

## Ripples from the Past

### Chapter 1 – Mendera City

**“By the 4<sup>th</sup> age of the temple, the marriage of state and religion was complete. Without any overt campaigning or proselytising, the emperor, The Chalné, had complete control of the three trillion citizens of the empire.” – Grimoire of Nurigen**

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A rather bad sand storm was approaching Mendera City from the west, but the weather defences could easily deal with it. Mendera City, capital of the planet Mendera, the holy city. Capital and centre of the most powerful empire that had ever existed, or was ever likely to exist. The City looked incredibly ancient, like a ruin from a previous age, restored and brought back into use.

A city space over forty miles in diameter, with a strong five metre high wall going right round the perimeter. Four roads leading from the city, all still busy routes for traders. Fifteen rings of housing for the great and the good were the main feature of the city itself and at their centre was the famous Temple of the Flame. Over two hundred thousand clerics spent their entire lives inside the vast temple complex, never setting foot in the outside world. There was no law or imperial notice against sitting on the steps in front of the Temple’s main doors, it just wasn’t acceptable behaviour. “Identify please ?”

Commander Yerli didn’t need to use Chlo’s name, she was clever enough to know the request was for her routine systems. Yerli had been commander of the Menderan Militia for over six hundred years, he knew the routines inside out. He’d run his finger over the image of the young woman, daring to sit on the steps of the Temple of the Flame. It wasn’t just frowned upon, such audacious behaviour was unknown. His office was in a building right opposite the steps, he could even see her through his window. This was the fourth time he’d tried to identify the young woman on the security screen and once again the reply was.

“Unknown humanoid female. Requires investigation.”

A male voice used for the response, Yerli had noticed that Chlo liked to mix and match with her response voices. He waited, the correction had taken a minute or so the previous times. That had actually scared him a little, Chlo was normally fast and infallible. The Gods might have their bad days, but he’d never known Chlo to make a mistake.

“Ahh, time to get her in for interrogation.” He muttered.

Two minutes and a red warning halo was still around the mystery woman’s head. He had internal comms, but it was easier to lean into the duty room and shout.

“Four men needed for a pickup “ He yelled. “Unknown female, proceed with caution.”

Unknowns were always a worry. Four of the militia had died once, trying to arrest a drunken Algarian warrior, one of their elite fighters. In theory Chlo saw everyone who arrived on or left Mendera. There were unregistered craft in the merchant’s zone though and they weren’t averse to bringing in the occasional illegal.

“Take Ion weapons and be careful guys !” Shouted Yerli.

All his men were mercenaries, but he still didn’t like losing good men. Their relatives could become quite aggressive and then there was all the work involved with recruiting replacements. The Militia had been the police force of Mendera City, since the 1<sup>st</sup> age of the temple and paperwork had been

a curse then and it was still a curse. Yerli heard the security screen make a pinging sound, just as his pickup team were about to leave.

“Hang on guys !”

The halo around her head had gone green. Safe, Chlo was telling him she knew the young woman, yet no identification had been provided. It wasn't a rare occurrence, it was unknown. Crap, it was downright impossible. Chlo was the Organic and AI hybrid that ran everything in the empire and a lot of what went on in the rest of the multiverse. She either knew the woman or she didn't. Anything else meant the ground shifting under his feet.

“Cancel the pickup !” He shouted. “Get out there though, be seen. Comfort the pilgrims in Temple Square and report in if you see anything unusual.”

No muttering as they left, discipline was far better than it had been in the past. The militia had been starved of funds for millennia, but now he had over three hundred well-armed men and women under his command.

“This is impossible.” He mumbled.

The technology was designed to be simple. He could spin the view around to see just about anywhere in the city and then he used to his fingers to highlight anyone that looked suspicious. Anything strange or unusual required him to talk to Chlo. He pressed his right index finger on the woman's image.

“Identity details please Chlo.”

“Not available.”

“Shall I get her picked up ?”

