

Mendera Temple

Chapter 2 – Rifts and Tombs

“She’d seen these kinds of creatures evolve on many planets and they were usually carrion feeders, but this one had decided to promote itself to hunter.”

For about the tenth time that day Delmus was re-arranging and re-securing their various bundles of goods on Stinky’s back, or Pug as Luri called their strange beast of burden.

‘Get a beast to carry your things,’ Chlo had told them, ‘you’ll blend in, it’ll add to your authenticity.’ So at the market place in Quron they’d bought a Farrag, the standard beast of burden for all self-respecting travellers of the rifts. They’d spent a long time with the best dealer in the town, one recommended by Nurigen and yet the smile on the dealers face as they handed over the gold should have been a warning. For a start Stinky seemed to have one leg shorter than the other three, as he seemed to shake about so much, even on nice even roadways, that all their goods ended up on the floor at least five times a day, and twice that if they were on rough ground.

“He’s good to help us blend in.” Luri told him every time he suggested selling the creature.

Then there was Stinky’s temperament and bad temper. Yes they’d known that all Farrag were known to be large furry creatures that occasionally spat and bit, but theirs seemed to be constantly trying to bite them or spit large quantities of sticky mucus over them. If you were unwise enough to get too close to his rear end, Stinky would try to kick as well. Delmus gave a strap an extra hard pull to get it nice and tight and made Stinky give a pained bellow.

“You’re not hurting him are you ?” Luri asked.

They both knew at least thirty local languages and dialects and Delmus took great pride in being able to swear about stinky in all of them. When he’d finished he noticed Luri had wandered off to talk to a few members the demon caravans who’d been keeping pace with them for days.

Their disguise as wandering demons had worked well, too well. Luri gave her skin an extra sheen to it, so it now had the colour of burnished steel and Delmus had the redish tinge of a high level demon. All done by creams and various spells Luri knew, but the effect was to make them look like two very hard warriors of the rifts. With strange goings on and rumours of missing traders, the caravans had been keeping pace with them; saw them as some kind of protection. A Shelzak demon had tried to steal Stinky, and although Delmus might have turned a blind eye to that, he tried to steal all their supplies too. It had been a fair fight, with Delmus giving him plenty of chances to run, but the Shelzak had been too stupid to realise he was outmatched.

“You made it look too easy.” Luri had told him.

The Shelzak had been reduced to a collection of bleeding body parts and their reputation as hard as nails warriors confirmed. There were now a good two dozen demon traders following them to the bazaar at Tandalla on the 5th rift. This meant they couldn’t use any means other than walking to travel, so they were seriously behind schedule. No using the rift manipulator to cover thousands of miles across the most barren areas of the rifts, they now had to use only their legs and that meant slow progress. Sikush had told them to take a year or so to reach the Nest and they were still on the pilgrims trail from Quron to Tandalla and they’d been in the rifts for over two years.

‘Accurate information is more important than speed.’ Sikush had told them.

Not that they had much in the way of solid information. Something strange was happening on the rifts, but there were so many rumours and crazy stories that finding out the truth was almost

impossible. True they had seen dried up river beds and some of the demon towns had become just empty ruins, but the caravans still kept to the pilgrim trail and other areas seemed fertile and prosperous. A portent of a rift wide apocalypse or just part of a natural cycle of the rifts ? Delmus had no real idea, but they were due to meet a contact friendly to the empire in Tandalla who might be able to tell them more.

“He bit you !”

While he’d been thinking, Stinky had put his jaws over his shoulder and was doing his best to pull off a lump of flesh. Delmus hadn’t felt any pain, but he put on an act of rubbing his shoulder for the girl and gave Stinky a playful thump on the nose. Well it was playful for Delmus, Stinky snorted and retreated a few yards.

“He can be difficult to handle.” He told her.

He’d seen the girl quite a few times, her yellow skin and the shape of her hands meant there was a lot of Dredger demon in her and they had different sexual parts to him. Not that he’d seen much of her body, everyone on the rifts tended to wear a loose fitting cloak and hood to keep the constant biting wind off their skin. The rifts weren’t a place that suited skimpy clothing.

“If the bite is deep ? I have some healing skills.” She said.

She leant towards him, her hand going towards his shoulder and he held her hand to stop her. Then he smelt the unmistakeable aroma of human female and realised she was very attractive. In the rift towns no half breeds were tolerated, but the caravans were different, the towns needed their goods. That was part of the reason they’d inflicted Stinky on themselves, to look like just another two hybrid traders.

