

Ripples from the Past

Chapter 19 - Algaria

“They buried the guard creature next, interring it under the soil in the fungus farm. A huge creature with claws, sharp teeth and a face that looked unsettlingly human.”

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It had actually happened. The vast doors of The Temple of the Flame, had been pushed back and fixed in the open position by new chains fixed into the walls. An imperial order had been issued, that the doors would remain open, the clerics free to come and go as they pleased. On Mendera where imperial orders were rare, they carried the full weight of the law. It was unexpected and momentous. For some clerics used to the temple being their total world, it was terrifying. Seesha had waited until after her morning chores were completed, before finding Mix and walking right up to the open doors.

“Can we really just..... Go out ?” Asked Mix.

“Of course you can.” Said the guard. “Clerics are also protected by several separate council and religious edicts.”

Not just an ordinary guard, but Commander Yerli himself. Seesha recognised him from the newsfeeds. Chlo had put up invisible fields, to ensure the general population weren’t tempted to saunter into the temple. Someone had obviously decided that a militia guard was needed too. Yerli stood with four of his men, all in their best uniforms. Yerli bent down and smiled at Mix.

“If anyone tries to even impede your way, they’ll be in serious trouble.” He said.

“Wow ! What will happen to them ?”

“Something very nasty. So go out and enjoy yourselves.”

Seesha held Mix’s hand as they ran down the temple steps. Yerli called out to them, just before the crowd in Temple Square, swallowed them up.

“And if anyone dares to stare at you.” He called. “You stare right back at them.”

A mistake to enter a crowd who weren’t wearing clerical robes, a crowd of strangers. Seesha held tight on to Mix’s hand and didn’t let go until they’d reached a quiet place, beside one of the famous canals. Her heart was still hammering in her chest and Mix was looking as scared as she felt.

“So many people Seesha.”

“Friends though, most are clerics or descended from clerics.”

A few families had rushed from the temple that morning, mostly those with living relatives to visit. After that a steady trickle had ventured outside, usually returning quite quickly. The brightly coloured clothing, the groups of gawping tourists. It was all too much, though Seesha was determined not to run for home.

“We’re not like the rest Mix.” She whispered. “Hol took us to see the ocean, teaching us to swim. And we bought fruit in a market on Algaria. Mendera is our home, nothing here will harm us.”

“Ok, I do like the canals. Can we go on one of the boats ?”

Seesha had a little money, just enough to buy them something simple for lunch. She had no idea how much a ride in one of the canal boats would cost, but assumed it would empty her purse.

“We can go on a boat or buy food in the market Mix, not both. So, food or boat ride ?”

He didn’t even need a second to think about it.

“Boat ride Seesha.”

She knew the history of Mendera City and knew the canals hadn't always been there. The legendary Kittara had seen the canals of Leng and told Sikush how much they improved that hot city. Leng was greener too than Mendera City, or had been then. Sikush had decided to add canals to his city and they now surrounded Temple Square and criss-crossed the entire city. Water brought life in the form of plants and insects, which in turn attracted all sorts of flying creatures. Mendera City had gradually become green and full of life. Seesha approached one of the long thin canal boats, which was moored up at one of the frequent jetties. The boatman had his back to them and seemed to be busy with something.

"We'd like to ride in your boat." Said Seesha. "How much do you charge."

"You know the rules, pick-ups are from Ojetin dock." He barked.

He had the usual signs of being born a Menderan. Legs a bit too long below the knee, slightly elongated neck. His expression changed from a frown to a smile, as he saw them.

"We don't know the routine." Said Seesha.

"He's rude." Muttered Mix.

"I am so sorry, you must be the clerics who've just been released?"

It was Seesha's turn to be a little grumpy.

"Not released, it's our home and always will be. But... It is nice to be able to move around the city and see the canals."

"I'm getting it all wrong and upsetting you." Said the boatman. "Allow me to take you right round the city, from council lagoon, past the west gate and back again. All for free."

"For free?" Asked Mix.

