

Ripples from the Past

Chapter 22 – Vast Engines

“Never talk of that again, the listeners of Leng are no myth.” Said Neola. “There was a great need and unwise invocations were made.... Sadly I have now been pulled from the darkness to fulfil my destiny.”

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Two more of the one thousand a forty two miners had died digging deep into the crust of Boomers. It was about average for mining in deep cold conditions and was near miraculous considering the extra dangers associated with the planet. Sventa wasn't happy to lose a single miner, but she was comfortable with how things were going. Seers had seen ahead of the technology, sensing a vast hollow chamber, just a few days below where her miners were digging. Not that digging was an adequate word to describe their high energy plasma drills and automated chewers of rock. Progress had been fast, the moment of breaking through was almost there.

“Everyone is excited.” Said Haan. “Some of the miners have actually been betting on what might be found.”

“They're miners Haan, they'd bet on two insects crawling up a window.” She replied.

Not that she wanted to squash the excitement currently felt by everyone in the habitation. Sventa felt it too, the lure of the unknown, the thrill of reaching deep unseen places.

“No one seems worried that it might be something dangerous down there.” Said Arran. “Even the children aren't scared, not the slightest bit.”

“Sons and daughters of miners.” Said Itzel. “They'll be used to danger.”

“Or spawn of miners, we have a few Agnopods for the heavy work.” Said Haan.

The joke was a bit alienist for her liking, but Haan rarely made jokes, even bad ones. She laughed, feeling it was her duty to encourage him in gaining a sense of humour.

“They'll be breaking through in a few hours.” Said Sventa. “We should begin suiting up and making our way down to the lowest levels.”

“Who are you taking with you ?” Asked Seren. “You never did tell us your choice.”

No she hadn't, the choice wasn't straightforward and almost certain to upset someone. Space was more limited as the diggings became deeper, not everyone could be taken. A good leader never explained such decisions though, they just announced them. The decision was actually easy, once she put her mind to it. She didn't need two bodyguards and Arran was well liked and useful in the habitation areas.

“I'll be taking Haan with me and Itzel.” She said. “Come on, we'll get into our all-terrain suits.”

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The sphere was heavier than it had looked, but Hol had wanted the entire contents removed, poured into a pile on a relatively clean piece of floor.

“What did you hope to find ?” Asked Mingal.

“I'm not sure, a kernel or seed maybe.” She replied. “The Watcher mentioned being reborn time after time. I just assumed there'd be something besides ashes in the sphere. We should keep it safe though, scoop it up into one of the Watcher's large jars.”

There wasn't much to scoop up, barely a pound or two of dry ash. Hol dusted off a clean lid and used wax to seal the jar closed. It was probably a waste of time, but so much relied on the rebirth of the Watcher. Most importantly, they had no way of leaving the depths of Ancient Leng. Everyone knew

of course, but there had been no discussion about being trapped. Hol placed the jar of ashes on a solid looking shelf and decided to have the discussion, then and there.

"The Watcher will almost certainly be reborn." She said. "But that could be tomorrow, or a million years from now. As we were relying on her to create a portal..... We are trapped here."

"There must be a way out." Said Albas. "We're a group comprising two powerful magic users and three of The Damned. Then there is the pool, which must come out somewhere."

"Not the pool !" Yelled Mingal.

He was actually shaking with anger or fear, or both.

"Never the pool, we have too little of the darkness about us." He added. "We would be consumed by it completely, even our souls."

"So, the pool sounds a bad idea then." Said Celli.

It was a typical Celli remark and made them all chuckle. Poor Celli would need a few more days to heal, but she was well on the way to being her old self.

"I can carry someone and move our place in reality." Said Hol. "Without Chlo though, it becomes unreliable and dangerous. We could end up safely on the surface, or become jammed in a wall, or inside a flooded tunnel."

"The same with a portal." Said Mingal. "This place was designed to thwart magical attempts at entry and exit by those not of Leng. I guarantee a portal would be useless, perhaps even fatal."

Juno hadn't commented, just looked steadily at her feet. Hol had a good idea what she was going to suggest.

"We can't stay here forever." Said Juno. "Opening doors is dangerous, but we know Kittara entered that way, even if it was a long time ago. I don't see that we have a choice..... We need to begin opening doors and killing the guard creatures."

"I'm not keen, one nearly killed me." Said Celli. "But I agree, it is the only way out of here."

Muttering between them, weighing up the odds. They were well on the way to being some sort of leaderless coalition and Hol couldn't permit that to happen. She pounded her foot on the door.

"Enough !" She yelled. "I have decided that we will go out through the doors, it is the only way. Celli needs a few more days to heal. We will begin packing up what we need to take with us and leave when Celli is fully fit again."

