

## Ripples from the Past

### Chapter 5 – The Old One

**“We must instil in the young a respect for all living things. For is it not said that even a creature as lowly as the humble garden worm, may be descended from a mighty deity, perhaps from Sevril-Narge herself.” - Desa Ubari, Chief Cleric Temple of the Flame**

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There was no one to see the slight reflection of yellow sunlight on the needle craft’s hull. Normally the seven needle ships ran fully cloaked, but he liked to disable their cloaking occasionally, just to be reassured they were there. Raptors too, he seemed to remember being given eleven, though only ten ever obeyed the command to de-cloak. The Old One had become a little obsessed with the notion that the pilotless raptor had gone rogue and was hiding from him. Or of course, he might only have started with ten, his memory circuits had been known to play up a little. His entire fleet of protection vessels glinted proudly, under the light of a fading red giant sun. It didn’t matter as there was no intelligent life to see them, none at all in the entire galaxy and the two other nearest galaxies. Not rare, planets with life were common, but intelligent life was staggeringly rare. Sadly those rare and precious intelligent creatures seemed to throw their lives away for often incoherent causes, which puzzled him.

“I know you normally see Alyz, but she’s on a mission for The Chaln .” Said Jen.

Jen, one of the girls who seemed to infest the interior of his hull, often in quite large numbers. He liked Jen though, tolerably well. It had been assumed that the Agnopods, the highly intelligent insects created from his DNA banks, would take over the role of liaison between him and the empire. After all, they were the race he’d spent billions of years protecting, while finding them a new home. They were everywhere now though, even a few initiated into The Damned. He’d realised quite quickly that they were actually quite dull and boring. In short, he didn’t like them, but then again, he didn’t like many people at all.

“Always good to see you Jen.” He replied. “You can help me sort something out, something that has been worrying me for some time.”

“Yes of course, what is it ?”

“I can appreciate they must get bored, but would any of my craft hide from me ?”

“No, well I don’t think so. Why do you ask ?”

“I only ever see ten raptors and I seem to remember The Chaln  giving me eleven.”

Alyz would have told him without the worried frown developing on her face. Alyz knew his ways, knew that he might get a little mild aphasia every now and then, but nothing too serious. Poor Jen did look troubled. She was blonde, blue eyed and very similar to Alyz in looks. She’d once confided in him that she’d been rather plain as a child. It seemed that part of the initiation into The Damned, included a change of appearance if it was desired.

“Given the choice, who wouldn’t look perpetually young and attractive ?” She’d asked him.

No one of course. Actually there had been Herusher, who seemed to enjoy looking fierce and rather old. He’d been the exception and anyway, Herusher had been killed in the last war with the Rejjacy. Come to think of it, Herusher had been the leader of The Imperial Guard, when he’d been given the raptors.

“You were only given ten raptors.” Said Jen. “I just checked the number with Chlo.”

“Oh, I was so certain.....”

“Seven needle ships, ten raptors,” said Jen, “and of course a varying number of drones, who remain permanently cloaked.”

He didn't like varying numbers, but knew the drones were essential. He might never see them, yet they gave him the ability to talk instantaneously with Chlo, from just about anywhere in the multiverse. Not that he talked to her very often, he preferred talking to Alyz, in person. The drones also gave him the ability to move his reality and travel anywhere, almost instantaneously. A nice trick if you're a five mile long spacecraft. He just wished Jen hadn't mentioned the varying number; he'd worry now, about not being able to count them.

“Thank you Jen, that answered my question. Now I'm sure you didn't come all the way out here, for no good reason. What does The Chaln  require me to do ?”

Never for the empire, his precious DNA banks had been carefully seeded on numerous planets by The Chaln , so he served him, not some nebulous notion of empire. In theory he was scanning, charting and searching for intelligent life, in the vastness of an almost infinite number of bubble universes. He enjoyed the work, thrilled by each new specimen of an unknown form of life encountered, every way that life flourished in adverse conditions. In reality he had another, far darker purpose.

“Mendera has a new enemy,” said Jen, “though at present we're not sure who, or what they hope to achieve.”

She explained much of what had been happening on Mendera and to the people he knew. The dark angel, Sventa hadn't been exactly a friend, but he respected her ferocity in battle and her purity of purpose. Mo he knew well, though not recently. The Old One wasn't as quick at working things out as he had once been, despite Chlo regularly upgrading his circuits.