“I’m Pi.” She whispered to him.

It was an expression he hadn’t heard since he was a child and he thought its use had died out long ago. It didn’t mean the girl was necessarily of easy virtue, she was just telling him she had human genitals, which could save a lot of embarrassment if things got hot and steamy.

“Me too.” He said.

Her hand went to his cheek and it had the hard feel to it, almost like toughened leather, but the kiss on his cheek was sweet and soft. He noticed her pupils dilate slightly as his hand went inside her cloak and gently fondled her breast.

“Will you come to my tent tonight ?” She asked.

Delmus was unsure, there could be problems with her people, the traders were notoriously protective of their women, but then he saw her tail twitch against her cloak.

“Which tent ?”

He’d lost his virginity to a hybrid with a tail that twitched when she was aroused and ever since then he had a real thing about tails. Some people needed unguents from passing mystics to gain the ultimate experience, Delmus just needed a pretty girl and her tail twitching against his stomach.

“The blue one made of hide, right at the far side.”

Delmus knew that angry family or not he’d be sharing her bed that night. As to Luri ? She was always advocating the virtues of a varied sex life and neither of them had known any variety for the last two years.

“I’ll be there.” He said.

~ ~

Kittara had come to Sessana alone. Her mission wasn’t exactly a secret, but many on Mendera would have viewed it as being unwise. She took herself to the same stairs where she’d arrived with Estrid

all those years ago and walked into the ante chamber of his tomb, the tomb an enemy had prepared for Sikush. Not of course that he ever had any intention of using it.

She looked along the paintings on the wall and although still very clear and detailed, a few were showing distinct signs of some sort of growth eating into the paint. Sessana was far too hot and dry for mould, but something was doing a good, if slow job of eating away at the paintings. A bit further along the ante chamber and her statue looked pretty much the same as when she was last there apart from a large pile of animal faeces at its base. Animal crap in his tomb, it just didn't feel right. Then she saw the pile of gnawed bones and pieces of skin, some quite large. Obviously some large predator had set up home in the tomb, his tomb. Should she get it cleaned up? It wasn't really his tomb, but still it had been around for billions of years. She felt for Chlo and informed her about the mess and was told a clean-up team would sort it out.

Through the open door at the other end of the ante chamber and she was in a place that she actually liked, the only place she liked on the whole awful planet, the cloisters. Kittara still had the dreams of dying on the 7th rift, but these days she almost enjoyed them, like a visit from an old friend. But once they'd nearly driven her crazy and in those days she's walked for hours around the cloisters in the Temple of the Flame.

"You've etched your own footprints into the stones." Sikush once told her.

Perhaps he was right, but even now, billions of years later, cloisters still meant safety and tranquillity to her. She looked at the nearby mountains and thought Sessana could have been a good planet, but now it was just too far gone. Even sleeping here could bring on nightmares that had left some permanently insane. Chlo had many theories about why the place was so damaged, but Sikush as usual gave a sensible reason;

"The planet just has too many bad spirits."

It was the kind of answer a shaman from the rifts would have given, but that didn't make it wrong. Too much evil had gone on for far too long for the effect to ever dissipate.

Kittara started off across the square encircled by the cloisters and noticed the cloisters were intact all around the square and that pleased her. The ground beneath her feet was dry and dusty, but it had always been like that for as long as she could remember. From the corner of her left eye she noticed a large cat like creature watching her from the far side of the square, the current occupant of the ante chamber no doubt.

No it wasn't a large cat. As it came from behind a pillar Kittara could see that its rear legs were slightly shorter than the ones at the front. Its jaws were huge and it seemed to be stuck with a constant smirk across its face. The fur was mottled with a diseased looking yellow pattern of random smudges all over the dirty looking grey fur. As to its size? Even at a distance Kittara could tell the creature's head was higher than hers. She'd seen these kinds of creatures evolve on many planets and they were usually carrion feeders, but this one had decided to promote itself to hunter.

The creature held its head low and started to make a loud chattering sound and then it hurtled at her. Kittara could have pulled her demon blade from her weapon store and cut it in two, but instead she waited until it made its final leap at her and moved her reality six feet backwards. The creature's head hit the ground hard, its jaws trying to close over a neck that was no longer there. It rolled over in the dust several times, while making a strange whimpering sound. Eventually it stood up and shook the loose dust and grit from its fur. Kittara pulled a wicked looking blade out of her store and into her right hand and stood face to face with the creature.

"Fuck Off!" She shouted.

