

Ripples from the Past

Chapter 8 – Taken Alive

“Chinnura were a rare thing in the multiverse, very rare. Sometimes the multiverse adds something extra to a soul, a spark of something truly powerful and immense. Sometimes that spark is of the light, but in Luri’s case it was dark, very dark.” - Nurigen

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Chlo was excited ! It had been a long time since she’d been involved in anything, which held the promise of violent conflict. True, they wanted to capture the chaos invoker alive, but the project would involve her organic form in a situation of real peril. Of course Sikush had only agreed, because Minraver would be present, but a battle is a battle. Chlo almost hoped something would go wrong and she’d need to do more than had been asked of her, get a lot more..... Physical.

“I wish we could just kill it.” Said Hol. “Chaos creatures are evil things. The thought of one in my temple..... urghhh.”

“There are too many of us.” Said Chlo. “In such a place, fewer would be better.”

It was true, the number of The Damned, trying to fit into the narrow tunnels was becoming ludicrous. Chlo also knew they were reaching the lowest region of the temple, the single vast chamber, which had been dug out to supply stones for the temple. The quarry, which only had one entrance and nowhere else for the chaos creature to run to. Chlo was determined to meet it, to fight it, to perhaps even find an excuse to kill it.

“I tend to agree with Chlo.” Said Minraver. “My two Genova and I will stay. Hol of course, it is her temple after all and Chlo is essential.”

“And one other,” said Hol, “Juno perhaps ?”

“Yes, Juno too. Five warriors plus Chlo.” Said Minraver. “If we can’t catch a solitary chaos creature, the empire deserves to fail.”

Five warriors plus one indeed ! Anyone else and she’d have argued the point, quite robustly.

Minraver was different though, like Sikush but not really like him. Chlo honestly still found it hard to deal with her, even after knowing her for countless billions of years.

“I’ll send all other members of the guard back to barracks.” Said Chlo. “I will put several hundred on watch though, just in case this particular invoker proves difficult.”

They were gone almost instantly. Instead of an overcrowded entrance to the quarry, there was just the six of them. None of them had weapons drawn, they were waiting for the most advanced AI in the multiverse to direct them, her ! Chlo could look along the time lines. Not as well as some of the deities, but well enough to look back and see the creature walk through the quarry entrance.

“It went to our left.” She said. “About the size of a man, in yellow robes.”

She pushed the image up into the air, showing them what looked like a harmless priest. Male, with his hood only half covering his face. There was a fair chance that it was using the face of one of its victims, but it couldn’t change its physiology completely.

“I have its unique energy trace now.” She said, pointing. “It lurks behind the half-finished columns.”

They spread out, even Minraver pulling a long thin blade, out of a scabbard attached to her belt.

Time lines became blurred by the future, far too many options the creature might take to avoid them. In one possible outcome, she saw Hol’s body, dead and lifeless on the ground. Only one of several thousand possible scenarios, but it made her pause.

“Stupid girl, use your intuition.” She muttered at herself.

Yes, one time line felt better than the others. Hardly a scientific way of choosing, but it had worked well for her in the past. Chlo turned to her right and crept silently towards two large columns of stone, almost finished and looking ready to be moved to the temple. She wedged herself in the gap between them, peering out into the gloom behind them.

“I see it !” She heard Hol shout.

Several other shouts and the sound of something screaming, producing sounds more like a wild animal, than any intelligent being. Minraver ordering her angels to help someone and then the chaos invoker appeared out of the gloom. It was the one screaming, though it didn’t look wounded. Male by its face, though that might have been an illusion. It hissed at Juno, before running towards the columns, where Chlo was hiding.

“Don’t kill it !” Shouted Minraver. “Where is Chlo ? Has anyone seen her ?”

Chlo was hiding, which is a difficult thing to do when you’re hunting a creature that can see your aura, as well as you can see his. The stone columns helped of course, but she still needed a lot of skill to mask her presence. Chlo liked an opportunity to use her combat skills, not in practise, but up against a genuine enemy.

