

VIOLATION

A futuristic spaceship is shown in space, illuminated by blue light. The ship has a complex, multi-layered structure with various panels and lights. A bright blue arc of light curves across the top right of the image, and another similar arc is visible at the bottom. The background is a dark, starry space.

THE
MYSTIC
SAGA

MCELHANEY

Violation

The Mystic Saga

Scott McElhaney

The Mystic Saga so far...

Indentured
Legacy
Violation

The moment Shay's fingers wrapped around the three days growth on his chin, he realized he was doing it again. Back when he used to be the Chief Engineer on the USSC Foothold, his chin rubbing had become the telltale sign of a stressful day. Even the captain himself would make comments along the lines of "*Chief Engineer's rubbing his chin again, so look out.*"

Many years have passed since his engineering days on the Foothold and his hair has found its way from black to gray, but the commander was still rubbing that same chin for the same reasons. Now, as the supreme commander of the Disruption Mission, Commander William Shay found himself faced with infinitely more stress than he ever faced in his Foothold days. He could have never imagined that one day his shoulders would be bearing the weight of all the hopes of a beautiful planet in the Hydrus constellation.

He felt a lump growing in his throat as he stared at the three scan results on the Apollo's pilot panel. One scan told him that they indeed had arrived in their solar system – no surprise there. The other scan told him that their shuttle had arrived just inside the Mars' orbit of the sun at about 11 million miles from the sun. The red planet itself however was nowhere within the vicinity of the local scan. The third scan was the one that was the most disheartening, hence those fingers rubbing against the stubble of his chin.

If their new Jump Drive had caused the shuttle to rip through 24 light years of space in an instant, barring all the laws of relativity, they would have theoretically arrived back at Earth around the year 2377. Although Legacy had its own unique dating system, he never lost track of what the date should be back on Earth. Shay was fully aware of the fact that the laws of physics insisted that arriving in 2377 was never a possibility.

If the shuttle's Jump Drive followed the same scientific laws as drive that doomed the USSC Pioneer, they would now be stuck somewhere in the 16th century. Shay was *promised* however that the alterations made to this new Jump Drive should prevent such significant time-dilations as the original experimental Jump Drive.

Yet here were the results of the radio traffic scan. The solar system was absolutely silent. While he'd been hoping for nothing more than a hundred-year dilation factor, he was now faced with a minimum of four hundred years.

"Did we make it as planned?" Weapons Chief O'Rourke asked, interrupting the commander's thoughts.

"Not as planned, but we didn't come unprepared for such a possibility," Shay muttered, tapping the small screen in front of him, "No radio traffic whatsoever."

The chief approached the commander, then leaned in to examine pilot panel. He swallowed, staring at the scan results, believing for a moment that perhaps they would change if he willed them to.

"So, what are your thoughts, Commander?" the chief asked, hiding the worry in his voice.

The commander sighed, shaking his head.

"Well, this scan doesn't necessarily mean we arrived at a pre-technological point in history. We won't really know anything until we get to Earth. For now, I'm just hoping we don't find ourselves orbiting a 16th century world in a few hours."

The commander rose from his seat and headed over to the navigation terminal. The navigator, Shay's own niece Jennifer Byers, was one of the eight people they left behind on Legacy when the Apollo was forced to make a hasty escape. This would have been her workstation during the entire

mission, but now it remained yet another vacancy to be filled by a very limited crew. Commander Shay sat down at the terminal and tapped a few keys, then performed a planetary scan. It responded only a few seconds later with the report.

“Well, we’re in luck. Earth is at its aphelion about 62 million miles to our left. We can get our answers in under an hour,” he stated.

The commander entered in a course for Earth. Since the Apollo wasn’t equipped with the Ytterbium-Flank engines of interstellar craft, they were limited to speeds slightly less than a tenth of light speed.

Shay finally had a moment to relax a bit after nearly two hours of chin-rubbing stress. He pressed his fingers into the sore muscles at the sides of his jaw, realizing that he must have been clenching his teeth the whole time. That was when he noticed the chief pacing near the communications terminal.

“What’s on your mind, Chief?” Shay asked.

The chief knocked his fist on the back of the communications chair, then grasped it in both hands. He stared off at the main viewing panel which was now showing some evidence of the movement. After a moment, he turned his attention to the commander.

“As Weapons Chief, there’s something I think I need to tell you,” he replied, pausing a moment to gather the words, “We left in quite a rush, as you well know. The last of the intended crew to board the shuttle earlier today was Legacy-Sergeant Ryan Eight. A good man, by the way. Anyway, he’s well, he...”

Commander Shay rose from the navigation chair, confused by the chief’s sudden lack of words. He’d been working closely with this crew for more than a full Legacy season and he’d never seen the Weapon’s Chief at a loss for words.

“Just spill it, Chief,” Shay said, “We’ve got some free time on our hands to deal with whatever problem there is.”

“Sergeant Ryan brought those two Foothold survivors aboard. He invited them to join us,” Chief O’Rourke stated, “I’m talking about the two that helped Tristan the Mystic to destroy the Constellation camp.”

The commander almost shrugged him off, wondering why that would concern him much. Two more people could be beneficial since they found themselves losing half their intended crew. Then he remembered the gloved hands and the black irises of the Foothold’s surviving male.

“Wait a minute,” the commander replied, feeling his pulse suddenly rise, “Ryan brought the Mystic aboard?”

“Yes sir. A living, breathing weapon,” the chief replied, “That’s why I figured I needed-”

“What was unclear about ‘no Mystics’?” the commander growled, “We were leaving Legacy to come to Earth – a world unaccustomed to the... the *whatever-it-is* that the Mystics do. Besides, it’s a danger to all of us.”