It looked at her and Kittara could see it thinking things over, examining the odd two legged creature that could vanish and was now armed with a nasty looking weapon. The creature had intelligence and after snarling at her a few times it turned and limped back to its den in the ante chamber. Kittara was pleased, it was after all just a hungry animal looking for a meal. She realised she felt more of an affinity with that creature than she did with most of the population of Mendera, especially the damn clerics. She left a note for the clean-up team to move the beast to somewhere a few miles away rather than kill it and continued her walk towards the stairs leading down in the centre of the square.

The stairs were beginning to look their age, the stone cracking in places where the merciless Sessana sun burnt it. It was dark as she descended and as she turned the first corner it became very dark. Not that the dark worried her, as her vision was independent of light, she sensed the fabric of the multiverse and sensed it so well that even with no light she could see better than most. Chlo obviously felt light was needed and started to put floating lights against the passage ceiling. Kittara had been in the tomb before, in fact quite a few times, but she still looked at the map on the common channel to remind herself where to go. The first place she needed to visit was on the 3rd level down, so she walked swiftly to the next set of stairs going down.

Bones on the stairs, human looking bones and several old energy weapons. There were rumours all over the empire and beyond about a fabulous treasure hidden in the deepest areas of the tombs, in a way they were right. No matter how hard the empire tried to deny the rumours, craft still visited Sessana and although some just left empty handed, quite a few never left at all. Those that slept here had terrible dreams, often dreams terrible enough to cause suicide or worse, caused them to butcher all their friends. Chlo could have looked down the timelines to find out how these people had died, but Kittara wasn't interested, she hurried past the bones and turned left into the second level.

Wider passageways here, with rooms leading off in both directions. Kittara remembered brightly painted plasterwork in this section, but most of it seemed to have crumbled away. The walls looked strong though; there was no damp problem on Sessana and none of the decay that came with it. She crossed one empty room to find a passage with several large metal crates against the wall; it looked like they'd been there some time. One had a metal cover, but most were still open and inside was a treasure trove of rare objects and artwork. Nothing of the real treasure though, if that had been disturbed The Damned would have known and been there in force. Past the crates were more bones, gnawed bones, but there was no sign of any more dropped weapons. Then as Kittara approached the stairs down something moved behind some crates ahead of her, something big. She carried on walking and saw the end of a tail being pulled behind the boxes, a long serpent's tail. Now she knew why the carrion beast had settled for the ante chamber, the tomb was already occupied. Kittara had no need to enter that part of the passageway, so she headed down the stairs and heard and unsettling slithering sound from above, there seemed to be more than one serpent in the tomb. She was on the 3rd level and the first action to get past the security in the tomb was here. Most raiders seemed to assume the tomb was all it appeared to be; an ancient stone structure, probably prehistoric. In fact the race that built the tomb had some of the most advanced technology in the multiverse and so far all the security devices of the tomb still functioned. She found the room she was looking for and pulled yet another metal crate out of a corner. Whoever the raiders had been, they seemed to have arrived in force, as there were yet more bones behind the crates. On the wall right in the corner was a painting of a bat like creature and Kittara put her finger on its right wing and simply said.

“Ojist.”

(Open)

If her voice hadn't been added to the recognition system by Chlo a very long time ago, the area would have been full of toxic gas, but Kittara just felt a slight vibration as the billions of years old tomb came to life.

No lights though, not in this section, so Chlo kept putting lights against the ceiling as Kittara crossed another room, in search of the stairs down. Then she saw the serpent trying to keep to the shadows and it was huge. In the dark, or the light of a few torches it must have felt like a guardian monster had come to protect the tomb and Kittara had some sympathy for the dead raiders. But she knew all the defences of the tomb and it didn't include huge grey serpents. Where had they come from though? There couldn't be enough regular food for one, much less a whole nest of them. Kittara had other things to concern her though and knew there was a spot on the 4th level she needed to visit, so she ignored the almost musical clatter of serpent scales over stone and walked down the next set of stairs.

She'd remembered detailed mosaic floors, paintings on every wall and ornate statues in black marble, what she saw was almost total destruction. This must have been where the raiders had made a last stand. They'd put several layers of metal crates in the doorway and by the scorching they seemed to have laid some sort of mines. None of the defences had worked, the crates had been pushed back, the mines passed and the entire room was strewn with bones and long dead energy weapons. One heavy duty blaster was still attached to its tripod at the other side of the room and lying next to it was something very interesting, but for now Kittara started to examine various sets of bones and surviving equipment.