"Was she ever fully fit ?" Asked Mingal.

Celli took a playful swipe at him, but everyone was in a good mood. Fighting their way to surface would be dreadful, but it was a solid plan. Sometimes an almost suicidal plan is better than no plan at all. They ate some of the few rations remaining, from the supplies brought from Mendera.

"I'll fight any number of those guards, rather than having to eat slime forever." Said Albas.

They'd given up keeping watch at night, once the Watcher had assured them that nothing harmful could get past her senses. Hol resumed the watch, taking the first three hours herself. It seemed as though the others had barely settled down, when she heard a scraping sound from one of the storage areas. Probably imagination, they'd seen no other living thing in the various passages and chambers.

There was a gap on the shelves where she'd put the jar containing the Watcher's ashes. Crap! Yell for the others, or go on alone ? Hol decided the others would hear a fight and come quickly enough.

"Would she be reborn this quickly ?" She muttered.

Hol was hoping that she'd find the Watcher, reborn and ready to go back into her sphere. The multiverse was seldom that cooperative though, she knew that. Hol found the jar of ashes in a side

passage, some distance from where her people were sleeping. The jar looked intact, as a demon arm twirled it about.

“Thank you for putting her remains in here.”

A high level female demon, of the ruling class by her clothing. Only there were none of the old ruling class now, not after Neosto had been killed. Usurpers and hybrids had taken over as emperors, many millennia before.

“Sit, sit I brought a few bottles of passable wine with me.”

Hol sat, facing her new friend over the top of a smoking oil lamp, which she must have brought with her. It looked like a picnic was the intention, with some food which smelt wonderful and several bottles of wine. The demon filled a glass and handed it to her.

“Stay and keep me company, while I eat this foul stuff. The wine is to wash it down and the food..... The food is a reward.”

Hol sipped the wine and it was no apparition, no nightmare or something created in a mental delusion. It was delicious, the best she’d ever had.

“This is superb.” Said Hol. “Who are you ?”

The female demon poured the ashes out of the jar and picked up a handful, before putting them in her mouth and chewing. Wine then, a few large gulps from her glass.

“Awful, foul but it needs to be done. I have to eat all if, or so I’m told. My name is Neola, or rather it was. I’ve been dead for a long time, an almost unimaginable length of time.”

Hol drank, as Neola worked her way through the pile of ashes, complaining and cursing at every mouthful.

“You’re Neosto’s daughter ?” Hol asked.

“Yes, born out of Thandora, last royal consort of Neosto. My lineage and titles are probably carved on many walls in long disused temples. Now I am cursed by destiny.... I have to eat the ashes of the last Watcher, to become the next.”

“So the last Watcher was consumed ?”

Neola reached over and filled Hol’s glass, before shaking her head.

“Never talk of that again, the listeners of Leng are no myth.” Said Neola. “There was a great need and unwise invocations were made.... Sadly I have now been pulled from the darkness to fulfil my destiny.”

Neola was now on the second bottle of wine, drinking straight from the bottle between mouthfuls of ashes. She clinked the bottle against Hol’s glass.

“Drink, child of Mendera..... This may take a while and I intend to be very drunk by morning.”

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Mining on Sessana wasn’t progressing as well as on Boomers. Difficulties associated with digging down through the ancient Terak ruins, there had been cave-ins and a few functioning traps. After that had come an attack on the habitation structure, by a small fleet of mercenary craft. No harm done to their dwellings, the fleet easily destroyed. No one complained or wanted to leave, the pay was exceptionally good.

“We speed up we lose miners.” Said Jen. “We’ve already had over fifty deaths in the deep diggings. We’re at least five days behind Boomers and if we slow down even further, we might not break through for another ten days.”

“It’s not a race Jen.” Said Luri. “We know there is a vast cavern below our diggings. When Boomers break through, we’ll have a pretty good idea of what to expect, when our miners finally dig into the cavern here.”

"I know it's not a race, but Sventa's dark angels are almost breaking through and they need to wear all-terrain suits." Said Jen. "It's.....humiliating."

Luri managed not to laugh. Poor Jen, upset that dark angels were beating her, at what the empire was supposed to excel in. Find someone digging a hole on an ice world anywhere and nine times out of ten, it was an empire mining company.

"There is a way to see what's below our feet." Said Luri. "Though Chlo won't like it. Do you mind upsetting Chlo, just a little bit?"

"How upset are we talking about?"

Jen was grinning at her, but Chlo was famed for holding grudges. Luri could understand why Jen might be reluctant to upset her.

"Just mildly upset. Chlo can't transfer your reality to the caverns below, as she has no idea what might be there." Said Luri. "I can feel things she can't and I'm not as worried about everything being completely safe."

