

Ripples from the Past

Chapter 18 – Chelac Nurigen

“Algaria was one of those planets that expanding empires tended to avoid. Their belief system was based on warfare, with dying peacefully of old age considered a sin. Dying in bed was fine, just so long as it was from wounds gained in battle.”

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No communication could be direct or traceable of course. Chlo could trace those and The Damned could turn entire planets into rubble if they chose to. Nurigen understood that, he'd seen it happen. Those he'd aligned himself with, still seemed reluctant to believe that the empire's most dangerous weapon was Chlo. There had been bad news, not unexpected, but far sooner than he'd hoped.

“A banking facility with the imperial bank has been frozen.” He said. “The authorities on Phlot are also making enquiries about the money we hold there.”

He'd have known sooner if the lines of communication weren't so complex, but he was confident the empire couldn't trace anything back to their base. Nurigen knew the empire's intelligence systems well; he'd designed quite a few of them.

“You knew your part in this would eventually be known.” Said Aukar. “We have other sources of money. Or are you just concerned that your daughter will consider you to be a traitor ?”

Aukar sneering at him again, as if the last King of the Terak had anything to feel smug about. True, the Terak had nearly beaten the empire once, to become the rulers of the multiverse. That had been a long time ago though, before the Menderan Empire had become the unstoppable force it now was.

“With luck my daughter will come looking for me and end this curse of immortality.” Said Nurigen. “I have people at the highest levels of the Tech Clerics though, people who trust me. My main fear is that their loyalty to me, will cause suffering for them and their families.”

Again that look from the creature who looked like a seven foot tall flying reptile. The look of contempt for someone he thought was without courage and the ruthlessness needed by a true leader.

“Immortality is a curse, oh poor Nurigen.” Hissed Aukar. “You're weak, the creeping rot of decadence has eaten right through you. Mendera isn't the unbeatable enemy it once was. They will fall, just as the demon empire has fallen.”

The eyes were the most disconcerting thing about the Terak. Yellow eyes with black slits. It often amazed Nurigen that Kitara had once taken Aukar as her lover. The last of the Terak always seemed so cold, so alien. Then again, he no longer was the last of the Terak. Aukar had made a deal with those they served, to have an army of his own warriors brought back from the multiverse that had ceased to exist. Impossible of course, if it weren't for the fifty thousand or so Terak, currently being trained to use Ion weapons.

“The demons thought your kind were long gone and being hunted by dark angels, has left them with an instinctive fear of enemies that can fly.” Said Nurigen. “Next time they won't flee in fear and Leng still stands..... And as I'm fed up with telling you; Mendera won't be easy to conquer.”

“Decadence is the cancer of empires.” Said Aukar. “Even the Red-Tops managed to penetrate their planetary defences. An agent of chaos was easily placed into their famed impenetrable Temple of the Flame and a simple synthetic managed to plant a bomb in the holy city itself. These are the people you think I should fear ?”

Nurigen had been around for a very long time and he wasn't used to having his opinions treated with contempt. He also felt fatigued by going through the same circular arguments, over and over again. "No more !" He yelled. "Go away and begin your assault on Mendera. When you fail and your people are decimated, come back and I will tell you how the war should have been fought."

Aukar actually went for his dagger. He might have used it too, if his wings hadn't impeded his movements. The Terak were designed for a different, non-technological age. Having wings large enough to lift them into the air was useful, but not in the confines of a room designed for human habitation. Aukar stood there, as if deciding whether to rip him apart with just his claws. Nurigen sighed.

"Sit down, they probably won't let me die yet anyway." Said Nurigen.

They of course were the dark servants of chaos, who only wanted one thing. With Mendera destroyed, they could easily release the crawling chaos from its prison, returning the entire multiverse to an eternal state of chaos. That didn't appeal to Nurigen, so he hadn't told any of them about a suspicion he'd had for several billion years. He was now convinced that nothing was buried below the Temple of the Flame, apart from an empty prison, with a lot of residual darkness about it. Aukar summoned four of his generals and joined him at the conference table.

