

## Ripples from the Past

### Chapter 13 - Estrid

**“Most Menderans thought Celli was from an unaligned planet, there were a lot of stranger looking people in Mendera City. The odd thing was that in a world where almost no one was sick, Celli made a very good living out of her potions.”**

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Hol learned the hard way that promises made to children, had to be kept. They pestered, they gave you looks of disappointment for hours at a time. Seesha and Mix weren't going to let her off a half promise she'd once made to them.

“You said we could meet a real demon.” Seesha had told her, often.

“One with a tail.” From Mix.

Kids could dish out cruel verbal punishments for breaking promises and Hol knew she had to do something, even if only to keep their trust. The intention had been to take them to see Silky, with her tiny wings and tail as long as she was tall. Silky was harmless, most days and she loved children most of the time. Silky was on a mission with Mo though, heading towards the planet Medrona, the planet with portals to just about anywhere. There were pure blood Dredger demons on the 4<sup>th</sup> rift, traders in rare herbs and magical items. The rifts were a dangerous place for children though, even annoying ones. That had left Celli, who no one in their right mind would call harmless.

“Celli is a Shelzak demon, one of the most dangerous.” She'd told them.

“Wow.” From Mix.

“Does it have wings ?” Seesha had asked.

“She not it, Celli is a female demon and yes she has wings, tiny ones and a tail.” Hol had answered.

“And Shelzak have claws.”

She could tell by the look in their eyes that nothing was going to put them off. Hol was currently getting them dressed in clothes to fit in with the citizens of Mendera.

“After you've been to see Celli, we can look around the market.” She said.

“Thank you.” Said Seesha. “Can we buy things ?”

“I want a pet, a lizard !” Yelled Mix.

It was going to be fine, all kids were noisy and gawped at people. Hol said a silent prayer to no one in particular and hoped the day passed with no serious incident.

“No pets ! You have to be polite to Celli, she can be a bit grumpy.”

“Wow.” Said Mix.

It was that kind of day, when everything excited them. She'd shown them the ocean and an uninhabited moon. Now was their first outing in Mendera, a chance to rub shoulders with people who weren't all clerics of the flame.

“Hold on tight and close your eyes, we're going to appear in her store room.”

“Wow !”

Celli had moved in from the rifts, helped by Hol to find premises for rent in the cheaper part of the market area. A favour done for the empire, and Celli had been helped to find suppliers of the potions and herbs she'd sold from a yurt out on the rifts. Most Menderans thought Celli was from an unaligned planet, there were a lot of stranger looking people in Mendera City. The odd thing was that in a world where almost no one was sick, Celli made a very good living out of her potions.

“Be polite and I'll buy you both something nice.”

They were in the storeroom behind Celli's shop and Hol felt the need to bribe the kids again. Not a good long term practise, but it was effective. Hol opened the door and led them into the shop, where Celli was stood behind the counter.

"So these are the children !" Said Celli. "Welcome to my emporium of magical potions and herbs."

"Wow !" Said Mix.

"Are they really magical ?" Asked Seesha.

"Some are, some maybe not." Answered Celli. "Come over here and I'll show you some that are."

The kids ran forward with glee, which was surprising. Shelzak demons come with a hard carapace, which makes them hard to kill, but doesn't improve their looks. Hol had seen one carry on running, after getting hit in the chest by an Ion blaster. They were tall and tough, even the females. The kids were used to seeing weird creatures on the newsfeeds though and they showed no worries about Celli. Even the ridge of sharp bone fins on her neck didn't phase them.

"Have you got a potion to make me invisible ?" Asked Mix.

Celli looked at him with her unblinking green eyes and actually smiled. Hol had heard she was good with kids, but seeing it with her own eyes....It was jaw dropping.

"No, but I have a perfume that I think will please your sister. It is the one used by the female members of The Damned. Expensive and hard to obtain, but genuine, you have my word."

"Really, I can buy it ?"

Everyone was looking at her and obviously expecting her to say yes. Did she want Seesha using her favourite perfume ? It seemed better than looking at her disappointed expression for weeks.

"Fine Celli, add it to my bill."

Seesha used far too much of course, filling the room with the perfume that most female members of The Damned had used at one time or another, including Kittara. She looked happy though, accepting a few instructions from Celli on the correct amount to use. Mix still looked unhappy at not being invisible though.