“Careful ! It got Hol.” Juno was yelling.

No, Hol wasn’t dead, she could still see her essence, shining like a bright orange light in her mind. Hurt though maybe and chaos creatures could inflict wounds worse than any natural death. The creature screeched once more and moved to within a few feet of where Chlo was waiting. She’d chosen the right one out of all those time lines, her intuition had been correct. Chlo stepped out of her hiding place.

“Behind you.” She said, softly.

It heard her and spun around. No longer looking like a harmless priest, the face snarled at her. A man still, perhaps the likeness of one of Hol’s clerics, turned into a snarling mask by the evil within. It lifted a hand to touch her, but Chlo didn’t move away. The snarl turned to a look of triumph, as it touched her arm with its hand.

“I’m immune to your games.” She said. “You aren’t immune to mine though.”

Chlo grabbed its hand in hers and enveloped the chaos creature in a stasis field. From head to foot, it was covered in the dull green glow, which could hold it at the same point in time, for eternity.

Minraver was soon stood beside her, Juno arriving a second or so later.

“Well done !” Said Minraver. “Now I can attempt to break its conditioning. I’m sure I hit it with my sword, yet I can see no wounds.”

Juno spotted the gash just below its right knee, though there was no sign of bleeding.

“There ! I knew I’d made it scream.” Said Minraver.

“Do you want me to move it to the cells beneath the barracks ?” Asked Chlo.

“Excellent idea, but first we should check on Hol. The abomination got a good hold on her arm at one point.”

The two Genova were trying to sooth Hol. Chlo had seen other people who’d been touched by chaos. Some lived with ruined limbs for the rest of their lives, others chose suicide. She’d even heard of tribesmen on the rifts, who’d immersed their own arms in cauldrons of boiling water.

“It looks bad, but it can be cured.” Said the male angel.

Poor Hol, her left arm looked more like a writhing serpent than a real arm. She had to look though, even though it horrified her. Hol’s arm was now scaly and seemed alien to the rest of her body.

“You’re in luck Hol, these things are usually incurable.” Said Minraver. “With two of my Genova and my own skills, I’m sure we can give you a normal arm again. Though I can’t promise the procedure will be painless.”

“Did you get the.....Thing ?!” Asked Hol.

“Yes, it’s held in stasis.” Said Chlo.

Hol screamed as they used their healing skills on her arm. Sometimes screaming is good though, only living things can scream. They’d all survived and had the chaos invoker safely held in stasis. Some of the other potential outcomes had looked far worse.

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After everything Mo had said, Rhian wasn’t surprised to see their contact with the Red-Tops, sat at the bar in military fatigues. He even had his name sewn onto the chest of his jacket, Rorkath. Anywhere else in Novra-An, any other bar or hotel and he might not have stuck out like a sore thumb. The Pilgrim’s Oasis was for the more upmarket traveller though, the ones who even dressed for dinner. Rorkath might as well have been wearing a flashing sign, saying Red-Top.

“I know guys, I know.” Said Mo. “Let’s get the information about the freighter quickly, before the militia turn up to arrest him.”

Did they have militia outside of Mendera City ? Rhian was one of those rare people, who actually read and digest travel information. She was fairly certain that Novra-An, had no militia to keep the peace. Not that they seemed to need it, the city was peaceful to the point of being boring. Rorkath seemed very pleased to see them, which probably meant he was expecting to be paid.

“Mo, good to see you again.” Said Rorkath.

“You know Silky of course.” Said Mo. “And this is Rhian and Kerr, the crew who will be flying the freighter.”

“Good, good, can I get you something to drink ?”

A guy in military fatigues and dirty boots, offering to buy them drinks in the expensive hotel bar. She suspected that Mo was about to pay him a very large sum, probably in imperial credits. She ordered the most expensive drink she could think of, which did make their new friend gulp a bit. Rorkath reminded her of her dad a little. He’d always worn his military uniform, which she’d thought of as being really cool. Until she was old enough to realise they were just about the only clothes he’d owned.