Jen was going to say yes, she could tell from her expression and the way her right hand was fondling the hilt of her Nurigen blade.

"Unfair Luri, so unfair to tempt me. You know I want to beat Sventa and find what we're looking for first. I'll do it, though you have to promise not to embed us in solid rock, or shred my molecules."

"There may be a little risk, but The Damned are tough." Said Luri. "If Delmus was here, I'd suggest adding him to our number, if that makes you feel more comfortable."

"It does, though I think that only you and I should go. At least until we have an idea of what might be down there."

There was a risk of mistaking a flooded chamber for an empty one, but Luri knew that Jen was tough enough to survive immersing in just about any liquid.

"I agree and don't turn off your link to Chlo."

Jen was looking a little confused.

"She'll know the instant you cut off your link." Added Luri. "Let her have the info feed for whatever we find. It'll probably improve her temper and enable her to follow us down."

"Now I'm having second thoughts." Said Jen. "Chlo once cut Delmus off from just about every service in the empire, just for being a bit rude."

"I know, I was with him that day. So, are we going to see what's down there?"

"Yes, but I'm going to tell Chlo that you led me astray."

Luri had already felt an area of space, slightly away from the larger void below the crust of Sessana. The small space might be a storeroom, a tank full of water, or a large vat of acid. There was no way of knowing, until they arrived there. As a living God, her powers were extraordinary, but often limited in annoying ways.

"Hold on to me Jen. I'm going to take us, to what I hope is a store room."

Luri hugged Jen and moved them to the space below. It was dark there, but they hadn't arrived inside anything nasty. Luri created several orbs of light, which she sent up to the ceiling above them. As she'd hoped, the room was a construction of some kind, with metal walls and an open door at one end. Jen was coughing, the atmosphere obviously wasn't to her liking.

"The air is cold and noxious." Said Jen. "Must be near minus two hundred, with a methane vapour atmosphere."

"Light I can provide, but as to the atmosphere? You don't need to breathe."

"I know, but I've become used to breathing. Can you make it a little warmer?"

“Warming up areas of methane, mixed with various hydrocarbons, is a little dangerous.” Said Luri.

“Are you getting soft Jen ? It’s not even close to absolute zero.”

Jen smiled at her and headed towards the door. The doorway was oval shaped, a tall squat oval shape, which indicated use by non-humanoid creatures. Through the doorway and Luri created more orbs to illuminate the vast underground cavern. Chlo appeared before they’d had a chance to look around, in one of her many non-organic forms. A young human female, with blonde hair cut into a bob. A ridiculously inappropriate form for exploring deeply cold holes in the ground, but Luri was now used to her eccentricities.

“You are forgiven for breaking a few rules.” Said Chlo. “This place is amazing.”

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It was dark when they reached the ruined gates at the entrance to the mountain fortress. Silky could see in the ultraviolet light that constantly washed over the rifts. It looked dark to her though, even the UV light seemed to be against them. Pug was making a bellowing noise, which he seemed to do all the time, sometimes even in his sleep.

“Can you stroke the beast or something ?” She asked Rhian. “I want to listen and feel for anything that might be waiting for us.”

“What do you feel for ?” Asked Kerr.

He just had to pick that night to become curious. A night dark even to her, when she desperately needed silence.

“I listen for beating hearts and feel for the body heat of humans.” She told him. “If I’m lucky there might even be the tell-tale body odour of hiding demons. The entire quarter of a mile of roadway, from here to the centre of the fortress, was designed to be one large trap. Lots of places for the defenders to wait with pots of boiling oil, walls for archers to hide behind and no cover at all for anyone using the road. Now will you be quiet ? And keep that damn beast quiet too.”

She beat a steady rhythm with her tail, something most people instinctively knew was a warning sign. Mo took Kerr’s arm, leading him away.

“We’ll keep Pug quiet my dear, you do what needs doing.” Said Mo.

One guard tower to the right of the gatehouse had collapsed, the debris adding to the general feel of dilapidation. Why had the fortress once seemed like home ? She could only put it down to the desperate circumstances that had brought her and Mo to such a place. Silky climbed the surviving guard tower on the left of the gatehouse, counting over three hundred steps to reach the top. Once there would have been a wooden floor, but it had rotted away to nothing. She perched herself on the edge of the tower, like a large bird of prey.

“Now we shall see, if unwanted visitors have visited this place.” She mumbled.

Silky used her nose and ears and eyes to look, listen and smell for anyone hiding in the vast ruined fortress. She also used other senses, which she couldn’t describe, because she didn’t understand them herself. Luri would have understood, what she meant by feeling for enemies. It was similar to the way empaths could feel another mind, but far more powerful. After taking her time over feeling the fortress, she returned to the others, finding them almost asleep.