Chief O’Rourke nodded, looking to the floor. The commander was now pacing in front of the main view panel.

“For what it’s worth, these are two of people who obliterated the camp of nearly a hundred of our enemies. And these are the two who destroyed the ASA Constellation in orbit above the Earth,” the chief offered.

“I know,” he replied with a sigh, “I saw the two of them right before I boarded and actually even planned on getting their deposition once this was all over with. But I didn’t plan on taking them along with us. And what do you think this Mystic would say about our... our ‘special cargo’?”

The chief shook his head, not quite sure of how to reply. The commander stopped his pacing and turned to the chief.

“Don’t worry about it. We’ll cross that bridge when we come to it,” the commander stated, “I think that we should take it all one step at a time, beginning with briefing the crew.”

It didn't take me long to find Elix this time. It was a lot easier since I'd been following him quietly during the last portion of his little escape. As I watched my son from the Upper Mountain Doorway, I felt certain of one thing: curiosity would kill my Elix one day, and when that happens, I would lose the last living portion of my heart.

"Elix," I called, stepping out into the crisp night air, "It's not safe out here."

"They're coming closer, Mom," Elix replied, never even turning at the sound of her voice, "They used to always avoid the Mountains. Now they're digging."

"I know."

What more could I say? I couldn't lie to him and tell him everything would be all right. I truly had no idea what would happen when they found us. I know what happened the last time they discovered us many generations past. Savages.

My innocent Elix was glowing a beautiful violet tonight, which was the main thing that scared me about his brave ventures into the Upperalands. He was almost as bright as the Night Orb above. When the uplanders looked toward the peaks, they'd surely see some form of moving light.

"Come, my son," I said, reaching a hand to him, "We must get below before Giant Star rises."

He turned to me, causing my heart to melt again. I hungered to have that same kind of beautiful innocence radiating again behind my own black eyes. He still had a hold of something precious that I wish our whole world could capture and embrace.

"Why are we stuck in the Tunnel-world all the time? I love the feel of this breeze on my face. Can't we have it all the time?" he asked, approaching and taking my hand.

I turned back toward our doorway hidden in the shadows of the rock, inhaling that refreshing breeze.

"The Giant Star hurts our flesh, so we can't be out here when the star comes. But we're the lucky ones, you know," I said, patting him on the shoulder, "Do you remember when you saw those two uplanders from the cliff top? Did you see their skin?"

"Yeah, but don't you remember the Scripts? Script 107 says 'Overlord gave them light with their flesh so darkness would never overtake them in their homes'," he said, slipping into the doorway with me and down the angled tunnel, "The Scripts say that Overlord gave us our light, but it never says for us to stay below – never."

"You think too much, Elix, but I'm glad to hear that you're studying your Scripts," I replied, following his lead down Mindian Tunnel, "The Scripts tells us that our skin was created to glow and our eyes were created for low light. The uplanders have dull brownish skin and eyes of many colors, but if we took them below, they would be blind."

Elix started running up ahead, enjoying the speed of the tunnel's sharp downward slope. He was a blur of violet light that melted my heart. It melted everyday that I opened the Scripts and read the one fact that I would never be able to change. That would be Script 1086: "And his name would be Elix – the one who would be taken from his mother, snatched from the world. He would be returned but only at a time that the Overlooker could fully comprehend. And Elix would save the world."

"I'm sure you're all aware of the blinding fact that we have a much smaller crew than v intended. I also take it that you've also had time to meet our two stowaways Diana and Braxton Commander Shay said with a kind grin that looked a little forced, "But I haven't had the pleasure. I' Commander Shay, the appointed commander of this shuttle and this mission."

"It's a pleasure to meet you and please don't be upset by our presence. We had about tw heartbeats to make a decision and we were also a little frightened at the time," Diana said, reachi out and shaking the commander's hand, "But be assured, we will do whatever is necessary to save o planet from the likes of Earth."

"Please..." the commander said, raising a hand to stop her, "On this side of the galaxy, startin today, we need to stop referring to the opposition as 'Earth'. I'm talking to everyone here on th point."

Commander Shay glanced around the cabin at all the people spread out in the available seating. Since the shuttle was meant to transport twice as many people, the crew had apparently decided to take advantage of the space, littering the seats between them with their open bags. It was evident th some of them had already started making themselves comfortable, digging out notepads or books to consume the time it would take to reach Earth.

"While we could use these terms on Legacy and everyone understood the meaning, it won't work here at all. Our current mission is to preemptively disrupt the establishment of the Australia Space Administration. We have everything we need to accomplish this as long as we've arrived sometime within the information age." the commander stated.

"Do you have any idea how far back we've gone?" Combatant First Class Rollins asked.

Combatant-1 Rollins was the only female aboard besides Diana. Diana almost mistook her for a male when they were first introduced based on her exceptionally short red hair and the fact that she wore a uniform that hid any feminine features she may have had.

"No, but it seems like we're further back than we intended."

Braxton shifted in his seat so he could see the people who were asking these questions of the commander. He didn't like the fact that he was so easily confused by all that was going on. As much as he wanted to hide his ignorance, he was going to have to speak up sooner or later.

"What are you guys talking about when you mention 'going back'?" Braxton asked.

"Time dilation," the commander replied, "We can't travel at excessive speeds without creating something of a well in the space around us. Any warp of space will create a comparable warp in the flow of time for those inside the well. This shuttle was essentially traveling faster than the speed of light, creating a reverse time flow."

Braxton stared at the man, completely confused and not really sure if the commander was joking with him or not.

"We travelled back in time, Mystic. Today is a day long before you were even born," a uniformed man called from the back corner of the shuttle.

"How's that for super powers, Mystic?" someone else added with a laugh.