"There is a powder that grants the user temporary invisibility." Said Celli. "Once again it is quite rare and rather expensive."

Hol had seen a few magicians use such powders, they rarely worked that well. She didn't want to upset Mix, but buying him junk that didn't work, was likely to upset him more.

"How long is temporary ?" She asked.

"Five to ten minutes, depending on the amount used..... I could give a little free demonstration, if you'd like ?"

"Yes, please Hol, say yes." Said Mix.

"Fine, show us how good it is." She said.

The powder sparkled, as Celli sprinkled a tiny amount over Mix. He vanished, apart from a tiny ripple in the light, which was barely discernible. It wasn't good enough to excite the military, but Seesha was astounded.

"You've gone Mix, vanished !" She yelled.

He pulled her hair, while she pretended not to know who'd done it.

"Can you find two packets of that powder ?" Asked Hol.

Celli gave a slight bow.

"I can always find more of a rare item, for such a good customer."

The children were happy; her treat day out for them was working. True they'd have been just as happy trudging along a beach on an uninhabited planet, but Hol wanted them to become used to dealing with people. Proper people, who didn't spend their entire life living in the bowels of a

temple. The invisibility powder had just worn off, when someone came into the shop through the door to the street. Hol didn't bow, though Celli and the children did.

"I sensed your presence in the city and needed to talk to you." Said Estrid.

"I promised the children a full day in Mendera City." Said Hol.

"It won't take long Hol, perhaps Celli could look after them?"

Estrid always seemed to know everyone, even shopkeepers who'd only moved into the city relatively recently. It seemed living deities really were omniscient, or Estrid had a link into Chlo's databases. The local population were confused by a legend come to life, who now walked the streets of their city. Estrid did seem popular though, which meant Sikush pushing her onto the daily news broadcasts. Celli was nodding at her and the kids looked happy to remain with her, so Hol walked through the door into Celli's backroom, the one where she entertained big spending clients.

"I'm sure the death penalty is still in force, for removing clerics from the temple." Said Estrid.

"They are owed more than a few days out." She replied.

Estrid had always been Kittara's friend, or gone around with Alyz. Hol didn't really know her that well, wasn't really sure how to take her. Celli's backroom was furnished like a nomadic yurt, enormous cushions surrounding a low table. Estrid sat first, with Hol finding a place where she could see Estrid's face as they talked.

"I always wanted the young to be allowed time away from the temple." Said Estrid. "What did you think of the plan Sikush outlined?"

They were alone and Hol had been wanting to speak her mind about events on Leviathan.

"Sending vast numbers of The Damned to the far reaches of the empire isn't a plan." She said. "Any more than parading two deities in front of the news media. I can see that it will comfort the citizens of the empire, but as to a plan..... I'm assuming he's still working on it."

Estrid was looking at her so intently, that Hol almost felt her mind crawling over hers.

"I did something silly while I wasn't fully awake." Said Estrid. "I told him that Kittara wasn't really dead. He pretended to ignore it, but I know he's planning to look for her."

"Oh, using resources we desperately need." Said Hol.

Again Estrid just looked at her, as if deciding whether to tell her more. The deity nodded, obviously a decision had been made.

"I need you to do me a favour Hol, a huge one. A favour that will put you in peril and may even cause your death."

"Sikush has appointed me as head of the temple." Said Hol. "There are duties that come with the role, responsibilities. I can't just run off on errands, even for you."

An answer almost guaranteed to annoy, yet Estrid was smiling at her.

"Sikush may be head of the temple and Mendera has always been more into veneration than worship." Said Estrid. "I am one of the deities venerated though, so it could be said..... That you now work for me."

Hol gave a slight bow, barely more than an exaggerated bob of her head.

"I am of course happy to be of service." Said Hol. "As long as Sikush agrees to this favour."

"Oh no, that would never do, he'd just get in the way and complicate everything." Said Estrid. "This favour is all about bringing Kittara back, if that helps?"

It helped a lot, though she still wasn't keen on simply vanishing from her new role. It suddenly broke through her preoccupation with the mundane. It was as if she's heard Estrid say it, but hadn't understood the words, at first.

