

## Ripples from the Past

### Chapter 14 - Medrona

**“Ask any member of the imperial guard and if you can get an honest answer, they’ll tell you that all colonists are a nuisance.”**

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There was one thing about container freighters that no one could agree on. It was something which captains and crews bitterly disagreed on, to the point of fights breaking out after a few drinks. No landing by shuttle, while tons of cargo and vessel carried on circling the planet in orbit. Container carriers had to land, the whole kit and caboodle. There were advantages to everyone and everything landing. Your backup was there with you and any tool or spare you might need, had landed with you. Some saw the disadvantages as pretty much the same things. One major problem during landing and everyone died. There were emergency life pods of course, but they were just about useless, once the freighter entered the atmosphere.

“Careful Kerr.” Said Mo. “The air is dry, but you still get turbulence in the upper atmosphere.”

“Nothing The Revenge can’t handle. You bought a good one Mo.”

Their vessel was designed to be balanced by thousands of full containers. Anything from food to children’s toys. Not empty though, no container vessel ever took off or landed empty. Empty meant no freight charge for the cargo, empty meant losing money on the trip.

“I’m feeling queasy.” Said Silky. “Can’t we land a bit more quickly ?”

“That’s called a crash.” Said Mo. “Let Kerr bring us down at his own pace.”

With no containers to balance the weight of the engines, they were bouncing quite badly.

“Clear air turbulence is the worst.” Said Kerr. “You can’t see it, so you can’t avoid it.”

The Revenge bounced hard and yawed to the right, causing some worrying noises from the engineering bay, beneath their feet. Silky ran into a corner and threw up what remained of her breakfast.

“I have the landing site in view.” Said Kerr. “We’ll be landing at what passes for midday on Medrona.”

“Good, we can walk to the stone circle and be on the rift before dark.” Said Mo.

“Do the creature come out at night ?” Asked Rhian.

“No, they’re always there.” Answered Silky.

They bounced again and Silky made more retching noises. Mo gently rubbed her back, as she puked.

“The ground is soft away from the track.” Said Mo. “I would never attempt the walk at night.”

They dropped down into the lower atmosphere and the turbulence stopped. The Revenge had been designed to have a slight positive lift through air. The shape of the craft, a few small wing shaped panels. They looked good, but in reality they’d simply been falling, an organised crash at best. Kerr kicked in the landing thrusters and they all felt the difference.

“We’re flying.” Said Rhian. “How far now ?”

“We’ll see the landing site very soon.” Said Kerr.

Low hills and sweeping valleys below them, all uniform browns and greys.

“It doesn’t look any better close up.” Said Rhian.

The navigation system was bringing them down onto the top of a small hill, made of the standard brownish soil and sand.

“The landing site looks like just another hill.” Said Kerr. “Are you sure it’s the right place ? We’re not exactly a light craft, even empty.”

Mo looked at the screens and zoomed one in. It was the right hill, he could even see the track leading off towards the stone circle.

“That’s it.” He said. “The empire dug out a vast pit and lowered a prefabricated landing platform into it. The winds and loose soil then did a good job of covering it all over. Trust me, it’ll hold our weight.”

“Fine, but if I feel us sinking, I’m taking us back into orbit.” Said Kerr.

The freighter didn’t have expensive impulse lifters, it had good old fashioned plasma engines. They dislodged so much loose soil and debris, that the screens quickly became useless. Kerr lowered them down onto the hilltop, the last twenty feet or so done blind. They all felt the landing feet hit something solid and unyielding.

“We’re down.” Said Kerr.

The Revenge had created a minor dust storm, which took a while to settle. Once the screens were clear again, the track to the north was easy to see.

“The track is solid.” Said Mo. “Keep to the centre of it and you’ll be fine.”

“Did the empire build the track ?” Asked Rhian.

“No, it’s old.” Said Silky. “No one knows who built it.”

Kerr began shutting systems down, they probably wouldn’t be back for some time. Mo looked out at the unwelcoming surface of Medrona and tried to remember details of the last time he’d been there. He’d been drunk that day for some reason and didn’t remember much of the journey to the stones. He remembered that one of his men had been swallowed by the soft ground and another had gone mad.

“No weapons, they won’t work on the rifts. No technology works for long on the rifts.” He said.

“Pack what you need and don’t forget the oxygen breathers, if you need them.”

