

## Ripples from the Past

### Chapter 7 - Minraver

**“We, the eternalists tend to keep apart. On our own we can do wonderful and terrible deeds, but two of us together ? I worry that the two of us could do literally anything !” – Minraver**

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Not all citizens of Mendera rose from their beds at dawn, but those who did, saw the fleet of spacecraft arrive. There was some concern, but mainly the people felt a little more secure. It was Mendera after all; no enemy fleet would dare hover over their city. It had to be an ally, a powerful ally. A small number of Menderans recognised the design of the craft, an even smaller number of immortals had seen them a few times before. Hol hadn't been asleep at all; there were still bodies to be removed from the cleric's vegetable garden.

“Minraver is here,” said Juno, “we really do live in desperate times.”

Hol had to smile and pat her on the shoulder.

“We're immortals Juno, we live through all times. Some of them are bound to be more.....Interesting than others.”

“Have you ever seen the crews of those ships Hol ?”

“No, nor the thousands of warriors they're rumoured to carry.” Replied Hol. “Kittara once fought with them for several years, so they can't be that different to us.”

Even The Damned were a little spooked by the strange fleet. The rumours among the general population were probably wild, strange and of course, inaccurate. That might be to their advantage though, it was certain that their unknown enemy would know that Minraver had arrived on Mendera.

“Some of the clerics say she travels with an army of warrior angels.” Said Juno. “Genova from her own reality, still fierce fighters, armed with terrible weapons.”

“Juno, you're beginning to sound like one of the market traders. Be thankful, Minraver is on our side.”

Albas caught her eye and winked, at least he didn't seem to be listening to rumours and weird fears.

“Two more unidentified bodies, under the paving in the cloisters.” Someone called.

Would it never end ?! There had to be more than a hundred bodies, the murders had to have been going on for decades, maybe far longer. Hol looked up at the group of space craft, hovering over the city and hoped they didn't mean things were going to get worse, before they got..... maybe even worse still.

“Fifty hanging over the Royal Palace and another hundred or so, hovering above the desert.” Said Albas. “I must admit that they give me a nice warm feeling.”

“Two of the warriors they carry, will be here soon.” She told him. “Keep it quiet though, they don't appreciate crowds.”

“Angels in the Temple ! Surely that's against the law ?”

“The Chalne has granted a special dispensation.” She replied. “As this is a time of special need, we may see others granted access to this holy place. The Genova have a skill we require, the ability to re-sanctify the room containing the chaos shrine and get it done quickly.”

They both looked up at the craft Minraver had arrived in, hovering barely five hundred feet above their heads. Few of the empire worlds were allowed to bring their fleets to the holy city, even fewer

were allowed to hover over the Royal Palace. Those craft that did hover, usually remained at a horizontal angle, their artificial gravity turned off. The long dark craft above Mendera were moored at an angle of about thirty degrees, facing downwards, as if diving into the city. It either had to be very uncomfortable on board, or their artificial gravity was left on. There were other alternatives, the craft had arrived from an alternative reality after all. Hol cleared ideas of strange otherworldly creatures from her mind.

"That's a lot of craft to bring two angels." Said Albas.

"It is and they've come a long way."

There was about a minutes warning on the common channel, before Jen arrived with several other members of the guard. The two Genova looked more like prisoners than honoured guests, they were so outnumbered by The Damned. Did she shake hands, just smile, or something else entirely ? She remembered the few words Sventa had once taught her.

"Hennor spledara." She said.

She hoped it really did mean good morning, Sventa could have a wicked sense of humour. The two angels were smiling at her, which she took as a good sign. Not immortal as most people assume, or particularly long lived, the angels seemed to be waiting for instructions.

"Do you wish to see the chaos shrine now ?" She asked.

Hol was trying not to stare, but the man and woman in front of her were a new experience, rare if you count your birthdays in billions of years. Like the semi-corporeal angels she'd known, but solid, all the time. No grabbing their arms to keep them focused on her reality. The longer she looked the more differences she noticed. Three fingers and a thumb on each hand, a slight difference to their eyes. Their eyelids hung over the backs of their eyes, giving a slightly hooded effect. Less than thirty seconds and Hol saw them not as the Genova she knew, but as something from another world. Even the simple white robes they wore, were probably something to make them look more like the Genova she was used to. Did they have fully developed wings ? Hol was desperate to know.