"Yes young sir, free. Consider it as an apology for my rudeness. Just say a blessing for me and my ageing mother when you get home."

"Oh we will, I promise." Said Seesha.

The boat bobbed about more than she'd have thought, but probably not enough to cause motion sickness. Technology involved in the boat's propulsion of course, there were no crew to use oars or poles. The boatman touched a panel and they moved forward, at a fairly sedate pace.

"A long boat ride and we still can buy food." Said Mix.

Their new friend had obviously heard and gave Seesha a questioning look.

"We're not used to money." She said. "I just brought out enough coin for our lunch."

"Then after our trip, you must come home and eat with us." Said the boatman. "My mother is old, but she still cooks the best Nurag Garn you'll ever eat."

"Wow, really?" Asked Mix.

"Quiet Mix." She said. "We couldn't possibly.... We hardly know...."

There would be provider of lunch was chuckling at her.

"Of course you know me young lady." He said. "I'm descended from the original clerics who settled here, just like you. We probably have relatives in common, if we had all day to look up the records. Now my mother is old, but if she hears you were in my boat and I didn't bring you home for a meal.... She isn't too old to beat me with a stick."

Seesha had to laugh and it was true, the boatman was a cleric and as such, he was family.

"Thank you, we shall be honoured to eat your mother's famous Nurag Garn."

As the boat entered the lagoon next to the council building, Seesha felt happy and glad that they'd left the temple for the day. Lunch with their boatman was just the right sort of gentle adventure that she needed.

"I'm Seesha by the way and this my brother, Mix."

“My name is long and almost unpronounceable, you know clerics. Everyone calls me Seb.”

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Algaria was a planet of noble and proud people. Which as everyone knew, really meant arrogant and quarrelsome. Chlo was stood in the command centre of their planetary defences, Jen stood beside her. There was no question of Mendera running the show, that was unthinkable to the average Algarian. Unless things looked to be going wrong of course. At the moment Chlo was happy to simply give resources to the Algarian Commander of Defence. That meant several attack wings and enough raptors to fill the sky over Tranquillity, capital of Algaria.

“I’ve linked everything into your big board.” Said Chlo.

“All appreciated, there seems to be a full armada on the way.” Said Hovorachak. “I’m surprised that you can spare such a force. There are rumours that the entire imperial fleet is involved in missions elsewhere.”

“A rumour we’ve worked hard to spread around.” Said Jen.

Chlo liked Hovorachak and she’d never subscribed to the belief that all Algarians were stupid brutes. Some were though and it had been burned into their DNA from the time in the past when they’d colonised New Algaria. Now they simply called every new home world Algaria and the capital city was always called Tranquillity.

New Algaria had shaped the Algarian mind and body though, for good or ill. The gravity there was about fifteen percent higher than their original home world and a politician somewhere had decided that was within acceptable limits. Within a few generations the people had started to look heavier and more muscled than the population of their home world. At first a few jokes had been made about this, but a few keen new colonists had still slipped onboard the shuttles sent a few times a year to pick up mined minerals and produce. Then the people of New Algaria had started to look so different that no one wanted to go there and no one wanted them to come home. Even the constant chatter over the communication network with home had reduced. Of course the shuttles continued to take away goods and bring whatever had been bought by the colonists, but no one really wanted to be seen dead on New Algaria.

Not that all the blame could be put on politicians. Everyone wanted to expand and gain wealth and planets exactly matching the conditions of their home world were rare. One group of returning colonists had actually been attacked and killed by a mob on one planet for being too alien, too divergent from the norm. Other aliens in the Empire was one thing, but having your own kind adapt into something different really seemed to freak people out.

“Can we expect help from The Damned, when they reach the surface ?” Asked Hovorachak.

“Do it right and no enemy will set foot on the soil of Algaria.” Replied Jen.

Hovorachak was descended from a long line of elders, who were also leaders of the Church of Yraag, their God of war. He wasn’t used to be spoken to in such a way, but it seemed to inspire him into action. All the raptors began to leave the sky above the vast city and head towards the incoming invasion fleet.