“No. Subject known.”

Chlo scared him a little, she scared quite a few people. The emperor's right hand, almost omniscient, most people were cautious about upsetting her. It was his job to keep the city secure though, he had to understand.

“I need help Chlo. How can she be unknown and yet known to you ?”

“I wish I knew.”

She was there with him, moved her reality to be there, right by his side. Blonde hair and quite small, she looked like a girl barely out of puberty, but that was how she'd always looked. There were rumours of her imprinting on the first of the imperial guard to find her. A female it was said, a young Hol Azreemy just out of training. Like so many rumours on Mendera, it was probably nonsense.

“Shall I pick her up ?” He asked.

Chlo ignored him, using the zoom function that he'd never mastered. The face on the screen was clear now, a woman who looked like a Menderan cleric. Chlo gave a long sigh.

“I do know her commander, her name was Vita.” She said.

Was Vita ! Yerli decided not to notice that. He was a simple banger together of heads, paid quite well to keep the peace. Anything else fell well outside of his remit.

“I see,” he said, “just missed off the official data I suppose ?”

“Oh no commander, Vita has been dead for quite some time. I will deal with this.”

She had those eyes, the kind that hold your gaze a little too long, examining your soul. Blue eyes to go with the blonde hair, quite attractive if he wasn't so wary of her.

“Will you do me a huge favour commander ?” She asked.

“Yes of course.”

Chlo smiled at him, actually touching his arm for the briefest of moments.

“Forget about it, all of it. I'll delete the visual data and it will be as though Vita was never here.”

She vanished, to appear on the screen, walking towards the temple steps.

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Look up Mozim in a dictionary from the original planet Ixir and you'd find the following definition; Mozim – Ugly, misshapen, unnatural, deformed, chimera, curse of the gods. Not that you'd ever be able to find the dictionary, not now, Ixir has long gone.

Mozim had used many names, though mostly he was known simply as Mo. He'd done a huge favour for The Chalné, the emperor. For a while Mo had been one of the inner circle at court, allowed to use the emperor's intimate name of Sikush. Other rewards had been showered on him; it had been quite a big favour. The slum runner from the Ixir slums was now an immortal and there had been riches too, even the occasional blind eye turned to Mo's crooked deals and illegal activities. Oh, the favour had been huge, finding a sleeping God no less, one who didn't want to be found.

Mo was a chimera, though he never considered himself to be deformed. A mother from the slums of Ixir and a hybrid demon father, he was never going to be the best looking child in the slums. The midwife had even suggested killing him at the moment of birth, discarding his dead body in the local creek. His mother would hear none of it and Mo had grown into a strong, dangerous and almost legendary slum runner. Actually, let there be no damning with faint praise, he was legendary.

The slums had christened him and some called him Mozim, even after the meaning of the word was lost in antiquity. Friends called him Mo, though true friends were rare in the slums. Mo's long legs and powerful arms gave him something to sell, his skills as a slum runner. Drugs, contraband, cash, Mo could deliver it all safely, by taking it over the rooftops and along paths few others could negotiate.

He delivered for all the slum gangs, joining none, being useful to them all. At some point in his teens, he discovered another use for his strength and he became an assassin as well as a slum runner. Mo brought quick death to many who deserved it and to many who probably didn't. He did well, amassing enough money to make sure his mother had enough to eat and always had shoes to wear. Mo became known and respected by most who lived in the slums. He became the best slum runner in his district and eventually in all of Ixir. Able to deliver anything safely and with enough strength and skill to take care of anyone who got in his way.

"She's out there Mo, by the well." Said Silky. "Sat on the fence as though it was the most natural thing in the world."

He was still with Silky, a rather odd pairing, but one that worked well for them. She was probably more of an exotic creature than him. A creature of chaos, converted by unspeakable means to become an invoker for the high court of Leng. Silky still had healed over scars on her head, where long thin fingers had been used to alter her mind. It was said that converted chaos creatures eventually became mindless brutes, the undead of the rifts. Mo had lived with Silky for countless years and she still seemed quite lucid and sane to him. She was twitching her tail, which was usually a sign of her being extremely agitated.