"Sorry to stare." She said. "It's just that most Genova I know... tend to drift in and out of this reality."

"You know others of our kind ?" Asked the female.

"Yes, quite a few actually, though obviously less since the conversions."

"Conversions ?"

Damn, they wouldn't know about Sventa and her army of converted dark angels. They might not react well to the news, which was likely to annoy The Chaln . She decided to ignore the question and ask one of her own.

"Sorry, I have to ask. Do you have wings ? Fully formed wings I mean."

"Of course, neatly folded under our robes." Answered the male.

Oh, how she would love to see those wings extended, see them take to the air. She was being rude again, looking for changes, signs of evolutionary differences from the Genova she knew.

"Yes." Said the female

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

"Yes, we would like to see the site of the defilement."

"Yes of course, it's this way."

Sventa would have pulled herself through the grey between worlds, being there when she arrived, leaning on the chaos shrine and looking nonchalant. Could these angels move like that ? There was so much she didn't know about them, including their names. As they went down stairs to the first underground level, she decided to fill that hole in her knowledge.

"We weren't properly introduced. I am Hol Azreemy, Head cleric of this temple."

They were communicating with each other, in some way without audible words. She recognised the signs, because The Damned did it all the time. A slight nod of the head, expressions in their eyes. A whole discussion, before making a decision.

"I am truly sorry." Said the male. "We are forbidden to tell anyone our names."

"Why?"

More chatter she couldn't hear. Hol began to realise why some people found The Damned so irritating.

"We do not wish to seem rude," said the female, "but no, we can't tell you. A huge number of races and planets have a taboo about names, a race memory that knowing someone's real name can give you power over them. There is some truth in that belief and we can be..... Damaged by anyone who knows our true names. As you have traitors in the temple and we might be overheard....."

"I understand." Said Hol. "If you can follow me through reality, we can get there quicker?"

"No." Said the female. "We'll walk there."

"There is an essence here," said the male, "a deity has walked these halls and left a trace of their passing. It is..... Pleasurable."

Hol had to think who they meant, it had been a long time before. So long that the visit by Estrid, had been during the existence of the previous multiverse.

"Estrid you must mean Estrid." She said. "You probably know her as Estrin-Okanan."

That brightened up their moods, more quiet communication between them. They were only on the stairs to the third basement, it was going to be a long day. Kittara used to unkindly refer to the Genova as spiritual flying insects, drawn to the flame of anything even vaguely holy. Hol was beginning to understand what she'd meant.

"Is Estrin-Okanan still in this reality?" Asked the female.

"No, she helped us to defeat the other deities, before hiding again. We have no idea where she is."

Crap! That dampened their mood, the female looked particularly depressed. Hol really didn't want Minraver, asking why her two angels had been returned looking depressed and scared.

"In hiding?!" Said the male. "War with the other deities! We knew nothing of this."

"You must tell us about it." Said the female. "Why did she hide?"

Hol learned fast, two could play the information too dangerous to know game.

"I'm sorry, but that all happened before the beginning of this multiverse. It is forbidden knowledge, never to be discussed."

Her two new angel friends, merely nodded at her and asked no more questions. If only every difficult question in life was that easy to avoid. She had memories of previous multiverses of course.

"Just enough implanted to keep you from going crazy." Chlo had once told her. "You can hardly be reborn, with no memory of your past. I store and implant enough to give you a full history, otherwise you'd find the lack of any history..... debilitating."

As it was she was finding it hard to visualise her father's face, which was upsetting, yet perfectly normal. Time did that to everyone, especially if you'd been born into a multiverse that didn't exist anymore.

"Stairs to the next set of library rooms, level four – upper quadrant." She said. "Quite a way to go yet I'm afraid."

"We will continue to walk, even though this place does feel like a prison." Said the male.

"No offence meant Hol." Added the female. "But we were brought here by Jen and her people. We cannot move through the outer walls of the temple, the enchantment is too powerful, put in place

so very long ago. We cannot leave here unless we are taken, which is an unusual experience for us. So we feel trapped."

"I understand, the rifts make me feel that way." She said.

Oh crap ! Supposing the rifts were something they knew nothing about. Her two angels looked happy enough though, nodding at her. The female Genova actually touched her hand.

"Don't be concerned Hol, we will clear the evil from your temple."