"You are of course right." Said Aukar. "There is no point in having the famed chronicler of Mendera on our side, if I don't listen to your advice. Tell me Chelac, why we should ignore the obvious signs of a decaying empire ?"

Nurigen took a second or two, refilling his water glass. An old trick to regain control, making them all wait for him to speak.

"It is all superficial, the same breakdown in minor bureaucracy seen in other empires, throughout history. To assume it signifies a weakness in The Chaln  and The Damned, would be a grave error of judgement."

Muttering from the generals, his words weren't being well received. Aukar did seem to be giving the matter some thought.

"Yes, they do have two living deities to call upon." He said. "We never saw that eventuality in our planning."

Nurigen had to chuckle. It was like trying to reason with children.

"The deities will do what they always do...Very little." He said. "They'll threaten and be useful in minor ways, but they're too in love with the precious balance to do much. It's the people you barely notice who may cause the biggest obstacles in your path. People like Mo, the best slum runner that Ixir ever produced."

"The thief from the gutter ?" Asked one of the generals. "Haven't we already wasted enough time trying to kill him ?"

"It's thinking like that, which will cause our defeat." Said Nurigen. "He was one of the group who defeated Sevril-Narge, the great bug goddess herself..... Your main problem is Chlo though, who doesn't care about the balance. All Chlo cares about is protecting him, Sikush who she loves so much."

"Surely Chlo is just a machine." Said Aukar.

It wasn't anger that caused him to bang the table with his fist, it was frustration. A mistake of course, one of the guards near the door was looking quite upset by the disrespect shown to their leader. Not that Nurigen cared, he craved death the way a starving man craves food. Not by his own hand though.

"Call her a machine if you like, but she has the ability to change reality." He said.

“Useful for their technology, but never used in war.” Said Aukar.

“Chlo has used the powers granted by the eternal once.” Said Nurigen. “Against a planet called Panajarum. A world which decided to challenge the empire and paid the ultimate price. Chlo did some terrible things on Panajarum, really terrible things. The final act that ended all life on Panajarum, was instantly shifting its axis by three degrees.”

“That was enough ?”

“Oh yes my friend, more than enough to empty the oceans, kill every living thing and send its moons flying off into deep space.”

He had them, their whole attention for the first time since they’d sat down.

“So, I’m assuming you think a direct attack on Mendera, will cause Chlo to use changes in reality against us ?” Asked Aukar.

“Yes I do. Chlo will become a creature of darkness, a destroyer of worlds. In seeking to release chaos, you will create a bringer of chaos. Chlo will destroy us all and not even lose a night’s sleep over it.”

Aukar muttered to his generals, who were only ever there to agree with him.

“If you had full control of our forces. How would you proceed ?” Asked Aukar.

“Easy, more of what we have been doing. The changes are in place to end the entire multiverse, but it will take several billion years to be irreversible. We hire new mercenaries and carry on attacking Mendera, causing confusion and effectively rendering them impotent. Your own warriors can keep Leng busy for countless millennia, though they need to avoid suffering serious losses. The Chalné’s group of misfits need to be found and destroyed of course. Mo is especially dangerous, far more dangerous than you realise.”

“So my friend.... Your plan is no plan..... Just more of the same running around in circles ?”

“Yes it is. Keep the enemy confused, until the multiverse ceases to exist. It will work, though eventually Chlo will realise your people are limited to following certain course of action.... Limited to following ripples from past timelines. A direct attack on Mendera would be suicidal.”

The arrogance of the creature ! Aukar actually waved him away from the table, so he could talk to his generals in private. Nurigen looked through unbreakable glass, at a fairly grim planet. Little water, the life limited to a few anaerobic primitive organisms. Just trying to breathe outside would bring an unpleasant death in a few minutes. No one had heard of the planet though, no one had ever given it an ident. Even the empire had never heard of it, which made it the perfect place to build their base.

“We need to seriously consider.....”

