

Ripples from the Past

Chapter 32 – The Forty Thousand

“Time is meaningless in the dream world, where space is infinite, yet everything important to the dreamer is close enough to touch. Lovers can accomplish anything in the world of dreams, even the impossible.... Even miracles.” - Chaos-Nagoria 126:14

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Commander Casto Yerli had been commander of the Mendera City militia for several hundred years. He was respected by just about everyone and had brought order and discipline to the men and women who policed the holy city. If he was being honest with himself, most of his success had been down to attitude. Yerli wanted a quiet life, so he created few waves and never questioned the orders of those in authority. He might have reacted differently if Chlo had arrived with the rather unusual instructions; he was becoming quite fond of Chlo. After years of being wary of her, Chlo had become someone he trusted, almost a friend. Jen was in charge of planetary defences though, and the problems began when she arrived with her orders.

“I have no wish to appear awkward.” He’d told her. “The city militia began as a volunteer group of clerics, who began patrolling the streets to keep the peace. I have tried to be cooperative in the past, but I am not answerable to The Damned.”

There had been trouble in the past, a commander of the militia killed by a member of the Chalné’s elite guard. Scuffles were common and Yerli had been brought in to calm down tensions. Money helped of course, his budget meant he could hire the best.

“I do respect your position.” Jen had told him. “But a large Terak army is travelling across the rifts and they aim to attack Mendera City. You need to begin preparing for when that happens.”

It had been her tone really and talking about things he knew little about. Flying creatures appearing out of The Well of Souls, after travelling across the rifts. It was all crazy talk, the stuff of myth and legend. Partly he’d dug his heels in to show he wasn’t afraid, though deep inside he was terrified.

“The militia were brought under the control of the Chalné by an imperial edict.” He’d told Jen. “I work directly for the emperor and have a right to consult him if I need to. At this time, I desperately need to consult him.”

“Before you begin carrying out my orders ?”

“Yes, before I do anything.”

Jen had offered to arrange a meeting with the Chalné for all three of them, but he’d insisted on arranging his own private meeting. After Jen had left, he realised he had no idea about arranging an audience with the emperor. Yerli had thought about it for a while, before calling for Chlo and asking her to arrange it.

“Just go through the open doors and he’s inside, waiting to see you.”

Casto Yerli was currently dressed in his best uniform and standing outside the doors to the Chalné’s famous veranda. He was nervous and Chlo hadn’t helped by mentioning that he was first militia commander to insist on a private meeting with the emperor.

“Is he in a good mood ?” He asked.

“Just go in there and talk to him Casto.”

It looked as though the emperor was alone, though Yerli knew that two members of The Damned would be watching from somewhere discreet. The Chalné was beckoning him over towards the rear

of the veranda, where stairs led down to private garden. There was a table near the pool, which was shaded by several large trees.

"I love this garden in the morning." Said the emperor. "It's perfect before the day heats up. Please sit down.... Are you hungry?"

Yerli hadn't intended to eat or drink, yet there he was; having a leisurely breakfast with the Chalné, emperor of the great Menderan Empire. The surprises weren't over, as the emperor actually apologised to him.

"I'm sorry commander, the militia should have been more involved in the decision making for the war and the defence of the planet. War by its very nature creates chaos though and you were left out of meetings by accident, rather than by design."

He was being charmed, Yerli knew that. It was working though, the tension left his body and he found himself enjoying the breakfast and the beautiful garden.

"It's just that the orders I was given, seemed, with respect.... Illogical." Said Yerli. "Surely I should be organising an orderly evacuation of the city. We don't even seem to be warning anyone, not even the visiting pilgrims."

"Not warnings as such, this is Mendera after all. There will be announcements about the imminent invasion attempt, but I doubt if anyone will leave. A few pilgrims may well go home and some of the visiting politicians from unaligned worlds. The people of Mendera though Yerli, the clerics.... I doubt if any will leave. As I said, this is Mendera and we don't run away, it's not in our nature."

Yerli felt awkward, even though he suspected he was being played.

"I should have realised there would be official announcements." He said.

"Would you like to do most of them?" Asked the Chalné. "A face that is known and respected by the people. No talk of ordering an evacuation though, just a mention that anyone who wishes to leave will be given free transport to a place of their choosing. Do you like the idea of being the face of Mendera security?"

