

The Laborer

Sidic Fulo jumped awake to the screeching noise of his alarm. He looked at the face of the clock, hoping that it would tell him he had today off, but he knew it wouldn't. The red numbers read painfully in his mind. It was only five. *But when the alarm rings, you get up*, and Sidic peeled the sheets from his body and sat up with a groan and thumped the alarm off. Everyone in the pod was already awake, but he didn't want to be a disturbance. Putting his feet on the floor he was reminded that the sandstorms blew in last night; his entire pod was covered in a thin layer of grit. "Shiska," he muttered, standing. The laborers closest to him grunted in agreement.

He weaved his way over to the Task Table that hung on the wall near the door. He wiped the dust from the screen and tapped the center three times, waking the display. Sidic skimmed the daily distributed news while his podmates shuffled about: The Watchers had beaten three people to death in Qinam for "Seditionist Actions", Risok was still negotiating with nearby cities, trying to address their water shortage, and there had been two explosions in Lakhur last night, prompting the Watchers to enforce curfew indefinitely. *Life as usual*, Sidic thought. The bombs in Lakhur would make travel in that region nearly impossible, but then, nobody really traveled anyway. Even moving from one city to the next for a delivery brought you under the scrutiny of the Watcher's overseers..

Sidic tabbed past the news and moved on to his orders for the day. He prayed that he would not be assigned to the mines again. He had worked there twice already this week, and he wasn't confident he could survive another fourteen hour work day in the hot and dark. It took the Task Table a moment to retrieve his orders and he prayed all the harder. Finally the readout began to type out his orders:

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ORDERS RECEIVED FOR LABORER 0-K14632-CCR19

// SIDIC FULO, AGE 27

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DATE 15.15.3062

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0-K14632-CCR19 WILL REPORT TO //_MAKRANA PORT_\\

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DUTY: COURIER

START: 0615

END: 2200

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VEHICLE WILL BE PROVIDED
DAMAGE TO VEHICLE DURING USE WILL RESULT IN PUNITIVE ACTION
FAILURE TO ARRIVE ON TIME WILL RESULT IN PUNITIVE ACTION
FAILURE TO COMPLETE DUTIES WILL RES-

Sidic tabbed the display again, pulling up the location he needed to report to. He didn't need to read all of the reasons the Watchers made to beat him. Most of the time following the rules wasn't enough anyway. The route to Makrana Port would take him through two checkpoints and would take a little more than thirty five minutes. It was already 0515. He threw his clothes on, grabbed a Ration Stick from his dispenser, and pulled his jacket from its hook on his way to the door. His seven podmates, kept their heads down, preparing for their days.

The door scraped open and the dim light of morning greeted Sidic. That was maybe the only thing he liked about being up this early: it wasn't hot enough to roast a gutfly yet. He walked towards the jetcycle rack and realized that their covers had been blown off in the storm last night. He cursed under his breath, opened his breakfast, bit down on the end of it, and started to work at the motor. He would need to clear away the intake if he was going anywhere.

Sidic's neighbor Wijo was doing the same thing a few meters from him. Neither neighbor greeted the other this morning, but Wijo cursed aloud, "Tohavia grit-guster! Mucked up my intake."

"Uh-huh." Sidic still held his Rat Stick in his mouth, "wharyouwarkinduhday?"

"Got the day off. First one in twenty-three days." Wijo said.

"Huckyman. Enzhoyit!" Sidic broke off the stick in his mouth and stood up. He reached over and flipped his bike on. It coughed to life, shooting dust clouds out from under it as it lifted off of the ground. He climbed on and began to back it into the street. He blinked hard twice and brought up his HUD. It was 0525.

"You?" Wijo shouted over the motor.

"Docks."

"Be careful. Checkpoints are bad this morning. Bombs in Lakhur got the Watchers crawly."

"Thanks Wijo, enjoy your day off." Sidic rolled back on the throttle and headed into the city.

Early rides usually allowed for a little more freedom than the normal commute. The roads were mostly quiet until about 0600. Today the roads were strangely coagulated. Sidic weaved around as many people as he could until he reached the first checkpoint. Dirahl's sister suns, Sulloni and Hecatia, had crept above the horizon and were already making the day hotter than comfortable. The Watchers at the first checkpoint made it clear that they weren't happy about the heat either. One by one, Sidic made his way to the front, his papers already in hand.

"Papers." The Watcher barked.

"Hey they are right here man, relax." Sidic said. The Watcher snatched the papers from his hand with a grunt and looked them over. He continued to grunt every few seconds and Sidic wasn't sure if he was responding to a voice in his ear, or to the second Watcher who had been speaking since he pulled up. The Watcher spat on the ground. A dark, thick, tar-like substance that splashed onto Sidic's foot. "Come on..." He said, to himself, reaching down to wipe his boot.

"Is there a problem?" The second Watcher snapped down the sights of his rifle.

"Whoa, whoa, whoa. I was just-"

"Is there a problem, slug?" The first shouted.

"No. No problem at all." He kept his head down, not making eye contact.

The Watcher leaned down and, with a voice like stone dragged across stone, said "Good," and smacked Sidic's papers into his hand. "Papers." He said. Sidic took his documents back, tucked them into his coat, and accelerated away from the checkpoint. His HUD read 0545.