Aukar getting angry with someone. Not that they’d agree to his plan of course, the Terak were mortal creatures. Staggeringly long lived of course, but so warlike that few ever died of old age. Waiting for countless billions of years, trusting future generations to keep within mission parameters.... No they’d never go for it, no mortal life form would ever agree to such a plan. There was simply no glory involved. Aukar was waving him back to the table.

“We have had our difference, but we all do respect your wisdom.....”

Crap ! Aukar was going to ignore everything he’d said and directly attack the empire.

“Our forces will carry on searching for Mo and the others, killing them all at the earliest opportunity.” Said Aukar. “We will be launching an attack on the empire though, beginning with.....”

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Chlo had used the age old investigative technique of following the money. All imperial credits could be traced and the ones paid to the terrorists, had led to four bank accounts with the Menderan Imperial Bank and half a dozen accounts with Phlot Credit Union.

“Be gentle with the bankers.” Sikush had told her. “We need their ongoing friendship and goodwill. As for the people holding the accounts and their contacts.....”

The bankers had given up names and addresses, at the first sight of an imperial guard uniform. The dozen or so contacts of the contacts, of the contacts..... had been less forthcoming. In the end though, everyone talks once introduced to the pain a sharp blade can cause, in the hands of an expert. Jen had personally interviewed a few.

“They all shriek one name Chlo, they all said Chelac Nurigen.” Jen had told her.

Still not enough to accuse the chronicler of Mendera and creator of the famed Nurigen weapons. Chlo took risks and shortcuts through the timelines, sending her benign probes back through the lives of those contacts. He was there every time, that face so beloved by the citizens of Mendera. Always him, the pathway always led to that smiling face of Nurigen.

“Faces can be faked; contacts can lie and be deceived.” She’d told herself.

Nonsense of course, she was already convinced. Telling Sikush was going to be hard though, almost impossible. She had to be completely certain, before inflicting that pain on him. There could be no question of any error. Chlo found one of the rooms where a contact had met the man she was still hoping might not be Chelac.

“Rip the room apart.” She’d said. “I’ll compensate the hotel owner.”

Not more versions of herself, she’d felt the need for an independent analysis of whatever might be found. It had been a few weeks since he’d used the hotel room on Algaria, but his DNA would still be there, if they looked hard enough. Just one tiny hair or piece of skin would be enough.

“What are we looking for ?” Asked the senior tech cleric.

“Just tell me what you find.”

He was everywhere in that room, dozens of traces of his DNA. It was almost as if he’d wanted to be identified, leaving a smear of blood on the side of a wash basin. On Mendera the room would have been perfectly cleaned, but Algaria wasn’t into deep cleansing.

“Almost as if he’d wanted to be caught and killed.” She’d told Sikush.

Telling him had been one of the hardest things she could remember and her memory was fairly perfect. He’d just sat for hours, ignoring meetings and causing a few concerns, until she’d flagged him up as ‘busy’ on the common channel.

“We never checked on him ever Chlo, he was one of us. Yes we had our differences..... but....”

“I will find him for you.... I promise.”

“He knows us and how we work Chlo. Everything has to be looked at and changed, every security system we have. It will have to go out on the newsfeeds of course, the entire empire must know he’s a traitor.”

Of course the empire had to know, some might still be trusting him and unwittingly helping Nurigen and whoever he now served. There had been something on her mind though, ever since she’d first suspected treachery by someone among their inner circle.

“There is Alyz. I’d like her to hear it from me, before everyone is told.” She’d said.

“Oh of course, poor Alyz. She will have to be questioned too, it can’t be avoided. In her own time of course, there is no real suspicion that she..... Go now Chlo, tell her we trust her.”

Now Chlo was on The Old One, preparing to tell Alyz that her father was almost certainly the worst traitor in the entire history of the empire. She was barefooted, enjoying the slap of her feet against the cold metal floor. The sound and feeling both soothed her. No warning, no calling ahead on their private channel. It seemed best to simply arrive and get the bad news delivered quickly. Chlo entered the control deck of The Old One, finding Alyz looking at a control panel.

“You’re still losing energy on the front end shields.” Said Alyz. “Ask Chlo to look at the circuit cubes.”

