

Mendera Temple

Chapter 13 – Freedom Fighters

“Damn fool military,” said the pilot, “tell them we have five thousand passengers and it would be appreciated if they’d keep their distance.”

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The old one had been playing with his new fleet for some time, the needle craft he was used to, but the raptors really excited him. He’d attacked barren mountains on lifeless moons, strafed whole continents of simple plant life. Now though Chlo had given him a target, one that would require a certain amount of skill and co-ordination.

“Any particular instructions ?” He asked.

His entire fleet was still cloaked, effectively invisible to anyone he didn’t want to see them. The huge starship was passing directly in front of his fleet at a very sedate pace, but that gave the five thousand paying passengers a good view of the cascading nebula.

“Just destroy it.” Said Chlo.

The cascading nebular looked superb, the pilot of the passenger vessel had turned at just the right angle to catch all the colours to perfection. True the majority of the passengers would be seeing the nebular on internal screens, but everyone said that ‘being there’ made it better in some way. The wealthy few had access to two very exclusive viewing domes, where they could watch the nebular live, through several inches of super hardened, optically perfect glass.

“We should have taken the cruise years ago.”

Far away from the wealthy in their domes the woman was dressed in a very chic, but affordable outfit that clung enough to turn heads, but allowed her to move freely. Her children too were dressed in the current fashion, but mass produced and they were watching a screen as though it was a genuine window.

“Do you remember being their age ?” Asked her partner.

“You mean believing the screens were windows ? Let them have a few more years to be kids, then we’ll tell them the awful truth.”

They both laughed, it had been a good holiday and her mother had helped them with the cost of the trip. They had badly needed to get away from it all for a while. The vessel was new and huge, the owners had wanted to fill every room, so prices had been reduced, even so the family would be in debt for a while to pay for the holiday. In the control room the usual tranquillity was broken by an alarm as the central computer noticed a small fleet of vessels appear quite close by, none of them carrying any auto responders.

“Damn fool military,” said the pilot, “tell them we have five thousand passengers and it would be appreciated if they’d keep their distance.”

The old one ignored the message, instead he instructed four raptors to attack the front of the starship. Imperial raptors could level a city in a few passes, in space they could open up military armour plated craft like can openers. The passenger craft had no armour, or shields and there didn’t need to be a second pass from the raptors. The craft was new and well designed, the hull integrity coped with the fires and the depressurisation very well.

“She’s going Chlo.” He said.

Over fifty percent of the craft was now open to the vacuum of space and the massive frame could no longer cope with the forces trying to tear it apart. Dots started appearing around the craft, grouped

together in places, the bodies of the people on board who'd been dragged into space by the escaping atmosphere of the vessel. There were no emergency shuttles launched, there hadn't been time, but the old one picked up several automatic emergency signalling drones. There had been no orders about them, so he allowed them to carry on sending out their streams of data.

"No life detected, run time eight minutes." Said Chlo.

The vast wreck vanished, as did the hundreds of bodies, the automatic drones and all signs the craft had ever been there. All that remained was the beautiful colours of the cascading nebular. The old one received pages of assessment from Chlo. Most of it good. His use of resources was put at ninety percent and kill rate at ninety five percent.

"Do they still use craft like that in this galaxy?" He asked.

"No," Chlo answered, "that was an exact copy of a tourist vessel and its passengers that visited the nebular several million years ago. The people who built it are long gone and their planet is now lifeless."

In front of the old one a bulk transport had appeared, the sort used to carry the entire grain harvest of a planet across a galaxy. Larger than the pleasure starship and much heavier the craft turned sideways onto him, almost taunting his deadly fleet.

"Time matters now," said Chlo, "I want it destroyed and burning in under five minutes, then we'll try for three minutes. After a few days I'll start to create multiple targets for you to attack."

"Will any of them fire back?" He asked.

The old one didn't keep the needle craft back this time, he used them all, to almost surgically remove every major strength point on the bulk carrier.

"Once you can attack a passenger craft with that ferocity I'll give you targets that fire back." Said Chlo.

