

Ripples from the Past

Chapter 30 – The Catacombs

“Vargouille, creatures that resembled flying wolves. They were considered myths by many, creatures from other planes of existence, evil planes. They screeched and descended upon the enemy on the stairs, routing them.”

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“There must be thousands of them.” Said Juno.

“More lights, let’s have a good look at our army.” Said Kittara.

Water was important to many of the chaos factions. It acted as a conduit for certain dark powers, easing their entry into different worlds. The dripping sound that permeated every chamber in the catacombs, originated in the place of meeting. In the centre of the vast cavern was a broken statue, all that remained of a once mighty statue of Yam Kermul himself. A slow steady stream of water, fell from the cavern ceiling, covering the statue. The dripping sound was made when the water fell into a small pool which surrounded the ruined statue. A viscous pool, which hinted at being more than just plain water.

“Too much water.” Said Mingal. “This is bad, anything of the darkness might enter this place.”

“Nearly all of the factions have agreed to assist me.” Said Kittara. “Or they’ve been persuaded to remain neutral.”

Were there any real enemies left among the factions of chaos ? If there were, Kittara knew nothing about them. There might be a few enemies left in other realities, or the gaps between worlds, but she doubted if any of those constituted a real threat. Kittara even felt confident enough, to address the undead in the ancient language of Leng, the dark tongue of Mendera’s oldest enemy.

“Welcome, I am here with the blessing of the Lady.” She said.

The accepted wisdom stated that the undead were silent, without voice apart from an angry growl. There were words coming back at her though, some recognisable sentences.

“Praise the Lady of the Shrine.” Was clearly spoken by many.

Not that all the thousands surrounding her were the catacomb’s infamous undead. There were wraiths in human form and other things, unspeakable horrors. Kittara would take them all if she could, even the few who couldn’t tolerate any form of light. The fortress had its own lower levels, which needed to be defended.

“All of you are welcome to fight with me.” Said Kittara. “I can remove you from this place and once the battle is over, you will be free to roam the rifts.”

“We come and go as we please, Kittara of Mendera. Why should we serve you ?”

Again it wasn’t as the elders of Leng had told her. Perceived reality stated that the undead were a leaderless rabble, yet a revenant stood before her, acting as though he was their leader.

“You know my name, may I know yours ?” She asked.

“My name was Gessereth Osranetherer, though most now know me simply as Gesse. I entered this place willingly, after being betrayed by my brother. He went on to become emperor, whereas I..... I became the pitiful wretch you see in front of you.”

Not so pitiful, the revenant was huge, standing a good twelve feet tall. Strong too, revenants were almost invincible against most of the warriors who inhabited the rifts. Kittara could understand why the undead accepted him as their leader.

“We crave the end of everything as a release from what we have become.” Said Gesse. “Your aims are known Kittara, the obsession of Mendera, to keep chaos locked away for eternity. Why should we help you ?”

“I brought a chaos creature with me, now a loyal servant of Mendera.” She replied. “He can explain why he wishes to fight.”

Oh, that had been a mistake. It was as if thousands had spoken as one, saying ‘No’ with one voice. Gesse was actually sighing, if a revenant was capable of sighing.

“We mean no disrespect to you Kittara, friend of those in the darkness beyond Leng.” Said Gesse. “If you followed your creature, we’d listen to him, but he serves you. It is your words we wish to hear. I ask you again, why should we serve you ?”

Why indeed ? She’d hoped they’d agree because the Silver Lady had sent her and she travelled with a creature who understood their plight. If they refused to listen to Mingal, she had no plan. They were hardly likely to be swayed, because it was the right thing to do. Kittara decided to try being honest with the undead and hope for the right outcome.

“The 1st rift is never wiped clean.” She said. “There is no time of renewal, no end of everything. The ruins of Tomma-Goran’s city should have been wiped clean a very long time ago, but they weren’t. Your suffering has continued and might well carry on for eternity. I can understand how you must feel. Who are the oldest among you ?”

“The shadows, they were here first.” She heard several voices say.

They were right at the back, shadow beings with little form and no language.

“The shadows were here before the great city.” Said Gesse. “They inhabited the lowest caverns then, though none know where they came from.”

Kittara looked at the things of shadow and noticed other revenants among them. Instead of just a few undead, there was a potential army that might well be more than a match for whoever attacked the fortress. She just had to convince them to fight for her.

“I know where the shadows came from, they were put here by Sevril-Narge, the great bug goddess herself. Placed under the great city, to cause conflict and foment trouble. They were her dark creatures, created by her. They are welcome to join me, as are you all.”

