

## Mendera Temple

### Chapter 3 – Necropolis

**“Like spiders her probes sped off up the ever changing web of the time lines, looking for a reason and Chlo just hoped it wasn’t her.”**

“She’s awake.”

Kittara opened her eyes and wondered why the young girl cleric was upside down. Then she realised that she’d spun around as she meditated while hovering over the flame and she righted herself. She never slept while meditating, but she found it hard to understand where her mind went to and could never have explained it to the thirty or so clerics who’d come to watch her. Mostly young and male they came to watch her turn upside down, all with dopey smiles on their faces. The girl who had spoken brought a bunch of flowers and laid them at her feet.

“Thank you..... they’re beautiful.”

Not the usual bunch of wild flowers from the gardens inside the temple, but rare and exotics blooms from all over the empire. How had they come by them ? Then Kittara realised Estrid must have obtained the flowers for them. There had been a slight panic when The Damned had realised Estrid could go anywhere she chose, including the forbidden Temple of the Flame. Sikush had simply issued an edict that Estrid was now a cleric of the flame and allowed full access. Not that Estrid came into the flame chamber much and hadn’t entered it at all in many years. The crawling chaos trapped there seemed to unsettle her in some way, so she kept her visits to the main communal areas of the temple.

“I can name all the blooms.” Said the girl.

Having a living deity visit the temple regularly had transformed the lives of the clerics and even Kittara could feel a new vibrancy about the place. Why had The Damned never brought them small tokens of the outside world ? Like Kittara most of them resented the clerics, but Estrid had brought in new plants for the garden, junk food and best of all respect and attention. As the person seen as Estrid’s guardian, Kittara received a great deal of affection from the young clerics, which much to her surprise she found quite enjoyable.

“Go on then ?” She said to the girl.

“Pink Smarzo blooms from Pinzo 4, Blue leaves of the Mondan plant of Menura 5,.....”

Kittara smiled as the girl proudly showed off her knowledge of the blooms of the various empire worlds, all gained from the books Estrid had given them. Modern books, contemporary books, not the usual dry texts from countless billions of years before. As the girl finished Kittara gave her a kiss on the cheek and felt the young cleric’s skin start to blush. Then she moved her reality to her bedroom in her house in the first circle.

“Where is everyone Chlo ?” She asked.

She threw her Nurigen blade on the bed. She still had it strapped to her back when she went just about anywhere and now felt almost naked without it. The flowers she put in a vase by the window and smiled as Chlo instantly filled it with water.

“Estrid is in the garden with the cats and Sventa is dressing for the hunt.” Chlo told her.

Good time for a shower. Kittara shimmered and was naked as she opened the door to her shower. No one was allowed on her floor of the house. There had been a period when Sventa and Estrid were allowed to go wherever they pleased, but then one morning Sventa had interrupted her having

a personal moment in the shower with Chlo. Not that she was against public sex and quite enjoyed getting hot and sweaty at the council club nights, but Sventa had interrupted the key moment and she'd been in a bad mood all day. Now only the cats were allowed upstairs and they hated water and kept well clear of her shower.

"Do you want company?" Chlo asked her.

"No today, going hunting and need my edge."

Quickly out of the shower, allowing Chlo to dry her and put her in a fresh uniform of the Guard. Then across the hallway and into her room for the sword and then a change of pace as she entered her weapon store. She never hurried any time spent in there and would often sit for hours polishing the blades with the kind of care most women only give a first born son. The demon blade for the hunt, it was the obvious equivalent of Sventa's wicked talons. Kittara fixed the blade to her back with webbing and as usual tightened everything on her uniform as tight as it would go, right down to her boots. Then she moved her reality to the garden area.

"Ojetin is being scratchy today." Said Estrid.

Kittara still found it bizarre that the female cat was named after a revered male cleric, but she'd called her cat Emperor Xeod 3<sup>rd</sup>, so she couldn't say much. Most people simply called her cat Emp and Kittara could see Emp was bleeding slightly from a scratch to his nose. As she sat down he climbed onto her lap and started making the chortling sounds that meant he was fine.

"Have you been trying to steal her food again?" She asked him.

Emp was getting bigger and not just in weight. Now of such a huge age that even Kittara considered him ancient, her pet showed no signs of his age apart from a bit of grey fur on his cheeks and the fact that he was growing larger and getting fatter. At first Ojetin had refused his advances, but from the noises Kittara heard around the house in the middle of the night they were now more than just good friends. Not that Ojetin showed any signs of bearing young, but perhaps Emp was simply too old to be fertile?

"Are you joining us today?" She asked Estrid.

Estrid had come on a few of their hunting trips and had even helped Sventa locate the kill. At first Kittara had assumed Estrid was looking at it all as a kind of educational expedition, much in the same way that tourists watch wild predators. But on one occasion Estrid had eaten the flesh of a fresh kill, a human raider, with obvious relish. Kittara had never asked her to explain, but now she simply saw it as the curiosity of the deity to try anything and everything the multiverse had to offer.

"I can't," said Estrid, "I'm taking Chenad to the Shrine of the Tree of Life."