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Often creativity is born out of boredom. A mind left to its own devices, searching for a way to alleviate the torture of boredom. Or it may be that once the usual background noise has stopped, an intelligent being can finally concentrate. Whatever the truth might be, Chlo had such a moment while waiting with Commander Yerli. She ran through the images of Sventa, discussing what her tame Red-Top had told her. There was Hol’s reaction and her own experiences. Sudden moments of revelation were rare for most powerful AI systems and even rarer for Chlo. She could see along the timelines, should have seen it sooner.

“It’s like ripples from the past.” She mumbled.

“Sorry ?”

“Talking to myself, ignore me.”

Chlo linked with Sikush and gave him just the broad brush strokes of her ideas.

“Are they even still there ?” He asked.

“Yes, I have two probes looking at each of them. Their suns are now cinders, yet the planets are still there, still orbiting on the same paths.” She replied.

“How is that possible ?”

“I’m not sure, it implies something unthinkable Sikush.” She said. “That someone else has the ability to manipulate reality.”

Yerli was counting down the minutes until the transport containing twenty fake pilgrims arrived.

Chlo gave that matter a little of her attention, while most of her waited for Sikush to respond.

"It is unthinkable, but also the most plausible conclusion." Said Sikush. "Re-assign the fleet to the two planets and use whatever resources you need. I'd send Sventa to NKG0056 with Estrid, they both have experience of the planet."

"I'll send them right away."

The organic form of Chlo, that she liked to think of as her real self, remained with Commander Yerli. She produced two other versions of herself and sent them across the multiverse in the blink of an eye. One appeared on the control deck of the Hyperion, which was being used as flagship of the imperial fleet. Sikush had given Estrid the use of his personal spacecraft, to ensure she had comfortable quarters. Sventa knew how to train her people, none of them reached for a weapon as she appeared on the control deck. Half of the imperial fleet was now under Sventa's control, touring the outer worlds of the Menderan Empire. Their presence served as a comfort to most and a deterrent to those who might be plotting insurrection.

"Chlo, have you come to join our baby kissing tour of the colonies?" Asked Sventa.

There were a lot of muted cheers, warriors never enjoyed goodwill visits.

"No Chlo is here with a purpose in her stride." Said Estrid. "I wouldn't mind betting that our grand tour is being cut short."

"A nostalgic trip to the past." Said Chlo. "Do you remember a mining planet, designated ident NKG0056?"

"A New Keo Group mining planet, but disputed ownership at the time with The Maran Group." Said Estrid. "Also the place where Qunan Arje died, the great rebel leader. Fighting on our side then of course, though he had a tendency to drift off mission."

"He's still there." Said Sventa.

A statement guaranteed to grab the attention of everyone on the control deck. Even Arran went quiet and waited for the rest of the conversation.

"Dead I mean, his body will still be there." Said Sventa. "What's left of it of course, after I'd killed him and eaten enough to heal some of my wounds."

"He was a good man until something in that place got into his mind." Said Estrid.

"You killed the great Qunan Arje?" Asked Arran.

"He only became the great legendary leader a hundred years after his death." Said Chlo. "At the time he had the charisma in bucket loads, but no tactical skills."

"I take it we're going back there?" Asked Estrid. "Most of the underground workings collapsed though, we were lucky to escape and many of our people didn't."

"I put the location onto the imperial navigation system." Said Chlo. "You need to get there and secure the planet. I'll send you miners and engineers to dig out the old mine workings and what lies beneath them."

"What do you think we'll find?" Asked Sventa.

"Cold, deep cold." Answered Chlo. "You'll need to get secure habitation set up, before you can do anything else."

Estrid was nodding in understanding.

"A very old world orbiting a new sun when we were there last." She said. "Now the sun has run out of fuel and the planet is orbiting a cold cinder."

Chlo beckoned them away from the small but growing crowd of curious observers.

"The planet is orbiting something, I'm not quite sure what." She said. "I'll send you Grey Walker and a team of researchers, to find out what is now at the centre of that solar system."

"Well, it doesn't look like being boring." Said Sventa.

“Get to NKG0056 and.....”

“Can we call it Boomers ?” Asked Estrid. “The New Keo miners called it Boomers, short for Boom Town. Though they seemed to call anywhere with a bar Boom Town.”

“Anywhere with a good bar..... is Boom Town.” Added Sventa.

