

Ripples from the Past

Chapter 29 – The Undead

“Estrid had opened the heavy metal door, letting the light from inside illuminate that alien world. They’d been calling it a planet, but of course it wasn’t. Like the rifts, it was a world that bore little resemblance to a planet.”

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Kittara had made a pact with the Lady of the Shrine, an agreement to gain her approval for using some of the undead as warriors to help guard the ruined fortress on the 1st rift. As everyone knows though, before you can skin a Shuud, you first need to catch it. She helped Juno clamber over the last of the debris and her entire party of five was standing in an intact part of the catacombs. So many had tried to destroy the ancient tunnels and chambers, yet the almost perfect brick lined passageway, stretched out into the distance.

“Lighting is your speciality I seem to remember.” She said to Juno.

Light would announce their presence to things best left undisturbed, but they were all powerful fighters and there wasn’t time to be timid, or careful. Juno created a dozen tiny orbs of white light. Magic some might call it, though the empire loathed that description. The orbs moved away from them, illuminating a passageway, which looked to be at least half a mile in length. The creatures from the lowest levels would have felt her arrive and the lights would announce her arrival to others. That wasn’t enough for Kittara.... She used the hilt of her Nurigen blade, to hammer on the brickwork.

“Now we wait.” She said.

“What for ?” Asked Juno.

The first answering hammering on a distant wall, took several minutes. That was answered by others, which in turn caused the sound of hard objects being used to beat the walls. Other sounds too, began to rise up and travel along the side tunnels. It didn’t take long for the air around them, to be filled with a cacophony of sound, a symphony of the undead and those best left undisturbed. The sounds stopped quite suddenly, leaving only the sound of water dripping in the distance.

“Good, the undead know we’re here.” Said Kittara. “Now we need to gather them up, somewhere in what remains of the lower depths. There are others here who would be useful, but they will never join us. They will let us pass through the tunnels unmolested though.”

“A promise from the Silver Lady ?” Asked Juno.

“Yes.”

“Do you trust her ?”

“Of course I don’t, but I’ve promised her something she truly desires.”

She looked at their faces in the harsh light of one of Juno’s globes, wondering who would have the courage to ask her. Mingal of all people asked, what all wanted to know.

“What did you promise her ?” He asked.

“If we survive you’ll know.” She told him. “Come on, we need to move. Lots of light please Juno, our new comrades need to be able to find us.”

As they passed the second set of side tunnels, something slithered towards them, its jaws open to bite, its claws ready to rend flesh. It resembled both nothing and everything that used teeth and

claws to hunt its prey. It was low to the ground, like a six foot long growler, but growlers weren't semi-transparent. Kittara hit it twice with her blade, though once would have been enough.

"We may meet more of these." She said. "Easy to kill, unless a swarm of them of them attacks you. Luckily most of them were killed a long time ago."

"What are they?" Asked Juno, turning it over with her foot.

"It's a slithering thing." Said Mingal. "A manifestation of true evil, they served Yam Kermul himself. Though as Kittara said, few are thought to have survived the death of their master."

"That sounds like a cleric's legend to me." Said Tejan.

Kittara had to laugh. Once she'd been the lone voice, the only one of The Damned to treat the teachings of the clerics with caution. Now just about everyone was cynical about many of the ancient teachings. It had crossed her mind that Sikush wanted the old wisdom to fade, to be thought of as nothing but myths and legends.

"Mingal is right." She said. "Mothers in the City of the Lost God used to use Yam Kermul as a threat to keep their children well behaved. Tell a lie, commit a sin, be disobedient to your parents and a slithering thing would be born. There was a legend that every murder, created several of these monsters. It might sound like nonsense, but there is some truth in it."

"It died fairly easily." Said Albas.

"They hunted in swarms." Said Kittara. "If you see a swarm use fire against them..... They're easily killed by fire."

They were attacked by one more of the slithering thing, which Juno easily cut to pieces. Kittara didn't know the way, but felt herself being directed by an entity that felt as though it supported her mission. She hoped it was at least benign, though there was no way of really knowing. Even if she was being led into a trap, the undead would be gathered there.