Kittara had been there a few times and didn't envy Chenad. The clerics there regarded most things she enjoyed as sins, and seemed to tut at her the whole time she was there. Sventa walked down the stairs from her room and even Kittara was impressed and it took a lot to impress her.

"Wow." Estrid said.

"Indeed. Wow." Kittara agreed.

Sventa had always felt a little awkward about her talons and most of the clothing Chlo produced for her had to work around her wings and at the same time hide the talons. The result was often something that resembled a sack, a very pretty and comfortable sack that kept her warm, but still a sack. Kittara knew Chlo had been working with her on a new battledress, one that would give Sventa freedom of movement, yet protect key areas and be easy to change. Neither she nor Estrid had expected to see that battledress become what Sventa was doing a quick spin around to show them.

"Most dark angels wear nothing at all." She told them.

The skirt was very like the one Kittara used as part of her fighting uniform and there was a definite flash of red hair as Sventa did her twirl, so obviously knickers weren't part of her battle wardrobe. There was a small and very tight top that enhanced rather than hid her breasts and that was about all she had on her torso and it was all in black. On her arms she had something that was familiar to Kittara, the tight strappings that went from shoulder to wrist and was used to attach knives or whatever else she might need in a fight. There was the same strapping across her back and it was pure dark angel and Kittara had seen it on the few dark angels she'd actually met. On her feet and legs she wore thigh length boots of some kind of cured animal skin and again everything was in black. Her wings she held tight against her sides, but they were completely uncovered and ready to spread out for flight. The talons far from being hidden had been polished and the claws painted black. With Sventa's naturally grey skin tone the effect was sensational.

"You can't go out like that !" Said Estrid.

Kittara simply smiled. She knew that Sventa and Estrid frequently went to the clubs in the Ixir enclave on Mendera. They went to look for some fun and male company for the evening and Estrid had enjoyed the almost magnetic effect the dark angel had on most males. But Estrid could sense that the way Sventa dressed wasn't to attract, she was reverting to the dress, or lack of it, of her kind and Kittara loved it.

"She's not wearing anything under the skirt." Continued Estrid.

"She couldn't dress like that in Mendera," said Kittara, "but for where we're going it's perfect."

Estrid still looked shocked and had obviously decided to ignore them both and carry on feeding her cat.

"Ready ?" Kittara asked.

There was no need to go over the details as they'd both had a briefing from Sikush and Sventa was getting very good at remembering details. No need these days to warn her to watch out for friendlies or not to eat the bodies of allies, well at least not without taking them somewhere private. Sventa was now a good and disciplined warrior and as Kittara moved her reality to a small planet in the Piso sector she knew Sventa would be arriving about two miles east of her and looking for raiders to hunt.

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"You allow courtesans on the streets of Mendera ?" Asked Aukar.

Sikush ignored the question, it was of course forbidden to ask such questions of The Chaln , but he'd given Aukar a lot of leeway. Jen was with him today and he noticed her grip the hilt of her sword until her knuckles were white. All the Guard were jumpy around the last of the Terak, after all he was the last leader of what had been one of their greatest enemies. The girl he was talking about was a regular in the market, a native of Ixir and hugely popular with the clerics. Chlo ensured the girls were healthy and as long as no one was hurt, the empire left the working girls that frequented market place in peace.

"You'll like the stall of Jolann, he has creams, ointments and herbs from the rifts." Sikush said.

Aukar merely grunted, but he did start to look at the various jars and packets with interest. Jolann was a hybrid demon with four arms and a redish colour to his skin, yet even he started to look nervously at Aukar. Sikush had hoped the last of the Terak would blend in with the melting pot of the market area, but there was something about him. Sventa looked far more dangerous, yet she could move through the market without causing a stir. Aukar on the other hand made everyone nervous and Sikush wasn't sure what to do with him. What do you do with a war lord when he no longer has an army ?

"Is that Rivan weed ?" Aukar asked.

"Yes sir and it's fresh, picked 3 days ago." Answered Jolann.

They began a haggle over the price and Aukar was transformed from a sinister loner to just another citizen of Mendera in an instant. Sikush had a plan for the Terak, but it wasn't supposed to happen for some time and after a lengthy time in stasis. But plans change and as Sikush watched Aukar talk the trader down to a lower price he decided to send him to Annill much sooner than originally intended and far sooner than Sumahn-Nerish was expecting him.

"Agreed ! Ten imperial." Jolann said.

Jen talked to the trader and arranged for Chlo to pay him. Sikush had expected Aukar to be offended by the imperial purse paying for his purchases, but he seemed to accept it as his entitlement as a visiting head of state and his section of the palace was gradually filling with his purchases. The Rivan weed was a powerful narcotic and he'd bought enough to get half of Mendera city high for a week. Aukar moved through the crowd with more ease now, less nervous looks coming his way as he stopped at the stall of a weapon seller who specialised in small and expensive daggers.

"Would you like an army to lead ?" Sikush asked him.

"Your army ?!"