“They will be relying on surprise, so I hope Hovorachak doesn’t show his hand too soon.” Chlo told Jen, on a private link.

“He knows his business Chlo and if he doesn’t..... Our people know theirs. We can apologise to the Algarian government afterwards.”

The dots on the big board were getting larger, as the enemy armada kept their engines running. Soon they’d have to turn and decelerate to attack and that was the perfect time for Hovorachak to hit them with everything he had. The trick was to make sure not a single enemy soldier survived to land

anywhere on the planet. Rumours have a habit of spreading though and there was already talk of giant blood sucking bats invading the planet.

“Are there really millions of Terak in those craft ?” Asked Hvorchak, as he watched the screens.

“I doubt it, they’re probably using the Terak to inflict shock and awe on other worlds.” Said Chlo.

“There may be a few, but I think you’re facing an army of hired mercenaries and fanatics.”

“There must be tens of thousands on those craft.” Said Hvorchak. “Are there really that many willing to risk their lives for a few coins ?”

A few coins indeed ! Chlo knew Nurigen’s wealth was almost legendary. If he was financing the enemy, they could afford a lot more than a few coins. Not that she felt an explanation was owed to anyone outside of Sikush’s inner circle.

“There are always some warriors willing to turn traitor for money.” She said. “You may well find that quite a few of the enemy warriors are Algarians.”

There was a look of sadness on Hvorchak’s face, as he realised she was probably right. He simply nodded and turned towards his communications officer.

“When the battle begins, issue an order that no prisoners are to be taken. No mercy, they all have to die, every single one of them.”

Chlo saw it first, through the sensors of the attack wings, as they remained fully cloaked. She saw the enemy begin to throw out chaff, large plates of ceramic material, that would survive hitting the atmosphere at speed. Throw out enough chaff and other decoys and the ground defences would think a million separate craft were attacking them. Not with Chlo on Algaria though, hiding all the chaff and decoys from the big screen.

“Some may run as soon as our craft uncloak.” Said Jen.

Full cloaking, another technique the empire had stolen from the Aumashy and improved. Not that even their allies knew the empire had such technology at its disposal. Sikush liked to keep his secrets, in case there ever was, a really rainy day.

“If they do, Alyz and The Old One will chase them down.” Said Chlo.

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Sventa checked with Chlo as soon as she heard the bad news from the morning patrol.

“The diggings are a steady minus two hundred and ten Sventa. No known life form can survive at those sorts of temperature.” Chlo had told her. “Totally impossible, yet as we know.....”

“The impossible has been happening a lot lately.” Said Sventa. “I’ll go out there and look for myself, before the body is moved.”

Haan was already out there and officially in control of the situation. Sventa had needed to see the bite marks with her own eyes though. Suiting up had required more time, with any evidence at the scene probably being walked over by agitated miners. She took Seren with her and Arran, who’d shown himself to be quite useful. Two and a half standard hours after hearing the news, Sventa was half a mile underground, examining the corpse. She ignored all the voices coming through her communicator and concentrated on finding out why a miner half a mile underground, working in the deep cold, appeared to have been partially eaten by an animal of some kind.

“See the bite mark that cut right through his suit ?” Asked Haan “I measured the wound and whatever did this, had incisors five inches long.”

She had seen it and merely grunted a reply. The shift manager was still there, even though his air supply had to be running low. Sventa cursed herself for having trouble remembering his name.

Haral, yes she remembered him talking at one of the safety briefings. As for his family name ? She made a mental note to look up all the key personnel and get better at remembering names.

“Did you know him ?” She asked.

“No, but with so many shifts coming on and off duty.....”

“There is nothing you can do for him, you should go back to the habitation.” She said.

“It is one of our unwritten rules.” He said. “Our dead are always carried back to where we live. Someone has already brought a stretcher.”

She could sense his fear of upsetting her, yet he still wished to honour his dead miner. Sventa could respect and understand his wishes. The scene was trampled anyway. If she wanted clues, she'd have to look well away from where the body lay.