“Who were they Chlo?”

“It was a long time ago,” Chlo replied, “the bones are basically human, if I had to make a guess I'd say a party from Pineus, which has long gone. One of the females was augmented, which was rare then. This was a serious raiding party.”

Mention of augmented females brought back memories of Salomé and her band of raiders, but this battle had been before Salomé's time and anyway she was now dead. No one had really been surprised when Salomé had died, less than two years after Estrid's 18th birthday. But she'd died in a fire fight with New Keo troops, her party outmatched, far better than being eaten by snakes in an underground hell hole.

“What do you make of it Chlo?”

Next to the heavy duty blaster was the skeleton of a huge serpent. The rear third seemed to have been blasted off by some means and a great many of the rib bones were broken. It looked like they'd had to throw everything at it to kill it.

“It looks unusual.” Answered Chlo.

It was huge, a good thirty feet long if the skeleton had been in one piece and broad. Kittara was used to snakes being long and thin, but this one was very broad, could have swallowed someone three times her width. She consoled herself with the thought that at least a creature that size was unlikely to be able to sneak up on her. Kittara crouched next to the skull and felt the eight inch long fangs and they were hollow, designed to inject venom.

“How dangerous are they?” She asked.

“If you meet a live one, I advise killing it first and wondering if it could have hurt you later.”

Kittara was used to Chlo being a little over protective, but the long fangs had made her feel the same way. There was nothing else for her to do at the scene of the battle, so she left the room and walked

along several empty passages before finding the small storage room she was looking for. It was empty and seemed to have avoided the attention of the raiders, as a perfect statue of a bat like creature was still on its plinth in the centre of the room. She ignored it and examined the pictures of animals on the rear wall, especially something that looked like Jangar beast. She put her finger against its head.

“Ojist.”

Distinct vibration now as the tomb filled the room of the sleeper with a breathable atmosphere, or at least breathable to a non Terak and shut down the fusion device beneath the tomb. Anyone unwise enough and with the expertise to reach the sleeper without deactivating it would have been turned to a wisp of super-heated particles, along with the rest of Sessana. She walked through an area that seemed fairly unmolested by the raiders and she wondered if Sikush would have the remaining works of art transferred to Mendera ? It seemed a pity to leave them for the inevitable next party of raiders. The steps down were clear and Kittara walked down onto the 5th level and the lowest level she'd need to visit.

Most raiders had assumed the great treasure was below the deepest level and Kittara knew that many had tried to blast a way through the walls, but all had failed. The tomb was well built and Chlo had added her touch to the defences. The walls might get blast marks, the plaster decorations might crumble, but the main walls remained impervious. There wasn't a device in the multiverse that could tell where hollow cavities existed in the structure and even Chlo could do little more than put a few lights up for her. The original builders had also learned from other older races and realised the last place you hide anything valuable is on the lowest level. Some tombs had side corridors that looked unused, but in reality were the route to the where the deceased lay, surrounded by the treasures they'd been buried with. The Terak had improved on that and Kittara knew the exact spot, where a wall on the 5th level would reveal a passageway to Aukar, the sleeper.

Level 5 showed more devastation, with a row of what looked like portable latrines lying in pieces against one wall and bones, always more piles of bones. She entered a long room and the walls had bed rolls against them and some personal items that had survived the countless millennia. A plastic comb, a water bottle, even what looked like a wallet. Kittara went to pick the wallet up, but it crumbled to powder in her fingers. As Chlo put lights up against the ceiling she saw a crude picture of a man squatting had been painted on the wall, with an arrow pointing in the direction of the latrines. As the final light illuminated the far end of the room she caught the movement and then she saw the head of the serpent.

In the low light she'd thought the tail she'd seen was grey, but now she noticed the creature was a very pale green, with yellow stripes reaching almost to the tip of its tail. Its head was large, very large and between the yellow serpent eyes was a red diamond shaped marking. It was huge, a good thirty feet long and about six feet across, it must have weighed a good ton, yet she'd had no warning of its approach. To the raiders in the dark tunnels it must have seemed like hell itself was attacking them. The creature opened its mouth and seemed to be hissing at her, but she heard no sound at all, which was far more unsettling than the loudest roar. It started to move towards her, moving its body in a long side to side wriggle that moved it forward at a surprising speed and still its jaws remained open and ready to bite. It hit the bed rolls and they became fine dust that filled the air and just as it was getting too close for comfort Kittara hit it with fire. Not a fireball, she just surrounded it in its own personal hell of flame hot enough to turn most creatures to a pile of ash in seconds.