“Well ? Are we alone here ?” Asked Mo.

“I am fairly certain we are. Wake the others up, we need to be off this road before sleeping. The central square still looks intact and there may be scrub for the beast to eat. No resting here though, not safe, not safe at all.”

Her anxiety was infecting the others, Rhian was looking quite worried. It wasn’t anything definite, but Silky felt something or someone was hiding from them, from her. That meant someone who

knew how to play the game well, someone very dangerous. Pug was carrying quite a lot of their heavy equipment, since it was obvious he wasn't likely to run away. Silky pushed the others up against him, using his bulk as cover.

"Watch the walls." She said. "Stay alert."

"You said we were alone here." Said Rhian.

"We are, yet I feel..... Something." Replied Silky.

Her instincts were usually good, but nothing came out of hiding to threaten them, no arrows flew their way, fired by unseen archers. It took them half an hour to reach the central square of the fortress and although the trudge with Pug had been stressful, they'd hadn't been attacked.

"There is scrub for Pug to eat." Said Rhian. "Does the well work?"

"It did when we were here before." Said Mo. "Though we'll need to examine it in the full light of day. Something might have chosen it as a place to crawl into and die."

"I don't think Pug will care." Said Kerr. "He hasn't had a decent drink in days."

"Of course, the beast must be watered." Said Silky. "I'll help you turn the mechanism."

Awkward in the darkness, even for her. She showed Kerr how to turn a handle, which worked a set of buckets, attached to a flexible metal belt. It looked hellishly complicated, but worked perfectly, to draw water up from the deep well. Soon water was filling a trough, while Pug rushed forward to quench his first. Silky sipped some of the water.

"It smells and tastes of nothing but fresh water." She said.

She drank from one of the buckets, the others joining her. There was still that feeling though, of someone watching them. Silky shook the thoughts out of her mind, there was still a lot to be done before they could rest for the remainder of the night.

"There is an old guardhouse, where we can risk a lamp." She said. "Maybe even a fire if we can find enough dead scrub to burn."

"We'll need to unload Pug." Said Mo.

It took a while, to carefully unload their beast, taking the equipment into what had been the main guardhouse of the fortress. Strong walls and no windows facing the outside world, it was the first place that Mo and she had slept, all that time ago. The air inside smelt musty, but there was no trace smell of anything using the guardhouse as a lair. Mo lit one of their oil lamps, while Rhian and Kerr made a small fire of dead scrub stems and branches. Once the bed rolls were down, the place actually began to look quite comfortable.

"Just our old, rather stale rations tonight." Said Silky. "I'll hunt for fresh meat tomorrow."

"What is there to hunt?" Asked Kerr.

"Rock Croppers," she replied, "small and hard to catch, but decent eating. There used to be lots of them on the far side of the mountain."

"Maybe the occasional Shuud," added Mo, "and one of those will feed us all for a week."

Slowly, one by one, the others fell asleep, doubtless dreaming of eating their first meal of fresh meat for quite some time. Mo still remained awake, looking into the flames of their fire.

"I feel it too now." He said. "Though I'm not sure whether it feels hostile."

"It's quite close to where we buried Nurigen's metal pages." She said. "We might need to fight it tomorrow."

"I'll stay awake and take first watch, you look tired." Said Mo.

"Thank you."

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Slowly everyone had come to look for her and then they'd arrived looking for each other. They'd arrived with weapons drawn, spells ready to be used. All of them had quickly realised it wasn't a situation requiring weapons. Neola's wine hadn't lasted that long, but she didn't seem to begrudge them drinking it. They were all sat round the ash eating demon, when Hol noticed the first changes occurring.

"It might be the wine Neola, but you look to be growing fur." Said Hol.

"I expected change, though most will be to my mind, my perception of..... Things." Said Neola. "The changes to my body will hurt, a lot. I'm hoping being very drunk, will help with the pain."

"She does seem very drunk." Said Mingal.

"Neola drank two bottles, before you arrived."

"Need it !" Shouted Neola. "The change will make me primitive you see.... Very painful."

"What does she mean ?" Asked Juno.

Hol had no idea, but luckily Neola was fast becoming a noisy talkative drunk.

"I have a decent bottle of fake Ushong." Said Celli. "In my pack, to help celebrate bringing Kittara back from the dead."

"I think you should get it, she might need more pain relief." Said Hol.

"Kittara ! Yes you succeeded !" Shouted Neola. "Once I change you can go home, or you can..... No you're too selfish.... Far too selfish in Mendera."

"Ahh, the maudlin self-pity stage." Said Albas. "Ask questions quickly, she'll soon be in the passed out and comatose stage."

Everyone was chuckling but her, probably relieved to hear that there was a way for them to escape from the lower depths of Ancient Leng. Hol just wanted answers to all the half-finished statements, which Neola had made.