“The question..... Do I need to ask it again ?” Asked Gesse.

“I am not here to threaten anyone.” Said Kittara. “If you say no, there is a chance he will be set free, the great crawling chaos. The entire multiverse will return to a state of chaos and you will all obtain the death you crave. What if we win without you though, what becomes of you all then ?”

It did sound like a mild threat and she was glad that Juno began to handle the hilt of her blade.

Kittara felt a little sorry for Tejan, whose skin hadn’t become as tough as hers. If it came to fight, she might not survive a battle with thousands of the undead.

“What can you offer, that is better than the release of death ?” Asked Gesse.

One of the undead near her still had a little power left in him, she could feel it. He might now be a mindless monster dressed in rags, but he hadn’t always been like that.

“What position did you once hold in the world above ?” She asked him.

The poor creature, his body decaying, while part of his mind remained stuck inside the rotting remnants of what he had once been. He even smelt of death.

“I was.....Sorcerer..... The Guild.”

“You were once a sorcerer with the guild, when the city wasn’t a ruin ?” Asked Kittara.

“Yes.”

"You were all in respected positions once." Said Kittara. "No one wastes the powers of a converted chaos creature by giving them a menial position. There is one of the eternal with me, who believes she can restore some of your faculties. Instead of remaining here for eternity, there is a chance that you can become more like you used to be. I won't lie to you, there is no promise, no guarantee of a miracle."

"All might-bes, maybes and ifs." Said Gesse. "What can you promise?"

"I give you my word, the word of Kittara of Mendera. Fight with me and I will gladly spend the rest of my immortal life, looking for ways to either return you to a state of dignity, or helping you find the release you seek."

It didn't sound much of an offer to her, but how many offers had been made to them during the past few dozen millennia? Kittara thought that it was probably none and that they were the first visitors in a very long time.

"Besides, there's a good chance we might all die in battle. So what have you got to lose?" She asked. It was an odd sound, a revenant laughing. Gesse began and the other revenants joined in. Laughter is contagious, even among the undead. The strange wheezing noise didn't sound much like a laugh, but thousands of them joined in.

"You have given us a rare gift Kittara, honesty." Said Gesse. "We will fight by your side. As you rightly said, we've got nothing to lose."

Kittara heard the Lady of the Shrine in her head and she too was laughing.

"Oh Kittara, you are a tricky one. I said you could take some of my creatures, not thousands. You may have them though.....So tricky.....We really could be sisters."

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There had been what looked like a group of human mercenaries, grouping for an attack. Delmus had seen them, gathering at the far end of the passageway, that led into the chamber. He'd powered up his RM9, firing just once. There had been a lot of noise when he'd fired the powerful weapon and not all of it was the screaming of those about to die. There were several small explosions, some at least an hour after he'd used the RM9. They were like the aftershocks from a powerful earthquake. Silly of course to use the weapon, he might have destroyed something vital and caused the death of them all. He was becoming desperate though and part of him no longer cared about dying. A good part of his mental state was caused by Trey, who was fast approaching the moment of death. Trey was trying to be brave about it of course and not fill their ears with his screams, but it was a small chamber and he had to be suffering a lot of pain.

"He said his feet hurt Delmus, so we took off his boots." Said Dava. "His feet have gone as black as his hands and it's spreading up his legs. We have to do something."

There was only one way to help Trey now. The only question was who was going to do it. Delmus followed her to where Trey was lying on the ground, surrounded by worried looking faces. Was he contagious? Should he tell them to move away? It all seemed pointless. They were probably all infected by now, three were coughing. Delmus decided to let them remain and comfort their comrade.

"I can't feel my feet anymore." Said Trey. "My legs hurt though, they really hurt."

There had been some optimism when Trey's cough had cleared up. He had no headache, though he was still fatigued all the time. After about a day and a half, his fingers had started to blacken as the tissue decayed. There were splits in his fingers now, with tiny green fungus tendrils growing inside them. His hands were now dead, no longer causing him pain. Now it was his legs, which made him screw up his face and grip Dava's hand.

"I'm not leaving this awful place Delmus." Said Trey. "Kill me, please. I'd do it myself, but my hands....."

There had been the constant hope that Luri would arrive and heal Trey, before taking them all back to Mendera. It was his fault they were there though, his stubbornness in refusing to leave. Luri might come, he hoped she'd be there before the seventh day. Trey would be dead by then though, after suffering unimaginable agony.

