

LORE CARD 004 "THE WEAKNESS OF DEMONS"



She coughed into her shoulder, like she always did when trying to hide it. The dust was terrible, and if he didn't set the cruiser down soon, she'd go into a full asthma attack. He knew that, and did his thing too, where he just looked away and pretended not to notice. That's what she wanted, for the cough to just go unmentioned.

"Why didn't they just blow them all up or something...instead of dumping them all out here?" She had to shout to be heard, which brought on another fit of coughing. So she tried to make it seem like she was clearing her throat instead. She was asking about the stonewisps, devious artificial intelligence imps coded into the computronium embedded in building materials dating back thousands of years to the Merchant Wars. Masters of propaganda and brainwashing tactics, manipulation and cult methods, stonewisps were planted in those

days for the sole purpose of convincing people to do things, even as extreme as suicide if that's what was needed.

"They tried." He shouted back. And that said all you needed to know about how effective the stonewisps could be. In fact, the wastes where they were headed were littered with stonewisps, possibly with thousands of them. She turned to see a pile of broken masonry and a busted statue with sparkling eyes lying on its side as they whizzed past.

"Was that some back there?"

He nodded, then he glanced back at her and tapped his thumb to his right nostril, indicating she needed to wipe her nose. When she did, a bright red spot streaked across the back of her hand. Her nose was bleeding. She rubbed it on her shirt and sat on her hand, avoiding his eyes.

He shouted again, "There's a poison wind out here. You need to know that. It's got a deep whistling sound to it. If they start trying to convince you to go somewhere out in the open and you hear that, you'll know what they're up to."

"Why would they do that?"

"Dry, strong and hot wind. Moves fast and comes on quickly. Will suck the moisture right out of your lungs and throat, but heat you up faster than you can cool off with sweat. I mean even people with good lungs will drop where they stand in that kind of wind. They'll go for the easy kill if they can, and trick you into where they know the wind's gonna blow."

She twisted to look back at the rubble they'd passed, the statue with the sparkling eyes. When she looked back at the man driving her into the heart of the wastes, he was rubbing his wrist against his right eye. This wasn't easy for him, but it was their last chance for her. Truly. She knew that.

Resting her hand on his arm, "I'll make it. And they'll let me in this time."

It broke him, and he could barely catch his breath. Codeswarm candidates are supposed to be accepted into the school first, then dropped out here years into the program close to graduation. If they're going to let you steer tornadoes and hack the very landscape your soldiers tread, if you'll wield that kind of power just by the code you write, you have to be rock solid and unbreakable. Surviving out here with demons like the stonewisps was how they tested that.

When the dirigible cruiser settled onto the sand, he looked away from her to steady himself before showing his face. His threadbare shirt was ripped and patched, his shoes worn such that a toe poked out. He had nothing to offer her but this one chance. And it was a slim, desperate one.

"I wish I could."

She held up a hand to stop him, "I'm not as frail as they will think. And I know the weakness of demons."

He didn't understand her, and never had, so tried to smile and said "And what is the weakness of demons?"

Her crooked smile was beautiful and cunning as she hoisted a rucksack twice as large as her tiny body, "They turn on each other. And that's exactly what they're going to do here after I have some words with them. I can be a very convincing girl when I need to be."