"What are you turning into ?" She asked.

"I am evolving backwards... Shall we say I'm de-evolving ? Or maybe un-evolving ?"

"You'll get no sense out of her, until she's sober again." Said Mingal.

Celli arrived back with the fake Ushong, which Neola grabbed out of his hands, drinking a quarter of the bottle in one gulp.

"Feel better, best pain relief there is.... Being drunk." Said Neola. "I am becoming one of the inhabitants of the original Leng."

Maybe she was drinking herself sober, or Hol was drunk enough to understand gibberish. It sort of made sense.

"Painful to transform, but soon I'll have just two arms and be shorter..... Much shorter."

"Why are we selfish Neola ?" Asked Hol.

"For insisting that I send you to the rift gate of course. You owe us Hol, you owe all of Leng.... You wouldn't have Kittara back without us.... Though that will bring its own consequences, even for those still unborn..... But no, you refuse to stay and fight what is coming. Selfish.... Even though Aelfraed desperately needs help.... Bastards the lot you !"

Neola drank more Ushong and began to glare at each of them in turn.

"I begin to understand what she's rambling on about." Said Mingal. "She can send us to a rift gate somewhere, or we can stay and help defend Leng."

"Same war, just a different battle." Said Juno. "I'd like to stay, we do owe them."

"I say if we stay or go." Said Hol. "You did all agree to follow me."

"Wasn't that just until we saved this Kittara woman ?" Asked Celli. "I wouldn't mind getting back to my shop."

“Damn Shelzaks, always looking after number one.” Said Mingal. “Never trust a fucking Shelzak.” Celli hit him in the face. She hit him so hard that he rolled over backwards, coming to rest with his feet and arms waving about like an upturned insect. He was laughing though, everyone was, even Celli. Hol now understood why people became addicted to drink. Booze had that wonderful effect of smoothing out the rough edges of life.

“What is coming ?” Hol asked Neola.

“You don’t care.... Selfish demanding to go home.”

“Shut up ! We’re not going, we’re staying. What is coming ?”

“Not sure, no one is, but it’s scaring the seers. Even poor Aelfraed is scared. You’re staying ? Really ?”

“So it would seem.” Said Celli.

“Aelfraed will be so pleased.”

Neola finally lost the battle to remain conscious. Her body crumpled, her head hitting her upturned knees. Hol moved her about, making her comfortable.

“Actually, I’m pleased we’re staying.” Said Celli.

“Me too, though it is likely to be a futile gesture.” Said Albas. “But when have we ever run away from those ?”

Everyone was laughing again, as Mingal pulled the Ushong out of Neola’s hand.

“Here’s to futile gestures !” He yelled. “Ow that hurt. I think Celli broke my jaw.”

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Jen watched as Luri and Chlo, appeared to have a contest on who could create the most light orbs, throughout the huge cavern and the shaft at its centre. Machinery the colour of burnished bronze filled the cavern, all of it immobile, or so she thought at first. Large spheres hovered impossibly in the cold methane rich air. Huge cogged wheels remained static, as if waiting for their creator to return and start some vast engine in motion. Jen had once seen a giant clockwork robot, an attraction at the annual Grand Fair on Phlot. It felt as though she was inside that robot, looking at what powered it and gave it motion.

“It all looks to have been.... Turned off.” She said.

Her voice was strange, deeper and more sonorous than usual, in the strange cocktail of gases in the cavern.

“Everything is working, moving, creating.....I’m just not quite sure what it’s creating yet.” Said Chlo.

“We’ll need the miners to arrive and get some heavy equipment down here, probably some tech clerics too.”

She’d never seen Chlo so excited, like a child with a new gigantic toy. Jen put her hand on one of the spheres and felt nothing. No movement, no vibration, no warmth.

“Nothing is moving.” She said.

“It is, just very slowly, while creating no heat, no sound and not the slightest vibration.” Said Luri.

Jen walked over to where Luri, was looking down into a huge shaft in the floor of the cavern. There was no guard rail and the shaft had to be several hundred feet across. It was like being in a world created by giants. Jen looked down, not quite believing what she was seeing. Deep below them, at the bottom of the shaft, it looked like the entire core of the planet was slowly revolving.

“They removed the core and replaced it with the heart of their vast engine.” Said Luri. “No sound, no vibration, which should be impossible, yet we can both see it moving.”

“It must be technology from the future.” Said Jen.

Oh why had she said that ? Jen could see Luri getting ready to give one of her ‘the past and the future are the same,’ speeches. Chlo would join in too, patronising the warrior who only knew how to bash heads and wave a sword about. It was a good job Estrid wasn’t there to be a third tormenter. As far as Jen could see, she got up and had breakfast, performed her duties and then went back to bed. It was all linear in time and the whole notion of non-linear time was weird and sounded impossible.

