

Ripples from the Past

Chapter 4 - Heretics

“Evolution has run amok on Mendera and we have some of the most dangerous fauna in the Multiverse.” – Imperial Cleric, Annotov

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The imperial attack wing looked lethal and impressive, as it orbited the huge blue gas giant planet. Two battle cruisers, each a quarter of a mile in length and covered in weapons of almost unimaginable lethality. Add twenty fully armed needle ships and it was easy to see why the attack wings had inflicted such devastation on enemies of the empire. Shock and awe was their trade and they did it very well indeed. Add a few imperial raptors into the mix and there was no fleet in the multiverse capable of defeating a single attack wing in battle. The empire had five attack wings constantly patrolling, ready for battle and another five kept in orbit around Mendera.

“Assuming the commander of the craft that tried to penetrate the Menderan defences wasn’t insane.” Said Sventa. “They must have been heading for one of the moons of MGC 9.”

It wasn’t her idea, Chlo had outlined the theory during Sventa’s briefing and it sounded sensible.

Sventa was merely repeating it to her command team and adding a few ideas of her own.

“The inner planet defence systems are impregnable, so the assumption is that there must be an enemy base on one of the larger moons.” She continued. “Who the enemy is, we’re here to find out. The crew of the Melak Sunrise were very brave, but most freighter crews wouldn’t be. We have to assume the enemy successfully used the same trick many times. They may have a large force assembled on one or more of MGC’s moons.”

The Chalné had given her one of the empire’s battle wings, on loan for as long as she needed it. A skeleton crew of empire warriors to take her where she wanted to go and a few of The Damned on call, in case she found anything really nasty. There had also been a large payment from the imperial coffers, for the services of the twelve hundred dark angels she’d brought with her. Her own special troops, her own elite guard.

“How many moons to investigate ?” Asked Haan.

“Malagena Contraba obviously has nine main moons, but we’ll need to look closely at another fifteen or so. If they’re spread out thin, the enemy could be on some quite small moons.” She answered.

They were all looking at her, not really understanding what she’d just said, even the empire’s own mercenary fighters.

“I’ve been coming here for a long time.” She said. “I even lived on Mendera for a period of time equivalent to many of your lifetimes. MGC 9 is short for Malagena Contraba and the nine indicates the number of main moons. Malagena Contraba means Blue Goddess by the way, in the original Menderan tongue.”

“A far better name than MGC.” Agreed Haan.

The empire warriors simply nodded. Like empires before them, the Menderans hired warriors from all over their empire, there were few if any Menderan born fighters in their ranks. She recognised a few of the different races around her, especially the fierce Algarians. Some were a mystery though, the empire was constantly expanding, new races blending in with the old.

“We’ll use surveillance bots.” She said. “Thousands of them to investigate every crevice of every moon big enough to hide an enemy. When one of them spots something or gets shot at, we’ll investigate.”

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Hol had often sat next to the flame with Kittara, though she hadn’t been there for many years. Two young clerics watched, as she passed her hand through the flame that had burned since the construction of his prison.

“Doesn’t that hurt ?” Said Seesha.

“Not if you’re considered worthy. Try it.”

“Go on Seesh !” Said Mix.

Seesha and Mix, sister and brother, born two years apart, Seesha seventeen and the oldest. Hol had known their family for a long time, right back to their original forebears who’d arrived on Mendera with The Chalne. Hol had also helped set up a new school for the clerics, within the temple itself. Seesha and Mix were as close to family as it was possible for a member of The Damned to have. She trusted them and intended to use them as her eyes and ears among the clerics.

“I’m scared Hol.” Said Seesha. “If it burns me, will I have to stop being a cleric ?”

“I’ve known you since you were born.” Said Hol. “Trust me, you won’t be burned.”

In truth few of the clerics visited the chamber of the flame and only a tiny number had ever dared test their personal worthiness, by running their hand slowly through the flame. It would have been easy to get all the hundreds of thousands of clerics to take the test, but obviously impossible. The clerics of the temple were beyond reproach. Even the merest idea of treachery was unthinkable, yet Sikush was thinking it.

“Then you next Mix.” Said Hol.

“Me ?!!”

“Oh yes, my two favourite clerics. Then I will have a treat for you.”