"You're really saying Kittara is still alive?" She asked.

“Life, death, where one ends and the other begins..... It’s all immaterial really. Tell me Hol, what do you remember of her death and the current legends surrounding it ?”

“There is no legend among the general population, her deeds are long forgotten. The clerics keep to the version etched onto metal pages by Nurigen. Kittara took so much power into herself to defeat the crawling chaos, that her mortal body was destroyed. She literally melted away, leaving just an essence behind in the ground where she fell. Millennia later a group of converted chaos creatures converged on the spot and began the construction of a town, which eventually became the vast city of Leng.”

Estrid nodded for a second or two, looking straight at the ground.

“As accurate as makes no difference.” She said. “Half of all legends are false, but so is a good half of everything believed to be fact. The essence was found by a gifted shaman, travelling with a demon army who’d just lost a battle. Twenty thousand demon soldiers built the first version of Leng, though that hardly matters now. You need to go there Hol, it’s important.”

“Me ! Go to Leng ?!”

“You’ve been there before with Kittara.” Said Estrid. “You’re one of the few to go there and return, almost the only person known to have shouted defiance at Gateway and lived to tell the tale. You faced the entire demon army with Kittara and Gateway isn’t the place it once was. Sadly neither is Leng and I fear time will have been unkind to those that wait there.”

“What do I need to do ?”

“Find a few to take with you, those designed to survive life on the 7<sup>th</sup> rift. Take your new friend Mingal, he may be useful. You can’t tell them where you’re going of course, until you’re away from Chlo and her ever open ears. Those that wait will be in Leng, though you might not recognise them as friends. As I say, time is likely to have been unkind to them. They will know what must be done.” Going to Leng, it all seemed strange and impossible, but she had been there before. It felt like a different person had made that trip though, a younger and braver version of herself.

“When do I need to get there ?”

“Enjoy your day with Seesha and Mix, then collect your group together. Not too many, two or three should do it. Be on the 1<sup>st</sup> rift within two days and hope it’s not already too late. You’ll need to travel in dark places and trust Mingal Hol. You were always very resourceful though.”

Estrid vanished, leaving Hol to join Seesha and Mix, who’d managed to find another four, must have items to add to her bill. It occurred to her that Shelzak demons actually thrived in places like the 7<sup>th</sup> rift.

“Celli, can we talk in private for a moment ?” She asked. “Later of course, once these two monsters are safely back home.”

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Late that night, while Hol was trying to persuade Celli to join her group on a journey of unspecified dangers to a place yet to be defined, Commander Yerli was trying to deal with yet another identity problem. Tourists and pilgrims to the holy city arrived on vast space cruise vessels, which remained in orbit around Mendera. The old practise had been to wait until the shuttles landed, before carrying out identity checks on the new arrivals. Now the scanning and checking started while the shuttles were in transit. It could take three hours for a shuttle to leave an orbiting vessel and arrive at a landing point just outside the city. More than enough time to deal with any dangerous arrivals and anomalies. He looked at the twenty harmless looking pilgrims, sat in their seats and wondered why they all had red circles around their heads. The automated checking systems had given everyone else on the shuttle, a nice green ring on the screen. Green meant harmless, it meant no headaches;

it meant getting home on time after his shift finished. He selected one of the red circled passengers at random and pressed his finger to the screen.

'Physical anomaly.' Said a male sounding voice.

Yerli had run the Mendera City militia for over six hundred years, building up a lot of experience. Sadly most of it involved banging heads together to keep the peace, but he knew pilgrims. Millions of them swarmed through his city every year and there was something strange about the twenty with red circles round their heads.

"No children." He muttered.

Tourists always brought their children, often far too many in his opinion. Plus they were all from several different empire worlds according to the passenger list, yet they'd come together in one section of the shuttle. Commander Yerli knew his own limitations and how upset The Chaln  would be about anything bad happening to the three hundred and five pilgrims on the shuttle.

"Chlo, I need some assistance with this." He called.

"You're right about the children. Silly mistake for them to make."

Chlo, stood beside him making him feel more confident. He was still wary of her, most people on Mendera were. Chlo arriving usually meant a problem being solved though, or at least being given to someone else to sort out. He rarely asked direct questions of her, but curiosity got the better of him.