"Who is by the well ? Why are you so upset ?" He asked.

Mo had left most of his money with the Imperial Bank of Mendera. He hadn't seen the balance there for a long time, he might well own half the bank by now. With the remainder he'd bought a small country estate in the greener part of the 3<sup>rd</sup> rift. The rifts, the seven brutal and dangerous realities that acted as a buffer between the world of the living and the darkness beyond Leng. Mo felt comfortable on the 3<sup>rd</sup> rift, though most who were fully human, would find it too hot and strange to live there for long. People from planets expected to see an horizon and the rifts had none.

"Her Mo, the one with the essence of the great warrior."

That description only matched one person and she'd been dead since before the switch, when the last multiverse had ceased to exist, to give birth to the current one.

"Talk sense, it can't be Kittara !"

He loved Silky and hated to see her agitated, her skin becoming flushed, her stubby residual wings fluttering against her back. He gently kissed her forehead, hearing her make the gentle purring sound he loved to hear.

"Wait here I'll go and see who it is."

"It is her, I'm not going crazy."

The estate had been built quite near to the ruins of Ingar Gols, an ancient temple from the days when reptilian deities had ruled the rifts. Most estates were near major towns or known locations. It gave instant directions to anyone wanting to find you, among millions of square miles of largely featureless rift.

"Probably Chlo come to ask yet another favour." He muttered.

Relations with Mendera hadn't been good for years, but he had a feeling that Chlo was keeping an eye on him, even on the rifts. The woman had moved to the well, sitting on the stone surround, looking away from him.

"I am the owner of this estate." He said. "What business brings you here ?"

By the eight great Gods of old, it was her ! Mo felt his legs wanting to collapse, his head began to feel light. No, he wasn't going to suffer the indignity of passing out. He closed his eyes for a few seconds and looked again. It looked like Kittara, but there was something not quite right. A feeling, a missing essence, maybe even the lack of a personal scent ? Something was telling him it wasn't Kittara sat on his well.

"You're not her !" He yelled.

"I am if personal memories make a person who they are Mo ?" She said. "I know you were one of the few people she genuinely cared about, one of the very few she trusted."

The voice was the same ! Hearing it again after all those years. His legs, difficult to walk on at the best of times, collapsed. Mo ended up on his knees and feeling confused.

"I am so sorry Mo, but I knew you'd take me seriously if I looked like her. There was no intent to hurt you like this."

"Who are you ?" He asked.

"That is unimportant Mo, you need to run. Take the invoker with you, she is important too."

"I don't understand !" He said.

"Mo, if you don't start running you'll die and that will be bad for you and a lot of other people. Get to Ingar Gols and go deep, right to the bottom. Wait until it's over and I'll send help."

It might have helped if she'd looked agitated, but the creature using Kittara's face just smiled at him all the time.

"What's going to happen ?" He asked.

"No time Mo, get running ! Tell Silky not to spin up a portal, they'll be able to locate it. Use those long legs of yours Mo and RUN !!"

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Chlo enjoyed walking through the streets of Mendera City; she especially liked the square in front of The Temple of the Flame. The weather was glorious sunshine, she'd even adjusted the temperature within the city walls, to be a few degrees cooler than that outside. Some still remarked on the wisdom of locating the capital of the empire, in the centre of a hot and often dry desert.

Like so much to do with the early days of the empire, it had happened rather than being planned. Chlo quite liked the desert, she often looked out over the dunes to the west, from the roof of the sentinel temples. She watched Vita as she walked, the image of a woman long dead.

"Vita is my carrier of maps, my right arm and my good nature." Thrax had once told her.