“Luri, please don’t give the past and future being the same lecture again.” She said.

“No, though I may bore you with it before the day is out. I was going to say that you’ve fallen into the common trap, of thinking technology constantly improves and it doesn’t.”

“No one builds weapons like the Rejjacy anymore.” Added Chlo.

“Precisely and Chlo wasn’t always around with her ability to find intelligent life.” Said Luri. “There could have been highly advanced civilisations out there, but The Chalné and his warriors didn’t know they existed.”

Jen quite liked hearing about the forbidden times and she’d spotted something to be a little smug about.

“So the term advanced civilisation is meaningless ?” She asked.

Chlo laughed and clapped her hands, which was a rare sight since the troubles had begun.

“She has you there Luri, she has you there.”

“Indeed she has, I might let her off the non-linear time lecture.”

The three of them stood close to the edge of the shaft, watching the core of the planet far below, as it quietly rotated. Chlo sent more lights, to reveal a surface of the same bronze looking metal, which every piece of machinery was made of. There looked to be giant rivets in places on the surface of the rotating core. Watching it was almost hypnotic.

“Can we stop it ? Break it in some way ?” Asked Jen.

“Might be dangerous, it is linking two multiverses in ways we don’t understand.” Said Luri.

“Think of hanging a massive weight by a single thread of strong wire.” Said Chlo. “Then think of cutting that wire. We might do irreparable harm to our enemies, or destroy a large piece of our own multiverse.”

“Destroying the engine might mean the end of.... Everything.” Added Luri.

“So what do we do ?” Asked Jen.

“We finish building a passage to the surface.” Said Chlo. “Then we bring in tech clerics to study the vast engine and work out what it’s doing and why. There are rumours of a race the Terak are descended from. Highly intelligent creatures, far stronger and larger than the Terak. The doors certainly suggest a creature of their height and width. That needs investigating too.”

“So we wait and do nothing ?!” Said Jen.

Luri actually put an arm around her shoulders.

“The famous complaint of all those who have led lives full of action and daring deeds.” She said. “We need the answers to a lot of questions though. The Menderan tech clerics will give us those answers, in time.”

Jen consoled herself with having discovered what was inside Sessana, before Sveta broke through the crust of Boomers.

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It was the young clerics from The Temple of the Flame, who spent the most time away from the temple, exploring the streets of Mendera City. The older clerics had quickly gone back to their previous routines, rarely even looking out of the now permanently opened doors. Several adults had

remarked on how quickly Seesha and Mix had become comfortable with wandering the streets for most of the day. There was no question of mentioning Hol taking them for days out, even teaching them to swim in the ocean.

“Keep up Mix, or we’ll miss the shuttle leaving.” Said Seesha.

“It’s alright for you.... You’ve got longer legs than me.”

Hy Astar was currently staying in the imperial palace. The news channel was still full of his exploits and his imminent move to Algaria. The hero of Mendera, was going to be the new ambassador to Algaria, living in Tranquillity for at least five years. Five years was an intolerable amount of time for him to be gone, especially as she hadn’t had the chance to talk to him, in person.

“You just want to kiss him.” Mix had told her. “Seesha looves Hy.”

Mix had stopped teasing her after having his arm twisted a few times. She didn’t love Hy, but her heart did beat faster when he was on the view screens in the temple. He had those haunting eyes and he’d saved all those people. Sometimes she even felt a tingle in her tummy, just thinking about him. Now he was going away and she’d never, ever talked to him. It wasn’t love though and she’d threatened to give Mix a black eye if he ever used that word again.

“Are you deliberately being slow ?” She asked.

“No, it’s hot.... Too hot Seesha.”

She felt guilty, kneeling in front of him and wiping some loose dust off his face. She kissed him on the forehead, making him smile.

“Sorry Mix, if we miss him, we miss him. It would just be nice to talk to him.”

“I’ll try to be faster..... Promise.”

They soon arrived at the entrance to that section of the imperial palace. There were no doors in the high walls, just a twenty foot wide gap, protected by a gentle force field. If you weren’t supposed to be in The Chalné’s palace you didn’t get in. Seesha knew, she’d already tried. It was like being ejected from the palace by a soft fluffy towel, but ejected is ejected and the experience had left her feeling depressed.

“It won’t let you in.” Said Mix.

“I know, we’re going to his shuttle.”