Diana rose from her seat and turned around to the huddle of snickering people near the back corner. This was a group of three combatants who had refused to introduce themselves earlier and spent a lot of their time whispering.

"Do you have a problem with Braxton, Triggers?" she spat angrily, using a slanderous name given to uneducated warriors.

"Triggers? And just who the heck are you?"

Braxton rose from his seat, putting an arm around Diana. He hoped to usher her back into his seat, but she didn't seem to want to budge. Braxton then turned his attention to the people who had probably spent half their lives just looking for a fight.

"She's the woman who destroyed the whole ASA Constellation in orbit over Legacy. You'd better know who you're dealing with before you pick your fights, *Trigger*," Braxton said, "And rumor has it, I destroyed the first whole shuttle that ever set down on Legacy."

"I hate to break up this '*I'm tougher than you*' playground game, but we have a very important job to plan for right now," the commander said, "And if any of this crew gets injured or killed by another member, I will see to it that the offender gets to do a 20-year indenture on Legacy when we return. And if you think I can't do this, remember the planet we'll be returning to when our Jump Drive takes us yet another couple centuries into the past."

Silence filled the room while the commander paused. Combatant Third Class McDonald raised his hand in the front row, drawing a nod from the commander.

"Are you saying we can use the Jump Drive more than once?"

The commander nodded, "I believe so. We did have a spike of radiation levels after the jump, but it wasn't high enough to cause any damage. The Drive did require for us to dump forty pounds of spent uranium, but that had been expected in the best-case scenario."

"So you're saying that we truly lost everything? We're stuck on an ancient Earth or a primitive uninhabited Legacy?" a voice blurted out.

"I hope you're kidding, Combatant-3 Edwards. Please tell me you paid attention from the very beginning," the commander said.

"I just... It's sort of like when we agreed to give our lives for Legacy. We didn't really plan on actually dying, even though we'd be willing should the situation be unavoidable. I... I just sort of thought we had a chance of returning home again, even though... well..."

"I'm sorry, Edwards, but none of us ever had a chance of returning home to the Legacy or Earth we had left behind. I'm sorry if you had misunderstood."

Edwards nodded, then looked down at the hands he had in his lap.

"We are on a mission that will save a lot of heartache in our own era on Earth as well as save many lives on Legacy. This is bigger than us all," the commander stated, addressing the whole room. "It's important to know that during this mission, we will have to respect the UN Laws of Causality. Although these laws may not have ever truly applied to anything, once we started experimenting with Jump Drive technology and Tachyon Communications, we were forced to take a refresher course on the UN laws that were in place. Here are the layman's versions: Number one, we will share our technologies with these people. This means that they cannot so much as look at any equipment inside the shuttle and they definitely cannot see our Jump Drive even if it means we have to scuttle the shuttle and strand ourselves or kill ourselves in the process. Number two, no names. We give out no names of our organization, ourselves, our ship, our shuttle, or the planet Legacy. We can lie and as a matter of fact, it's even recommended. We can however share the names of our targets if you find an opportunity for assistance from the citizens,

"And number three, we kill no one *ever* except for the intended targets. Whatever the reason and whatever the excuse – *even if your own life is on the line* – we kill no one except the intended targets. We are already violating causality laws by what we are doing, but we must keep our violations to a minimum. What we are attempting will never be known to the UN and we stand no chance of ever answering for our crimes, but this is a matter of honor and justice. We will serve with honor just the way we've been trained."

Braxton raised his hand, but the commander seemed intent on ignoring him. Finally after a moment of silence, he nodded to Braxton.

“What exactly are we doing?” Braxton asked.

—“You’re doing nothing but waiting on the shuttle ‘til the big boys get done working,” one of the corner combatants blurted.

Braxton turned quickly and pointed to the man with webs of electricity dancing along the length of his finger.

“If I’m waiting on the shuttle, you’re waiting with me, ‘big boy’,” Braxton said, “just try leave this shuttle and see what happens.”

“Braxton!” the commander growled, “You are drawing a weapon on a member of my crew and this will not be tolerated now or in the future. If you wish to be a member of my crew, I will never see such a thing again. Do you wish to remain a member of my crew?”

Braxton snapped his fingers, making a show of the electricity disappearing in a bright spark, then he turned back toward the commander.

“Yes, sir. I’m sorry. As you’ve been able to witness, a crew with no kills under their belts may have a lot of trouble accepting the presence of two surprise additions who have killed more than they could count,” Braxton said, “We’ll all just have to hope they can learn to accept us.”

The commander just stared at Braxton while the angry whispers rose from the back.

“To answer your previous question, Braxton, we will be going to Earth at an undisclosed moment in the past with a hefty list of human targets. These targets are the ancestors of those who started the ASA or those who played a major role in the ASA. We are all assassins for the USSC, the Foothold, and for Legacy. Once we realized the terrorist intentions of the ASA, the only way to stop them would be to prevent their existence altogether.”

“Wow,” Diana whispered.

“Indeed,” Commander Shay turned to her, deadpan.

Underworld

I slipped out of my home and locked the door, satisfied now that Elix was tucked safely in bed. I closed my eyes and rested my forehead against the door hoping I'd have the strength to make through the evening. I wondered in that moment how Reqora was doing with her spouse being away for so long.

I turned away from my home and headed down the busy promenade tunnel. It seemed like everyone was out tonight. The evening bell sounded in the distance as I shuffled around a corner to a ventilation panel and headed toward the brighter lights of the shopping district. I passed a group of boys huddled around a promenade lamp, their hushed laughter telling me they were probably up to no good.

I could feel the familiar vibrations beneath my feet, reminding me yet again of the trouble coming from above. Why the uplanders were suddenly fascinated with the poison black rock above was beyond all understanding. It was that very vein of poison we'd counted on to always keep their interest away.