Bribes were morally iffy, but Hol had found they worked well with kids their age. She held Seesha’s left hand, as she extended her right towards the flame.

“No, stop.” Said Hol. “Sit down and get comfortable, opposite sides of the flame. That’s how Kittara and I used to sit for hours, sometimes days.”

The flame began just above the stone floor, which wasn’t a floor at all, but the huge stone door to the prison below. The flame reached up towards the ceiling and gave out no heat, though it looked hot. The outside of the flame was a metallic blue, with a yellow inner and a centre cone of white. Hol and Seesha sat either side of it, as Hol put her hand through the flame.

“Hold my hand and we’ll do it together.”

“I’m scared, really scared.”

“Trust me Seesha.”

She held the girl’s hand firmly, but not too hard. Sventa had once put her hand through the flame, a dark angel. Surely Seesha had to be far purer than her, more worthy. Sikush had worried her though, with stories about clerics in the past.

“One was totally consumed Hol, nothing left but ash and a belt buckle.”

No wonder they left the chamber and the flame well alone. Gradually Seesha’s hand moved toward the flame and then entered it.

“Oh, that feels so good.” Said Seesha.

“Kittara used to say it was pleasurable, though I’ve never felt it.”

She let go of her hand and watched as Seesha moved her hand up and down the flame, even through the white central cone. No sign of pain, instead an obvious feeling of pleasure.

"You next Mix, sit beside me." She said.

He just sat there shaking his head at her. Hol removed their treats from her pocket, two staggeringly expensive Arroya Fruit. The rare fruit were Sikush's favourite and he had barrels of them in his private stores, kept in stasis. That morning Hol had bought two in the market, for an eye watering number of imperial credits.

"Seesha can eat her treat." She said.

A round fruit that just fitted into Seesha's hand. Arroya Fruit had an unappetising looking grey skin, but underneath was a fruit that tasted wonderful. The best taste in the multiverse some claimed, though Hol thought well-cooked Farrag steak was slightly better. The kids were given Arroya Fruit at the main annual festival, but only one between about twenty. They knew how good it tasted.

"A whole one.... Each?" Asked Mix.

"Yes, just sit next to me and feel the flame."

He shuffled over and sat next to her, his knees up against his chin.

"You promise it won't hurt?"

"I promise."

Crap, he was a fifteen year old cleric who lived in a temple. How much opportunity had there been for him to be bad. Hol was still relieved though, when he felt the flame without screaming.

"Feels nice." He said.

Wonderful! They both found it pleasurable. She handed Mix his Arroya Fruit, watching as he quickly removed the thin grey peel.

"I want you both to come here for a few minutes every day." She said. "Make it your quiet place, somewhere you can be alone together. I have something important for you both to do."

All their attention was on eating the fruit she'd given them. There was a theory that Arroya Fruit contained tiny amounts of a drug that hit the pleasure centres of the brain. There were also theories that it might be addictive, though no one was likely to be rich enough, to buy enough of them to test that theory.

"I want you to be my eyes and ears." Said Hol. "Find out if anyone in the temple is doing anything.... Unpleasant."

She'd imagined them refusing, being angst ridden about spying on their friends and families. Instead Seesha was nodding at her without a care in the world.

"There are loud mouths." Said Mix.

"Heretics," added Seesha, "harmless and ignored by everyone. There are rumours of heretics who aren't harmless. We can find out about them, if you like?"

Desa Ubari, Chief Cleric of The Temple of the Flame, had assured everyone that not a single subversive had ever been found, during thousands of routine investigations. Now she'd found out there were potentially dangerous heretics and it had only taken two expensive gifts and being nice to two kids. Sikush was right, Desa Ubari was an incompetent leader.

"Do it carefully, don't get caught or hurt." She said. "There will be other rewards, maybe even trips outside of the temple walls."

That shocked them, going outside was something they never expected to do in their entire life.

There had been large numbers of suicides among the temple clerics, hundreds a year. Eventually someone had realised it was being so cut off from a world they knew existed beyond the walls of their temple. View screens were given out, terminals to talk to Chlo and gain access to all the news

about the empire. It was living outside vicariously, but the suicides had mostly stopped. Tragically a handful of clerics still took their own lives every year.