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Mo was in not only the best hotel in Novra-An, it was a hotel he owned. His emporium empire had more money than it knew what to do with and a few savvy finance managers, during the centuries he'd been busy elsewhere. Mo was an absentee owner, but he was no fool. He knew the four shops he owned in Redemption, known by most as Novra-An, and he was aware that the Pilgrim's Oasis was his. He'd stomped in and demanded to see the manager, as soon as they'd arrived from the nearby shuttle landing zone.

"I told you we'd get the VIP suite." He said.

"You're amazing Mo." Said Rhian. "From now on I'll believe everything you tell me. You're a..... fucking legend !"

"Don't encourage him," said Silky, "there'll be no living with him, and his ego."

Kerr seemed too busy drinking an excellent bottle of local beer, to join in the general conversation, though he did nod his agreement and shout;

"Agree..... a damned legend Mo."

He was some distance away, the VIP suite was huge. Designed for visiting dignitaries who fell within certain parameters. Important enough to travel with an entourage and have the money to afford it of course. Yet not important enough to be offered accommodation at the Royal Palace in Mendera City. Mostly ambassadors from non-empire worlds, or minor celebrities, the suite was rarely unoccupied. The politician already occupying the suite, had been moved to another room, with a huge reduction on his bill of course. There were four bedrooms and a small private pool.

"I could move in here !" Yelled Rhian. "I mean it Mo, just give the word and I'll be all packed up and moved in.....fuckkkkking ace !"

"I think she likes it." Said Silky.

"I'm glad everyone likes the accommodation." Said Mo.

"Hell yes !" Said Kerr. "I agree with Rhian. I don't want to leave here, ever."

Mo too, was pleased with the Pilgrim's Oasis, it was a hotel he could be proud of. He'd had an interest in Xeod's on Ixir once, but that had been a front for a brothel. A good brothel, one of the best in the empire, but still.... An upmarket cathouse.

"It's money you see." He said. "I already had quite a bit when I went away. It grew while I left it in the Imperial Bank, grew quite a lot actually. That's what happens when you leave it alone for a few million years..... It grows."

"Make that billions of years." Said Silky.

"Yes, yes indeed. I claim no recognition for my success, it's all down to the great Gods of compound interest."

He was a little intoxicated and there was something he needed to tell the others, something that wouldn't wait until they were sober.

"We're meeting the contact for the freighter later." He said. "I told him to come here, after we should have finished dinner tonight."

"Good idea, is he coming to the bar ?" Asked Kerr.

"Yes, he is."

"Great." Said Kerr, swigging his beer.

"Any friend of yours Mo....." Added Rhian.

How to tell them ? Mo decided to come right out with it. If they refused to help him, there were other freighter pilots he could hire. No others that had become personal friends though.

"The contact is from the Red-Tops." He said. "I thought you should know. It's not as if he'll turn up dressed in a military uniform with his name on it or anything, but I thought you needed to know."

"They're everywhere though, aren't they Mo ? He probably has nothing to do with the guys who attacked the imperial fleet, right ?" Asked Rhian.

He prided himself on being a highly plausible liar. It was one of his key skills, the ability to convince most people that he was telling the truth, while selling them a ludicrous pile of nonsense. Not with them though, they might die going to the rifts with him.

"These are the same guys I'm afraid." He admitted. "That is the thing with a good deal though, there are no wrong sides or right sides, just who can get what you want, for the right price."

He'd once told Kittara the same story, while she had a demon blade at his throat. She'd not been even slightly convinced by his logic.

"What do they have, that we need so badly ?" Asked Kerr.

"A freighter, a good one." Said Mo. "Not a piece of space junk, likely to fall apart the first time we slam the drive full on. Expensive, but I can afford it."

"You're buying it ? Hiring is easy, as long as we show our crew papers." Said Rhian.

"Crap Mo ! Tell them everything." Said Silky.

"I was going to, really. This is a dangerous trip and if you're risking your lives, I intend to be completely honest."

"Careful, don't wrench a muscle or anything." Said Silky.

It was true, no one could hurt you like those you loved. Silky's comment was accurate though, which gave it that bit of extra sting.

"If we hire they'll want proof of destination and cargo." He said. "Plus they'll plant a few trackers somewhere, to make sure we don't go anywhere off the charts, which is what we will be doing. Buy a freighter and nobody cares what you do with it and we won't have to show your documents to anyone."