"Purlinscz!"

I turned to discover Reqora running toward me, waving excitedly.

"I was just thinking about you, Reqora," I said, welcoming her in a hug, "How have you been?"

"Lonely and ready to find myself a new spouse. How about you?" she asked with a laugh.

"What? It's only been eleven bells since he left. I haven't..." I started, then shook my head.

"Let's just say that I've heard a lot of evening bells since the last time I've seen any sparks."

Reqora laughed, then put an arm around me, leading us both toward the shopping district where I had originally been headed.

"So, where were you going just a moment ago, Purlinscz?" she asked, still seeming much too happy for a woman whose spouse was working down in the lava streams.

The lava streams were located inside a large natural cavern our people discovered a generation ago beneath the lower tunnels. The cavern was enormous beyond anything we had ever created ourselves. This cavern offered us plenty of heated springs as well as an abundant supply of heat to create steam for our power plants. Reqora's spouse was one of the many that were now offering their services to build bridges, homes, and power plants throughout the cavern.

"I was going to the store to get some fungal root, peppernuts, and water weed. I was thinking about making Elix's favorite stew tomorrow," I said, shaking my head, "I'm still struggling to keep him from going above all the time. Maybe a good dinner will do the trick."

"That boy of yours is going to get himself hurt or killed. Doesn't he know what kind of creatures live up there?" she asked, "Those were the ones who attacked us a hundred generations past."

I didn't need to hear my own thoughts from someone else and to be honest, it made me a little angry that she thought I was stupid enough not to realize this.

"I know, but how do I explain to a little boy the way these creatures attacked? His innocence is too important to me and I want him to keep it as long as possible." I replied, nodding toward one of the stone stairways leading up to the second-level stores, "Boli's has the freshest peppernuts and his store is up there."

"Honey," she said, stopping at the base of the stairs and twisting me toward her, "I'm your best friend and I know what you're telling me, but I disagree with protecting innocence in favor of protecting life. Let's forget the peppernuts for a moment and go get a drink at The Violet Legs."

The Violet Legs was a hangout that I typically avoided. It was a place where the "hungry

gathered in search of a temporary fix. But ultimately, I understood what Reqora was trying to do, so I took her up on her offer.

...

Sitting at the bar in a noisy room filled with probably a hundred others, I felt more than just a little out-of-place. I could see Reqora's image in the reflector-glass behind the bar. I could see my own image next to her and for the life of me, I couldn't find much of a difference in the two of us. Her violet glow was the same as my own – radiant and smooth throughout all the curves of the face. The ridges on the top of her head rose slightly higher than my own, but we both had the same full length black hair parting down on both sides. Her pink lips were only slightly fuller than my own and her body was no more slender than mine. Her cheekbones rose slightly higher than mine, definitely giving her a sexier look. But both of us were pretty in the most natural ways without the benefits of floral paints. Why was it that she attracted everyone while the whole world just passed me by?

"You never smile anymore, Purlinscz. If I was a single guy looking for someone special, I would avoid you too," she said, answering my unspoken question, "I'm not trying to be harsh, but your happiness isn't sincere even when you do smile."

"I'm scared all the time, Reqora," I replied, "I've read all the Histories and I feel the vibrations of their machines tearing through the rock above us. I'm scared all the time."

She lifted her drink from the bar and examined the sparkling red fluid in her glass. Then she drank it down quickly and turned to me.

"In the Histories, I don't recall anyone truly ever putting up a fight. That won't happen the second time around, I guarantee it," she said with a smirk, "Now drink your schlimmerin and let me find someone to dance with."

Three

The planet, a mere fifteen hundred miles beneath the shuttle, bore an uncanny resemblance to the planet they had just departed from only several hours earlier. Nearly all the crew had managed to crowd themselves into the limited space on the bridge and in the doorway leading to the passageway. Everyone had been anxious to hear the result of the many scans performed on the planet below. The commander was already piping in the canned voice of a woman singing sweetly about a blue moon watching over her. The fact that her voice was travelling through the airwaves at least confirmed that they were in a technological era of some sort.

“Well, I can do better than just telling you the year that we arrived. I can even narrow it down to an exact date. That’s a post-WW2 Earth down there, and unfortunately for us, it’s the beginning of that paranoid nuclear age we liked to call The Cold War. Today is June 2nd, 1949,” the commander said, “I couldn’t have picked a more unwelcoming date to arrive if I tried. What’s your opinion on this, Brown?”

The tall bearded man who had been standing next to the commander nodded, then looked out at the planet on the main view panel.

“Those people down there are watching the skies for atomic bombs, Russians, and aliens,” Chief Strategist Brown added, “No matter what story we decide to give them should we be discovered, we will be a group of spies for Russia or aliens bent on human annihilation.”

“So what’s the plan?” Combatant ‘Chunk’ asked.

The commander rose from his seat and turned to the crew who were still loitering near the doorway.

“Well, we’re definitely going down under the cover of darkness. But, where we’re going to hide is a three hundred and twenty foot shuttle – I don’t know,” the commander said, turning to Brown, “Our chief strategist will probably be taking over the operation from here.”

Brown nodded, then placed a black briefcase on one of the nearby chairs and opened it. Everyone waited in silence while their new leader shuffled through dozens of folders, each one jammed full of papers. A moment later, he drew out a thick folder and held it up.

“Not to worry – we came prepared,” he said, opening the folder and drawing out several papers. “Since we had no idea when we’d actually arrive back on Earth, we printed out a list of targets spanning many different eras. This particular list will show about seventy targets with expiration dates next to each name. You’ll notice that some of the names on the list are already expired.”

He passed out a list to each person, then resumed his position near the main view panel.

