

Mendera Temple

Chapter 21 – The Darkness

"By the laws of non-convergent cause and effect; a dozen people could throw the same stone into a pond and cause only one ripple." – Cleric Ojetin

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Delmus couldn't handle years of spare time the way Luri did. She could contemplate a single piece of magic for months, focusing on it totally, giving herself to it completely. Then she'd smile at him and show him a spell that would leave him amazed for days. It was what Luri did, she'd helped Chlo with shortcuts to find all intelligent life in the multiverse, she'd invented the tears of the damned. Delmus was different, he was more physical, more hands on. Some would say he enjoyed nothing more than any excuse for violence and destruction, but Delmus saw it as having the skills any good warrior needed.

"How much for six?" He asked.

The demon stall holder wasn't a pure blood, they tended to think selling merchandise was beneath them. Delmus had tried to fit in, it kept him busy and he'd learned five major demon languages since being at the nest. The woman in front of him looked about a third dredger demon, a third Shelzak and a third of something unknown, that gave her purple coloured skin.

"Anyone else I'd charge forty, but for you Delmus, thirty."

She was actually flirting with him. He handed over the correct number of coins and took his fruit. Nothing was wrapped and he'd become used to that, in the same way that he'd long ceased converting everything back to Menderan prices to see if it was a good deal.

"Tomorrow I'll have something special for you."

She winked at him and he smiled back, he was definitely going native. Luri still wore her proper uniform, they did get a few deliveries from Mendera every year. But Delmus now wore demon clothing, right down to his underwear. He pulled one of the fruit off the section of vine he'd just bought. It was a grey coloured fruit that felt oddly squishy and smelt rancid, but he'd come to love the flavour. Luri of course thought they tasted and smelt of rotting bread and refused to let him eat them anywhere near her.

"Delmus we caught a monster, come see."

The children were around him like a swarm and he had to go to see the monster to get any peace. It was a growler of course, they had spread out right across the rifts now, but the children pretended it was a monster. He left the kids and walked between the various temples, to get to the door to the nest that he usually used.

"You shouldn't encourage them." One of the guards said.

"Darn kids eh?"

"Yeah, got five myself."

Delmus noticed the resident Shaman in the reception area was preparing to slaughter an offering. He waved at the Shaman and received a smile and nod back, life in the nest had settled into a routine, almost like a family. He walked down the ramp leading to the quarters he shared with Luri, quite enjoying the feeling of coming home. The fruit had to go in a cupboard outside, as did most of the local food and drink that he bought, but he could put up with that. To him it smelt slightly odd, but Luri had given him an ultimatum.

"Either the demon food goes, or you find other rooms."

Delmus had bought the cupboard and put it just outside their main living area. It was a compromise and Luri sometime wrinkled her nose as she walked past, but it was a compromise that had worked well for over five hundred years.

“The kids caught another growler,” he said, “a big one, must be four feet long.”

“Did they kill it ?” Asked Luri.

“Not yet, they’ll probably prod it around for a while.”

“They’re becoming a nuisance. One damaged part of the web a few days ago, Charadask went crazy.”

The growlers had come with people of Ixir, probably as eggs attached to their possessions. They’d quickly multiplied to become the main scavenger on the rifts and thrived wherever there was waste food and there was a lot of waste in the demon town.

“Did you find any of the fruit you like ?”

“Yes and Maggs even told me she might have something special tomorrow.”

Luri chuckled and brought him a drink. They had servants, but Luri still preferred to do most routine things herself. Having someone do your washing was great, but having a servant around all the time, quickly became intrusive.

“And the reinforcements for the Garrison. Are they settling in ?” She asked.

“Yes, it’s no longer a town, but a large demon city out there.”

“They’ll all be needed if Sevril decides to create another Dracc army and use it against the nest.”

They both knew why Sevril had ignored the nest and the rift around it, despite her obsessive curiosity about anything being built on the rifts. Estrid was a regular visitor, who often brought their new clothing and provisions. Sevril had often confided in Estrid, but the deity seemed to have no problem about telling them details of those conversations.

