

Ripples from the Past

Chapter 28 – So Many Ripples

“We need to talk terms Kittara of Mendera, Kittara also of the dark places beyond Gateway. I’ve heard talk of deities falling over themselves to grant you new powers. You seem to be almost loved in the darkest of places. With me though, there is always a price for my help.”

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Minraver decided quite quickly, that someone else was going to be the leader of their odd little army. She had noticed that Sikush tended to be a figurehead on Mendera, with Chlo making sure the empire ran like clockwork, while Jen ran the imperial guard. It was a model that worked well and left her brother time to ponder on the broad brush strokes of leadership. She badly needed to hear less questions about what people were supposed to do and more time to think of a long term plan.

Minraver gathered everyone together near to the well, for her one and only address as leader.

“As you know, I never intended to spend much time here.” She told them. “I certainly don’t want to be your leader, there are others far better suited to the role.”

“Nonsense.” Shouted Louelle.

“Only Louelle seems to want the job.” Said Mo. “And none of us are that keen on her becoming empress of the fortress.”

An agitated Kiyoh is something to see, all coiling tail and barely hidden anger.

“Why ?” Asked Louelle. “Explain yourself slum runner.”

“She’s got a bad attitude.” Said Kerr.

“It has to be a Menderan.” Called out Celli.

“Why did we kill the Shaman ?” Asked Mo. “He’d have made a great leader. Real natural for the role, even if his holy powders made me sneeze a bit.”

Mo never took anything seriously and the others looked likely to begin a row, which would leave things said that couldn’t be unsaid. Only one person had been standing quietly, while the others bickered. The tribespeople were there of course, though most seemed to understand little of the common tongue.

“Quiet !” Yelled Minraver. “I have decided to appoint a leader. No arguing, no putting yourself or another forward for the role. I will decide and I choose Hol Azreemy.”

Celli cheered of course and there were a lot of smiles, though Hol didn’t look pleased.

“I thought..... I assumed you’d put Kittara in command of our forces.” Said Hol.

Kittara had been sat on the dusty wall of the well, observing but saying nothing.

“I follow whoever Minraver tells me is our leader.” She said. “I’m not the kind to lead and I have other ideas to keep me busy..... As long as Hol agrees of course.”

“Can she even communicate with the tribespeople ?” Asked Louelle.

“Languages are my passion.” Said Hol.

She spoke to the tribespeople, telling them she was now their leader. Not a single one of them showed the slightest hesitation in bowing towards her. It seemed that being in thrall to Louelle, was a transferable effect.

“Looks like you got the job Hol.” Said Mo. “Now tell us what we’re supposed to do ?”

Minraver sat next to Kittara on the well wall, leaving Hol to issue her orders.

“There is an obvious backbone to the fortress, those that have been here for some time.” Said Hol. “I have no intention of breaking that up. I’m hoping Minraver will continue to look after our young visitors from Mendera City ?”

“Yes of course, a delightful pair of children.” Said Minraver.

“The tribespeople still need to work on repairing our defences, supervised by Louelle. The rest of our backbone will be Mo, Silky, Rhian and Kerr. They will be our permanent garrison. A priority should be the rebuilding of the defence towers next to the front entrance.”

Lots of nods of approval, even the normally grumpy Louelle, seemed pleased to be called part of the backbone of their defence.

“Now I’d like to hear Kittara’s ideas ?” Asked Hol.

“Mingal’s ideas too, we discussed it last night.” Said Kittara. “I wanted to try and find a few of the undead who still wander the rifts. I thought they’d be spread about, but Mingal thinks they’ll have returned to the caves below The City of the Lost God by now.”

“Why ?” Asked Mo. “The last time they worked as a group, they tried to wipe out all life on the rifts.”

“Let me ask the questions Mo.” Said Hol. “Though I’d like to know why you want to find some of the undead ?”

“They were once powerful invocers, as powerful as myself or Silky.” Said Mingal. “They’ll never be what they once were, but they’d still make powerful defenders for the fortress.”

“Plus..... They’re fast and almost indestructible.” Added Kittara.