A rare joke from the genius who had built Mendera City, only to be killed during the first demon assault on the new empire. No reward of immortality for Thrax, he'd been an old man, but death is always premature for one so gifted. Vita had been the one to sooth the egos Thrax wounded with his brusque words. She organised where to place the quarried stones and created work patterns to ensure everything was completed on schedule. Chlo remembered it all, which was supposed to be impossible. She sat on the step next to Vita, close enough for their hips to touch.

"You're not her !" She said.

"Someone else said that to me today." Answered Vita. "I have all her memories, so am I her ? I have many of your memories too ! But yes, there is something missing and you know that, you can sense it."

One of the militia was fondling his Ion blaster and watching them. Yerli had fired them up, prepared them for a fight that wasn't going to happen. Chlo waved the man away.

"We should walk." Said Chlo. "Sitting here is guaranteed to get you noticed, which was probably your plan."

"Ahh yes, the famous Temple, four miles it goes into the ground, home to nearly a quarter of a million clerics." Said Vita. "Is he still there, in his prison ? Of course he is, or the multiverse would have reverted to chaos."

Maybe the woman really did have some of her memories. Knowledge of the one held captive had faded away until only a few knew of it and even they believed it to be nothing but an ancient myth.

"Yes, still there and it's still a crime to try and climb the walls. A crime punishable by death." She said.

"And yet a few drunken pilgrims try every year and pay for that act of stupidity with their lives." Said Vita.

Chlo followed the woman out into the square. The one who looked like Vita had the form of a Menderan cleric, but there wasn't the normal length to her legs, or the narrowness of her neck. Chlo tried to halt the ever creeping changes of evolution, but some alterations were inevitable. Vita looked like one of the original clerics, the few thousand who's arrived with the emperor.

"Here I think, below the statue of The Chaln ." Said Vita. "A bench placed here for the benefit of the pilgrims. Do they still try to walk around the temple wall in a day ?"

Chlo sat down before answering, noting that no one seemed to be close enough to hear a quiet conversation.

"That practise has fallen into disuse. The current fashion is to spend a week over walking the pilgrim's path, stopping at hostels along the route."

"I like that and I think Thrax would have liked that." Said Vita. "Does it ever surprise you that you remember Thrax at all ? Isn't everything wiped clean when the multiverse ends ?"

"Some things are kept within the Temple. Information considered too important to lose."

"Yes, Sikush and his books written on metal pages to be kept forever. In reality they remain on shelves, neglected and gathering dust for years beyond number. Isn't that his ultimate arrogance Chlo ? Keeping the knowledge and artefacts that he considers important. The ego of the man, setting himself up as emperor and head of the temple !"

Chlo was angry, the woman just didn't understand !

“Enough !” Yelled Chlo, gaining the attention of a few pilgrims.

“What do you want ?” She asked in a quieter voice.

“Yes, or poor Mo will think help will never arrive. But think about it Chlo, how do you remember details of past worlds that existed several switches ago. I bet you even know who was leader of the Rejjacy when they fought Mendera ?”

“They had no leader, a council of six voted on everything.”

“See ! You’ll say there’s a deeper memory. But speak a few words of the dead language from Leng and everyone within earshot will feel nervous. Shall I try it ?”

It was something Chlo had thought about, but not often. It seemed unimportant in a way, as long as the memories were there.

“No, let the pilgrims wander about in peace.” She said. “Now tell me about Mo needing help ?”

“You know he’s on the 3<sup>rd</sup> rift of course ?”

“Yes, an estate out near Ingar Gols. I’m sure he only chose the rifts for his new home, because he knows I can’t watch him there.”

There was a kind of dementia that affected immortals, from trying to cram so many memories into a finite brain capacity. She’d often put Mo’s hostility down to the dementia of the immortals, but knew Mo was still sharp and had all his wits. He’d been treated badly by the empire, asked to do too much, too many assignments for the empire that were dangerous and morally questionable.

“You need to send him help.” Said Vita. “Not too urgent yet, but don’t take too long. I believe Alyz still has a rift manipulator somewhere among her many and varied possessions.”

