is ?"

She wanted to bite him again for the right answer at the wrong moment. She didn't though. She turned towards him and smiled.

"She claimed to know you better than I." She said.

No reply, he just put his arm around her, sheltering her from the cold night breeze.

"Why do you fight ?" She asked.

"You know why."

She bit him again, harder this time.

"Tell me !?"

"I fight to keep him locked up in his prison, the crawling chaos. Everything else is secondary. The empire is only a mechanism to give the peace and security necessary to keep Mendera safe. He must be kept prisoner for eternity."

"Why ?" She asked. "What are you protecting from chaos ?"

"Ahhh, I see.....The obvious contradiction." He said. "I will gladly sacrifice an entire empire to keep him in his prison. Why ? To save the lives of those in the next version of the Great Menderan Empire."

He chuckled and kissed her cheek.

"On the surface it looks a circular and fairly ludicrous reason for all the effort put in to what I do.... No what we do Chlo, you and I. But there is much more to it than that."

"Oh Kittara was right ! You are so annoying. Explain it to me, what are you fighting for ?"

He sighed and leant his head back against the wall.

“It’s for everything beyond the empire Chlo. Every child born on a world still untainted. Millions of billions of creatures we’ll probably never see or know. If he gets out, they’ll all die, every single one of them. A multiverse without the laughter of children Chlo, imagine that. Isn’t that worth sacrificing quite a lot to prevent ?”

Chlo felt content again, giving his hand a final kiss.

“I knew that, always did.” She said. “Come on, let’s go back to bed.”

~

~

Sventa barely recognised the planet where she’d fed on so many warriors of The New Keo Group. New Keo was no more though, gone in the last mass extinction of the multiverse. Boomers had survived though, pushed into the current reality by an unknown force.

“It never was much of a place, but at least it was warm and had an atmosphere.” She said.

“Even I don’t enjoy walking on the surface.” Said Estrid.

They were both travelling in an imperial ground vehicle, designed to thrive in temperatures barely above absolute zero. Everything outside was frozen, including the methane lake where the miner’s village had once stood.

“They had a bar right there.” Said Sventa. “Not a nice one, but any bar makes a town boomers to miners.”

“Chlo says there’s no geothermal activity.” Said Estrid. “No matter how deep we dig, it isn’t going to get any warmer.”

Sventa knew the reliability of empire tech. No imperial power pack had ever failed and their vehicle had several backup systems anyway. There was zero chance of being left without heating and air to breathe, yet she had to ask.

“How long would I survive on the surface ?” She asked.

The inside of their vehicle was kept at a comfortable temperature and just the right humidity. Well, perfect for human physiology, but Sventa wasn’t about to complain. Looking at the blue nitrogen haze in the lower atmosphere, made her shiver though.

“A fraction of a second maybe.” Answered Estrid. “Barely long enough to feel any pain, as your blood solidified in your veins.”

“No wonder deep cold miners are a strange bunch.”

“They do it for the money, most can retire in comfort after a decade of digging in places like this.”

The miners were keen; a few new arrivals were already grouping at the entrance to the old mine workings. They had machines a miner could sit inside, but eventually all mining came down to a lone miner and the tools he could carry. One man was hitting something with a hammer.

“They have their all-terrain suits, but it still looks.... Crazy to be out there.” Said Sventa.

“Chlo said we may lose one or two in a thousand, from accidents.” Said Estrid. “Far better odds than being in any army in the empire. Plus, I did mention the huge amount they get paid.”

Sventa knew she’d be out there soon, walking on the surface while wearing an imperial all-terrain suit. Kept alive by a tiny power pack, half the size of the blaster she carried. It worried her, in the same way that wearing an atmosphere suit in space worried her. It wasn’t cowardice, it was the anxiety of not being in control.

‘We are about to begin blasting, please clear the area.’ Someone said over their comms link.

No tracks or hover system, their vehicle ran on eight large wheels and turned round in its own length, as Sventa head back towards their hastily erected habitation. There was more space there, the sense of being on a normal planet, even if was an illusion.

“You’ll love it once you get out there.” Said Estrid.



“Are you reading my mind ?”

“Me ! No, never. I may be a living deity, but even I have limitations. Sikush says a child can realise by the age of ten, that for the multiverse to survive, even deities must have limitations.”

“Good guess then.”

“It is nasty out there Sventa, but survivable. The dangerous thing is to believe technology can tame such places. It can’t, at best we can only survive.”

The explosives detonated while they were halfway back, registering as a slight pop inside their vehicle. No proper atmosphere, but the thick nitrogen haze communicated some sounds. No light outside though, the planet was in complete darkness, outside the arc of the powerful lights their vehicle carried. Slowly the dots of light in the distance grew brighter, as they approached the stack of prefabricated buildings.