“I once saw one take on a Shelzak and win.” Said Mo. “No offence Celli.”

“None taken, I make no claims about being indestructible.”

“How many do you think there might be ?” Asked Hol.

“I can’t be certain, but there are rumours about thousands of them.... Inhabiting the deep catacombs again.” Said Mingal.

“I’d like to take Juno and Albas with us.” Said Kittara. “Just in case we run into trouble.”

“Mariba was the given name of The City of the Lost God.” Said Silky. “Though few remember that name. One thing you can guarantee..... Is finding trouble there.”

“How about me ?” Asked Tejan. “Will I be going with you ?”

“You’re not forgotten Tejan.” Said Kittara. “You’ll be with me, trying to find the undead.”

“Finding them is one thing.” Said Hol. “Can you control them, make them fight for us ?”

“One tried to chew off my leg once.” Added Mo.

“Mingal believes he can influence them.” Said Kittara.

Celli and Louelle, snorted at exactly the same moment.

“They’re mindless killers.” Said Celli.

“No they’re not.” Said Mingal. “They were once scholars and academics. I’m certain I can still touch that part of their minds. I’m completely sure of it Hol.”

“Very well Kittara, go and investigate the catacombs of Mariba.” Said Hol. “Celli can remain here though, we need her strength in the rebuilding work.”

“We’ll be ready to leave in less than hour. Said Kittara.

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Aukar survived the toxin Nurigen had injected into his system and the wrath of his generals. It was traditional among the Terak, for a defeated leader to offer his own life in recompense. He’d been lucky, only two out of his eight surviving generals had asked for his life. He was still their leader, even if he had lost his aura of invincibility.

“The journey here was a one way trip, there is no question of simply going home.” He said.

He looked around the table and saw determined faces. Not one of his generals had suggested anything other than planning another attack. There was one huge advantage from being pushed through time with no hope of return. It meant his generals and his warriors were reconciled to never seeing home again. Everything they now did was for one end, the glory of the Terak.

"It's not something I'm proud of suggesting." Said General Dhūlen. "Mendera still has an open door at The Well of Souls. Anyone can arrive within the walls of Mendera City and many have. We could simply send a Nova Device through that open door."

"Yes, vaporise the entire planet." Someone muttered.

It sounded so simple of course, which meant someone would have already tried it. Actually several different enemies had tried over the course of innumerable millennia and none had succeeded.

"The traitor Nurigen gave us extensive data on Mendera." Said Aukar. "He had no reason to lie then, so I believe his data can be trusted. Others have tried to destroy Mendera by such a method and all have obviously failed, as Mendera still exists."

"Do we know why they failed?" Asked General Jelran.

Aukar liked Dhūlen and Jelran, they both questioned him about his plans and intentions. The rest of his generals were competent, but rarely contributed anything to their meetings. It was his own fault of course, for appointing yes men as generals.

"Chlo feels whatever is coming through from the rift gates." Said Aukar. "Any doomsday device is detected and dealt with. According to Nurigen, two powerful bombs are in the imperial stores, secured inside stasis fields."

"They keep them.... Extraordinary." Someone muttered.

"We know their behaviour can be quite eccentric." Said General Dhūlen.

Aukar had the current resources at his disposal, scribbled onto a single sheet of paper. Over half of his precious Terak warrior had died in the assault on Leng. He had less than forty thousand Terak and about the same number of dredger mercenaries.

"Nurigen included quite a lot of rambling stories in the data he gave us." Said Aukar. "One key event in the early days on Mendera, was the demon invasion, which used The Well of Souls to enter Mendera City. Four, maybe five million demons poured into Mendera City, only to be wiped out within a few hours. The sentinels were the key to their failure, at least according to Nurigen. The sentinels alerted the population and kept the invaders covered in white hot, devouring flames. Sikush was quite proud, that the demon army had walked into his trap."

He could see the story had affected his generals, it had been intended to. He knew that the best way to serve medicine with a bitter taste, was to serve it after something truly terrible.

