

Ripples from the Past

Chapter 27 – Older or Newer Than Time

“All warriors do it of course; wonder if they’re better than another nation’s soldiers, or another planet’s fighters. It is in the nature of intelligent creatures to be competitive, part of the natural process of improvement.”

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Kittara had found some of her personal belongings in the sanctuary on Quasit. An old uniform of The Damned from before she’d died and some perfume she’d left in a cupboard. There had been boots too and several pieces of underwear, all looking as though she’d folded them up the day before. She’d tried everything on to amuse herself, but nostalgia has more power than most realise. The memories of good times wrapped themselves around her, like a warm comforting cloak. He hadn’t even asked her why she’s dressed in the old style clothing, or cut her hair to be slightly longer on one side. Her destiny had robbed her of so much. The clothing took her back, though it was the perfume which pulled her mind right back, to the time when she’d been his lover.

“You look just like your statue in Temple Square.” Said Tejan.

She’d been gone for a fraction of a second to Tejan, but her appearance had gone back countless millennia, to how she’d looked at the height of her fame.

“My emergency change of uniform, completely forgotten about.”

Sikush kissed her as though they were alone and then he quickly took the oath from Tejan, making her one of his elite guard. Not just a matter of procedure, the elite were granted the imperial touch, a marking on the back of their left hand. A very personal marking, which granted some real protective powers.

“I must go now, good luck to both of you.” Sikush had said.

They’d agreed to no long goodbyes, no lingering over a farewell kiss, or the touch of entwined fingers. If she was victorious on the 1st rift they’d be lovers once again, with eternity to enjoy each other. If she failed ? The multiverse would end and the feelings of two lovers wouldn’t matter.

“We need to hurry, but I must see this statue you mentioned.” She said. “Keep the pilgrims off me if you can.”

“Can I kill them ?” Asked Tejan, with a twinkle in her eye.

“Don’t tempt me.”

They must have looked like pilgrims themselves, as they appeared in Temple Square, with their over full back packs. Poor pilgrims, taking in the holy places of the empire for a few credits a day.

“There..... They put it by the canal.” Said Tejan.

It was there, the statue the Terak had made and placed in a special Mendera gallery on Sessana. Not out of love of course, but out of hatred and perhaps a little grudging respect. Sikush had been in their gallery too, the carved images of their most hated enemies. Only just a little larger than life size, the statue had been placed on a plinth of black marble.

“I’m glad he never had it destroyed.” Said Kittara. “It is my favourite likeness of myself.”

“You’re wearing the same style of uniform.” Said Tejan. “Even the hair is the same.”

Kittara moved towards the statue, holding her arm out, pressing it against the right leg.

“See the colour is the same.” She said. “It’s the only statue of me that looks right. Even Chlo isn’t sure about the origin of the black stone they used.”

No one touched the statue of the famous Kittara of course, apart from the occasional mad person or drunken tourist. The crowd in Temple Square were becoming agitated, which brought the attention of two members of the militia.

"Touching the statue is discouraged miss. There are small copies for sale in the market, if you're looking for a souvenir of your trip to Mendera."

A woman in body armour, holding an impressive looking plasma rifle. Kittara simply walked closer and smiled at her and her male colleague.

"It's..... You. The rumours said..... Is it really you?"

"It really is me officer. Could you do me a favour and keep the crowd back for just a minute or so. This statue means a lot to me, I'd appreciate a quiet moment."

"Of course, no problem at all."

They made a lot of noise to give her that quiet minute. Shouting achieved what calm requests seldom did. The crowd of pilgrims moved back, leaving just Kittara and Tejan standing in front of the statue.

"Ironic that the Terak created that." Said Tejan. "Considering they now want to destroy the entire multiverse."

"That is me." Said Kittara.

"For an enemy, they did a good job of catching your likeness." Said Tejan.

"No you don't understand.... That is me ! Not the person you see in front of you, but that statue is of me, the real me. I can remember how I felt in those days, how carefree my life was, even if the Terak wanted me dead."

Tejan was nodding at her.

"I do understand Kittara. That was you before your destiny took over your life. I can't imagine what it must be like, to know you're cursed by such a dark prophecy."