"Proper stairs heading down." Said Albas. "I thought the catacombs had been destroyed. These stairs look as good as the day they were built."

"Tomma-Goran built his city to last forever." Said Kittara. "It's the new additions that have crumbled and suffered from countless destructive battles."

Down, always down, ignoring three entrances from the stairs, until the staircase could take them no lower. It led them out into a vast hall, with many corridors leading off from it, in all directions. The sound of dripping water had been their constant companion, becoming louder as they walked across the hall.

"They're here, all around us.... In the other corridors." Said Juno.

"I see them, they're here to follow us." Said Kittara. "Do nothing, they will follow. There is a place of meeting about a mile away.... There we will see if they can be turned into allies."

"How do you know that?" Asked Mingal.

That question surprised her; she'd assumed the entity in her head would have been audible to Mingal. He was a chaos creature after all, probably doomed to becoming one of the undead, even if that awful event was still a long time in the future.

"I am being led by something that inhabits the lower darkness." She said. "I believe it to be trustworthy, though we should remain wary of a trap."

"Is it too late to stay with Mo?" Asked Albas.

A joke that was wrong in so many ways, but it gave them a chance to laugh. The outer edges of the vast hall, were now full of the undead. Watching in silence seemed to satisfy them for now, or the Silver Lady had used her powers to make them docile and silent. Kittara led her group on, across the hall and into a wide corridor.... The undead slowly following them.

"I know they were used against us once, nearly destroying Mendera City." Said Juno. "Where did the undead come from though and why are they drawn to this awful place?"

She saw Mingal twitch, such questions had to be troubling to him. Plus he probably saw the undead more as victims than villains.

"Mingal probably has his theories about that." She said. "Let him answer your question."

"You might not like my answers." He said. "They don't follow the official empire version of events."

"I still want to know." Said Juno.

"Very well, I'll start with the parts that aren't contentious. Chaos creatures are created in the wastes of eternity, by whatever you think of as the ultimate divine being. Every civilisation clever enough to have travelled across the rifts, has their own version of God."

"Or Gods, my family worshipped about seven of them." Said Albas.

"Oh, is this the bit that isn't contentious?" Asked Tejan.

"Just let Mingal tell it, at his own pace and in his own words." Said Kittara.

"Chaos creatures are creatures of the darkness.... Few understand that." Said Mingal. "Left alone we'd wander the rifts for a few millennia, before being drawn back to the wastes. Yes, there would be some casualties along the way, but many of the 1st rift tribespeople actually worship chaos creatures.... We've changed not just lives, but whole societies."

"And you Kittara, do you agree with that version?" Asked Tejan.

"Let him finish."

"The inhabitants of Leng, the demon emperors and their followers... They decided to control the chaos creatures." Said Mingal. "Not for any common good, but to gain an inexhaustible supply of powerful invocers. Mendera didn't just turn a blind eye either. The Chaln  agreed to the horrendous process of conversion, just so long as Mendera benefitted from any important snippets of information the converted creatures might divulge. No good looking at me with disbelieving eyes. Kittara knows I speak the truth.... Ask her about the 9th Great Concordat.... Ask her."

Why did he have to put her on the spot? Kittara decided that the truth is the truth and hiding it from her fellow members of the imperial guard was pointless.

"He speaks the truth, I've seen the agreement..... Though you won't find it in the official archives."

"The Chaln  agreed policy with Leng, with the demons?" Asked Juno.

"Yes and it's probably why both worlds still survive." Said Kittara. "I don't think Mingal has finished though. If he has, I'll give my own version of why the undead are drawn this place. Mine isn't hearsay though or apocryphal.... I was a friend of Tomma-Goran, the living deity."

"Please, please..... Tell us about your version of all this." Said Mingal.

Where to begin? They had walked about a quarter of a mile, with a slow hour's walk still ahead. The undead were beginning to fill the corridor behind them and the plan looked likely to succeed. Kittara decided to give the verbose version, the one going by the scenic route, as Chlo often said.

