

Ripples from the Past

Chapter 25 - Expectations

“She was sure Mo was alright underneath his rather annoying exterior. Deep down, very deep down, he was probably only slightly irritating.”

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Nurigen found some of the arcane devices quite difficult to control. He needed them of course, to monitor the battle for Leng, the battle he expected to win. Expectations... That dangerous thought process that hoped for so much that was eventually never delivered. This time the plan was his though and nothing could go wrong. Aukar wasn't helping his composure, stomping about the room and looking angry.

“Useless, all this ancient demon technology... Useless.” Yelled Aukar. “I should be there, leading my warriors to victory.”

The demon devices were older than the universe they were currently in and still worked perfectly, if you knew how to use them. Golden boxes with no instructions, designed to be used by creatures with more fingers than a human. Nurigen concentrated and used both of his hands to make a few subtle movements across the box made of incorruptible gold. The hazy image being projected onto the wall sharpened, the sounds becoming clearer.

“That's it, keep it just like that.” Said Aukar. “I should be there Chelac, we both know that.”

“You are still healing my friend.” Said Nurigen. “Your army can win this battle, trust me.”

Those eyes that never blinked and gave away no emotions. Aukar might be thinking positive thoughts about him, or be about to send him for execution. The leader of the Terak still wasn't completely fit, but Nurigen had other reasons for keeping him away from the battle. The victory had to be his and seen to be his. Nurigen was the warlord of the Terak now their Ezzagory. The destruction of Leng would bring him the respect of Aukar's warriors. No, he wasn't going to share that wonderful moment of victory.

“I made you my Ezzagory and I will trust you. There can be no second defeat though Chelac. I hope you understand that ?”

“Leng will be nothing but a ruin within three days Aukar. You have my word on it.”

Expectations again and he was feeding them to Aukar. Nurigen understood of course, he knew how ruthless the Terak could be. For giving them victory, he'd probably be showered with gold and precious gems. Fail though and his death would be slow, painful and undignified. He didn't fear death; in fact he welcomed the idea. It was the months of pain and indignity that he wanted to avoid. There were six images being shown on the wall, most of them annoyingly hazy, like viewing everything through fog. Nurigen ran his little finger over one of the gold boxes.

“Better Chelac, now I can see my army. Look at them old friend, filling the sky beyond gateway.”

“Your generals know their trade and your warriors are well trained.” Said Nurigen.

Not just a few words to please Aukar, the Terak warriors were famed for their ferocity in battle and their discipline. The bulk of Aukar's army were flying towards Leng, hanging back to give cover to the ground troops. Large ancient weapons of war had been slowly dragged across the rifts. Catapults and giant cross bows on wheels, which could fire ten arrows at a time, each weighing as much as a Terak warrior. Antique weapons really, but still very effective when firing munitions augmented by spells and sorcery.

“Look, look Nurigen.... My warriors are in sight of Leng.” Shouted Aukar.

“There will be losses, don’t expect an easy victory.” Said Nurigen. “Aelfraed isn’t an uneducated low level demon, she carries the bloodline of the last emperor, Neosto himself. Her people won’t panic at the sight of a Terak flying army.”

“I don’t care if it takes seven days to accomplish Chelac, just give me victory.”

A minor threat or maybe encouragement, backed up by a clawed hand resting on his shoulder. There were still fine scar lines on the back of that clawed hand. Aukar had survived wounds that few would have survived and he was still healing quickly. Not as fast as the Terak had once healed though and he wasn’t as strong as even he had expected. Expectations again, often promising much and not quite delivering. All the Terak were showing signs of not being at their best. The best guess, and it was only a guess, was that being dragged through time from a previous switch hadn’t been good for their health. Doing the impossible always arrived with consequences, but the Terak were still formidable warriors.

“Can you do something about the view from above Leng ?” Asked Aukar.

“I will need to concentrate, the points of reference are a problem.”