The hardness was back in the eyes that looked like polished marble even when the Terak was happy. As if he'd let him lead The Damned, or that any of them would follow him ?

"Not here," he told him, "I was thinking of Annill."

He knew Aukar would know nothing about Annill, but he hoped natural curiosity might cause the Terak to want to know more. Sikush looked at the stall and noticed a white metal dagger with an Arcadian mark on it. He reached for Chlo and she confirmed that it was old, from before the last switch.

"Probably lost in the Kivar wars." Chlo told him.

There were so many pre switch items turning up that he'd long since given up on tracing their history and the weapon dealer was well known and his family had run a stall on Mendera for over ten generations. He felt for Chlo and asked her to arrange for the weapon to be bought and a few seconds later Alyz appeared near to them and started to examine the dagger.

"I don't know Annill," said Aukar, "is it an imperial planet ?"

"Actually it's not a planet. It's a city, a vast city at the furthest point east on the 3<sup>rd</sup> rift."

Alyz was arguing with the stallholder, while Aukar was looking at a boot dagger which had a particularly intricate inscription on it.

"I've heard of the rifts. Aren't they quite small though ?"

It was a weird myth among many of the outer worlds that the rifts were just small gateways through other dimensions and one Sikush was keen to dispel.

"The 3<sup>rd</sup> rift," he began, "covers billions of square miles and has climates varying from deep cold to tropical and barren landscapes to lush rain forests. The populations are larger than some entire empire galaxies, but so spread out that you can travel for weeks without meeting anyone. The creatures there vary from people descended from the citizens of the empire through to pure blood demons from beyond gateway."

Alyz had obtained the knife for a small fraction of its real value and taken it to his office in the barracks of the Guard. He now had the full attention of the Terak, so he continued.

"For some reason all the peoples of the 3<sup>rd</sup> rift seem to end up in Annill at one time or another and many end up trapped there as it's surrounded by desert lands. Once there they either join the militia

or they're expelled from the city. The result is a standing army of over three million, all battle hardened and trained in just about every art of warfare."

Aukar put the dagger back on the stall.

"Who rules Annill?" He asked.

"The deity Sumahn-Nerish, but he never leads the armies of the city."

Sikush had often noticed that a crowded market was the perfect place for a private conversation.

Many looked at Aukar, especially if he made a loud comment, but they just moved on by, too wrapped up in their own affairs to take much notice. Even the owner of the stall looked more worried at the potential loss of a sale for the boot knife than their conversation.

"It's Ushong sir, very old, very rare." He said.

The Terak picked up the knife again, but continued to talk to Sikush.

"Who leads the army now?"

"Herusher, but I need him back here."

In truth Herusher had little to do and since the defeat of the Dracc Annill had become a peaceful city with the army losing its edge. But there was the trouble on the rifts and if Luri and Delmus found anything strange Annill was in the perfect spot to deal with it.

"Two credits." Aukar said to the trader.

The man looked insulted and named a ridiculously high figure.

"So you woke me up to lead the army of Annill?" Aukar said.

Sikush decided the market place was as good a place as any to tell him the whole plan.

"Yes," he said, "but there is likely to be little to do for many millions of years."

Jen had taken over the haggling for the knife while Aukar simply looked questioningly at Sikush.

"You will need to be converted to one of The Damned or you'll die before being of any use to me."

"Will I be made to look like a Menderan?"

The eyes told Sikush nothing. The last of the Terak might be excited to be offered immortality or deeply insulted at the idea of being physically changed.

"Yes," began Sikush, "the Guard need to fit in, so everyone is made to look like an old world Arcadian. It's a principle that's served the empire well and you'll blend in better."

The anger was quick and shocking for many of the people in the market. Aukar picked up a handful of items from the stall and threw them to the ground, then he pointed at Sikush.

"No! I'm the last of the Terak. I will not be converted."

The outburst subsided, the market trader moved to pick up his wares and the general hubbub started up again. Aukar looked ashamed of his anger and apologised to the stall holder many times before agreeing to pay him far too much for the boot knife. As he apologised once again, Aukar looked at Sikush.

"You have a warrior who I've been told moves unchanged through time, yet retains her original look. Sventa I've heard her called."

The Terak was treating every piece of stock the stall holder had as though it was immensely precious and offering to help him clean any items he'd thrown on the floor. Sikush knew that even if he had to compromise on some of his plan, he had to have Aukar on his team. He moved closer to the last of the Terak.

"Sventa was given immortality by powers outside of Mendera and it required the sacrifice of an entire city. But I could give you immortality without changing your body. It's not ideal, the full conversion gives The Damned a body that learns from every time it's damaged, becomes tougher and tougher with time and experience."

"I'm fairly tough anyway." Said Aukar.

Jen was talking to the stall holder, who was pointing at several items that hadn't even been on the floor. Before he ended up buying the entire stock of daggers, Sikush took hold of Aukar's arm and gently led him to another part of the market.

"Yes you are tough," he said, "and I'm sure Nurigen can design some armour to make you even tougher."

Behind them Jen was shouting at the stall holder and calling him a greedy crook. Nothing unusual and just the market in Mendera carrying on business as usual.