“She’s insane and obsessed with Charadask,” Estrid had told them, “the tapping of his claws drives her crazy, she claims to hear it constantly. Yet she’s tried to kill him at least a dozen times and failed, as he seems to exist outside of our reality. Now she sees him as a symbol of her own failure and avoids him completely.”

It was a reassuring story and it did account for their relatively tranquil existence in a very troubled multiverse. But they both knew that when Sevril realised the trap was meant for her, she’d come for them. Not as an aspect, but she herself would visit the nest and the army outside would survive for only a few minutes.

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“I thought you’d have gone by now,” said Neola, “you’ve been here a thousand of our seasons.”

“Barely six hundred Menderan years, I’ve had a bad mood that lasted longer than that.”

They were friends now, good friends, although Kittara was still careful about what she told her. Having a friend in Leng was good, but a demon will always be a demon. Kittara was away from the palace now and had her own mansion on the edge of the city, the edge closest to the darkness. It meant a longer journey to the various arcane learning places, but she also had her own carriage and servants. Neosto had issued a proclamation, that Kittara was the prophesied champion of the demons, who would win a mighty battle to ensure their survival. She’d never felt like contradicting the story, especially as it meant a life of comparative luxury. No one had ever read the quoted prophesy, or heard of anyone who’d read it, but anyone who spoke openly about such things tended to vanish. Quite quickly the people of Leng accepted Kittara as their dark saviour and as the years went by, they started to treat her like royalty.

"I've learned so much," said Kittara, "a million spells I'll never need. It is time to leave and besides we both know the real source of magical ability in Leng."

"The darkness," said Neola, "its tendrils constantly wash over the city."

"Yes, simply being here for a thousand of your seasons has helped me more than all the books and all the arcane study. But before I leave there is the lowest level of Leng to be explored."

Neola was a woman now, well into the age where children were expected of her. There was a husband somewhere, but he seemed to be for official purposes only and so far there had been no issue from the marriage. Neola had countless lovers and Kittara had often wondered what her father thought of her excesses.

"Will you ask my father if I can go with you?"

They were in Kittara's garden and the variety and colours of the plants would have made Chlo envious. There was a saying in Leng that a planted stick would grow and Kittara had tested the saying. A hundred years before she had driven a staff into the ground and it was now a fruit tree, forty feet high.

"I already asked your father and he said yes. Though he did make me promise that if you died in old Leng, I had to bring your body back for burial."

"It sounds strange, but burial is very important to us. Sometimes it seemed ritual and death is more important than living."

"Mendera can seem like that too."

"Are you really our dark saviour Kittara, the one the demons have been waiting for?"

Kittara gave a laugh and threw a small pebble into her ornamental pond. It brought back memories that had been locked away for so very long. She'd been Mardoun then, or perhaps it was even before Mardoun? Sikush had thrown pebble after pebble into a pond, to illustrate something, though precisely what still eluded her.

"Why would you say that Neola?"

"Because my father has never said no to you. I thought I could get most things from him, but you know something I've never been able to get close to, his secrets."

The big secret was that Neosto knew about Kittara and her history, but she wasn't going to tell Neola anything about that.

"Perhaps I am your dark saviour, perhaps I'm everyone's dark saviour, or no one's. Only time will tell. First there is an adventure to organise and you always enjoyed adventures."

"I still do."

Neola was smiling at her and Kittara hoped she wasn't about to get her friend killed.

"Not too many of your guard," said Kittara, "about a dozen of the best and us. How long until they can be ready to go into the disused mines?"

"The mines!? Everyone has always thought the way to old Leng was through the caverns in the north."

"Which is why they've always failed."

Neola stood up and smoothed her dress over her perfect legs, or at least perfect for a demon, Kittara thought they were a bit over muscled.

"Another of my father's secrets," said Neola, "I can be ready to leave in a few hours, if that would suit our dark saviour?"

"Yes, that suits me very well."