There had been other girls outside the gate once. Being girls there had been no actual fighting, just a lot of glaring and looking each other up and down. Hy had come out of the palace at the usual time and ignored them all. He’d given a smile in their general direction, but hadn’t said a word. The smile though, the eyes that crinkled at the corners, so wonderfully as he smiled..... Seesha had decided to try and sneak onto his shuttle. Even if he shouted and threw her out it was worth it.... Shouting at someone was talking to them.... Wasn’t it ?

“Isn’t it wonderful ?” She asked.

“You won’t get inside.”

He was probably right, but she had to try. Hy’s normal routine was to use his shuttle to get to the market area, where he bought a few things, received lots of attention from the passers-by, before returning to the palace. She’d tried talking to him at the market, but being one adoring voice out of a hundred, wasn’t good enough for her.

“This is so cool.” Said Mix.

The shuttle had scorch marks, which hinted at past space battles. There was even a chip out of one of the side fins. Surely only a true hero would fly such a craft ? Seesha climbed up the steps, placing her hand firmly against the plate with a hand painted on it.

“It won’t open Seesha.”

“I know.”

They were both wrong. Either Hy hadn't bothered to set the locks, or the onboard AI was playing up. The door hissed and opened, allowing the odours of machine oil and stale coffee to drift out into the air of a decent looking Menderan morning.

“Come on.”

She grabbed his hand, pulling Mix in after her. The shuttle was large, designed to carry up to a hundred fully armed soldiers. Its size was probably the reason why Hy was leaving it on a hard standing, outside the palace walls. There were lots of cupboards and storage areas to hide in, but Seesha wanted one with a view of the entry door. There was a cupboard, just behind a row of seating. It was low, but if she left the door slightly ajar, she could watch Hy as he came onboard.

“Here Mix, in here.”

He didn't complain, even when they had to fight for space with a mop and two buckets. Mix claimed the gap in the door though, looking out and promising to keep her informed. It was about twenty minutes later, before he saw something to tell her about.

“He's here, carrying two bags.” Mix whispered.

Bags, he'd never arrived carrying anything all the other mornings she's got up early to come and watch him. An idea was beginning to form in her mind, which excited and terrified her in about equal measure.

“Let me look.”

Mix had to jam himself hard against a smelly bucket, but eventually she could see Hy, as he placed two large bags into a luggage holder. It was happening, she was sure of it. Hy was going to Algaria and they might well be going with him.

“We might be going on an adventure Mix.”

“Wow !”

They had no money, no food and only the clothes they were wearing. That didn't worry her or Mix, who seemed as excited by it all as her. Level flight meant the market as usual. A steep and steady climb meant going into orbit, to get taken up inside a huge transport vessel for the journey to Algaria. Not that any of the young clerics in the temple had ever been on such a journey, but they all knew how it was done from the imperial newsfeeds. It suddenly occurred to Seesha, that they might well be the first clerics from the temple to leave Mendera, since..... Since forever.

“We're going up.” Said Mix.

“I think we're going to Algaria.”

“Wow.”

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There had to be a reason, for someone baking the planet under three artificial suns. It couldn't just be to make the surface one of the most unpleasant places he'd ever been. If the heat wasn't bad enough, there was a constant corrosive rain with the colour and smell of stale vomit.

“Maybe the heat is part of a surface sterilisation process.” Suggested Dava.

“Or, whoever's here needs a high temperature to survive.” Said Trey.

Delmus just listened and wondered why new members of The Damned weren't more inventive with their names. Dava and Trey screamed of outlying worlds with muddy streets and low incomes. All The Damned might look fairly similar, but the names nearly always give away origins. Maybe they were proud of their roots ?

“My proudest achievement ? Being the best slum runner on Ixir, of course.”

Mo had said, when he'd been officially made a citizen of the empire all those years ago. Ixir may have had its problems, but it didn't have acid rain that smelt of puke.

"This place is worse than Ixir." Muttered Delmus.

"Where's Ixir?" Asked Dava.

How old was she? Dava the female, Trey the guy and everyone knew they were sharing the same bed in the barracks. There were a lot of new people fresh out of training, but she'd never heard of Ixir! Crap, how green were they?

"Ixir has gone now." He told her. "The empire moved the population to the 1st rift."

He could see Trey about to ask where the rift was, but Dava gave him her 'shut up' look. Crap, he'd been given a team who really should have still been in training. There was a war going on though and Chlo had given him a squad of kids. Delmus used a hand scanner, designed to pick up the usual electromagnetic indicators of intelligent civilisations. Even if you didn't understand their language, alien transmissions could be traced. The scanner was playing up. Like him, it didn't appreciate the heat and drenching in corrosive liquids. There was a definite ping though, two miles ahead.

"Some sort of tech, over there." He said, pointing. "Keep together."

