

Mendera Temple

Chapter 11 – Tonokae

“As he walked tens of thousands of creatures the colour of mud rose from the ground to follow him. Others appeared out of the air around him and yet others broke through from other realities.”

“How old is your blade ?” Asked Aukar.

Luri was cleaning the dark mess off her Nurigen blade, the mess the undead left when she used the blade to scramble the inside of their skulls. She pulled the robes from one of the undead and started to lovingly polish the weapon.

“I was given this for rescuing Nurigen and Alyz from the rifts, before the last switch,” she said, “it’s so old that the multiverse no longer knows how to deal with it. This blade will never age, never be broken and it can cut through just about anything.”

Luri gave the blade a few spins in her hand. One handed she’d cut the head off thousands of the undead and two handed she’d used it to cut through stone walls. Nurigen had offered her one of the new lighter curved blades, but Luri loved her old blade better than many loved their children.

“May I hold it ?” Asked Aukar.

She passed the blade to him and watched as he made several expert lunges and parries with her sword. As he moved around she could see why Kittara had once had a long affair with the last of the Terak. The eyes told you nothing and were a bit off putting, but his body was lithe and attractive, even the wings added a certain something. Aukar handed the Nurigen back to her.

“Perfect balance and much lighter than I thought.”

“I’ve been using it so long, it’s become like part of my arm.”

She continued to polish the blade until it shone. The strange letters on the blade, that few could read, meant ‘Beyond Technology’ and Nurigen used the phrase on most of his work. She found a fallen stone to sit on while she waited and started checking her kit.

“Shouldn’t be long now.”

The passing soldier gave her the comment and was gone, he was the same Annill warrior who had proved so proficient with Ion grenades. The bulk of the army had returned to the surface, they were just getting in each other’s way in the narrow passages of the necropolis. They’d gone down through the various underground floors of the ancient building with just a few hundred troops, a strange mixture of The Damned and Annill warriors, with Aukar always first into the fight. There had been losses, even among The Damned, the undead seemed very good at setting traps, but the bulk of the army had survived and were now certain to be victorious.

“You’re certain Faarlh is on the next floor down ?” Asked Aukar.

Her previous journey to the lowest depths of the necropolis did have a dreamlike feel to it, but Luri was certain that the next floor down was the bottom of the ancient structure and it was where her brother held court.

“Yes, he’ll be there.”

She walked over to the stairs down and watched the troops carefully removing the pile of rubble the undead had used to block it. Delaying tactics by her brother, but very effective. On one floor they’d used explosive devices to clear the rubble and twenty good warriors had died when part of the floor above had come down on their heads. The entire structure seemed to be on the verge of complete

collapse and Luri was being patient while the troops moved the rubble a stone at a time. As they could finally see the floor below Luri waited for the inevitable attack from the undead, but for some reason it never came.

“Turn left at the bottom of the stairs and he’s about fifty yards from the stairs.” She said.

Luri allowed the main force to get ahead of her, keeping to the rear and still uncertain about the job she knew was hers to do. Water was dripping from the ceiling, green dirty water. It seemed to be dripping everywhere, corroding the stones, encouraging the ancient structure to collapse in on itself. It was as if the rebuilding by the undead had come to nothing, some of the stone walls crumbled at her touch. There was an attack by a rear guard of the undead, but nowhere near as ferocious as Luri had expected. Perhaps she had made a mistake about where her brother was? No she recognised the door to the large room where she’d seen him last.

As they approached the large chapel like room one of the undead leapt on the warrior in front of her. One of the best of the Annill soldiers, Luri gave an involuntary gasp as the creature simply pulled his head off his shoulders. Blue blood with streaks of crimson Luri notices as it started to cover the ground in a puddle around the dead warrior. Most of The Damned put their hand up and aimed their palm as they threw spells at the undead, perhaps that helped them focus? Luri merely felt for the disruption spell in her mind, looked at the undead and watched as its head exploded, its body vibrating for a few seconds before it fell to the ground.

“We have your brother.” She heard someone shout.