“Fine, but take his body to the medical team. No burial or incineration until they've carried out a full examination.”

“Of course.”

She watched as six or seven miners appeared out of the shadows and lifted the body gently onto the stretcher, before carrying it towards the entrance to the diggings.

“They must have known him well.” Said Haan.

“I doubt if they even know his name.” She replied. “It's just what they do, when one of them dies. Have you found any tracks from this impossible animal ?”

“Not tracks, but it has body heat, enough to cause chemical changes in certain compounds. Only a trace is left of those changes, but I followed them into one of the old mining tunnels and found where they stop.”

“They simply stop ?”

“Yes.”

“Hmm... show me where they stop. Good idea looking for chemical changes. I assume you thought of that.”

“Yes my president.”

Arran was still on his knees, examining the scene of death.

“Arran, you too.....” She called.

It was a long way into the old mine workings, though Sventa didn't recognise anything. It had been a long time since she'd hunted enemy soldiers in those tunnels, a very long time. Shadows everywhere, the only light coming from their suit lights. It was a good place for an ambush and everyone had their weapons ready, without being told. Haan had left a reflective marker, at an intersection of three tunnels.

“There..... The small changes in the chemicals stop right there.” He said.

A blue nitrogen haze hid the floor, the marker glowing through it. Sventa didn't need the warning light inside her helmet, to tell her the temperature was perilously close to absolute zero. Why were the tunnels so cold ? It was another of those impossible things that Chlo seemed so worried about. Sventa sensed something, right through her suit and the intense cold.

“There was a portal here, a powerful one.” She said.

“I feel it too.” Said Seren.

“Then it's probably gone back to where it came from.” Said Haan.

“I tend to agree.” She said. “We'll concentrate on shifting digging rotas, perhaps keeping the miners in guarded groups all the time.”

“It never left.”

“What do you mean ?” She asked.

Arran talking and pointing down one of the old mining tunnels.

“Look, any decent tracker can see it, once you stop and really look.” He said.

"Yes, I see it." Said Seren. "A chip out of the wall, another mark just beyond it."

Damn Arran and bless him too. Simple tracks that should have been easy to spot. They would have spotted them with ease out on the rifts, or a nice warm planet somewhere. The cold was insidious though, the mere threat of what it might do, ruining their judgement.

"Maybe its portal didn't stay open long enough." Said Haan.

"We'll follow it, just try to take it alive." She said.

Arran led, he had earned that privilege. No sarcastic remarks, and no one could see if he was smirking inside his helmet. He took them unerringly down a long winding tunnel, stopping at an intersection of five tunnels.

"I know it sounds crazy, but I recognise all this." Said Sventa. "There was an ambush here, Qunan Arje lost a lot of his people."

"Look." Said Arran.

Not that far away, in the centre of a side tunnel, lay a creature no sane mind could imagine, though Sventa had seen a chaos enforcer before. Once common on the rifts, though now thought to be rare. It looked like a mad sorcerer's attempt to combine a growler with a warm blooded, four legged predator. Ten insectoid legs at least, maybe more, all coming from a large fur covered body. It had be at least eight feet long, though it was its head that grabbed everyone's attention. Compound eyes on each side of a furry head, with jaws that looked strong enough to rip through an all-terrain suit.

"Is it dead?" Asked Arran.

"It must be, nothing could survive the cold in here." Said Haan.

"I hope it isn't dead." Said Sventa. "I was hoping to ask it quite a few questions."

"That..... Can talk?" Asked Haan.

"Not the common tongue, but at least six of the languages from the rifts." Said Seren. "I've only ever seen pictures carved on temple walls, but I recognise a chaos enforcer."

"Don't assume it's dead." Said Sventa. "These things are never really alive, in a way we'd normally define as being alive."

They approached the creature slowly, weapons up and ready to fire. Something made Sventa come to a sudden halt.

"Did it move?" Asked Arran.

"Maybe..... Not sure, but something makes me think it's probably dying, but not quite dead yet." She replied.