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Chlo was trembling. The very worst thing about being able to look along timelines, was knowing just how bad things were going to get. She walked in a straight line through the palace, moving her reality through walls and scaring a visiting party official from Pineus. Chlo knew he was about to ask her to do something he'd forbidden her to do for so very long, interfere with the natural course of reality. She saw death and destruction in her future and she still had nightmares about Panajarum. "He can't make me do it." She muttered to herself.

A party of visiting school children from Menura gave her a worried look as she muttered and walked through them and out a door on the far side of the room.

"He'll hate me again, I know it."

Chlo was finally on the veranda overlooking his favourite garden. He was there, smiling at her and beckoning at her to approach. She walked towards him, but stopped a few feet away, refusing to sit opposite him.

"Bastard ! You've always told me this is wrong." She screamed.

Sikush came to her and took her to a rarely used long sofa at the back of the veranda.

"Medrona and its moons have a population of over a billion Chlo, you'll be saving most of them. With luck, you'll be killing no one."

They shared a part of each other consciousness, she knew he wasn't lying, but the images refused to leave her head.

"I see it, death and worse than death, far worse. Then you'll hate me again !"

He was stroking her hair as she sobbed.

"If Medrona goes, then Ventella will leave the empire. Why stay if we can't protect their colonies ? If Ventella goes, they'll all go, the empire will be over."

"Send someone else."

"There is no one else Chlo, no one who will succeed at least. If I send The Damned against the deities they'll all die, you are the only one who can do this."

She pulled away from him, tears still filling her eyes.

"What do you want me to do ?" She asked.

"You can't move the planet, but you can move the two warring deities. Move them to another system, better still another bubble universe. Put them close to each other, make them face the possibility of mutual destruction. My guess is that they'll both calm down and run away."

"Your guess !! Have you looked along the timeline ?"

"Yes Chlo, of course I have. Nothing is certain with the deities, but I don't see the death and destruction you talk of."

His guess, his fucking guess ! Chlo could see the deities definitely not running, but not attacking each other either and there was something bad on her timeline, something that terrified her.

"Can't you do it ? Take Minraver with you. The two of you together can beat the deities, you can beat anyone."

He stood up and paced up and down in front of her. It shocked her more than if he'd struck her, he never paced.

"No. There are rules that can't be broken, you know that. The deities are there to keep us in order, to rebalance our excesses, not the other way around."

Suddenly he was next to her on the sofa and holding her hand.

"If we attacked the deities, the balance would shift so far, the outcome would be so severe..... I might as well release our prisoner myself. It has to be you Chlo, I need your help."

She touched her forehead against his and then kissed him.

“Do you promise not to hate me ?”

“I never did hate you Chlo, I just despaired about you for a time.”

Chlo got up and looked down at him, her left Hand gently rubbing his cheek.

“I will do this for you.”

Chlo moved herself to the vicinity of Medrona, 57th planet to be annexed by the Ventellan alliance and currently an unwitting victim of a conflict between deities.

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The mines were hot and seemed to be getting hotter as they descended. Kittara doubted if anyone apart from demons could have tolerated the intense dry heat. Gallery after gallery opened up, but Kittara relied on the map Neosto had given her to find the way.

“Never really a mine,” she said, “it’s where they’ve found most of the ancient metal books that are in your libraries.”

Neola seemed shocked into silence, as did her guards. None of them had seen the mines, which Neosto had worked with mute dredger hybrids, who’d been disposed of once they’d become too old or infirm to dig. They saw the occasional miner, using crude hand tools to dig into the hard brittle rock. The miners shunned them; some ran away, strangers in uniform had come to mean pain and death.

“How has all this been kept secret ?” Asked Neola.

Should she tell her the truth ? Neosto hadn’t said it was a secret and Kittara doubted if Neola would be that shocked.

“The miners are all rendered mute and live their entire lives in the mines,” she said, “the garrison of guards who keep them under control, are also here for life. No one, not even the Leng council of elders, is aware of the true nature of the mines.”