“No system is perfect Hol.” Sikush had once told her. “A few deaths have to be weighed up against the dangers of allowing those within the temple to ever leave. Their duties include reading some of the forbidden knowledge, they know the identity of the one they hold prisoner.”

Sikush was right of course, but she still hoped there might eventually be no clerics who decided their life was so bad, that they needed to end it.

“Isn’t that forbidden ?” Asked Mix.

“We’ll be executed !” Said Seesha.

“Not if you’re with me. I can get you different clothes, no one will know where you’re from. Think about places you’d like to go to. Wouldn’t you love to stand beside the ocean, throwing pebbles into the waves ?”

“Oh yes !” Said Seesha.

It was a silly question to ask, perhaps seeding ideas in their heads, dreams that could never become reality. She had to ask though.

“Are you both happy here ?”

“Oh yes, I want to be head cleric one day.” Said Seesha. “I love the temple, it’s my destiny and duty to serve the Holy City.”

“Me too.” Said Mix.

It was the lore and tradition they were brought up with, taught from being old enough to talk. Some might call it indoctrination, but most of the temple clerics seemed to live content and happy lives.

“It would have to be our secret.” Said Hol. “Would you like trips out ? Do you want to see places like the ocean ?”

“Oh yes !” They replied as one.

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Sventa looked at the last few images the surveillance bot had taken and saw nothing to explain why it had ceased transmitting information or obeying commands. There was a cave on a lump of rock barely large enough to be called a moon. Something in that cave had destroyed the bot, or of course it might be a simple systems failure.

“Send in another bot, an armed one this time.” She ordered.

The armed bots were tougher and faster than the harmless surveillance drones. Each one was armed with two powerful Ion cannons and two clever missiles.

“If the bot gets hit, the missiles self-launch to hit back.” Said Haan.

“Unless they’re destroyed too.” She replied.

Sventa wasn’t a great fan of technology, it had let her down far too often. She especially didn’t want to trust her survival to a space suit of any kind, though she could see the need arising. Dark angels were tough, but unlike The Damned, she needed to breathe air to survive.

“Armed bot approaching target.”

Sventa watched, trusting her own senses more than the hundreds of readings the bot was taking of its surroundings. A cave entrance just large enough for a small needle craft to enter. How deep was the cave though, that was the key thing. The bot used its bright front lights as it entered the cave, illuminating the wreckage of the first drone.

“The surveillance bot looks as though it was crushed.” Said Haan.

The screen showed twinkling reflections, as the bot’s lights illuminated the shiny crushed titanium shell of the first drone to enter the cave.

“Slower ! Get it to swing around to the right.” She ordered.

The bot was slow to answer the command, something seemed to be blocking it from turning. It was the tripod assembly from the dead surveillance bot, still holding its three high definition cameras.

“Up, get it over the wreckage.” Said Haan.

The operator still seemed to be having trouble, when there was movement at the far right of the screen. A fraction of a second of something large and dark, before the armed bot ceased transmitting.

“Damn ! Play back the last minute.” She said.

She watched it several times, learning nothing new. It might have been some kind of automatic protection device, or an armed enemy bot.

“I’m going down there.” She said. “I’ll take Itzel and Seren with me.”

Two females she trusted with her life, descendants of some of the original converted dark angels. Fitting a space suit required help, they walked together towards the suit room. Haan was with her all the way, desperate to get her attention.

“Take me with you,” he asked, “I can be useful and I’ve studied unstable moons.”

She wanted to tell him he wasn’t a warrior, even if he did outrank most of those on board. She wanted to tell him to stay where it was safe, but all that would deeply wound him. He had his father’s eyes, even some of his mannerisms.

“A moon is a moon.” She said. “Tell me why I need to worry about this one ?”

“It’s not solid rock, just an accumulation of space rubble that’s clumped together. One day the perturbation caused by the large moons, will probably shatter it completely.”

“Is that likely to happen soon ?”

“That’s the thing it might happen today, or a billion years from now.”

She had to smile at him. When it came to useful intelligence, Haan was second to none.

“You just earned a place on the team.” She said. “Tell the others everything about this unstable moon, while we get into our suits.”