“Home again.” Said Estrid. “At least until we find it, whatever it is.”

Someone had put the planet into orbit around a singularity, though no one seemed to have any idea who. Their habitation was an eight storey stack of prefabricated housing, put under one of Chlo’s defence shields. It all looked flimsy, but could withstand just about any kind of attack.

“I told Chlo to let the miners bring their families down here.” Said Estrid.

“Is it safe enough ?”

“Safer than being on vessels in orbit.”

“You can be so infuriating Estrid. Do you know they will be attacked ?”

“Limitations Sventa, remember that I don’t see everything. Just a feeling though, that the miners families would be safer down here.”

“I’ll talk to Chlo and get it done.” Said Sventa.

It was like being on an airless world, but deep cold was less forgiving of errors than airless space. You had a few seconds to escape a faulty airlock. The outside temperature on Boomers could freeze your body, before you even felt any pain. They waited inside the outer airlock, allowing the technology time to warm the air a little. It was still dangerous to touch anything metal, they both wore heavy gloves. They left their vehicle and used another airlock, to enter the main habitation. Nothing was rushed, no corners were cut. The deep cold couldn’t be tamed, only survived.

~

~

Delmus had attended the standard briefing for the new miners of Sessana. It had been the usual talk about the importance of following safety procedures at all times. Basically it boiled down to not doing anything to let the deep cold into their habitation. His attention had drifted a bit during the details about using an all-terrain suit. After the briefing, he wandered into the communal dining room, in search of breakfast.

“You should pay attention, it might save your life.”

His old friend Flip from Pineus 8, looking at his uniform of The Guard, as though he suspected Delmus might have stolen it.

“Flip, I didn’t know you were a deep cold miner.”

“Haven’t done it for a while, but the money being offered was just too tempting.”

Flip wasn’t good at hiding his curiosity, looking Delmus up and down, as if disbelieving his own eyes.

“Maybe it’s none of my business, but you were a mining engineer the last time we met, a good one. What game are you playing ?” Flip asked.

“Oh, I enjoyed my time on Pineus 8, but I was there on empire business, sorry I can’t tell you what. Is Lois still running ok ?”

“Was when I left. I meant it though, empire warrior or not, you should listen to all the briefings. If a miner with twenty years service can listen, you can.”

It had been a long time since anyone had told him off, not counting Luri of course. Delmus didn't much like the experience.

“I can survive in space without a suit.” Said Delmus. “They make us pretty tough, when we join The Damned.”

Still not the respect he was used to, Flip still looking as though he'd offended some sacred creed of the miners.

“Delmus, I'm only saying this for your own good. You're confusing a lack of heat with deep cold and they're different creatures, trust me.”

His mind did a few cartwheels, but he knew Flip was a good mining engineer, one of the best.

Delmus decided to listen to what the Algarian had to say.

“Ok, ok, we'll get some food and you can explain why the vacuum of space, isn't the same as deep cold.”

The dining room was busy, full of miners getting to know one another, while seeing what sort of food they'd be living on for weeks. No self-service, or much choice, but the food did look and smell good. They found an empty table and carefully tried a small amount of the food.

“Hey, pretty good.” Said Flip.

“Better than on Pineus and that wasn't even free.”

By the time half his plate was empty, Flip was ready to impart his words of miner wisdom.

“Sorry if I'm stating the obvious.” Said Flip. “There is nothing in space. A few particles roaming about, but basically as close to a complete vacuum as you'll find. Deep cold is different Delmus and far more dangerous.”

“Flip, you're beginning to sound like a street corner doomsayer.”

“I know at least five miners sat here today, who have an artificial hand.” Said Flip. “They make them well these days, not easy to spot. They're the lucky ones, the others who touched something seriously cold, never survived. There is an atmosphere, of a sort out there Delmus, all sorts of gases that only co-exist because they're too cold to react with each other.”

“I had the nitrogen haze lecture back on Mendera.”

Flip actually banged the table, gaining them some attention. Children looking at them too, though they were supposed to have been left in orbit.

“Big as you are, we're going to have to fight this out, if you won't listen.”

“Yeah sorry Flip, I will pay attention.”

“I've heard fire fighters talk about fire being like a living thing, once it gets a real hold on a building. They'll tell you it follows the ceiling, as if it's intelligent. I don't know about fire, but Nitrogen can act like a living organism. It hates to be cold, especially when the temperature drops close to absolute zero.”

Despite all the experience brought by a long life serving the empire, his friend was beginning to get to him. Flip was the expert after all, the mining engineer who'd worked on deep cold planets.