Of course he did, but he still had questions about the wisdom of leaving The Well of Souls as an open door and why weren't the pilgrims being sent home? Not that he could ask those questions after being offered a chance to be on every newsfeed broadcast for the next few weeks. Yerli did what he was best at, he went with the flow.

"I would be honoured to record the announcements my emperor."

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Mo had noticed that Louelle was spending more time out on the battlements, her eyes constantly scanning the rift. He'd developed the habit of joining her for a while before breakfast. They were the first to see something almost unknown on the rifts.

"Well...if anyone didn't know where we are, they will now." He said. "And it'll be obvious to everyone with eyes to see, that we're guarding something important."

"Personally, I've never been fond of technology." Said Louelle.

Why had Minraver sacrificed the pride of her fleet to the technology destroying rifts? Mo wasn't really sure, but it was probably the quickest way to transport her warrior angels to the fortress. Not her entire fleet, there had been at least twenty of her sleek black vessels hovering over Mendera City. Ten of the most advanced space craft ever built, were hanging in the dull morning sky.

"They didn't really arrive." Said Louelle. "One moment there was nothing there, the next.... There they were. I won't even pretend to know how Minraver did it."

It was silent out on the battlements, but Mo looked towards the main camp and saw that just about everyone was awake and staring into the sky. How long would those vast space craft resist the

corrosive effect of the rift ? Mo remembered the needle craft which had attacked his home. They had become nothing but useless metal debris in less than an hour.

“Here they come.” Said Louelle. “Forty thousand warrior Genova. We just might leave this mountain alive now.”

It looked like the craft were falling apart. Pieces appeared to be falling away, but they were shuttle craft, escape pods, anything that could be used to evacuate the doomed craft. Raptors began to leave the craft too and several large needle craft. The evacuation looked practised and well disciplined, yet it was something no sane person would ever consider doing. They were living in insane times though.

“Minraver kept her word.” Said Mo. “I’ll give the eternal’s this... When they do something, they do it in style.”

The cloud of approaching craft spread out, some moving around to the far side of the mountain. They had no idea what orders Minraver had given her forces, but spreading out wasn’t going to stop their craft from being sign posts, saying ‘here we are.’

“One of the raptors is in trouble.” Said Louelle.

The rift was doing what it did to all technology. Now he understood why Minraver had spread her craft out. The raptor turned over, before dropping like a stone. It hit the stony mountainside and exploded, orange flames lighting up the dull morning sky.

“If the crew were angels, they’ll have escaped.” Said Louelle. “If they weren’t.....”

It was the only one of the escaping craft he saw crashing, the rest landed about half a mile from the entrance to the fortress. The first few Genova were walking into the main camp, when the first half mile long spacecraft, fell out of the sky. It wasn’t gradual, Mo had been watching Minraver walking past the newly rebuilt guard towers.

“I felt the ground tremble.” Said Louelle.

Mo looked back towards the rift and saw just a cloud of dust and sand, being thrown up into the air. The sound was incredible after such a quiet morning. Mo actually put his hands over his ears, as the noise carried on for at least a minute. The vessel was destroyed, after burying itself in the ground. Mo had no idea how the craft had been powered, but an explosion followed it crashing into the stony soil of the 1st rift. Menderan craft tended not to explode, but Minraver’s craft came from somewhere else, perhaps a different reality.

“I suppose I should join the others.” He said.

Minraver was talking to Hol, probably not a pleasant conversation. No one looked happy, but they did have a decent sized army at last. Not just angels, there were a few Algarians walking into the fortress.

“She’ll never forgive Hol.” Said Louelle. “Never annoy an eternal, their grudges last for eternity.”

“I’ll leave them for a while.” Mo.

It was hypnotic anyway, watching the massive spacecraft fall from the sky. The next one didn’t fall really, it disintegrated, each piece hitting the ground one after the other. It created a sound like thunder, which seemed to go on forever. The dust thrown up was creating dense brown clouds, which luckily were being blown away from the fortress.

“Minraver has created another landmark on the rifts.” He said. “The broken remnants of her huge interstellar space craft.”