As if in a dream Luri drew her Nurigen blade and entered the room. The first thing she noticed was the number of bodies, the Annill troops must have encountered more resistance than she’d thought. Many of the troops were wounded, but they were all looking at her and her brother. Faarlh was against the furthest wall, surrounded by the remains of dozens of the undead. He was holding a demon blade two handed and Luri wondered where he’d obtained the blade. Help from beyond gateway? Luri thought that betrayal by Neosto would have been more subtle, Faarlh had probably taken the blade from a dead demon out on the rifts. Aukar was waiting for her, looking at her, as were all the rest. Killing her brother was more than her duty, it was an essential rite of passage, a cleansing of any association of guilt she might share simply because he was her brother.

“It didn’t need to have come to this.” She said.

Faarlh ignored her, he held the demon blade firmly and looked straight at the last of the Terak.

“I heard the Terak were famed for their valour,” he said, “yet you hide behind my sister. Unless you are a coward, come and face me.”

There was nothing Luri could do, Aukar was simply unable to ignore the insult. Not only his pride, but his genetic makeup simply didn’t allow him to walk away from such a gross insult. She watched as the last of the Terak drew the razor sharp blade Nurigen had made from him and approached her brother.

“Surrender and I’ll make it quick.” Said Aukar.

Faarlh looked so small, still the small boy she’d last seen in the catacombs below the City of the Lost God, but then she blinked her eyes and realised he was now a powerful warrior. He may not have had the muscles of Aukar, but he moved quickly and handled his weapon with skill. He successfully blocked a direct lunge from Aukar and came back at him for more. Aukar pretended to slip, to draw Faarlh towards him, but he didn’t fall for the trap and nearly gave the last of the Terak a good scar to teach him a lesson.

“Finish him.”

The call went up as the two warriors circled each other, both being cautious in the restricted space the room offered. Several of The Damned had sent light globes to the ceiling, yet the very fabric of the necropolis seemed to be devouring the light. Faarlh looked to be tiring, but he still taunted Aukar.

"I'm told you're destined for great things in the great war to come," he said, "so what happens when I kill you here, today?"

Aukar was slowly pushing her brother into a corner and as Faarlh looked down to avoid falling over a chair, Aukar had him. Faarlh screamed as the Nurigen blade went into his chest and Luri gave a cry as her brother was killed. Not satisfied with one blow, Aukar brought his blade back and plunged it once again into Faarlh, this time the Nurigen went right through and came out of Faarlh's back.

"Leave me a body to bury." Pleaded Luri.

Aukar stood back and turned towards Luri, a look of pity on his face.

"I'm sorry I....."

He got no further. Faarlh's blade hit him at the side of the neck and he brought his demon blade down through Aukar's body, bringing it out just above his waist. Luri watched as Aukar's eyes died and the two parts of his body hit the ground. The soldiers gasped and moved forward to attack Faarlh.

"No ! He's mine." Said Luri.

She had no idea how her brother had survived such terrible wounds, but she doubted if he'd survive being cut into pieces.

"So sister, this is how you repay me for following you into the catacombs."

She ignored him and went for him with all her strength. There was still blood coming from his chest, but her brother seemed to be as fast and strong as ever. There were no further taunts, no words from her at all. She had a job to do. If a chair got in her way she destroyed it, if Faarlh gave her the chance she sent a fireball spell his way. None of it killed him, but he was slowing down and eventually Luri knocked the demon blade away and thrust her Nurigen deep into his body.

"Luri, please, no."

She ignored his pleas, he had to die. She twisted her blade, then pulled it up his body and out, large coils of his entrails fell to the floor. Again she thrust her blade in and brought it out covered in glistening viscera. Nothing could survive such an attack, yet her bother still stood on his feet.

"Farewell sister." He said.

She watched in disbelief as the skin on his open abdomen closed up and then he stepped back and vanished, gone in a shimmer of light, leaving his guts steaming on the filthy floor. There were gasps from all the soldiers, but then they heard the muttering and found a high level sorcerer behind a pillar. Luri rushed over to stop them, but by the time she got there the sorcerer had been cut into at least six bloody pieces.