“The freighter is ready Mo. There is just the small matter of the balance owed.”

“I’ll want confirmation that the ground locks are off.” Said Mo.

“Sure, no problem. I’m assuming you can use the hotel’s credit link, as you own the place.”

“Yes, come on, we’ll do it now, before the guard show up. Really !? A uniform, with your name on it.”

Rorkath seemed to see the clothing he was wearing for the first time and actually blushed, ever so slightly.

“Sorry, didn’t think. There are no militia in Novra-An anyway.” Said Rorkath.

“That’s because The Damned look after security in the pilgrim towns.” Said Silky.

“Ok, ok, let’s get this done then.”

Mo led the Red-Top towards the hotel’s front desk, obviously intending to use their credit transfer device. Would the imperial bank flag up the transaction ? For an old hand at these kinds of things, it occurred to her that Mo wasn’t being that cautious.

“They shouldn’t be long.” Said Silky.

She was wrong, it was over an hour before Mo and Rorkath appeared again. Both looked happy, grinning at each other, as though slightly crazy.

“We’re ready.” Said Mo. “Ground locks are off, we can take off as soon as we get there.”

Rorkath finished the drink he’d left on the table.

“And I’ll be on the next shuttle out to Algaria.” He said. “It’s been a real pleasure doing business with you. If you ever need another craft in a hurry.....”

“We’ll find someone cheaper.” Said Silky.

Rorkath didn’t seem insulted by her comment, he simply laughed and headed for the door. Mo called out to him about something and undoubtedly saved his life. As the Red-Top turned, an energy burst from a plasma blaster, missed his head by a fraction of an inch. It hit a woman near the bar, burning off the top of her skull. There was no panic and no one screamed.

“Crap ! That was meant for me.” Said Rorkath.

She’d been with a group, pilgrim’s tended to travel in small family groups. They just looked around, as though stunned. The hotel had its own security people and Mo was proud of how quickly they arrived. Four of them, blasters up and ready, running out of the hotel, in pursuit of whoever had fired the shot.

“Any idea who wanted you dead ?” Rhian asked.

“I could give you a very long list.” Said Rorkath. “I’m just hoping the guards catch up with him, or her.”

He might have had his wish answered, there was the sound of blaster fire from outside of the hotel. A medic was looking at the woman, but it was just a formality. No one survives the top third of their head being vaporised. One of the women in her party was crying, but otherwise, they seemed a remarkably stoic group of pilgrims.

“I need to leave and so do you.” Said Rorkath. “The Damned will be summoned to look into this. I’d suggest you pack and leave, before they arrive.”

He went, out into the night, not even turning to say a proper goodbye.

“He’s right.” Said Silky. “Dead pilgrims are bad for tourism, they’ll dig and delve through everyone’s business and the empire definitely won’t approve of our current project.”

Kerr seemed stunned by it all, though she was sure he’d once served in the military. Mo was looking at them both.

“Are you still with me ?” He asked. “We’ll be keeping just ahead of the hue and cry, hopefully. The local city council will have to request an investigation by the Menderan Guard. It all takes a while, so we do have time to pack and leave, without looking as though we’re running away.”

“Be thankful for empire bureaucracy.” Said Kerr. “I’m still with you.”

“Me too.” Said Rhian.

“Good. Pack quickly and head up to the roof.” Said Mo. “I’ll have my shuttle meet us there. After that we’re winging it.”

“I thought we already were.” Said Silky.

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Sventa didn’t mention the certainty of being attacked to her warriors. Get them too jumpy and a warning, could all too easily become a self-fulfilling prophecy. She did however; choose the toughest fighters as the group to take to the surface. Haan had to go of course, leaving him behind would create havoc on the timelines, even she appreciated that. Itzel and Seren had to go, she needed two experienced aides. Then there was Arran and fifteen of the hardest and toughest warriors she had, all armed to the teeth.