“What’s the expiration date?” Diana asked, “Does that mean the person is already dead?”

“No, it means that killing that person will no longer serve our goal. Let me see something here,” he replied, examining his copy for a moment, “If you look at the third name on the list which is Eleanor Jennings in Florence, South Carolina, you’ll see that her expiration date is February 4, 1947. Killing her will achieve nothing anymore, but there’s a reason for this. Now, look about ten names lower on the list. There’s a Richard Jennings in Florence, South Carolina and his expiration date isn’t until June 12, 1969. I’d be willing to bet that Richard Jennings was born on February 4, 1947 and our primary goal was to prevent his birth. After this date, there’s no need to go after his mother – only Richard.”

“But Richard would only be about two years old now,” Braxton said, staring down at the sheet of paper, “He’s just a child.”

“This is a very unconventional form of warfare that we are a part of here, Braxton,” the

commander inserted, "I understand that you and Diana weren't volunteers from the start. It would stand to reason that you may have some reservations about the job we're here to accomplish, but you *have* to do this job with or without you if we're going to save Legacy and our Foothold families."

"No, I completely understand. I just can't imagine..." Braxton said, shaking his head.

"Don't worry about it, Mystic," Chunk grunted, "That's why we brought some Triggers along. To get the job done."

Braxton nodded, then looked up at the commander.

"Yeah, if it's alright with you, Commander, can you give me the real targets and leave all the little children for the Triggers?"

Chunk leapt forward, taking Braxton immediately into a headlock. Combatants Rollins and McDonald tried unsuccessfully to stop the fight, grabbing at Chunk's arms and uniform.

"Commander," Braxton choked out the words, "I want to follow orders, but this Trigger is about to die if you don't stop this."

The commander just stepped back, watching the struggle between the two. Diana finally stepped forward, drew her fist back quickly and slammed her palm down into Chunk's collarbone, cracking in a single blow.

"Aaargh!" Chunk screamed, falling to the floor.

"What the heck?" McDonald shouted.

"Was it worth losing a member of your crew, Commander?" Diana asked, "And for the record, Braxton didn't retaliate and all I did was use brute force which you apparently approve of."

The commander gave Diana a look of disgust, then turned to his strategist. Diana tended Braxton while the other combatants helped get Chunk up off the floor and out of the room.

"Well, I guess I don't have to stay with the shuttle now that we have an injured crew member who can stay behind," the commander stated, "When the others return, we'll discuss all the strategy and placement."

Brown leafed through his folder, retrieving a few more papers. The rest of the crew returned to the bridge, leaving Chunk medicated, taped, and resting in the passenger area.

"We will have eight drop zones tonight, the final one being in Australia. Two of you will be going after four non-expired targets in Australia. Two others will be dropped in the United Kingdom to take out five targets located there," Brown stated, handing maps to the people he had already decided for those particular jobs, "One of you will be going after a target in Ireland. Another will be dropped in Puerto Rico to locate a target. One will be going to Toronto to locate three targets there. Two will be going to the southeastern US to take out four targets. One will be going to the western US to take out two targets, and two more will be spending some time in the northeastern US to take out three targets."

It was during this last statement that he handed a map to Braxton. The map showed a close up view of New York, New Jersey, and part of Pennsylvania. There were notes for each of the targets listed on the back of the map, giving known addresses and occupations of the people. Braxton handed the map to Diana.

"Each person will receive a handheld communicator that can be used to contact the shuttle or any one of us," the commander said, opening a silver case and drawing one of the small devices out to show them, "I'd also like to point out that we won't be limited to the use of their primitive weapons, but the rule is, if you bring an ion pistol with you, it better still be with you when you return to the shuttle."

"Everything better still be with you when you return," Brown added, glancing around the room. "That includes your Mystic suit, Braxton."

Underworld

The Histories – Book 6.3

The Sons of Violation

During the era between the Rhodall Quake and the Sqilte Flood, we would often send groups to the Upperlands in the late evenings when both Giant Orbs were no longer in the sky. These people would load up baskets with the nuts, peppers, and tree fruits that seemed to only grow up above. We knew about the similar-shaped creatures that were living there in recent times, but they seemed somewhat violent, so we avoided any contact with them.

The horror came one night when our people were secretly followed back home. There were almost fifty of them who overtook our night gatherers, then followed our tunnels to the first level. No one could understand their language even though they truly seemed to want to communicate with our people. Then, witnessed by many, they tore the clothing from two of our women and they started violating them in ways that we only use for procreation.

Their people became more violent while these others continued violating those two women. They started tearing through our homes, looking for more of our women. Before the night was over, they would have stolen forty-two of our women and brought them to the Upperlands.

The two women who were attacked in our street became pregnant, but the pregnancies were highly unusual. Their bellies grew quicker than we were used to and the women found it harder to breathe as the babies grew. Both women died in childbirth, bearing mixed-breed children who resembled the Uplanders more than any of us.

A few days after those children were born, the carcasses of twelve of our kidnapped women were returned to the mountain entrance as well as seven other women who were still alive but extremely pregnant. All these women would die in childbirth, bearing the Sons of Violation.

The Sons of Violation were healthy babies as far as anyone could tell, but we didn't want their reminders to stay with us. Many lost their spouses to the Uplanders and because of that, many hated these babies.

The next night when only the Night Orb was in the sky, we loaded the Sons of Violation into a cart and wheeled them to the village of the Uplanders. There we left those mixed-breed babies to live or to die.

Four

The cloud cover heralding a coming storm brought with it a welcome darkness over the North Atlantic. The shuttle coasted barely thirty feet above the ocean as it approached Point Pleasant Beach on the New Jersey shore. Thanks to a thunderstorm pulsating on the horizon, the beach was found to be nicely abandoned. The shuttle banked right and stopped parallel to the shoreline, then opened its side door. Its metal plank moved outward about twenty feet, then dropped in small sections toward the sand, forming a nice stairwell.