“I can only think that I feel myself to be very old Chlo, so I think old !”

He still came up with the right answers though, often surprising people with his astute answers.

“People I know, close friends and respected colleagues.” He said. “Everyone attacked has been part of Kittara's inner circle, it can't be coincidental. We're her rogues and thieves, the group responsible for waking the deities.”

Jen was nodding at him.

“I'm sure you'd have been targeted too, if your location wasn't one of the most closely guarded secrets of the empire.”

“You need Luri.” He said. “Not only a deity, she was one of us, one of Kittara's rogues.”

“Delmus has gone to find her.” Said Jen. “Sikush wants you to return to Mendera, establish a high orbit, well away from any of the routes used by other craft. Stay hidden and be ready for when you're needed.”

“I understand Jen.”

“Chlo was told to be prepared to be darker than she dared. That means you must be too.”

“Yes Jen, I understand the implications.”

The Old One was the empire's doomsday weapon, executioner of worlds for The Chaln . His fleet had been altered, pointless additions placed on their outside hulls. Once uncloaked they looked asymmetrical, strange to the eyes of most. Alien ! Which was the effect that been aimed for, more alien than anything usually seen in battle. The empire had even employed the hated Aumashy, adding their terrible weapons to his already deadly assortment of firepower.

In one cargo hold he carried over eight thousand of the Aumashy's Immortals. Not really immortal, yet capable of fighting any battle as though they were. Creations of the bio-technicians, all fear

removed from their minds. The augmented and altered prisoners of wars fought long ago, kept alive for one purpose. To fight to the death, to defeat any enemy The Chaln e might want them sent against. Secret of course, even The Chaln e had to pretend there were lines he wouldn't cross. Did Jen know he'd destroyed an entire race already ? Probably not and he wasn't about to tell her. Wiping out the Kivar was a terrible secret to carry, almost unbearable. He wasn't about to inflict that on Jen.

"I will be ready Jen, I will be ready."

At least Nethuns was more than a loose pile of rubble. A proper moon, as large as some minor planets she'd visited while working for the empire. No atmosphere and about two thirds of the gravity she was used to. Heaven compared to the moon where they'd discovered the giant rockworm. A large force of her dark angels had landed and spread out, some digging in, aiming heavy blasters at the cave mouth. Sventa was patient, waiting for her people to be ready. "Nothing must take us by surprise." She said. "No matter what comes out of the ground, we must be ready for it."

Haan still haunted her steps, rarely more than a few feet from her. She wasn't sure if he sought the reassurance of her presence, or was attempting to protect her. They were both suited up and barely fifty yards from the cave, using the rocky terrain as cover.

"Send in a drone." She ordered. "Using low light image intensifiers only, let's see if we can creep up on them."

The cave that Chlo had identified as the source of the craft, which had just destroyed an imperial battle cruiser. There were scratch marks on the rocks in front of the entrance; something heavy had been regularly entering the cave. An enemy base inside the Menderan solar system defences was a major embarrassment; Chlo was already increasing defences throughout the empire.

"Keep the drone tight against the floor where possible." She ordered.

Seren was carrying the portable terminal. The mobile terminals had many makes and types, yet soldiers invariably ended up calling them all 'the battlebox.' Sventa could follow several drones on its screens and see where all her forces were waiting. In the heat of battle, orders issued via the battlebox, were usually easier to understand than voice commands. Sventa watched, as the drone moved into the cave and began to descend.

"That wall isn't natural rock," said Itzel, "looks like prefabricated habitation, the sort used by mining colonies."

"Looks like a whole town down there." Said Haan.

The floor dipped, as the cave widened and spread out. Whole sections of the cave floor had been cleared of rubble, solid smooth flooring taking its place. Haan was right; at least forty prefab buildings filled the right of the cavern. The left side was where the attacking fleet of craft had been housed and repaired.

"Lots of empty bays, but they still have a few craft left." Said Seren.

"Crap ! They're Red-Tops." Said Sventa. "Someone should have noticed when they attacked."

Of course the cruiser was under attack and over two hundred of her people had died, but someone should have noticed the red painted upper parts of the attacking craft. She admitted to herself that her anger was a little unreasonable, but her officers were sensible enough to avoid mentioning it.

"It's almost a relief," Said Haan, "knowing they're nothing but Red-Tops, space vermin."

"Not a relief for those they killed." She snapped.

"No, of course not. My apologies my president."

