

Prelude: Dust to Dust

The landing pad at the station was mostly hidden in gloom, lit only by the lights of the control tower and surrounding buildings at the other end of the pads. The moon of Severus, Aemilia, was starting to rise over the horizon, shining blue in the clear skies. The encompassing countryside was deathly quiet, a sound that would have been beautiful, if the lone figure stood by the shadow of a Reliant Sen were not already on edge. This landing pad had been picked specifically because it was little used and mostly unmonitored. Plus, the tower operator that night apparently owed her contact a favour. That was a bonus, but not one that filled her with confidence. This was still a UEE world. Somewhere she would prefer not to hang around for too long.

Dr Aelyrya Payne wrapped her arms around her against the chill in the air, the light duster she had been lent by Captain Amathi providing her lithe frame with little protection against the atmosphere. Clear skies and what amounted to the tail-end of winter – her choice of clothing had been poor for this planet. Though in fairness, she had not anticipated actually arriving on this particular rock; nor anywhere in this system. Severus was supposed to be an up-and-coming hub for the young of the UEE, thanks to Imperial Recognition, but all Aelyrya has seen of it so far was darkness and cold. Tutting to herself, Aelyrya thought of the beautiful twin star system of Baker, and how she could have been studying the interaction between the two stars and their planets, all in the comfort of her newly acquired Sen. Her visit to the Covalex Shipping Hub had been very productive, if she did say so herself, and she had wanted to spend some time floating about, taking readings, and testing her new equipment. But then, this happened...

The scientist lifted her gaze at the sound of an approaching vehicle, moving slowly across the landing pads with its lights off; carefully avoiding any direct spotlights and seeming to navigate behind the cameras as they conveniently pointed in the opposite direction as it passed by. She unfolded her arms and rested her left hand lightly on the pistol at her hip. She hated pistols; absolutely loathed them. They did not have the same poise and grace as a sniper rifle, and she hated getting into any sort of close combat. But she had been given a very limited choice by Galadriel Pope: armed escort or carry a pistol. Seeing as an armed escort would have attracted far too much attention, the pistol had practically been forced into her hand. The vehicle continued its approach with no sign of any additional vehicles close by, on the ground or in the air. These eyes do have their benefits... Aelyrya thought, watching the vehicle closely.

It was a large van, designed for carrying specialised equipment, painted in the official colours of the Judicial department. Her eyes narrow slightly, but she held her ground. After all, her contact was supposedly someone on the “inside”, as Kaidy had put it. As it approached, she could see the emblem of the Coroner’s Office on the hood and she relaxed a little. In her eyes, there was less to fear from a man who spent most of his time around the already deceased. The van pulled to a halt about ten feet in front of Aelyrya and the driver stepped out. He was a tall, slender man; dark skinned, with cropped black hair and thin, wire-rimmed glasses. He was dressed in a black t-shirt, dark trousers and a white lab coat that

appeared in stark contrast to the darkness about him. He looked flustered and on edge, his eyes darting about him for any sign of being followed.

“Dr Payne?” he asked, his voice audibly trembling.

“You must be Cayman Rhodes,” Aelyrya nodded at him. “What can I do for you?”

“Dr Kaidy said you would be interested in what I have for you,” Rhodes motioned to the back of the vehicle. “I hope you understand that I’m taking a huge risk here. If Dr Kaidy is wrong, and this is a waste of my time, I might as well just hand myself over to the authorities now.”

“Show me what you have and I’ll tell you if it’s worth my while,” Aelyrya raised an eyebrow, noting the professional tone that Rhodes used when he mentioned Kaidy’s name. Clearly, their relationship was not as deep or long-lasting as her’s was. “Kaidy was cryptic, as always, but if I didn’t have a sliver of interest, I wouldn’t be here.” Aelyrya sighed and added in a softer tone, “He said this was of interest to my fleet. I owe them the time to investigate, at least.”

Rhodes nodded and beckoned Aelyrya to follow. Keeping her hand firmly on the pistol, she cautiously followed Rhodes behind the vehicle, where he was opening the doors. He stepped back, allowing her to look inside, and she glanced at the tall man with a puzzled expression. Inside the back of the van was a coroner’s cryo-storage unit on an anti-grav gurney, secured in place with thick, grey webbing. The box was shorter than an average man, but was also wider, suggesting it was for the collection of bodies that were not of standard shape upon their discovery. There was also a small box, labelled with a handwritten note: “John Doe, Kiel III:117-47. For Secure Destruction”.

Looking at Rhodes with a mixture of bewilderment and vexation, she hissed at him, “Are you handing me a body?!”

“Technically yes, but let me explain,” Rhodes hurriedly reached for a datapad that was attached to the side of the gurney.

He tapped the screen a few times, then turned it to face her, showing her images of the body as it was found. “This John Doe was found in a chemical waste disposal barrel, dumped outside the city walls. As you can see, he’s in really bad shape; dead at least a week, and he suffered a great deal in his last few hours, perhaps even days, of life.”