The suit room was large enough for about eight people, as long as they weren’t dark angels with wings and tails. The suits were designed to accommodate tails, wings, even talons instead of fingers. It was hard work though, helping each other to fold away delicate wing membrane.

“The erratic gravity will cause problems.” Said Haan. “Some of the moon is nothing but light rocks, while other places are formed from iron meteorites. Gravity shifts from being about a tenth of normal, to almost nothing. All within ten paces.”

“Wonderful.” Said Seren. “Even walking in a straight line sounds a challenge.”

“Nausea will be an issue.” Said Haan. “Worse than any travel sickness. We’ll need to focus on getting to the cave, while trying to ignore the dizzy feeling from a constant change in gravity.”

“Can’t we just blow the cave up ?” Asked Itzel.

“No, we need to know what’s in there.” Said Sventa. “Search and destroy ! First we search, then we destroy. Never the other way round.”

Sventa checked Haan’s suit, before sealing it up and making sure his comms worked. When they were all ready, she led them onto a small military shuttle.

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Alyz watched Delmus getting his kit together, something that he normally did without thinking. Now though, everything seemed to be an effort and he was giving her odd looks.

“Come on Delmus.” She said. “We can live without anything you might have forgotten.”

She had her own backpack, enough clothing and essential to last for quite some time. Food and water were an optional extra if you were one of The Damned, but she still felt better after eating a decent meal. Delmus was still fussing, still hadn't closed his pack.

"What is it Delmus ? You'll have to tell me eventually, or we'll be sat in your room in the barracks until the next Feast of Nigon."

Nigon was gone of course, an old deity from the rifts, who'd boiled away into the wastes of eternity, as had many others. Delmus finally closed his pack, but still seemed reluctant to leave. Not that she knew their destination yet, everything seemed to be a huge secret.

"You'll need to turn off your link with Chlo." He said.

"What ?"

"And give me your word to never tell a living soul where I take you, or a dead soul for that matter."

Alyz sighed and sat on the only chair in the room, worn and rickety to the point of being almost useless. Not for the first time, she wondered why he lived in the barracks with the new recruits, rather than buying himself a proper home. She knew he had enough money to live in comfort, they all had.

"We both took an oath to serve the empire and The Chaln ." She said. "I won't promise you anything unless you can tell me it won't mean breaking my oath to Sikush."

"And why didn't you move out of this shit hole years ago ?!" She asked.

"This was her room....."

Of course, she didn't recognise it without Luri's dressing table and sofa covered in discarded clothes. Luri had her own home, but had loved the camaraderie of barracks life.

"You must still love her very much." She said.

"Cut off your link and promise, or I won't take you with me. I mean it !"

He meant it, she could tell. Orders or no orders he'd turn off his link and vanish. With an entire multiverse to hide in, even Chlo wouldn't be able to find him. Alyz disconnected herself from the constant chatter at the back of her mind.

"Done it, disconnected." She said. "And you have my promise. Just don't make me regret this Delmus. Where are we going ?"

"The Well of Souls first."

He vanished and for a fraction of a second she wondered if he'd run away. She moved her own reality to the ancient ruined temple at the far southern edge of Mendera City and there he was, stood on the grass beside the dimension gateway to almost anyway. Menderans called it The Well of Souls, yet it pre-dated the city and had been given other names by different peoples.

"Feel it ?" He asked. "Waiting to take us anywhere we wish to go."

"Stop being dramatic Delmus, where are we going ?"

"A random jump into the well, let luck take us where it wishes. Impossible for anyone to know where we go, our movements un-trackable."

"You're crazy Delmus, we could end up anywhere."

"That Alyz is the point of doing it. Once I'm happy no one could possibly be following us, I'll take you to meet Luri."

He held her hand and stepped toward the glowing heart of The Well of Souls.

"Ready ?" He asked.

"Ready."

They stepped forward, into the gateway that might be taking them to the 1st rift, or the capital of a hostile and alien civilisation, or an almost infinite number of other destinations.

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The shuttle didn't touch down on the small rocky moon; it carefully manoeuvred to within two feet of the surface.