“Give it a few millennia and travellers will make up tales to explain the huge pieces of corroded hull and wrecked technology.” Said Louelle. “None of it true of course. We’re seeing the birth of a legend Mo.”

“As long as we win Louelle and the multiverse isn’t returned to a state of chaos.”

Seesha and Mix joined them, talking about the adults arguing yet again. Mo lifted Mix up, so that he could sit on the battlements and watch the spacecraft hit the ground. They all watched the spectacle, as one craft after another created sounds like thunder and caused the ground to tremble. “Wow, cool !” Yelled Mix, as each space craft hit the rift.

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Aukar hadn’t reached the rift gate to the 1st rift, or he might have seen the explosions caused by Minraver’s fleet. Not that he’d have cared or acted, if he had seen the spectacle. His mind was totally focused on just one thing, attacking Mendera City, the holy city. He’d lost a lot of warriors fighting the strange invisible phantoms on Medrona, before choosing the wrong portal stone. Instead of the relatively safe 1st rift, they’d entered the 3rd. It meant a lot more walking, a lot more fights with growlers. None of it had improved his temper.

“Keep the warriors together Dhūlen.” He yelled. “We can’t afford to lose more of our fighters to the sand storms.”

“I will do my best, but these storms seem to appear out of nowhere.”

It really did feel as though the weather on the 3rd rift was sentient. The dust storms gave no warning, appearing out a clear sky, obscuring vision, biting into exposed skin with some severity. Aukar wasn’t a superstitious person, but even he was beginning to think they were either cursed or something out there didn’t like their presence.

“At last, relief from the biting sand.” Said Jelran.

The storms vanished as suddenly as they started. They were still several hours from the rift gate, provided the weather didn’t throw anything else at them. There was a river with what appeared to be clean water and a useful rocky outcrop, to use as shelter from the wind.

“Test the water, always test the water.” He heard someone shout.

It really was as if the rifts hated them. His hardened troops vanished in sand storms, the water poisoned them, even the growlers fought them instead of running away. The next full headcount would be after their evening meal and Aukar knew it would be more bad news. The 1st rift would be better though.

“At least the dredgers love this climate.” Said Dhūlen. “We haven’t lost a single dredger mercenary to this dreadful place.”

“Be thankful, we’ll need every warrior.”

Jelran was strutting about, talking sedition to anyone who’d listen. Despite needing every skilled warrior, Aukar hoped that Jelran would challenge him. It seemed that Jelran had decided that place beside the river, was to be where he’d finally challenge Aukar.

“I am fed up with seeing good warriors die or simply vanish.” Shouted Jelran. “We need a new leader, one worthy of the fighters he commands.”

There was no avoiding or ignoring a remark like that, it was treason.

“Are you putting yourself forward as leader ?” Asked Aukar.

It didn’t matter what Jelran replied, they were going to fight. A contest where one of them was going to die.

“You’ve failed us too often Aukar.” Said Jelran.

That was it, no further words of threats were needed. The Terak warriors moved back, giving them space to fight. Jelran was younger and probably better with a blade, but Aukar had once been a tournament fighter in the Lowenscar Depths. He’d learned a lot of tricks in those fights. Aukar held his sword tightly in his mighty clawed hand and ran at Jelran.

“No one insults me and lives.” He yelled.

Jelran side stepped, their blades clashed and they were left about ten feet apart, glaring at each other. The river bank was perfect, in that it was equally bad for both of them. The ground was too soft and there wasn't enough oxygen in the air. Aukar smiled at his opponent.

“You picked a strange place to finally challenge me.” He said.

“We need a leader with courage for the attack on Mendera.” Shouted Jelran.

Some applause was only polite, perhaps even a few cheers. Aukar made a note of those who shouted for Jelran with a little too much enthusiasm.

Jelran moved towards him and they took a few swings at each. More luck than skill, Jelran's blade made a tiny wound on Aukar's upper arm. First blood to Jelran, his supporters began to chant his name. Aukar looked at their faces, remembering who they were. Few of them would survive to fight on Mendera.

“We need a new leader.” Someone yelled. “Aukar is finished.”

Aukar decided to play the part of a tired old leader, who'd been surviving on his past reputation. He feigned weariness and allowed Jelran to cut him another two times. They were both breathing hard in the thin air, but Aukar pretended to be constantly out of breath.