Red-Tops, the space gangs. They'd started off as bored rich kids, using their parent's money to buy the fastest and best planet hoppers they could find. Often an annoyance, but basically harmless. Then they'd begun to hire themselves out as muscle, recruiting those the military were keen to discharge. Not just from the empire, they recruited anyone who knew how to use a blaster, which usually meant ex-soldiers. Some thrown out of various armies because of dishonesty, but mainly because of mental instability. The Red-Tops were crazy space vermin, hated by all civilised planets. Who had hired them though ?

"I see movement," said Itzel, "two of them. No, three, all without suits. They must have an atmosphere bubble down there."

"Can't rely on it to stay up, when we attack." Said Sventa. "Keep suited during the attack. We'll move forward immediately and don't forget we need live prisoners to interrogate. No going crazy, try to leave their prefabs intact too. What do I always say about search and destroy Haan ?"

"Search first, then destroy. Never the other way round."

"Good, good. Come on !"

No one moved.

"It's just space vermin." Said Seren. "Let your warriors deal with them."

"It makes sense my president." Said Haan.

It did, but staying safe, doing the sensible thing would have killed her, twice. Sensible would have meant remaining in her quarters on Erasmus Seven, when they were destroyed. The right things would have been to stay on her flagship, when that was blown apart.

"No, sensible seems to be the way to get killed. I'm leading." She said. "Tap it into the battlebox Seren, we need live prisoners. Definitely no feeding !"

Dark angels were well known throughout the empire, their tails and wings no longer scared the citizens. They fed on the meat of animals and generally behaved in a civilised manner. Mothers remembered old stories though, still used them to get naughty children to behave.

"Stop that, or the dark angels will come for you. Eat you they will, now be good."

It was still whispered that they fed on those they killed in battle. It was a secret that everyone in the empire seemed to know. A dark angel's favourite food was a liver, plucked hot and bloody, from the body of an enemy.

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Being nice to Commander Firass and his second in command wasn't a chore, they were both very agreeable company. At first they stared at Silky a little, especially when her wings fluttered. They'd become used to her now though. They were regular evening guests in their home above the emporium, sharing food and often a little too much wine.

"So, I hear you're both going to move here permanently ?" Mo asked.

"Yes, quite soon." Replied Rhian. "I've been told that all my family will be given Menderan citizenship and my boyfriend, if I want that. I'm definitely going to be living here, though I'm still not sure about the boyfriend."

She said it with a smile, but Mo knew the decision had been a difficult one for her. It's never easy to uproot your entire life, even if it is for a promotion and a higher salary.

"There are lots of good looking men on Mendera." Said Silky.

"How about you Kerr, pleased to be on the imperial payroll ?" Mo asked.

"Don't start him off !" Said Rhian. "He keeps finding things to worry about."

Hardly the way to talk to a superior officer, though he'd noticed they were quite good friends at informal gatherings.

"I just keep wondering." Said Kerr Firass. "What's in it for The Chaln  ? He's too damn keen to get us here, far too keen."

"See !" Said Rhian, rolling her eyes.

It seemed the commander was prepared to accept the extra money, but still had doubts. Mo was beginning to really warm to him. He too had been wondering why the empire needed to hire two quite ordinary freighter crew.

"If it means we'll see more of you, I'm happy." Said Silky.

She meant it, though mainly about Rhian. Silky had sort of adopted her into the role of surrogate daughter.

"You were definitely told all your family would be given citizenship ?" He asked Rhian.

"Oh yes, by The Chaln  in person. I have a note too, bearing the imperial seal."

"I have no right to ask." Said Mo. "Tell me to mind my own business if you like, but do you have it with you ?"

Of course she did, probably shown with pride to everyone she knew and a few strangers. Rhian took the piece of thick paper from her pockets, unfolding it carefully before handing it to him.

"It is the only copy I have, don't...."

"I would never dream of damaging it."

There it was, an imperial notice no less. It said that Rhian Dess and all her living blood relations, were granted full Menderan Citizenship. There was even a note about adding one other person, to be named at a later date. The maybe, maybe not boyfriend. It was unheard of ! Warriors had fought and died for the empire, only to have their widows deported. No one was given citizenship, or at least almost no one. Mo had been granted citizenship, though he'd never been given an imperial notice. Silky was still just his guest, an outsider. Mo was feeling slightly upset by it all. Rare wasn't a strong enough word, the piece of paper in front of him was, as far as he knew, unique.