Neola had brought a dozen of her personal guard with her, the best in Leng. To Kittara it was obvious that even those that survived the trip to the lower levels, were unlikely to live to tell their story. Yet none of them seemed to show any concern, which impressed her.

“We’ve a long way to go yet.” Said Kittara.

Some galleries were wider than other, with trucks that carried the spoil to the surface. Strange looking four legged creatures pulled the trucks and took no notice as Kittara and her following guards went past them. Down a ramp to another level, even hotter and even darker. The lamps fixed to upright props became fewer, the signs of cave ins more frequent.

“A bad roof collapse could trap us here forever.” Said Neola.

“Don’t worry, I can get us back to the surface.”

Kittara ignored the questioning look, but was pleased that her friend looked relieved by the information. Small piles of rubble were easily removed, but one large cave in meant finding an alternative route. Now Kittara understood why the map Neosto had given her was so detailed, the direct route couldn’t be relied on. Down they kept going and the diggers became fewer, until they seemed to have one long gallery to themselves.

“Not far now,” said Kittara, “to the sealed off section.”

They were half way along a narrow passageway, when Neola suddenly stopped and started pulling at something in the wall. One of her guards starting helping her and by the time Kittara had come to see what they were tugging at, the passage was filling with dust.

“It’s a book,” said Neola, “not just a few pages, but an entire book of metal pages.”

Kittara looked at the wall and it wasn't rock, but the petrified remains of a library. Most of the wood and books had merged together to form a solid wall of fossilised material, but the metal book still shone like new.

"Be careful," she said, "the whole wall looks likely to come down."

It was no use, another of the guard began digging his sword into the wall and everything began to crumble. Neola pulled the book free with a whoop of triumph and Kittara grabbed her and began running.

"Run you fools, run !" She shouted.

Kittara was strong, far stronger than Neola, so she had no difficulty pulling her along behind her, quickly outdistancing the guards. Sixty yards from the collapse they came to a wide junction, where a major excavation had once widened the tunnel considerably. Kittara simply dumped the spluttering demon princess on the ground and sat beside her, taking the book from her. By the time Kittara had used a few lighting spells to remove the gloom, the guards were entering the junction and collapsing in a spluttering heap. Kittara had little sympathy for any of them.

"Didn't you consider why the diggers had avoided that section ? We'll wait here until the dust settles and then go back and look at the damage."

Kittara already realised that only eight of the guards were with them. Not even in the sealed area of the mines and they'd already lost a third of their force. Kittara read the book, while Neola coughed up large amounts of dust. It was a mixed bag, as the books often were. Part was a treatise on the long dead animal life of ancient Leng, but there was a priceless section on pre-demon technology.

"Is it worth it ?" Asked Neola.

For a second Kittara almost decided to lie and attempt to take the book back to Mendera. There were the plans for several rift manipulators, Nurigen would give her a room full of weapons for it. But Kittara knew now that they were coming to a time when the long war between human and demon mattered very little.

"It's priceless," she said, "give it to your father though, not the librarians. It has plans for old technology that he will be very pleased to have."

When the dust had largely gone, Kittara went back to see what had become of the passageway. Neola followed her, as did two of her guard. The passageway was completely blocked and three of the missing guards were assumed to be under the collapsed ceiling. The fourth was conscious, but trapped, his crushed arm wedged under the rubble.

"He was one of my best," said Neola, "I'll take away his pain."

Neola put a dagger to the guard's throat, but Kittara held her friend's arm.

"We need every warrior. Which arm does he fight with ?"

"This one." Said the guard, waving his free arm.

Kittara took the dagger from Neola and without saying a word, used it to cut the guard free of his crushed arm. He screamed and passed out as she cut through the muscles and then the bone. He could only afford to bleed for so long, so she worked fast and removed the arm about two inches from the shoulder joint. After hundreds of years in Leng, she knew how to heal demon flesh. Kittara put her hand on the bloody stump and uttered a few lines of a long dead demon tongue. The blood stopped flowing and the wound looked almost healed. She shook the guard and received no response, so she gave him a heavy slap across the face.

"Wake up. Don't make me regret saving you."