"Very well." Said Delmus. "I need to talk to the others first."

He took them as far away from Trey as he could, though The Damned could hear sounds that others missed. There was a chance that Trey might hear them discussing his death, but that couldn't be helped.

"Trey will still be hard to kill, we don't die easily." He said. "I will do the deed, but you all knew him far better than I did. It would be better if a friend took away his pain."

He meant Dava of course, Trey's lover. He didn't want to single her out though, it seemed unfair.

"It should be me." She said. "It has to be painless though Delmus, tell me what must be done?"

He had a demon blade tucked down the side of his boot. Not a gift, he'd won it by combat, killing the high level demon it had once belonged to. He handled the blade carefully, giving it to Dava.

"Use with care, demon blades don't care who they bite." He said. "It will penetrate his flesh and end his life, though you may have to use some force. Call us when it is done, his body will need to be incinerated."

They waited and there was a scream of anguish a few minutes later, from Dava. She was gone when they incinerate what remained of Trey and didn't re-join them for some time.

"Thank you." She said, as she gave back the demon blade

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Estrid could be darker than Luri sometimes, which was often the way with living deities. She'd once brought hundreds back to life, who she thought had been wrongly sacrificed in her honour. They'd died by immolation, a practise she considered particularly barbaric. A few years later she'd covered one of her priests in flames, purely because his indecisiveness irritated her. Such things happened if you were a God though, no one ever mentioned things that were out of character, or just plain wrong.

"This is not my world." She told Sveta. "I have no idea what powers I still possess."

Their enemies were humans in atmosphere suits, though they had no idea that Delmus had fought against similar servants of their enemies. Sveta was using her blaster to good effect, while Estrid began to weave the image of creatures into her thoughts. Their Lummel were making the occasional jab with their spears, but spears are useless against energy weapons. The thoughts of deities can be both wonderful and dangerous things. Their thoughts, even their merest whims, have the potential to become reality.

"We're being attacked Luri, more about to arrive in the elevator. Your help would be appreciated."

No answer and Luri looked to be deep inside her own thoughts. No matter, Estrid had already woven a dozen creatures inside her mind, which she sent to attack the mercenaries on the stairs. Her creations looked vaguely human, but with very few facial features. They had no weapons, using just their fists and feet against the mercenaries.

"My creations are simple things, born of mud." She told Sveta. "They have strength though and will easily destroy the enemy on the stairs. I recommend that you aim your weapon at the occupants of the elevator."

The elevator doors opened, to reveal several mercenaries in atmosphere suits and two of the small silver creatures, which had caused so much trouble for Delmus. Luri helped, raising her left hand and filling the elevator with flames, before going back to concentrating on her own thoughts. Sveta used her blaster to finish clearing out the elevator, though the small silver creatures were incredibly hard to kill.

“They’re like the thing I found on Pesallia.” Said Sveta. “Chlo said it was as tough as old boots. That one died from walking into a growler trap, several thousand volts of electricity.”

“Good to know.” Said Estrid.

“There, three Vargouille.” Said Luri. “I was trying to create something far more impressive, but my powers are being affected by this world.”

Vargouille, creatures that resembled flying wolves. They were considered myths by many, creatures from other planes of existence, evil planes. They screeched and descended upon the enemy on the stairs, routing them. They joined with Estrid’s creatures, chasing the mercenaries down the stairs. Sveta was running after them.

“Let our creatures do the hard work Sveta.” Said Luri.

“Why should they have all the fun?” Shouted Sveta, running down the stairs.

“We’d better go after her.” Said Luri. “She’s obviously forgotten that we’re providing her with a breathable atmosphere.”

They caught up with the dark angel, allowing her to have her fun. Her tail whipped through the air, ripping right through the metal suite of a mercenary, skewering his heart. Sveta looked happy.

“One more for Haan.” She shouted, as each enemy merc died.

“I owe her so much.” Luri whispered. “I was concentrating on the time lines, finding the exact moment he died, preparing to bring him back..... The times lines are jumbled and interwoven, it’s complicated.”

“I understand, if he lives Sveta will keep protecting him, putting herself at risk.” Said Estrid.

“Eventually there was a high likelihood that Sveta would die.”

“You knew that?”

“Yes and so did Sveta.” Said Estrid. “The multiverse told her, warned her that keeping Haan alive was almost certain to cause her own death. You did the right thing by not bringing him back to life.”

“I am so glad you said that..... I owe her so much.”

“Hmmm.... I wouldn’t tell her though, she might not see it from our point of view.”