Vita stood, their meeting was obviously over.

“You’ll see me again Chlo. You need to talk to him, the emperor. Get permission to do what needs doing. You need go far enough to scare yourself ! The dark place Chlo, you will need to trust yourself there.”

Vita was gone, vanished as though she was never there. None of the pilgrims reacted, it was how the imperial guard moved all the time. She shared part of her mind with Sikush, an area of shared memories and emotions. It was useful, though it often felt like benevolent Schizophrenia. He’d already picked up her emotions and watched at least part of her conversation with the creature who looked like Vita.

“Do what you need to do Chlo.” She heard in her head.

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Alyz was one of the original members of the Imperial Guard, or The Damned as they were known to most of the empire. Not the usual sort of over dramatic name that people give to warriors, The Damned really did go through a conversion process. Willingly of course, who would object to a little pain to gain immortality ? Immortality with a price though, no children, no marriages and the obligation to risk that immortal life, to save a bunch of seed munching colonists. That last part wasn’t officially mentioned anywhere, it was just how it often seemed to Alyz. The imperial guard were the last line of defence for the empire, which often meant hard battles at the edges of an ever expanding empire.

All of The Damned had a permanent link with Chlo. A common channel rolled through the back of Alyz’s mind, usually ignored. Who was being sent where, alerts from the local militia, the usual routine notices that everyone tends to ignore. Her direct link to Chlo was never ignored, that was unthinkable.

“Mo seems to be in trouble.” Said Chlo. “Take six of the guard with you, six you can rely on.”

“Six ! Has Mo started his own private war or something ?”

'Seems to be in trouble' was strange talk for Chlo, who normally knew exactly what threat she'd have to face, usually in precise detail.

"I have a bad feeling about this one Alyz. Be careful ! Just bring Mo and his companion back to Mendera in one piece."

"Is he still living on the 3<sup>rd</sup> rift, out near Ingar Gols ?" She asked.

"Yes and still living with Silky."

"Still ! Wow, who saw that pairing standing the test of time ?"

Chlo didn't reply and seemed to be thinking. That was odd in itself, Chlo rarely needed thinking time for anything and usually loved to gossip.

"Do you still have the rift manipulator ?" Asked Chlo.

"It's somewhere among my junk. I'm fairly certain I can find it."

A harmless lie, Alyz had the manipulator on her dressing table. It was a box made of pure gold, covered in intricate carvings in an ancient language of the Demon world. Far too attractive an object to be left in a drawer, she'd promoted it to the role of ornament. Alyz picked it up, spinning it round in her hands.

"I could find someone to create a door to the 3<sup>rd</sup> rift." Said Chlo. "Probably easier for you to use the manipulator."

"If it works !"

"If it doesn't let me know. Use it out on the dunes, just in case."

Chlo let the connection drop, her way of saying goodbye. Alyz bounced her ornament about, reading the demon language she knew perfectly. All sorts of threats and curses for any who dared to use the golden box without permission. Pretty though, a language with lots of curly characters.

"Don't blow up when I use you." She muttered.

The box was a mixture of technology and old world magic from beyond Gateway on the 7<sup>th</sup> rift. From the City of Leng, though many still didn't like to mention that place. The box had been found during the 14<sup>th</sup> age of the temple and was probably made long before then. It was now the 23<sup>rd</sup> age and each age lasted for around eight hundred billion years. Her ornament was old, even for demon technology.

"Hmmm, a long way out on the dunes, just in case." She mumbled.

Alyz had her own home, a small villa by the side of Lake Misogon. A bit of an honour, as the local population on that part of Mendera, weren't too keen on strangers. She appeared to shimmer slightly, exchanging her loose fitting civilian clothing, for the black uniform of the guard. A neat trick they all used, manipulating reality was far quicker than dressing and undressing. Out of habit, she tightened the laces on her boots and pushed a long thin blade into her right boot. It was time to up the pace, poor Mo needed rescuing from whatever was happening out by Ingar Gols.