"I'm getting crazy readings, the navigation systems are useless." Said the shuttle pilot. "It's too dangerous to land without being anchored to the surface. I can ask for tethering lines to be brought to us, if you wish?"

"No, we'll get off and you can move away." Replied Sventa. "Not too far though, in case we need picking up in a hurry."

"Yes my president."

It was only a minor nuisance, having to clamber out of a shuttle that wasn't quite on the ground. It helped that they hadn't brought any kit, just themselves and hand held blasters. Their suits had built in cameras, sensors and comms. They went through the usual checks, to make sure they could communicate with one another.

"Where is he going?" Asked Seren.

Their shuttle had risen up and away to quite a distance and still seemed to be accelerating.

"Shuttle, I said stay close." Said Sventa.

"Sorry, too many gravity anomalies, had to move further out. Will remain here until you call."

Their shuttle was now a large dot against the blackness of space, but at least it didn't seem to be moving any further away.

"This is dangerous." Said Haan. "You should have remained on the cruiser"

She ignored him and began to carefully walk towards the cave, which was further away than she'd hoped. Not that she blamed the pilot, unstable moons weren't in the training manual.

"About a hundred yards to the cave mouth." She said. "No rush and walk carefully."

Every planet in the empire had a slightly different gravitational pull, but like the difference in the length of the day, visitors quickly adapted. Most living creatures were used to gravity being unchanging though, not altering wildly with every few steps. Sventa's mind was picking up the impossibility of changing gravity from her muscles and it didn't like it.

"This is worse than I expected." She said.

"I might vomit." Said Haan.

"Don't." She replied. "Throwing up in a suit you might be wearing for hours is something to avoid."

Nausea was making her feel ill and clouding her judgement. Sventa had to hold onto a rocky outcrop for a moment to steady herself. Itzel stopped next to her, blaster up and ready to defend her president. In some ways it was nice but sometimes Sventa longed to be a solitary hunter, out on the rifts again.

"I'm alright now, let's continue."

They were all relieved to reach the round hole that led into the side of a crater. The edges of the cave mouth looked melted, probably by the heat of the collision that had formed the crater.

"Old, very old." Said Haan. "A large meteorite hit millions of years ago. The blast created the cave and several others."

Seren began to enter the cave, but Sventa held her back. She wasn't about to let someone else take the risk of being in the lead, even if she was the president.

"My idea to come here, so I lead." She said.

Her suit lights automatically brightened, as she slowly entered the cave. Not far away were the remains of the first surveillance bot. A little further into the cave, the armed drone lay on its side, smart missiles still in their hangers.

“Do you see anything ?” Asked Haan.

He was behind her and must have pulled rank to be next into the cave. Maybe there was a bit of warrior in him after all.

“There’s a dark area over to the right, doesn’t look natural.” She replied. “I’m going to fire a low energy shot at it and see what happens.”

“That might be a bad idea my president.” Said Seren.

“I know.”

The blaster was designed to be used by someone wearing a suit. An easy to use dial that she wound right down to low and then a large trigger with no guard. Easy to fire, but probably also easy to fire by accident. Sveta handled it carefully and fired one shot into the back of the cave.

“Crap !” She yelled. “It’s not the enemy, it’s a rockworm. A huge fucking rockworm !”

Sveta had been expecting trouble, so her reactions were fast. She’d just stepped back as the creature’s tail hit the wall of the cave where she’d been standing. They all backed away, as quickly as anyone can while wearing a space suit.

“Rockworms are small and docile.” Said Seren. “Never seen one over a foot long. That had to be a good seventy feet long and mean as hell.”

“It’s Mendera.” Said Sveta. “Everything goes crazy here, some of the strangest creatures in the multiverse.”

“Evolution allowed to go wild for billions of years.” Added Haan.

The creature was agitated now, moving about, its dark eyes staring at them. Larger than seventy feet, there looked to be a hundred feet of it curled up in the rear of the cave. Harmless if left alone, it wasn’t the enemy they were looking for.

“Do we kill it ?” Asked Seren.

“No, just mark the cave so that no more bots disturb it.” She replied. “The Chalné gets very upset if people start killing the Menderan wildlife.”

She’d intended to take the unpleasant walk back to where the shuttle had dropped them off. There was a flat area in front of the cave though, big enough for the shuttle to land.