“Are we expecting trouble ?” Asked Seren.

“Nothing specific.” She lied. “Just keep everyone alert.”

Much to the annoyance of Pesallia Two traffic control, she had two raptors shadow their shuttle to the surface. Despite trying to avoid it, her people were getting jumpy, realising that their president was taking security a lot more seriously than usual.

“They’re getting irritable down there.” Said Seren. “Now they’re demanding that the rest of our fleet leave orbit immediately.”

“Ignore them,” she replied, “no, actually just acknowledge all their nonsense, then ignore it.”

If only the empire didn’t require her to be nice to the bastards, but she had her limits. She left Seren to deal with the constant stream of irritating calls from Pesallia traffic control. They’d be met of course, by a pompous official of some kind, probably accompanied by quite a few armed soldiers. The shuttle pilot was breaking through the rest of the comms coming in, desperate to get her attention. The capital city of Banjoon, was visible on the view screen, by the time she understood what the pilot was saying.

“They’re refusing us a landing slot.” He said. “We’re being diverted to a town about five miles away.”

They didn’t need a landing slot, or the use of the spaceport in Banjoon. They were using an imperial shuttle, which could land just about anywhere. There wasn’t a lot of time to react to being diverted, probably a deliberate ploy by the Pesallian authorities. They weren’t a war like planet at all, but just seemed to feel it necessary to remind the empire that they were an Indie planetary system.

“I seem to remember that Banjoon has several large parks.” She said.

“Yes, it’s famous for them.” Said the pilot.

“Pick one, in the outskirts of the city.” She said. “And land in the centre of it. Be careful, no squashed locals.”

“Yes my president.”

He seemed excited, all of her team seemed to perk up at the idea of landing wherever the hell they wanted to.

“Can I have a weapon ?” Asked Arran. “You seem to be stirring the local up a bit.”

“No.” Replied Itzel.

The pilot was good, he circled the park once, finding a good spot to land several hundred tons of imperial shuttle. They skimmed over the ornamental lake, to land among a group of flowering bushes. A few would never flower again, but that was the full extent of the damage they’d caused.

“They’re angry.” Said Seren. “Demanding that we wait for their diplomatic reception team to arrive.”

“The lake looks nice.” Said Sventa. “Tell them we’ll wait there.”

She had time to spare and very little in the way of a plan. Originally the idea was to take Arran to every bar with a bad reputation and hope he recognised someone. Not much of a plan, but better than nothing. The diplomatic people were going to be quite insistent, demanding to know the purpose of her visit to their planet. Just telling them it was complicated, wasn’t going to satisfy them.

“We’ll wait for the welcome party by the lake.” She ordered.

It was nice to be out of the shuttle, even if the gravity was slightly too low and the air had a tang to it, that she unused to. Sventa saw the local people react to her appearance, most dragging their children away. On Mendera the entire known multiverse might turn up at the market. Creatures so strange, that even Chlo could take a while to identify them. Pesallia was different, three planets who prided themselves on racial purity. That meant you were only really welcome if you conformed to the basic humanoid pattern. Two arms, two legs, two eyes..... etc. They had even invented a term for

non-humans, which was still considered an insult on many worlds. Transbio ! Sventa had seen it scribbled on a wall, above the bodies of a few dead aliens, who didn't fit the humanoid ideal of what life should look like.

"I know the empire is to blame." The Chalne had once told her. "We seed the new multiverse with our DNA, to give it a bit of a head start. Hardly surprising that a few planets see anything non-human as a threat. Education is the key Sventa, along with exposure to other cultures."

Officially Pesallia welcomed everyone, but she knew the diplomatic welcome team would react badly to her warriors, with their claws and wings. Transbio indeed ! Fuck em !

"Is your raptor supposed to be doing that ?" Asked Arran.