Sventa swung the adjustor right down on her Ion blaster, setting it to minimum. It would still give most creatures a nasty jolt, but it shouldn't kill even a wounded chaos enforcer. She fired, hitting it on the body, just above its rear set of legs.

"Crap!" She heard Arran yell.

It's reaction speed told her it wasn't even nearly dead. The creature had sprung up, leaping straight at Haan. It only had to make a few tears in his suit and that would be the end of Haan. There was no alternative and Seren fired just a fraction of a second after her. No blood, just what looked like grey smoke, rising from the holes in its side.

"Is it dead now?" Asked Haan.

Sventa kicked it hard in the head and waited a good thirty seconds, before kicking it again.

"Looks dead, but I still don't want it here." She said. "Get a team to pick it up and arrange for it to go to Mendera. We'll let Chlo deal with it."

"It was after me, wasn't it?" Asked Haan. "That's why it waited here."

"Probably just killing two birds with one stone Haan."

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Marius wasn't unique, though pilots on Algaria who could fly imperial raptors were rare. As far as he knew, less than a dozen Algarians were going to be flying raptors that day. The Damned flew those in the attack wings, but most circling Tranquillity were autonomous, or being flown by Chlo.

"Happy hunting Marius."

He just nodded at the comment and carried on walking towards the raptor, which was to be his to use during the battle. Few of his fellow pilots had wished him luck; he'd never really been one of them. He'd served in the Menderan Militia for a good part of his life and even his name was an imperial version of his true name. He was used to Marius though, all his friends called him by that name. His fellow pilots could go to hell, that militia training had included a few hundred hours flying raptors. They were being kept back to defend the city, but he was going up there, high into orbit and then beyond, meeting the invaders in space. He stepped into the raptor and sat in the pilot's seat. There were two seats, but today he was flying alone.

"Marius AGS1497 Please initiate red run."

Colours, everything was by colours. A blue run was training; a green run was live weapon target practise. There were dozens of them, all the subtle shades included. Red was the best though, all weapons armed and everything under his control. He heard Chlo respond, recognising her voice from his training days on Mendera.

"Welcome Marius.... Rush to battle and honour, lest another takes your place."

"Thank you Chlo. I'll try to make you proud."

She'd spoken part of the famous quote, attributed to Yraag himself, used all over Algaria, to prepare warriors for battle. Marius wasn't sure if he believed in Yraag anymore, few modern Algarians had blind faith in their Gods these days. He was near to retirement age and looking forward to spending lazy hours with his wife and visiting their children. Death in the heat of battle had lost its appeal.

Defence command were now issuing his orders.

"You are cleared for high orbit. Be careful, the sky is fairly busy over Tranquillity."

The raptor vibrated slightly and rose up to about twenty feet above the ground. Being more than a little scared of enclosed places, he knew the part that terrified him was about to happen. Raptors had inertial damping, but the pilot needed to be held securely for battle. The Damned might be able to survive the sudden acceleration and swerving turns at twenty gravities, but his body would be pulled apart. A section of the cockpit began to descend and cover him completely.

"Oh, I am not going to miss this." He muttered.

There would be two just about audible clicks as the section of cockpit covered him completely. The first click meant the soft material was all over him and beginning to harden slightly, to stop his internal organs from being destroyed by acceleration at thirty or forty gravities.

'Click.'

His eyes were already closed and nothing was going to get him to open them, until the second click. He'd once opened his eyes to find total darkness. He hadn't be able to move or hear anything either. He still remembered thinking he was about to die from that panic attack. He'd learned to think of the wonderful miracle the craft was performing. Linking up external sensors, moving the various interfaces, through which he'd view and hear the outside world. It was going to be beyond wonderful, he kept telling himself.

'Click.'

Just a few seconds was it had all taken, yet he could feel the sweat on his skin and his heart beating way too fast. Luckily his reactions had always been like that and Chlo had set them as his 'normal.'

He should have been taken off the raptor course, but Chlo had seen something in him, above and beyond his morbid dread of small dark places.