Alyz turned, hearing her footsteps as she walked into the room.

“Wow Chlo, that was quick.”

“I’ll set the circuit spiders to work, but I came about a personal matter. Is there a room you use?”

“Yes, quite a nice set of rooms.” Said Alyz.

The rooms were nice, obviously The Old One had instructed the tech clerics to construct them. It seemed the geriatric AI system really did have a soft spot for Alyz. Good, Alyz was about to need a reliable paternal influence in her life, even if it was a five mile long spacecraft.

“There is no easy way to say this.” Said Chlo. “And you won’t have long to mentally prepare for the consequences. The newsfeeds will be told within the hour, though Sikush has asked me to say that you still have his trust. Mine too.....”

Waffle, so much waffle and she still hadn’t told her the key fact behind all the waffle.

“What is it Chlo, you’re worrying me?”

“There is no dispute about it, you can see the proof Alyz. No error, no question about it, new evidence is being found as we speak. Your father has betrayed us, all of us. He organised the Red-Top attacks and the bombing by The Children of the Wilderness. I have looked back along the timelines and witnessed it all.”

Alyz actually fell to the floor, Chlo following her down and hugging her as she wept.

“Stay here Alyz, where you’re away from the worst of it.”

Eventually Alyz looked at the pictures of her father, meeting and paying those who had attacked Mendera. He was even laughing, about using imperial credits to pay enemies of the empire.

“I want to be the one Chlo. The one Sikush sends to kill him.”

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Juno Erroon had been through the usual routine to join The Damned, though none of it had prepared her for a journey to Ancient Leng. She’d been born on the relatively affluent empire world of Felos 11. There hadn’t been ten previous versions of the planet. For some reason it had been named after a constellation in that region of space. Who was Felos ? Juno had left the planet at the age of fourteen, without ever finding out. She wasn’t called Juno then of course, though her old name had vanished with her old life. Her family had called her Tikka then. It had begun with several Genova appearing outside the house where she lived.

“Don’t be scared Tikka.” Her mother had told her. “It is a good omen. Perhaps your father is destined for greatness.”

Only it wasn’t her father and it had turned out to be a confusing form of greatness. More Genova appeared, some drifting through the walls of the house, to watch her as she slept. Only one thing was ever said to her, before the angels stopped visiting her.

“They will be here soon child. You have been chosen.”

Chosen for what ? Tikka did notice that her father, mother, two older brothers and one younger sister, didn’t seem too keen on having a ‘chosen,’ in the family. Her father being picked for a special destiny was one thing, but Tikka !? Still, fame is fame and her father began to take her around with him, showing her off as the ‘chosen,’ and gaining a lot of free food and drink in the process.

It took half a year for the imperial shuttles to arrive and The Damned, in their famous uniforms. Jen herself had come to pick her up, Tikka recognised her from the daily news broadcasts. Her family and the entire crowd of curious citizens of Felos 11, had been shooed away by Jen. The famous warrior had knelt down to look into her eyes on the same level.

“Is this her ?” Asked Jen.

“Yes, there is no mistake.” Answered a Genova. “She is the one.”

She’d actually given her a warm smile, while gently stroking her cheek.

“What do they call you ?”

“Tikka, Tikka Erroon.”

“Well Tikka Erroon, your life is never going to be the same again. If you’d like to be a member of The Damned of course. It has to be done out of your own freewill.”

Jen had looked over her shoulder, at her parents, who seemed about to faint with pleasure.

“No pressure from family, friends or even the local politicians. If you decide to go with me, it will be your decision. Do you wish to come with me to Mendera ?”

“Why me ? What makes me one of the..... Chosen ?”

They were in the street, with its cobbled surface, covered in dust and the detritus that covers any busy road. Jen actually sat on that grubby street, pulling Tikka down beside her. The famous member of The Damned, actually talked to her, as though she was an adult.

“The Genova constantly search Tikka and they are never wrong, ever.” Said Jen. “You haven’t been chosen for what you are now, but because of what you will be.”

“I don’t understand.”