"How about you Kerr ?" He asked.

"Just me, all my living relatives are gone. There is a kind of aunt, but I certainly don't want her moving anywhere near me. Crazy isn't the half of it ! I did get a piece of paper, but it's in the drawer at the hotel."

"This legit Mo ?" Asked Rhian, waving the note. "My family have told everyone, even started selling things they don't want to bring."

"Oh yes, that isn't just a piece of paper, it's law." Said Mo. "The Chaln  is head of church and state, his word cannot be questioned. His honesty has to be assumed in any and all courts. As head of the church, his word is sacred."

He'd overdone it all a bit, but he knew Chlo would be watching everything. Not just through his link with her, she saw and heard everything that went on in Mendera City. Once he had the ability to talk to her, in the same way used by The Damned. Then he'd insulted Sikush for about the fourth or fifth time and the privilege of talking to Chlo, had been removed.

"Good." Said Rhian. "I couldn't see The Chaln  misleading me."

"Relax, as Mo said, The Chaln 's word is law." Said Silky.

Mo remembered Kittara being sent to kill those who'd been promised things by the emperor. He always kept a promise, but the dead didn't ask for promises to be kept. Kittara had been the imperial executioner and Mo was often her companion on such missions. Those had been powerful men and women though, not ordinary people.

"I still wonder, why us ?" Asked Kerr.

"I think it's his way of thanking you." Said Silky.

The diplomatic answer, but Mo still had the same questions as Kerr, why them ?

“Where were you living before ?” Asked Rhian.

“We had an estate out on the 3<sup>rd</sup> rift. Really nice, until this new unknown enemy bombed it to destruction.” Answered Silky.

Kerr was looking at Rhian, not exactly shrugging his shoulders, yet Mo could guess the next question.

“Where is the 3<sup>rd</sup> rift ?” Asked Kerr. “I’ve never heard of it.”

A legitimate question, but Mo grabbed Silky’s hand, before she could answer. Time moved on, the rifts had become something else that had faded into legend. It was rumoured that Sikush encouraged knowledge of the older times to fade, though nothing had ever been officially mentioned about it. Chlo listening in or not, Mo decided to give his guests an honest answer.

“The rifts are the seven worlds that separate the worlds of people, from the darkness beyond Gateway.” He said.

“Yeah, of course.” Said Rhian. “And you had a pet dragon.”

“Tease the colonists time.” Said Kerr. “A bit unkind Mo.”

“He’s telling you the truth.” Said Silky. “Seven rifts, though people like you can only tolerate conditions on the first five. Too little oxygen on six, you need to be a demon to live there. They’re cold blooded and can survive in hot, airless places.”

“What about the 7<sup>th</sup> rift ?” Asked Kerr.

“It’s hell !” Said Mo. “I mean it is literally hell. I’ve read a lot of books from most of the empire worlds and the descriptions of hell are surprisingly similar. I believe it’s a race memory of condition on the 7<sup>th</sup> rift. Hotter than an oven, no oxygen at all. Yet inhabited by.....”

He’d gone too far, he didn’t need Chlo hissing in his ear to tell him.

“Awful place.” Said Silky. “Even I, a creature born of chaos, find it.... Uncomfortable.”

“A what ?” Asked Rhian.

Chlo was really talking to him, telling him it was alright to answer their questions. Poor Kerr and Rhian, it appeared the empire had something in mind for them, rarely a good thing. Not that Silky would have been easy to stop, she was becoming quite agitated.

“What do you think these signify ?” She asked, flapping her tiny residual wings.

Mo thought a tail as long as she was tall, was the real giveaway, but he decided to let Silky run with it.

“Well, we’ve seen some strange..... Sorry Silky.” Said Rhian. “This is Mendera and there are creatures.... Sorry people from all over the empire. I guess I thought....”

“That I’m a strange freak !?” Yelled Silky. “I was born out of chaos, on the edges of the wastes of eternity. I was old before your planets even existed.”

Mo hugged her and kissed her cheek. Silky was becoming hot and agitated, never a good sign. She was a chaos invoker, even if she did usually behave herself while on Mendera.

“I’m so sorry.” Said Rhian. “No offence was intended.”

“You’re our only real friends here.” Added Kerr.

Mo felt Silky cool down. It seemed their guests were no longer in danger of being incinerated or ripped apart.