Kittara held onto Tejan's left hand, the one with the newly created imperial markings.

"You do understand dear Tejan." Said Kittara. "He should have initiated you into the elite, a very long time ago. Come, Minraver is about to arrive with the children."

"How do you know?"

"I'm not sure, but I'm always right about such things."

Kittara moved her reality out onto the dunes, Tejan arriving a second later.

"Keep close Tejan, this isn't going to be a portal. I was taught something new by those who inhabit the dark places. Don't resist the pull....."

Kittara relaxed totally and let the darker side of her nature rise to the surface. She became covered in a dark grey mist, which seemed to move under its own volition. Sometimes the grey mist arrived unbidden and outside of her control.

"Like a cat wagging its tail." Sikush had often said.

Kittara pictured the 1st rift, Mo strutting across the ruins of an ancient fortress. Actually not so ruinous now, dozens of tribespeople were busy building walls and digging ditches. The image became stronger in her mind, until it was like a window. She heard Tejan gasp, as they were both pulled into that image, to appear only a few feet from Mo.

"So fast." Said Tejan. "I feel as if part of me must still be out on the dunes."

"Tiring, so very tiring." Said Kittara. "I need to become a thing of shadows to move in such a way and pulling you behind me takes so much effort."

Mo, poor Mo. He was looking at her as if she might be a phantom, or another message from the annoyingly vague multiverse.

"It is me Mo, the real, genuine and original."

She hugged him for a long time, before kissing him open mouthed and hugging him again.

"I never thought I'd see you again." Said Mo. "Unless it was in the dark places, after I'd died."

"I'm back now Mo and hopefully for a very long time."

Kittara saw Silky watching them, her tiny wings beating at a frantic speed, her tail thumping the ground at regular intervals.

"I'm sorry Silky, but we haven't seen each other for so long."

"You're forgiven Kittara, just don't get him killed. He's so stupid when it comes to you. Promise me you'll do your best to keep him alive."

"You have my promise. Though in truth, none of us might survive the coming battles."

"See, she said battles." Said Kerr. "Why will no one talk about the battles, plural?"

There was no link to Chlo, no checking of identities. There had been mention of the crew of a sprint class freighter, being coerced into following Mo onto the rifts. Kittara saw two humans, one of each standard gender. She assumed they were the crew of the Melak Sunrise.

"This is Kerr and Rhian." Said Mo. "They've been with me all the way from Mendera City."

Probably useless with the sorts of weapons that worked on the 1st rift. Kerr was coughing and Rhian looked too weak to wield a long sword or battle axe. They'd followed Mo on his trip to hell though and deserved her respect.

"We're fish out of water I'm afraid." Said Rhian.

"Nonsense, you probably have useful skills for the coming battles." Said Kittara. "We just need to find out what they are."

"Battles again." Said Kerr.

"There will be three or four waves of them, though even my sight is unclear on the details. With each wave there will be more of them than the last, until we either win or die." Said Louelle. "Now Kerr, tell me.... Does knowing make it better or worse?"

Kittara had never seen a living Kiyoh before, just carved images on temple walls. There had been a famous Kiyoh seer called Louelle in the later years of the City of the Lost God. Did the Kiyoh live that truly immense amount of time, or were they all called Louelle?

"Knowing is always better." Said Kerr.

Kittara approached Louelle and simply stood examining her for a minute or two.

"More than just curiosity Louelle." She said. "Tomma-Goran once talked to me about a Kiyoh called Louelle, yet I doubt if any mortal creature could live that long."

Louelle sat back on her tail and looked exactly like the carvings she'd seen.

"That was many generations back along my family tree." Said Louelle. "I took her name, but I am not her. We are long lived compared to most and we are all female. We each lay one egg in our lifetime, which becomes the next great seer."

"Have you laid your egg?" Asked Rhian.

"No, because then I'll die and there is still so much to do."

A loud whirring sound stopped any further conversation, as a spinning purple portal appeared. Out of it came the two children, followed by Minraver.

"Ah, an eternal has joined us." Said Louelle. "Now we might stand a chance."