“Fine, Boomers it is, I’ll even put that name on the Ident.” Said Chlo. “Get there and get somewhere warm to live, the surface temperature is low enough to turn Methane into a liquid. I’ll find you your miners.”

“What do we hope to dig up ?” Asked Sventa.

“Probably something nasty, so be careful.”

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In reality the term Outer World of the Empire was meaningless. In a multiverse made up of an almost infinite number of bubble universes, nowhere really fitted the description of being an outer world, though the term was used on unaligned worlds and Menderan planets. It tended to mean rarely visited worlds, populated by troublesome colonists. Ask any member of the imperial guard and if you can get an honest answer, they’ll tell you that all colonists are a nuisance.

“A fucking nuisance.” Said Delmus. “Why did we get the crappy end of the stick ?”

“And where did you send Alyz ?” Asked Luri. “She’s part of our team now. Is she coming back ?”

The second copy of Chlo, not receiving the warm welcome the first had received from Sventa and Estrid. No good telling them that though. Chlo had learned during her very long life that pointing out the illogical nature of someone’s anger, just made them more angry.

“Alyz will be back, I just need her for a short time.” She replied.

“Doing what ?” Asked Delmus.

“Important work for the empire!”

She gave him her most withering look and hoped he remembered the consequences of being rude to her. The last time she’d cut him off from the empire entertainment network for months. No access to porn had really tortured him.

“Sorry Chlo, we’re just all fed up with being.....emissaries or whatever.” Said Delmus.

“Your days as emissaries are over.” Said Chlo. “You’re going to Sessana.”

“That awful place !? It must have been destroyed a long time ago.” Said Luri.

“No, it’s still there and now completely cold and lifeless, hopefully.” Said Chlo. “So cold you’ll need shuttles and suits to do everything, even the digging.”

“How cold ?” Asked Delmus.

“Nitrogen Haze cold.”

She was sending them both to one of the coldest planets ever recorded, yet they seemed excited.

“You mentioned digging.” Said Luri. “What are we looking for ?”

All the stock answers sounded fine, but Chlo honestly wasn’t sure what they’d find. She’d had her suspicions ever since Kittara had delved deep below the surface of Sessana. The Terak of Sessana had been a worthy enemy of the empire once, perhaps too worthy. There had been a point in a certain campaign when it was a close run thing. They could easily have become the dominant force of the multiverse.

“Something that shouldn’t be there.” She answered. “You will know when you find it.”

“No clues at all ?” Asked Delmus.

“Just be careful and remember that even The Damned find life uncomfortable, that close to absolute zero.” Said Chlo. “Keep warm, build a strong habitation not too close to Sikush’s tomb and I’ll begin finding miners with experience of frozen worlds.”

"I'd forgotten the Terak had built a tomb for Sikush." Said Luri. "The ultimate in threats and insults. I heard they also added a side chamber for Kittara."

"They did and you'll probably find it." Said Chlo. "Don't forget they nearly beat us once and they may have left traps. You'll need to dig out the entire tomb, but be careful."

They went from irritable to happy so quickly. Teasing each other about who could tolerate extreme cold the best. Chlo left that version of herself with them, to answer their questions and join in with their fun. Most of her consciousness she put back into her true form, the one waiting with Yerli.

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Yerli was still watching the screens, noting the time until the shuttle arrived at the space port at Calmis-An. Chlo had been carrying out routine communications, making sure that Jen and her team were in the right place and Yerli's people were ready. All done automatically, barely registering in her mind.

"They'll be on the ground in thirty seconds." Said Casto Yerli. "We really should have informed the spaceport staff."

"Surly reception staff, lost baggage, everything has to appear normal." She said. "One over anxious baggage handler and..... Calmis-An becomes a hole in the ground."

She hoped Yerli wasn't going to be a problem. She knew he was more scared than showing signs of rebellion. She'd watched the tape of his interview for promotion to Commander and Jen had asked him why the empire was important.

"Well... You have to have empires, or the people will think they can do what they want."

No, Yerli wasn't going to be a problem. She knew that observation gave the illusion of control. Chlo pushed several screen up onto the wall, probes locked onto the key players in the fiction about to be played out for the benefit of twenty fake pilgrims. Plus a screen showing a panorama of the arrivals area of the spaceport.

"So it begins." She said. "Hy Astar is in place and looking suitably bored."