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"Oooo," said Peli, "I didn't realise Mendera had markets like this."

Mo had legitimate business interests on Mendera, so he'd taken Peli with him while he looked at sights for another emporium. She'd already bought a few items to give his home on North Nerrabar a look that most would recognise as a feminine touch, now she was eyeing the market stalls with delight.

"It may look a bit rustic," said Mo, "but you can buy goods from every empire world here and from non-empire worlds if you know where to look."

He followed her, allowing her to wander and explore, her eyes finding yet another object that made her almost leap for joy. Mo knew the buying process for Peli was going to be a long and involved procedure, involving a lot of browsing. But as he had somewhere else to visit, the market would keep her occupied for hours.

"Can we get a pet?" She asked.

She used the 'we' word, it made him happy. Mo looked at the tiny creature she was petting and knew it would grow into a large but friendly adult.

"Of course," said Mo, "but ask Chlo before you fall in love with anything, some of the creatures here can be a problem once they mature."

She looked blankly at him, then remembered that Chlo is just a call away inside the city walls and she started to have a conversation with her. To passers-by it looked like she was talking to herself, but in the market they were used to people checking purchases with Chlo.

"He'll grow bigger than us, but have a friendly temperament." Said Peli.

She thrust the tiny creature at Mo, to him it looked too young to be away from its mother.

“For your good lady, just five imperial.” Said the stall holder.

The creature would grow into a monster, a great big slobbery monster that was always pleased to see them and always ready to play.

“We’ll take it.” Said Mo.

Peli gave the bundle of fur back to the stall holder to be put in a carrier and then she began haggling about food and toys for her purchase. She’d gone back into professional realtor mode and Mo enjoyed watching her get a good supply of food at a bargain price. He’d already thought about asking Peli to work for him, but that was a conversation for another day.

“I need to be somewhere for about half an hour,” he said, “will you be alright shopping on your own ? Chlo can arrange to have your purchases paid for and delivered.”

“Just be back in time for lunch.”

She gave him a kiss and started looking at another stall, one selling rugs from the outer worlds. In just a morning Peli had become an inhabitant of Mendera, completely relaxed and just another local browsing the market. It was what people from Ixir did, it was why you found them all over the empire, usually running something slightly illegal. Mo walked away from the crowds and asked Chlo to join him.

“Is she ready for visitors ?” He asked

“Miram is with her, but I know she wants to see you.”

At the back of the council building, down a rarely used set of stairs Mendera had several floors of advanced medical care, enough to treat several thousand patients. Chlo kept it clean and up to date, in case a contagion arrived from an outer world, or a pathogen ran amok in the holy city. It was there for anything Chlo couldn’t treat as part of her overnight scan and cure of every citizen of Mendera. Every citizen, apart of course from the few who chose to live reclusive lives far away from the relative bustle of Mendera City. There were currently five citizens of the empire being treated in the facility, four of them were pilgrims with diseases picked up by Chlo as part of her routine screening of arrivals. The other, hidden away in a section of the facility reserved for special cases, was Mouse. Chlo took Mo there and left him in an area of semi darkness, just a few yards from Mouse.

“Is there anything else you need ?” Asked Miram.

Mouse was lying on what looked like an ordinary bed, but Mo knew it monitored and cared for her, gently healing and re-growing body tissue as needed. Mo had been a patient in the facility far too often when he’d carried out missions for the empire, he knew the function of the technology very well indeed.

“Some of my own clothes for when I leave.” Replied Mouse.

Miram was holding the girls hand and there was another woman there who Mo didn’t recognise. He hung back in the shadows, giving them privacy, but Mouse had spotted him.

“Mo, I was hoping you’d come to see me.”

He went to her, she held his hand and didn’t seem to want to let go.

“We were going anyway,” said Miram, “the Ixir news is nothing but slum runners now, you picked the right target.”

The other woman kissed Mouse.

“See me before you go away again Andrea.” She said.

“I will mum.” Replied Mouse.