'Aggrivas Nulonde' (Beyond Technology)

Was etched onto the sword she lifted loving from its rack on her wall. Made by her father during the era generally accepted as his best period. The blade itself was covered in intricate etchings of angels and demons and in its centre in the old dead language of the Holy Warriors from the forbidden times, the single line Aggrivas Nulonde. Anything her father made was priceless, his swords were rare and usually given as gifts by the emperor, The Chaln . Nurigen, master maker of weapons and self-appointed chronicler of the empire. Her father had been missing for quite some time, but that wasn't unusual.

"Probably learning another dead language on the 5<sup>th</sup> rift." She muttered.

Five of her team were easy to select. She chose five she personally knew, changing their status to active on the common channel, sending them an instruction to find her out on the dunes. Hol was different though, Hol was a member of the elite guard. Alyz connected with her on a private link. "I see you're not assigned duty today Hol."

"First rest day in quite a while and I'm already bored. Got anything interesting for me?"

Like her, Hol had a pattern on the back of her left hand. Not a tattoo, but an enchantment of a kind. Each marking was personal and different, as were the effect of the enchantment. Everyone in the empire knew what the mark meant though. Officially there was no elite, all members of the imperial guard started off at one rank and worked their way up the hierarchy. In reality the elite were selected by The Chaln  and invited to take an oath above their oath to the empire. The elite became his special guard, sworn to obey him in everything. If the day ever came when The Chaln  left Mendera, the elite would leave with him.

"Mo is in need of help." She told Hol. "Chlo seems to think it might be serious, we're going in strong. There will be seven of us and I was hoping you might be one of them."

"If Mo needs help, count me in." Hol replied.

That was how it was with The Damned, they looked after their own. Mo had once fought with them, side by side with Kittara. He was one of them.

"I'll be out on the dunes Hol, come find me."

Alyz changed Hol's status to active and picked up a pack that always contained a few essentials. A simple pickup might well lead to a situation that required days away from home, maybe longer. Alyz liked to be prepared for anything. Happy she had everything she was likely to need, Alyz moved her reality to the west of Mendera City and out onto the miles of dunes. Miles of orange sand, left there by an ocean that no one remembered.

She waited for everyone to arrive, exchanging the usual welcomes and surprise at seven of The Damned being needed for a simple rescue mission. Alyz ignored them all, moving away from them before operating the rift manipulator.

"Don't blow us all up!" Yelled Hol.

"I'll do my best!"

As an ornament she loved the gold box, but as a demon device of unknown reliability, she hated it. Designed for demon hands and fingers, the box had several functions. Sadly for Alyz, no one living knew half the things it was designed to do. Place your fingers in the right place, say the right words and it could spin up a portal to anywhere in the rifts. It could also send its operator to a multitude of unpleasant dimensions and alternative realities. She used both hands, placing her fingers just right, she hoped.

"Sre amnit donara senela onamba." Alyz said quietly.

The first line, calling on dark forces to activate the device. In a way and if it worked, she was connecting the manipulator to a mystic power socket. The gold box hummed a little, vibrating against her fingers. Next she pictured Ingar Gols in her mind and said the words for destination. There was no way to check the destination on the rift manipulator. Finally she used the word to tell it to get on with spinning up a portal.

"Sident."

The box opened by some mysterious means she didn't understand. The device had no obvious openings, yet a side opened and a purple beam of light began to draw on the sand. Not a drawing, but the base of a portal, which grew quickly into a spinning vortex. High level demons were large



creatures, much taller than the guard. Quite quickly the box closed again, leaving a spinning portal about twenty feet in diameter.

"I hate demon tech." Said Hol.

That didn't stop her being first to step into the spinning purple light. Alyz hated it too, so much seemed to require blind faith. No way of checking where you were going, or if those already gone had arrived safely. Alyz gave a long sigh and went through next, the others close behind her.