"Five million demons, so easily destroyed." Said Jelran. "I don't like to sound negative, but we have so few warriors left."

"That is where Nurigen's ramblings come in useful." Said Aukar. "We were hoping to arrive on Mendera as an army of occupation. I asked Nurigen about the sentinels attacking us and he assured me they only reacted to creatures like demons and those that inhabit the dark places. He told me the sentinels wouldn't view us as a threat. They will ignore us, which gives our army a chance of reaching the centre of Mendera City, without suffering serious numbers of casualties."

"Nurigen was a traitor.... Can his drunken ramblings be trusted?" Someone asked.

Aukar wanted to remind his generals that Nurigen had been right about so many things, including the failed attack on Algaria. That had been his error though and his generals didn't need to be reminded that their near legendary leader, was all too fallible.

“Yes, I trust what Nurigen told me.” He said. “At the time he hoped to walk the streets of Mendera City as a conqueror, putting his boot against the necks of the population. The sentinels will ignore us, I’m certain of it.”

“Which buildings in the city would be our targets ?” Asked Dhūlen.

“Just one, the Council Building.” Answered Aukar.

They were shocked, he’d known they would be. The ones who’d pulled them all out a long dead multiverse, conversed with him in his dreams. Not that he had any intention of mentioning that to another living soul.

“I assumed..... With respect...” Said Dhūlen. “I think we all thought we’d attempt to take over the Temple of the Flame, or perhaps the Imperial Palace. The Council Building has little strategic importance.”

“The one we sought to release from his jail below the temple, has been moved.” Said Aukar. “I have been told that his prison is now on the 1st rift and others will now fight that battle.”

“How do you know this ?” Someone asked.

Aukar slammed his taloned hand onto the table, causing his generals to become still and look down in submission. Aukar was famous for his wrath once angered.

“I have my methods to contact those that brought us here.” He said. “I will not be interrogated on these matters. Is that understood ?”

“Yes of course.” Said eight timid voices.

“The defences around the Temple of the Flame are legendary and the palace is just as well protected.” Said Aukar. “We can take the Council Building with our limited resources though and keep control of it. There are those within the empire who will turn on Mendera, once they see a weakness. I have been assured that we will not be left for long without reinforcements.”

“It sounds a good plan.” Said Dhūlen. “A very good plan.”

They were scared of him now and would have said anything he suggested was a very good plan. They were easier to handle when scared, but he knew the plan wasn’t that good. Sadly though, it was the only plan he had.

“Prepare our warriors for battle.” He ordered.

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“It’s getting hotter.” Said Dava. “I think they’re messing with the life support settings, trying to cook us.”

“They won’t succeed, though it’s interesting that they’d try.” Said Delmus. “It implies they don’t know that much about our physiology. How is Trey ?”

“Much the same, feeling unwell.” Said Dava. “He looks awful, but can’t give me any specific symptoms. Can you take another look at him ?”

“On my way.”

Nowhere was that far away, it was a fairly small chamber. The equipment there had to be essential though, the creatures hadn’t made any attempt to physically attack them. Trey was in a corner, as far from them as it was possible to get. There was a general feeling that he might well have been infected by the deadly fungal spores.

“How are you ?” He asked. “Dava says you’re not giving her details of your symptoms.”

“I just feel awful. You know how it is Delmus, we’re never ill. I have nothing to gauge it against..... I just feel really ill.”

“How bad, on a scale of one to ten, where ten is the worst.”

“At least an eight. I just want to lie here all the time, which isn’t like me at all.”

"Do you still have the cough ?" Asked Delmus.

"Yes, but it comes and goes."

"Any headaches ?"

"No none..... So doc, will I live ?"

Trey looked awful, though even that was hard to define. The muscle tone in his face seemed to have gone, leaving his face looking slack and far too old for a member of The Damned. There was a look in his eyes too, of a man scared that he might be about to die.

"I have no idea..... The lack of headaches has to be a good sign." Said Delmus. "You might just have an alien planet type of flu, which Chlo can easily fix."

Trey's eyes were bloodshot and Delmus only noticed when he looked up at him.