The women were met by Chlo who took them away, leaving Mo grinning at the girl in the bed.

“Andrea indeed ?” He said.

"I know fucking parents huh ? Oh and in case you were wondering why she was here. She founded the Sisters of Ixir with Miram."

She looked alright, the colour had come back to her face and she was now holding his hand in both of hers. The new one had a slight pallor about it, but a few days out in the sunlight would cure that.

"Are you here for much longer ?"

"Chlo is still building muscle, but I should be home in two days' time. Chlo keeps moaning about my blood results, I think she's keeping me here to build me up a bit."

They both laughed, but Mo knew the nutrition on Ixir was pretty poor and Mouse had hardly been huge before being injured.

"Do you get plenty of company ?" He asked.

"Yes, Chlo always seems to be here and Sikush came and we had dinner together last night."

Mo was more than a little surprised.

"He said he was very pleased," she continued, "how the slum runners were the talk of the news channels and how much he valued my contribution."

Her eyes had the glow he'd seen before, the look of a genuine fanatic. Miram had her own reasons for joining slum runners, her own goals. Mo had a few ideas what they might be, but he doubted that Mouse would care if Miram declared herself dictator of Ixir.

"The slum runners will continue," he said, "but the targets will be smaller now, there should be smaller numbers of casualties."

"But Miram said....."

She stopped, looking like a child who'd blurted out something that was supposed to be a secret. The slum runners had achieved a huge success. The various factions on Ixir now had either a common enemy or a common ally, depending on their point of view. There would be no internal war now, no massive loss of life. The population would need to be moved before the next great ice age, but Chlo had told him the prognosis for the people of Ixir was good. All the slum runners needed to do now was carry on an efficient but limited campaign, become a long term group of freedom fighters. Mo didn't care what Miram wanted, if it came to it he'd find a way to deal with Miram.

"Just get well Mouse." He said.

He kissed her on the lips and started to leave, but she hung onto his arm.

"You look upset," she said, "we did well, didn't we ?"

He knew it was no good asking her to sit out the next mission, she'd probably take it as a negative comment on her abilities. Quinn would organise the duty rota and he knew Mouse would be the first name up for every assignment, big or small. Her chances of surviving to see her next birthday were likely to be slim, but her mother would no doubt be proud of her.

"You did well Mouse, very well, everyone did well."

Her face beamed up at him as he turned to leave. He forced a grin back, but wondered if he'd ever see her again.

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"I told you bringing the Farrag was a good idea." Said Kittara.

Sventa had complained that the portal created by Kittara had burned her, but there had been no marks on her skin. Charadask had received the books with genuine gratitude and he'd been especially pleased with the Farrag, once Kittara had explained its presence in the nest.

"It's yours," she'd said, "I thought you might be in need of fresh meat."

The sorcerer had clattered his feet on the ground, but Kittara had no idea if that meant he was pleased or annoyed.

“Thank you,” he’d said, “most thoughtful. I have become tired of a diet mainly consisting of demon flesh.”

The sorcerer had given them a brief tour and shown them into a room that was comfortable, but like everywhere else in the nest, there was no natural light. The lighting was bright and clear, but there was still the feel of being somewhere deep underground.

“I have a major task to finish,” said Charadask, “make yourselves comfortable, you may go where you please. I will have time to give you my report for The Chalne tomorrow.”

They’d wandered around, relying on Sventa’s abilities to take them back to their room when they wanted to sleep. The nest was now beautiful, the amount of work Charadask must have put into the underground complex was incredible. But there was no one there but them, and the occasional half eaten demon. The sorcerer didn’t seem to worry about the invasions of his home; he seemed to view it as a regular delivery of food. Eventually they’d retired for the night and woken up to find food and drink in the room, food that they could eat.

“He has no servants that I can feel,” said Sventa, “he must have prepared this himself.”

They both drank some of the excellent wine, but Sventa left the fruit and berries for Kittara. She only ate that kind of food if she was desperate and she’d recently fed very well.

“You know what this room needs ?” Said Sventa, “Doors. There are two entrances that anyone could come in by, even a wounded demon.”