“Take off when ready.”

He opened his eyes and that miracle had happened again. The raptor had vanished, leaving him appearing to hover about thirty feet off the ground. Only the slight feeling of pressure on his ribs, told him he was still in the craft. Everything was invisible, apart from a minimal display right above his left eye. Even the controls were invisible to him, though his hands felt as though they were fixed to them.

“There are others younger and more savage Yraag.” He muttered. “Keep their souls and allow me to return home.”

Marius simply looked upward and moved his right hand slightly. The imperial raptor shot into the sky, accelerating out of the atmosphere in less than a minute.

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Grey Walker had been fully refurbished in record time and several of its core systems upgraded. Once thought of as the best spacecraft in the multiverse, there was no longer any dispute about it. Even Luri was impressed;

“This craft can visit place where even I fear to tread.” She said. “I hate to say it, but I’m impressed by Grey Walker.”

Delmus was just amazed at the change in the clerics, once they had a project they believed in. On Mendera they were small minded and usually boring beyond belief. Yet a group of only a dozen or so were crewing Grey Walker. The clerics had control of a craft that could skim the edge of a singularity, even travel through time. Currently, the advanced piece of Menderan tech, was keeping well away from whatever the planet Sessana was orbiting.

“Definitely a large and energetic singularity.” Said Ojetin-Nerish.

Delmus had noticed that all the tech clerics, tended to have Ojetin in their name somewhere.

Citizens of the empire usual favoured naming their children after sports stars and warriors, even favourite deities. To the tech clerics Ojetin had been almost a God though, so a lot of children ended up being called Ojetin, even the girls.

“You mean a black hole ?” Asked Delmus.

Ojetin-Nerish actually snorted at him, though Delmus decided to let it go, this time.

“No one uses that term anymore, haven’t for several millennia.” Said Ojetin. “Singularity of course has no meaning and was just meant to mean something very strange and singular. Sadly that name has now become normalised by use.”

The other clerics looked at him and frowned, adding their own comments.

“Very sad, totally wrong of course.”

“Personally, I blame the media.”

“The public are just so.....”

Delmus was just worried about how long they’d need to remain in the company of so many clerics. Luri went straight to the important point though.

“So what is it ?” She asked.

Delmus looked at a view screen and just saw an area of blackness, about half the size on any self-respecting moon. There was a slight glow around it, but otherwise it looked totally unremarkable.

One of the female clerics, looked at a few screens before answering.

“A rotational gateway at the top end of the Radley scale.” She said. “Some gamma emissions and intense X-ray, lethal if we weren’t inside Grey Walker. Gravity pull quite low, meaning almost certainly a non-aggressive type seven rotational geozode.”

Delmus just felt his head spinning a bit, though Luri had heard something that excited her.

“You mentioned it being a rotational gateway ?” She asked. “I use those to transfer objects and people between normally non-compatible realities.”

“Yes, yes, you understand.”

“We could travel through, if you wanted to ?”

“No telling what we’d find. So exciting.”

The clerics were all so excited by the idea of travelling through the gateway. He had to ask though;

“Would it be safe to enter the gateway ?” He asked.

“We are in Grey Walker, which is as near indestructible as makes no difference.” Said Ojetin.

“Ninety seven percent probability of surviving rotation, to be exact.” From the female cleric.

“Rotation ?”

“The correct term for Grey Walker, fitting itself into whatever reality we’d find ourselves in.” Said Ojetin.

“What do you think is at the other side of the gateway ?” Asked Luri.

“No real way of knowing.” Said Ojetin.

“Could be anything.”

“Might be a type of reality we don’t understand.”

“It will be a huge step for our science.”

Luri simply looked at him and shrugged and at that moment, he knew they were going through the gateway, the type seven whatever it was.

“I’m needed here of course.” Said Luri. “I’ll get Chlo to allocate a dozen of The Damned to join you though.”

Was she punishing him for something ? Had he offended her, or done something truly dreadful ?

“You can’t leave me here..... With them.” He whispered.