"Only we don't get flu, do we ? Just promise me you'll get Dava out of this awful place, if I've got one of those things inside me."

"Honestly, I can't guarantee any of us will leave here alive. I promise to do my best to get everyone home and that is all I can promise."

"Then it will have to do."

Trey began to cough again, a deep nasty cough.

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The long disused gold mine on Suspesia II was close to ten miles deep and no one had entered it in many thousands of years. There was even a rock shelf at just the right height, to display the sentinel stone.

"Not a perfect spot to hide it, but it will have to do for now." Said Chlo.

"All those poor clerics." Said Alyz. "They'll need to rewrite a lot of books."

They both laughed. Clerics carried out the duties which any empire needs, from traffic control to keeping track of visiting pilgrims. Despite being essential to the smooth running of the empire, none of The Damned really liked them.

"It explains so much, but leaves so many questions." Said Chlo. "Our enemies are restricted to following ripples from the past, almost having to re-enact historical battles. Someone used the power of the sentinel stones, to drag people and objects backward and forward from different multiverses. They are locked into the old ripples, which we can use to our advantage Alyz."

"How do we do that ?"

"That is the flaw in my plans..... I currently have no idea, but I'm working on it. Freighter traffic will be delayed on a dozen empire worlds, to free up enough computing space."

"Wow.... Really ?"

Alyz didn't mind Chlo laughing at her expense. It was nice to see her laugh again, a good honest laugh. Chlo seemed the worst hit by every attack of their enemies. It was almost as if Chlo blamed herself, for not realising Nurigen had become a traitor.

"You are so gullible Alyz. Trust me, no freighter will be slowed down. I once used hollowed out moons to store data on the entire multiverse. Totally unsustainable of course, until Luri came up with a truly brilliant idea."

"Luri !? Is this another tall story Chlo ?"

"No, not at all. Luri asked if I'd ever thought of simply using the multiverse as my data, the most real of real time data. Genius, pure genius. I rewrote all of my pointers over the course of..... A long time, even for me. If I need data on the population on Phlot, I simply look at where my pointers tell me to look. Currently the population of Phlot is just over five point six billion."

"I'm not sure if I understand it, but it sounds brilliant." Said Alyz.

“Still unsustainable, all those pointers, indexes and search loops.” Said Chlo. “Happily the multiverse clears itself down on a regular basis, or..... Well, I’d have to start destroying some of the lesser used galaxies.”

“What ?!”

“Oh Alyz, you are so wonderfully gullible.”

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Estrid left the elegant Lummel craft and walked onto the strange red sand, which stretched to the far horizon. She could still hear Luri talking to the Lummel, arranging for them to leave and return to the dark places beyond gateway.

“We’ll find our own way back, there are great dangers here.” Said Luri.

“No, we will wait.”

There was more arguing and it looked like the Lummel had decided to upset a living deity, rather than abandoning them on an alien world.

“The Lummel once broke an oath to Sikush.” She called to Luri. “They claim to be cursed by that act of disloyalty. You will never talk them into deserting us.”

“But they’re almost certain to die.” Said Luri.

“What did Delmus say to you ? I think he said that only the eternal really expect to live forever.”

Luri glared at her, there were days when they just didn’t get along. Hardly surprising really, as they were each on opposite sides of the great balance.

“Fine..... I’ll bring the others outside.” Said Luri. “What is this.... Place like ?”

Estrid stamped on the red sand and took a sniff of the atmosphere.

“The gravity is a bit high, but dark angels are strong enough to cope with that.” Said Estrid. “There is a thick atmosphere, but I recognise none of the gases. It’s also a little too hot for Sventa and Haan to fight in comfort and it seems likely there will be fighting.”

“I’ll create an atmosphere bubble for them.” Said Luri.

It was strange to see Sventa, stepping cautiously onto the surface of a new world. She and Haan, both walked with tiny steps, as though the ground might open up and swallow them. Estrid wasn’t surprised, when two of the Lummel joined them, holding long thin spears.

“This is ridiculous.....” Said Luri. “At least stay on your ship.”