“What the fuck is it Chlo ?” She asked.

The creature seemed in pain, it thrashed about and the room was filling with the unpleasant smell of burning flesh, but it refused to die. Kittara used more fire, hotter, yet still the jaws moved towards her and she could see venom dripping from the long sharp fangs.

"The venom could kill you. Destroy it!" Said Chlo.

Kittara pulled her Nurigen blade out of store and used it two handed. She'd never met any living thing that she couldn't cut with a two handed blow from her favourite blade. She swung hard and almost expected the blade to bounce off, but it bit the creature hard right between the fangs and kept cutting. Blood, red blood started to flow from the creatures head and now it hissed and screamed at her. On went the blade, cutting through skull, then brain and finally through about two feet on neck before Kittara pulled it back. Still the end of its tail kept thrashing about, but finally after a few seconds it was still.

"Is it a construct?" She asked.

She pulled back one side of the head and the brain looked normal to her, no circuitry, no signs of augmentation, yet the creature had survived flames that burned hotter than any furnace.

"No. It has all the signs of being a carbon based life form, but it is unusual. The venom seems to change to suit the prey it's stalking and a very small amount would have killed you."

She used the sword to open up the creature's body and found just an ordinary set of internal organs, but still the last few feet of tail moved about.

"Can any animal you know do that?" She asked.

"No and I have an idea, but it's just a guess."

"Guess away?"

"I think they've been put here by a deity, perhaps Sevril. She likes serpents and this looks like her handiwork. Perhaps to protect Aukar, or maybe to stop anyone who might seek his aid. With Sevril her aims often seem to be illogical, so I can't be certain."

Kittara wiped her blade on her skirt and put it back into her weapon store and then she felt for her dark self, the side that revelled in the dark arts. From that side she drew out a spell and weaved it in her mind until it was ready and then she used it on the body of the serpent. She felt resistance and the huge body started to glow, but quickly the resistance went and only a heap of fine white dust was left of the creature. Kittara walked to the end of the room and turned to her right and saw a long corridor with the large bat like image of the Terak repeated at least twenty times along the wall. She went unerringly to the 4th image from the end and put her hands in the middle of the wall and firmly pushed.

"Ojist."

She offered a silent prayer to the eight great demon gods, more out of habit than expectations and felt the wall move slightly back. Then after a slight crunching sound a large section of the wall moved back about two feet and then moved sideways into a slot in the wall.

She'd last been here a very long time ago and systems did suffer from decay, but after a about a minute of staring at the very solid looking area of wall behind the door, she saw a small hole form. The hole was ragged at the edges and as it grew it looked as though something was biting at the fabric of the wall. Pieces of debris fell from the top of the hole, dust started to billow out and Kittara patiently waited for the hole to be big enough for her to walk through. She didn't remember the hole being ragged last time, but even the best of technology is no match for the ravages of time. After about five minutes the crunching sounds ended and the hole was wide enough for her to walk through without stooping, but still dust and debris fell on her head as she walked along the hundred feet or so of ragged tunnel. Some might have been uncomfortable with the near darkness of the

room at the end of the tunnel, but she knew the last of the Terak needed darkness, his eyes would have been hurt by sudden bright lights. Kittara dusted herself off and looked around the fairly large room that was illuminated by a single dim red light. The passage control was where she remembered it, so she could crush any serpent that might try to follow her and the power light on the console was dim, but still green. She started the sequence to wake her old enemy and walked over to take a look at him.

She'd always respected Aukar and perhaps it had gone further than that ! Her own roots were reptilian and perhaps, just perhaps she saw a kindred spirit in the black leathery skin of the leader of the Terak ? Certainly where others were repelled by their appearance, she wasn't, but then again she had known creatures of immense beauty who seemed touched by evil and other like Mo, who were in many ways grotesque, yet seemed to have a good soul. As to Mo ! According to Chlo he'd eventually tired of running a thieves guild and had become a holy mystic, living in a temple out in the middle of nowhere. Kittara decided not to wait for him to drift back to Mendera when it suited him, she was going to find him once she had Aukar safely on Mendera.