"Traffic control will want to see our certs." Said Rhian. "All empire worlds follow the same rules. No certs, no launch pad slot."

"We're not leaving from an empire world."

"Most indie planets use the same rules." Said Rhian. "It screens out weapon smugglers and low level banditry."

"We're not leaving from an indie world. We're taking off from an uninhabited planet, way out in the Udaries Nebula." Said Mo. "The freighter is there, fully provisioned and waiting to go. There is a problem though."

"There always is Mo..... Tell us it all." Said Rhian.

"It's currently painted up as a Red-Top craft and there's no possibility of getting that changed."

"I knew it !" Said Kerr. "We'll all die out in the lawless Udaries belt, ripped apart by several angry imperial raptors."

"Not if we're careful." Said Silky. "Mo and I have worked out a route that will take a while, but skirts round most inhabited worlds."

Bless the wonderful creature ! Support when he most needed it.

“Freighters hold their value.” He said. “We can sell it when we get back and I’ll split the proceeds with you both, say eighty, twenty.”

“Fifty, Fifty.” Said Kerr. “This plan gets more dangerous by the minute.”

“And I want to live here for a while, when we get back.” Added Rhian. “Two months, maybe three, until I get somewhere of my own to live. Kerr can live here too, if he likes.”

“Yeah, like the sound of that.” Said Kerr.

His quiet trip to the rifts, was beginning to sound very expensive. Still, there was a huge pile of imperial credits in his bank account.

“Fine ! Fifty, fifty on the freighter proceeds and you can live here for three months. I’ll even let you both run up a sizeable amount of room service.”

“So Mo, how do we get to this rock where the freighter is ?” Asked Kerr.

Rhian had her hand up, waving it about like crazy.

“I know this one !” She yelled. “Judging by what has already been said, we get there in Red-Top planet hoppers.”

Was he becoming that predictable ? Probably ! Mo simply nodded at her and wondered what else he’d have to bribe her with.

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Some portals could be gentle, popping you out where it was set to send you, on your feet, clothes barely ruffled. Not the portal from The Ring of Volkin. Delmus had been spun about until he was dizzy, before realising he was a good fifty feet above the ground. He’d used the portal before, yet he always forgot about the fall. No time to turn and land on his feet, his back took the full force of the fall. The sky above him was an unpleasant shade of yellow, as he remained on his back for a few seconds. He heard a scream and a thud to his left, Alyz had arrived. He rolled onto his knees and looked at the bundle of angry dust and clothing, which had to be Alyz.

“Are you alright ?” He asked. “The landing can be a bit rough.”

“A bit rough ! You might have warned me.”

“Sorry, I always forget about it, until the next time I arrive here.” He said. “The fall would kill most people and I’m assuming that’s deliberate. No one is really welcome here.”

Alyz dusted herself off and stood up, looking across the bleak wilderness, that seemed to go on forever.

“Where are we Delmus ?” She asked.

“Look behind you.”

“What.....”

She gasped, he had the first few times he’d been through the portal. It was a few miles away, the distance was hard to judge. A wall of darkness, reaching up from the ground and towering miles up into the yellow sky. Like a living thing, the wall pulsed, sending out small tendrils of purple flame. The purple barrier filled the horizon, going off to left and right, as far as the eye could see.

“We came the easy way, avoiding the 7<sup>th</sup> rift, Gateway and Leng.” He said. “We’re on the very edge of our reality, looking at the barrier between our existence and the dark worlds beyond.”

He remembered standing and looking at the great barrier, just as Alyz was looking at it. There was a look of awe on her face.

“You come this way every time you see Luri ?” She asked.

“Yes, I do.”

“Wow, the sex must be staggeringly good Delmus.”

She was grinning at him, awe only lasted so long, once you'd seen as many strange sights as they had.

"Well.... Now you mention it." He replied.

He gave up on trying to shake the fine dry dust off his jacket, it was an impossible task. Luri was used to him arriving covered in dirt and blood, the journey was hardly ordinary.

"Where to next ?" Asked Alyz. "I'm beginning to enjoy this."

"There is only one way to go."

He pointed his finger at the purple barrier in front of them.

"Leng is a good four day's walk behind us, and even we wouldn't survive trying to fight our way through the demon city of Leng. There is only one way from here.....we're going into the darkness beyond the wall."

Alyz was looking at him, as though expecting him to say it was all a huge joke.