"You fools," shouted Luri, "now we'll never find out where he sent my brother."

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Tomma-Goran waded the river alone, like most of the deities he preferred his own company. Even in the golden years of his city, he had merely created it and moved on. He'd perpetuated the myth that he'd return to Mariba and a second golden age would follow. Now no one knew the destroyed city by its real name, he hadn't heard a mortal tongue use the name in.... even he couldn't easily grasp the length of time. Now everyone simply called Mariba the City of the Lost God. He wasn't lost of course, he'd just left the various humans, demons and hybrids who'd used the city to go about their business.

"I'm pleased you came." He said.

When their reality had been destroyed the Genova had become pathetic creatures, drifting in and out of other realities, like dreams given momentary substance. Sikush had some affection for the creatures, he even found them useful. But Tomma found their ability to go anywhere annoying; they always seemed to be buzzing around him, often like an insect swarm. Juliette was different though, somewhere she'd gained immortality of a sort and she'd become a warrior.

"You asked and I am pleased to offer my service." Said Juliette.

He walked over the rubble where the slums had been and Juliette followed him, drifting in and out of several realities as she went. To most Juliette appeared to move erratically, vanishing from one point and reappearing a few feet to the right or left. To Tomma though her movements were a graceful glide through reality and time, almost like a ballerina moving to the rhythm of the multiverse. Juliette was wise; perhaps the wisest essence in the multiverse and Tomma greatly valued her advice.

"I want to rebuild the city, but here doesn't feel right. Too many bad souls have dwelt here, too many dark events have occurred." He said.

He looked up to the mountain and a few walls of the dome still survived and here and there was a recognisable piece of stone, but Kittara had finished his city, completed the work of billions of years of wear and tear. The catacombs were still there, at least in part, but they were now empty, just the darkness remained. Pity really, it was a great place for a city. The river was wide and had once provided clean drinking water, there was decent farmland to the north, but he needed a new site for the new city.

"If you want to stay near the rift gate, the other side of the river is ideal. There are clean streams off the mountains and nothing of the dark has ever been built there."

He followed Juliette over the river and onto the narrow plain between it and the mountains. There wasn't a huge amount of space, but there was room for a city, his city. Tomma remembered there had been a temple built to honour him in a nearby valley, perhaps he'd have it rebuilt.

"So they're coming here," asked Juliette, "the inhabitants of the doomed planet Sikush seems so fond of?"

He looked at the fertile lands stretching out to the edge of the rift, tens of thousands of miles away and decided that not only would it be nice to have humans on the rift again, but also it was a definite improvement over their current sulphur smelling over crowded slums.

"Yes Juliette, the majority of the population of Ixir will be coming to the 1st rift."

Juliette seemed less than enthusiastic and kicked over a pile of loose rocks.

"It's barren Tomma and the light is appalling, their crops may like the high ultra violet, but their eyes won't."

It was all minor adjustments to Tomma, the light would be right for their eyes by the time they arrived and the river water cleaned up a bit. He was going to leave the Nesh bugs and the other biters and stingers, no new home should ever make a people soft. Juliette vanished from the rifts, but he saw her moved through several realities, before appearing again nearer to him.

"The demons will hate them and so will others. They will have to survive a constant state of war."

"You should see their current world Juliette. I think they'll thrive here and they number into the billions. Many will die but most will live. As to the demons, there is room enough for all here; they will have to learn to live beyond the mountains."

Juliette picked up a handful of soil and rubbed it between her fingers.

"They may like it here, if their own world is as bad as you say. Will they be given a choice?"

“No, their own world will soon be destroyed. But Sikush views their move here as a gift to them, something they should appreciate.”

“Why?”

Tomma looked at Juliette and wondered why she refused to admit she understood the value of being on the 1st rift. Her own race was happy enough to cling to its edges when the multiverse had one of its periodic purges.

“You know full well,” he said, “the switch never takes the 1st rift, or at least hasn’t for almost an eternity. The people of Ixir will evolve and the creatures they become by the next switch may not look anything like they do now, but they will survive.”