The last of the Terak lay on a table and there were no signs of life, but Kittara knew he was alive. The Damned were very good at detecting if anything was alive, all part of their expertise in making sure that beings weren't alive if their orders required it. There were no tubes attached to his body, no wires, no stands with drugs. The table he was on was the best their advanced civilisation had developed and he could be kept asleep without ageing as long as the power cells deep below the tomb functioned and they still had billions of years of life. He was a good foot taller than her, but then again nearly everyone was. She put her hand on the matt black skin of his arm and felt the life force within him. He had wings that neatly curled away on his back. Not that they were as powerful or efficient at flying as those of a dark angel, but he could climb straight up to five hundred feet without getting tired. His face wasn't pretty, the nose was too flat, the ears far too large, but Kittara still gave him a gentle kiss on the cheek. She heard a noise in the passageway, but it was just another bit of debris falling from the ceiling, so she sat on the floor, pulled her knees up to her chin and waited for him to awaken.

~ ~

Like most towns on the rifts, in Tandalla you took your animals and goods everywhere with you. There were places where you could leave them, even pay a guard to look after them, but only the very naïve expected to find the guards and their goods when they returned. It was after all a demon town.

"We didn't bring an offering." Said Luri.

They'd both expected trouble getting away from the rest of the caravan they'd been unintentionally leading across the 5th rift, but as soon as they entered Tandalla they'd all drifted off and no one had seemed keen on visiting the shrine. Now they knew why, the queue to get a second or two in front of the statue was taking hours. Even the girl Delmus has shared his bed with a few times had drifted away with barely a nod, which had dented his ego a little. Luri noticed a flower seller moving among the queue of pilgrims and beckoned him over. With everyone bringing their animals and carts to the open air shrine the flower seller had trouble getting to them. He looked at Luri as though appraising her.

"For such a pretty lady it has to be Ashunt blooms grown near the great City itself."

Luri could see that all the seller had was a basket over his shoulder full of the bright red flowers and that he'd probably picked them himself from wild bushes a few miles from town, but they needed some kind of offering for the shrine.

“We need to go; it’ll help us blend in.” Delmus had said.

During the last two hours of boredom Luri had decided the trip to the shrine had been a good idea, but only because it meant they were alone again. None of the other seasoned traders had wanted to put up with the hours of queuing.

“How much for a dozen blooms ?” Luri asked.

He made a big show of removing the basket from his shoulder and selecting the dozen bright red flowers.

“The best I have and for you, just five Kaperi.”

It was a solid price, a full price as some would call it and Luri wasn’t in the mood to pay it. Nearly two years on the rifts had honed her skills in the various demon languages and she prided herself in knowing more inventive insults than most. She let rip with a few comments on the parentage of the seller and the dubious qualities of his blooms. To her surprise he gave her a huge smile.

“Mistress, if I’d known you were from the City I’d have offered them to you for two Kaperi.”

Was her accent from the City of the Lost God ? She’d certainly spent quite a long time there once, as had Delmus. She looked across at him as he prodded Stinky to move forward and he just shrugged at her.

“Fine.” She told the seller.

Kaperi was the town currency and no one entering Tandalla ever had any, but Luri knew the usual exchange rates and gave the flower seller a very small imperial gold coin, which he seemed happy with.

“May chaos always pass you in the night.” Said the seller.

It was the goodnight blessing her mother had used all those billions of years ago and Luri was back in the City for a second, watching her mother leave her room. She was brought back to reality by Stinky snorting as Delmus gave him a not too gentle prod.

“Get the flowers ready, we’re next.” Said Delmus.

In front of them an elderly Shelzak half breed and his family were coaxing their own beast of burden to move away from the feet of the statue. As they cleared the space Delmus virtually dragged Stinky towards the shrine.

“It could be anyone.” Said Delmus.

Luri knelt and placed the flowers on top of the hundreds of other left in front of the statue of the founder of the pilgrim route from Quron and the town of Tandalla. The much eroded statue could indeed have been of anyone, but Luri kept to the tradition of kissing her hand and then placing her hand on the statues lower legs.

“Move you fucking thing.” Delmus shouted at Stinky.

That was it, the pilgrims behind were looking impatiently at them and she joined Delmus in shoving and pushing their increasingly ill-tempered Farrag beast away from the shrine. They had to stop Stinky fighting with at least three other creatures and by the time they left Shrine Square they both just wanted a meal and a bed for the night, a real bed, definitely not another night on a bed roll.

“Where now ?” Asked Delmus.

They could of course go to the famous town bazar with its hotels, bars and almost legendary bad places to eat. Several members of the caravan had warned them about the queues for everything, the danger of food poisoning and the exorbitant prices.

“We should find a place to stay at the bazar.” Said Luri.

“Or we could try to get the contact to put us up for a few days ?” Replied Delmus.