"We're really going through that barrier ?"

"Oh yes Alyz, we are ! You did insist on coming with me."

Delmus began to walk forward at a gentle pace, Alyz keeping up with him.

"Are there planets in the darkness ?" Alyz asked. "What is it like there Delmus ?"

"I don't really know, Luri sees me in a bubble she created to be deliberately like Mendera. She will never speak about the worlds out there. I get the impression that they're nothing like ours, nothing at all like ours."

"Kittara talked to me of her trip into the darkness beyond Leng." Said Alyz. "She talked of vile creatures slithering over each other in the darkness. She talked of feeling suffocated by them. It changed her, whatever she saw out there."

It took a while to cover even a small distance, as the surface changed from a fine dry dust to rocks and what looked like, volcanic debris. He knew the point to stop, when the purple flames coming from the wall, sounded like explosions. Any closer was dangerous, very dangerous. He dusted off the top of a boulder and sat on it.

"Now we wait." He said.

"What for ?"

"For the Lummel, the rift walkers. They know me, I've often travelled this way. They'll have seen us and will already be on their way. Only the Lummel can offer passage through the barrier."

Alyz found her own boulder to sit on, as they patiently waited for their guide and transport to arrive. She'd have seen the bones among the rocks, but didn't mention it. Some came to the wall, who weren't known to the Lummel.

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The tunnels were cool; Chlo had been keeping them at a comfortable temperature, so that the clerics could carry out repairs to the fabric of the temple. Already the walls demolished to access the hidden shrine, had been lovingly rebuilt. Hol had ordered the re-opening of a quarry within the temple, located four miles below the surface of Mendera. It was important to her that every block of stone was finished to a degree the great Thrax would have approved of. Everything was going to be quarried, finished and placed by hand, exactly how it had been originally constructed.

"The shrine is down this passage." Said Hol.

"We feel the defilement of this holy place." Said the female Genova.

Hol hadn't been in charge of the temple when the shrine had been built, but she still felt a sense of guilt and a need to defend her people.

"The shrine has been examined and the teeth have been removed." She said. "It would have been destroyed if The Chaln  hadn't ordered that it was to be kept intact."

"Yes, we have our own methods to destroy the..... physical aspect of the defilement."

Again the female Genova speaking, as they entered the room where the chaos shrine, still remained standing up against one wall. The male Genova ran his hand over it and red sparks flew from the shrine.

"An invoker has been here, and placed a strong enchantment on the stone." He said.

They muttered at each other, without making a physical sound. Hol was used to them taking a while to make decisions, but the wait did seem to be going on for quite some time.

"Are you going to destroy it?" She asked.

"We do have the ability to remove its..... Tainted power." Said the female.

"To be safe though, we've asked Minraver to examine the site." Said the male.

Hol just nodded, unsure if she liked her temple being called 'the site.' Minraver though, that was a surprise, the big guns being sent for. Either they really were just being careful, or the shrine was more powerful than everyone had thought. Minraver, the sort of sister to The Chaln  and one time lover of the now dead Herusher. Mendera City had seen more of her when Herusher had been alive, but little of her since. Hol suspected she'd been avoiding memories, even eternal must have feelings. She was brought out of her thoughts, by a swirl of a robe and the scent of ashunt blooms..... Minraver had arrived.

"Hol..... So good to see you, it's been far too long. And I hear congratulations are in order."

"I don't feel like celebrating quite yet." She replied.

"Yes..... All so terrible. Let me see this chaos shrine."

Minraver seemed unconcerned by the sparking, as she ran her hands over the twin horns of the shrine to chaos. She gripped it, causing almost an explosion of bright red sparks.

"You've had an invoker here," said Minraver, "a powerful one. They're probably still here, pretending to be one of the clerics. I can remove their power though and their influence over your people."

There was no warning, as Minraver uttered a few words in an unknown tongue and the shrine exploded into millions of fragments. The lights went out for the entire length of the tunnel, leaving Hol coughing up dust in the dark.

"Light please!" Yelled Minraver.

Genova were good at light. Spells were spoken and two orbs of bright white light, bobbed about against the ceiling.

"I didn't think it would do that." Said Minraver. "The power has gone though, it's effects removed from this place."

"Thank you." Said Hol.

Poor Minraver, her glorious white robes had been shredded and were now filthy rags. Not that she seemed concerned, as she ran her hands over the walls.