“It wants heat Delmus, your heat.” Flip continued. “Just a fraction of an inch of exposed skin is enough. If you're lucky it'll just grab the heat from a hand. If you're unlucky it will drag the life right out of you, leaving a lifeless, frozen husk.”

“Fine Flip, job done, you've worried me.” Said Delmus. “I'll be careful, especially now there are kids here. I thought they were going to remain in orbit?”

"It appears the rules changed and we do have the space." Said Flip. "They're bringing all the families down here. It means a few of us moving rooms, but we hadn't had time to settle in anyway."

Flip actually grabbed his arm as he stood up to leave.

"I've heard that strange things happen as the temperature gets close to absolute zero, impossible things." Said Flip. "Perhaps some weird things start to happen as the temperature drops close to that point. I've seen nitrogen do odd things Delmus, be careful."

"Ok Flip, as I said, you've convinced me."

Delmus went to his own quarters, intending to spend the day reviewing base security. Instead he felt a need to face the worst Sessana was likely to throw at him. Flip was right in a way, deep space wasn't the same as a frozen landscape, where everything was trying to drag the heat out your body. Delmus had never stood on a planet like Sessana, there had been no reason to.

"No time like the present." He muttered.

Delmus moved himself to the roof of one of the few buildings remaining from the days when Sessana had been the home world of the Terak. The building was a ruin, but the roof gave him a good view of their base and the area to be mined. He was alive, as he knew he would be, it takes a lot to kill one of The Damned.

"That... Is unexpected."

His voice sounded strange, several times deeper than usual, though that wasn't unexpected. He sent what he was seeing to Chlo, to be added to her vast database of information regarding the imperial guard, The Damned. There was a slight blue glow over his skin, like a form of bio-luminescence.

There was no life on Sessana though, none at all, not one solitary bacteria.

"The atmosphere is trying to take heat from your body and succeeding, slightly." Chlo told him. "Not much heat and well within your ability to survive. It shouldn't interfere with your abilities at all. The glow is strange though, completely....."

"Unexpected." He offered.

"Yes Delmus, unexpected."

"I met a miner here who says the nitrogen in the atmosphere can do weird things, even act like a living thing."

"Miners always invent their own folklore and superstitions." Said Chlo. "Most are just ways for their minds to cope with staggeringly hostile working conditions."

"But the blue nitrogen glow is odd."

"Yes, Delmus and unexpected. I will work on the problem and let you know my conclusions."

"Thank you."

Work on indeed, she was confused and Chlo being confused was rare. Delmus was determined to ignore the glow and the feeling of something biting at his skin, which was probably all his mind anyway. He dropped off the roof and walked round their habitation. Eight floors of incredibly strong prefabricated habitation, identical to the one on Boomers. A secure world for the miners and their families, protected by an impenetrable energy shield. For no reason other than bravado, Delmus found a pool of frozen methane. It didn't really freeze, more like a weird state of constantly being between liquid and solid.

"You need to do this !" He told himself.

His bare hand melted the methane crystals, causing a cloud of steam to rise from the pool. Methane steam of course, still cold enough to kill most people in seconds. Not Delmus though, who pulled his hand out of the pool and didn't feel even the slightest hint of pain.

"Fuck you Flip, giving me the jitters." He muttered.

Delmus returned to the habitation, arriving next to a long planter, full of flowering plants under their own miniature sun, an ultraviolet bulb. Some colonists thought such things were there to clean the air. In reality they tended to be there to soften edges and simply look pretty.

"It's daddy !" Called a young child.

"You got the wrong guy kid." Said Delmus.

It was instinctive to bend down and put his arms out though, to grab the young girl. Tiny, barely able to walk properly, she hurtled towards Delmus. Her mother was actually smiling at him and shaking her head, as if apologising for her child. Then, before his hand touched the child, he remembered what Flip had told him.

"No ! Keep back !" He yelled. "I'm not your father !"

The child crumpled into a heap, crying. Her mother scooped her up, glaring at him.

"I'm sorry.....I....." He began.

His hand touched just the tip of a leaf and the plant died. Delmus watched in disbelief, as a blue glow went down the stem of the plant, right down to its roots. A fraction of a second and the plant was a lifeless stalk.

"I am so sorry..... I'm just not used to.....deep cold mining."

"Then you shouldn't be here."

He tended to agree with the child's mother. If Flip hadn't decided to have breakfast with him that morning..... Delmus left the mother to soothe her daughter and went in search of Flip. He owed him an apology and several drinks, while he asked him a lot more question about the perils of deep cold mining.

~

~