"When do you want me to go to Annill." Asked Aukar.

When indeed ? Sikush realised he'd have to go too, mainly to introduce Aukar to Sumahn-Nerish, as the new leader of his army. Not that Sumahn would mind, since Alyz had destroyed the Dracc he was more than happy to let The Damned run the Annill defences.

"Soon," he said, "there may be something serious happening on the rifts and you'll be in the right place at Annill to deal with it."

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"Really ! You don't want to mess with them." Said Mo.

They'd left the comfortable house Mo owned in Tandalla and headed out onto the 5<sup>th</sup> rift. Luri had thought Mo would just point them at somewhere they should investigate, but he'd insisted on coming and bringing half his household. Stinky had been left in the care of the servants and didn't appear to mind being left behind.

"I'd lose face if I left town without my guards." He'd told them.

Luri looked at the assembled group of at least twenty local warriors and decided that Mo knew how to pick a team. Yes, she wished her and Delmus were travelling alone, but if she had to travel as part of some kind of circus, then these guys were a good choice.

"How many usual travel together Mo ?" She asked.

Mo was a new name for their boss and Ubari the leader of his guard gave Luri a strange look every time she used it. It was obvious that on the rifts Mo was a big wheel and his men weren't used to him being addressed in such an informal way.

"It depends," said Mo, "sometimes two or three, sometimes as many as fifty."

They were looking down the steep sides of a valley and walking beside the small stream at the valley bottom were six men in rags. They might have been women, or they might not have been people at all, the rags covered most of their body and their features were too far away to be seen. The pace they were setting spoke volumes though. No slow saunter, they were striding along at a good four miles an hour and that meant they were reasonably fit.

"Leave them alone and just follow them." Said Mo.

"Are they really that dangerous ?" Asked Delmus.

Mo turned to look at them and there was a genuine look of concern on his face.

"Ubari has seen them fight, he can tell you how dangerous they are."

Ubari looked like a tough medium level pure blood and his skin still bore the scars of many battles. No one there, including Luri and Delmus had him pegged as someone likely to scare easily or make up tales to frighten them.

"The master tells the truth," he said, "I have seen just a few of them kill many."

Luri had good eyesight and even without access to Chlo and her probes she could see the no sign of weapons of any kind being carried by the creatures.

"Do they have concealed weapons, or some kind of magic ?" She asked.

“No weapons,” said Ubari, “but they don’t stop coming and they are immensely strong.”

“They don’t die !” Said another of Mo’s guards.

Luri looked at the six figures covered in rags who were walking peacefully along the bottom of the fertile valley and was more determined than ever to take a closer look.

“Have you seen them fight ?” Delmus asked the young guard who had spoken.

“That is Tareq, he was with me,” said Ubari, “come and tell them what you saw boy.”

Tareq was a young full bloody demon and he didn’t look any easier to scare than Ubari, but he was keeping a very nervous eye on the creatures in the valley.

“We were in the farmlands outside Aarabash,” Tareq began, “about four or so of the creatures in rags walked right through the town and they seemed completely unaware of anything around them.

Ubari had taken me with him to deliver a payment to a farmer in the area and by the time we arrived in Aarabash the local people were already brave enough to stand right in front of the creatures.”

Ubari looked anxious and carried on the story.

“The people started laughing and pushing the creatures and then one of them hit back. The strength of the blow was far greater than any human could have delivered and the man was killed, his neck snapped like a twig. I say man, but he was really still a boy and some of the townspeople drew swords and knives and went for the walkers in rags.”

Ubari went quiet and just looked at the ground. Luri noticed the creatures were now some distance away and she wanted to get to the substance of the story.

“Did the townspeople manage to kill any of them ?” She asked.

“The people all died.” Said Ubari without looking up.

“The creatures are so fast,” said Tareq, “as soon as one of them was attacked they all went crazy.

Some of the people died from blows, but we watched as most died from being bitten on the back of the neck. We saw it ! They bit through everything, skin, flesh, bone, nothing can bite like that !”

“How did you escape ?” Asked Delmus.

“It wasn’t our fight.” Muttered Ubari.

Mo undid his cloak and let it fall to the ground and underneath he was wearing the uniform of the damned and a demon blade Kittara had given him millennia before.

“You ran !” He said.

“It wasn’t our fight,” said Tareq, “we found a house with a hatchway onto the roof and then we waited until the fighting stopped. Some townsfolk who kept indoors lived, but all those outside died.”

“You didn’t try to help ?” Asked Luri.

Neither man seemed to want to answer and Mo broke the silence.

“You’d better not run away this time,” he said, “come on, we’ll need to run to catch up with them.”

Mo led the run down the side of the valley, the vegetation making it a tough journey. Once they reached the stream at the bottom Luri took the lead and easily caught up with the creatures, but she carried on running until she was a good twenty yards in front of them before stopping and turning around. She saw Delmus to her right and Mo was keeping pace with one of the creatures, but Mo’s guard were still some way off.

“Don’t attack them, not yet !” She shouted.