One of the devices had been set to look down on Leng, centred over the imperial palace. The gold boxes worked by looking into the user’s mind though, showing the point of reference they were concentrating on. It worked well for ground based landmarks and features, but the sky above Leng had none of those. There weren’t even any constellations in the sky to calibrate the ancient device. At the moment, the projection was showing a very indistinct view of Leng, from about a mile above the city.

“It’s no better.”

“Please old friend.... I need a few minutes of silence.”

Aukar sighed and tightened the hold on his shoulder. Nurigen placed his fingers on what he believed were the right places on the gold box. No instructions had survived the vast time since a demon artisan had created the box. Everything was done by experience or by trial and error.

“Better, much better Chelac.”

Nurigen concentrated with his eyes closed, imagining Leng as he’d last seen it. He centred his mental view on the palace roof, before pulling back to a height of about five hundred feet. In his mind he could see most of the city from that height, yet still see details on the ground. He opened his eyes and saw the same image on the wall. It was an image of Leng as it was now though, complete with the parts of the city still being rebuilt.

“Perfect.... Can you zoom in on the palace ?”

“I will try, but this isn’t modern technology Aukar. I can’t simply press a few buttons.”

Nurigen closed his eyes and imagined being about fifty feet above the palace roof.

“Oh.... It’s all broken up now.” Said Aukar.

The problem was trying to put an image in his mind of somewhere he’d never actually been. He’d seen Leng from quite a few places, but never while floating over the rooftops. Nurigen concentrated, allowing his mind to be a little creative. A mental impression would probably get the job done, as long as it was a reasonably accurate mental image.

“Chelac..... You really are a genius.”

He opened his eyes and the empty roof of his mental image had been over written by reality. There were warriors on the roof tops, lots of them. A small number of them seemed to be dressed in the uniform of The Damned.

“I do believe Aelfraed has sent Hol and her group of renegades to defend the palace roof.” He said.

“How many of The Damned do you see ?” Asked Aukar. “Are there enough to make a difference ?”

Nurigen had always liked Hol. Seeing her there and knowing she was about to die saddened him. If only she hadn't gone rogue and decided to travel to Leng. He still didn't understand that, but there wasn't much she could do with a small army of misfits.

"There has been no portal opened to Mendera, our seers would have felt the disturbance in the rifts." He said. "Hol just has Juno and Albas with her and a few misfits of course."

"Three, just three." Spat Aukar. "They will die with everyone else in Leng."

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Tejan had a short blade in her hand, as she walked into the room where the welcoming voice had come from. There was a long table in the window, giving a perfect view of the lake. The glass was the expensive kind, which polarised the harsh rays of sunlight, creating comfortable ambient light. Perfect for an artist's studio, or a kitchen that faced the rising sun.

"Come in, come in.... There are all sorts of fresh nuts and berries. Warm Carocakes too, though I know you've already eaten two of those.... Come in, I won't bite."

It was seeing a face from history that made Tejan so nervous. The woman sat eating a bowl of Arroya Fruit looked exactly like all the pictures she'd seen of Kittara, right down to the old fashioned hairstyle. An enemy could choose to look like a friend. Tejan moved closer, but kept her blade ready.

"Who are you?" She asked.

"A few days ago I wasn't quite all of Kittara, but now I am."

"I've heard that another is using that face."

"Only while I was dead. Please eat with me.... It's an old custom for building trust, but still a very effective one."

Tejan put her blade away and filled a plate with pieces of fresh fruit. She'd already eaten, but was famous for always being hungry. She sniffed the jugs of juice and poured herself a mug full of one she recognised.

"Seb and his mother live well." Said Kittara. "It's been a comfortable temporary residence."

"Minraver was worried about them. She seemed to think they were up to something."

"Ahh, that wonderful phrase.... Up to something." Said Kittara. "No, Seb and Moly are harmless clerics, descended from a long line of harmless clerics."

Tejan ate her fruit, which was wonderfully fresh, as was the juice. Seb and his mother probably had a stasis cupboard somewhere. Hugely expensive, Tejan had always thought them to be a ridiculous luxury.

"Why is Seb a boatman?" She asked. "It's hard work and early morning starts, for someone already quite wealthy."