He blinked at her a little and then got to his feet and as if to make a point, drew his sword and gave it a few practise thrusts.

"I'm ready." He said.

Back to the junction and then down one more ramp and they were into a passageway through hard bedrock. No mining galleries, no creatures pulling trucks, no diggers. At the end of the passage was a very heavy looking door, with a single line of writing crudely etched into it.

"Enter here and die." Said Neola.

"That door was magically sealed millions of years ago." Said Kittara.

She pulled a key from her pocket, but the key wasn't enough, she had to break the sealing spell.

"What is beyond the door Kittara?"

"I don't know, no one does. Something started killing, killing everyone, so they sealed it inside."

The key didn't need to be turned, pushing it into the orifice was enough, or so Neosto had told her.

There was a reassuring click, but the door was still firmly closed. She put her hand on the door and used her will to force it open. Neosto had told her there was no spell to unseal it.

"It has to be a person of immense power," he'd said, "if you can't open it, no one can."

She thought of the door being opened and heard the hiss as air rushed into the area beyond the door. Kittara had closed her eyes to concentrate and when she opened them the door was open and beyond it was a darkened cave and the slight sound of dripping water.

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Monazin-Conosin was a good deity if that word had any real meaning. Out of all of them he seemed the wisest and the most calm, but Chlo knew it was no use trying to reason with him. The deities took a very long time to wake up and become angry, but once their rage had started, there was no reasoning with them. The Damned had done all they could in the Medrona system, leaving them there any longer would get them killed.

"All empire fighters to return to Mendera."

She put the notice on the common channel and within a few seconds the few hundred who'd been trying to save lives on the planet had gone. Jen was using a private channel, not to query the command, but to offer support.

"You got the shitty end of the stick huh?"

"I'll cope with it Jen, we've seen worse day."

She was lying, the feelings of doom were worse than when she'd been left alone on Enfellan for millions of years. Chlo hung in space, quite near the largest of the planets four moons. Below she could see the moving dots, the thousands of assorted craft being used to flee the planet. Only those able to afford their own craft or a place on a government vessel of course, the majority of the population were being left to their fate.

Monazin was several light years away and his adversary, Tenneth-Sisanath was hundreds of light years away on the opposite side of the galaxy. Distance didn't matter though, nor did time, Medrona was in between the two deities and was a victim of their rage. Many cultures, across many bubble universes have legends about the earth cracking, the sky falling and the doom caused by the rage of the gods. The people of Medrona were learning that the legends were, as they often are, based on fact. Gravity waves twisted the very orbit of the planet, massive perturbation of the fabric of the multiverse, shifted the axis of the planet's moons. The rest of the solar system was being affected too, with a large gas planet being gradually pushed into a closer orbit to the sun.

Chlo linked into the planet's communications and saw long dead volcanoes were spewing forth rivers of lava. Ocean tides were reaching hundreds of feet higher than usual and were flooding entire continents. This was just the beginning though, soon it would get worse, far worse. In less than a day the planet would shift massively on its axis, the oceans would sweep from pole to pole

and all intelligent life would be destroyed on Medrona. The living gods would have destroyed yet another planet, but this time it was an empire world was in the way of their wrath.

"I'm moving them," she told Sikush, "it's the only way."

Chlo had already chosen a bubble universe to use, one with a vast area that was uncharted and free of any signs of intelligent life. Let the deities play there, she'd put them almost face to face. They could either call a truce, or destroy each other, Chlo didn't really care which. She couldn't move the deities themselves, but she could scoop them up by moving the area of space they were in. A bit like moving a slippery fish in a bucket of water. She picked them up simultaneously and moved their realities to the different bubble universe, shoved them right up against each other.

"I'm in trouble." She told Sikush.