Juliette was smiling at him.

“So you’re going to give them a great city?”

“Well it is almost a tradition. I will summon the delvers, the diggers, the hewers of rock and stone. Time to summon the dredgers and remind them how they came by that name. The 1st rift will be transformed and a new great city built upon it.”

“Will you give them domes, towers and minarets this time?”

Tomma-Goran began to summon the creatures of the rifts and the ground around him started to almost bubble as the soil rose and moved. He raised his arms and began a long melodic chant and other beings were brought into existence. Huge powerful creatures, with strong backs and muscular arms.

“Yes Juliette, I think I will. I rather like towers and minarets.”

Tomma started walking towards the foot of the mountains, the place he intended to build his new city. As he walked tens of thousands of creatures the colour of mud rose from the ground to follow him. Others appeared out of the air around him and yet others broke through from other realities. They were all there to build the new city, but this time there would be no talk of a lost god. Juliette followed behind, eager to see how the city would turn out.

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Abijah clung to him as the Genova pulled them both through the grey between realities. To him the constantly changing view of different worlds and times was confusing, to Abijah it must have been terrifying. She pushed her face against his chest and closed her eyes, while he kept an eye on the bright orange glare the Genova were chasing through time. One moment very close, the next a very long way off, the orange light seemed to be running from them, but he knew it was just the uncertainty of events that made it seem that way. There could be no talking in the grey, but he put his hand on her head and held her close. As he kissed her cheek they broke through into solid reality and found themselves on a hillside in near darkness. The Genova had gone, their part in the plan had been completed.

“Where are we?” Asked Abijah.

There was no Chlo in his head, but he knew it wasn’t Qasit. Sikush guessed they were still on the rifts, but he had no idea which rift they were on. The orange glow was still there, approaching slowly through the air, clear to see but for some reason impossible to focus on.

“We’re on the rifts,” he said, “but I at the moment I have no idea where.”

Abijah had one of the oldest Nurigen blades and it was her most prized possession. Sikush watched as she drew the blade and took a few practice swings. They both knew why she was there, it was her destiny, it was why ‘they’ had given her back to him. Sikush recognised the amount of ultra violet in the air, the slightly different feel of this rift from the other six.

“We’re not far from Tandalla,” he said, “I know these hills; we’re on the 5th rift.”

He'd expected they'd be at an old temple site, or maybe a dark shrine, but the hill was just like many others. There was a scrubby green plant that covered where the gravel and rocks would allow, but in the near darkness everything looked grey.

"He's here." He said.

The orange glow stopped and Faarlh appeared with a slight rushing sound and a small flash of bright white light. The would be King of The Many looked in a bad way. He knelt on the ground and started to cough up blood, dark grey blood. He had a ragged wound in his abdomen that didn't look like it would heal quickly, if at all and he had two deep wounds in his chest.

"Defend yourself," said Sikush, "this needs to be done."

He'd already warned Abijah not to underestimate Luri's brother and as Abijah approached him Faarlh seemed to regain some strength. Holding his demon blade in two hands, he stood his ground. "You'll find I don't die easily." He said.

Sikush stepped back and simply watched. He'd already broken many of his own rules and put the balance in jeopardy. But 'they' had sent Faarlh, given him an army, perhaps they'd even given Nigon the power to trap the undead. The time for playing by the rules wasn't over, but he'd decided to ignore quite a few. He noticed Abijah seemed reluctant to use all her skills against a wounded opponent.

"We're not here for an honourable fight Abijah, he needs to be destroyed."

The warrior picked up her pace, but Faarlh was a skilled fighter and he had more space than in the catacombs. Try as she might, Abijah found it impossible to strike him with her blade. Round and round they went, both of them using all their skill and strength, but so evenly matched that none could strike the other. Abijah was fresher though and as she kept landing massive blows on his blade the leader of the undead began to stagger. By pure luck he staggered and his heel found a stone that moved as he stood on it. Faarlh toppled over and landed on his knees, his left hand reaching for the ground. Abijah didn't hesitate; she lifted her Nurigen and brought it down on the top of his head.