"I knew Tomma very well." She said. "I never knew him to lie, or even exaggerate the truth. The general consensus is that the conversions in Leng do something, cause so much trauma that the converted chaos creatures, eventually go mad."

Mingal was grinning at her in a very disturbing way. Hol really did need to find him a new hat to hide the wounds in his head. She was about to disagree with his view of his own fate.

"Yes, the conversions caused the undead." He hissed.

"No, though it is a barbaric act." She said. "Firstly there is a belief that nearly all converted invocers will eventually become the undead. Tomma assured me that over half will simply wander the rifts, but keep their sanity. A huge number of tribal shaman, were once chaos creatures."

“Makes sense when you think about it.” Said Tejan. “But why do they still gather in the catacombs ?”

“Nigon once brought them there as a place of safety and they still remember that.” Said Mingal.

So hard not to laugh or sneer at that particularly inaccurate piece of perceived wisdom. Hol obviously liked Mingal though and he’d proven himself to be loyal to Mendera.

“I’m sorry Mingal, but that just isn’t true.” She said. “Tomma deliberately allowed a darkness to take root in the deepest of the catacombs. He knew it would attract the undead, bringing them to somewhere safe. It also stopped them from creating havoc right across the rift. It was also Tomma, who put a barrier across all the entrances to the catacombs. Once inside, the undead had no way to get out again..... Though that magical barrier was destroyed a long time ago.”

“If the great Tomma-Goran told you this, then I must accept it as truth.” Said Mingal.

“What happened to the darkness that brought them here ?” Asked Albas.

“Nothing, it’s still there. It will live forever, in the deepest caves below our feet.”

So many things for them to learn. Her whole group were looking at the floor they walked on, as though it might open up and devour them.

“Who is it, or what is it ?” Asked Juno.

“Some things are best left undisturbed.” Said Kittara. “And some should never be named, lest we disturb their slumber. Come, I sense that a huge number of the undead are gathered in the place of meeting.”

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Aukar hated the rifts, because they stripped his army of their technology. Gone were the blasters, the communications systems and just about all motorised transport. There were some beasts of burden used to pull carts, but they were useless to transport an army of nearly two hundred thousand warriors and their equipment. Just keeping his army fed on the rifts was going to be a nightmare.

“We planned and carried out the attack on Leng.” He said. “Now we’ll do it all again, for the attack on Mendera City.”

Without Nurigen and his demon devices, his army needed to be transported to Medrona and use the stone circle to open a doorway to the 1st rift. For a while at least, they’d follow the same route Mo had taken. If they survived the horrors waiting on Medrona of course and Nurigen’s notes were accurate about how to activate the ancient stones. Dhūlen was with him, the most able of his surviving generals.

“It’s a long hard journey from where we’ll enter the rift, to the nearest rift gate.” Said Dhūlen, as he examined one of Nurigen’s hand drawn maps.

“We’ll need to go here, to the abandoned village.” Said Aukar, jabbing the map with his talons. “It is one of the few unguarded gates and the most direct. Our warriors are brave, but I have no wish to waste time fighting demon armies.”

“Most flee at the sight of our warriors in the sky.” Said Dhūlen.

It made him proud, to see his general ready to fight his way through the demon hordes if he had to. If they were successful in capturing Mendera, Aukar had decided to name Dhūlen as his successor.

“Caution is important now Dhūlen.” He said. “Every warrior is precious, even the dredgers. Food and water must be a priority, enough to last for the entire long march across the rift.”

There was talking at the door to his quarters, someone seeking entry. The guards on the door had instructions to admit no one, but he hadn’t meant them to keep Jelran waiting in the corridor.

“Let General Jelran in you fools.” He yelled.

Jelran his other talented general, though he could be a bit too ambitious. Giving Dhūlen his official approval as successor was one thing, but Jelran was the sort to organise a coup, if he thought he stood a chance of winning. Jelran was intelligent, running his eye over the map and understanding the main problem.

“A long way, moving at the pace the dredgers walk.” He said. “Rations will be tight, no living off the land on the rifts. Of course..... Our fighters could eat the dredgers.”