They'd briefly stared at each, as if startled by suddenly seeing the object of their respective rage. Then though the object of their wrath became her, the creature who had dared to move them across the multiverse. Chlo ran, moving herself out to another bubble universe, watching as the deities tried to close up the reality where she'd been. They weren't trying to catch her, teach her a lesson, they were out to remove her from existence. They followed her, so Chlo fled, moving her reality from universe to universe, even briefly moving across the 1st rift. She knew the multiverse well, all its dark corners and hidden places. She found one such lifeless rock that no living thing had ever seen, except her and there she waited.

"Are you alright ?" Asked Sikush.

"Yes."

She left no trail, but the deities left a trail of residual power behind them. They had briefly chased her, but had quickly tired of the game and gone their separate ways. Chlo could now link into the fabric of the multiverse and she was pleased to see that Medrona would survive. The tides would subside, the geology would calm down and quite quickly things would return to normal. What worried her though was the bubble universe she'd put the deities into. It was still collapsing, they'd set the entire bubble to collapse and disappear. There had been life there though, entire systems of intelligent creatures. Not empire planets, but the empire believed that all intelligent life was so rare, that it was almost a sacred duty to nurture it. The universe went, blotted out in seconds and with it went her memories of it. First there were facts that she couldn't quite remember, but quite quickly all she could remember was that there had been civilisations on many planets and now they'd all been removed from time and space.

Chlo could have remained where she was and spent the next millennia in a dark anguish, part of her wanted to. But she felt hatred for the deities. Hatred was a new emotion to her and she was going to let it loose. The trap for Sevril-Narge was designed to trap her and draw out her power. Now though Chlo was going to make her suffer, know real pain. When the trap was sprung, Sevril was going to die in agony.

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The caves went on for miles and the ceilings were high, sometimes so high they could almost believe they were back on the surface. No long dead city buried in the dust of ages, these had always been caves.

"I think we're below the original city of Leng." Said Neola.

"Where would you expect them to be ?" Said Kittara.

"Who ? Who is it you expect to find ?"

The guards were dying, they'd started dying as soon as they entered the caves. Not sudden or violent death, it was as though something was draining the life from them. Only Kittara and Neola

seemed immune to the effect. By the time they reached the ruined city all the guards were dead and they entered the rubble strewn streets on their own.

"I've never seen buildings like this." Said Neola.

"I have, but only in dreams."

The city was still vast, though not one building seemed completely intact. Obviously built for creatures different to demons or humans, the doorways were the wrong proportions and the windows seemed too few and too small. Everything was built of a hard black stone, which had shattered where the blocks had fallen into the streets. Some buildings had been vast, covering several acres, while others were small and almost intimate dwellings.

"Why build all this inside a cavern?"

"They didn't Neola. They knew the end was coming, that a switch was going to clear the rift. The people of the first Leng were capable of great thing and they built a vast dome over their city. They hoped to survive being pulled into the darkness."

Kittara knew where to go, something was pulling her along ruined streets and through long deserted squares. Nothing seemed to be alive, not even the foragers and vermin you'd expect to see in a dead city. Kittara stopped and simply looked around.

"What is it Kittara?"

"Listen."

For several minutes they both stood in a dusty square of abandoned Leng.

"I don't hear anything."

Kittara didn't comment, she was beginning to have a terrible idea about the ruined city, the idea that it really might be completely dead. Neola was following her as they clambered over a pile of rubble that was blocking the street.

"It looks like they didn't survive the darkness." Said Neola.

"Oh yes, they survived. If you can call what they came back as survival."

Their route went straight through one of the largest buildings, Kittara jumping over most obstructions and climbing over the worst. Rarely did she deviate from a straight line to where she was being drawn and every time consuming obstruction began to annoy her.

"Kittara, please. I need to rest. Where are you taking us?"

At first she glared at her friend, but then she nodded and sat on a fallen door lintel.

"They've waited for billions of years, they can wait a little longer." She said.

"Who are they?"

"You'll see, you're coming with me."

Neola drank from her water bottle, but Kittara just sat and listened to the silence and hoped she wasn't too late.

"What do you think killed my guards?"

"This place, something came back from the dark, it's inside every stone, every building."

Neola looked nervously around, but she still took a food pack from her bag and began eating.

"Why are we immune?"