Kittara hadn’t been worried by the lack of doors and it hadn’t seemed as though Sventa had felt inhibited by the lack of privacy the night before.

“I don’t think Charadask would be interested in spying on us.” Said Kittara.

“You might be surprised.” Said Sventa.

The dark angel began to tap her talon on the side of her head.

“Outside you see the creature created by chaos,” Sventa continued, “but here, inside, he’s still a man.”

Part of the reason Kittara liked travelling with Sventa was her different slant on the world, she seemed to see everything from an alternative perspective. Kittara ate the fruit, it was excellent, she wondered where Charadask obtained his supplies.

“Do you think he could be cured,” asked Kittara, “turned back to how he was before being touched by chaos ?”

Sventa turned her head slightly on one side, it was a sign she’d something profound to say, or at least something she considered to be profound.

“I was created out of a damaged Genova and a few talismans, so anything is possible, but I don’t think Charadask considers himself in need of a cure. He is now in the perfect form for what he intends to do.”

“Damaged ? You mentioned being damaged.”

Sventa drank some more of the wine and began tidying her clothing, ready for their meeting with Charadask.

“Oh yes, I was a complete mess. I was, at least for a while, completely insane.”

“What makes you think that ?”

Sventa clasped her talons together and flapped her wings.

“Because from what I remember, my biggest dream then was to be turned into a human.”

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“By the time the Dracc attack comes,” said Nurigen, “none of the tech weapons will work.”

Luri knew it was true. It wasn't just the high ultra violet; there was something about the rifts that killed technology. In Annill almost everything worked by pulleys and chains, electrical generators lasted a few years at best. Some who turned up in Annill arrived with blasters and Ion grenades, but they all ended up with low tech weapons. Swords, bows and axes were the most common weapons in the army of Annill and they were very proficient in their use.

"Will you be able to continue producing weapons here?" Asked Luri.

Nurigen had taken over a complete floor of the Alcázar as his workshop and he'd employed a dozen of the brightest local artisans as his helpers. The workshop was a hive of activity, but it was much lighter and airier than his basement on Mendera. There were dozens of part finished swords in some areas of the workshop and breast plates in others, it all looked very low tech, until you noticed the fusion furnace in one corner.

"My tech isn't showing signs of rift rot yet," he said, "but it will do in a decade or so. Alyz knows the kinds of tech I need and the metals. I'm hoping to arrange for Sventa or Estrid to deliver the parts to me, or perhaps some kind of permanent gateway could be constructed?"

A permanent gateway to Mendera would have been nice, but Luri didn't think that would ever happen. She knew Kittara could tear holes in reality and then there was the rift manipulator that was currently with Delmus. Yes, a visit from Delmus with a few supplies would be very useful and of course he might be able to stay for a few nights. Luri found herself day dreaming and Nurigen was waiting for a reply.

"How much metal will need to be brought," she asked, "are we talking about tons of it?"

"No, the metal they mine here is good quality, I just need certain imperial alloys in quite small amounts, Chlo can produce it. Then there will be parts for my equipment."

It sounded like something they could manage every few years, she might even ask Sikush to open a gateway once in a while.

"I can't see there being a problem obtaining what you need. Is there anything else?"

"No. I have a few ideas for some siege defenses for Annill, but most of those will be very low tech."

Luri looked along the shelves and noticed a neck guard, the kind Kittara wore for fights in the practice ring. Normally shiny trinkets didn't appeal to her, but the metal was the same hue as her sword.

"I didn't make that here," said Nurigen, "that came from Mendera. Would you like it?"

"Yes, it's perfect, but are you sure, it looks very special?"

Nurigen put the guard around her neck and adjusted the clasp so that it fitted perfectly.

"Consider it a thank you for remaining in Annill to lead the army." He said.

"That is only temporary."

Nurigen put his hands on her shoulders.

"Luri, we all know Sikush means things when he says them, but can you think of anyone better to command the army? I think you'll be here for quite some time."