She almost snapped a rude remark, but he had a point. One raptor was on its way back to the fleet, but one had been a little slower in leaving. It was now manoeuvring to one side of the lake, zig zagging as if to avoid enemy fire.

"Find out what it's doing that for ?" She shouted at Seren.

No time to find out, the imperial raptor began to fire at the far end of the lake. There were a few sculpted hill and a rock garden in the way, all Sventa could see was a small crowd of people, running away. Sventa decided to talk to the raptor herself.

"What target are you engaging ? I repeat, why are you firing ?"

"It's there my president ! At first we didn't believe our own eyes, but it's there !"

No telling the craft to disengage, her warriors were well trained. If there was an 'it' that needed firing at, she'd trust their judgement. Besides being attacked was something she'd been warned would happen.

"Advance towards the far end of the lake." She ordered.

Raptors had legendary firepower. A rotating weapons pod, that could remain locked onto a target, while the craft moved at speed. The raptors was going around the lake, maintaining withering blaster fire on whatever enemy it had found. It was almost too fast to see, but something had come up out of the lake and hit the raptor. The stricken craft crashed through several trees, before almost righting itself.

"They're going to make it." She muttered.

No, the raptor flipped over and hit the ground at speed, half burying itself in a well laid out, formal garden. The raptor's usually had a crew of two and Sventa knew they'd both be dead. The shell of the raptor might well be salvageable, but the inertial damping wasn't built to cope with that kind of crash. Her people would have been killed on impact.

"Run !" She shouted. "Fire as soon as you have a clear target !"

It was happening, she could see her fate being played out, but was powerless to stop it. Haan was some way in front of her, already firing at the enemy, whatever or whoever that was. She knew that their blasters wouldn't harm 'it.' It was going to be her job to destroy it, or simply run away and leave Haan to die, probably with a few of her warriors. No, dark angels might kill each other for often ridiculous reasons, but they were loyal.

"Run ! Faster !" She yelled.

Sventa was going to kill it, or die in the attempt.

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Alyz had no idea what kind of craft to expect. The Lummel were a mystery that the majority of the multiverse had never heard of. They were even considered to be a legend by some rift dwellers. Alyz had heard rumours and seen them mentioned in ancient carvings. Delmus was probably as

knowledgeable about them as any of The Damned had ever been, and he didn't seem to know much.

"I only know a few words of their language," he told her, "just enough to get by. Their craft are slow, with no visible method of propulsion."

"What are they like, the Lummel?" She asked.

"Tall, thin and taciturn, they'll barely talk to us. Luri won't say anything other than that the legend about them is probably true. She's a deity now and even she said probably."

"Do you know the legend?" She asked. "I've never heard of it."

Delmus usually loved to talk about all sorts of nonsense, shutting him up was often the difficult thing. Even he seemed reticent to talk about the Lummel. Maybe it was the presence of the purple wall? It loomed high over the entire edge of the rift, explosions of energy breaking its surface, like solar flares.

"Luri and I once visited the Shrine to the Tree of Life." He said. "A long time ago and there is no tree by the way. Not quite as disappointing as the Temple of the Fallen Women, but there should have been a tree. I mean there were trees, hundreds of them, but not 'the tree.'"

She just glared at him and picked up a decent sized rock.

"Sorry, it just seemed a bit of a let-down." He said. "Anyway, there are carvings everywhere and one gives a very brief history about the fall of the Lummel."

"And? Come on Delmus! Usually the real trick is shutting you up."

He looked towards the wall and nodded at it.

"They listen," he said, "to everything and they see everything this close to the wall. Still, if it's carved into the wall of the shrine, it can hardly be a huge secret. The Lummel are supposed to be the Holy Warriors who failed to keep their vows, the fallen is their other name."

"Every world has its legend about fallen angels of one kind or another." Said Alyz. "Or warriors who didn't keep an oath to someone or other. Most of it is crap!"

"You might be right, but they do seem to be the only creature from our side of the wall, who can survive quite happily over there." He said, pointing at the wall.