“This is your stop,” the commander said to Braxton, handing him the black bag Tristan had given him before they left Legacy, “Three simple targets with no option to fail. Call us when you’re done and we’ll get the team back to Legacy as soon as possible.”

Braxton took Diana’s hand and followed her down the stairs. The shuttle had never actually landed, so the final step was quite a distance above the beach. Diana jumped, landing nicely on her feet. Braxton tossed her the bag, then jumped and landed just as firmly. The stairs retracted quickly, followed by an immediate departure of the shuttle.

“So this is the planet that our enemies call home,” Braxton said, retrieving the bag and tossing the strap over his shoulder.

“This is the planet our own *ancestors* called home. If you really think about it, we’re finally home for the first time ever,” Diana replied.

“We’re home to a planet that we’ve never seen; to a race that’s beneath the technology of our current hosts, yet probably still far advanced of our own people; to a city that we know nothing about in a paranoid world that considers ‘*curious people*’ to be aliens or spies,” he replied, “I think our home may be a little frightening at this time.”

As they started up the sandy beach, heading toward the boardwalk, Diana noticed an older man propped against a tall chair holding onto a bottle of amber liquid. She smiled at him as she trudged onward, but received a negative nod in response.

“That was a weird ship if ever I saw one,” the man slurred, tipping the bottle at both of them.

“Ship?” Braxton asked, looking out toward the noisy ocean, “I can’t imagine any ships being out in this. We’ve got a storm coming in.”

The man’s eyebrows furrowed as he looked at Braxton, then he glanced out at the rising seas. Each flash in the eastern sky was now accompanied almost immediately by a crack of thunder. The storm was closing in quickly.

“But, I just saw that ship that went upward?” he asked.

“Storm’s coming in,” Diana said, pointing toward the ocean, “Better get to higher ground. I don’t see any ships and obviously they don’t go ‘upward’.”

They offered the man another smile, then proceeded to the boardwalk. The storm was now announcing its New Jersey debut with a drizzling rain. Braxton took Diana’s hand and sought out shelter beneath an awning of one of the many large buildings lining the boardwalk.

“I don’t think this will protect us for long, especially if the wind picks up,” Diana said, peering out toward the road, “And I’m sort of leery about going into any of these buildings since we don’t know anyone.”

“Then let’s head out and look for better shelter before this gets any worse,” he replied.

Diana agreed with a nod, then rushed out from beneath the awning and started jogging up the road. Braxton followed, noticing that the rain pelting his face was no longer just a light drizzle.

“How do you feel about the job?” he asked, finally keeping pace next to her.

The buildings and streetlights were now just a wavy blur beyond the intensified downpour. A flash of lightning offered a temporary view of a bridge crossing their road in the distance. They accepted this vision of a potential shelter and made it their destination.

“I’m not real excited about it if that’s what you’re asking,” she replied, raking a hand through her hair and drawing the sopping strands from her face, “No sane person likes to kill people, especially in a preemptive attack.”

“See, that’s my biggest problem,” he said, “I understand self-defense, but I guess I’m a little worried about how I’ll fare when I have to actually kill an innocent person.”

They finally reached the shelter of the bridge, escaping both the torrential rain as well as the increasing wind. Diana combed her hair back through her fingers while Braxton palmed the rain from his face.

“How is it that I find my ex-wife sexy when she’s more than twice my age?” Braxton asked, staring at the woman who was now ringing the water from the lower portion of her shirt.

“Don’t start and please refrain from the age remarks. If I could have it my way, I’d be twenty again too,” she replied.

“Trust me when I say that I much more prefer this shapely version of Diana,” he replied, “I’ve seen both and both are beautiful, but one has the curves where the curves count.”

“Please,” she groaned, “Please don’t do this to me, Braxton. You don’t understand how much time I’ve spent regretting my choices and how much time I’ve spent missing you. I didn’t revive this... this young version of you to be used as a...”

“No,” he pointed at her, a look of anger suddenly spanning his face, “I refuse to have my emotions held in contempt. You revived a twenty-year old version of me and this version has all the heart of my past self. If you have a problem with my heart and mind, then you need to leave me now. We need to split this list of targets and work alone. I can’t work with you if I have to conceal my heart.”

She looked at him, taking in the man before her. No matter how many times she tried to push the past away, it kept presenting itself in the closest and most dangerous ways.

“It’s just so hard for me, Braxton. We had a life together that didn’t quite work out as we planned. You don’t remember this life, but I do. You have an attraction to me that I now realize I’m not worthy of,” she said, nodding suddenly toward the vehicle approaching, “I think we’d better probably head up that hill and stay out of sight.”

Braxton was quick to agree. They climbed the little hill and sat at the peak with the bride directly over their heads. Their shelter felt a little more private and comfortable from this high viewpoint.

“We’ve discussed your selfish past aboard the Foothold and we’ve discussed why you and Braxton divorced. I don’t care about all that. I care about now and the world today. If you have problems regarding a different Braxton, then you need to deal with those problems when I’m not around. I’m a different Braxton and I’d appreciate it if you offered me that respect,” he said, turning to the woman seated next to him, “This Braxton finds you attractive and there’s nothing you can do to change that.”

She shook her head and turned to him.

“Then can I kiss you right now – completely selfish and absolutely unworthy?” she asked.

“You never have to ask,” he replied, cupping her shimmering face in his hand as he leaned in.

He tasted her lips, kissing the moisture of the rain off them. He took her face in both hands, holding his prize as he kissed her more intimately. She groaned, wrapping him in both her arms and preventing the old Braxton from sneaking in between them.