Luri left him, walking out of the Alcázar and onto the hill overlooking the city. Annill wasn't without beauty, but Luri had become used to being part of the imperial court. She remembered an eager Sikush, showing her the flame that always burned in the temple, telling of his plans for a new kind of warrior. One day Annill would be just another memory, but until then she would do her duty. She decided to inspect the entire outer wall of the city, that would take her all day. Then in the evening she would create a strategy to keep herself sane and that included bringing Delmus to Annill.

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"I was hoping to meet you. We're already preparing your living quarters beyond gateway and Neosto talks about you in such revered terms that we're all a little in awe of you."

Kittara quite liked the gentle perfume Silky was filling the room with; she recognised it as the same kind of pheromone trick that Sventa used to obtain just about any mate she desired. Kittara was fairly immune to the sexual arousal intended, but she did find Silky very attractive. Sventa just flared her nostrils and glared at the chaos invoker, obviously viewing her as a rival predator who had to be tolerated.

"Your tricks are wasted on me," said Kittara, "but Charadask may enjoy them."

Charadask was clattering his feet on the floor, which seemed to indicate every extreme emotion from hatred to sexual tension.

"Do you think I want a chaos creature in my home ? I have to put up with her to gain some peace to finish my trap."

Silky seemed impervious to insults and lounged further back in her chair, her split skirt opening enough to show a few bruises at the top of her thigh. Kittara had heard rumours from Sikush that Neosto could be a little rough with his lovers.

"A garrison of The Damned here would cause gossip across the rifts," said Silky, "but an army of demons building an outpost to monitor the area will hardly be noticed."

"It depends on where the army goes from here !" Said Kittara.

She knew there was a need for a certain amount of co-operation with the demon world, both sides had a lot to lose if things went wrong, but it didn't mean that she trusted Silky.

"I don't make the plans," said Silky, "like you I just get my orders and carry them out. Neosto has said the army will never move off this rift and Sikush has his word on that."

"As long as they stop the attacks on the nest, so I can work in peace," said Charadask, "I don't care who builds an outpost outside."

Kittara settled in a chair and knew she'd have to trust Silky and the demon army, Sikush wouldn't have agreed to it if he wasn't sure Neosto would honour his side of the bargain. They'd already seen the web and it was finished and charged. How Charadask had achieved so much all on his own was astonishing, all that was left was calibration and for that he needed peace and tranquillity.

"When can the first contingent be here ?" Asked Kittara.

"First will come the engineers and surveyors," said Silky, "they'll arrive in three months or so. They'll have enough guards with them to discourage any casual attacks on the nest, the main army will arrive a year or so later."

"That will please Sikush, it's quicker than he expected." Said Kittara.

Silky moved closer to Sventa, smiling at the dark angel. She felt like warning Silky that Sventa sometimes didn't feel inclined to accept orders as to who was and wasn't a valid enemy. But Kittara decided to let Silky find that out for herself.

"When you come to see Neosto, will you be bringing the dark angel ?" Asked Silky.

Sventa decided to answer for herself.

"I will be staying in Mendera to be near Sikush."

"Probably for the best. We have dark angels beyond gateway, but they're probably stronger than you. They're not tainted by being part Genova."

Sventa moved so fast Kittara couldn't have stopped her, even if she's wanted to. The dark angel had Silky on the floor, her talon to her throat and the barb on her tail an inch away from the chaos creature's eyes.

"If you'd seen her in battle," said Kittara, "you probably wouldn't have made that remark."

Charadask merely watched and waited without saying a word. Silky turned her head slightly so that she could see Kittara.

“Neosto wouldn’t be pleased if I was harmed.”

Sventa carried on holding Silky while making a very sinister low growling sound.

“I don’t think Neosto would jeopardise the plan,” said Kittara, “over the loss of a chaos invoker. Even one who handles pain well in the bedroom. If you want to be set free, apologise to Sventa.”

Probably an automatic device, but Silky was now putting out a huge amount of her pheromone, filling the room with her perfume. It seemed to have no effect on Sventa, but Kittara was beginning to look at the curve of the creatures back with a new interest. Silky looked Sventa straight in the eye.