They had to run down the stairs to keep up with their creatures and Sveta, as they carved their way through the enemy.

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There had been no real need for Jen to enter the habitation building on Boomers, but she felt the need to reassure the miners. Two thirds of them had brought their families down to the surface and were understandably nervous about the sudden evacuation. As with miners everywhere in the empire, once they were sure their families were safe, their thoughts turned to money.

“Sorry, I know what you said at the meeting.....”

There was going to be a ‘but’ and the inevitable run through of key points again. Jen liked to think she was good at explaining things and Chlo had been there to fill in the gaps. The woman in front of her was a miner who’d travelled halfway across empire to be there though, so Jen was happy to answer her questions. Just so long as another twenty miners didn’t ask her the same questions.

“Ask me about anything you’re not sure about.” Said Jen. “My only job today is make sure you’re all safely on your way in the next three hours.”

"We were all promised good pay for this job." Said the miner. "I know you said we'd all be paid and everyone trusts the empire.....But will we get the full pay for the contract, plus the completion bonus?"

"You will, in imperial credits, as promised. We're taking everyone to Mendera and there will be a free vacation available at a luxury hotel in Calmis-An, right on the coast. Only if you wish to go of course, otherwise we'll get you on the first vessel home."

There was that look in her eyes, the woman wasn't going to go away that easily. Jen had already dealt with about a dozen such queries. Miners were a superstitious lot and there had been a few strange deaths. A little nervous curiosity had to be expected.

"My children say they've seen things, outside. They have nothing else to do all day of course, apart from looking out of the windows. Then there was talk about the strange machinery in the deepest levels. We're going to be alright aren't we?"

Jen wasn't into reassuring hugs, though she did touch the miner on her shoulder.

"You will be fine, your children will be fine." She said. "The machinery was found to be unstable, which is why we're evacuating everyone. It's just a precaution and you'll soon be leaving Boomers. I hope you accept the vacation, Calmis-An is beautiful at this time of year."

"I will, the kids will love it."

Jen had learned not to mention spouses, deep cold mining was a career well known for destroying relationships. The miner left looking a little happier, which had been her aim. Jen had walked a mere ten paces, before another miner approached, two young children holding his hands. He had that look in his eye, the look of worried curiosity.

"Sorry, I know you mentioned it at the meeting, but..."

Crap, it was going to be a long day. After Boomers, there would be the same routine to evacuate the miners from Sessana. Two thousand miners and their families, meant close to five thousand people to be moved to safety. They'd do it of course, the empire was famed for its efficiency in such matters.

"Yes, what did you want to know?" She asked.

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Hol would have probably attacked the creatures who were their new army of defenders, if Kittara hadn't arrived earlier, with a warning.

"Some are old enemies, there are even some of Sevril-Narge's shadow creatures in their number. Revenants, the wraiths of warriors killed in the first war to capture The City of the Lost God.

Phantoms and other creatures of the darkness, which even I don't recognise." Kittara had told her.

"Mostly they're the undead though, close to three thousand of them. They will soon all be here to fight with us, even those that shun the light."

They'd all been near to her, the people she liked to think of as the backbone of their garrison.

"Do they have their own supplies?" Kerr had asked. "There is little here to feed such a number."

"Keep the revenants hungry." Said Silky. "It will make them fight harder, if they are only allowed to eat what they kill."

"Are these creatures..... Safe?" Asked Rhian.

"Of course not." Said Kittara. "Will they try to eat the children? No, they will not."

"The undead require no food." Said Celli. "Just a little water from the well and we have plenty of that."

"Do they have a leader?" Asked Mo.

“They are led by a revenant who was once the brother of an emperor.” Kittara had told them. “His name is Gessereth Osranetherer, though he goes by the name of Gesse.”

“Good, I doubt if I could pronounce his full name.” Said Mo.

Louelle always showed the world when she was agitated. She began to unravel her long tail, tapping the end of it on the ground.

“I have heard of him.” She said. “Once an honourable man, but can any revenant really be trusted ?”

“Why are they fighting with us ?” Asked Celli. “Did Mingal manage to convince them ?”

She’d never seen Kittara shrug before, but she’d shrugged then.

“I made them a few personal promises, but it wasn’t that.” She’d told them. “To be honest, I’m not sure why they agreed to fight beside us. They have little to gain, but my guess is that they’ll fight, because they have absolutely nothing to lose. The blessing of the Silver Lady might have helped of course.”

“You saw her, the Lady of the Shrine ?” Asked Silky.