“Be mine permanently this time, Diana,” he whispered against her lips, “Permanently.”

His left hand drifted to the front of her shirt then slipped beneath the wet fabric. His fingers caressed the cool skin along her upper hip, then drifted toward the lower portion of her back. His tongue tasted sweet to him as he continued kissing her tenderly, nibbling her tongue gently between his teeth and lips.

“Only if you’ll be mine alone,” she breathed against his lips, “Mine alone.”

His other hand bravely took hold of a generous portion of her shapely “seat cushion” while he tugged her bottom lip in a kiss. He then kissed his way tenderly down her chin, then along the front of her throat before taking subtle bites along the skin of her collarbone.

“Alone? Of course I’d be yours alone,” he whispered.

She leaned her head back, allowing him to kiss his way up the side of her neck. He tugged her earlobe into his mouth, sucking gently on it before kissing his way along her jaw line and back to her waiting lips.

“Was I not yours alone last time?” he whispered between kisses.

“No,” she replied, raking her hands through his wet hair and pulling his lips to hers, “You had someone else.”

He pulled back suddenly despite the grip she had on the back of his head. She leaned forward, unwilling to be left unsatisfied.

“I was a cheating loser?” he asked.

She slid her fingers through his hair, combing his wet locks back. Finally she squeezed his face and nodded subtly.

“How could I?” he asked, “How could anyone...”

“Thank you, Braxton,” she interrupted, her eyes suddenly filling with unexpected tears.

Those tears suddenly became uncontrollable, creating rivers down her cheeks in spite of her refusal to allow them. He stared in confusion.

“Thank you? I’m a disgusting-”

“Thank you for saying the words I’ve always needed to hear you say. Thank you for saying ‘how could I?’” she said, “That is exactly what I needed to hear.”

“But-”

“I’m yours now, Braxton,” she said, aggressively pulling his lips closer to hers, “You’re a different Braxton and I’m a different Diana now. You’ll never hear me referring to that other Braxton ever again. I’m yours.”

Underworld

I was grateful for Elix's assistance today. My contribution for as long as I can remember has always been at the Striliuxe River Fishery. My father used to take me there with him a lot of times because that was where he contributed. Then when I finally reached the age of society contribution, it was only natural that I chose a job I already knew a lot about.

The Striliuxe River is the largest underground stream in all of the Tunnel-world and thanks to the efforts of our ancestors; the river is populated by an abundance of fish breeds. I was going to have a heavy workload today due to a recent stock of clempin, so that's why I decided to elicit the help of Elix.

"Why do we have so many fish today?" he asked me, using the knife to open a clempin belly just like I'd shown him.

"The eco-system of the river was getting severely imbalanced. Pretty soon, the clempin population would have taken over the river and although they are quite delicious, they would eventually die off and leave us with a dead river. We need a good balance of all the fish so they can basically feed off each other and keep the river alive."

Working together, we were gutting the fish in half the time it took me the last time we did this. News had already spread throughout the tunnels that we'd be enjoying a clempin feast for the next several meals.

"Would you be mad if I told you that it stinks down here and I'm getting kind of tired of doing this?" he asked, offering me that familiar look of innocence.

I laughed, then shook my head, "It does stink, doesn't it? But no, I wouldn't be mad. What were you planning to do?"

"I was hoping I could play at Qall's house. He invited me over today."

Qall was a boy Elix met the last time he went to the tunnel chutes. The tunnel chutes was his favorite hangout for a lot of the kids lately. It was a large cave with its floor angled sharply downward. Kids would bring their wheeled sheets with them, lay down on the sheet, then ride them dangerously fast to the bottom where it gradually returned to a flat surface, allowing the sheets to slow down safely at the end.

I'd only met Qall twice, but from what I could tell, he was a really good kid. I gutted another fish, then placed my knife on the board.

"You can go ahead and leave if you want, but you need to promise me that you'll go straight to Qall's. If his parents aren't home though, I want you coming straight back to the river," I said.

"I promise, Mom," he replied, quickly rinsing his hands in the soap tub.

"I'll stop by Qall's on my way home later," I said, kissing him on the top of his head, "I love you."

Five

As the infrequent vehicles continued to drone by, it became more and more evident to Braxton and Diana that their affections were a bit indiscrete. It may have been late at night, but anyone who happened to glance up at them in the crevice beneath the bridge would not require a lot of imagination to transform what they saw into something it wasn't.

"You're a very brave woman, Diana," he grinned, drawing back from her, "It hasn't been easy for me to keep from electrocuting you."

"I must say," she replied, turning to see a vehicle slowing down as it passed, "I was wondering how you were doing with that."

The vehicle started backing up, then a light came on at the side. The beam spotlighted the ground, then shone along the sidewalk and finally aimed at the two of them. Although they could no longer see much beyond the blinding glare of the spotlight, they could hear the sound of a door opening and closing.

"Hey, up there. What's going on?" the male voice called.

Diana held her hand, shading her eyes from the intense light.

"The storm took us by surprise, so we figured we'd hang out here until it passes," Diana said.

The man had walked up the hill and was now standing in view of them. He was wearing a uniform of some sort with markings on it similar to those of The Guard on the Blaze Continent.

"I thought you were a couple of kids from the high school. They've been known to tip a few drinks up here from time to time," he said, "Where were you headed when the storm came, 'cause we have to admit, this isn't going to pass us by for a while from what I hear."

"We were..." Braxton began, drawing the folded sheet of paper out of his pocket and opening it up, "We were headed to the Lynn Theater."

Their first target was listed as working at the theater in this city. The man was staring curiously at Braxton's paper, so he quickly folded it and returned it to his pocket.