"For some reason it wants us alive. You should be pleased."

An hour or so Kittara gave her friend, before standing up and starting off again. A straight route became impossible, the rubble was too high in places and Kittara needed to lead them in wide circles to get back to the correct route. The buildings looked more ruined now, as if they were approaching the centre of some kind of cataclysmic event. Then Kittara realised why the buildings were so pulled apart.

“Someone has been reusing the stones,” she said, “they didn’t all die out.”

To prove the point they arrived at a section of the city that had obviously been repaired. None of the buildings were totally intact, but it was easy to see where walls had been restored and rubble had been swept into neat piles. There were even tracks in the dust, tracks that no human feet or demon could have left.

“Nothing scares me Kittara, but this place does. It’s the not knowing what we might face.”

“I’ll go alone, you can wait here.”

Neola drew her sword.

“No I’ve come this far, I might as well see it through.”

A large open doorway took them to a long chamber, lined on each side by tablets of hard black stone. On each stone tablet tiny writing had been etched. Kittara was in a hurry, but curiosity made her look at some of the writing.

“Can you read it?”

“Yes, it’s a history of Leng. These stones are priceless.”

There were more chambers full of stone tablets and then yet more, until they seemed to have walked through dozens of them, the history written about slowly becoming more and more up to date. Eventually they reached a workshop with several stones that looked in the middle of being finished. There were tools everywhere, though none looked useable by any creature Kittara had ever seen. One a bench in the centre of the room was a tablet that had been propped upright and on the bottom someone had etched a last paragraph that was far cruder than the rest of the writing. The bench was where Kittara felt drawn and as she read the crude writing she let out a loud moan.

“What’s wrong?” Asked Neola.

“I’m too late, they’re gone. The last of them carved these words on the stone, telling of his loneliness and how he longed for the release of death.”

Neola came forward and ran her hand over the words.

“He might have survived.”

“No these words were carved millennia ago. I’m too late, I should have come here sooner.”

Kittara picked up a tool from the floor, her fingers finding it impossible to hold it properly.

“I’ll open a gate for you to return,” she said, “I’ll stay and read some of the stone tablets, the information on them may prove useful.”

“I can stay with you, perhaps search some of the other buildings.”

Kittara pulled a gateway in reality that would take Neola back to her home in Leng.

“No. I may be here some time and unlike you, I don’t require food or drink to survive.”

Her friend was obviously unhappy to leave her, but she approached the portal.

“Ask your father to talk to the Lummel for me, he’ll know what that means.”

“Don’t stay here too long Kittara, this place feels... Unhealthy.”

Neola stepped into the portal and was gone. Kittara closed the door in reality and simply stood and stared at one corner of the room.

“She’s gone,” she said, “you can show yourself now.”

The hastily carved words on the tablet had told her to be alone, only Kittara had known the words had been written that day. The creature seemed to unfold itself from the shadows at the back of the room, filling the corner like a dark fog.

“I was tempted to kill her like the others, but I sensed your feelings for her.”

There was no voice, Kittara heard the words in her head, something that she was quite used to. It moved towards her, no arms or legs were visible, it seemed to slither forward. There were no

features that Kittara could recognise, except a single large eye at the top of the body. A yellow eye that didn't blink. If eyes were really were the window to the soul, this creature had a tortured soul that was in constant agony.

"You see what we became Kittara, what the darkness did to us !"

As it came closer she could see that it did have some kind of appendages, but they were more like tentacles than arms and like its body, they seemed more liquid than solid.

"I am the last and you nearly missed me, I'll soon die and then those that come after you will have to read the tablets."

"Are you in pain ?" She asked. "Perhaps I can heal you ?"

The creature was very close now, it was taller than her and broader.

"Heal me ! Why would I want to extend my existence any further ? We are the oldest, switch after switch I've seen. With each one we thought the pain must get less. After all what was there left that the darkness could do to us. Yet each time the pain was just as bad, the changes to us more disgusting. Would you believe I once looked..... Beautiful ?"