"Now you die !" She shouted.

The blade cleaved his skull, splitting his left eye and sending a shower of grey blood out in all directions. Down it went, through his neck, Abijah only pulling it free when it reached his chest. Faarlh's body fell forward onto its chest, while Abijah turned towards Sikush.

"Shall I burn the body, or is it needed for burial."

With unnatural speed Faarlh was on his feet, or at least his body was. His left eye was still split and dangling on his cheek, but the ghastly wound in his head was quickly closing up. He lifted the demon blade and brought it down hard on Abijah's neck, in the same place as he'd struck Aukar. This time though the multiverse didn't know what to do with Abijah, she didn't really exist in any reality that made sense. The demon blade hit, but it came to a complete halt and the blade was jarred from Faarlh's hands. There seemed to be almost an electric shock delivered and the leader of the undead was down on his knees again, swaying back and forth and whimpering. Abijah spun around, but Sikush held her by the hand and pulled her away. At the same moment Sventa appeared as if from nowhere, pulling Kittara behind her. Kittara immediately loosened the swords on her back, bringing out the god killer, while Sventa pointed her finger at Faarlh and her entire body started to glow.

"No ! This is for Abijah, it is her destiny." He said.

He approached Kittara and put out his hand.

"This fight isn't for you, but Abijah has need of your sword."

He took the heavy ancient blade and with some reverence he handed it to Abijah.

"I just wish there was another way." He said.

There was a sound like old dry leaves being blown by the wind and Faarlh was trying to get to his feet. Abijah took the sword from Sikush and in one movement plunged it deep into Faarlh's body. At first there seemed to be no effect, but then there was the sound of rushing wind and then a blinding white light, followed by the concussion of an explosion. Sikush held his feet, but both Sventa and Kittara were knocked over by the blast.

"They've gone." Said Kittara.

As Kittara got to her feet Sikush looked where Abijah had been and there was just a dark burn mark on the ground, of Faarlh there was nothing, he'd simply ceased to exist. The sword too was gone, vanished or blown apart, perhaps taken back by the power that had given it. There were just the three of them now, none of them knowing whether to celebrate or grieve for Abijah.

"Is it over?" Asked Sventa.

"Yes it's over," said Sikush, "Faarlh is destroyed and Abijah has gone after completing the task she was returned to do. As for the sword, it may turn up one day, but for now it too is lost to us."

Kittara approached him and there were tears in her eyes. He held her while Sventa scanned the horizon, searching for the quickest route home.

"Did we win?" Kittara asked him.

"I don't think we did. Aukar gone, Abijah gone and the sword. They have lost Faarlh and his undead, but I think they won the day."

He held her while Sventa seemed to sniff the air, finally turning towards him.

"I can take us to Mendera City, right into the palace." She said.

"No," he said, "we need to get back to Annill, to make sure the army get safely back into the city. Then I have a doorway to close."

As Sventa did her strange sniffing, sensing which way through the grey to take them, Sikush gave Kittara a gentle kiss.

"The only good thing," he said, "is that no one told poor Babak that Abijah had returned."

The multiverse changed slightly, the balance moving an infinitesimal amount against Sikush and Mendera. True the multiverse had given him Abijah, but in its strange turnings and endless conspiring it had also sent Faarlh against him. Very few felt the change, but Chlo did, she felt, or rather heard it, like a loud clang as the multiverse changed. Mo never felt a thing, he just noticed Chlo having a serious moment and put it down to their two very noisy children.

"Did we have to bring construct children?" Asked Mo.

Chlo had created the two children, a girl aged four and a boy of three and it seemed their main instruction was to make endless noise and get under his feet.

"They add authenticity and the noisier they get, the more the officials will avoid us."

Mo hadn't needed much conversion to look like an Ixir local. Some fairly cheap but hard wearing clothing, or was that hard to wear? Mo was constantly itching from the rough fibres. Ixir had a link to the empires facial recognition database, and he had a face that people tended to remember. Chlo had given him a reality blur effect. Mo had no idea what that meant but he now saw an Ixir hill billy in the mirror. Even his accent had started to broaden and he was sounding more and more farm folk by the minute. Chlo had it easy, she just created a local Ixir woman look for herself.