Luri stood her ground as the creature walked at her and at the last minute it walked around her, as though walking around a tree or some other inanimate obstacle. She reached out as it went past and grabbed its rags, pulling the creature round to face her.

“Not so fast.” She said.

The arm hit her harder than she could remember being hit. Even a Kivar warrior fighting for his life had only just about managed to knock her off her feet, but the walker in rags had knocked her at least twenty feet, most would have died from the blow. As she stood up Ubari was next to her taking in large lung fulls of air and giving her an ‘I told you so’ look. All the rest of Mo’s guard were with him, but all of them were still gasping and recovering from the run.

“I know who they are,” Luri shouted, “they’re the undead from the City.”

The instant the hood had gone back and Luri had seen the face, she’d known the enemy they faced, though she still had no idea how to kill it. She ran at the creature who had struck her and drove her sword hard into its chest. It just pulled her sword out and tried to hit her again, but she avoided the blow and used her sword two handed to hack at the top of its left leg.

“How do we kill them ?” Shouted Mo.

She looked up to see him clinging to the back of one creature as it bucked and rolled over trying to dislodge him. The other creatures were attacking the rest of the party and she noticed Delmus was hacking at the head of the one he was trying to deal with.

“I’ll let you know when I find out.” She replied.

The leg wasn’t quite severed, but another blow and the creature toppled over, but it kept coming and seemed even more intent on destroying her. It climbed onto her back and bit her hard on the shoulder and even though it didn’t draw blood Luri felt pain from the bite. She threw the undead creature off and noticed the creature Delmus had been fighting was no longer moving.

“The head,” he shouted, “hack the head to bits !”

It was still crawling towards her at speed as Luri drove her sword hard into an eye socket and yet still it came at her. She decided to forget fighting finesse and just hacked the head until it was nothing but a sodden mess of dark red blood and pieces of bone. At last the arms stopped trying to drag the undead towards her and she could go to help the others.

“Help Ubari.” Shouted Mo.

She saw Mo plunging the demon blade again and again into the head of the creature he was fighting, but Ubari wasn’t having a good battle. The leader of the guard was limping from a bad bite to his leg and the creature was on his back and preparing to use the neck bite that seemed to be their favourite method of killing their enemies. Luri cut the creatures head off with a single blow and then she quickly hacked it into several, but before she could congratulate herself, she saw Tareq being killed. There was nothing she could have done, as she went to help him she saw the jaws bite clean through the bone and spinal cord and Tareq was gone. Delmus pulled the undead off the dead body of Tareq and hacked its head to pieces and Luri moved towards Mo, only to find that he’d killed the creature attacking him and had also rescued another of his own guards.

“All the creatures are dead.” Said Delmus.

Luri looked around and counted six of the undead who were no longer moving. She could have contradicted Delmus and told him they’d been dead in any sensible meaning of the word for countless millennia, but she knew what he meant.

“How many of ours ?” She asked.

Ubari fell over, so Luri ran over to him and applied some healing salves to the bite in his leg. They were intended for her or Delmus, but they seemed to work on the medium level demon and the raw wound quickly stopped bleeding and Ubari looked far more comfortable.

“Twelve,” said Mo, “twelve including Tareq.”



Luri walked up to Mo and started to look him over for wounds, but the ex-slum runner seemed to have come through the battle unharmed.

“Twelve ! We lost twelve that quickly ?” She asked.

As she looked around she saw the full extent of the damage to the guards. Of the eight who still lived at least three would need all her healing expertise to survive and none of them seemed to have escaped at least one bite.

“They moved so fast.” Said Mo.

Luri moved among the guards applying ointments to some and spells to others. One was too far gone, lost just a little too much blood and died in her arms.

“You know what they are ?” Asked Mo.

“Yes,” she said, “and so does Delmus. We both lived in the City of the Lost God for some time and we knew of the huge numbers of undead that were trapped in the catacombs.”

“I’ll start burying the dead.” Said Delmus.

The ground was softer near the stream and Luri watched as Delmus, with the help of two guards with minor wounds, dug shallow graves for the fallen.

“What are these undead, where do they come from ?” Asked Mo.

In her head Luri was a child again and she was back in the catacombs and something was coming towards her out of the darkness. She felt the hammering of her heart and realised she was close to a panic attack.

“They’re chaos creatures Mo. Their body dies, but for some reason they carry on, often carrying on with an almost normal existence, though there is always something of the darkness about them. At some point they seem drawn to the catacombs of the City, where they get trapped.”

Luri got her emotions under control. The City was now gone, Kittara had destroyed the ruins and no one was going to make Luri go back there.

“I don’t understand,” said Mo, “where are they going and why ?”

“They’re going to the Necropolis on the 6<sup>th</sup> rift. It was a ruin when I was last there, but they’ll probably rebuild it.”

She applied some stronger ointment to one of the guard and was pleased to see the look of pain slowly vanish from his face. She doubted they’d be able to travel for a day or so, but a night or two on the rifts wouldn’t delay their mission too much.

“So if they’re going to this Necropolis we can forget about them ?” Asked Mo.