“I have to help the miners, but you’re always talking about being bored.”

That was it, simple female revenge. They’d been together, sharing a bed every night again and he’d said he was bored. Stupid of course, though the punishment felt far worse than his crime.

“We’ll need to alter the configuration of Grey Walker.” Said Ojetin. “You have plenty of time to bring your people onboard.”

The clerics were all smiling at him, yet Delmus just saw a dozen monsters, eager to drain his spirit and bore him to death. He hugged Luri, whispering into her ear.

“Don’t leave me here..... They’re horrible.”

“Nonsense, you’ll have them swearing and watching porn within days.”

They kissed and she left. The clerics began to move the various sections of Grey Walker around, converting the craft to run in the most hazardous of conditions. Members of The Damned arrived and of course he recognised none of them. He was about to set off on a journey into the unknown with nothing but strangers and clerics for company, and he hadn’t brought any porn with him.

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Hol was seriously worried that Celli might die. The hole in her side was deep and bleeding green blood with a few twists of red in it. She found herself wishing it had been Juno or Albas who’d been injured. They were members of The Damned; their bodies could heal even dreadful wounds. Celli

was a Shelzak though and few people understood their physiology. Hol didn't, she was doing her best and hoping for a miracle.

"I was only gone a few hours. Why did you have to open a door?" She asked.

"They were told not to, many times." Said the watcher.

Juno had been the one to open a door, probably out of boredom, though she hadn't yet come up with a plausible explanation. Just one of the guard creatures had been behind that door and it had taken her entire team to kill it, leaving Celli severely wounded.

"I just thought it might lead outside." Said Juno.

That was it, the same ridiculous explanation she'd given several times. The creature was dead, killed by Mingal of all people. While Juno and Albas had distracted it, Mingal had used a destructive spell on the guard's head. The result had been messy, but effective. Hol currently had her hands deep inside a wound in Celli's torso, with no real idea of what to fix.

"Is this one important to your group?" Asked the watcher.

It was a typical watcher question, just the way she tended to express herself.

"Yes, all my people are important."

"Squeeze shut the parts that bleed..... I have plans."

The watcher could move at quite a speed inside her metal sphere. So fast that Hol wondered if the motion made her dizzy. They all knew what she meant by plans. The watcher had books everywhere, full of drawings of just about everything, covered in the scrawl of writing in the language of Ancient Leng. Unsettlingly she had plans for living creatures, probably obtained by dissection. Hol held several bloody tubes closed and tried to ignore the fact that Celli was close to death.

"Here, here..... I have plans, plans for a Shelzak."

Drawings, pages of them with notes that only the watcher could read. They were all becoming used to the watcher and her ways. They'd even learned her name, but it had sounded like a long series of high pitched peeping noises. They carried on calling her watcher, which she didn't object to.

Watcher had two claws on her sphere, both holding her plans for a Shelzak Demon.

"I will tell you what to do, but your hands must do it Hol." Said the watcher. "You will need someone to help you."

They were lucky in a way, all of The Damned carried a small medical kit in their supplies and usually a tub of healing unguent. Needles and surgical thread to stitch wounds, a few dressing and pain killers. Nothing that sophisticated, but as there were three of them, they had quite a lot of it.

"Juno can help me."

Yes, she was punishing her, making her put her hands inside the gory mess that her been her fault and hers alone. Hol had no option than leaving them for a few hours to fix the effluent pumps that fed the fungus farm. No one wanted to think about what might be in the effluent, but the fungus were the only food they had. Juno had behaved like a child, wilfully ignoring orders once Hol wasn't there.

"Juno first." Said the watcher. "Hold the large tube firmly and twist it until it stops bleeding."

"Like this this?"

"Yes, good. Now fold the end over... Yes.... Now Hol should stitch it in that position."

"Isn't that a major blood vessel?" Asked Hol.

It actually sounded as though the watcher sighed.

"Shelzak are not like other demons, her body will grow new blood vessels. No more questions and more stitching Hol."