"What are they Chlo?" He asked.

"Fake people with bombs inside." Answered Chlo. "Not androids, but fully organic humans, right down to their last set of chromosomes. Not a new idea Commander, but I haven't seen anyone use it in a very long time."

He looked at the passengers in their seats, all behaving so normally. One of the women must have told a joke, because everyone around her began to laugh.

"They look so ordinary." He said.

He was used to her screens popping up out of thin air. She showed him the view from one of her probes, as it scanned what looked like a harmless young woman. It was there, a metal canister nestling where her left kidney should have been. Munitions was something he understood and twenty such canisters, containing high tech explosive... It was enough to flatten miles of the city. "Less space inside children of course." Said Chlo. "And their minds are still forming, far harder to insert large amounts of pre-determined behaviour."

He had so many questions, but knew asking them wouldn't please her. They were faced with a serious problem and he had confidence in her ability to solve it.

"The Maran Group used such creatures to try and kill members of the high council." Said Chlo.

"Scanning wasn't as advanced then, canisters under flesh were harder to spot with the equipment used at the shuttle landing sites. Now these people will be caught as soon as they walk into the arrivals area and they know it."

Chlo used another screen to bring up a map, showing the shuttle landing area to the north. It was right up against the city wall, barely half a mile from the imperial palace. He didn't need her to tell him what the creatures had been intending to accomplish.

"They'll detonate on arrival and destroy a good chunk of The Chaln 's palace." He said.

"Imagine the panic throughout the empire Commander, the drop in public morale." She said. "The empire will look vulnerable and some of our old enemies might be tempted to try their luck again.

We mustn't let it happen."

He didn't like the we, he really wanted Chlo to vanish, taking the dilemma with her. There were two living deities in Mendera City, why weren't they going to sort it out ? Chlo was being quiet, looking intently at the map of the city.

"First I'm going to allow a sandstorm to get past the defences." She said. "One far too powerful for any shuttle to land near the city. It must all look genuine, these creatures aren't stupid and we don't want them destroying the shuttle en-route."

"During the last severe storm, shuttles were diverted to the spaceport near Calmis-An, the one usually only used by tourists visiting the southern ocean." He said.

"Far enough away for our purposes." Said Chlo. "You can call traffic control to have them redirected, make it all sound purely routine."

"Yes, I'll do it right away."

He didn't have direct links to traffic control, he needed to go to his private office to use an old fashioned communicator. Chlo didn't seem to have moved from the spot, while he'd been away.

"They will land at Calmis-An Spaceport in two hours and thirty seven minutes." He said.

"Good Commander, I have the start of a plan forming in my head."

She smiled at him, the disconcerting smile that seemed to find every flaw in his soul.

"We've known each other a long time, haven't we ?" She asked.

"Hmm.... Yes, over six hundred years. Since I became Commander of the militia."

"Six hundred and eight years, to be exact." Said Chlo.

A bottle appeared in her right hand and then two glasses in her left. He recognised the label on the bottle as his favourite, a hard to find wine from the Pesallia Group. She filled the two glasses and handed one to him. Drinking on duty was against the law, but it was Chlo giving him the drink. He sipped at it, while she continued to look him over.

"May I call you Casto ?" She asked.

Crap ! His first name, things had to be serious, even his wife called him Yerli.

"Of course."

"We're going to sort this out, just you and I." She said. "We'll need a few of your men and a few of the imperial guard to help us. Then, once all this is over, we will never mention it again. Do you understand ?"

"Yes, yes I do Chlo."

"Good ! The automatic systems are part of me Casto, which will be useful. At the moment your militia in their barracks at Calmis-An are being woken up, alarms bringing them out of their beds. They will only know that a diverted shuttle will soon be landing, one full of pilgrims to be looked after."

He nodded at her, knowing the local militia there were glorified tour guides, guaranteed to panic if they knew the truth.

"They will be the background noise for our plan, bustling about to add a feeling of normality." Said Chlo. "I need two of your best though, two who know your procedures inside out and are well known in Calmis-An. Most importantly, they must be tough enough to know the truth and still function as though they don't."