Forget about them ? Luri had memories of the undead she’d hoped to keep locked away, but they kept being forced into her mind.

“Tell your people to ignore them Mo, they can’t fight them, but once they all arrive at the Necropolis they will start to move out across the rifts, destroying every living thing. Then they’ll use the gateways to other worlds and they won’t stop until every living creature in the multiverse is dead. It might take them a few billions years, but they aren’t getting any older.”

She felt a hand on her shoulder and realised she’d been crying.

“How do you know all this Luri ?”

“Because the darkness in me wants to go there and join them. It wants to destroy every pieces of the curse of life in the multiverse and I want to help it. I want to help it so badly I can taste it.”

Mo sat beside her and held her hand as they watched Delmus say a few words over each grave before digging the next.

“How many undead are there ?” Asked Mo.

“No one knows for certain,” she said, “probably forty or fifty million.”

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The planet was fertile and beautiful. The metal panel warehouse that served as a base for the raiders was a blot on the landscape and Kittara was already contacting Chlo to have it removed once all the raiders were dead.

“Have fun.” Chlo told her.

Kittara moved her back muscles to relax the webbing so that she could pull the demon blade from its resting place, enjoying the feel of the cool metal against the skin of her shoulder. She was prepared and eager for a fight, but Chlo was showing very few live targets.

“Bitch !” She shouted.

Even in the almost complete darkness Kittara had seen a large section of the metal roof ripped apart as Sventa pulled a raider out into the night and let him drop a hundred feet onto the ground. Sventa was keen to get at food she was allowed to eat, too keen. They’d had the conversation about keeping to agreed mission times so often and yet here was Sventa, early and killing every raider she could.

“You started early. Again !” She shouted as she ran up to dark angel.

It was a mercy that the fall had killed the raider. Sventa was using her talons to rip open his clothing and then cut open his abdomen. Kittara was still fascinated by how skilfully the dark angel could open up her prey, almost like a skilled surgeon. Sventa snipped a piece off the still hot and steaming liver before turning to Kittara.

“Sorry, I was so hungry.”

“Did you leave any alive ?”

Sventa took a huge bite out of the liver and Kittara had to wait for her to swallow it.

“Not sure,” said the dark angel, “I marked where I didn’t go.”

As Sventa pushed her head into the body to drink the cooling blood, Kittara realised it was pointless arguing with her.

“This isn’t over Sventa !”

Kittara had her own needs and had been looking forward to taking a little time over the kill herself. She strode towards the warehouse door and found two more dead bodies, both with the kind of evisceration that Sventa was so expert at.

“Fuck you Sventa.” She shouted over her shoulder.

“Sorry.” She heard faintly as she stepped inside the building.

The emergency lighting in the warehouse was giving off the dull yellow, flickering light that the people who design these things seem to think adequate for panicky people to evacuate by. She was so angry that she almost walked straight past the boy, but the slight movement caught her eye. He was on the floor, leaning up against some fuel barrels. Sventa had taken the lack of weapons and uniform as an indication that the boy was a non-combatant, but even so Kittara knew he was lucky not to have been an aperitif for the dark angel.

“Who are you, what are you doing here ?” She asked.

The eyes were wild and there was blood on his shirt, blood that wasn’t his. Kittara had seen the look before when settlers on various planets had seen the creature with wings devour her prey. Then the boy started to scream, a long loud scream that showed no sign of ending. Kittara put her hand on his head and found the switch in her mind to give him a long peaceful sleep. Before moving on she marked his position for pickup as a potential non-combatant. There was supposed to be no indigenous population on the planet, but Kittara would let Chlo sort that problem out.

Past several large sets of metal shelving containing everything from food to shuttle parts and she was at the double door leading to the back half of the warehouse. Another two dead raiders and Kittara looked over her shoulder and gave Sventa another silent curse. Almost the entire back half of the building was taken up by their craft and it was old, very old. It still had external propulsion motors and one of those was in the middle of being taken apart. No one was going anywhere in the ancient craft, so Kittara moved around it and thought that maybe she'd been a little too hard on Sventa.

"So who are you?" She said.

The man couldn't answer, Sventa had bound and gagged him far too well. She'd put him up against an old turbine fan and used wire to fix him to it. The bare wire had torn at his flesh where he'd tried to pull free. The eyes though were alert and followed Kittara as she went to fetch a metal frame chair that was lying some distance off.

"Might as well make ourselves comfortable." She said.

She was happy now, she had a live raider to interrogate and with luck he might not talk. As she removed the gritty rag from his mouth Kittara wondered what type he'd be? Some spat at her and started off with a long and often inventive series of insults. Others just said nothing at all and others were garrulous to the point of being embarrassing. This one just spat out some dirt from the gag and looked at her.

"Who is the boy outside?" She asked.

"Just a kid, begged us to bring him with us. Fucking nuisance."

Kittara settled herself on the chair and gave off all the signs of having all the time in the world.

"You had four hostages, where are they?"

Sventa returned making the chirruping sound that meant she was happy, but the bound raider looked terrified. Kittara turned and what she saw shocked even her.