“Call him Itzel, get him to come and pick us up here.” She ordered. “And tell him to land properly this time. Fed up with his nonsense !”

She was angry at wasting two bots and her time, to discover just a harmless rockworm, even if it was a gigantic specimen. As she looked for the returning shuttle, she saw the first flash of light. Almost on the moon’s horizon, where her fleet was in orbit around the gas giant planet. There were several more bright flashes, before she heard her fleet commander calling her.

“My president, we’re under attack.” He told her. “Hundreds of small craft came out of nowhere. Not firing on us, just aiming themselves at our defence screens.”

“What do these craft look like ?” She asked.

“Half the size of an imperial raptor and slower. They don’t seem to have any weapons, other than using themselves to batter our defences. They might well be drones with no crews at all.”

“An attack in the Menderan solar system.” Said Haan. “They must be insane. Chlo will send enough raptors to wipe them out.”

Chlo would, but everything took time and if they were just drones loaded with explosives, their enemy might not mind sacrificing them all. To gain what though ? She understood why, before asking the question.

“Are they attacking any other of our craft ?”

“No just us, with mindless fury. They just keep coming, no matter how many we destroy. We badly need.....”

No sound in the near vacuum of space, just the bright flash just above the moon’s horizon. They’d been trying to kill her of course, another attempt on her life. The imperial cruiser she’d chosen as her flagship had gone, she just hoped that at least some of the crew had escaped.

“They were trying to kill you.” Said Haan.

“Maybe both of us, you seem to have pissed them off a bit too.”

There would be shock of course, but her people were well disciplined. Sventa knew the second cruiser would finish off the enemy, with some help from Chlo and her raptors. It seemed a long time before anyone contacted her, but she knew it was only a few minutes. Chlo connecting with her instead of the commander of the surviving cruiser.

“They’re all destroyed Sventa and I plotted their origin.” Said Chlo. “Nethuns, third largest moon of MGC 9.”

“How many of my people died Chlo ?”

“The automatic jettisoning of the living quarters worked well and a few made it to the escape capsules. I’m still tracking various parts of the vessel, but I think two hundred and ten died, out of over seven hundred. It could have been a lot worse.”

“Yes it could have, thank you for helping.”

“They were trying to kill you of course.” Said Chlo. “Assumed you’d stay rather than simply using a portal to escape. They must know you very well and seriously want to kill you.”

“I know, do you have an exact location on Nethuns ?”

“Within half a mile. Probably an underground base in an existing cave system. Your fleet commander has been given the location details.”

Some people saw Chlo as cold and heartless. Sventa didn’t see her that way at all. To her Chlo was just being professional and highly efficient. Of course there were those who accused her of being more cold and aloof than Chlo. Her shuttle had landed; the airlock doors open at ground level. Once everyone was safely on board, she contacted the dark angel who’d inherited the role of fleet commander.

“I want the entire attack wing ready to move as soon as I’m back.” She said. “Calculate an orbit around Nethuns to keep us hidden from the enemy base.”

“Yes my president.”

Over two hundred of her elite dark angels killed, there had to be a pay back. Haan and the others seemed to sense her mood, leaving her alone with her thoughts. She offered a silent prayer to the eight great demon gods, that there were still living sentient beings at the enemy base. Someone had to feel pain, a lot of pain. The eight great gods were gone of course; she just hoped the darkness heard her prayer.

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Desa Ubari might have been a bad Chief Cleric for the Temple of the Flame, but she’d spent the last five thousand years working her way up the clerical greasy pole. Clerics lived long lives, often in excess of six thousand Menderan years. Plenty of time to learn the art of internal politics. Hol was finding that an apparent agreement to help her investigate a potential group of subversives, met a barrier of petty annoyances and bureaucracy. Nothing she could make official complaints about, but guaranteed to slow her down to a crawl.

“I’m not living here !” Yelled Hol. “I want something at ground level, first basement if I absolutely have to.”

"We're always short of living space. The Chief Cleric assumed you'd continue to live away from the temple itself."

He was elderly and walked with a limp. Desa had probably given her the elderly male cleric as a guide, with the purpose of being yet another annoyance. He limped, which had to be an affectation, as Chlo could cure any illness likely to cause a limp. He'd also refused to let her carry him through reality. It had taken them most of the afternoon to walk to the room allotted to her.