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Alyz found the dying trees and knew she was in the right spot. The trees had hidden a wide shallow depression in the ground, the sort of crater formed by a meteorite strike. Long ago though, long

enough for the crater to fill up with soil and erosion to hide any signs of the event. Chlo was seeing everything through Alyz's senses and the high flying drones.

"There's significant radiation Alyz, no wonder the locals avoid the place." Said Chlo. "A few unexplained deaths from radiation poisoning and everyone stays well away."

"Will it harm my bio-constructs Chlo?"

"No, they're already dead in any meaningful use of the word. Just be careful, there's a powerful gamma emitter somewhere under that crater."

Chlo telling her to be careful, that was almost a first. Heading towards the centre of the vast crater seemed sensible, even if the dead and dying trees still hid most of the terrain. Alyz looked at the feed from the drones and saw a dark spot about a quarter of a mile to the East. A hole in the ground, probably the entrance to a wet and muddy cave. For a second or two, she considered coming back in the daylight.

"Who are you?" Alyz shouted.

They'd run by her so quickly, before vanishing into the trees. A woman dressed in the usual clothing of an imperial colonist. No human creature could move that quickly though, especially in the dark.

"Did you see her Chlo? The woman who ran past me."

"I saw no one Alyz, neither did the drones. I believe you're being affected by something in this place."

"The spooky things the locals muttered about."

"Exactly..... You'll need to watch the reactions of your guards. They're not affected by.... Whatever it is."

It was true, the bio-constructs were under orders to react to any threat, yet they hadn't raised their weapons. Something else ran through the trees, a young boy dressed in rags. Alyz turned to follow the apparition, but her guards didn't.

"Well, if that is the worst these spooky things can do." She muttered.

The apparitions grew in number, always humans in some sort of distress, or running away from an unseen attacker. A few even added sound to the tableau, their screams filling her head. All hallucinations of some kind, but it was impossible not to be affected by it.

"I think these apparitions are of real events Chlo. Something truly terrible happened here once, probably a very long time ago."

"Now you've roused my curiosity." Said Chlo.

Chlo was stood with her in the dark, in her true organic form.

"I've always wondered if I can see the ghostly apparitions that some humans see." Added Chlo.

"But I'm not human." Said Alyz.

"Oh, you are and far more than you might think. Conversion plays about with your DNA, augmenting certain qualities, while removing others. You are still over two thirds pure human though."

Drone pictures from above are always nothing like the object on the ground. Scale is the main problem and the lack of side shadows to add texture. The hole in the ground was a classic sinkhole, about fifty yards across. It was the drainage point for the woods, with a waterfall running over the northern edge, the water cascading into the depths below. Everything smelt of damp and rotting vegetation.

"I think we need a mining drone for this." Said Chlo.

Large and strong, the drone appeared above the centre of the sinkhole. It hovered by using dozens of small plasma engines, rather than the usual rotors. Designed to travel anyway up and at any angle, the drones could get just about anywhere in caves and mines. The drone slowly lowered itself into the hole. Something ran past Alyz, an old lady with terror written into her features.

“Did you see her Chlo ?”

“Yes, I did. I know she wasn’t real, yet on some level, part of my mind saw her. It is..... Intriguing.”
The drone had descended far enough for its sensors to begin reporting on conditions inside the sinkhole.

“Radiation straight away.” Said Chlo. “Enough to cook your bio-constructs. It looks like we’re going alone, unless you want me to summon a few Agnopods ?”

“I know it’s a bad thing to say it, but they..... Ewwww.”

“Don’t let Sikush hear you say that, he’ll send you to live on an Agnopod planet, until you see the error of your ways. I’ll tell the Old One to recall your guards and we’ll go down there alone.”

“I’m not a bad person Chlo, but there is just something.....”

“Everyone says that.” Admitted Chlo. “I guess insect life will always have that ‘Eww’ factor.”

Chlo put up two screens, for them to see what the mining drone was seeing. It wasn’t seeing much as it descended into the hole, apart from wet rock walls.