"Are you sure you want to go ahead with this?" Asked Chlo.

They were in the trees behind the shuttle park for the Tonokae Fusion plant and the visitors centre had been open for about an hour. Mo had wanted to come. It wasn't a reconnaissance mission, Mo had been honest about that. It wasn't to gain intelligence or the lay of the land either. Back in Xeod's

they could look at Chlo's benign probes and see behind every locked door in the fusion plant, hear every whispered secret.

"If we're blowing five thousand people to hell, I want to see them." Mo had said.

Chlo did feel for the population of Tonokae, all four thousand, four hundred and sixty two of them. There had only been seventeen hundred, but new jobs had come with the plant and after reaching nearly six thousand the town had settled at about four and a half thousand people. Chlo knew that Mo realised a few had to die so that billions would live, but she simply couldn't understand why Mo was becoming so emotional. Sikush wanted to achieve a goal and destroying the plant and with it the town would help achieve that goal. It was all she needed to know, everything else was secondary. That was what made her such a perfect weapon.

"Yes, let's go." Said Mo.

Children under foot they walked through the parked shuttles and made for the sign that said visitors centre. Although outwardly inviting there were plenty of signs saying that the local militia would be called if visitors became unruly.

"Looks like they've had problems." Said Mo.

A large twenty foot sign next to the visitors centre proclaimed; Tonokae plant for clean and cheap fusion power. Across the bottom someone had used red spray paint to add 'All radiation kills,' the addition looked recent.

"They were given the official line about clean fusion power," said Chlo, "but no one told them even that creates tons of low grade waste. Machinery, old piping, irradiated tools. It's all been buried near here and there has been water contamination."

The sign on the door said the visitors centre was open, so Mo pushed open the door and held it for his wife and children to enter. One of the children banged a knee on the door frame and started to howl. Chlo pretended to soothe the child, while noticing that the woman behind the reception desk was trying to avoid looking in their direction.

"Has the contamination caused deaths?" Asked Mo.

"Long term yes, child birth defects are fifteen percent above the average."

The woman on the desk was informing them that the pre-tour introduction was about to take place and the next tour was in thirty minutes. They pulled and tugged the children into a large room that was half full of people, people who gave the impression of being restless. There was a stage area with several worried looking people on it, all of them wearing 'Tonokae Fusion' badges. There was a lot of security between the visitors and the stage and Chlo spotted at least six plain clothed security in the room, all carrying blasters.

"Looks like a bar fight crowd." Muttered Mo.

"We'd better keep to the back of the room." Replied Chlo.

They sat down at the rear of the room, they even managed to get their kids to sit still, but the other people in the room didn't seem to want to sit down. A woman on the Stage started to pin a few charts to a white board, but she looked scared.

"Sit down everybody, or I'll clear the room."

The security guard was in a smart uniform and to show he meant business he started to wave an electric prod around. The crowd, who all looked like local farmers, reluctantly found chairs and sat down. The woman on the stage moved to the microphones and began reading from a script on the lectern.

"Can I remind you," she began, "that this is the pre-tour information. If you wish to discuss any other matters, we do have an enquiries department."

There was muttering at the front of the room and one man shouted.

“I’ve tried, they ignore all our questions !”

The guard with the prod waved it in his general direction and the man was escorted from the room.

When everyone had settled down the woman looked at her script again. Chlo noticed the woman fixed her eyes on her and the kids, the only people in the room who didn’t seem hostile.

“Welcome to Tonokae Fusion, the home of safe power, the home of fusion power.....”

She never got any further than that. One man started shouting that ‘radiation is radiation, it all kills,’ while a woman simply shouted ‘liars,’ over and over again.

“Why are our children dying ?” Shouted one very large man.

That was enough for the security team, they moved in and the large farmer was given a jolt from the prod. The crowd rose en-masse and one of the security team received a punch to the head and went down. The security team were obviously used to clearing a rowdy crowd and they went in with prods and sticks. Fairly quickly the room was cleared, leaving just Chlo, Mo and the kids, looking like startled tourists, which by then wasn’t an act.