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Mo had legs designed for running and climbing. Joints that seemed to go the wrong way, oddly shaped muscles. Everything worked perfectly once he straightened his chimera legs and ran. He had at least twenty staff on the estate, though most of them lived quite some distance from the main house. Would they survive whatever was coming ?

"Run !" He shouted at everyone he saw. "Tell the others ! Run, hide out on the rift !"

He saw the cook's idiot son, teasing one of the maids with a half squashed nesh bug.

"Run stupid boy, run like the ghost of Emperor Xanash is after you !"

"What is coming sir ?" Asked the maid.

Mo didn't know himself, but he was sure his answer was accurate.

"Death child, death ! Get everyone to run for their lives."

He could hear panic beginning to spread throughout his estate, which just might save a few lives. Some would merely run around in a panic, but nothing could be done about that, the creature with Kittara's face hadn't given him much notice. Mo had a pool, filled by pumps from an underground river, it was a rich man's status symbol. Silky was standing by the pool, two back packs by her feet. "I packed a few essentials." She said. "I guessed we'd be leaving here."

Guessed or sensed ? Mo knew Silky saw the time lines differently to most. There was no time to discuss the matter though, they needed to run. He picked up both packs, putting one over each of his strong shoulders. Silky sat on the ground and began to spin up a portal.

"No, they'll detect it, she told me." He said.

"Who Mo ? Who is coming ?"

"I have no idea, but we need to be deep under the ground before they arrive. We have to use our feet and run for the caves below Ingar Gols."

Silky just nodded and followed him, running through the scrub that surrounded the estate. She trusted him, you can't live with someone for countless millennia, without building up quite a bit of trust.

Time hadn't left much standing of the once Great Temple of Ingar Gols. Weather erosion, earthquakes and the people who'd originally built his estate had used many of the stones. There was no respect for the past in a place where available stone was in a quarry over a thousand miles away. One tall pinnacle of stones was left, a good landmark to aim for as he ran. No conversation, they were both breathing hard, as Mo opened a heavy metal trapdoor in the ground.

"By the eight great.....I forgot to pick up a lamp." Said Mo.

"Let me lead, I can produce some light."

Darkness was something they weren't used to. There was no real night on the rifts. The light level rose at what passed for dawn and lowered at their time for dusk. Always the light was high in ultraviolet, which was still there as a background wash all night. Most inhabitants of the rifts could see clearly by the constant background ultraviolet wash. Silky could use spells to create a globe of light, but it wasn't that bright and only covered a small area.

"Careful or you'll get a lot of cuts and bruises by the time we get to the caverns below." Said Silky.

“She said to hurry, so we must hurry.”

Mo had been curious about the ruins and he had an almost limitless amount of time and money at his disposal. Timber had been imported from Quron on the 2<sup>nd</sup> rift for a truly ridiculous amount of gold. He’d built trestles and stairs that went from the hole in the ground, right round the dome of the temple and into the caverns below. Silky had been right, his arms were covered in scratches, by the time they entered the caverns.

“Do you hear that ?” Silky asked.

“Thunder, or explosions. We must get deeper, all the way to the river.”

The sound of thunder grew, as they ran through tunnels and clambered over obstructions. Neither of them particularly liked the underground river, or the strange blind creatures attracted to its waters. There was no choice though, it was the deepest part of the caverns. They sat against the cavern wall, hugging each other in the shadows.

“I know that sound.” Said Mo. “A bombardment, maybe bombs from the air. Someone is destroying our home, trying to kill us.”

“Technology weapons Mo ! We both know the rifts aren’t kind to technology, nothing works here.” He hugged her, remembering the few days before the last switch. Mo was one of the few to survive the end of the last multiverse, though he was still unsure if that was a blessing or a curse.