Jen had hugged her and Juno still remembered how good that had felt. The media were keeping a respectful distance, but it had been nearly half a million years since the last chosen had been found. Tikka was going to be famous, whether she liked it or not.

“Fame can be confusing.” Said Jen. “Even I sometimes get confused by it all. The angels have seen something in you, in your future. A potential, which you have every right to ignore. You can either live your current life, or come with me to Mendera. It is a big decision, but you have to decide right now. The whole empire is watching and waiting Tikka.”

“I don’t know..... what do you think I should do ?”

“This looks a nice place, but is it enough for you Tikka ? Would you like to see the sun rise over planets that only a few will ever visit ?”

Something had stirred in her that day, something deep down that had never stopped pushing her forward.

“Oh yes, I’d like that a lot.”

There had been the year of selection training, when she was treated as just another grunt.

“We’re already certain about you.” Jen had told her. “The year is for you to decide if you want to join us.”

Then the great celebration after her conversion. It felt like the whole universe arrived on Mendera to celebrate the initiation of the newly renamed Juno Erroon. So much money, so much fame. Just to become a newbie grunt once again. Yes, fame could be very fickle and confusing. A particularly bloody encounter in the tournament ring had brought the attention of The Chaln . It appeared that for an empire supposedly based on consensus, peace and justice.... A lot of store was set on the ability to use weapons.

“Don’t falter now young Tikka.” Jen had told her, when she’d been accepted into the Elite Guard. None of that had prepared her in the slightest, for the ruins of Ancient Leng, which is where the portal had delivered them. It all seemed so dirty, so wrecked, so dark and alien. The one Hol called the watcher, was pointing out various places in the gloom.

“We’re deep below the surface, five or six dead cities lie between us and the surface. This is the original Leng, though I believe other ruins lie beneath our feet. There is clean water, though your chaos creature might want to test it.”

"I am not their creature." Said Mingal.

The watcher ignored the comment and seemed to pour itself into a metal sphere. Actually not an it, but a she. For some reason Juno knew the creature might be the most alien life she was ever likely to meet, but there was something that shouted female.

"This sphere protects me and provides a means of transportation, but like everything, it needs fixing. Kittara spent many years getting the key systems of this part of the city to work, but that was..... So long ago. Now most of it needs fixing again... It is quite annoying."

"How old are you ?" Asked Celli.

"That depends on where you start counting. I have died before, though something keeps bringing me back. Neola, Neosto's daughter was supposed to take over as watcher, but the silly girl died in battle. My age though..... Far too long to calculate with any meaning."

Her head was going round and for a moment, Juno was that fourteen year old girl again, sat in the middle of a dusty road. It was all far too confusing, especially after such a long journey across a searing hot desert.

"Can we enter any other parts of Ancient Leng ?" She asked. "Are there doors that lead outside ?"

"Oh, doors can be dangerous. Leng was once called the City of Doors, though other places have claimed that name. A good door will just lead to the next room. A bad door though.... Might drop you into an oubliette, put you into the heart of a sun, or worse. Besides, 'they' are behind some doors and they're not all scared of me anymore."

"Who are they ?" Asked Hol.

"Oh, short questions that need long answers to make sense."

The watcher in her sphere, rolled closer to Hol.

"They were guards, but so much time without receiving any orders or support..... Now I suspect they are not guards anymore. Not enemies, but angry, confused and tired. There is an army of them between us and the surface. So we don't open any doors, none at all."

"You make them sound like machines." Said Albas.

"I did make them, though they won't remember that. Few of them will obey me, so the only way to leave here is by a portal or the pool. Kittara left through the pool, but none of you would survive the darkness beyond the pool."

Albas gave a long sigh and Juno could understand why. They obviously weren't going to have a quick visit to Leng, no in and out in a day or so. It looked like they were going to be there for some time.

Hol brought sense to the confusion and jumbled thoughts of the watcher.

"The air seems stale, I'm assuming we need to fix that ?"

"Yes, I have plans for it. I can show you how." Said the watcher.

"Good, we'll look at that while Mingal tests the water." Said Hol. "Food too, there must be something here we can eat ?"