"I heard you're using the clerics to rebuild the damage by hand."

"Yes, I think it's the way Thrax would have preferred." Replied Hol.

"Good, have them rebuild this wall and I'll return and place a sealing enchantment on it. Thrax was a good builder, but never forget that he worked for our enemies once. Don't deify him; he was very much a flesh and blood man. He did build The City of the Lost God for the serpent Gods and he was a bit of a rogue. Even tried to get me into his bed once."

"Really..... the old goat."



Hol really wanted to know if he'd succeeded, but wasn't brave enough to ask.

"Now that the shrine has been destroyed, the clerics under its thrall, will return to normal." Said Minraver. "You'll easily spot them, the ones looking dazed and confused. Be kind to them Hol, they were under the influence of a powerful chaos invoker."

"I don't understand how this creature of chaos, entered the temple." Said Hol. "If I don't understand, it might happen again."

Minraver seemed to realise that a good part of her robe, had gone to join the rubble and dirt on the floor. She shimmered for a second or so, before reappearing in a fresh robe. Hol could do the same trick, all of The Damned could, with the help of Chlo of course.

"The how is easy Hol, someone brought it in. There have been suspicions for years, about children being given a day outside as a secret treat. Then there are stories of the elderly being taken for a look at the ocean, before they die."

It was exactly what Hol had intended to do for Seesha and Mix. In fact she was going to do it once things quietened down a little. A promise was a thing to be kept, especially now that she was head of the temple. It did shock her though, to realise that other members of The Damned, had helped other clerics to have their special day outside, their treat.

"But a child is a child." She said. "No one would bring back an abomination, a thing of chaos."

"Yes, on the surface it looks so harmless." Said Minraver. "Sikush has turned a blind eye to such treats, for..... well a very long time. Supposing the child was killed though and its physical likeness copied ! I'm not saying that's what happened, but it is a strong possibility. A well-meaning member of The Damned, took a child outside for a few hours and brought back something else, something totally evil."

Hol had assumed she'd been the first to think of a day at the ocean for two of the children. It was actually quite humbling, to realise she wasn't the first to think of the idea.

"I have been thinking about it over the last few days," she said, "an idea that is simple, but was impossible to put in place while Desa Ubari ruled the temple. I will get all the clerics to regularly run their hand through the sacred flame. It will bond them together and hopefully, stop any further infiltration from outside."

Someone had been busy repairing damage, the rows of lights down the passageway, came back to life.

"An excellent idea." Said Minraver. "May I make a suggestion ?"

"Yes of course."

"Get all clerics, young and old, to repeat their oath to serve the temple every year. Make a huge thing and general fuss about it. There'll begin to feel they belong to something real and tangible, rather than some age old myth. Firstly though, we have an important job to do."

Hol liked the idea of an annual reaffirmation of their vows, probably because Desa would have hated the idea. She had no idea what job Minraver had in mind.

"You have a friendless and desperate chaos invoker in your temple Hol. Left to its own devices, it will hide in the darkest places and begin its work of sedition, all over again. It needs finding and I'd like to help you catch it, if I'm invited ?"

"Yes of course, I've already requested enough of The Damned, to carry out a full search."

"We will need them, but if possible I'd like to take it alive Hol. I've studied the methods of converting these creatures and I'm confident of being able to switch its loyalties to our side."

"I can see how that would be useful." Said Hol.

Minraver seemed happy and quite animated. Hol had seen Sikush in similar states and it rarely ended well. Excitement for an eternal, usually meant something that was terrifyingly dangerous, to those around them.

“Think of the information we can get out of this creature Hol, once I have it under my control. The conversion isn’t pleasant, but necessary. Come on ! We’ll move to the lowest level and work our way up.”

Catching a chaos invoker and killing it was hard enough, but capturing it and keeping it alive ! To Hol it sounded like juggling with live Ion grenades. It was Minraver though and saying no to her was just about impossible.

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There were two ways of arriving at Pesallia Two. There was the back door way, on board one of the hundreds of craft arriving, from other independent worlds. Or there was banging on the front door, as a duly authorised agent of the Greater Menderan Empire. Sventa decided to bang on the front door ! Chlo had replaced the lost cruiser and Sventa once more commanded an entire imperial attack wing. No one argued with those, or rather nobody except Pesallia traffic control. They were becoming very insistent and quite agitated.