“It’s all true,” said Mo, “everything you’ve read about Menderan mythology. Actually mostly true, there have been a few weird additions over the year. We lived happily on the 3<sup>rd</sup> rift and I’m part demon myself.”

“And the dragons ?” Asked Rhian.

Silky was shaking her head.

“No dragons, they are just a legend.” She said.

Mo was enjoying the look on their faces, as his guests realised that most of the legends they’d read about Mendera were actually true. He had no idea why they were so important to the empire, but they would have a better idea of what they might encounter. Of course, how dense he’d become ! That was why Sikush had told him to befriend the good captain and his second officer.

“Why are you chuckling ?” Asked Silky.

“Nothing important dear, nothing important.”

No matter how well planned, all battles descended into chaos once the first shots were fired. Sventa knew that instinctively, others had to learn it the hard way. Her warriors were obeying orders, trying to take the enemy alive if possible. That meant taking risks, four of her elite team were injured. Not dead, it was a difficult task to kill a dark angel. Out of action though and she’d only taken a small force into the caverns.

“Seren.” She called, using her communicator.

There wasn’t the usual instant response, everyone seemed to be having a tough fight. The Red-Tops might be space vermin, but they fought well when cornered.

“Yes my president ?”

“Do we have any prisoners yet ?”

“Two, both transferred to the shuttle.”

“We need more, at least four of five. One of their leaders would nice. Move most of our forces to the habitation areas.”

“It will be done.”

The enemy were relying on the atmosphere bubble holding up. Risky, but it meant they weren’t hampered by moving around in clumsy space suits. Sventa had seen a few atmosphere bubbles collapse and the effect on those inside was unpleasant. Designed for mining communities, the force fields holding the air inside were reliable, unless something blasted a huge enough hole to collapse the whole thing. Haan was in front of her as one of the Red-Tops seemed to appear out of nowhere, Ion blaster held up in front of him. Haan reacted quickly, almost cutting the man in two with his blaster.

“Sorry, I know you wanted prisoners.”

“I’m happy to have you alive and a dead enemy.” She replied.

Something was happening near the habitation areas, lots of firing and Seren’s voice in her ear.

“One of their commanders has escaped and has locked himself in one of their craft. It seems likely he will try to launch the vessel and escape. What are your orders ?”

“If he tries to take off, bring him down. Use everything you have.” She replied.

She could only watch, the hand held blasters she and Haan carried, weren’t designed to penetrate the hull of a space craft. More blaster fire, though it was hard to tell where from. There was a bright flare of light, as the enemy commander used the lift thrusters to get off the ground.

“He’s going to escape !” Said Haan.

“No, some of our people brought missile launchers.”

It seemed Haan might be right, as the small enemy vessel accelerated towards the exit from the cavern. A missile found it though, reducing it to a white hot ball of energy and pieces of debris. It had all taken less than a few seconds. Too much for the atmosphere bubble, the generators couldn’t keep up with the damage. The cavern was almost instantly exposed to the near vacuum of space.

“Down Haan !” She yelled. “Hug the ground.”

The rush of air didn't last long. It was powerful though, pulling her across the cavern floor, until she found a crack in the ground to get the fingers of her suit into. Sventa saw enemy bodies sucked into space, barrels of some kind too, one hitting her helmet. It stopped and she was up on her knees, surveying the wreckage. Part of the habitation area was still intact, hopefully still airtight.

"Haan, are you alright?"

"Yes."

He'd collided with the side of a mining machine. It had never occurred to Sventa, but it looked as though the cavern might have once been an imperial mining colony. The machine looked old, no obvious empire markings, though those might have corroded away. She helped Haan stand up.

"Seren."

A long wait, she must have had a few problem of her own to deal with.

"Are you safe my president?"

"Yes, though little is left in one piece out here. I'm joining the forces in the enemies habitations, we need more prisoners."

"We have one more my president, one of their leaders."

"Good, look for more though."

She walked towards the nearest airlock, Haan following her. More evidence that the cavern had been a mine, piles of ore of some kind. They'd been mining metals on the moon once, though everything told her it had been years before, perhaps centuries. The enemy had recycled a convenient hole in the ground.

The Red-Top might have known what he was doing, or it might have been an accident. Maybe not everyone was aware that the cavern was now open to space. Just a few feet in front of her, the airlock door opened, before being flung out by explosive bolts. An enemy, weapon up and ready, followed it.