He had less than a dozen good fighters in the entire militia. The new discipline had made the militia far more popular among the local citizens, but it was suffocating to old time warriors. He gave Chlo two names, one female, one male. She instantly pulled their files up on a screen.

"You don't usually see augmented females in the militia." She said.

"She's good, one of the best." He replied.

Casto Yerli sipped his drink and hoped his choices were the right ones, the lives of the two thousand or so inhabitants of the spaceport at Calmis-An were at stake. Plus the genuine pilgrims on the shuttle of course. If they died, he'd probably need to find a new career.

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Rhian watched the various screens for reports, as The Revenge orbited the lifeless rock that Mo had led them to.

"No life at all, no water and yet a breathable atmosphere." She said. "Only just about breathable, the oxygen is a little low. Are you sure this is the right place?"

Mo looked at the screens and nodded at her.

"This is Medrona, I've been here a few times." He replied. "The air is a bit thin, might be a good idea for you and Kerr to take breathers."

Mo had been quiet since they'd gone into orbit around Medrona, so had Silky. It was fairly obvious that Medrona wasn't a good place to visit and the rifts sounded far worse. Not for the first time, she wondered if it was all worth the bonus Mo had promised them. Kerr seemed unusually animated and sober.

"Where do you want me to put us down?" He asked.

The Revenge wasn't designed to look closely at the planet surface; container spaceports usually broadcast their coordinates via several powerful beacons. Mo glued his face to the screen and zoomed in the view to show the planet's surface in the best definition possible, which wasn't that good.

"We're just coming over it." He said. "Damn a few dust clouds in the way..... There !!"

He jabbed his finger at an area of brownish rubble that looked much the same as any other part of the landscape below then. Rhian entered the coordinates into the navigation systems.

"See that hill?" Asked Mo.

"Not really?" She admitted.

"It all looks the same from up here, but it's about a mile away from where we'll be landing." He said.

"There is a pathway of sorts, though we'll never see it from orbit. On the side of that hill is a ring of standing stones, which is our doorway to the rifts."

Silky was looking at the screen as though it might bite her.

"Tell us about the things that will try and kill us?" Asked Kerr.

"I er... What !"

"Come on Mo, there's obviously something bad down there, tell us about it?" She asked.

"It was the clerics digging up their stones." Said Silky. "Disturbing what should be left alone."

"Ok, now you have to tell us, or I'm not taking us out of orbit." Said Kerr.

Mo was prodding his finger at the screen, at the spot he wanted them to land, which was about to vanish as their orbit took them round the planet.

"That is the only safe place to land, the only solid piece of ground for miles." Said Mo. "It was put in by the empire, to take the weight of mining vessels and support craft."

"They don't mine here anymore." Said Silky.

"What did they mine for?" Asked Kerr.

"Medrona is one of those odd planets, pushed forward from a previous multiverse into ours, by ways no one understands, even the deities." Said Mo. "Estrid once told me it might have been pushed back from a future multiverse. Talking to Estrid can be confusing though, as she sees future and past as pretty much the same thing."

“They dug out two sentinel stones on Medrona.” Said Silky. “Both of them from over a mile beneath the surface. They lost a lot of miners getting them though.”

“How many ?” Asked Kerr.

“lots.” Sad Mo. “Even with The Damned to look after them, they still lost one out of every twenty miners sent here.”

“The angels killed them with dreams.” Said Silky.

“No Silky !” Yelled Mo. “Not angels, we’ve seen enough angels to know these are something different.”

“I still have the dreams.” Said Silky.

Rhian was surprised when Kerr simply engaged the thrusters to send them into the atmosphere.

“You’re landing ?! No vote, no discussion ?” She asked.

“If I listen to much more about angels killing with dreams, I’d never be able to take us down and it doesn’t seem we have much choice.” Said Kerr. “We’re here now, we have to carry on.”

“He’s right, though I don’t want to go down there.” Said Silky.

“I’ve done it before, we’ll be fine.” Said Mo.

Rhian noticed a scanner saying there was zero humidity on Medrona. She’d never landed anywhere with no humidity at all, would it dry them out, did they need to take lots of water ? So many questions that Kerr had made pointless, by beginning the landing procedure. All the screens went dark, as the scanners closed their outside shields to protect themselves from the heat of hitting the atmosphere at thousands of miles per hour.