Kittara put her hand out to comfort the creature, its skin felt like touching a pool of foul black ichor but there was no bad odour from the creature.

"Is there anything I can do for you ?" She asked.

"No. I can pass my knowledge onto you and I still have more power than you might think, you might as well have that too. Merge with me and then I can die in peace."

The creature moved around her, engulfing her in its liquid like body. Kittara didn't feel panic as the creature covered her, she found it strangely comforting.

"We shall be one my child and everything I am and know will be yours."

~ ~

Luri was quite surprised to see Chlo walk into the nest. It wasn't just that she'd never heard of Chlo visiting the rifts, but she was dishevelled and looked distressed. Delmus was just staring, as though the world had come to an end, but Luri brought her over to a chair and sent a servant for food and drink.

"You look awful," said Luri, "we have spare clothing you can use."

Chlo seemed to notice her ragged clothes for the first time.

"I walked here from the rift gate. I need a bath too, if that is alright ?"

"Is there a problem on Mendera ?" Asked Delmus.

"No."

Luri led Chlo to the bathroom and explained how everything worked and then went to her own room to find clothes that would fit her. Delmus was following her with the rift manipulator in his hands.

"I should go there and check," he said, "Chlo wandering the rifts ! This could be really bad."

"No. Trust me, this is something personal for Chlo."

"But she seems to have walked through every thorn bush from here to Ingar Gols."

Luri took the manipulator off him and put it back in a drawer.

"When she's ready, she'll tell us what the problem is."

By the time Chlo was clean and dressed in clothing at least two sizes too big for her, the servants had brought the food and drink. Luri picked at her food, but Chlo ate as though she was starving. Delmus just sipped his drink and watched her.

"Thank you, I was out on the rifts for days. Can someone ask Charadask to join us ?"

A servant was sent for the sorcerer, who appeared surprisingly quickly.

“Is there a problem ?” He asked.

Chlo relaxed in the chair and was Chlo again, the relaxed and highly efficient organiser they all knew so well. She rolled up the sleeves of the shirt Luri had given her and had another drink before talking to them.

“I am here to ask a favour,” she said, “when Sevril enters the trap, I don’t want her to leave it. Does anyone have a problem with that ?”

“You want her destroyed ?” Asked Charadask.

“Yes.”

The sorcerer began to tap his claws on the floor, while Luri asked a servant for a drink stronger than the fruit juice she had in her hand. It took Delmus to answer for all of them.

“Excellent. Tell us what we have to do ?”

~ ~

“I’ve paid them a lot of gold,” said Neosto, “but I have no power over them. There is no guarantee that they’ll bring you back.”

They were stood less than half a mile from the where the darkness started. There were no buildings for miles, even demons were afraid to live too close. The black wall shimmered at them, purple flashes threatening to leap out and engulf the rift.

“They’re here.” Said Kittara.

Three figures had appeared as if from nowhere, just a hundred yards or so from them and one was walking towards them.

“I’m not going to say you don’t have to go, we both know you do.” Said Neosto.

“Yes, I know. It’s my turn to throw the pebble.”

Kittara was quite pleased to be leaving Leng. For some reason she felt unable to talk about her experience in the ruined city, but they’d all sensed a change in her. The people of Leng had been treating her like some sort of hero for quite some time, but now they almost seemed to worship her. Neola had even started giving her a slight bow when they met. It was all a bit disconcerting and made Kittara feel uncomfortable.

“Take good care of her, or I will hear of it.” Said Neosto.

No one had ever seen a Lummel, they covered themselves in layer after layer of loose clothing. The one in front of Kittara had a head under a hood though and only two arms and two legs. Almost a relief after some of the creatures she’d had to deal with. Kittara had a flashback of being drowned in a dark clinging liquid and gave an involuntary shudder.

The Lummel gave Neosto a slight bow and then beckoned Kittara to follow as it walked back towards the darkness.

“See me when you return !” Shouted Neosto.

The other Lummel joined them and Kittara walked beside them as they strode through the interface and into the darkness, into the abyss.

~ ~