"Poor bastard!" Said Haan.

He'd been an enemy, but Sventa agreed. There were stories about people surviving for several minutes in space, but they were all crap. Maybe for a cold blooded demon, with an external hard carapace. Even then, they'd probably just take a few seconds longer to die. A warm blooded member of the Red-Tops, with soft skin and lots of tiny blood vessels, boiled to death in a few seconds. Sventa had seen it before, but it didn't make it any easier to watch, even for a creature who fed on viscera.

"Don't throw up in your helmet Haan, look away."

The man's blood boiled in his small veins first. His neck became a mass of bloody steam, as his veins burst. His eyes next, a fraction of a second later. He steamed from every orifice, as all his bodily fluids, boiled and evaporated. Soon he'd be nothing but a dry husk, but Sventa look away before that happened.

"Fuck! We need them alive." She said. "Come on Haan, we'll use the door he opened."

Sventa entered the prefabricated housing area, surprised but pleased, that the lighting still functioned.

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Delmus and Alyz found themselves standing on a perfect beach of fine white sand. No footmarks, just miles of unblemished white sand. Gentle waves of clean ocean water, rushing up the beach at regular intervals. It looked like they'd been dropped into paradise.

"Beautiful, but where are we?" Asked Alyz.

He looked around for a while, the beach and the palms behind it, were perfect. He just wished he knew where they were, so that he could return one day. Normally he'd have connected with Chlo, to be given his current location in a matter of moments. There was no Chlo though and the multiverse contained an almost infinite number of planets with perfect beaches and clean oceans.

"I have no idea." He admitted. "We're lost, which was an important part of the plan."

"Let me talk to Chlo."

"No, you gave me your word."

"Fine."

Alyz sat on the sand and looked fed up. He sat opposite her and removed a small gold box from his pocket.

"A rift manipulator is useless without a known location, as a start point." Said Alyz.

"Who said it was a rift manipulator?"

He had her interest now, as he held the gold box in his hands and concentrated. A gift from the Gods, or more accurately Luri, the deity who was still his lover. The box looked like a demon device of some kind, which was why no one had suspected it was his way of meeting Luri.

"What are you doing Delmus?"

"Shush, I need to concentrate."

Two words in the tongue of the Lummel, the rift walkers. Luri had taught him how to think the words, until they became real, turned into keys to open a lock. There was an audible click, as a portal opened on that perfect beach. Alyz winked at him.

"Never doubted you for a minute." She said.

"Hmmm, come on, still a long way to travel. Close your eyes as you step into the portal, it tends to spin you round a bit."

Despite his warning to Alyz, he arrived on the hillside, feeling a little nauseous. The sky had the constant ultra-violet wash, which indicated they were on one of the rifts.

"First rift, the Ring of Volkin, fifteen miles or so from the ruins of The City of the Lost God." Said Alyz.

"I've been here before, though not very often. Why here?"

"The ring is a gateway, to any of a thousand locations, most of them long gone." He replied. "Know the right words and actions to activate it and you can go straight to the darkness beyond Leng."

"We're going there?"

"I'm not forcing you to come, Alyz. If you want to come with me to see Luri, that is where we'll find her."

"Fine, I'm coming."

He liked the way she didn't ask if it was going to be dangerous, or if they were likely to die in the attempt. He liked that about Alyz, no getting bogged down in nonsense with her.

"We need to stand in the gravel area, right at the centre of the circle." He said. "Be alert though, there are quite a few bandits on the rift and worse."

"Bandits I can handle, what is this worse?"

"A year ago I saw a chaos creature on the other side of the valley." He replied. "You don't want one of them touching you."

He walked down the edge of the valley. Fertile land, it had once been full of farmers and their crops. The city had gone though, no more people to buy fresh produce. The farmers had moved on, but the land was still green and fertile. There were several competing ideas about who Volkin was, probably all wrong. Five ancient rings of standing stones, with an area of gravel at their centre. Treasure had been found near some of the stones, so the locals had dug and tunnelled, until the ring looked like a

building site. That had been long ago and nature had softened edges, but the Ring of Volkin looked fairly dilapidated.

“Did they ever find any treasure ?” Asked Alyz, looking into a hole.

“Yes, heaps of it, from what I remember.”

He passed a skeletal hand with six fingers, protruding from a hole next to a toppled stone. The ring was a bad place and many had died trying to find the treasure it contained. Delmus thought they were going to reach the centre unmolested, until he heard the noises behind them.