“I did, she said we could almost be sisters, but that is a story for another day. You will need to keep the rift warriors calm, I’ll soon be back with our army of the undead.”

Kittara had kept her word, though Hol hadn’t known what to expect. Was Kittara powerful enough to pull thousands of the undead behind her, with her strange cloud of darkness ? It seemed she wasn’t, arriving with fifty or sixty creatures from the catacombs.

“She’s brought the worst.” Said Silky. “Or maybe the best, the unholy things which shun all light.”

The children were allowed to be there, after Kittara’s assurance that none of their new friends, would think of Seesha and Mix as food.

“They scare me.” Said Seesha.

“Think how they will terrify our enemies.” Said Celli. “Look, they’re descending into the underground places, the areas of total darkness.”

“They fall through the ground.” Said Mix.

Hol still wondered if the fortress was the right place for the children, but Minraver now seemed happy for them to be there. As Mix had noticed, the creatures appeared to be largely made of shadows. After screeching at the light and a little growling, they moved downwards, right through the solid ground. Minraver had been keeping to herself, muttering as she saw the creatures that had abjured the light for a very long time.

“Sikush would love our new friends.” She muttered at Hol.

Was that implying she didn’t ? Hol was happy to have an army of any kind, even if they were the infamous undead, who had once nearly destroyed Mendera City. Plus Hol had always trusted Kittara and always would.

“The undead are arriving.” Said Silky.

Kittara was bringing them in groups of no more than fifty, allowing them to wander where they pleased. They sat mostly, in the same groups they’d arrived in. A few of those that seemed more alert, showed some excitement at being out in the light, after years in the dark catacombs. Most simply ignored everyone, sitting in groups and looking out past the fortress gates.

“They know, they feel where the attack will come from.” Said Louelle.

Hol had worried about how the tribespeople might react, but they seemed unconcerned about sharing their new home with the undead. They’d seen the creatures before of course, the ones who had roamed the rifts for several millennia.

“They don’t look that impressive.” Said Rhian. “How tough are they ?”

“Speed is the thing, they can run twice as fast as you can.” Said Mo. “And kill you simply by trampling you under foot. One nearly killed me, out near Aarabash on the 5th rift. If Luri hadn’t been there to help.....”

“I wouldn’t like to fight just one of them and we have thousands of them.” Said Celli.

“I think they’re cool.” Said Mix.

“I just wonder what Kittara promised them.” Said Kerr.

Hol wondered too, though she’d never dream of asking Kittara. Personal guarantees and promises where just that, personal. Bringing all the undead a few at a time took hours and it was nearly dark before Kittara deposited her fellow members of The Damned, near the well. They all looked tired and probably grateful to finally leave the catacombs.

“They might be on our side.” Said Tejan. “But the undead don’t have much in the way on conversation. It was a tough few hours.”

“Where is Kittara ?” Asked Hol.

“Gessee wanted to make sure none of his people were left behind.” Said Juno. “Kittara will soon be here with him and the other revenants.”

“There are other revenants ?” Asked Silky.

“There are about seven or eight of them.” Said Albas. “It was difficult to be certain in the gloom of the catacombs.”

“Eight, definitely eight.” Said Juno.

“Eight..... I’m impressed, they’re superb fighters.” Said Silky.

“What is a revenant ?” Asked Seesha.

Deference to each other’s knowledge was stopping anyone from answering. All those wise and knowledgeable minds, not wanting to step on each other’s toes. Hol decided to give the job of answering Seesha’s question, to the one most likely to have the correct answer.

“You must have seen a few revenants Louelle.” She said. “What is their origin ?”

Louelle obviously enjoyed being respected for her wealth of knowledge. The last living Kiyoh, settled her tail into a nice comfortable pile and sat on it.

“The simple answer in necromancers.” She said. “Only the most powerful have the ability to turn an ordinary creature into a revenant. A magical being, often immortal and incredibly strong. They are usually created as guards or assassins, often outliving their masters. It can be more complex than that though, with some being created when conjurations go awry. Most though, are the work of necromancers.”

“Nasty people, I’ve never met a nice necromancer.” Said Mo.

“What is a necromancer ?” Asked Seesha.

“Someone who won’t leave the dead in peace.” Said Louelle. “Mo is right in saying most are bad. On some worlds necromancy is punishable by death, but not of the rifts.”

“They wake up the dead Seesha.” Said Silky. “To use them as their slaves. The dead should always be left in peace.”

“They sound awful.” Said Seesha.

“Oh, they are.” Agreed Mo.