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Hy Astar did feel fear and he wasn't that good at ignoring it. Despite a good military record and a box full of medals, awards and commendations, he never thought of himself as a hero. Hy had always been a bit of a dreamer, though a teacher had once called them delusional fantasies. He could play out scenarios in his head and believe in them so deeply, that they removed all fear from his mind. He wasn't going to die in a massive explosion at Calmis-An, the story running in his head didn't include that option.

"Crap ! Why didn't they take them into orbit until the storm passed ?"

"Pilgrims bounced about become unhappy pilgrims." Hy replied. "Sorry you were dragged out of bed Jacek, but put on a happy face for the tourists."

"Yeah right !"

All the spaceport staff would be feeling tired and irritable, not just baggage handlers like Jacek. That was perfect of course, it fitted the scenario running in Hy's head. Through several sets of doors marked as being for security personnel only and he was stood behind the staff who did the tough job of being nice to thousands of tourists every year. No matter what the provocation, they were trained to smile and be ludicrously polite.

"All passengers may use any arrivals ramp." Said the public address system.

The arriving tourists were unexpected and the first shuttle out wasn't for a few hours. There were quite a few people in the spaceport though, it was rarely completely empty. Two or three women who looked to be waiting for the next outbound flight to some part of the empire. Men too, some

stood in huddled groups, muttering in languages from the outer worlds. Probably miners and engineers, on leave and heading for home, wherever home happened to be. Someone was kicking a comms terminal, that happened a lot. Odd things went through people's minds late at night and inanimate objects often took a beating.

"Hey, cut that out !" Someone yelled.

The first of the tourist families appeared, looking fed up of course. They'd have been travelling in relative comfort and given free drinks, but no one enjoys being on a diverted flight. Most visitors to Mendera brought their elderly and young with them, often carrying babies down the exit ramps. The twenty fake pilgrims had been trained to look ordinary, but twenty fit and healthy adults stood out. Hy thought through the next act in his personal drama, as he mingled with the pilgrim families.

"My family will want to pick us up." Asked an old lady. "Is that alright ?"

"No lady, but you'll be well looked after tonight and all for free." He replied.

He was about to shout for silence and remind them about remaining together, but Crit Imada beat him to it.

"Can I have your attention ?" She yelled.

He quite liked Crit, but she had a fairly scary voice and a physical appearance that demanded respect.

"There are no working security scanners here." She boomed. "As your pilot will have told you, scanning of you and your luggage, will take place in the morning. You will be staying in the best accommodation in Calmis-An Space Port. All courtesy of the Menderan City Council of course."

A few happy faces, most people liked a freebie.

"Does that include drinks ?" Someone yelled.

"Yes, and unlimited room service." Crit replied.

It was a good way to turn an annoyed mob, back into a happy group of tourists. Hy thought it was his turn to play slightly bad militia person to her good guy.

"And!" He yelled. "Any unauthorised attempt to leave the spaceport and you'll be a guest of the militia for the night."

A few fairly good natured jeers, they all knew the reputation of the Mendera City Militia. Mainly happy though and no one threatening to complain. Hy was actually enjoying himself and gave Crit a friendly wave. Next he had to split the twenty away from the herd. Originally Jen had suggested trying to get all the twenty onto one of the dozen or so local ground transports.

"I can think of a better way." He'd told her. "Make it seem their own idea to go where we want them to go."

Hy waited at the exit doors, talking to one of the staff he'd dated a few times. Her reactions to him and occasional laughter, reinforced his cover, his ordinariness. As the tourists dragged their bags and children towards the gates, he went into action.

"All resort hotels will be happy to give you accommodation for the night." He yelled. "Apart from the Sacred Water Resort, which is an adult's only resort. Only board their transport, if you aren't travelling with children."

A few happy faces and a few sad ones. The Sacred Water had a good reputation and served the best drinks in the area. Hy's voice began to go, from constantly repeating the announcement, until Crit took pity on him and took over. Half an hour later the space port was once again left to the few people who seemed to have nowhere better to go.

"It worked." Said Crit. "Every single fake pilgrim is at the Sacred Water. With another fifty or sixty genuine tourists of course. That'll be fun to sort out in the morning."

"In the morning though, I need a few hours sleep." He replied.

He could relax, knowing that Jen and her people would patrol the hotel grounds all night. All done in a very low key way of course, nothing to worry the pilgrims, fake or genuine. Anyone trying to sneak away would be politely returned to their hotel. For their own safety of course.