"Oh yes, not very tasty, or so Kittara said, but nutritious."

Juno felt her headache improve, as they went about the process of making sure they had the essentials of life.

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Chlo knew that Sikush and Minraver had abilities she didn't possess, yet she was still amazed by some of them. Floating above the pond, just below Sikush's favourite veranda, was a huge moving picture of Leng. Both of the immortals would be fatigued by the effort needed to view the world beyond gateway, but they had achieved something most would think impossible.

"Extensive damage, but the city is being repaired." Said Minraver.

“Water everywhere, just as Kittara described.” Said Sikush. “The temperature is only a fraction of that on the 7th rift, but Leng is still amazingly green for such a hot city.”

“I based the canals around Temple Square, on Kittara’s description of Leng.” Said Chlo.

Minraver was glaring at her, looking upset at the notion of stealing ideas from the capital of the demon empire.

“We shared more than a few ideas once.” Said Sikush. “Thrax designed much of Leng and Mendera City. Look closely at Leng and you’ll see a lot of similarities with our temples and public buildings.”

“They must have cleared the dead off the streets.” Said Minraver. “I was hoping they might have left a few enemy bodies impaled on spikes. We still have no idea who attacked them.”

“Aelfraed will know, if you can find her in such a vast city?” Said Chlo.

“Blood is everything to demons and Neosto put some of his bloodline into Aelfraed.” Said Sikush.

“Neosto was the last emperor of the true bloodline, even though there were a few great emperors after him. Mussaneth Osratherer was long after Neosto and he is still revered as the greatest of all demon emperors. A hybrid demon tavern owner, known as Muzzie became an emperor, imagine that for a moment.”

“Why would Neosto pass on his bloodline to a converted chaos creature ?” Asked Chlo.

“I wish I knew the answer to that question.” Said Sikush. “He was long lived yet mortal. Perhaps he hoped an immortal might survive the catastrophe that caused his death. His blood legacy might live on, if Aelfraed and Leng survive the coming war. We just might see her proclaimed as the first female emperor of Leng, for quite some time.”

“Oh, I always love your anecdotes my brother, but how does any of this help us find Aelfraed ?” Asked Minraver.

“I knew Neosto well, we even became sworn allies at one point.” Answered Sikush. “Such an alliance required the sharing of blood in a solemn ritual.”

“You..... you shared blood with a demon ?” Said Minraver. “You’ll be saying he was a friend next.”

“He was a friend, by any sensible definition of that word.”

There was that look in Minraver’s eyes again. Few on Mendera were openly critical of the eternal, either of them. Delmus could be a little careless with his speech though, after a few drinks.

“Minraver is too pious to live for long on Mendera.” He’d told her.

Chlo could almost see Minraver shiver, as she asked her brother the question.

“So you can find Aelfraed by the scent of her blood ?”

“Precisely. I just need to concentrate for a moment, it was all a long time ago.”

Chlo enjoyed the view, as the screen showing Leng, appeared to soar over the rooftops. A much larger city than Mendera City and more populous. It all looked so grand, despite the signs of recent warfare. Eventually on the far northern edge of the city, the screen entered a large house. Their view went straight through walls and ceilings, only stopping when their view was centred on Aelfraed. She was talking to two high level demons, both wearing armour. Sikush made a hand gesture and Aelfraed jumped back a step or two. It appeared that she could now see them, as well as they could see her.

“I apologise for violating your privacy.” Said Sikush. “It is vital that we talk and this seemed the quickest way.”

“That is alright I understand.”

Aelfraed sent the Demon warriors away, only speaking again when she was alone.

“Your people are here, Hol and that creature she now calls Mingal.” Said Aelfraed. “She’s also brought two of your guard and a Shelzak of all things. Useful in a fight of course, but not known for being that bright.”

“I had hoped she’d be there by now.” Said Sikush. “Though I didn’t send her, that was Estrid deciding to add a little extra spice to the pot. Are they all now with the watcher ?”