“If they want to come, let them.” Said Estrid. “Perhaps it’s their destiny to fight on those far off brown hills.”

“They only have spears Estrid.... They’ll die in the first fight.”

It was if they’d swapped sides in the never ending war between light and dark. Estrid had seen more of the multiverse than Luri though and realism was born out of experience.

“Once, on a particularly nice morning, an entire town of eighty thousand decided to sacrifice themselves in my honour.” Said Estrid. “I didn’t ask for such a thing, or want it. It was their decision though, their choice. That is the problem with free will Luri, people use it to make some truly terrible decisions. Let the Lummel go where they please.”

Estrid walked towards the closest of the low brown hills, noticing that the Luri had allowed the Lummel to walk with them. They’d only covered a few yards, before there was a disturbance in the red sand below their feet.

“This I understand.” Said Sventa. “These creatures mean to kill and eat us.”

Estrid had seen several different types of large insect predators, but none that moved so quickly.

Dark red bodies, with more than a dozen legs, the front four armed with pincers. Their jaws were truly massive and impressive. Judging by the vicious looking jaws, their usual prey had to be hard to

kill. Estrid relaxed a little, when one of the Lummel killed one, with a single thrust of her long thin spear. One nipped Haan on his upper arm, causing him to yell out.

“Bastard !” He yelled.

Estrid used fire, simply touching one of the large insects, reducing it to nothing by a small heap of red ash. Haan seemed to forget about his weapons, ripping one apart with his talons. Sveta too, appeared to prefer her talons to her blaster, tearing the heads off at least five of the creatures. Soon they were surrounded by the dismembered bodies of at least twenty of the large insects.

“Like the Dracc, but larger and tougher.” Said Sveta.

“We’re sure to come across more of these things.” Said Luri.

“I don’t mind.” Said Sveta. “After all that time wearing an all-terrain suit on an ice world, it’s nice to get out of the cold and fighting something I can get to grips with. Where do we go now ?”

It was one of the Lummel who pointed, aiming her arm towards what looked like any other way across the red sand.

“There.....Not far.” She said. “The strangers dug in the ground there.”

Estrid didn’t wonder how the Lummel knew, she understood that the member of the crew hadn’t just been sacrificed for entry to the grey between worlds, their death had bought information too.

“How far ?” Asked Luri.

“Not far, we can walk there before the dark time.”

The dark time, yet another term for night, or what passed for night on the alien world. The way the Lummel had said the words, didn’t sound encouraging.

“I think we need to be off the surface of this world before the dark time arrives.” Said Estrid. “We need to get moving.”

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There was no one there to see the swirl of grey mist, as Kittara pulled her group of warriors into the remnants of the bone yard. Every truly civilised city has a bone yard, though they may be called by other names. Somewhere to bring the dead, to stop their bodies decaying in the streets, or being thrown into the river. Space had been scarce in the City of the Lost God, only the wealthy were given a proper burial. The poor ended up in the bone yard, their body fat melted down for soap, their bone crushed and powdered, to be used as fertiliser.

“I did more damage to the City than I thought.” Said Kittara.

“Don’t blame yourself for all of it.” Said Mingal. “Numerous magic users have cracked foundations and brought down walls, draining off whatever dark magic you might have missed.”

“Does anyone live here now ?” Asked Juno.

“There was a tent city near the river.” Said Mingal. “No less than fifty adventurers, all digging and tunnelling to find a stash of gold left by Emperor Tarin, of the Crown of Nigon, or enchanted weapons left by the Lord of the Dead himself, Yam Kermul.”

“Did they ever find anything ?” Asked Tejan.

“Some did, just enough gold or precious artefacts, to cause the settlement to keep growing.”

“What happened to the tent city ?” Asked Albas.

“No one really knows.” Said Mingal. “One day the tents were still there, full of personal possessions. As to the fifty or so adventurers ?..... They’d just vanished.”

It was all news to Kittara, gossip from the period when she’d been dead. The city looked a lifeless pile of rubble, but she felt something alive near where the Shrine of the Dark Angels had once stood.