"I have a room quite near." Said Crit.

There was a look in her eyes that left no doubt about her intentions. He'd slept with augmented females before and it usually meant a few bruises. Still, it was a good way to kill a few hours.

"Got any Ushong there ?" He asked.

"A bottle of the best."

"Lead on then Crit, lead on."

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Rhian decided to carry the breather, rather than wearing it. The oxygen level was a little lower than ideal for her physiology, but enough to allow movement at a fast walk. The breather was fairly old tech and weighed enough to make it a nuisance. Kerr had ignored her advice and had decided to walk the mile or so without extra oxygen.

"No plant life or oceans for algal blooms." Said Kerr. "There shouldn't be any oxygen at all."

"Just another mystery of Medrona." Replied Mo.

Rhian walked to the edge of the hill and looked in all directions.

"Nothing but grey dust and brown rocks." She said. "Was there ever life here Mo ?"

"I don't know."

"There are lots of stories about the people who lived." Said Silky. "None of them pleasant and probably all nothing but lies and legends."

Mo simply shrugged and began to walk down the side of the hill. He seemed to be following a path of some kind, though to her the ground was just a uniform grey.

"No rush." He said. "A careful slow pace will get us all there in one piece."

She felt her feet sink and hit something firm. Looking carefully she saw a slight difference in the ground, the outline of a narrow path, leading to the track below. She turned and pointed it out to Kerr.

"Follow my footsteps, there's a path."

"Oh, sorry! Should have mentioned that." Said Mo. "Keep to the path I take."

Rhian never expected them to move across the terrain like a military operation, but she still glared at Mo and gave a loud audible sigh.

"Anything at all live here ?" Asked Kerr. "Bugs maybe, anything ?"

"The dead decay, so there must be small organisms in the ground." Said Silky.

Great ! More less than encouraging information from their resident chaos invoker. Rhian decided to follow Mo and deal with problems as they arose. A mile at a slow pace was probably only going to take half an hour and there was still hours of daylight. They slowly descended the hill, ending up at the track, which led off in the direction they wished to travel and in a zig zag to the south.

"Where did it lead to, before the empire built the landing platform ?" She asked.

"Tombs, a whole valley full of them." Said Mo. "It appears that a long dead civilisation, used Medrona to bury their dead. Chlo once mentioned that millions of them are buried here."

"Best use for this place, a necropolis." Said Kerr.

The track had edge markers every few yards, small statues of various winged beasts. The angels of Medrona ? Rhian didn't like asking, in case Silky gave one of her encouraging answers again. They'd barely gone fifty yards, before spotting an imperial ground shuttle, half buried in the grey sandy soil.

“Don’t worry, that’s been here so long that it’s become a landmark.” Said Mo.

“Bad ground over there, very bad ground.” Added Silky.

Another half mile and they’d seen more pieces of ancient technology, all buried in the grey soil of Medrona. Silky spotted what looked like wisps of mist on the horizon, pointing at them.

“They’re coming, the angels.” She said.

“I’m immune to their tricks.” Said Mo. “Watch each other carefully for signs of confusion and sleep walking. Stop anyone who’s getting close to the edge of the track.”

Signs of confusion ?! Crap, what had Mo led them into ? It would have been nice to know more, but the wisps of mist were approaching at some speed.”

“Ignore them and they can’t hurt you.” Said Silky.

Rhian carried on following Mo, trying to ignore whatever was arriving from the hills to the north.

More corporeal once they arrived, yet still hardly what most people would call solid. Ghosts of angels, with a snarly attitude and an obvious evil intent. If the jaws snapping at her had been real ?! Maybe that was how it was done ? Rhian thought of the idea and quite quickly an angel had its teeth embedded in her upper arm. Skin as grey as the dusty ground, wings too broken to keep anything in the air, yet the creature was biting her, causing so much pain. Only its skin was now the colour golden sand, its wings long and perfect.

“Help me get it off !” She yelled.

She was on her own though, with several more of the winged creatures heading towards her. Bows too they had, with quivers full of arrows on their backs. Several were taking aim, she had to run and find cover. The angel biting her let go, as if aiding her decision to run.

“No, this is all your tricks. I understand now !” She yelled.