“I don’t have time for this.” He said. “Go now and you might see another sunrise.”

Sometimes a threat worked, though in truth, they rarely worked. The leader of the bandits was a large demon hybrid, with eight or nine of his fellow bandits to impress. He wasn’t going to back down, they almost never did. Delmus drew his Nurigen sword and waited for the bandits to attack. In truth, the bandits didn’t worry him. A chaos creature was coming out of the trees behind the bandits and that did worry him, it worried him a lot.

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Hol waited in the corridor, her body pushed back into a corner full of shadows. No one followed her or entered the corridor, which only led to one place, the chamber of the flame. The true flame, there was an official flame in the main meeting hall, where there was room for thousands to kneel before the sacred flame. Most of the clerics knew it wasn’t the real flame, but some had grown up, thinking it was the real thing. A few more generations and it was likely that no one would visit the true flame, apart from The Damned. Hol decided it was safe to talk to Seesha and Mix, her two young spies. She quietly entered the chamber, watching Seesha read to Mix.

“What are you reading ?” She asked.

“Tales of the Demon Wars.” Replied Seesha. “He likes to hear about the ancient heroes.”

It was a book etched onto metal, part of the forbidden knowledge. In theory they were committing a grave offence, but both of them appeared to think it was purely fiction.

“Xanash the 34th and last Demon Emperor, is my favourite.” Said Mix.

Hol remembered that Xanash had been responsible for impaling his enemies in vast numbers, but didn’t want to mention that to Mix.

“Did you hear anything I might find useful ?” She asked.

They’d happily agreed to be her spies, yet she now saw a worried look on their faces.

“You can’t do anything to make them think we told you.” Said Seesha.

“I won’t Seesha, we can even meet in different places. Though no one seems to come to this chamber.”

“The flame scares them I think.” Said Mix.

Hol sat cross legged on the dusty floor, waiting for them to tell her their news, in their own time.

“We watch the news from right across the empire.” Said Seesha. “Do they have those machines here, detectors to find dead bodies ?”

“Where did you hear about those ?” Hol asked.

“Algaria 3.” Answered Mix. “They used a detector to find some dead gang members.”

Cleric’s kids watching broadcast news about dead drug dealers, it seemed grotesque, yet locking them completely away from the outside was worse.

“This is Mendera.” Said Hol. “We always do things a little differently. Here the militia call in the assistance of those with an ability to see what is hidden, the Seers.”

“The Seers can’t enter the temple.” Said Seesha.

“Here ! You’re saying there are dead bodies inside the temple grounds ?”

"We think so." Said Mix.

"They trust us now, we hear things." Said Seesha.

"Have you joined this group?" Asked Hol.

Poor Mix had his head down looking at the floor. She didn't really need them to answer her question.

"We had to." Said Seesha. "You either join or become what they call an unbeliever. The unbelievers sometimes have bad things happen to them."

"Have you hurt anyone?"

"No, never Hol, honestly." Said Seesha. "We just nod when they talk to us and keep quiet."

"We listen." Added Mix.

"Who have they killed?"

More awkward looks between them. It might well be nothing but nonsense anyway, the warped imagination of a group of bored kids. It was Mendera City, where Chlo watched everything, Chlo knew everything that happened. A cult killing clerics! Hol hoped it all turned out to be nonsense.

"We can't tell you." Said Seesha. "They always seem to know if anyone has betrayed them. You'll need to search the entire vegetable garden."

"Especially near the statue of Thrax." Added Mix.

Seesha actually pinched his arm, making him yell.

"You can't go straight to the bodies." Said Seesha. "They'll know someone talked. They'll find us and kill us. Promise me you'll make it look as though you found the bodies by accident."

"I will, promise. What do these people worship, if they call others unbelievers?"

Hol shuddered as both of the kids simply looked down at the floor. Fuck! A chaos cult in the temple itself, it had to be a huge mistake. It was all too much for her to handle alone, she had to talk to Chlo.

"I need to talk to someone." She said. "Don't worry, we'll make any search look random. I have to go now."

"Will you still take us outside?" Asked Mix.

"Of course I will, you've done nothing wrong. Would you like to see a real live demon?"

"Oh yes, really? I thought they were all dead."

"No Mix, there are still some, if you know where to look."