All Sikush had given them was an address in the best part of town, though for the rifts that wasn't really saying much and a name, Farhj. It was an old Dredger clan name which had been adopted by just about every trading family on the rifts and could well have been an alias.

"He will at least have a walled courtyard where we can leave Stinky." Said Delmus.

He played his winning card, knowing Luri had an odd affection for their spiting and biting pain in the behind.

"If he says no we'll be sleeping in the street." Said Luri.

"I'm not in the mood to let him say no !"

They'd had a rough last few miles across the rifts, with quick sand that had taken a whole family and their cart and then there had been the clouds of biting insects. Like Delmus she just wanted a decent bed for the night, so she nodded at him and pulled at Stinky to get him to move a little faster.

~ ~

After several hours he showed signs of waking, he moved around and then his eyes had opened. Black eyes with a yellow dot in the centre, eyes that told you nothing, that definitely weren't windows to his soul. Kittara kept still and watched as he moved his wings about and stretched an arm, then a leg, his eyes never leaving her. He had claws, she'd forgotten he had claws instead of hands, it always seemed strange for a high tech world to have a population with claws.

"How long has it been ?" He asked.

He still hadn't risen from the table, but the voice was firm, the words perfectly formed.

"So long that the answer would be meaningless."

He nodded at her and used his arms to push himself up so that he was sitting on the table, but he looked very tired for someone who'd been sleeping for half the lifetime of the current multiverse.

"Do you need anything, food, perhaps a drink ?" She asked.

He was experimenting with letting his legs take his weight and looking at her, still refusing to look anywhere else but at her.

"A last request for the condemned ?" He asked.

So he assumed she'd come as his executioner, but her orders all those years ago had been to kill him if she had to. Not that the empire had killed the peoples of Sessana, internal warfare and a few old enemies settling scores had done that. Kittara had been sent to make sure the last of the Terak didn't run amok, but in the end he asked for stasis, so Sikush had given him perpetual sleep. She asked Chlo for suitable food and drink and a bowl of bad smelling liquid arrived on the floor and a fruit of some kind, both of which she put on the table.

"No Aukar, I'm not here to kill you," she said, "we have need of your services."

He ate and drank and gradually he could remain standing for longer. Still he watched her and as always the yellow dot in his eyes told her nothing. Eventually he walked towards her.

"It must be bad if you need me."

"It is."

"How bad."

"Sevril-Narge has put serpents in the tomb to stop anyone waking you."

He just nodded and put his hand on her arm. They never really had been enemies, it was just a fact that the multiverse couldn't have two empires wanting to control it and Sikush had won. A few battles had been fought, but in the end internal strife and vendetta had been the downfall of the Terak. He walked awkwardly to a cabinet and the door needed several tries before opening to reveal decayed clothing and a sword hilt with dust where its blade once was. Without asking Kittara obtained a replacement from Chlo and watched as he dressed and fitted a sword belt across his right

shoulder. His movements were still awkward, but Chlo was telling her it would be safest to get onto the surface before moving to Mendera. The tomb was built to block just about anything disturbing the sleeper, who of course should have been Sikush, so penetration by The Damned had been guarded against.

"Where are you taking me?" He asked.

She was gently leading him along the passageway and trying to support him as he made his way unsteadily over the debris.

"Mendera. You'll have your own wing in the palace."

It wasn't the great honour it sounded, there was fifteen square miles of palace and little of it was regularly used. Often trainee clerics were housed in the palace, but Aukar didn't need to know that.

"So Mendera survived," he said, "I thought the demons would have destroyed it."

"It's still there and the demons keep to the rifts and beyond gateway."

As they walked across the various levels Kittara kept looking and listening, but no further serpents tried to attack her. As Aukar was leaning on her more and more she was grateful not to have to fight their way out to the surface.

"Who were these people?" He asked.

They were walking past the bones of the raiders, his treasured possessions either destroyed or packed into metal crates and Kittara felt the tension in his voice.

"Raiders. A few parties have come down here, but I've never heard of any leaving alive."

He seemed to gain strength and opened a crate to reveal several statues of the Terak carved in black marble.

"So my ancestor's spirits still guard the planet?"

"Very few seem to sleep here and remain unchanged." She said.

He pulled the tops off a few more crates and pulled out statues and ornaments made in gold and ornamented with precious gems. Kittara knew what he must be feeling, she had been alone once, one of a kind in a strange place.

"All this could be brought to the palace if you wanted?"

He stood up from examining the skeleton of the serpent and started walking towards the stairs.