Rhian had suffered from severe nightmares as a child and only one thing had pulled her out of them. The damage had been misinterpreted as self-harm and caused her family a lot of worry, but it had worked. She pushed the nails of her left hand, deep into the back of her right hand.

“Wake up you idiot !” She yelled.

The arrows began to fly, all missing her. The incentive was obvious, run or die. Rhian dug her nails in further and dragged them downwards. The pain woke her, showing her Kerr, who seemed personally unaffected by the angel’s tricks. He was looking at her as though she’d gone mad. Silky seemed alright, though she was looking past her, at something outside of the track.

“Fuck ! Why didn’t you stop him ?” She yelled at Silky.

She regretted the words, poor Silky looked terrified. Mo was at least five yards from the track and still walking further away. He seemed oblivious, as she and Kerr shouted at him. She knew what he’d be seeing and hearing, knowing his head would be full of angry snarling angels. Rhian never thought of the consequences, as she ran towards Mo.

“Mo ! Wake up you idiot !” She yelled.

The soft ground was opening up to swallow Mo, as she wrapped her arms around his neck and held on tight.

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Chlo left the screens in place, showing the views from two benign probes, as they gave a perfect view of Hy and Crit having sex. Sounds too, of two people enjoying each other’s bodies, filled the militia control room. Yerli didn’t say anything, but she could see he was becoming uncomfortable with the display of carnal pleasures.

“We can pick them up again in the morning.” She said.

“Thank you, it was a bit.....” Said Yerli.



She left the probes and blanked the screens, which appeared to please Casto Yerli. Chlo never ceased to be amazed that fighters who had seen people die in hideous ways, became uncomfortable watching two people enjoying something as natural as sex.

"Hy did well." She said. "Some original ideas that worked well. He was a good choice."

"Crit is tough; she'll prove herself in the morning."

"I'm sure she will commander."

Original ideas were something the empire seemed to lack. At one time The Chalné had been surrounded by people full of ideas. Many of those bright people had been immortals, so they were still there, acting as advisers. Only now there seemed to be far less innovation, far less creativity of ideas. It puzzled Chlo and she wondered if all empires eventually ended because people worried more about the mundane than the important.

"People hate wars and troubled times." Sikush had once told her. "Yet those are the times that incubate new talent, bring out the best in some. I'd never have thought of The Damned, if the previous Holy Warriors hadn't failed so badly in battle."

So it seemed that the need to survive brought out the creativity in some people, even Sikush. Not for the first time, she decided that wars and rebellious nations were essential to keep the empire expanding and running smoothly. Not an idea for public consumption of course, but she knew most of The Damned would agree with her. You had to win though, it was all about survival, spreading their humanoid DNA and most importantly..... Keeping him, the crawling chaos, locked away forever.

"I will watch, if you need a few hours sleep?" She asked Yerli.

"No, I'll be fine."

She smiled at him, making eye contact and nodding towards his emergency bed in the corner of the room. A bed for when flaps were on and the fake pilgrims definitely fitted the description of a flap.

"Sleep Casto, you'll need to be alert when our pilgrims wake up."

"Fine, but wake me if anything happens."

Chlo waited by herself after he'd gone to sleep, voyeuristically watching Hy and Crit for a while. Both of them lacked any real style, but made up for it with stamina. She blanked the screens again and checked on the effectiveness of her announcements for miners to serve the empire. She was happy with what she found.

"There will be more than enough, even allowing for casualties." She muttered.

Experienced deep cold miners didn't apply for jobs, they just sent a message saying they were going to turn up. Too many in one place and rumours started, so she was giving various destinations as staging points. They needed at least a thousand miners to dig quickly and it looked like two thousand were answering the call to serve The Great Menderan Empire. Not totally out of patriotism of course, the empire paid well and paid in imperial credits, the hardest currency in the multiverse. She looked in briefly on Estrid and Luri, comforted by the frantic activity she found.

"Oh crap Mo!" She muttered.

She'd only looked at Medrona out of curiosity and what she saw wasn't encouraging. Rhian Dess being swallowed by the soft grey dust, bad ground the locals had named it. Not that Medrona had locals anymore, or much else in the way of life. Mo had his arms round Rhian's neck, while Kerr and Silky had hold of his legs.

"Wake up Rhian, wake up!" Kerr was shouting.

Medrona was a strange place and Chlo's options were a little limited. Sikush had emphasised the importance of Mo having no idea he was actually on a mission for the empire.