“I loathe Pesallia Two.” Said Arran. “Crappy little planet with a bug up its arse.”

“Please identify yourself ? This is Pesallia traffic control. If you do not respond, we will be forced to consider your fleet as a threat to our security.”

Sventa sighed and watched, as several ground based missile system, were flagged up as active on the tactical screen. It was irritating rather than threatening, Pesallia had no weapons capable of penetrating their defence screens.

“We could just ignore them and land the entire fleet.” Said Seren.

“They know who we are, they’re just being awkward.” Said Haan. “Our automatic systems have been squawking at theirs since we entered their solar system.”

Sventa was so tempted to simply land and ignore all the petty politics, but that was impossible. The empire traded with the Pesallia Group and trade was king in the empire. The planet below made cheap crappy tech, which the kids of the empire seemed to enjoy. Cheap and crappy, but also light and innovative. Just the thing to keep billions of empire kids happy. Sikush would be unhappy, if she caused a diplomatic incident.

“Are you going to zap them ?” Asked Arran.

So damn tempting ! Sventa decided to use diplomacy first and maybe zap them if that failed.

“Talk to them Haan.” She said. “You’re good at this stuff. Keep them happy, keep it respectful, but be firm. Emphasises that we will be landing a team on their planet. Ideally with their agreement, but we will be landing a team.”

She heard him begin to use his charm on the traffic controller. There would need to be dialogue with their superiors of course, but she was in no hurry. Eventually they’d haggle it down to a landing party of about six. She hated all the politics ! Arran had the right idea. Zap the bastards !

“..... You know who we are; our tech systems have had contact with each other for nearly an hour...”

She was glad Haan was with her now. He’d never be much of a fighter, though he did try very hard. He was a natural when it came to charming people though, a born diplomat. Sventa heard a gasp and the hum of blasters being energised.

“No ! She’s come to see me.” She shouted.

Her, the creature who looked like Kittara was walking towards her, as if she had every right to be on the command deck. Sventa's mind still found it hard to comprehend the multiverse itself as being a sentient being, pulling everyone's strings. It was easier to think of the Kittara lookalike, as a messenger from some group of Gods, who might not be that trustworthy.

"Couldn't you appear as someone else ? I find the image of my old friend, quite disconcerting."

"Then it is a good choice. We need to speak Sventa, in private."

A good idea, Haan would probably do better, without having her listening to his negotiations. Not to her quarters though, there was an unoccupied break room much closer.

"I didn't think you'd be around until Luri turned up ?"

"There is a problem, quite a serious one. I see the past, present and future together, each one effecting the others. It's a constantly changing picture, even the past may alter, though that is rare. A critical point in time, is likely to occur on Pesallia."

"Yet I must go there."

"Yes, events are in motion, probabilities are high that you will learn valuable information. It all comes down to one thing Sventa. How fond are you of Haan ?"

There was a bowl of various bags of junk food on the counter. Sventa's people never touched it, but some of the imperial techs seemed to eat nothing but. Sventa unwrapped a bar of something brown and sweet and began to chew on it. It gave her time to think. To her surprise, the creature who looked like Kittara, chose a pink coloured bag of junk food and began to eat the contents.

"I can see you're leading up to a decision." Said Sventa. "Where I have to sacrifice Haan for the greater good. I am not particular enamoured of the greater good, though I am rather fond of Haan. I will take some convincing."

"It is now unavoidable and far too many time lines are now dependent on it. The darkness will attack Haan while you're on Pesallia. No probability, a certainty, no way it can be stopped or avoided. Only you can save him, but only by putting yourself at great risk. I can't order you to let him die of course, that is your decision."

She knew it ! Sventa had met quite a few Gods and assorted deities. None of them had been all that reliable or trustworthy.

"This was your doing !" She spat. "And I thought Haan was important to our side ?"

"I have looked at several trillion likely outcomes, looking quite a long way into all those possible futures. You are essential to all of them, while Haan is useful in most, but only essential in two, maybe three. The conclusion is inescapable."

"Damn ! Thank you, I will think about what you've told me."

No dire warnings about what might happen if she died instead of Haan, the messenger from the Gods, simply vanished. Sventa went back onto the command deck, to find everyone smiling at Haan.

"We can take a party of twenty down to the planet." He said. "And we can carry weapons."

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