“Finish him.....A beheading..... Take his head.” Jelran's supporters yelled.

Jelran was too confident, moving around him, looking for just the right spot to land the blow. Aukar waited and as Jelran raised his sword, he stepped inside the blow and buried his blade in Jelran's chest. Not once or even twice, four times Aukar rammed his blade in deep, twisting the sword as he withdrew it. Jelran, his most able general was dead before his body hit the ground. His own supporters cheered, while Jelran's were now quiet.

“Bring his body with us.” Said Aukar. “We'll bury him with full honours after we've set up camp tonight. With luck we'll be on the 1st rift by then.”

He glared at those who'd shouted too loudly for Jelran, forcing them to drop their eyes and look at the ground.

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Everyone had the cough now, including him. Delmus was certain that Chlo could come up with something to destroy the deadly fungus, but Chlo was in a different multiverse, which didn't exist yet. Dava had blackened toes, but the contagion was spreading more slowly than it had with Trey. His small force could still defend themselves if attacked, though he realised they'd be finished in another few days. Not for the first time, he powered up the RM9, aiming it at the spinning device in the centre of the chamber.

“Have we reached that time ?” Asked Dava.

“Not yet Dava. Sometimes I just wonder if it's worth waiting.”

Dava had worked out a way to walk on her knees, while still holding a Yakkie in her one remaining hand. Seeing her move towards him made him feel proud of her courage and a little ashamed of his own feelings of hopelessness.

“They might not have evacuated the miners yet.” She said.

“I know, turning on the weapon makes me feel better.”

Part of him craved the peace of death, but whole star systems might be destroyed if he fired the RM9 too early. The empire had a plan, Luri had a plan. He trusted her, but it was so hard to remain hopeful when it had been days since her brief message. Dava put her Yakkie down, before sitting next to him.

“You need a few hours sleep Delmus.” She told him.

"We don't need to sleep."

"Crap !.....I always feel better after sleeping. Give me the RM9 and forget all about this dreadful place for a while. I'll use the weapon if it looks like we might be overrun. You have my word."

When had he last slept ? Probably onboard Grey Walker and that seemed so long ago. He gave her the heavy weapon.

"Wake me if we're attacked." He said.

"I will."

Delmus leant back against the wall and drifted off into a troubled sleep. He did dream, though most of The Damned claimed not to have any dreams at all. His were usually about the mundane details of the previous day's events. Luri often talked about the world of dreams as though it was a real place. He remembered that in his dream state, the pages of the Chaos-Nagoria which she often quoted.

'Time is meaningless in the dream world, where space is infinite, yet everything important to the dreamer is close enough to touch. Lovers can accomplish anything in the world of dreams, even the impossible.... Even miracles.'

It had always seemed a bit romantic for a section of the great holy book of chaos. It gave him hope though, something he badly needed. His dreams took him to a beach with perfect silver sand, then a mountain range on Felos 11. His dream self even watched the coronation of Xanash the 34th, last of the Demon Emperors. Had he been there ? Was the dream a real memory ? As with so much in dreams, the images joined and became confused, with Xanash being crowned on that perfect beach. "Maybe everything in dreams is just mental confusion." He muttered.

He'd been waking and only slept again after feeling Dava holding his hand. His second descent into the world of dreams was far darker and felt more real. He saw the faces of many who'd died by his hand in battle. He dreamt of worlds he'd known, but which were now lifeless rocks, some by natural means and others by war. It felt as though he was being offered a chance to feel regret, but in truth he felt none at all. He'd once been a high level demon, before being converted into one of The Damned. Neither of those existences were well known for emotions like regret or sympathy.

"I am waiting Delmus.... Come to me."

More of a command than a request. Her voice was distorted, but he knew it was Luri demanding his presence. The dreamscape felt even more real, as he found himself stepping out of a Lummel vessel and into her world. It was the small part of Mendera City, her creation as a place for them to meet. There she was waiting for him, as she'd done so often before.

"I have missed you so much." Said Luri.

They kissed, a long unhurried kiss. Was it real ? He could smell the familiar scent of her skin, her hair. He wanted to kiss her again, but she held him back.