“A lot of sulphides down there, the smell of several millennia’s worth of rotting vegetation.” Said Chlo. “Low oxygen too and the radiation is the highest I’ve seen on any colonist planet. Something other than radiation too, lots of energised particles you don’t expect to see outside of a stellar nursery.”

“Can you survive down there Chlo ?”

“Oh yes, I was built to survive just about anything.”

The drone stopped descending at about five hundred feet. There was a lake of foetid water, which seemed to be the source of the sulphides. The drone spun slowly, enabling its lights and cameras to see the entire cavern.

“A truly unpleasant place.” Said Chlo. “One way out, a tunnel heading east.”

“Time for us to join the drone.” Said Alyz.

The sinkhole looked unpleasant, but it was no obstacle to Alyz or Chlo. As her bio-constructs boarded a shuttle back to The Old One, Alyz levitated and moved forward, to hang over the centre of the hole. Chlo joined her and they allowed gravity to pull them slowly down, towards the drone five hundred feet below.

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Farhj died in quiet agony. Delmus had no idea if the lack of screaming had been heroism, or an effect of what had killed him. It was awful to see the death of a member of The Damned and have no idea what was killing him. With a face contorted by pain, Farhj breathed in very quickly a few times, before dying.

“Is he..... ?” Asked Dava.

“He’s gone, I can feel it in some way.” Said Delmus. “His essence has moved on.”

If only death had been the end of the horror, but the creatures had used something truly dreadful to kill Farhj. His head cracked open in several places, a green substance pushing its way out of the cracks in his skull.

“What the fuck is that ?” Asked Trey.

Delmus was annoyed when his team moved back, rather than trying to see what had killed one of their number. There was even the sound of someone vomiting.

“Dignity, remember who you are.” He yelled. “You are The Damned, the best warriors in the multiverse, so act like it.”

“Sorry Delmus.”

“We need readings while things are still fresh.” Said Delmus. “Scanners, analysers and most of all your brains. Tell me what we just saw?”

Delmus wanted to run away from the death of Farhj too, but he couldn't. It looked like something fungal had broken his skull apart. Fungus didn't grow that fast though, unless the silver creatures had developed a weaponised fungus?

“The bio scanner doesn't understand what the green stuff is.” Said Dava. “It does recognise certain enzymes associated with several types of fungus.”

“Assume it's a fungus and work from there.” Said Delmus.

Someone put curiosity before disgust, snipping a section out of the still growing fungal body, which was coming out of the head of their fallen comrade.

“I see no fruiting body yet.” Someone said. “We should incinerate the body though.”

“The silver creature on his face probably infected Farhj.” Said Trey.

“True, but I agree with incineration, just to be certain.”

It had probably only taken one tiny fungal spore to kill Farhj, though he didn't want to remind them of that.

“We should eat nothing now, until we leave here.” Someone muttered.

“Or drink and we should make face masks.”

They had a plan, though he could already see problems with it. They needed to talk, which meant breathing in the atmosphere around them. Delmus consoled himself with the thought that if he felt the pains in his head begin, he'd use the RM9 on the machinery in the room.

“Take any final reading you can, it's time to incinerate Farhj.” He said.

Delmus saw the thin tendril grow up from near where Farhj's nose had been. A long thin piece of green fungal material, which began to sprout a fruiting body at the end. A grey fungal cap full of spores, which might eject a shower of slow death at any instant. Delmus moved back, as Dava used her spells to incinerate what was left of Farhj.

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All warriors do it of course; wonder if they're better than another nation's soldiers, or another planet's fighters. It is in the nature of intelligent creatures to be competitive, part of the natural process of improvement. There had been a lot of one on one fighting during the Kivar wars, to settle who was best. The Damned had suffered some surprising defeats, but when all was balanced out, they were better. Chlo recorded just about everything and the footage of Kittara cleaving a Kivar warrior in two, had gone viral across the empire.

“I always knew we were better than the Terak.” Said Hol.

“And Mendera only sent the reserves.” Said Celli.

“No calling them only the reserves.” Said Mingal. “They've won a great victory here today.”