Aukar wanted to hug both his generals like brothers, but that would have been inappropriate. He did chuckle at Jelran’s comment though.

“Spoken like a true Terak.” Said Aukar. “We need the dredgers though. They will enter Mendera first, to cause confusion and draw the anger of our enemy. Our warriors will follow, silently infiltrating the city and taking over the council building.”

“Besides, dredger meat tastes of mud.” Said Dhūlen.

Aukar ignored the hand written maps and notes, turning towards a screen which showed several routes from their base to Medrona. Empire vessels could make the journey in less than a day, but his small fleet would need to travel carefully and keep out of the main freight lanes. Again like Mo, he’d need to use the routes less travelled, to reach Medrona. There was a number ticking down on all the computer screens in the base, Nurigen’s prediction for how long it would take Chlo to find them. It was currently showing five days.

“We need to leave here when it says three days.” He said. “The Chalné won’t just send his attack wings, he’ll send Chlo. Nurigen thinks she’ll be allowed to act as a weapon, which will mean this entire planet becoming a lifeless rock.”

“Can she really do that ?” Asked Jelran.

Only the empire had the ability to use changes to reality as a weapon and they almost never used it. The whole concept of what destruction could be caused so easily..... It had taken a long time for Nurigen to convince him. He’d seen the notes on Panajarum and knew that Chlo was the most destructive weapon ever created.

“She can and will.” He said. “She will be tracing Nurigen through the time lines. A fraction of a second after seeing him arrive here in the past, she will be here. A fraction of a second later, everything here will be dead, or wishing they were. We can’t live off the land, but we can raid unaligned planets without too much risk. We’ll leave in two days time and carry out a few raids to top up our supplies.”

“If Chlo is so powerful, why doesn’t The Chalné use her as his main weapon ?” Asked Jelran.

Because he wasn’t insane, though his generals wouldn’t understand that. Again, it had taken a long time, for Nurigen to convince him that doomsday weapons were best kept for use against exceptional dangers. Quite rightly, Nurigen had assumed that the end of the multiverse and the release of the crawling chaos, definitely posed exceptional dangers.

“No further debate.” Snapped Aukar. “You have my orders, prepare to leave this planet in two days time.”

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Sventa was beginning to enjoy herself, on the strange planet in the long dead multiverse. The gravity was a little high, but nothing she couldn’t handle. They were plagued by the insects, which came out of the red sand to ambush them, but they weren’t a hard enemy to kill. They’d just destroyed at least another fifty of the giant insects, when the planet had another surprise for them. The dunes were vibrating, the sand becoming difficult to stand on.

"Keep together." Said Luri. "Don't let this split us up, or you might move outside of the atmosphere bubble."

"It's like quicksand." Said Haan.

Only it wasn't, they weren't being sucked down. It was just becoming harder to keep on her feet and the Lummel were becoming agitated. One was shouting at Luri in a strange language, which sounded like a long sequence of high pitched bleeps.

"They say it's coming and we need to move." Said Luri.

"What's coming?" Asked Haan.

"I'm not sure, but it scares them. Walk as quickly as you can, but keep together."

The Lummel were falling over less than them and seemed to have a way of walking over the sand, which wasn't sapping all their strength.

"Watch the Lummel." She told Haan. "Copy the way they move."

It worked up to a point, though the Lummel had the advantage of being much lighter than dark angels. Luri and Estrid seemed to have forgotten about being living deities, as they too followed the Lummel, while trying to keep upright.

"What are we running from?" Asked Haan.

"Just keep following the Lummel." She said.

The vibrations underground grew, until they reached a firmer spot, near the top of a large brown hill. The ground still looked like sand, but it was a firmer type of sand. The Lummel stopped, they were obviously safe from whatever they were still making noises about.

"By the eight great demon gods!" Yelled Sveta. "We can't fight that."

It looked as though half the planet was trying to drag itself out of the ground. Huge jaws came first, followed by the massive shell of some kind of insect. Sveta had seen some strange creatures, but nothing as huge as the insect appearing from below the red sand.

"Sevril-Narge never created anything so huge." Said Estrid.