“This way, there should be a way to the catacombs from the shrine gardens.” She said. “Stay alert though, there is something there.”

“Probably one of the undead.” Said Tejan.

“No, whatever it is, it’s alive.” Said Kittara. “Though sometimes it isn’t, which is confusing.”

She barely remembered the way and the frequent signs of holes being dug didn’t help. It really did look as though every vagabond on the rifts, had been digging for treasure.

“I recognise the gateposts, this is the place.” She said.

To her right was where she’d once drawn power from the entire city, to give Sventa immortality and a corporeal body. There was nothing left of the circle of statues, or the piece of sacred ground, where she’d once barked commands at the old dark gods.

“Nothing..... Nothing still remains, not one stone upon another.” She said.

“Where was the entrance to the catacombs ?” Asked Albas.

Kittara looked to her left, towards where that had once been a temple dedicated to the Lady of the Shrine. Not all factions of the darkness are allies and the lady had broken away from Leng, forming her own allegiances and nurturing her own acolytes.

“There.” She said, pointing. “I can just see a few of the silver stones, used to build the entrance hall for the temple. The entrance to the catacombs, is to the right of the temple.”

They found the hole in the ground, where a set of grand stairs, had once led down to the sealed entrance to the catacombs. The stairs were now destroyed the heavy silver doors gone, probably melted down by one of the adventurers who had inhabited the tent city. Kittara looked down the hole, which was now full of rubble.

“There is a way past the detritus.” Said Mingal. “Not a pleasant task to get down there, but it can be done.”

“None of us are exactly fragile.” Said Tejan. “We can climb down there, no problem.”

“There it is again..... Something alive.” Said Kittara.

She’d felt it, the creature wanted to be discovered, she was certain of it. She walked towards a mountain of rubble, where the temple had once stood, the others following her. There was a way to walk between the vast stone blocks, to gain access to a small but undamaged part of the temple.

There she was, leaning against an altar carved from a single huge piece of silver stone.

“Stay here,” Kittara told them, “no matter what happens, stay here.”

The lady of the Shrine was called the Silver Lady by some and Kittara could see why. A tall beautiful woman, who looked like one of the humans who’d conquered the 1st rift a very long time ago. Tall, slender, a wise smile on her face. Her skin had a silver glint to it, as did her hair and of course; her long flowing dress looked to have silver threads sewn into it.

“I get so few visitors to this temple now.” Said The Lady of the Shrine. “I rarely come to the City since it was destroyed, but for such a guest.... Kittara herself. Though you should still be dead.”

Strangely Kittara had never met the Silver Lady before. She had no concerns about associating with the creatures of darkness; it was just that there had never been a need... Until now.

“I have need of the undead, if they still inhabit the caves below the catacombs ?” She asked.

She strutted, the creature who had been the true ruler of the City of the Lost God, during most of its existence. There had been many kings and rulers, even an emperor once, but it was The Lady who had pulled the strings of power.

“We need to talk terms Kittara of Mendera, Kittara also of the dark places beyond Gateway. I’ve heard talk of deities falling over themselves to grant you new powers. You seem to be almost loved in the darkest of places. With me though, there is always a price for my help.”

Dark deity, or just an immortal invoker who had been very lucky and victorious in a few battles ?

Kittara didn’t know the origin of The Lady, but her powers were real enough. Simply taking the

undead from the catacombs might be impossible, or likely to cause a conflict, which might well carry on for millennia.

“Everyone has one goal now Lady of the Shrine.” Said Kittara. “There are no sides if the multiverse returns to a state of chaos. Most have given me their aid, because they can see it is in their own long term interest.”

The laugh was so pleasant, so natural that Kittara found it hard to believe The Lady, had such a bad reputation for cruelty.

“Ahhh all those factions who took an oath to free our Lord from his prison. Just about every guild in the City took such an oath, though I often wonder how few really wanted it to happen. I am a rarity Kittara, a believer in that oath. I see no reason to help you.... Unless you’re willing to pay my price ?”

“What is your price ?”