“It works for a while.” He said. “The empire once sent their machines out onto the 1<sup>st</sup> rift. They all fell apart or stopped working, but they lasted for a day or so. If whoever wants us dead was willing to sacrifice their machines.....”

“Who hates us that much Mo ?” Asked Silky.

“I have no idea my love. I thought everyone had forgotten about us a long time ago.”

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Alyz came out of the portal, relieved to see the spire of Ingar Gols in the distance. They were where they needed to be, so she used the box to close the portal. Left open it was just an invitation for an enemy to enter Mendera.

“I hope it opens again.” Said Hol. “How far is the nearest rift gate ?”

Alyz knew, she still had memories of living on the rifts as a child. Her father had arrived at some sort of agreement with the demons and had lived on the rifts for years. She pointed past the ruined estate.

“That way and about twenty thousand or so miles.” She answered.

“Crap ! Hell of a walk.” Someone remarked.

She could see the orange shimmer, the distant wall that marked the edge of the rift. It looked deceptively near, yet she knew it was over two hundred thousand miles away at the closest point. The 3<sup>rd</sup> rift was huge, the same space as over a thousand Mendera sized planets. Walking out could take years, if you survived the hostile landscape and fauna.

“Looks like a dozen attack craft were used.” Said Hol. “None of them left here, the place is surrounded by derelicts.”

Mo’s main house was a ruin, bombs from above and the scorch marks left by energy weapons. Blasters on the rifts. It was unheard of ! One of the attacking craft had crashed quite near them, partially burying itself in the sand.

“Spread out.” Ordered Alyz. “Look for any survivors hiding out on the rift and anything else that..... Might explain what happened here. Remember there is no Chlo link here, so keep within eye contact of each other.”

Alyz examined the attack craft. Fully space flight capable though older in design than the imperial raptors. The famous rift rot had brought it down ! Electrical systems failed, joints guaranteed to hold under full vacuum broke open, weapons self-detonated. The rift had brought down over a dozen craft, the pride of some nation's military. It just didn't make sense.

"No bodies." Said Hol. "This one came down hard, there should be bodies."

Pilot, engineer, two gunners, yet no bodies. The craft could have been built on any of the empire worlds, everyone copied empire technology. Alyz decided to concentrate of finding Mo. Who had sent the bombers and why someone had sacrificed so many resources to try and kill Mo, she'd leave to Chlo to sort out.

"Come on Hol, Mo will be deep in Ingar Gols, the place is a bit of hobby of his, or so I've been told."

"You'd need a hobby here." Said Hol. "Back end of nowhere."

They found Mo halfway to the temple, crouched in the scrub with Silky. Mo looked a bit worse for wear, while he treated a wound on Silky's leg with some sort of balm.

"Was this you ?!" Yelled Silky. "Has the empire decided to claim the rifts ?"

"Calm down, we're here to help." Said Hol.

Alyz had various healing unguents in her pack, but Silky was a converted chaos creature, their physiology was a bit strange. Besides, Mo seemed to know what he was doing.

"Did they come after you ?" She asked. "Talk to me Mo, who attacked you ?"

"This wasn't them, we never saw them !" He answered. "Silky was attacked by a growler, the damned things are everywhere, even the caverns. A blind one bit Silky ! They're evolving to survive everywhere."

Growlers were a large six legged insect. Originally from Ixir, they'd been accidentally introduced to the rifts and had multiplied. No one knew how many there were, probably trillions by now.

"She said you were on your way." Said Mo.

"Who ?"

"One who looked like Kittara, even had her memories."

He held her eyes for a moment; they'd both loved Kittara in their own way. Alyz had cried when she'd died, a rare emotion for one of The Damned. One of her team arrived, telling her that a few survivors had been found.

"I'll look after your people and collect information." Said Alyz. "I'm going to create a portal for Hol to take you both to Mendera."

"But..... My people....." Said Mo.

"Sorry Mo. I'll bring any survivors back to Mendera, but you need to leave now. Like it or not, it looks like you're working for the empire again."

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