Taking the datapad, Aelyrya flicked through the images before looking at Rhodes pointedly. “So why is this of interest to me?”

“Well, when we searched his body, looking for ID, we only found two things.” Rhodes picked up the box and opened it, holding it out for her to see. Inside was a small data chip in a clear case, and a chain with a circular pendant on it.

Aelyrya stared at the pendant dumbfounded for a moment before lowering the datapad and leaning over to get a closer look at it. She pulled a mini torch from her trouser pocket and clicked the beam to life, shining it over the disk. From the lustre, she guessed it was some kind of silver composite, about an inch in diameter and less than a quarter inch thick. But what was most interesting was the emblem embossed onto the front of it. The Lorelli phoenix and stars in all their glory; recognisable only to those of Lorelli affiliation, or those who were called their enemies. But there was something slightly off about the design. Instead of remaining outstretched, the wings of the phoenix curved back in, the tips touching, and

where they touched, they cradled a fifth star, not normally present on the crest.

“Where did you find this?” Aelyrya asked quietly, studying the pendant carefully.

“The pendant was in his jeans pocket. The data chip... Well, that was found sticking out of one of his injuries. We think it was surgically implanted under his skin, but we don’t know for sure,” Rhodes looked around the pad, once more checking that they were alone.

“And do you know what this is?” Aelyrya motioned to the pendant, her face impassive. If Rhodes recognised the sigil, it meant one of two things. He was either a descendant, or he was an enemy.

But Rhodes shook his head, “I have no idea what it means, but when I sent a picture of it to Kaidy, he said he knew someone who might know it’s significance. He didn’t say much more.”

Aelyrya visible relaxed. Kaidy could always be trusted to keep details to himself. And once more, he had known to keep unwitting parties completely in the dark. “Well, I’ve not seen it in this format before, but I know someone who might,” she leant back from the box, looking once more at the images on the data-pad. Rhodes carefully closed the box and was putting it back in the vehicle when Aelyrya startled him with her next question, “Why are you off-loading him?”

“Because the Chief Coroner received an order from somewhere outside the Judicial Services that the Chief Medical Examiner and myself were to cease investigation into the death of this man, and were to destroy everything pertaining to his very existence with immediate effect.”

Aelyrya looked back up at Rhodes, her brow furrowed and her eyes narrowed. “You were told to get rid on him? On what grounds?”

“We don’t know,” Rhodes shook his head. “All we know is that the Chief was really rattled. Whatever was said to him, it was enough to make him order the disposal with no questions asked.”

“And why did you talk to Kaidy?”

“The Chief Med would never disobey the Chief Coroner; he’s not that kind of guy. But he’s also not one to get his hands dirty in anything that might be... well... immoral. So he ordered me to sort everything out our end. I didn’t agree so I sent a message to Dr Kaidy asking what I should do. The barrel was disposed of before I could get to it, but I managed to, um, intercede on the rest.”

“So it’s serious then,” Aelyrya pursed her lips for a moment, thinking hard. Finally, she handed Rhodes the data-pad and asked, “What exactly do you want me to do with him, Mr Rhodes?”

“Dr Payne, I’ve been told by Dr Kaidy that you love a good mystery; a puzzle to solve. Something new to learn. This man has no name, no background, and nowhere to go now. And someone wants his very existence wiped from all record. Surely you can guess what needs to be done here?” Rhodes took the data-pad and looked at Aelyrya with a desperate plea in his eyes. He truly believed that this man deserved to have the truth of his death discovered, no matter what he did in life.

Aelyrya sighed heavily. This man was, in effect, a microcosm of everything that had happened to Lorell. Destroyed, left to rot and then have everything related removed from all

records. But the truth had a horrible habit of poking its head up when you least expected it. And yes, she did enjoy a good mystery. Given that Rhodes had risked a lot to sneak this man to her, she at least owed him, and the rest of the fleet, the decency of finding out who he was, and what he meant to Lorell, if anything. It had crossed her mind that the pendant might have been a plant, but it did not make any realistic sense; attempting to link a man to an entity that, according to history, did not exist.

Aelyrya rubbed the back of her neck and sighed again. She was sighing a lot tonight. "All right, I'll smuggle him away for you. But before I do that, what can you tell me about the data-chip?"

"Nothing, I'm afraid," Rhodes looked relieved, and slipped the data-pad back into its holder on the side of the gurney. "The chip was encrypted, and we were told to destroy it before we could have it analysed properly."

Aelyrya nodded slowly and reached for the box, "All right, let's get this stuff on board and get this over and done with. We've lingered too long already. And, Dr Rhodes, your lab coat is not exactly stealthy out here."

The corner of her mouth lifted into a half-smile as Rhodes momentarily looked uncomfortable; he clearly had not thought about his attire as he made his way to this meeting. As Aelyrya reached for the box, Rhodes jumped into the back of the vehicle and released the webbing. The gurney bobbed slightly as it was released from its restraints, but otherwise remained where it was. "Everything we know is on the data-pad," Rhodes said as he pushed the gurney from the vehicle. The gurney glided smoothly over the lip of the back of the vehicle and the anti-gravity adjustment system kicked in, lowering the gurney gently until its base was hovering four inches from the ground. Rhodes jumped out after it and motioned for Aelyrya to lead the way.