“You’ve made your point, you’re as dangerous as any dark angel. Now either kill me or let me go.”

For a few seconds nothing happened, but then Sventa moved away, but she never took her eyes off Silky.

“Thank you,” said Silky, “I must return to Neosto. I hope we meet again Kittara, before you come to spend some time with us.”

The purple glow of a portal opened behind Silky and she was gone.

“I keep telling her not to open portals in here,” said Charadask, “the energy disrupts my calibrations.”

The sweet alluring smell of Silky still filled the room, it had awakened needs in Kittara and there was no immediate need to rush back to Mendera. She moved closer to the dark angel and stroked her cheek.

“We’ll stay tonight and return to Mendera in the morning.” Said Kittara.

“Just make sure you open any rift gates outside of the nest.” Said Charadask.

After a clattering of his feet on the ground the sorcerer was gone, back to the web and his calibrations.

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Delmus ran his hand over her bare back and thought life could still be full of surprises. Alyz had perfect skin, but just above her right thigh was a scar about six inches long. They all had them, all the beautiful, perpetually young members of the guard. Or rather most had them; Delmus had always allowed Chlo to fully heal all of his wounds.

“What are you doing ?” Said Alyz.

Her voice was still sleepy, her back moved a fraction under his touch. Ask any of The Damned why they left the odd scar untreated and you’d probably be told, ‘it’s a reminder to be quicker next time.’ There were a few variations on the idea, but Delmus suspected it was a way of giving themselves a little individuality among so many physically perfect beings.

“Stop moving,” he said, “I’m busy fondling you. Why do you keep this scar ?”

He could have asked why she’d slept with him, all he’d gone to see her about was using the rift manipulator to take her to Annil. Sikush was worried Nurigen might be missing his daughter, so Delmus had been assigned to take her, it was a quite straightforward mission. The extra benefits had surprised Delmus, Alyz hadn’t invited him into her bed for..... well quite some time.

“The scar is your fault.” She said.

“My fault ! How is it my fault ?”

He moved his hand off her back and onto her shoulder, gently pulling her around so that he could kiss her. Her face, highlighted by her long blonde hair still took his breathe away. Arcadia had produced some of the best members of the guard. It was a pity that now they’d locked themselves

away behind some kind of planetary sized cloaking device. Sikush had once told him they'd all gone back to nature, become hunter gatherers in the woods.

"It was your daft idea to get us off the rifts before I was converted," said Alyz, "I let Chlo heal most of the scars, but this one reminds me that I was once an Arcadian, that I wasn't always one of The Damned."

Kittara had a visible scar on her cheek, but he'd noticed most left a scar in a private area, a bit like personal tattoos that only a few intimate friends ever see. He ran his hand through her hair and kissed her, while she edged towards the edge of the bed.

"Tempting as it is to stay in bed," she said, "Sikush wants me in Annill today and then I think Luri will claim your attentions."

She was grinning at him, there was never any real jealousy among the guard. Yes they had favourites, but even the most devoted pairings appreciated a little variety. Delmus joined her in the shower and was quite pleased that Alyz's resolve didn't prevent a quickie against the shower wall. They used Chlo to dress and in a few minutes they were in full uniform and ready to go.

"The manipulator can be a little risky," he said, "we should move outside the city."

Alyz hung onto him as he moved their reality to a dry hot part of the desert to the west of Mendera City. A sandstorm looked to be moving towards the city, but that just made it a normal day on Mendera. He took the small gold metal box from his jacket.

"What do you mean by risky?" Asked Alyz.

Delmus realised not everyone in the guard had the level of experience he and Luri had built up with demon tech.

"We should be alright, but ephemerals can be killed by the device, even at a distance."

Alyz was looking confused and eyeing the box with interest.

"Can't Chlo fix that," she asked, "after all she built the thing?"

"This is demon tech Alyz, from a previous switch. The demons no longer have the capability to build this kind of thing and Chlo doesn't understand how it works."