"Nice look." She said.

She was used to Sventa's red hair becoming even redder from her habit of putting her whole head into the body cavity of her victims, but the new battle dress hadn't quite worked as intended. The blood had soaked into it and seemed to want to stay there and it had acted as a glue for numerous other body fluids and parts. It looked as though Sventa's whole body was made of glistening congealed blood.

"There are more than four," said the raider, "we didn't hurt them."

Sventa sat herself on the floor, pulling her wings around her like an extra cloak. Then she started the chirruping sound that seemed to so alarm the raider. It was fairly obvious she was waiting to be allowed to rip him open.

"So they're all fine?" Asked Kittara.

"YES!" He shouted. "Ask her, she'd been everywhere. They're in the hold of our craft and they're fine. We had a bit of fun with the women, but nothing too nasty."

"Still hungry." Said Sventa.

Kittara stood up and examined the bare copper wire the dark angel had used to tie him up. There was a lot of it and for someone obviously in a hurry she'd made a good job of it. Kittara pulled one piece loose from his left wrist.

"Nothing too nasty you say?" She asked.

"A few bruises that's all. Ask her she must have seen them. Ask her!"

Sventa ignored the questions being sent her way, as Kittara knew she would. They'd been on many such hunting trips and they both knew the game well. Kittara pulled all the wire off his left arm.

“You promise me you’ll never set off early again ?” She asked.

“What are you talking about ?” Said the raider.

Then he realised that although Kittara was looking straight at him, she was talking to the dark angel.

“I promise.”

Kittara knocked the man’s hand away as he tried to undo some of the wire himself, but she started to pull it loose from his legs.

“Break this promise and I’ll make you leave my house. Do you understand ?”

“I promise”

After a few more pulls and twists the raider was free, but Kittara held him by the throat.

“You’re to give him a full ten minute start. Agreed ?”

The chirruping began again.

“Agreed.”

She let the man go and was surprised at how fast he managed to run. He picked up a blaster on the way out and Kittara wondered if he was going to use it on himself. In the dark outside he certainly had no chance of getting anywhere near Sventa with it. Kittara left an eagerly waiting Sventa and walked towards the raiders aged craft.

“A full ten minutes.” She shouted.

“Ok.”

Sventa was always impatient, always in a hurry. Kittara had tried to instil in her the pleasures of a long and drawn out kill, but Sventa just seemed to enjoy the hunt and the food. Kittara had often thought that for a dark angel there didn’t seem to be a lot of real darkness in her.

The rear cargo doors of the craft were open and she heard the sobbing and smelt the fear and unwashed bodies as soon as she entered the small vessel. The lighting was better in the craft and Kittara heard a young voice.

“We’re going to be alright, it’s Kittara.”

They’d been put inside a metal storage container, but at some stage in the battle someone had ripped open the rear doors, probably Sventa. With no idea what was going on, or where they could go the dozen or so captives had simply huddled in a corner of the container.

“You’ll be taken away soon,” said Kittara, “you’re safer here for now.”

There were occasions when a famous face was useful and the group obediently smiled at her and settled down. She walked among them and Chlo confirmed that the four imperial citizens were among the captives and that the others would be given transport home, to wherever home happened to be.

“Thank you.” Said an old man.

He looked very old, the features local to the Piso sector. Not the usual sort of person to be kidnapped for ransom, but she’d heard that raiders in the area were having hard times. Kittara left the hostages and walked back into the main area of the warehouse, just in time to see a support team from Mendera arrive.

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“A bit more blush to the cheeks.” Said the girl.

Chlo quite enjoyed the general fuss of her monthly appearance on Ixir broadcasting. The makeup girls always made her look a bit like a clown, but by the time she was in studio 1 under the gigawatts of lighting she’d look just right. In a world where recording devices could function with almost no light at all, she often wondered why studio 1 had to be lit up like a sports arena, perhaps like so much on Ixir it was just tradition ?

“Five minutes Miss Chlo.”

Loris the studio assistant always called her Miss Chlo. She sat back in the chair and looked out of the window on the 94<sup>th</sup> floor of the Ixir Media Broadcasting building and reflected on the simple fact that honesty was so rare on Ixir that it had earned her a top rated, peak time, live slot on Ixir broadcasting. They’d even moved the mid-evening Channel 77 news and that had become almost a local religion. Not that Chlo craved the publicity, or that she was even paid for the appearances, but part of her did enjoy being watched on live broadcast by several billion people.

Chlo had been invited quite a few times to appear on a local, limited interest broadcast called The Sky Over Ixir. Recorded months in advance and watched by just a few enthusiasts, it was the last foothold of amateur astronomy on the broadcast media and headed for extinction. Chlo usually listened patiently while uniformed experts expounded their views on the multiverse and then castigated her for telling how things actually were. Chlo didn’t remember why the particular expert that night had angered her, but he’d accused her of talking nonsense about stellar nurseries. Chlo had offered to take him to one and show him how they really worked, all in the few seconds it would take for his blood to boil in the near vacuum of space. Then she’d left fourth a tirade against so called experts who mix objective truth with their own subjective clap trap. She’d gone on for some time and didn’t expect any of it to be broadcast or to be asked back again. It seemed though that honesty and genuine emotions were becoming so rare on Ixir, that they were highly valued. Her piece was broadcast in full and went viral across the entire empire. When over twenty trillion had seen the broadcast the Ixir studios had offered Chlo a weekly prime time slot for the show, live of course. Chlo had agreed to once a month and insisted that the hour long broadcast had to include some genuine amateur astronomers.