Size became difficult to give meaning to, as the monster finally stood on the sands supported by a dozen large flat feet, on the end of a dozen short legs. It was ideally suited for crossing the vast areas of dunes, walking the way some insects can walk on water.

"It would take an hour, to walk around it." Said Haan.

"Yet our Lummel seem quite relaxed now." Said Luri.

One of the Lummel was pointing at the creature, as it knelt on its front legs and began to eat one of the insects they'd just killed. The Lummel pointed at her mouth and made eating noises. Sveta now understood.

"It's a night scavenger, huge but harmless." She said. "It probably only comes out after full dark, but the dead insects are obviously too tempting to be ignored."

"It makes me wonder what else walks this planet after full dark." Said Haan.

"Every eco system needs its carrion feeders." Said Luri. "We should be moving, the underground facility must be quite close."

Sveta was to think over the next few minutes a great many times. Sometimes she blamed herself totally and at other times, she excused herself of all blame. It had been dark and they had just seen an insect the size of a space freighter, pull itself out of the ground. The light was strange, the atmosphere poisonous and the gravity was draining. Still, she had been warned and should have been far more alert.

"Our Lummel have found a way in." Said Luri.

Oh, if only she hadn't been so desperate to be inside some kind of shelter. Estrid had opened the heavy metal door, letting the light from inside illuminate that alien world. They'd been calling it a planet, but of course it wasn't. Like the rifts, it was a world that bore little resemblance to a planet. No wonder that Sventa had let her guard down. The ground had begun to vibrate again, as creatures began to appear out of the sand.

"Inside Sventa, get inside." Luri called.

It had come from nowhere, but she had been warned. One moment Haan was alive and well, heading towards the door, the next he was dead. A chaos enforcer had appeared out of the sand. It had probably been waiting patiently for days. It first cut Haan in two and then began to nibble at his entrails. Kittara had told her to be alert and two living deities had warned her about the ones from the darkness being powerful on that world. Haan had still died though, less than six feet away from where she stood.

"No, it was mine to kill !" She shouted.

Estrid would have hesitated of course, but Luri had instantly used fire to incinerate the chaos enforcer and Haan's body. All so quick, no time to think about the magnitude of what had just happened.

"We couldn't have taken his body with us." Said Luri. "Fire is Better, this way is better than having the creatures of this place feeding on him."

"Vengeance for his death should have been mine." Said Sventa

"Get inside....I can see them coming out of the ground.... Terrible things." Yelled Estrid.

Estrid slammed the door closed after they'd entered the building. It was really just the top of a shaft going down into the ground, a very long way into the ground. Sventa really needed to grieve for the male dark angel she'd thought of as a son. There was no time though. There was the sound of running feet on the stairs and the elevator was on its way up.

"Are you alright ?" Asked Estrid.

"I will be, once I've killed a few of the bastards who built this place."

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Alyz should have been with The Old One, but she was pacing through the miles of corridors in the imperial palace. Priceless pieces of art covered the walls, which were probably only walked past once a century. There was the automatic cleaning system of course, though the devices probably didn't appreciate art, no matter how clever their AI. There were two reasons for her being in his palace in the middle of the long Menderan night. One of them was the painting she'd walked past at least six times.

"I am going to kill you father. I have given my oath to end your life." She muttered.

She had to stop and look at it properly, or there was no point in being there. Not that there was any question of destroying it. Alyz was a realist and knew that long after she'd driven a dagger into her father's throat, she'd need to visit the painting. Even if your father was an evil treacherous low life, he was still your father.

The painting was of her and her father, celebrating the first new version of his famous blades in several millennia. Staged by the artist of course, so their postures in the painting looked a little awkward. The artist from Ventella had been famous throughout the empire, though Alyz could no longer remember her name. The painting was signed A.R. in the lower right corner.

"Aery, yes.... Now I remember Aery Roolen."

Aery had made them sit for a few hours each day and it had seemed to go on for weeks. The finished work, with her father holding the blade between them, was a brilliant likeness. It was as though he

was there, looking down at her from the wall. The first of his lighter and slightly curved blades, which had become so popular.