Alyz held out her hand.

"May I see it?"

He handed the device to her, aware that a raging sand storm was only a few miles away and heading for them, huge, gritty and very unpleasant. Alyz looked over the device, even putting it to her ear, as though it might talk to her in some way.

"I used one of these once," Said Alyz, "I assumed it was our tech the demons had stolen. Has my father examined this?"

Delmus was too polite to tell her that Nurigen hadn't even been able to open the outer case of the device.

"I believe he has been given the device in the past."

The wind was building and although they wouldn't be hurt by the approaching storm, Delmus didn't fancy spending his time in Annill with sand coming out of every orifice. He took the device back from Alyz and created a portal in front of them, a spinning area of purple and black, just large enough for them both to enter. He held onto her hand and pulled Alyz through after him.

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"It's dreadful sir, these things are everywhere. I'll soon have it cleaned off."

Albas watched as the maintenance technician used solvent to clean the slum runners tag off the car park wall. The tags were appearing everywhere, the kids carrying on with the job the gangs had started. Albas had no idea who'd put the graffiti on the wall, but he could hardly leave it in place.

“The kids are doing it,” said Albas, “they painted it on the windows of the baby clothes shop.”

The cleaning stopped as the middle aged maintenance guy looked at him.

“Kids, you’d think they’d be ashamed of these slum runners after all the deaths.”

“I blame the parents.” Said Albas.

“I’d lock them all up, their parents too.”

Albas left him soaking the wall in solvent, knowing the offending graffiti would be gone in an hour.

Then he went to the lift, the one that took him to the slum runner’s base. The base where he was about to authorise the next ten acts of destruction by the slum runners. The base was now quite large and had used up most of the imperial stores on level 34. As Albas entered the main briefing room, Quinn was already arguing with Miram.

“Go too far and we’ll lose support, even in the slums.” Said Quinn.

Albas sat in his usual place, they were all there, all the original slum runner except Belso, who had sent his deputy. Normally Mo would have chaired the meeting, but as he was required on Mendera, Albas was standing in for him.

“Why was I denied weapons from the store Albas ?”

Miram spat the question at Albas and then sat glaring at him, demanding a reply.

“By weapons Miram, I take it you mean an explosive device that can level a small town ?”

She was obviously very agitated and Albas just hoped she wasn’t silly enough to draw her weapon. He’d never imagined the group would hold together in the long term, but civil war after the first mission wasn’t part of the plan.

“And why shouldn’t I use one of the weapons ?” Asked Miram. “After all we’re all equal here, they’re no more your weapons than mine.”

“All missions are to be agreed by a vote,” said Quinn, “that is why we’re meeting today.”

“Let’s vote on it then,” said Miram, “who is in favour of destroying the Moglas transport hub ?”

The hub was where every shuttle in or out of the city left from or arrived at. As its name suggested, every piece of equipment, food, passengers, everything. It all went through the Moglas hub, including over a million commuters every day. Albas wasn’t surprised that Miram’s hand was the only one in the air.

“They’re ordinary people Miram.” Said Axl.

“So were the people of Tonokae !”

Albas could have told her that was different, but he could see the wild glare of the fanatic in Miram’s eyes. Eventually they might have to remove Miram, but for now he just needed to control her, but without losing her resources.

“We lost three good people at Tonokae,” said Albas, “we can’t sustain those kind of losses.”

“The food for millions goes through Moglas hub.” Said Quinn.

“So we’re just going to sit on our backsides ?” Asked Miram.

Albas deliberately reached for a drink and offered drinks and nibbles to everyone else. He needed them settled and thinking as a team.

“I have ten targets,” he said, “all military or militia. If we make people hungry or contaminate their water we’ll lose support. If we attack the military there will be more slum runner’s tags around Ixir than there are now.”

“Some bastard put one on my vehicle.” Said Axl.

They were now laughing, even Miram was smiling and denying that the Sisters of Ixir had vandalised his very expensive personal transport.