There were six of them and they all seemed a little nervous of him. They were keeping spread out, far too spread out. Dava and Trey seemed to have been made unofficial squad leaders of some kind and given the doubtful privilege of talking to him. He growled at people and had a bit of reputation and of course, they'd probably heard about the dangers associated with the RM9. He had the weapon strung over his back on a sling, like some kind of primitive club. Delmus didn't mind their attitude, they jumped when he growled and that might save a few lives.

At least they'd all been trained up on using the YK2, or what most soldiers called Yakkies. A Rejjacy had invented and built the first Yakkies, a genius weapon designer called Yamish Karugin. A slender and light energy weapon, which could deliver anything from a stun to a blast capable of destroying enemy bunkers. Hold down the firing switch and the Yakkie delivered an almost continuous rain of high energy death and destruction. Also a smart weapon which could only be fired by the warrior it had been assigned to, and there was the famous proximity safety feature. No Yakkie had ever killed a friendly soldier or a civilian by mistake, or blown up any dumb fool who aimed it at something too damn close. For most warriors of the empire, the Yakkie was the perfect weapon.

"How old are you Dava?" Asked Delmus.

It was wrong to ask, he knew that. There were probably all sorts of rules and regulations about asking for that kind of information. Dava was looking at Trey, as if hoping he'd give her some kind of support.

"It's not a trick question.... Trey too, both of you. How old are you, in Menderan years?"

"I'm not sure if you....." Began Trey.

"Don't be an idiot Trey..... How old are you both?"

"I was born on Kahan, in the year fourteen AT Seven." Said Dava.

"Same planet but two years earlier." Said Trey.

Delmus could be quite good at mental arithmetic, when he wanted to be, and that made them about twenty thousand years old. Not just still in training, but still in the period when simply living forever caused its own stress. Delmus always thought that it had taken him nearly half a million years, to realise he had an absurdly long life ahead of him. They'd still be aiming for goals and rites of passage, which just weren't appropriate anymore.

"The others too, about the same age?" He asked.

"Thereabouts." Answered Dava.

It wasn't good news, but at least he now knew what he had to work with. Everyone was quiet, until they reached what looked like an artificial hill, built out of yellow stone slabs. He brought his team to a halt, about two hundred yards from the hill.

"Use whatever tech you brought." Said Delmus. "Tell me what you see?"

He was treating it like a training exercise, which in many ways it was.

"A small building, probably just an entrance to an underground facility." Said Dava.

"No sign of energy weapons." Someone mentioned.

It went on for a while and Delmus began to respect whoever had trained them. Within a few minutes, they'd analysed the enemy position and assessed the risks. They might be wrong about a few things though, that was the first unwritten law of battle tactics.

"Yakkies on full, rely on the proximity feature to keep you alive." Said Delmus. "And if anyone fires at us, duck!"

He walked towards the hill at a steady pace, his small army of trainees spread out on either side. He wasn't surprised when none of them returned fire, after Dava had been hit. Energy weapon of some kind, probably part of the automatic defences for the hill.

"Everyone flat on the ground.... Now!" He yelled.

Dava looked to have lost her left arm below the elbow. Nasty, probably painful, but not even remotely life threatening for one of The Damned. He felt like telling her to stop yelling, but he had other things to do. Delmus removed the RM9 from his back and turned it on, enjoying the hum as it came to life. There were no sights of course, you just aimed in roughly the right direction and relied on the sheer brutality of the RM9, to get the job done. He aimed it at approximately where the defence turret was likely to be, before pulling the RM9 hard against his hip and pressing the fire switch.

"Oh, how I love this part." He mumbled.

The cone of energy coming from the RM9 started off white, then became red as it expanded and engulfed a third of the hill. Pieces of stone flew into the air, as the blast opened up the facility below. They definitely weren't going to need a key to get in. Delmus fired twice more, making sure that no automatic weapons turrets could have survived. The destruction might have jammed elevators, but he'd never attacked anywhere that didn't have emergency stairs, even if it meant descending thousands of them.

"That should have taken care of their defences." He said. "But stay alert and keep low to the ground."

Dava was still yelling, Trey holding her right hand and looking worried. Delmus knelt beside her and smoothed her hair out of her eyes.

"You'll be alright, Chlo can easily grow a new arm for you." He said.

"I'll stay and look after her." Said Trey.

"Oh, no you won't, everyone fights unless they're dead." Said Delmus. "You've all been through the training and Dava can fire a Yakkie with her other hand. And if she loses that hand?"

"I walk in and start kicking." Said Dava.

They'd all know the rookies verse of course, scrawled on the barracks wall, by an unknown hand. Some thought Delmus had written it, but if it had been him, he must have been too drunk to remember doing it.

"And if you lose your legs?" He prompted.

"I drag myself there with my teeth and bite the fuckers!"

"Good, on your feet Dava, we have an enemy base to explore."

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