"I have something to give you and we may not have long." She told him. "Dreams can change at a whim, you may vanish before I've told you everything."

"Is this real ? Are you really here ?" He asked.

"Everything is real here Delmus, anything is possible."

She took him to the room where they'd eaten breakfast together so many times, yet those memories now felt like dreams.

"I will be there in time Delmus, don't give up hope."

"Everyone is dying.... I'm dying. It's that dreadful fungus."

"I know and I can't cure it. My powers are very small in that world, but I can give you this. Hold it carefully my love, it will stop the infection from getting any worse. I'm sorry, but that is the best I can do."

"Thank you."

He had a small black orb in his hand, a sphere that he could just close his fist around.

"Hold it so very carefully Delmus. I wish I could do more... Break it in that world and none of you will die.... I promise. I love you....."

Damn dreams, he was on a cliff, looking down onto the vast recycling site on Erasmus Seven. It was one of his recurring dreams, probably caused by his love of old tech.

"Are you alright Delmus."

He awoke to find Dava looking worried.

"Yes, I dreamt about Luri. It was so real."

"Good, you were making strange sounds in your sleep."

There was something he had to remember, but the memory of the dream was quickly vanishing. It was important and had something to do with why his fist was closed. He opened his fist and held his hand out flat.

"Wow, what is that ?" Asked Dava.

He no longer held a black sphere. It was different, almost transparent. Whatever was in his hand was bending light like a prism, making his fingers look smaller, further away.

"It's a gift from Luri."

He crushed whatever lay in his fingers, releasing a cloud of darkness, which filled the chamber for a few seconds. As the cloud dispersed, he realised he felt better than he had for days.

"We're not cured." He said. "But no one else will die. Luri will be here in time, I'm certain of it."

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"Will you stop drifting off and focus on the enemy." Said Sventa.

"I am aware of everything happening and besides, you looked to be enjoying yourself."

Sventa had expected travelling with two living deities to be different, far more use of their Godly powers. Luri kept day dreaming and muttering about Delmus, while Estrid made excuses about it not being their multiverse. Sventa was beginning to think it might have been better to have arrived with a full squad her of her dark angels. She was enjoying herself though, trying to reach their enemies before the flying vargouilles.

"The stairs seem endless." Said Sventa. "Is there no way to reach the bottom any quicker ?"

It was another thing which irked her. Surely dropping a few thousand feet without anyone dying should have been an easy trick for two deities.

"You're assuming the device we seek is at the bottom." Said Estrid.

"Isn't it down there ?" Asked Sventa. "Do you know where it is ?"

"At the lowest level seems logical, but we don't know." Said Luri. "There is a doorway on the next wide landing. I suggest we use it to explore that part of the complex. Our enemies set a trap for Delmus and it's likely they'll have a few tricks waiting for us."

It was another thing which irked her. Why didn't they tell her what they knew, without it feeling like pulling teeth. Estrid even had a special dead eye look, when Sventa suggested keeping her informed a little more.

"Did you manage to contact him ?" Asked Estrid.

"Only briefly and I've helped him as much as I am able."

"Is he alright?" Asked Sventa. "The last time you contacted him, you mentioned them being trapped somewhere."

Was that a tear in the eye of a dark deity?

"They are suffering horribly from a terrible contagion Sventa." Said Luri. "I cannot cure it from here, but I have done what I can to relieve their pain. I do not wish to talk about the details."

"I understand."

The vargouilles made short work of the enemy trying to ambush them on the next wide landing. Sventa felt almost insulted that they'd left so few mercenaries for her to kill. Luri sent her vargouilles down the stairs, to continue their chastisement of the enemy warriors.

"They're not really designed for corridors and low ceilings." Said Luri. "They'll get to the bottom though and trigger whatever tricks were intended for us."

"My creatures born of mud have been damaged, one was even destroyed." Said Estrid. "I'll renew them and add to their number."

"Not too many, leave some of the enemy for me." Said Sventa.

"Let my creations deal with the enemy Sventa, especially the small silver creatures. From what Luri has told me, you should avoid any contact with them."

"Are they really that dangerous?"