"The Lynn? That's clear on the other side of town and I'm fairly certain their last showing was around nine or ten," the man said, "What are the gloves for?"

Braxton realized then that it wasn't the paper that brought a curious glance from the man, but rather his hands holding the paper. Diana reached out and took a hold of Braxton's hand.

"Burns," she said by way of explanation, "He was caught in a fire and it damaged a lot of his skin."

The man continued looking curiously at both of them. Braxton was beginning to wonder if the man was simply born with a natural accusatory expression since he somehow had a way of making them feel they should be guilty of something. Finally the man nodded.

"You his mother?" he asked.

"What are-" Braxton started.

"Yes I am," she said, squeezing his hand in hers, "And I think I should be getting him home now."

He nodded again, then stepped back as he watched them rise from the ground.

"You were really heading for the Lynn?" he asked.

"Yes we were," Braxton said.

"What's playing?" he asked, crossing his arms in front of him.

Braxton shrugged, not really even sure what the man was asking. Diana simply smiled at the man and started down the hill while keeping a hold of Braxton's hand.

“Why don’t you hop in the car and I’ll take you home,” the man said, “Whereabouts do you live?”

“I don’t mean to be rude, sir, but we really would thank you to just leave us alone. You’re getting kind of pushy and I don’t really trust you enough to get in your vehicle,” she said, increasing her pace now.

“I have a right to be pushy when two citizens are discovered hiding under a bridge. Then when they’re questioned, they start feeding me a bunch of lies about a movie theater and getting caught in a storm,” the man said, watching them scurry down the hill and out into the rain, “Not really sure who you’re up to, but I’d pick another town to do it in.”

Braxton and Diana rushed out into the cold rain, never taking a moment to look back. Knowing that there was a possibility the man would get into his vehicle, turn around, and come pressure them further for information, they decided to get off the road and find somewhere more secluded to hide out.

“I guess this really *is* a paranoid era for the people of Earth,” Braxton said, following her behind a building, then down an alley toward another road.

“Yeah, he sure had a lot of questions. I wonder if he’s part of the Earth military,” she said.

They almost approached the other road before catching sight of that same vehicle from before sitting at the corner. The spotlight on the side of the car was shining down one of the alleys. They quickly ducked back into the shadow of the building. Braxton tested the door on the side of the building, but it was locked. He then moved around the front of the building, finding two large bay doors covered in windows. Each door had a handle at the bottom, so he reached down and tugged one. The enormous door lifted, then fell again on its own.

“It’s open,” Braxton called for Diana.

He lifted the door again, waving her to duck underneath before the door fell again. He quickly ducked into the building, assisting the door to closing again. He was still able to see the rainy world outside, which meant that the Earth military man would also be able to see him if he drove by.

“It’s a vehicle bay,” Diana said, drawing his attention to the black vehicle labeled “Studebaker” in the room with them.

“We need to get away from the windows in case the military man drives by,” Braxton said, approaching the vehicle.

Diana opened the side door, causing a light to come on inside the vehicle. She peered in at the sofa-shaped pilot’s seat.

“Let’s hide out in here for now,” she said.

Braxton ducked in, unfortunately leaving her seat wet from his dripping clothing as he slipped across. She slipped in afterward, then closed the door. The light in the cabin turned off. She opened the door again just a crack to cause the light to come back on.

“Look at these control panels,” she muttered, “I wonder if it flies as well as drives.”

“I wish we knew how to make it work,” he said, tugging at the large control wheel.

They tested all the controls, making sure not to do anything that would accidentally bring the vehicle online. Braxton opened up a small cabinet that was filled with two paper maps, a foldable knife that he couldn’t seem to close, and a pack of little paper tubes labeled “Lucky Strikes.”

“What would they use these for?” he asked, sniffing the brown flakes that he dumped from the tube, “Seasoning for food maybe?”

She glanced at the brown flakes in his hand, then shrugged. She opened one of the maps, trying to figure out how they were read. It was clearly a map, but none of the markings made any sense.

“I’m thinking we should get some sleep while we have a chance. I might be soaked, but I’m getting tired enough that it doesn’t really matter to me,” she said, turning to him.

“You can use my black bag as a pillow if it helps. Heck, you can use my shoulder too,” he said, drawing his arm around her.

“I think I might have to take you up on that offer,” she smiled, ducking under his arm and resting her head on him, closing her eyes.

Underworld

Not again! I was furious and I've now decided I will never trust that boy alone again.

"I'm sorry," Qall said, holding the door open, "I did hope he would come by today, though."

I know I was being rude to a boy who didn't do anything wrong, but I turned away without saying another word. It wasn't Qall's fault that Elix never showed up.

I rushed up the tunnels, taking every shortcut I knew to get to the surface. I had no intention of being nice this time. He knew the rules and he knew how I felt.

Moments later, I was at the Upper Mount Doorway – the only doorway Elix ever used. In his mind, this was our safest entrance to the Upperlands, but I'd already told him that with the new digging operations up there, no entrance was safe anymore.

"Elix!" I shouted, realizing that he was nowhere nearby, "Elix!"

I was screaming his name as I walked along the edge of the cliff. My heart literally dropped from beneath my stomach when I saw a violet glow two cliffs down below. I could see the brownish figures of probably a dozen Uplanders with a glowing figure of violet in their midst.

Even if I screamed, they wouldn't hear me at this distance. Even if I ran down the secret path, it would take half a pass of the Night Orb to reach them down below. I screamed nevertheless.

"ELIX!"

I screamed again and again, tears pouring from my eyes as my heart shattered within me. Two of my own people wrapped me in their arms and dragged me from the cliff side. They brought me back into the tunnels, and all the while I was screaming his name.

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