“Beautiful view.” Said Loris.

It was and as she stood up Chlo could see most of Moglas City, the current capital of Ixir. Because the levels were where the poor had been put, height had come to mean wealth, so the 120 storey building was the pride of the city. The empire had put up most of the money to build Broadcast Tower, no one else trusted Ixir enough to invest there. Of course the investment didn’t make sense economically, but it gave Sikush a lot of influence among the 15 or so billion citizens of Ixir and the current crop of their leaders.

“This way.”

She knew the way of course, but Loris was fussy and attentive and obviously keen to get on the right side of the person who had the top rated show on Ixir, even if it was a nerd show. She ushered Chlo past cable links, emergency generators, swearing engineers and all the other bits of a busy studio that the public rarely see. How narrow the corridors were !

“Chlo ! Great to see you again. We’re on in one minute.”

Hogan Bluff had been and still was the top anchor man on Ixir, but due to the popularity of Chlo’s appearances he’d gladly come slumming in ‘geek programmes’ as he described it. Chlo liked him, he was like the guy at the front desk of the police office. Hogan had seen everything and could cope with most dramas without getting into a sweat. They sat at the coffee table and looked at the fake fruit until Loris started miming 5,4,3.....at them.

“Good evening and welcome to this month’s edition of The Sky Over Ixir.”

Hogan was professional and was superb at making the autocue script sound fresh and instant. Chlo let him carry on, adding the odd comment while he went through the usual clips of stars and planets sent in by enthusiasts from all over the planet. The company paid fifty credits for every clip used, so

there was always a huge amount of decent material to choose from and Chlo often helped Loris choose that month's items.

"So what is your take on this new ice age nonsense Chlo?"

The question was unexpected, but not a complete surprise. For years the scientists on Ixir had been predicting an ice age, there was only so much abuse any eco system could take and Ixir was well overdue for a major catastrophe. On the whole Chlo thought sixty thousand years notice had been more than the people of Ixir deserved.

"It's not nonsense," she said, "you'll need to move planets again in the next sixty thousand imperial years."

There was a stunned silence and Hogan was giving her a concerned look.

"Fair enough," he said, "it might be a bit cold north of Moglas City, but why would we need to move planets?"

Chlo had seen the empire move the entire population several times, but she realised the last time was millions of years before, the time of legends to the current population. Be honest? For a split second Chlo was tempted to say she'd been joking, but then she remembered she only had the show because of her honesty.

"You've a population of over 15 billion and rising," she began, "your society is highly fragile and relies on regular massive movement of food and water supplies. You just couldn't cope with half your globe being covered in ice, billions would starve."

The studio audience were hushed, but Chlo could see the floor manager urging Hogan to ask more details.

"So how long," he asked, "how long before we'd have to move?"

Chlo always saw the time lines, it was just like most people looking for traffic before crossing the road, but Chlo looked at time slices to check probabilities. Nothing was certain on the future timeline, but there was an almost a one hundred percent likelihood that no one in the building was going to die that evening, or that the building would collapse in the next hundred years. It was automatic that when Hogan asked the question she looked at the time line and then froze. Only for a fraction of a second and no one seemed to notice, but for Chlo it was as though the multiverse had broken a tooth off a huge cogwheel and she'd heard the clunk as it went by. Ixir wasn't there! Yes it was there a few thousand years into the future, but then it was gone, completely.

"Last time the empire moved the entire population in one generation, but there are more people to move this time, there always are."

Laughter from the audience, the overpopulation of Ixir was a regular joke around the empire.

"What is the population likely to be then?" Asked Hogan.

As Chlo looked up the time line she noticed the slight interference pattern out of the corner of her eye as the multiverse reacted to the damage to its fabric. So small though! But then again no one, including the multiverse gave a crap about what happened to Ixir. The timeline population figure made no sense, couldn't be true unless....

"Maybe 20 billion, perhaps 25." Said Chlo, making up numbers.

Hogan was talking to a few of the audience, getting a reaction to the news. Chlo used the time to let Sikush know about the absence of Ixir on the time line and then she put half her resources to work looking along the timelines for a clue, for a reason, for anything. Like spiders her probes sped off up the ever changing web of the time lines, looking for a reason and Chlo just hoped it wasn't her.

"Well at least none of us here will have to worry about it." Said Hogan.

He was raising the atmosphere prior to an advert section, a real pro was Hogan. As the advert for a sickly orange drink was broadcast Chlo realised that everyone on Ixir had a lot to worry about and she had more than a sneaking suspicion that she'd caused it.

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