Hol stitched and they carried on squeezing and stitching several other blood vessels that had been ripped open by the guard's claws. Eventually there were no more bleeding parts to stitch.

"Now a healing spell into the wound, before you stitch the wound closed."

"I can do that and I have some healing moss." Said Mingal.

Celli had threatened violence against Mingal, yet he'd done his best to kill the creature attacking her. That might have been through self-interest, but helping her now wasn't. Hol watched him shred the moss, before gently scattering it inside the open wound. He then uttered several healing spells over Celli.

"Now stich her closed." Said the watcher.

They did and Celli was still alive after they'd finished.

"Time will heal her now, she may be unconscious for days." Said the watcher. "Shelzak are hard to kill if their heart still beats. Your Shelzak should survive."

They buried the guard creature next, interring it under the soil in the fungus farm. A huge creature with claws, sharp teeth and a face that looked unsettlingly human. As they cleaned up afterwards, Juno showed her first sign of being ashamed of her actions.

"I am so sorry..... I had no idea....."

"We need to talk.... In private."

Hol took her through the newly opened door, it seemed appropriate. All the danger, the near death of Celli and the loss of a day working on things that needed fixing. All that had given them just another fifty yards of featureless corridor.

"Do you like the watcher?" Asked Hol.

"Yes, though she can be a little eccentric. I've already learned a lot from her."

"Good, because if you disobey another order I'll leave you here. As you're an immortal, you'll have a long time to learn from her, enjoy the slightly brackish taste of the water and become very fond of eating mushrooms."

Poor Juno had gone quite pale.

"You wouldn't..... Chlo...."

"Chlo isn't here Juno. If I get back to Mendera, I'll tell Chlo that you died in an heroic battle with the Terak."

"I'm sorry Hol, I'll never disobey another of your orders."

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Nurigen looked at the tactical screens, amused that their base had been officially named as 'Kakuas Ogem.' It was a name he'd put on several of his rough notes and somewhere along the line, it had been read by one of the generals. It sounded quite a pretty name, though it meant 'shit hole,' in the original language of Mendera. No matter, it was a name that suited a lot of planets and was unlikely to assist Chlo in finding them. She would find them eventually of course. You can never hide forever, from someone who can look back along the timelines.

"Are you staying to watch our victory?" One of the generals asked.

Aukar had gone to lead the attack on Algaria of course, but most of the Terak had remained behind. They thought it would be an easy victory, though Nurigen had his doubts.

"I'll watch the screen in my quarters." He said.

He walked out of the large control room and along the corridor to his private quarters. There was a guard permanently outside his quarters, sometimes two. So far Aukar had allowed his complete privacy inside his rooms. Nurigen didn't watch the screen, the outcome of the battle for Algaria was unlikely to help achieve his one true goal. After countless billions of years of life, he wanted to die.

Not by suicide though, there seemed to be something in his mind that prevented him from ending his own life.

“Probably another gift from Sikush, another curse.” He muttered.

He lay on his bed, drifting into a state between waking and dreaming. His mind was doing that more and more, to the point where he was sometimes unsure of reality. On Mendera Chlo could pull him out of such dangerous introspection, but it had been a long time since he’d lived in Mendera City.

“Stop wallowing in self-pity, it’s pathetic.”

He looked and Alyz was stood near his door, one of his blades in her hand. He knew it was impossible as he stood up, his mind almost willing her to really be there. He ripped open his garments, baring his chest.

“Do it ! Kill me !” He yelled. “Let this curse end.”

She was there until he blinked and Alyz was gone, no matter how hard he tried to entreat the Gods to make her real. He knew his mind was going, another victim of too long a life, inflicted on a physical being designed to last no more than a few thousand years, at most. The guard entered the room and simply looked at him.

“Please.... She won’t kill me..... Will you ?”

The guard didn’t comment at all, just left to take up his position outside of the door. He’d report the incident of course, the mad Menderan going crazy again. Nurigen decided to watch the battle unfold, turning on his own tactical screen, just as Aukar and his fleet were about to attack Algaria.

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