"They're capable of living in both worlds, but belong in neither." He added. "And guess who their broken vows were made to?"

"It has to be The Chaln e," she said, "our very own Sikush. He seems to be at the bottom of most strange legends and broken vows."

"Give that lady a prize! Yes, the Lummel are supposed to be the Holy Warriors who didn't show up to help Kittara fight the..... One held prisoner in Mendera."

She knew why he didn't want to mention the crawling chaos, it did feel as though the wall was a brooding presence, watching and listening.

"Or, it could all be nonsense and they're just taciturn ex-priests of a faith long gone." She said.

"True, but don't upset them, or we've no way of getting to Luri." Said Delmus. "Look, it still appears small and difficult to see, but their craft is on its way."

Dark brown against a purple background, the craft was difficult to make out. It seemed to be moving at the pace of a sailing ship, which meant that it might still take hours to reach them. Not a large craft, Delmus had already told her that they rarely held more than a crew of two.

"Do we have to pay them?" She asked.

"No, they come to pick up those that they feel have a need to get beyond the wall. If they don't think you're worthy..... Well, you've seen the bones."

"Do they kill them?"

"I don't think so. I believe they just leave them here to die of thirst, it is very hot."

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The Old One wasn't expecting to see the creature who looked like Kittara. He hadn't been that keen on the original and he was supposed to be hiding, fully cloaked and invisible to everyone. Her ability to find him and enter the command room irked him, considerably.

"I thought Alyz would be my liaison again ?" He asked.

He liked Alyz for some reason, though mainly because she listened to him, without trying to get him to hurry up, or 'get to the point,' as Kittara had often told him. It was probably because Alyz was Nurigen's daughter and used to the ramblings of her father. Kittara on the other hand, was rumoured to have been some sort of reptile, before being converted into one of The Damned. Not that he was creaturist, or whatever they called it now. The Old One just found it easier to talk to Alyz.

"I'm not really here on empire business." She replied.

"Good ! Then be off with you, before I use the internal defence systems."

She merely sighed, while walking right up to his main comms console.

"Do you really think that any of your systems could hurt me ?"

"You don't look that impressive to me. Besides, you came here to ask for my help. I'm assuming that, as there's no other reason for you to be here. It certainly wasn't to visit an old friend."

He'd been told of the strange creature of course and knew it was a biological link of some kind, to the sentient multiverse. That did give his curiosity a bit of a nudge, but not much of one. She, the Kittara lookalike, simply examined her own arms.

"You're right of course," she said, "this body doesn't look that impressive. It took her to some amazing places though, her memories are bewildering and exciting. You're also right about the reason for my visit, I do need to ask you for a favour. Do you remember Mozim ? You may have known him simply as Mo."

"Of course I do, I'm not going daft you know ! Yes, he was one of Kittara's gang of rogue's. I rescued him once, from the centre of a battle he couldn't win. I took a lot of damage in the process, so yes, I remember Mo, best of all the slum runners."

She stopped examining her own body and looked at the various needles and gauges on his console.

"I noticed you're not transmitting our conversation to Chlo." She said. "May I ask why not ?"

"You can ask ! I may send it to her later, it's just that..... I like to keep a little independence from Mendera."

"Good, Mo needs your help and it has to be done in secret."

"I am required by The Chaln , that comes before all else. Is it likely that I'll be damaged while doing this favour ? I seem to remember that Mo had a knack for upsetting the wrong people."

"I will be completely honest with you." She said.

The Old One had to laugh, a strange mechanical sound, which surprised himself.

"I am very old," he said, "and I can guarantee that no one has ever been completely honest with me. I no longer expect complete honesty from anyone. In fact, I believe all living creatures are incapable of complete honesty."

She stood up on her toes and twirled around. He was actually beginning to like her, though her actions often seemed a little eccentric.

"I am not a living creature, despite what you see before you." She said. "Would you like a momentary glimpse of what I consider to be my real form ?"