It looked like they might begin arguing again, but Celli merely nodded in agreement. The dead covered over a square mile of ground between Leng and Gateway. Some Terak had reached the city, but most had died without ever entering the city they sought to destroy. The entire plain of Leng was carpeted in dead Terak and the dredger demons who had served them.

“We'll need to begin burning the dead soon.” Said Hol. “There is already the stench of decay where the bodies are piled high.”

“I'll see that it is done.” Said Juno.

Juno was now a model second in command, eagerly rushing to carry out all orders. Gone was the moody and resentful Juno, in an almost miraculous conversion. It was the fighting of course, they'd all needed to fight a tangible enemy.

"I haven't seen many dead in the uniform of Mendera." Said Albas. "Did we lose many of the reserves?"

"One is too many." Said Hol.

The Chaln  didn't like losses in battle to be discussed in case they became public knowledge. The empire still had a lot of enemies, all wondering if they just might beat the near legendary imperial guard. Hol knew that four hundred and six members of the reserves wouldn't be going home, but that knowledge was for Sikush's ears only. It was what The Damned had been created for, what made them happy and why Juno was suddenly so content. No one would worry about the losses, they lived for war.

"Aelfraed is heading this way." Said Mingal. "I didn't think we'd see her until the mess was cleaned up."

"I saw her fighting hand to hand." Said Albas. "They say she gutted a Terak officer on the steps of her palace."

"Show some respect Mingal." Said Hol. "A lot of her invokers died while fighting with us."

Aelfraed, the new empress of Leng moved through the mounds of their dead enemies. The dead of Leng had already been removed for burial with full honours. No such honour for their defeated enemy, who would be burned, their ashes scattered to the winds. Occasionally Aelfraed would point to something and one her people would go and fetch it. The new empress was accompanied by at least a dozen servants and another dozen guards. Hol understood of course, that becoming empress had to be seen to have happened and nothing said power better than a large entourage.

"These I will have fixed into a monument of some kind." Said Aelfraed.

She was holding the badges of office, which the Terak officers had all worn. There had been a Terak general among the dead and he'd been carrying a rod of office, made of pure gold. Hol felt no guilt in having hidden that among her belongings, as a gift for Sikush.

"I promised you all gifts and recognition and you shall have those." Said Aelfraed. "Sadly though I have arrived with a little bad news."

"Are there more Terak on the way?" Asked Celli.

"No, I think we've seen the last of their army." Said Aelfraed. "Minraver has been delayed while carrying out vital war business. I still have a link with Mendera, though that isn't as good as it once was. I'm afraid that the Menderan reserves look like being our honoured guests for a while."

"I expect that few of them will moan about a little unscheduled relaxation." Said Albas.

"We will make them feel welcome, I can assure you." Said Aelfraed. "Until The Chaln  and Minraver can open a doorway home."

"I'm still concerned about my shop." Muttered Celli.

"Moving the entire Menderan army is out of the question, but we are quite good at spinning up portals in Leng." Said Aelfraed. "I can arrange for a portal which will get you to the abandoned village on the 1st rift. From there, you can be at the Well of Souls in no time. Unless you have somewhere else to go?"

There was no mention of a vote, no sarcastic remarks. They were all waiting for her to decide, finally treating her as their trusted leader.

"I had no official orders to come here, other than being pushed in the right direction by Estrid." Said Hol. "I can hear her words still and there is somewhere else I'd like to go. I'd like us all to go there, if you're all still willing to follow where I lead."

"There is my shop." Said Celli.

She'd said the words with a grin on her face and Hol knew they'd all be going with her.

“So where do you want to go ?” Asked Aelfraed.

“Can you send us all to Nara-Odil ?”

“Yes.”

“Good, I can find the way from there.”

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Minraver hadn't quite known what to expect, though she'd hadn't expected a crumbling ruin. Most of the defenders were under some kind of conditioning by Louelle, she could feel it, almost see it covering them like an invisible cloak. She hung onto Seesha, wondering whether bringing the children had been a good idea.

“Is this..... It ?” She asked.

“Nothing like a good motivational speech is there.” Muttered Mo.

“Sorry..... It's just that the children. Where are they to sleep ?”

“I quite like it here.” Said Mix.

“They even have a real live Kiyoh.” Added Seesha.