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Hiring Celli for the trip to Gateway and beyond had been expensive, especially as she couldn’t tell her where they were going. Luckily Shelzak demons were always keen on anything that paid well above the going rate. Celli had done favours for the empire in the past though, so Hol was fairly certain she’d be reliable on the journey. Only fairly certain, demons could be difficult to control, especially if they saw a way to make easy money. Currently Celli was fast asleep on her sofa and snoring, loudly.

“I have a dilemma.” She told Mingal, as they sat in her quarters in the temple.

He’d instantly agreed to go with her of course, though that was just the effect of Minraver’s adjustments to his conditioning. He’d have cut off one of his own arms if she’d asked him to, that was the way converted chaos creatures behaved.

“You need two more companions for your trip, yet cannot ask any of the elite guard.” He said.

Hol didn’t like to admit it, even to herself, but Mingal might well be the most useful person on her expedition to Leng. She’d gone through her own experiences of the 7<sup>th</sup> rift and he’d suggested ways to avoid the long weeks of walking across barren miles of the rifts.

“Yes, they are needed for the coming fight with our new enemy and anyway, Chlo will search for them, the moment they vanish off her sensors by entering the rifts.” She replied.

“You could take junior members of The Damned, like Juno and Albas.”

“I wish I could, but they’d be unlikely to survive conditions on the 7<sup>th</sup> rift. Perhaps we should think of other demons to add to our number.”

Mingal was smiling at her in a manner that could quickly become annoying.

“I seem to remember you mentioning Kittara choosing you as her companion on such a trip, when you were much more junior than Juno or Albas. Your first year wasn’t it, barely out of training ?”

It was and she’d barely survived parts of the journey. A family ring had melted onto her finger, in the blistering heat of the 7<sup>th</sup> rift.



"She did Mingal and I nearly died on that journey. Still, it is a better alternative than trying to hire some Dredger demons on the way."

She found them on the common channel, both enjoying a little free time in the city. Both gladly agreed to join her in her quarters. With luck Chlo still wasn't monitoring events in the temple, it was just about the only truly private place in Mendera City to exchange confidences. No time for small talk, she didn't even ask either of them to sit down.

"Do you keep your emergency back packs up to date?" She asked.

"Yes, it's standard training." Said Juno.

"Alyz used to go crazy if we couldn't show her a well prepared escape pack." Added Albas.

Escape pack, that was Kittara's words when they simply walked to The Well of Souls and jumped, to end up on the 1<sup>st</sup> rift.

"It's important that you tell no one." Said Hol. "Go home, pickup up your escape packs and come straight back."

They looked excited rather than curious or scared.

"Do we need weapons?" Asked Juno.

"No, I can give you better than you currently own."

As they vanished, Hol opened her personal weapons chest and removed two demon blades, complete with belts and scabbards. Priceless, both inherited from Kittara's possessions. As her two young friends returned, she handed them each a demon blade.

"These are the best weapon for where we're going." Said Hol. "They bite friend as greedily as they bite foes, so be careful with them. They're yours to keep, if you survive."

"Where are we going?" Asked Albas.

"I can't tell you until we're on the way, but we are on an important mission for the empire."

"So why the secrecy?" Asked Juno.

An obvious question and The Damned weren't as used to the occasional rogue assignment as they'd once been.

"This mission is important, but unofficial." Said Hol. "You both need to disconnect from the common channel, right now."

"You're joking!" Said Juno.

Hol put on her backpack and slung her Nurigen blade on a harness over her shoulders, in exactly the same way that Kittara had once shown her.

"I can't order you to go with me, or force you to go. Chlo once said something to me in very similar circumstances, a warning actually....

'She's going to hell and she wants to take you with her. She intends to take a week or so moving through the rifts and end up on the 7th rift. Then she wants to do what Mardoun is reported to have done. It may be a myth of course, probably is. This crazy bitch intends to shout a challenge at the gates and to fight whoever comes out.'

Kittara took me and now I intend to take you, if you'll come? I've already said too much and you'll either have to trust me or not, the choice is yours."

Albas put on his backpack without saying another word, while Juno still seemed hesitant. Finally she put on her pack and buckled the belt of the demon blade round her waist.