There was some commotion as Kittara returned, the undead making a strange hooting noise, as their leader arrived in the fortress. There must have been some undead who’d been missed, about a dozen arrived with Kittara. Mingal was striding along beside her, but most people’s attention was given to the eight huge revenants.

“They are good in a fight.” Said Louelle. “I saw one fight no less than four chaos enforcers and win.”

“There is a lot of angry demon inside a revenant.” Said Minraver.

Each of them stood about twelve feet high. They looked basically human in shape, two arms, two legs, a head in the usual place. More muscle than when they’d been alive though, much more muscle. Their jaws were strange too, looking like the jaws of wolf had been added to the face of a human. Two were female and had small breasts, which looked out of place on such brutal looking creatures. Their leader had to be the one striding towards her at quite a pace.

“Kittara described you.” Said Gesse. “I assume I’m addressing Hol Azreemy, commander of this fortress.”

The voice reminded her of Aelfraed, a slight accent of Leng. Had the revenant been there during his long immortal life ? Hol decided not ask then, but to leave such questions for the quiet times, the mellow times in the evening.

“I am Hol Azreemy.” She said. “You and your people are very welcome here.”

It was strange to see a creature so large, get down on one knee in front of her. Gesse still towered over her.

“In life I was known as Gessereth Osranetherer, one time inhabitant of The City of the Lost God. I am here to pledge my help and that of my people, for the coming battle.”

The undead began their strange hooting sound, which was taken up by some of the tribespeople. Hol could see Kerr twitching, dying to correct Gesse and tell him it was not battle, but battles.

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Aukar had a space fleet, more than enough vessels to carry what remained of his army. Nothing was state of the art, most of it bought second or third hand from dealers in the unaligned world. Nurigen had installed better engines in a few and they did have a few heavily armed needle ships. His fleet looked a little dated, but it could punch above its weight, if the need arose.

“I think we could reach Medrona in one more day, without risking a battle with the empire.” He told General Dhūlen.

He was having private meetings with General Dhūlen as General Jelran had been trying to stir up a revolt among his warriors. Jelran saw himself as the natural successor to a leader who had failed his people. At least that was how Jelran saw it. Aukar would normally have killed the treacherous general in personal combat. He needed him though, for his knowledge and ferocity in battle.

“To do the journey in one day will require us to enter the main freight routes.” Said Dhūlen.

Aukar looked at the navigation screen and recognised nothing. All the stars, galaxies and worlds were different from the multiverse he’d been pulled out of. Only Mendera was the same, the famous holy planet, centre of the great empire. There was the 1st rift too of course, which survived the regular destruction of most of the multiverse. No one really understood why the 1st rift was always spared. Aukar had long ago decided that the multiverse had a sense of humour and saving the 1st rift, was some kind of joke.

“I’ve thought it through old friend.” He said. “We’re running with a variety of Idents from different unaligned worlds. If a freighter sees us on its long range scanners, they’ll probably ignore us.”

“They might not. The war will have made everyone a little jumpy.”

“We’ll run with that then, a freighter captain who wants to be a hero.” Said Aukar. “His first notification about a strange fleet, will be to his company. They won’t exactly rush to get back to him, while all the time we’re heading towards Medrona at full speed. It might take his company hours to respond and then they’re likely to tell him to ignore it. There is no profit in raising the alarm about fleets of unknown warships.”

He could see his logic was beginning to work on Dhūlen, though his old friend still wasn't ready to agree with him.

"If we're spotted by a freighter from one of the empire worlds, they will send an encrypted and compressed data packet to their company." Said Dhūlen. "Mendera will know about us within a few hours."

"Unlikely that even Chlo will think it's the Terak fleet, heading for Medrona. We'll look like a large fleet of raiders, probably the infamous Red-Tops. Mendera will respond, but not as a matter of urgency. The worst scenario I see is arriving on Medrona, with the empire a few hours behind us."

"We might lose the fleet, if it's seen orbiting Medrona."

"Then we lose the fleet old friend. We can always buy another. Our warriors are restless and the Dredgers hate being cooped up in the storage holds. Plus every day spent skulking about in space, will give Jelran a few more supporters."

Aukar knew that Dhūlen was going to say the plan was a good one, simply by the way he folded his clawed hands in his lap. They had been friends for a very long time.

"To be honest, I grow weary of hiding, skulking as you called it." Said Dhūlen. "It is a bold plan, maybe even a dangerous plan, but it is a good plan."

"I am glad you agree. Please issue new orders to the fleet commanders."

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