Louelle uncurled herself, while Minraver waited for the anger. Kiyoh were famous for brooding on imagined wrongs and Seesha had unwittingly given her enough to moan about for days.

“Before you begin Louelle.” Said Minraver. “The children have lived all of their lives inside The Temple of the Flame. Their manners are good enough for most, so don't begin bullying them over points of etiquette.”

“Etiquette indeed, I am no one's pet Kiyoh.”

“That's not what she said.” Remarked Rhian.

“As good as..... By implication.”

It might have gone on for hours, if Kittara hadn't decided to answer her question about the children's living quarters.

“We have the old guard room as our quarters.” She said. “It's shelter from the weather and there is clean water from a well. Not much privacy I'm afraid, but they'll get used to that. They need to remain here and I'm hoping you will too ?”

“We really do need you here.” Added Silky.

It did seem strange that somewhere so important, was to be guarded by so few. Kittara was there though and she was a truly formidable warrior. Minraver could influence the will of others at a distance, though she was loath to do it to someone like Hol. Wars created desperate times though and Minraver felt for Hol in Leng, finding her about to leave. A little mental nudge and her group would change their destination to Nara-Odil, last reliable landmark before the long walk to the fortress.

“I've done what I can, Hol will soon be waiting at Nara-Odil. I'm sure Kittara can transport her group from there.”

“Hol is coming ?” Asked Seesha.

“Who is with her ?” Asked Kittara.

“Hol travels with two members of The Damned, a converted chaos creature and a Shelzak demon who runs a store selling various ointments.” Said Minraver. “I know they don't sound much of an army, but they did very well in the battle for Leng. And yes Seesha, Hol is coming here.”

“Yippee.” Yelled Mix.

“I can bring them here, but we still need you here.” Said Kittara. “One eternal to guard..... That. It doesn't seem too much to ask.”

Kittara had nodded towards the jail, where he'd been kept since almost the beginning of time. She could feel the darkness coming from it, even if it was only a very tiny amount. It needed burying really, as deep as they could dig a hole for it. Ideally it needed to be buried below a temple, with a few hundred thousand loyal clerics to guard it. Sikush must have been insane to move it, but what was done couldn't be changed and had to be endured.

"There are the reserves to be moved back to Mendera." Said Minraver. "I need to be there to keep communications open with Leng. So many things that I must do....So many places where I am expected. People will die Kittara, if I decide to remain here."

"People will die here if you leave." Said Mo.

"Please stay." Urged Seesha.

"Sometimes the only choices are bad ones." Said Kittara.

"Ah, quoting my brother to me.... Now we are surely doomed."

"You will stay, I see it and my sight is never wrong." Said Louelle.

Minraver wasn't sure why she'd already made up her mind to remain in the ruined fortress. Mainly it was the realisation that the entire war was about setting him free, the crawling chaos. Stopping their enemies from capturing his jail was essential.

"I can't be the one to ruin Louelle's reputation as a seer." She said. "I will stay, but his jail needs to be buried deep below the ground, or there is a chance it will infect some of us."

"It shall be done." Said Louelle.

Minraver was so busy supervising the digging of a hole for his jail, that she never noticed Kittara go to Nara-Odil. She heard the cheers when she returned though and the voices of two delighted children. They'd all appeared out of a grey mist, she was to hear later. Just the sort of thing to excite the youngsters and raise everyone's spirits.

"That Shelzak is a big one." Remarked Louelle.

"They always are and hard to kill." Said Minraver. "I'm just glad she's on our side."

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Alyz followed the mining drone, Chlo walking beside her. It had enough lights to illuminate the underground passage and the size to draw any enemy fire, if there was any. They'd travelled in a straight line east for a quarter of a mile, before finding the two bodies.

"Looks like two of the visitors the old woman mentioned." Said Chlo.

"She said they were tall." Said Alyz.

"The woman is about five feet tall, everyone is tall to her."

The bodies were human, the physiology common to dozens of empire controlled worlds. Chlo found a slightly decomposed ID card in the trouser pocket of a female body.

"Oh, that man.... His reach seems long indeed." Said Chlo.