It was going to be something cruel and spiteful, despite the warmth of the smile on the Silver Lady’s face.

“My price is always the same..... I am beginning to be predictable, or so I’m told. You arrived with a chaos invoker, who is of no interest to me, but the members of his guard, The Chalné’s famous Damned. They are of great interest to me and one must never leave here. My price is that one of them must die in the catacombs.”

“You wish me to fight and kill one of them ?” Asked Kittara.

“No, I can arrange their death during a small skirmish with a few of the more quarrelsome undead. A trip over a piece of stone, their attention taken at just the right moment. I can arrange the act, which will then allow me to capture their essence. In return, I will allow you take as many of the undead as you can. I will also make the undead more docile and easier to control.”

There was never going to be any agreement to such a deal, but Kittara had to know why.

“Why do you need their essence ? What do you do with it ?”

“Most of those who serve me were once mighty warriors.” Said the Silver Lady. “I can bring them back for a while, allow them to inhabit bodies again, for a short time. They are mine forever, those wonderful warriors. None are as skilled, or as valuable to me as one of The Damned. You must choose who it will be though..... Tejan, Albas or Juno....Which do you choose ?”

Not all her time in Qasit had been taken up by having sex with Sikush. There had been a lot of sex, but also a lot of pillow talk, discussions in the wonderful afterglow that follows really good sex. She’d spoken to him about a plan for the future, one designed to make Mendera far safer. Her vague ideas were still fairly nebulous and she had intended to use The Shrine of the Tree of Life, but she believed in being flexible.

“None of them.” She said. “I have something else to offer though, something..... Better. The entire shrine gardens area could be cleared and rebuilt. Your temple, the shrine, even the deeper shrine which is forever hidden from the light. It could all be better than it was the day Tomma-Goran created his city. There could be a road built, to connect your temple to the great Pilgrim’s Path, which leads all the way to Tandalla.”

“Rebuilding, is that your offer ? I could rebuild it all, but a temple is nothing without the devotion of faithful worshippers. Their blood too of course, there will always be a need to cleanse the unworthy from my followers.”

It was Kittara’s turn to give The Lady a warm knowing smile.

“I can give you a never ending supply of worthy followers.” She said. “I can arrange for the City to once again be an essential place for pilgrims to visit. It will require a few lies, a little deceit and quite a lot of subterfuge... Though I suspect you won’t mind that.”

“My dear Kittara, lies, deceit and subterfuge.... We could almost be sisters. Tell me your ideas and if they please me.... You shall have your army of the undead.”

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Seesha didn't like sitting on the ground, but the tribespeople had provided blankets for her and Mix to sit on. Their language wasn't a modern corruption of the common tongue, but a form of the original language of Mendera. As many of the books in the temple were written in that language, it hadn't taken Seesha long, before she was talking 1st rift tribal language, like a native. They were now treated like their own children, by their small army of tribespeople.

“This Shuud meat is lovely.” Said Mix.

“Yes, a sweet taste.” She agreed.

The Shuud had caused a little friction between the warriors from the rift and Minraver, though Seesha wasn't sure if Minraver had noticed. They needed more meat than the occasional small Rock Cropper, so Minraver had gone hunting. Only it wasn't really hunting, more grabbing a live animal from a hillside and using a portal to bring it to their fortress. Minraver had repeated the trick, until they had half a dozen live Shuud inside a makeshift animal pen.

“It's not traditional hunting, our blessed deities will not be pleased.”

One of the hunters had told Seesha. Mind you, after saying many similar things, the tribespeople seemed happy enough to eat the meat. Mix finally stopped asking for more food and seemed content.

“Good, very good food.” He said. “Not quite as good as Molly's Nurag Garn, but very good.”

Their new friends became quite animated, mentioning that they made the best Nurag Garn in the entire world.

“Far better than they make in the cities.” They were told.

“We will make you an authentic Nurag Garn for tomorrow.”

Seesha was willing to keep an open mind on the subject, but her brother's expression told everyone that he was sceptical about it being better than the one made by Seb's mother.

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