"Just don't get me arrested for treason Hol, my parents will go crazy." She said.

"Look on the bright side." Said Hol. "We might all die anyway. Can someone bring Celli to the well for me?"

"I'll do it." Said Albas.

Hol took Mingal with her and all of them were at the Well of Souls. It had been repaired, but not fully. There was still a lot of damage and areas of dead grass. There was also a new mound, a common grave for those who'd died there.

"We're going to the rift gate on the 1<sup>st</sup> rift." Said Hol. "A nice easy first step."

"I've never used a rift gate." Said Juno.

"This one is easy, the old abandoned village on the first rift is where it will take you, if you don't select anywhere else." Said Hol. "Just keep your mind a blank and jump."

Hol held onto Mingal, even though he probably didn't need her help. They stepped into the glowing vortex of power and came out into a dark night on the 1<sup>st</sup> rift.

"It worked !" Yelled Juno.

They were all there, though Celli was sniffing the air and obviously not liking what her nose was telling her.

"Nomads of the rifts." She said pointing. "Best avoided."

The sons and daughters of the population of Ixir, moved to the 1<sup>st</sup> rift many billions of years ago. Hol thought it was sad that their descendants were now enemies, but they were usually poorly armed and easily avoided.

"Where is this temple you told me about ?" She asked Mingal.

"Over the great river and a day's journey to the west." He replied. "An old temple buried then drowned by the river. It has been dug up and robbed of all its treasures, but it still holds power. I can use that power to create a portal, to take us onto the 6<sup>th</sup> rift."

"Come on." Said Hol. "We need to get over the river, keep alert and look for a shallow place to cross."

"Where are we going Hol ?" Asked Juno.

"We're going beyond Gateway, we're going to Leng." Said Hol.

"Crap !" Said Juno.

No one slowed their pace though, as Mingal found the shallows and led them across the great river.

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Chlo liked to use different versions of her organic form, to observe places in Mendera City. The wind on her cheek, the occasional overheard conversation, were things better done in person than by using a probe. She stood on the city wall, not far from the north gate. The road north was deserted; a few transporters had even pulled off the road to wait until the sandstorm was over.

"Just bad enough." She muttered.

Machinery would be damaged and there would be some disruption to the smooth working of Mendera City the following day. Nothing major though, nothing as disruptive as the detonation of twenty bombs hidden inside their human shells. The storm would be on all the news services, the pilgrims on the shuttle would believe their diversion to the south was genuinely for their travelling comfort and safety. In a way it was. Chlo could see through Jen's eyes, yet connected with her anyway. It was just good manners, like asking after someone's health, when you could see they were fit and well.

"How's it going Jen ?"

"I have Hy with me and we've just woken up Crit. She doesn't seem pleased, but we should be ready to go to the spaceport in a few minutes. Three of The Damned are already there, dressed in civilian clothes and pretending to be pilgrims."

Three was enough, with Jen there'd be four of them and that was plenty.

"Fine Jen, route all reports through Commander Yerli..... And good luck."

It was going to be a militia show of course, they were known in the various ports, they were the people incoming pilgrims expected to see. Jen and The Damned were just there in case things didn't work out too well. Hy was Hy Astar, the male militia member and Crit Imada was the augmented female. Their files indicated they were up to getting the job done, but as always, luck was going to be a factor. Chlo simply allowed the version of herself on the city wall to disintegrate, its basic elements returning to the fabric of Mendera. She gave her full attention to her true organic form, currently still with Commander Yerli.

"Jen has woken your people and will brief them on the mission." She said.

"Traffic control has just informed the shuttle pilot that passenger scanning systems at Calmis-An were fried by a recent power surge." Said Yerli. "Passengers will be told they'll be brought into Mendera City in the morning and scanned there. Until then, they're confined to a comfortable hotel with a sea view. I suppose now we can only wait for the shuttle to land and hope the fake pilgrims accept the story."

"If they don't, there will be a deep crater where the spaceport used to be." Said Chlo.

She picked up the feeds from traffic control, watching the shuttle go over the city, heading south. It was high, probably too high for any debris to do serious damage. She only relaxed when the shuttle had passed over Mendera City, without exploding. Now they just had to save the spaceport and keep nearly three hundred pilgrims safe.

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