Kittara looked at her, as if thinking about it for the first time.

"I have no idea, he certainly doesn't seem to enjoy it." Said Kittara. "Civic duty is the usual way clerics tend to explain their nonsense. I can assure you that neither Seb nor Moly is....Up to something."

"So why hide here, blocking Chlo? And why is Minraver concerned about them?"

"Careful Tejan... Curiosity will get you a bad mark in your file."

She was laughing at her. Tejan smiled back, as she ate her second breakfast that morning. Kittara knew her name, which was both flattering and confusing. No more being accused of curiosity though, she'd eat and wait for the inevitable explanations. The feed from Chlo started up again, it seemed that Kittara was no longer hiding. Had Chlo been helping her all along? The empire encouraged a certain amount of personal initiative, but disliked curiosity for its own sake. Tejan simply reported finding Kittara and that Seb and his mother seemed to pose no threat.

“Of course, the children.” Said Kittara. “I only decided to invite myself into Seb’s house, because she said he’d been good to them.... His mother cooks the best Nurag Garn on Mendera.”

“Who told you ?”

“The multiverse, during one of her rare moments of being helpful.” Said Kittara. “That made the children important along a great many vital time lines. As are you..... Now.”

“Me ?! I don’t understand any of this.” Said Tejan.

“And it will get worse.” Said Chlo.

Chlo had arrived, in her true organic form. She was looking the room over, as though she was an invited house guest.

“She’ll need to come with me.” Said Kittara. “Once her presence here was locked into the timelines, she too became an important part of it all.”

“Part of what ? The war ?” Asked Tejan.

“More like a game sometimes..... But yes, the war.” Said Chlo. “Kittara is right, you’re now cursed by it all more than the children.”

Cursed ? None of it made sense. Where was the team taking the house apart ? Nothing was going according to the rules and Chlo seemed to be talking in riddles.

“Where are you going ?” Chlo asked Kittara.

“To see him of course. He will need to know what I may need to do and approve my actions. Then I’ll have to keep my promise to Mo and help him defend the fortress.”

“Can you get to the 1st rift fairly quickly ?” Asked Chlo.

“Yes, the ones who inhabit the darkness taught me a few new tricks.”

It was all nonsense to Tejan, words jumbled up and meaning nothing. Only one word had stuck in her mind.

“Why am I cursed ?” She asked.

“My fault, I shouldn’t really exist at this time.” Said Kittara. “Time lines get fractured, the structure of the multiverse gets fractured. There is a danger that the fractures might be erased and you with them.”

“Not if you take her with you.” Said Chlo. “At least until the fractures heal.”

“I intended to. Do you still keep escape kits at home ?”

“We do, Jen has always insisted on it.” Said Tejan.

“Good, we’ll pick yours up, before going to see Sikush.” Said Kittara. “You’ll need to take the oath of course before knowing what you are about to know and see. I assume you’d like to become a member of the elite ?”

Like it ? Her whole life had been one long hope that she might be noticed and considered worthy of such an honour. She’d had no real expectations about joining the elite, but expectations can be fickle things and are often wrong.

“Yes, of course.” She said.

“Are you ready to take a personal oath to serve The Chalné ?” Asked Chlo.

“Yes..... Will I get the markings on my left hand ?”

Kittara was actually grinning at her, as if they were already friends.

“Of course you will.”

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Louelle had suffered such indignities before, but never complained. Or if she did complain, the grumbles were more than justified. It was being a seer, having visions put into her head by.... Often it seemed by far too many assorted deities. The visions often required her to work with some very

suspect types, sometimes worse than Mo and his friends. Sometimes she'd questioned her calling, but being a seer didn't come with an option to quit. She quietly meditated for a few seconds, closing her eyes to gain focus.

"Don't go to sleep, Rhian needs our help." Said Mo.

There was the option to kill them all of course, painfully, slowly, horribly. Louelle thought the deities might view that rather badly though. She was sure Mo was alright underneath his rather annoying exterior. Deep down, very deep down, he was probably only slightly irritating.