Chlo had a section of the Imperial Palace as her official home, but she liked to live in the barracks for some reason. It was an eccentricity that no one questioned anymore. Hol asked for permission to visit her, mentioning the matter was quite serious.

"Of course Hol, I'll have some wine ready."

Chlo was sat quietly, looking out of her windows at the area of trees that met the city wall about half a mile away. She had once told Hol that she couldn't remember much about Enfellan where she'd been created, but she remembered the furniture in the room where she'd gone for 'education.' She remembered the few ornaments around the room. She'd taken those few memories and created a suite of rooms for herself that was comfortable, yet with a definite alien feel.

"Ushong, my own copy, but good as the original." Said Chlo, handing her a long glass of cool wine.

Hol sat next to Chlo on the sofa, sipping her wine, while gathering her thoughts.

"We have a problem Chlo. There may well be a chaos cult among the cleric of The Temple of the Flame and they may be killing anyone they see as a threat."

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Four prisoners were in the holding cell, deliberately put in together. They hadn't said a lot, but they didn't need to. Sveta's people were good, in an hour or so, they'd analysed the social dynamic of the four captured Red-Tops.

"The one in the yellow shirt is the leader."

Aishar speaking, her chief inquisitor. At one time Sveta would have gone straight in with a sharp knife and found out what she wanted to know. She had to admit though, that Aishar's more subtle techniques, usually provided better intelligence.

"And the others?" Asked Sveta.

"The guy with one shoe is jumpy, scared shitless actually. He's probably a conscript they picked up during a raid. The usual join us or die horribly type of recruitment. Blue jacket is a medium level rank, probably been a hard core gang member for years. Same for the guy wearing the eyepatch."

"We only have one chance to find out who hired them." Said Sveta. "This has to work."

"Trust me, have I ever failed?"

"No Aishar, you haven't. I know the plan, let's begin."

Haan was still with her, like a permanent shadow. He didn't know her plans for the prisoners, which might work to her advantage. Itzel had other duties, but Seren walked behind, as they entered the room with the captives.

"Waste of time my president." Said Aishar. "We've been monitoring them for hours, they're low ranks who know nothing."

No reaction from the prisoners, even jumpy one shoe. They all lounged back in their chairs, waiting for their next meal to arrive. Everyone knew Mendera had gone a little soft, but not anymore.

"If you're no use for information, we have other uses for you." Said Sveta. "Just tell me who hired you and it'll be a comfy cell for a few years. Probably one more comfortable than the cavern we found you in."

Nothing, though blue jacket did deliberately burp loudly at her. Sveta turned towards Seren.

"Are you feeling hungry?"

"I'm always hungry my president."

Sveta pretended to look around, choosing the victim carefully. Actually she'd agreed who it was going to be with Aishar. Yellow shirt, the leader, or at least the one the other prisoners had deferred to while being held. It went against her instincts to kill the one who just might have the information they needed, but Aishar never failed, ever.

"Him." She said. Pointing. "Take your time, enjoy your meal."

Seren hadn't been part of the planning, she looked genuinely confused. There was a chance of course, that it was all a bluff. The prisoner's calmness seemed to indicate they weren't taking it seriously.

"Eat Seren, eat!"

Dark angels didn't need much encouragement to feed on their favourite food. No playing, not a bluff, Seren ripped off the yellow shirt, flinging him to the floor. She then pushed her talons into the flesh just below his ribs and ripped. The atmosphere in the room instantly changed. Blue jacket actually tried to attack Aisha, though she easily knocked him to ground. It was all for the benefit of jumpy one shoe though, he ran into a corner and actually cried.

The liver is a highly arterial organ; usually the person being used as food dies fairly quickly. Blood loss, shock, they normally passed out within a few seconds and were dead within a minute. Not him though, the one who'd had a yellow shirt. He seemed aware of being fed on, right up the point where Seren ripped out what was left of his liver.

“Anyone else want some ?” She asked, offering round the bloody remains.

That was enough for jumpy one shoe, more than enough. His trousers were already stained with urine, he’d seen enough to be terrified.

“I’ll tell you everything.” He said. “I heard them talking about it. Who hired them, how much they were paid and where they’ll attack next. Just don’t eat me !”

No getting him cleaned up, that would give his nerves a chance to settle down. Eye patch was threatening him if he talked, so Sventa ripped out his throat. She then sat on the ground near jumpy one shoe.

“Tell me everything.” She said. “We’ll start with who hired them ?”

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