"Who?"

Chlo handed her the card with a picture of a human female. She had been working for a Menderan weapons development company, reporting directly to her father, Chelac Nurigen.

"They died of radiation poisoning." Said Chlo. "Literally cooked by the intensity of the radiation down here. They probably didn't know what was killing them, I've seen no radiation detectors."

"It was my father of course, sending them to their deaths. I will kill him Chlo."

"I have no parents, but I imagine that killing your father is not a small thing Alyz."

"I will kill him Chlo. Right here, right now, I give my vow that my father will die by my hand. I don't care how repentant he is, how long it takes me to find him, or who tries to protect him. I will push a blade into his throat and watch him as he dies."

"The war goes badly for the Terak." Said Chlo. "Others might kill him before you can."

"No point in trying to dissuade me Chlo, my vow is given. If he lives, I will kill my father."

"I wasn't trying to talk you out of it. Nurigen needs to die.... But if you need someone to talk to afterwards, perhaps to share a bottle of Ushong with. Come and find me."

They walked on, finding another body which was too decayed to offer any clues. A mixture of radiation, time and the damp had rotted the body down a heap of yellow bones.

"They can't all have died." Said Alyz. "The old woman said their craft left Oasis."

"It might have left with just Nurigen onboard."

"I still can't believe he'd send all these people down here to die Chlo."

"Immortality can be more of a curse than a blessing." Said Chlo. "Your father and his wish to die became a bit of a joke. No one really believed he wanted to end his life. Perhaps, if Sikush had given him the means to end his existence.....?"

"There is no excuse for the things he's done Chlo, none."

Mercifully they found no more bodies, as the passage descended and began to turn towards the north. They were three miles below the surface, when the drone stopped at the entrance to a vast cavern.

"Its lights are still on, but I think our drone just died." Said Alyz.

"Can you hear it, the whispering?"

"Yes, but it's very quiet and sounds far away."

"I'll get rid of the drone and give us some lights." Said Chlo.

They walked into the cavern, as Chlo began to put hovering lights, all over the cavern. The ones near the centre fell from the ceiling like large snowflakes, though their lights still illuminated the ground.

"I thought so... There may be danger here Alyz. Does the whispering remind you of anything?"

"No, not really. Maybe the sentinel stones when they're agitated."

"Exactly." Said Chlo.

The cavern held four concentric rings of standing stones, which had all once been topped by lintels. Earthquakes, water seepage and the corrosive effect of time had toppled a few of the stones, but most still remained standing. The floor under their feet had been covered in tiles made from an orange rock and there were carvings on the floor of strange impossible creatures.

"It was a long time ago, when Kittara walked over tiles such as these, in the company of the famous cleric Piaff Ojetin. They found an entire dead army, all driven insane by what they'd unearthed."

"You're saying this is the resting place of a sentinel stone?" Asked Alyz.

"I am Alyz, I am. Such stone circles were found on Boomers and Sessana, with a stone buried in the centre of each. Deadly though, unless removed by someone immune to their effect and there are few of those around. You should be fine, but there is no way to be certain. If you feel at all unwell, return to the surface."

The bodies near the centre of the stone circle looked like litter, left behind by untidy tourists. Time had decayed most of the soft tissues, but it was still obvious that they'd fought each other, to the death. A dagger in a back, blaster holes in skulls, shattered bones. They'd been driven crazy by the undiluted effect of a sentinel stone and torn each other to pieces.

"This has to be the whole crew." Said Alyz. "He sent them on a suicide mission."

"He gave them a stasis box, which doesn't work. The stones exist outside of ordinary time lines. Are you feeling any ill effects?"

"Fine, just an odd nagging, telling me to run. I can live with it."

"Good, you can pick it up, perhaps even look into it as Kittara did."

The sentinel stone glowed, a dull red glow. Only the top tenth or so had been exposed, but that had obviously been enough to allow its effect to kill everyone in the cavern. There was the skeletal remains of a hand, reaching out to put the stone into a Menderan stasis box.

"They all died, trying to recover the stone for Nurigen." Said Chlo. "Your father must have been at his wits end, trying to recover something which kills most living beings. He could hardly ask one of The Damned to recover it."