"Rhian will be fine Mo, have a little faith." She said.

Things didn't look good, as the tribespeople surrounded Rhian and Pug, shouting out threats in their own corrupted version of the common tongue. Almost undecipherable apart from the profanity, which was quite imaginative. They weren't attacking though, for fear of hurting their smelly beast. Pug had now become a symbol for the tribe, a creature of almost religious significance.

"The creature has holy significance to them." Said Louelle. "Rhian will be safe, for a while."

The tribe's holy man was busy trying to create an irresistible fervour among the tribespeople. Given time they'd forget their desire to save Pug and concentrate on killing the outsiders. He was good, probably shaman for an entire region of the rift. He was shouting and dancing about, while throwing huge amounts of sacred powders into the air. He was too good and had to be removed.

Louelle could move fast over the scrubby ground, faster than most people were comfortable with.

The attacking tribespeople actually went quiet, as she slithered to within a few yards of them. She wasn't interested in them yet and just wanted to talk to Silky.

"I know what I said about killing, but their shaman is too effective... He needs to be removed."

"If you mean killed, say it."

"Killed Silky, but no feeding on his body."

There could be no conversion of someone like him; the religious fervour would eventually resurface. Louelle still felt sad, as Silky moved through the tribal warriors, ignoring them and heading towards the shaman. It gave Louelle a chance to move closer to Rhian. The people of the rifts were used to seeing strange creatures, but they'd never seen a living Kiyoh before. Race memories maybe, but those were never like meeting the real thing. They were becoming quiet as she moved, obviously scared of her serpentine appearance.

"I'll do it when Silky kills their holy man." She told Rhian.

"Can you do it? There must be two hundred of them, maybe more."

"More warriors for us to use.... Don't worry Rhian, it'll work."

There were more than two hundred, she'd counted their number as around two hundred and thirty. Many were warriors, experts with spears and arrows. A good number to help defend the fortress, but the hard work was just about to begin. The tribe had clustered around Pug, none being more than fifty feet from the beast. Everything was perfect, as long as it worked.

"Rift scum!" Yelled Silky. "You're not worthy of this death."

He had some real power, their shaman. He raised his right arm, showing a fist full of sparks and flames. No match for Silky of course. A rift holy man was never going to stand a chance against a converted chaos creature, an invoker trained in Leng itself.

"Fool, I am a creature born out of fire." Said Silky.

Silky raised her hand and the shaman was covered in flames. He screamed for about half a second, before becoming ash, which was carried away on the breeze. As a demonstration of power it was effective, causing all the tribespeople to be silent and look at Silky with awe.

"Now." Said Louelle.

Her tail was long and heavy. She raised it and struck the ground twice, causing tremors which shook the thorn scrub.

“Semoe derijit.” She exclaimed. “Semoe narden, semoe iridan.”

Ripples ran out in a circle from Louelle. They looked like ripples in the air, but she knew the old magic affected something deeper. They were ripples in reality, bending reality to her will. The free will of the tribespeople was her target. They began to look at her with unblinking eyes. They looked drugged, which wouldn't do at all. Louelle wanted alert and active warriors, who were in thrall to her will. Her tail hit the ground twice more.

“Semoe derijit.” She exclaimed. “Semoe narden, semoe iridan.”

More tremors, stronger this time. Another ripple, heading away from her at speed. That was better, the rift dwellers were kneeling towards her, turning their hand palm up. Supplication to her, the seer they would now serve and give their lives to protect.

“You truly are more than just a seer.” Said Silky. “I can see the Kiyoh are also powerful empaths.”

It wasn't an empaths skill, she'd bent reality in a very special way. Louelle felt no reason to explain herself, or her skills to Silky.

“That is amazing.” Said Rhian.

Over two hundred warriors of the rifts, plus a few of their elders. All of them kneeling, some holding out their weapons as some sort of offering. Kerr had been left behind a wall in the fortress as their lone survivor if things had gone wrong. If they had all died, he was to have travelled to the nearest rift gate and taken the bad news to Mendera. Louelle hadn't given much for his chances of surviving for even a day on his own. He was currently running down the hillside.