Luri merely nodded at her, which was enough to make her grateful for the two dozen warriors Estrid was creating. The deity destroyed all her creatures of mud, before creating a large force of new ones. Still no eyes or ears could be discerned, though Estrid had now given each of them a heavy club to wield.

"Keep back with us Sventa, let them cut a path through the enemy." Said Luri. "The Lummel too, keep behind us as much as you can."

"We should leave them here." Said Luri.

The Lummel obviously understood and argued with Luri in their strange high pitched language. By the look of Luri's face, it seemed the Lummel were coming with them. It was a bit of an anti-climax, when the door leading from the landing was found to be locked.

"My creatures will open it." Said Estrid.

One of them did, with a single blow from its heavy club. The corridor led straight on for some distance, with no sign of the enemy.

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Celli really was worried about her shop, though it had become a bit of a joke with the others. She trusted the militia and Mendera City was a safe place to do business. She was confident that her home would remain secure while she was away, but the regular customers would begin to find other suppliers of creams, lotions and unguents. Now though, her shop felt like a vaguely remembered dream. Mo had come to see her, in her role as rebuilders of the ruined fortress.

"I know the rifts well." He told her. "There are scavengers out there, carrion eaters working in packs. They'll be drawn to the wrecked spacecraft. After eating any food they find, they'll turn their attention to the fortress."

Celli looked out of the main gate and was pleased with what had been accomplished in such a short time. There were now two deep ditches, fronted by steep embankments. They'd even built a few earthworks to restrict the track in places, forcing the enemy to approach in small numbers.

"I'm told the Algarians and the Genova will be helping with the rebuilding." She said. "There should be enough strong backs, so what are you suggesting we build?"

“Clear the thorn scrub from lower down the mountain and use it to build a fence. It won’t keep everything out, but it’ll deter the large scavengers. Put the fence behind the deepest ditch.” It was a massive job, but Hol had asked Celli to try and keep the Algerian soldiers busy. Two hundred of them had been on Minraver’s vessels, to be transported to an outlying system. Now they were coughing and wheezing in the air of the 1st rift and feeling decidedly miserable.

“I’ll get that done.” Said Celli. “Officially I need to get approval from Louelle, but she tends to leave me to get on with things. It’ll keep the Algerians busy.”

“Oh those poor Algerians.” Said Mo. “Imagine suddenly being dumped in this crap hole, with no way of getting home.”

“Like us you mean ?!”

Mo was laughing, but they both knew it was true. They might have volunteered for the trip to the rifts, but they were just as trapped there as the Algerian soldiers.

“Do you know anything about tonight’s big meeting ?” Asked Mo.

“No, nothing at all. Juno told me I was invited, but didn’t say what it was about. I hope someone mentions the food situation, it could get really serious, really quickly. I saw one of the Algerians looking at Pug, with a hungry look in his eye.”

“I think Rhian would kill anyone who touched her pet.” Said Mo.

“Probably, though something has to be done about the food situation Mo.”

“Oh yes, something needs to be done.”

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Seesha hadn’t expected to be at the meeting. Kittara had invited them though, saying that she and her brother had an important part to play after the war. There had been a promise to tell them more details over the coming days. It was all very mysterious and exciting, though Mix was feeling tired and grumpy. The meeting was being held at a time when they’d both normally be asleep.

“Grown up talk is boring.” He muttered at her.

“Shush, be good.”

There was a lot of moaning going on, mainly about the lack of food rations. Mo made a joke about rock cropper stew, which no one laughed at. Tad Dunne didn’t want to be there at all, though he was no longer accusing Minraver of abducting him and his fellow Algerians. Seesha had heard Juno muttering about Tad being of quite a low rank. The meeting wasn’t as exciting as she’d hoped and Rhian looked to have fallen asleep.

“Please be quiet now.” Shouted Hol. “We have enough warriors to defend the fortress now, so we need to appoint leaders and organise our defences. We can no longer just let our warriors wander around, hoping they’ll be in the right place when the enemy arrives.”

There was more moaning at Hol, even Minraver saying the Algerians should have been left under her command. There was even some muttering about choosing a new leader. Seesha just hoped the adults weren’t going to argue all night.

“Does anyone here want to be the leader ?” Asked Hol. “We can let the meeting decide, or settle it in combat. Either respect my orders, or pick another fool to do the job.”