"Yes, I would."

“Most living beings couldn’t comprehend what I am about to show you, many would be damaged simply trying. For others..... it would be like a blind man given eyes again, only to have them taken away a few moments later. Like me, you aren’t a living creature, not really. You will see me for what I really am and simply..... accept it.”

She span again, turning from a spinning version of Kittara, into a vortex of white light. He had senses beyond that of any living creature and aimed all of them at and into the spinning vortex. There were worlds in there, whole galaxies and universes, still yet to be born. Some might never be born at all, they were what might be, if the current danger to the multiverse was avoided. Past, present and future were all the same inside the vortex, everything was possible. A few seconds and the spinning version of Kittara, was back again.

“Thank you.” He said. “I now understand things a lot better than I did.”

“Good, so you’ll help me ?”

“Yes, tell me what Mo intends to do and how I can help him ?”

She sat in the old flight commander’s chair, as if showing her true form had tired her.

“Mo is currently on the run, a misunderstanding about the death of a pilgrim on Mendera. He’s not guilty , but his current objective wouldn’t be approved by the empire. I’m sure Chlo has an inkling about it, but having an inkling and knowing officially.....”

“Yes, I’m all too aware of empire politics.” He said.

“Anyway, he intends to use his personal shuttle to reach the Udaries Nebula. His destination is a lifeless rock, where a deep space freighter is ready and waiting. I have doubts that a small shuttle will get him that far, especially as it has no heavy weapons.”

“So you wish me to intercept him and take him to this freighter in the Udaries Nebula ?”

“Yes.”

“Is there a chance that I will be damaged ?”

“A tiny chance, almost none.”

“Where will Mo be going in this freighter ?”

“That is his story and his to tell you, if he wishes.”

“Very well, I will intercept Mo and take him to the freighter. Give me the co-ordinates ?”

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The barracks for The Damned was a huge building, only second in size to The Chalné’s royal palace. It had been there so long, that the citizens on Mendera City really didn’t look at it any more. It happens in all large cities; only tourists really look at any of the old and famous buildings. For a creation of the almost legendary Thrax, it was an ugly building. All bare stones walls and hard angles. Not that Thrax could have been blamed; he’d built it to a specification, which had been agreed with Sikush and the town council, then in its infancy.

“It needs the look of a place you wouldn’t want to enter.” Sikush had told Thrax. “Hard, austere, it needs to exude an aura of ‘don’t mess with this place.’”

Chlo had attempted to soften the exterior with a few well-placed gardens and numerous climbing vines, but it still looked like somewhere best avoided. Strangely enough, many of The Damned grew to love the barracks, living there long after they could easily afford their own accommodation. Hol had moved her own reality and that of the honoured guest, as far inside the barracks, as she was allowed to. Her arm now looked normal, but was still causing her a little pain.

“I’m afraid we’ll have to walk from here.” She said. “The various blocks and shields make it unsafe to move about in any other way.”

“I understand, there are parts of Leng with similar limitations.” Said Aelfraed.

Aelfraed of Leng herself, an honoured guest in the holy city itself. They were living in strange times though, which required unusual alliances. If the multiverse ended, Leng would end to. The royal court of Leng had sent their most highly skilled invoker, who was even carrying the priceless Chaos-Nagoria, the great holy book of chaos. Aelfraed had even come virtually alone, with only two guards and a solitary servant. A sign of trust, or desperation ?

“Surely they are in league with the chaos forces who attacked the temple ?” She’d asked Sikush.

“Perhaps, but chaos comes in many forms and a large number of factions.” He’d replied. “If Mendera vanishes in a great apocalypse, it is certain that Leng will go too. Our guest is not to be trusted, but we’d be fools to refuse her help. She’s a converted chaos creature herself and helped Kittara on her journey through the wastes. Get to know her Hol and listen, with both ears.”