“It worked ! It actually worked.... Well done Louelle.” He shouted.

“I'll need to talk to each of them individually.” She said. “A long and tiring task, but they will then happily follow me for the rest of their lives.”

“We have our army.” Said Mo. “All we need now is for Kittara to return.”

Silky actually snorted.

“If she remembers us, once she's back living her old life in Mendera City.” She said.

“I share your pessimism about the promises of many heroes.” Said Louelle. “Not Kittara though, I feel her presence along many future timelines. She will be here for the main battle.”

Poor Kerr, he'd arrived breathing hard and looking stressed. His human physiology was still finding the atmosphere of the 1st rift a struggle.

“Main battle ?” He asked. “How many do we have to fight ?”

Louelle knew of course and she knew that the fortress would be the chosen place for the worst battle of them all. There could be no good outcome from any of them knowing that. She looked at the kneeling tribespeople and gently thumped her tail on the ground.

“Up, all of you, stand up.”

She waved her hand in the direction of the old ruined fortress.

“Your main task will be to rebuild and strengthen the fortress where needed.” She shouted. “Then you will defend it against any and all attackers.”

A few banged their chests and others shouted out their acceptance of the orders. They weren't a fighting force yet, but they would be. She'd need to spend the entire day and much of the night talking to them, one at a time. Then they'd be a force that even the famous Demon Elite warriors would be cautious about fighting.

“Follow me.” She called.

Everyone followed her, including Rhian and Pug, as she headed towards the fortress.

“You never answered my question.” Said Kerr.

“I know I didn’t”

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Mingal could see most of Leng from the roof of the imperial palace. Aelfraed had been right; the roof was a key strategic position in the city, even without its symbolic significance. Almost every rooftop in the city was occupied by warriors, most carrying weapons which fired arrows or bolts. Magic wielders would be up there too, ready to hurl flames and destruction at the attackers.

“They have catapults, large heavy ones.” Said Hol. “Hard work to have dragged them across the rifts, but they’ll throw boulders big enough to knock down any wall in Leng.”

“Not as many of them as I thought there’d be.” Said Celli.

The healers had looked them all over, bringing relief from annoying small wounds and tender bruises. Celli had been transformed by them, seeming to have more energy than the day they’d left Mendera City. She was stomping across the rooftop, looking for trouble.

“They’re close now.” Said Juno. “If Mendera are sending the reserves, they need to arrive soon.”

Did any of them believe tens of thousands of The Damned were about to pour into Leng ? Mingal certainly didn’t think it was going to happen. He was still feeling confident they’d win the day, but a lot of good warriors probably wouldn’t see another morning.

“They have other heavy weapons to slow them down.” Said Albas. “They’re still quite a way off, but a little fire might slow them down even more.”

“Nothing works as well on the rifts.” Said Hol. “Even our spell can be affected. Besides, there is a certain etiquette to follow, even in war.”

“Fuck etiquette.” Said Celli. “They declared war with their first attack on gateway.”

Mingal watched the approaching flying Terak, as they hovered above the ground troops, protecting them the way devoted mothers dote over their children. There had to be an army of a hundred thousand approaching. A little fire would send a clear signal of intent and just might destroy one of the catapults.

“I’ll do it Hol.” He said. “I’m a creature of chaos, unfettered by any rules of war.”

“Can your spells reach them yet ?” Askes Hol.

“I believe so.”

“Fine, tickle them with a little spark and flame.” Said Hol.

It was a long way to the front row of the ground troops, close to a mile, perhaps a little further. Well out of range for any weapons used on the rifts, apart from magic. Mingal concentrated on a fireball spell and knew the rift was causing problems. The spell built, but didn’t feel right. By the time the spell was a spinning ball of fire high above his head, it looked deadly. It just didn’t feel right.

“I’m not sure this will work.” He said.

“You won’t know for certain if you don’t try.” Said Juno.