"I'm not having my atoms scrambled, we'll walk."

"It doesn't work like that, it's quite safe."

Two and a half miles below the surface, at the end of a dusty gallery full of books etched onto metal pages. None of them likely to have been looked at for billions year, the information they held still considered to be priceless. Hol had once helped Kittara in her delving for information and knew some of the books were useless, while others really did contain forbidden secrets. The secret of immortality, on a stone shelf next to recipes for cooking Farrag beasts. Her room looked like a converted cupboard and it had no running water, hot or cold.

"How about showers and other facilities?" She asked.

"There are communal facilities at the end of gallery twelve sixty five."

"No if Desa thinks she'll get rid of me by....."

She stopped ranting at Piaff, it wasn't his fault. He was just an elderly cleric who'd been ordered to be her guide. A very slow guide, but he was named after and a direct descendant of Piaff Ojetin, he deserved her respect. Ojetin had been one of the greats, a truly remarkable mind.

"Where do you live?" She asked.

"I am lucky enough to have rooms on the main cloisters."

"Are they nice?"

"Oh yes, very light and airy, even in the hottest summers."

The damned weren't really bothered by heat, but she had noticed that the room she'd been given was very hot. It had been cleaned, yet there were still traces of brown dust everywhere.

"Show me your rooms."

"If you wish Hol Azreemy, if you wish."

He began to limp back towards the stairs that would eventually bring them to the surface, probably in another five hours or so. Hol made a mental note to mention his limp to Chlo. There were refusers, religious zealots who wanted their health left to whatever deity they worshipped. If he was a refuser that was none of her business, but if he was putting it on? No matter how good his lineage might be, she'd be having serious words with Piaff.

"No, hold on tight." She said.

"Actually I object to being....."

"Close your eyes or you might be nauseous."

Hol was angry, descendant of Ojetin or not, she was fed up with being messed around. No more! Hol was going to treat the clerics the way The Damned treated most empire worlds. Firmly but fairly, but mostly with an iron fist. She moved their reality to the main cloisters, which went right round the open square at the centre of the temple.

"Which are your rooms?" She asked.

He pointed to a door that had been left open, which she took as an invitation to walk inside. Three rooms, all nicely decorated and tastefully furnished. The small puddle in the bottom of the bath, told her water wasn't a problem in the cloisters rooms.

"I'm not interest in clerics with children, or with elderly relatives to care for." She said. "You're going to tell me which set of rooms is occupied by the youngest able bodied cleric?"

"I couldn't possibly..... If you want that information you'll need..."

"To speak to Desa, who'll take a year to find the information, if I'm lucky. Tell me or I'll take your rooms. I mean it ! Point through the window if you like, it'll be our secret."

He looked at her and obviously decided she wasn't joking. A finger pointed right across the square to the cloisters in the distance.

"Red door or yellow?" She asked.

"Yellow. Please never tell her I told you."

"I won't Piaff, you have my word."

A woman, damn. Gender mattered everywhere and those who claimed it didn't were fools or liars. Evicting a man out of his home would have been much easier. Still, she was angry and desperate enough to evict anyone with a working bath and toilet facilities. She opened the yellow door and entered without waiting to be asked.

"I'm Hol Azreemy, the new Head of Security. You'll need to move rooms."

"I don't understand..."

"Pack now and leave the furniture, I'll need it."

The woman looked little older than her, probably one of Desa's inner circle. There had to be some reason for her to be allocated one of the few outdoor sets of rooms in the temple. She was scared, pushing her clothes into a bag. Hol felt a need to soften the blow, though she was still going to take the rooms.

"I'll compensate you." She said. "Enough imperial credits to make yourself comfortable somewhere else."

She was bathed and settling in when Piaff arrived an hour later.

"You can eat with me." She said. "Then we'll go through a list of people I wish to interview. Mainly those with family members who've ended their own lives."

"Every suicide is a tragedy."

"I agree Piaff and it might cause ill feelings towards the temple. No absentees, no excuses. When I ask to see someone, they turn up."

"Of course Hol, of course."

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