“I’m sorry, but the tour is cancelled, you’ll have to leave.”

The guard was polite and smiled at her, he even smiled at the children. Mo he obviously wasn’t so sure about and gave him a stern look, but there was no waving of electric prods.

“Will the tour be held later today ?” She asked.

“I doubt it, but perhaps tomorrow.”

The kids were rounded up and they left the visitor centre, receiving yet more smiles and apologies from the staff as they left. As they walked across the shuttle parking area, Chlo broke the silence.

“Are you happier about blowing the place up now ?”

Mo looked tense, but didn’t answer. They walked into the tree line and Chlo evaporated the construct children back into the fabric of the multiverse.

“Well ?” She said.

“No I’m not,” said Mo, “but I am happy that I picked the right target.”

Chlo was glad her temperament held few emotions. She was now irrevocably linked to Sikush, if he wished a thing done, then doing it made her happy. Chlo was intelligent enough to see the flaws and weaknesses in that viewpoint, but it suited her, it gave her emotional stability.

“Then that will have to suffice.” She said.

Chlo held onto Mo and moved them both to his suite at Xeod’s.

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Luri always thought she’d know when and if her brother died, but she hadn’t. After settling everyone down they’d cleaned Aukar’s body and put it into an imperial body bag. While it was being taken back to Annill, Luri and a small team had planted explosive devices as they left the Necropolis. Faarlh may have escaped her, but she was determined he’d never infest the ancient building again. She’d pressed the button on the detonator and joined in the cheering of the troops as the building collapsed in on itself and became just another pile of rubble on the rifts.

She’d been helping to heal some of the wounded when Sventa had appeared out of the grey, pulling Sikush after her and onto the rift. As soon as they made eye contact she’d known and the loss struck her like a hammer. Sikush hurried to her and tried to comfort her.

“I know I tried to kill him, but now... knowing he’s gone.....” She said, half to herself.

He’d half carried her to the same ruined building where she’d hidden with Delmus and Mo, only recently, but it now seemed an age ago. Away from the prying eyes of the Annill army Sikush held her while she wept.

“Who killed him ?” She asked.

“Abijah, it was her destiny.”

At first Luri thought of vengeance, but for what, killing the monster she herself had tried to destroy ? Sventa appeared out of the wall and sat in the corner of the ruin, her eyes looking at her while she made a strange clucking sound that Luri knew was meant to show sympathy.

“I promise not to hold a grudge against Abijah.” She said.

“Abijah has gone,” said Sventa, “she died while destroying your brother.”

“If it was Abijah,” said Sikush, “the multiverse has been playing some strange tricks, but it certainly seemed to be her. The one thing we know for certain is that she has now been taken from us again.”

The three of them sat quietly will Luri tried to resolve the conflict in her mind. Her brother, the child who had leapt into the catacombs to save her...was dead and gone. She’d only just begun to get used to the idea of having a brother again and he was taken from her.

“Is there a body,” she asked, “did he die on the rifts ?”

Sikush held her hand and kissed her cheek.

“There can be no body, no burial, no place of death. Only Sventa and I will ever know the place he died. The last thing the empire needs is a martyr to act as a rallying point for every malcontent on the rifts.”

Luri was angry, the anger rose up her body like a wave. Her hand went for her sword and for the briefest fraction of a second she wanted to use it on Sikush, see his blood cover the floor. Then as quickly as it had come the anger was gone and she simply smiled at him.

“And what would you have me do now ?” She asked.

“Aukar was to have commanded the Annill army against the Dracc. I will find a replacement, but for now I’d like you to take over from Aukar. The troops know you and they’ll respect your leadership.” She used her fingers to wipe away her tears, exactly as she’d done as a child.

“I’ll get the troops together and take them back through the doorway.” She said.

She kissed Sikush and briefly touched her hand against Sventa’s talon. Then she was striding across the rift and shouting at the troops.

“Get your kit together,” she shouted, “we’re going home.”

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