“Yes and likely to be there for some time. They are deep enough to avoid the war though.” Said Aelfraed. “I was going to send word, but the enemy seem to use our portals to track us down.”

“Who are the enemy ?” Asked Chlo. “We’ve yet to see them, even the bodies of their fallen.”

“There are few of their fallen, that is part of the problem.” Said Aelfraed. “I have seen them before, though it was an immensely long time ago. You call them The Terak, though they’ve gone by other names. They are hard to kill, but fire works well and we’re good at fire in Leng.”

“The Terak! Of course.....” Said Sikush. “Pulled through from a previous multiverse. We’re hoping to find the engine used for such a task, deep below the surface of their old home planet.”

“So you had guessed the Terak were involved ?”

“Chlo had her suspicions and they were obviously correct.” Said Sikush. “The main reason I needed to contact you so urgently, is because we’ve found out that we’ve had a traitor among us, probably for quite some time.”

Chlo thought he was being unnecessarily hard on himself and her. A traitor among them sounded like Nurigen was a current favourite at court. In truth no one had seen him for years, even his own daughter.

“More bad news my friend. Who was this traitor ?” Asked Aelfraed. “I assume they are now dead or wishing they were.”

“Sadly the traitor still lives and we have no idea where he is. Nurigen has betrayed us, the man I once thought of as my most trusted ally and chronicler.”

“That is dreadful news.” Said Aelfraed. “Though I don’t believe he knew any of our security measures, though I will consult those in charge of our safety.”

“It is our security that worries me. Nurigen knew everything.....I think it’s time for you to prepare a place to keep our most valued possession. Today I am going to begin the task of easing it out of the ground.”

Chlo knew of course, but hearing him talk about removing the prison from Mendera, still gave her a shock. Minraver was hardly hiding her surprise, twisting her fingers about and looking agitated.

“You think things are that serious ?” Asked Aelfraed.

“I do.”

“Then I shall instruct our engineers to build a suitable chamber, deep beneath the imperial palace. I do of course, sincerely hope that isn’t necessary.”

“Thank you Aelfraed. I suggest we contact you at the same time in say..... four days’ time. Is that convenient ?”

“Yes, hopefully I will have news about Hol by then.”

The image of Aelfraed vanished and Sikush looked tired, as did Minraver. Chlo wondered how long they’d be able to keep using the same method to contact Leng.

“That was unexpected.” Said Minraver. “Are you sure moving his prison to Leng is a good idea ? They are still our enemy Sikush. They have attacked Mendera on several occasions.”

“But like us, they don’t want the multiverse returned to chaos. Besides, it is expected. The clerics will expect us to take precautions in case the unthinkable actually happens. Aelfraed too will think it natural that I asked her to prepare for the worst.”

“The citizens of the empire will be unsettled by such precautions.” Said Minraver.

Sikush actually laughed, a good long genuine laugh.

“The citizens of the empire consider our prisoner to be a myth, something I’ve encouraged for a very long time.” He said. “Leng, the crawling chaos, even you and your warrior angels. My dear sister, the public believe it all be no more than superstition and legend. Besides, I have a little good news to keep the people from worrying about Nurigen’s betrayal.”

“Anything I need to worry about?”

“No my sister, you might actually like it.”

Minraver actually appeared to flounce as she left, a little immature for an eternal. Chlo had so many questions to ask Sikush, but one seemed most pressing.

“I have little information on The Terak.” She said. “They were beaten many switches ago and little remains in my memory. I will need to consult Luri and Estrid.”

“Do so by all means, but I can give you a complete history on the Terak wars. Follow me, we’ll need to visit the deepest archives.”

Chlo followed him, deep underground, to the archives below The Temple of the Flame. It was hot, far too hot to encourage many clerics to be there. A few were moving metal books around, carrying out the never ending task of removing centuries of red dust.

“Not that the dust harms the books, it just looks so awful.” Nurigen had once told her. “All that priceless information, some dictated by living Gods. It can’t just be left to gather more and more dust.”

How much of that priceless information did Nurigen know? How much might he have copied? All that worried her and had to be worrying Sikush.