Most of the ground troops seemed to be low level Dredger Demons, just about the only demons who’d happily turn on their own kind if the pay was good enough. Yes, definitely Dredgers, he could see a large tan coloured male, in the front row of the attackers. Mingal chose him as a target and released the deadly ball of flame.

“They don’t like the look of that.” Said Hol.

Discipline wasn’t a strong point with Dredgers, nor were they cursed with too much intellect. They began to climb over one another and break ranks, to get out of the way of the approaching fireball. It burst high above their heads, showering them with a cloud of harmless sparks.

“Oh....” Sighed Celli.

It would have been far better if she'd insulted him, or yelled at him, or just about anything else. That single sigh seemed to bury itself in his already tortured soul.

"Try again, the next one will probably work." Said Albas.

Celli just sighed again, as he built up another fireball spell. It felt different yet again, but different in a good way. It was going to work, he knew it. Not that he said anything to the others of course, just in case. The Dredger in the front row selected as his target again.

"They're not running this time." Said Mingal. "Splendid, I have a good feeling about this one."

The enemy weren't vulnerable to severe heat, they had dragged their war machines across the searing hot 7th rift. Mingal's fireball was different though, almost a taste of the fires of hell. It burst, engulfing the Dredgers in fire with staggering heat and intensity. Many were simply reduced to ash where they stood, while others suffered the agony of a slower death. The entire Terak army, came to a halt, the huge catapults shuddering as they stopped.

"Can you do that again?" Asked Juno. "Now would be a good time to destroy one of their huge war machines."

The catapults had metal frames on metal wheels, but they'd buckle and collapse if he could get his fireball just right. He began to build another spell, though he already felt tired and drained.

"No, it doesn't feel right again." He said. "Damn the rifts."

"I can help, take what you need." Said Celli. "Just don't drain me until I can't fight."

The huge Shelzak demon put her hand on his shoulder and his spell felt right again. The strange feeling of it being out of sync with the rift went, as he drew energy from her. Not too much, she had a battle to fight, but enough energy to build a fireball larger than the enemy were probably expecting.

"Enough Mingal, I'm feeling too drained."

"Sorry."

He looked up and the fireball was huge, a good thirty feet across. Never in his very long life had he ever spun up such a piece of hell, or heard of anyone else doing so. He chose the largest of the catapults as his target and released the fireball.

"Look, even some of the Terak are running." Said Hol.

"Good old Mingal has routed them." Said Albas.

The approaching fire had meaning to them now. Even the Terak catapult crews were climbing over their Dredger warrior allies, desperate to escape the hellfire. The fireball burst as it hit the catapult, bringing instant death to any demon or Terak, who'd had the misfortune of being too close. Such a heat that the metal framed catapult didn't warp or break, it burned. The metal burned with a green and purple flame, as the machine of war fell onto the Dredger foot soldiers.

"They'll attack us now," said Hol, "we should be ready for them."

It looked like half the approaching army was dead or dying, but Mingal had fought in such battles before. The destruction of the catapult mattered most, not the two hundred or so dead enemy warriors. They were a tiny part of the approaching army, a drop in the ocean of the Terak army of a hundred thousand or so. The sound of demon drums began, the enemy announcing they were about to attack.

"What spells do you think will work best in Leng?" Juno asked him.

"Fire, always fire." He replied.

There were answering drums from Leng, each side trying to intimidate the other with the deep steady beat of their war drums.

"Here they come." Said Mingal.

The Terak had obviously decided the ground forces could now defend themselves. A cloud of the flying creatures were hurtling towards the roof tops, travelling faster than seemed possible for a large winged creature. Mingal suddenly felt nauseous and slightly unsteady on his feet. Something was disturbing reality, bending the fabric of the multiverse. He knew what it was, just before the large doorway opened, linking two different planes of existence.

“They’re here !” He yelled. “Mendera has come, the reserves are here.”

Horns adding to the noise of drums. The Damned created their own music, with long straight horns, which created a noise unlike any other instrument. The sound was harsh and loud, as if defying anyone to dare meet them in battle. The reserves had come, thousands of them rushing to engage the Terak army.