"No," he said, "there is a control to destroy all this, to take it all down into the ground, where no one else will be able to disturb it. Will you do that for me?"

Kittara felt for Chlo who told her that was possible.

"Are you sure?" She asked him.

"Yes. If I have the need to sleep again it will be a permanent sleep with my ancestors."

They carried on walking, the final set up stairs requiring her to almost carry him up the last few steps. As her attention was on Aukar the serpent came at her, its jaws open to give the death bite. As she dropped him in a pile on the floor she knew it was too late, the fangs were too close to her, moving far too fast to avoid. Then there was a blur of dirty yellow fur and teeth and the carrion beast had the snake in its jaws and both of them were rolling over and over in the hot red dust. Kittara looked at Aukar, but he just waved her away and started to pull himself to his feet, so she equipped her Nurigen blade and attacked the serpent.

The two creatures were locked in battle, rolling each over amidst a cacophony of screams, roars and a strange rattling from the serpent. Kittara now knew where the serpent had its brain though and she was quick, very quick. As the serpent seemed to get the upper hand and threw the carrion creature off she struck at just the right point and then gave her blade a quick twist to scramble the contents of its skull. The effect was instant and the thirty foot long creature was instantly still, apart

from a slight wiggle at the end of its tail. Kittara looked back at Aukar and he was now standing and seemed unhurt.

“At least destroying the place will finish them off.” He shouted.

Of course, the destruction would destroy the ante chamber too, would destroy the carrion beast that had just saved their lives. She looked for the creature, determined to have it moved to a place well away from the destruction. It was laying still on the ground and she knelt next to it to examine it for wounds. Nothing at first apart from a few scratches, but then she saw the hole where a fang had pierced its shoulder and the venom had entered.

“It’s dead Kittara,” Chlo told her, “died within seconds.”

Many would have thought it strange that she cut off its right paw and took it with her, but as she put the huge bloody object inside her tunic she felt better. At least some part of the creature would escape the awful fucking place and be buried in the tranquillity of her garden.

“What was that thing ?” He asked her.

“Just a carrion beast of some kind.”

Kittara held him and moved them both to the palace in Mendera City.

~ ~

It was late when they found the house. They’d been hassled twice by guards paid to keep the likes of them out of the better part of town and on each occasion they’d used threats to get past the guards. It was the way on the rifts, offering gold or showing respect to guards was a sign of weakness and just encouraged them to take more.

“Impressive.” Said Delmus.

The house wasn’t the best they’d seen, but it was large and had a fenced courtyard. Like all the houses in the areas it was surrounded by a wall at least twice the height of Delmus, but trees could be seen in the courtyard, which meant it was large, large enough to hold Stinky.

“I’d happily sleep in the courtyard.” Said Luri.

Delmus nodded as they noticed a face at an upstairs window. They had been seen observing the house and after the noise of the gate unlocking it opened to reveal a servant dressed in a simple robe accompanied by two armed guards.

“We’re expected.” Said Luri.

Stinky had been living up to his name and with all the pulling and shoving needed to get him to move they’d both ended up smelling of Farrag and neither of smelt or looked the sort of people expected anywhere. To their amazement the servant smiled at them as the gates opened wide.

“Of course, of course. Bring your beast inside.”

Even Stinky could sense a good thing and didn’t need the usual prods and nudges to move inside.

The courtyard was wide and spacious and even had a water trough, which Stinky found and started to empty.

“I’ll have your things unpacked. The master will see you right away.”

No chance to freshen up, but the servant was setting a good pace and seemed to assume they’d follow him. The house was a delight and every corridor they walked down was furnished well enough to look opulent, but never looked tasteless or overdone. Eventually they came to a large room with a veranda overlooking a garden. The smell of blooms from the garden was wonderful and Luri once again hoped the smell of Stinky wouldn’t be noticed. She took a sniff at Delmus and sadly realised they both stunk like Jangar beasts on heat. From the garden came a figure dressed in a pure white robe, several servants at either side taking orders. He walked towards them enjoying the moment and their surprise.

“Sikush told me you might need a bit of help.” He said.

“You might have let us freshen up first Mo.” Said Luri.

Despite the distinct odour of Stinky in the room they all hugged, it had been a long time since they last worked together, or had even seen each other.

“I thought you were way out in Kivar territory,” said Delmus, “being a fucking monk ?”

Mo looked a bit awkward.

“I was, but there was a bit of a misunderstanding about vows of celibacy and having female visitors.”

~

~

© Ed Cowling – Jan 2014