The ramp into the Sen, which Aelyrya had named "Minerva", was already down, waiting for loading. As they moved the gurney toward the ramp, Aelyrya stole a look at the body inside the cryo-store. The man was in a bad state, bruised and battered beyond recognition. But she did notice deep red hair, tangled and matted with blood and probably sweat. Red hair was a typical trait among the Lorelli, more predominant in the women as a blaze of fiery crimson. The men usually had a darker shade, as this man did.

Yet another small sigh escaped her and Rhodes looked up at her, concerned. "Is something the matter Dr Payne?"

"Rhodes, if someone discovers what you did here, what do you think would happen?"

Rhodes swallowed hard, pushing the gurney up the ramp and toward an anchor point. He did not speak for a moment, instead focussing on getting the gurney in exactly the right spot in the cargo area and secured in place. Finally, he looked up at her, fear clearly showing in his eyes, but also defiance. "If the person who ordered the destruction of the body is as powerful as the Coroner seems to believe, then I will likely be executed. Quietly and without trace or fuss."

Aelyrya nodded slowly as she tucked the precious box into a compartment for safe keeping, "I thought as much."

She glanced around the cargo area, looking for something to cover the cryo-store. There

was an old oilcloth at the far end of the hold, which she promptly retrieved and threw across the gurney. Turning back to Rhodes, she said to him with a serious tone, "Dr Rhodes, I need you to listen to me very carefully. This body has been destroyed. Erase everything you have left and never speak of this again. Whatever is happening here, it isn't worth your life."

"It was worth his," Rhodes jutted his jaw forward, though his brave show did not seem completely genuine. The man was torn between his duty as a medical examiner and his desire to remain alive.

"His death is not your concern now," Aelyrya stepped toward Rhodes. Just a single step, but it was enough to make the man flinch backwards. Her red eyes seemed to glow in the muted light. Dr Kaidy had warned him not to stare, but Rhodes found himself unable to look away. "This man is now under my jurisdiction. And my jurisdiction is not a safe one. Do yourself a favour. Pretend that it never happened. And maybe you'll live long enough to discover the truth for yourself. Now, if you'll excuse me..."

Aelyrya turned from the medical examiner and headed for the cockpit. For a moment, Rhodes stood dumbfounded, unsure of what to do next. Finally, he came to his senses enough to turn around and make his way down the ramp. Just before he reached the bottom, Rhodes turned around. "Dr Payne," he called out.

Aelyrya turned to look at him, one hand resting on the panel for the door. Her face held no expression. She was cold now. She had a mission.

Rhodes paused, trying to find a way to say the words he wanted to speak. Finally, he settled for the simplest thing he could think of. "Thank you."

Aelyrya nodded once and Rhodes stepped off the ramp. As he did so, the ramp began to close. He watched as the start-up sequence initiated and the ramp locked in place. Powerful bursts of heat erupted from the thrusters, causing Rhodes to step back, suddenly aware of his proximity to the engines. The Sen lifted off the ground, wobbling ever so slightly as she did so, and Rhodes continued to watch as Dr Aelyrya Payne flew off into the night sky with what was possibly his biggest mystery to date.

Aelyrya watched Dr Rhodes in a rear-facing security camera as she flew away. Was it chance, or fate, that had brought this man to her? That had delivered this Lorellian Mystery directly to her hands? She sighed heavily and looked out into the vast expanse of space ahead of her. "Well Gala, you're really going to hate me now! All the trouble I cause you..."

Aelyrya made a snap decision and tapped her mG, starting it recording. "Chief Science Officer's log, supplementary entry. Kaidy's done it again; only gone and set me up with something pretty big. Sometimes I think I should really hate that pervert. But, at the same time, he knows me far too well. Whatever is going on here could have serious repercussions on the fleet. This is going to be a heck of a job. I'll need to bring in Dakk; he'll love that, plus the Command Staff, N.I., the Council... Mother would want me to do this. It would have been important to her. And I know she would have gone running in to help, just like I'm doing. Crazy woman... Both of us! I just hope that someone back home knows what the Hell is going on, or can at least theorise. Home... That's a strange sentiment. I've never had a real

home before. Well, I'd better make good of it. Starting with this guy here. Maybe one day, I can feel like I earned that stupid ribbon hiding in my drawer. Entry end."

Aelyrya stopped the recording and paused for a moment, a listless expression falling over her face. That ribbon... The bloody thing haunted her. She had received many awards in her lifetime. Degrees, diplomas, Young Scientist of the Year, all forms of prizes... But that ribbon was like torture. Finally, she shook herself, and keyed a new course into the Minerva's computer. A course toward the Lorelli fleet.

To home. And to a new adventure.