Alyz lifted the stone out of the ground, remembering that Kittara had once said the sentinel stones weren't the dead remnants of old Gods.

"There was something in the stone, something alive." Kittara had once told her. "It wriggled, as if trying to escape. I saw the future too, and Sikush in his..... No matter."

Sikush in his true form she'd told her years later. Everyone knew the eternal's weren't human, but Alyz often wished she had never heard Kittara mention his true form. It was now a barbed piece of curiosity, sticking in her flesh, demanding to be answered.

"You can look into the stone if you wish." Said Chlo. "I've tried with a few of the sentinel stones and I've never seen anything."

"Is it safe?"

"Probably, though I can't be certain. It is your choice."

"Now I'll have to, or it'll be another barb of curiosity, digging into me."

"Another barb?"

"The whole true form of The Chalne thing Chlo."

"Ask him, I'm sure he'll show you."

Alyz looked deep into the red stone and it became cold flame in her hands. They were in there, the dancing tiny creatures, looking as though they were trapped. Not trapped, she understood that, just impatient. Not bits of dead Gods, but the tools of the Gods. These were the forces which had shaped and created the multiverse, before time itself had existed.

"Oh."

Too soon the creatures vanished and she was dreaming of Algaria of all places. Not Tranquillity as she knew it, but a larger city of the future, with taller buildings and far cleaner streets. The dream jumped and she was entering a shop with a risky boast above the door.

'We can fix anything. Try us!'

Again the dream jumped and she was killing two guards, before running up the stairs to somewhere. He was there then, her father. Sat there grinning at her, goading her, telling her she'd never do it. Another jump and he was on his back on the floor, her blade entering his throat as she pushed.....

"Oh, Crap! That was weird."

"What did you see?"

"Kittara was right, there is something alive in the stones. My own guess is that they're the workers of the Gods, the creatures who created everything. Then there was a dream where I was killing my father. Only I don't think it was a dream. It looked like a premonition of an event in the distant future. At least I know where to keep looking for him."

"Where?"

"Calehc Electricals in Tranquillity. Chelac backwards Chlo, his vanity will be the death of him. There was even a sign saying he could fix anything. Now, what do we do with this sentinel stone?"

"Tempting to bring the roof of this cavern down and bury it here, but it might be urgently needed for the war. Nurigen is no fool and he was desperate to get his hands on it..... Where to take it?"

“How about the gold mines on Suspesia II ? Eight miles deep and no one has visited the planet in over ten thousand years.”

“Perfect.”

~ ~

Luri had noticed how the Lummel craft changed with every different world, or part of the grey they entered. Sometimes quite ugly, with stubby wings and a general seedy feel. Now they were about to arrive on a world in a long dead multiverse and the Lummel craft was long, elegant and the colour of burnished bronze.

“Our means of transportation seems to like being here.” She said.

“No oxygen is still a bit worrying.” Said Haan.

Sventa was trying to give off the ‘been there, done it’ kind of vibe. It didn’t fool Luri though, she could see Sventa drumming her talons on the underside of the table where they ate.

“Just stay close to myself or Luri.” Said Estrid. “We’ll create an atmosphere bubble around ourselves.”

“How close ?” Asked Sventa.

“About twenty feet... Room enough to move about comfortably.” Replied Estrid.

It had to be difficult for Sventa, entering a world where she had so little control. Luri pushed her fingers through Sventa’s, stopping her drumming with her long sharp talons.

“I’ll try to create a bubble thirty feet across.” Said Luri. “It’ll be alright, you’re arriving with two living deities.”

“Do we need to take weapons ?” Asked Haan.

“Yes, the biggest you have.” Said Estrid.

The Lummel craft touched the ground and they were there, wherever there was. The windows just showed blackness, but Luri looked with her extra senses and found a world of red dunes and dark brown hills. It could have been far stranger.

“Are we ready to go outside ?” She asked.

Sventa and Haan were both nodding at her, both of them armed to the teeth. Estrid spoke to the captain of the Lummel vessel and the front set of loading doors silently opened.

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