“I always prefer the fool I know.” Said Mo. “You’re our leader Hol.”

There were a lot of supportive comments, though Kittara stopped any further arguments by saying she’d only accept orders from Hol. Seesha felt as though she’d been sat there for hours, listening to nothing but angry adults shouting at each other. It reminded her a little of decision making in The Temple of the Flame. Hol grabbed everyone’s attention by using the tip of her sword to scrape lines on the ground.

"This is our fortress, our temporary home." She said. "Basically a huge rectangle with a ragged edge along one side, where part of the battlements have collapsed."

It wasn't a bad drawing, once Seesha understood what it was supposed to be. Hol marked the main gates, the guard house near the well, even Pug's fenced off pen. It was vast of course, the entire fortress covered several square miles.

"Here." Said Hol, stabbing the rear of the fortress with her sword. "Here there is a sheer drop of several thousand feet, straight down into a dried up river bed. Nothing is likely to attack from the rear of the fortress, but we still need a few tribespeople keeping watch."

Next Hol ran her sword along the other sides of the hastily drawn map.

"Both sides are defended by cliffs, rocky terrain and deep ravines." Said Hol. "Whoever chose the site for this fortress knew what they were doing. We'll need a few guards to keep watch, but we're fairly inaccessible from the sides. As those of us who've hunted for rock croppers know all too well." There wasn't laughter, but a few people were smiling. The mood of the meeting was changing. Even Mix woke up and took an interest in what was going on.

"There will be portals opened, flying creatures, monsters we can't even imagine." Said Hol. "The main attack will be by an enemy on foot though, these things always are. The bulk of our forces need to be concentrated on the front wall and the new earthworks."

There was a lot more scratching on the ground and a few more arguments. Everyone agreed though, the main battle was going to be where the trackway led into the fortress.

"Battles, not battle. Louelle spoke of several waves of attackers." Kerr reminded them, often.

It had to be the early hours of the following morning, before Hol gave out her orders on who were to be her battle commanders. It was probably deliberate, as everyone seemed too tired to moan or argue.

"I have decided who will command our troops during the battles to come." Said Hol. "These are orders to be obeyed, not subjects for discussion. Silky will lead the creatures of the darkness, the wraiths and shadows in the underground rooms."

Silky actually looked delighted, though Seesha didn't see the appeal of fighting in complete darkness.

"Louelle will let Celli take full control of the rebuilding. That will allow Louelle to take tactical control of our tribal warriors. They have no shaman now and look upon her as their spiritual leader."

Again there were lots of delighted faces. Even Celli looked happy at being given the task of a lot of heavy rebuilding work.

"I'm tired Seesha."

"Quiet Mix, no one has mentioned us yet."

She'd spoken quietly, yet Kittara had heard. It seemed that everyone had heard her and was looking at her and her brother.

"What is to become of the children?" Asked Juno.

"Kittara and Mingal will protect them, it has already been decided on and arranged." Said Hol.

"The young ones can't stay here." Said Rhian.

"I have made my decision." Said Hol. "I'm sure everyone is tired, so we need to move on. Minraver will of course command her warrior angels, who will protect here, here and here."

More scratching on the map and Seesha still had no idea why Kittara was going to look after them.

"I don't like Mingal." Whispered Mix.

"Shush, be good."

“Lastly Commander Dunne will command the Algarian warriors, who will help in defending the front gates. I’m sure they’ll do well, even though I hear they’re annoyed that their blasters don’t work on the rifts.”

“Nothing works on the damn rifts.” Added Celli.

There was laughter, even though everyone badly needed a few hours of sleep. Hol had obviously chosen her moment well.

“Any more questions ?” She asked.

“There is the imminent danger of starvation.” Said Albas. “We currently have two days of food left for those that require it and that is at half rations.”

There was an audible sigh, as it looks like another hour of arguments and accusations. Hol looked straight at Kittara.

“Do you know of any food supplies we could.... Borrow ? Ration packs would do.”

“I’ll take two of the revenants with me in the morning. I know a few places we can raid.”

Hol was holding up her hands, while Minraver was looking quite upset.

“We need the food, so please get it.” Said Hol. “Just don’t tell me the details.”

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