“She even caught my half smile.”

Her own likeness wasn't perfect, but Aery had caught a certain look in her eyes. The Ventellan artist had been famous for catching an expression in the eyes. Alyz moved closer, as if trying to out stare the painting of her father.

“You don't have to kill him Alyz. Just find him and leave others to take care of the.... Unpleasantness.”

His voice made her jump. Sikush, leaning against the wall behind her, as though wandering through his palace at night was the most normal thing in the world.

“I.... er.....”

The words wouldn't come. She hadn't expected anyone to be there and had allowed her thoughts to drift too far to be captured.

“Sorry, do you need privacy ?” He asked.

“No, not really..... I have to kill my father for many reasons. Not least to convince myself that I'm not infected by his treachery.”

“I don't think anyone thought you were like him.”

“Yes they did, I can still see it in their eyes. There goes his daughter, still claiming not to have known what was going on. They'll all probably be long dead when I find him, but I'll know I proved them wrong..... I'll know.”

Sikush put his arm around her shoulder, as they both looked at the superb likeness of her father.

“Do you want the painting ?” He asked.

“No, I'd probably destroy it one night and regret it for the rest of my immortal life. Leave it here where I can see it when I need to.”

There was no seating, so they sat huddled together on the floor. Drink appeared and two long glasses, one of his better tricks. She allowed the alcohol to work, enjoying the slight numbing of her thoughts.

“I wanted to see you.” She said. “I know this isn't the right moment, but I let the multiverse get into my head. I know I shouldn't have, but now something has become a bit of an obsession.”

“Oh, she or it has played us all a little, it's what she does.”

“It's just that.....We've shared a bed more times than I can remember and fought together in far too many wars. Yet I don't know your true form..... I have no idea what you really look like.”

He laughed, the one reaction she hadn't expected. Sikush held up his hand, twisting it about and showing it to her.

“We seed the multiverse with cleric DNA, which tends to produce warm blooded creatures with two arms, two legs and a head at the top. There are many worlds that have no idea they are the result of our seeding and will never know. This is how I've looked for a very long time and it is now my true form.”

She was angry, for no real reason. It was the result of the multiverse putting ideas into her head, but also something else. Everything they'd been through and he was making excuses to avoid showing her. Alyz felt insulted and unappreciated.

“That's not what I meant and you know it.” She snapped.

She'd almost added 'you owe me the truth' to her words, but hadn't. His laughter stopped, as he drank some of the excellent wine, which had appeared from nowhere.

“To show you Alyz, we will need to link minds. For a while you will see everything that is me and I will see everything that is you. We’ll both be locked in that link for hours, perhaps days. Not something to risk during a war, but after..... I promise that if we both survive, I will show you my true form.”

“Thank you.”

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Minraver felt something herself, a kind of generalised anxiety. Still, without Louelle and her abilities as a seer, there might well have been a catastrophe. The trouble with a general feeling that something bad is going to happen, is that it’s unfocused. Minraver began to look for portals everywhere, anything that might give an enemy access to their fortress. It was getting to her, of all people, an eternal. It upset her that Louelle had noticed her state of mind.

“I feel it too.” Said Louelle. “Soon I’ll know where it will appear.”

“What is coming ?”

“I don’t know. It will be dangerous though and we must be ready.”

Their fortress was still a ruin, but a ruin with a purpose again, as Mo insisted on telling them, quite often. There were guard towers in just the right places, new deep trenches, some filled with sharpened stakes. Their archers now had places to hide, before raining lethality down on any invaders. Traps had been considered too, but they might kill any friendly reinforcements. Their army of tribespeople seemed happy too, or at least they had been. Minraver and Louelle muttering and searching about, had caused an unsettled feeling throughout the garrison.

“It might help if we knew what you were looking for.” Said Rhian.

“I don’t know, but I will know where it will arrive.” Said Louelle. “There won’t be much warning, so everyone needs to be armed and ready.”

The generalised anxiety infected everyone, even the normally unflappable Mo. He organised a few quick response units, armed to the teeth and ready to rush to anywhere Louelle might indicate. Minraver tried not to look anxious, but there was now a feeling of impending doom. Silky didn’t help, when she felt something too.