Not only Leng was sending aide, of a kind. Shaman were arriving at the Well of Souls, opening up long dead rift gates, arriving with their own strange tales. Not that Mendera City was full of tales of doom. The general population were actually pleased to see strange new allies, for what they thought of as a war against a powerful new enemy.

“We have to walk past the seven staging areas, the bays, before the stairs to the lowest areas.” Said Hol.

“Is it a long walk ?” Asked Aelfraed. “I’d hate to miss the interrogation.”

“Not that far, though I don’t think Minraver will start without you.”

Probably a mistake to let her know she was that essential, their honoured guest had a distinctly smug look on her face. They walked past several small bays, before walking past bay two, by far the largest.

“I can feel the reality blocks here.” Said Aelfraed. “It all looks so empty though, so deserted.”

“It can be centuries between major wars, but bay two has been well used in the past.” Said Hol. “I’ve been here with ten thousand of my brothers and sisters. The Damned, all heavily armed and moved as one onto the battlefield by Chlo. I’ll never forget the experience, the thrill of battle.”

It hadn’t been Hol’s intention to take the grin off their guest’s face, but she had. They walked on in silence, descending the last set of stairs leading down and into the detention and interrogation areas. Officially there were no prison cells on Mendera, or anyone held captive. In reality there were only a few, but several of the rooms had held captives, for a great number of years. Like many rulers, The Chalne had realised that sometimes the only real option with some enemies, is to lock them away, until old age renders them dead or harmless.

“Where are the fire pits, the red hot tongs ?” Asked Aelfraed.

For a fraction of a second, Hol believed her question was genuine. Then she saw the smile on Aelfraed’s face. Not a genuinely beautiful face, but pretty, for a converted chaos creature. Work had been done to fill and hide the dents in her skull, left over marks from her own conversion.

“The thumb screws and spine stretchers have been hidden away, for the duration of your visit.” Hol replied.

She was getting to like their visitor from Leng and could see why Kittara had become friends with her. Just making the journey past gateway and across the rifts, meant that Aelfraed, was due a huge amount of respect.

“Minraver had it put in the most secure room we have.” Said Hol.

“He or she, but never it.” Replied Aelfraed. “All chaos creatures are created with a defined gender.”

“Him then, he has changed faces a few times since capture, but always into another male one.”

There was no window in the room, windows were a weak spot. Even if the glass was tougher than the walls, hand gesture spells could be used through windows. Minraver was in the room with him,

the chaos invoker. All that was outside the room, were several worried looking interrogators and a bank of viewing screens. No cameras, the view screens were linked to several of Chlo's benign probes. Even so, the screens were flickering and details were difficult to see.

"This one is powerful." Said Aelfraed. "I hope he is well chained down !"

"He is, almost took my arm ! Minraver is in there to control him."

"I need to help her." Said Aelfraed. "Keep well back from the door as I enter."

There was one potential outcome, which had troubled Hol. Actually, there seemed to be quite a few potential problems, with allowing access to the captured chaos creature, by an agent from Leng. One had seriously bothered her;

"Supposing it's their creature and she simply kills it, to keep it quiet." She'd said to Sikush.

"You will see her do it and Aelfraed will suffer a dreadful and tragic accident."

That was what wars did, they caused all the rules and decency to go out of the window. Hol would of course kill Aelfraed without worrying about it, but that didn't make it right. She watched the screens, as their honoured guest, entered the room. No preliminaries to speak of, a quick hello to Minraver and Aelfraed got straight down to business, gripping the creatures head.

"I almost feel sorry for it." She muttered.

The other interrogators looked away, but Hol didn't. It wasn't that she approved of what was going on, but the invoker had killed over a hundred of her clerics. Maybe not directly, but it had caused others to carry out its will. The screens flickered, yet Hol could still see what was going on, perhaps a little too clearly. Aelfraed's fingers lengthened into long thin tendrils, which she pushed through the creature's skull and into its head. The look of horror on its face, as it must have felt the tendrils, probing its brain, its mind.

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