It took another twenty minutes of weaving through the bustling streets before Sidic got to the second checkpoint. Because this checkpoint was much closer to the heart of the city, the number of Watchers patrolling was more than triple that of the last stop, and they were moving people into sloppy lines, some into vans. Most of the people arrested at checkpoints had "outdated" paperwork, some had contraband, some just look at a Watcher the wrong way and end up losing a week and a half of pay for "disorderly conduct." Again, Sidic pulled his papers from his jacket and slowly moved toward the gate.

Watchers paced the lines of worn, tired people, checking identification numbers, authenticating registrations, and asking questions about each person's destination. The road was completely congested. As Sidic turned into and around the lines and pulled up to the gate a Watcher Stepped forward.

"Turn off your jetbike and step to the side." His voice like gravel.

"Yessir. Is something wrong?" Sidic asked.

"I don't know, is there?" The Watcher approached the bike and spot checked it for compartments. Sidic knew better than to continue the conversation. He stepped away from his bike and waited, scuffing his shoes across the concrete. "Where are you headed?"

"Makrana Port, Dock 3. Courier duty." Sidic said.

"When do you report?" The Watcher asked from behind his mask, which Sidic noticed had a smear of blood where the right brow should be. Sidic looked down at his watch, it read 0601.

"In fourteen minutes." He replied. The Watcher stood up and approached him. Suddenly another Watcher jogged over to Sidic.

"Hands on your head *Ghulla!*" He yelled, his gun was raised, aiming directly at Sidic's chest.

"Wait! What's going on?" Sidic raised his arms and laced his fingers behind his head. Panic began to paint his face. The Watcher drew closer and swung his rifle hard into Sidic's gut, knocking the wind out of him and dropping him to his knees.

“Your jetbike was seen leaving Lakhur last night, shortly after the bombings.”

“That’s...I dont know where the bike was last night. I was given access to it this morning. You can check my authorizations, I...I swear.” Sidic was still trying to draw a full breath. The first Watcher stepped to Sidic’s side and brought his hand down to his face. It was covered in sand. “Why is your bike full of sand *Ghulla*?” he asked.

“The cover blew off of it last night in the storm.” Sidic looked up at both Watchers. The second brought his rifle down on Sidic’s face this time, knocking him flat to the ground. He saw stars and black blots. He tasted blood.

“Don’t lie to us *Ghulla*.” The first Watcher picked him up by the collar of his jacket. Sidic struggled to pull his feet underneath him. “Where were you last night?”

“I was at home, I swear to the Gods.” Sidic’s vision was now bright and blurry. “I-I left the mines at 2300 and went straight home to sleep. Check my Codec.” He reached into his coat for his Codec.

“He’s reaching!” The first Watcher shouted to the other and stepped back. The second hit Sidic in face again. He felt his teeth loosen and he lost his balance. He sprawled to the ground, dropping his Codec at the feet of the first Watcher.

“PI-Please, I have to go to work. I-I-I swear...” Sidic mumbled through the blood in his mouth. Tears streamed down his face, but he was unsure if they were the result of pain or fear. As he attempted to lift himself from the ground he realized he was now surrounded. The Watcher nearest to his Codec retrieved it and began to thumb through it.

“Looks like this *Ghulla* is telling the truth.” He handed the device to a Watcher that Sidic assumed was his superior. She looked it over and tossed it back on the ground. It slid to a stop in front of Sidic, who remained hunched over on his knees. The display flickered dead, the screen cracked.

“Looks like you will need a new Codec, Sidic Fulo. Now get up and get to work. You have ten minutes to report.”

“Ye-Yes ma’am.” Sidic pushed himself to his feet only for the second Watcher to strike him again, this time just above his right knee. He felt a crack and stumbled, but refused to let himself fall. The Watchers around him laughed and jeered as he limped back to his bike. He flipped it to life and accelerated away as fast as he could without warranting a chase. He blinked through the blood in his eyes at his watch and saw that it read 0609.

Sidic arrived at Makrana Port, Dock 3 at 0616. He wiped as much blood as he could from his face, cursed under his breath, and limped to check-in. The woman behind the counter grimaced at his condition and rang him in through the door.

“Sidic Fulo. Laborer number 0-K14-”

“I know who you are.” The woman cut him off. “You’re late.”

“Yes ma’am. There was a mixup at Checkpoint 1.22.1.” Sidic responded, realizing that there was still blood in his mouth.

“And you look like Shiska.” Sidic didn’t say anything else. She was right. He looked down at his boots and exhaled short and sharply, the pain in his ribs surprising him. “Can you still make deliveries?”

“Yes. Yes ma’am.” Sidic answered weakly. She looked at him dryly, unimpressed by the pain he was in, and slid a ledger beneath her window.

“Your route will take you directly to your end time. Late delivery is unacceptable is that understood?”

“Yes ma’am.” Sidic grabbed the ledger and tucked it under his arm.

“And because you were late today you will take no breaks but to eat your lunch. And I am docking your pay by...” she tapped at her computer, “...twelve percent.”

“Yes ma’am, thank you ma’am.” Sidic nodded his head. It was better than calling the Watchers, or getting his pay docked the usual twenty five percent. The woman behind the counter smiled wide. Wide enough to make Sidic’s skin crawl. Her teeth were white and menacing.

“Have a great day!”