“Something born of chaos is on the way.” She said. “It seeks to test our defences.”

“Oh great, fucking perfect.” Said Kerr.

“Any idea where it will arrive ?” Asked Hol.

Poor Hol, trying to organise a defence by two hundred worried people, against an unknown enemy. Minraver was just glad she’d relinquished the role of leader.

“I feel it approaching along the time lines.” Said Silky. “.... I think it will enter the rift, near the well, somewhere near Pug.”

“Yes, the main courtyard..... Move more defenders to near the well.” Said Louelle.

Nothing was certain and they still had a lot of warriors covering the rest of the fortress. By the time Minraver was certain the attack would be near the well, they seemed to have very few warriors to fight the attacker. It was time to move the children to a place of safety.

“Where is the safest place Louelle ?” She asked. “Where do I send the children ?”

“The battlements where I salute the coming of the light. There is nothing of interest there for an invader.”

Really she should have consulted Hol, but there wasn’t enough time.

“Could you look after the children for me Rhian ? Take them out to the battlements.”

“Yes of course I will.”

Their faces looked sad, as Rhian led them both north, past the prison that held the crawling chaos and hopefully, to the safety of the battlements. Not that anywhere was guaranteed to be safe. A few minutes later she felt the change in the atmosphere, which meant someone was spinning up a portal, a large portal.

“Call everyone !” She yelled. “They are needed here, it is arriving.”

No panic and even Kerr had armed himself with a long handled wood axe. Louelle seemed to have gone into a trance, merely pointing to a place quite close to their one and only source of water, the well.

“It is here !” Shouted Silky.

“It might be here to poison our water.” Shouted Hol. “Try to keep it away from the well.”

There were many factions serving chaos, all with their own minions. Minraver had seen most of the creatures chaos could use as warriors, but not all of them. The few powerful invokers she’d taken alive had spoken of owing a debt to this or that faction and being given no choice. A debt was owed, for a favour done, or sometimes a genuine debt in gold coin. It was fight for chaos or be executed. Not that the creature appearing in their courtyard looked like a powerful invoker. It was a brute of a thing, huge, all teeth and claws.

“What is that ?” Asked Hol.

“Something that even I have never seen before.” Said Minraver. “Give it a touch of fire, most things are destroyed by fire.”

Not everything was damaged by fire, but it was always a good first choice. It had obviously come to do nothing else other than kill as many of them as it could, as quickly as it could. It reminded Minraver of how the old reptile Gods had looked, right down to the four legs and two muscular arms. There was no intellect there though, just the brute strength of a twenty foot tall monster.

“The bastard ! It’s eating her.” Said Kerr.

It had already crushed one of the tribespeople beneath a scaly foot and was biting into another, causing the woman to scream out in pain. The creature looked like a mindless parody of the great reptile Gods, an insult to the memory of Tomma-Goran. It even had two horns at the back of its scaly head. It was no God though and most things died if you aimed enough fire at them.

“This has gone on long enough.” Said Minraver. “Fire if you have it, arrows if you don’t. We need to kill this thing, now !”

Louelle hadn’t been in a trance, she’d been building a massive spell. As Minraver and Silky coated the monster in the fires of hell, Louelle used green flames against it, corrosive fire that burnt down to the marrow. The monster roared, screeched and tried to run, but it didn’t stand a chance. Hol probably killed it, sending two of the tears of The Damned, deep inside its body.

“It’s finished.” Said Kerr.

It appeared to melt from inside as the tears broke it apart. Very soon it was just a mass of burning flesh. Not that anyone felt like cheering, they had lost two of their rift warriors.

“It was sent to test us and failed.” Said Hol.

“I will know if others are sent.” Said Minraver. “I know their feel now, almost their taste. Next time it will be killed as soon as it arrives.”

“There will be a next time..... Wonderful.” Muttered Kerr.

The tribespeople began to prod at the burning remains and sing their song of victory. Soon they would cook a feast, to celebrate destroying the mighty beast.

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