“She doesn’t know, how can she not know?” Asked Chlo.

He knew what she meant of course, that shared area of mind saved a lot of guesswork in their often rambling conversations. Sikush stopped and looked at her. Really looked, as though she was the only person in existence at that moment.

“How do you know? It was done between multiverses, when you no longer existed.”

“I was only guessing, but now I know. You wanted to hide it from me too?”

“It seemed wise.” He said. “You’d have hated it being there and you’d have been constantly checking on it. It seemed simpler to have it moved by an expendable Kivar army. No traces, no witnesses. So much simpler.”

“I’m not happy about your description of me, but I can perhaps see why you wanted no record of it being moved. But it is the cage that holds him, the crawling chaos. Surely your sister should have been told.”

“She wouldn’t like where it is.” He replied. “Knowing my sister, she’d have built an outpost for her angels over the site. Trust me, the only way to keep a secret is if everyone else who knew it.... Is dead. As I didn’t want to kill Minraver.....”

Oh, he was grinning at her in the most infuriating way.

“So, where have you hidden the jail that holds the crawling chaos?”

He told her in their shared memory and he’d been right, the location did worry her.

“Poor Mo.” She said. “He might really not forgive you for this.”

Sikush walked on, stopping in front of a stone shelf covered in a good inch of red dust. He used his hand to move the dust, revealing a large book, a book written on metal plates. Normally such books were of fairly few pages, but the one he picked up, had to contain at least three hundred thin metal sheets.

“You may consider my metal books an eccentricity, but on occasions like this, they are invaluable.” He said. “This book covers Terak physiology and weaknesses to certain diseases.” Chlo took the book, noting that it was written in the original language of Mendera. It was priceless to her in terms of the information it held. Even the index hinted at vital intelligence she needed to know.

“Are there more books on The Terak ?” She asked.

He waved his arm in a circle, indicating the entire chamber. It was an area so vast that a cleric in the far distance, was merely a dot against the lamplight.

“This is it, everything in the chamber covers the Terak wars. We did fight them on a number of occasions, over a long period on time. They did almost win.”

He chose that moment to tell her the news he hoped would keep the public chattering about something else, other than Nurigen turning traitor.

“I’m going to allow the clerics of the flame, to come and go as they please.” He said. “They can even live outside the temple if they wish. It’ll be announced later tonight, on all the newsfeeds.”

It was all too much at the end of a few weeks of impossible things actually happening.

“But..... But how will you keep the temple secure ?” She asked.

“I’m just the broad brushstrokes Chlo, the detail of how to do it... I’ll leave to you.”

She could see why Kittara had once knocked him off his feet and held a dagger to his throat. She wanted to do the same, but instead she smiled.

“Letting the children out is a good idea.” She said. “Hol will love that.”

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Algaria was one of those planets that expanding empires tended to avoid. Their belief system was based on warfare, with dying peacefully of old age considered a sin. Dying in bed was fine, just so long as it was from wounds gained in battle. Aggressive and of reputed low intelligence and known to hold grudges for millennia. It was hardly surprising that Mendera had ignored Algaria. Surprisingly they had joined the empire voluntarily, seeing the potential for trade and technological advance.

“Their medical science advanced a hundred years in a single year.”

Or so she’d heard one of the bio-tech clerics claim. What did the empire gain from the deal ? Some of the toughest and most belligerent warriors in the multiverse. They now made up a good two thirds of the Menderan City Militia.

“I didn’t believe Chlo’s warning, but thank Yraag she convinced the war council.”

On the big screen, the one that monitored Algerian planetary defences. There was a rectangle of little dots approaching. None of the dots carried an Ident, but they were all burning their engines at maximum. A huge number of unknown visiting spacecraft, not bothering to identify themselves. All extremely keen to arrive in a hurry. As Chlo was to say later.

“Even an Algerian could recognise it was an invasion.”

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This was going to be Chapter 1 of Ripples Book 2. In the end I decided to just write one very long book. One thing I learned from City of the Lost God, is that readers seem to like online stories that run for a while.