“We both know Mozim.” He’d told her. “If he thinks for one moment that he’s working for us, he’s quite likely to simply sulk for a thousand years or so. All to assert his independence of course.” Mo couldn’t know she was helping, was obviously rule one in any help she might give. Then Medrona had a nasty habit of interfering with technology of any kind. If she did try to send help, they might well arrive as a heap of scrambled body parts.

“Simplest is best.” She muttered.

Chlo looked inside the mind of Rhian Dess and mentally shouted at her. A volume in the girl’s head, which far exceeded any physical noise. Chlo carried on inflicting the wall of mental sound on Rhian, until she saw her eyes blink and realisation dawn on her. There was no use in trying to follow Mo, his team would soon enter the rifts. Chlo turned her attention to the task at hand, separating twenty fake pilgrims from the genuine ones and rendering them harmless.

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Rhian was trying to stop Mo from falling into the bad ground and failing. The others seemed terrified, rooted to the spot by paralysing fear. It was up to her and her alone, to drag Mo out of the ground, if she could.

“Mo ! Wake up!” She yelled.

The noise in her head began as a buzzing, which she assumed was another trick of the Medrona angels. It grew, taking over her mind, condemning all her other thoughts to be forgotten. A wordless yell, so loud that she felt her skull had to split open. Then the yell became four words, spoken in rapid repetition.

“Wake up you idiot!”

“Get out of.....My head!”

She was awake, really awake this time and the world looked very different to how she’d left it. She was in the bad ground, grey dust almost up to her shoulders. Mo had hold of her, while the others were pulling on his legs.

“She’s come out if.... I think.” He said.

Rhian raised her right hand and gripped his jacket collar, trying to pull herself out. All she succeeded in doing, was pulling Mo further into the soft dust.

“Just hold on, let them pull us out.” He said.

She understood and got a good hold on both sides of his jacket. Kerr wasn’t that strong, but Silky loved Mo and she had demon strength. Rhian felt her body being dragged up and out of the ground.

“Saw you running and shouting my name.” Said Mo. “I guessed you were under their influence. You’re lucky I’m immune to their dreams.”

“I thought it was you being swallowed up.”

“You’ll be fine now Rhian, don’t worry.”

Silky did the hard work, even helping her rub the dust off her clothes. There was one distinct advantage of a planet with almost no humidity, dirt didn’t stick. Rhian was left feeling like a fool and watching the sky for her attackers.

“They’ve gone.” Said Kerr. “Was that some kind of test.”

“No, they do what damage they can and leave.” Said Mo. “Personally, I think they have trouble existing in our reality and get tired.”

“We should continue.” Said Silky. “We don’t want to be on the road at night.”

She led, with Mo at the rear, watching for a second attack. It did seem as though one appearance was enough for the angels, they reached the great stone circle without any further attacks. Great

was accurate, each standing stone had to be over a hundred feet high and there were dozens of them.

“Wow, that is impressive.” Said Rhian.

“There is talk of giants.” Said Mo. “Though I think they were just compensating for something.” She had to laugh, they were about to enter the rifts and Mo was back to his old self. He walked towards one of the stones that looked no different to any of the others, while the three of them followed him.

“Timing matters here.” He said. “No huge rush, we’ll have about ten seconds to get through the portal, before it closes.”

“And if one of us is stuck here ?” Asked Kerr.

“Just make sure you don’t” Said Silky.

It wasn’t reassuring, but ten seconds was longer than most people think. Ten seconds was how long someone could live after their heart stopped, or the length of a really good orgasm. Ten seconds was going to be enough time, she was sure of it.

“Be ready to follow me.” Said Mo.

He marked out shapes on the stone, while muttering something under his breath. A portal opened in the side of the stone, she hadn’t expected that. Mo entered the portal, Kerr following him.

“You next.” Said Silky.

Rhian closed her eyes and opened them again to find herself in a different place. They were all there and despite hearing about the hot dry rifts, they were on a hillside covered in green bushes.

“It’s beautiful.” She said.

It was as though something had bitten the back of her throat. Rhian began coughing, uncontrollably. The only slightly comforting thing was not coughing alone, Kerr was at it too.

“There are compounds in the air you aren’t used to.” Said Mo. “Your bodies will soon get used to it, though you might have a sore throat for a few days.”

Rhian coughed and heard Silky sigh and mutter something about rift virgins.

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