“There is a man cleaning one off a wall here,” said Albas, “we need to keep the people on our side, so we strike the right targets and then vanish. That way we can minimise casualties too.”

“Is the presidential compound still on the list ?” Asked Quinn.

Albas had them now, he nodded at Chlo and a list appeared in front of all of them and the first item on the list was a limited attack on the president of Ixir.

“There is no attempt at assassination,” said Albas, “we’ll set up four automatic launchers in the scrub a mile away from the compound and be long gone by the time they go off. Chlo estimates a team of six will be required, with no casualties on our side.”

“You’re really saying Ixir’s best troops, the ones that protect the president won’t spot our guys setting this up ?” Asked Miram.

“No,” said Chlo, “even after Tonokae they haven’t changed their routines, they still consider such an attack to be unthinkable.”

“The president won’t be in any real danger,” added Albas, “but his compound will be in a bit of a mess afterwards. Can we vote on this ?”

Every hand was raised and the date set for two days’ time. Albas was about to move onto item two on the list, but Axl was trying to get his attention.

“We’re going to set up ten live missions now ? That’ll need far more resources than we currently have allocated to project slum runners.”

Albas looked around the room, they were all back on side, he knew they just wanted him to ask the question.

“I thought you all wanted to push ahead quickly,” said Albas, “yes we’ll need more people, is that a problem ?”

They were all shaking their heads and smiling, though Belso’s second in command did say he’d need to get the extra resources approved.

“Second item,” said Albas, “the naval dockyards at Dalloy. Again this will be a very limited attack to sink the warship nearest to the outer gates and defences. With luck we’ll jam half the fleet inside the base for weeks. Chlo estimates a team of nine required and there may be a single casualty.”

Again there was a unanimous yes vote.

“Item three on the list.....”

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Delmus had walked into Annill with Alyz, but had left her to climb the hill to the Alcázar to see her father. He’d been disappointed that the main gates to the city hadn’t been opened for them, just a small door had been opened in the gates and they’d been beckoned in. Delmus had been told ‘Commander Luri’ was inspecting the defences, so he’d started to follow her route around the walls. Eventually he’d spotted a female behind bent over a wall, a hand pointing at the base of a defence tower.

“There has been some undermining, probably by an animal of some kind. Still it needs looking at and refilling.” Said Luri.

Delmus stood there, waiting for her to turn around and enjoying the look on her face as she recognised him.

“Guard Delmus reporting for duty.” He said.

There was no squeal, no passionate kiss, they were both professionals and Luri did have a small team of engineers with her. The passion and reforming of old bonds would come later, when they were alone in her quarters.

“I was thinking of you this morning.” She said, “what brings you to Annill ?”

"I brought Alyz to see Nurigen, but I can stay for a few days."

Delmus winked at Luri and was pleased to see her grin back at him. Commander Luri was going to take some getting used to, but he thought the defence of Annill was in safe hands.

"I think you'll be here for a bit longer than a few days." Said Luri.

"But I don't have much with me, no spare uniforms, all I have is what I'm wearing."

Luri ignored him and turned to the leader of the engineers.

"I'll catch up with in a few minutes, carry on with the inspection."

"Yes sir."

Delmus assumed all officers in Annill were called sir, it probably made etiquette much more straightforward. Once her men were out of sight, Luri put her arms around him and gave him the sort of kiss he'd been missing.

"We can find you clothes," Luri said, "Sikush said I can have whatever resources I need. I take it you've no objection to staying in Annill with me?"

As they spoke she opened a tower door, pulling him inside the dusty room. The floor looked dirty, but they didn't worry either of them as they undressed and started to get reacquainted.

"I'd like to stay here," said Delmus, "but can you really get Sikush to agree?"

Luri moaned as he gently slipped his fingers inside the moist area between her legs.

"Give Alyz the rift device," she said, "she can go back to Mendera on her own and tell Sikush that I've conscripted you into the army of Annill."

By the time his dick entered her body, Delmus no longer felt like worrying about how much trouble they might both be in, if Sikush wasn't amused.

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