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Alyz had returned home a few times for a few personal items, but had spent months with The Old One, hiding in the less travelled parts of the multiverse. The monotony of hiding broken by occasional warfare. They’d recently hunted down and destroyed the remnants of the Terak fleet, which had attacked Algaria.

“You’re sure this place is important ?” She asked.

The Old One and his fleet were orbiting the planet Menura Oasis. A fancy name for the beige planet below them. Beige planets weren’t usually good places to live. Exposed rock, eroded by weather to create dust and sand, lots of beige sand. Sand that tended to form hundreds of miles of dry barren dunes.

“I assure you, this planet is important.” Said Robanta

There were two small oceans, which was probably why someone had given it the Oasis part of the name. Dark green oceans and green oceans were rarely healthy ones. Too much nutrient in the water, causing too much algae to grow. Dead dark oceans, never penetrated by sunlight.

Robanta wasn’t the real Robanta of course. She’d been one of her father’s lovers, when Alyz had been a young child. An awful woman, who’d treated her cruelly when her father wasn’t there. Alyz understood the multiverse now, understood why it chose certain memories to bring back as living flesh. It was all about stirring up powerful feelings and emotions. Alyz had truly hated Robanta.

“Jen came here with a full squad.” Said Alyz. “She spent two days here, talking to the locals, what’s left of them.”

“I have her report.” Added The Old One. “She found nothing of interest, nothing at all.”

Jen had noted that the population had suffered from detrimental migration. So many people had left, that the remaining population had dropped below the famous Fah Point. One really bad harvest or an epidemic of some kind, would see the end of the one and only town on the planet.

“Such a dump, it doesn’t even have an imperial ident.” Said Alyz.

“Everywhere has an ident.” Said The Old One. “Two guys digging for gold on an airless rock and it automatically gets given an ident. So why did this place evade Chlo’s usually efficient labelling and listing system ? There is nothing in the official records.”

Alyz knew, though it had happened a very long time ago. She’d been involved in the wars against the Kivar. It seemed strange now, but the beige planet with its dead oceans, had nearly been fought over.

“We wanted to keep the Kivar on our side.” Said Alyz. “We had a few miners and a working town, even if it was only about fifty or sixty miners. The empire renounced any claim and allowed the Kivar to take over. As often happens, the early encouraging exploration for rare minerals didn’t work out.

Five years later the Kivar gave up their claim and left. Leaving the miners and their families behind of course.”

“A sad but common practise.” Said Robanta. “A mining community left to rot, perfect growing conditions for angry terrorists.”

Alyz watched the planet on the screens and it really was hard to believe that a few hundred disgruntled miners could pose a threat to the future of the multiverse.

“That was all a long time ago.” Said Alyz. “With all the bright people leaving..... Jen did mention detrimental migration quite a few times in her report.”

“I wouldn’t point you at this place, if it wasn’t important” Snapped Robanta.

A techy multiverse, that was new. Alyz could be techy herself, if she thought the situation called for it.

“Then tell us everything ?” She snapped. “No more hints and vague directions. Why is a failed mining planet that no one wants so important ?”

“Go down there and find out.”

The multiverse issued the command and was gone. It was quite a relief, the presence of Robanta was pulling some very dark memories up from her past. She did it deliberately of course, stirring up memories to use as leverage in the future.

“I’m glad she’s gone.” Said The Old One.

“Me too.”

“Shall I ask Chlo for a few extra members of the guard ?”

Alyz had to think about that. Delmus had been given recruits just out of training and the reserves had just been allocated to the battle for Leng. There’d be an almost endless supply of raw recruits of course, all probably useless.

“Shock and awe old friend.” She said. “There are over eight thousand of the Aumashy’s Immortals in the cargo hold. How soon can you have ten of them ready to accompany me to the surface of Menura Oasis ?”

She was sure the sound from the hull was The Old One chuckling. He always claimed it was metal fatigue of course, or rodents in the cable runs. Both impossible scenarios.

“Shock and awe indeed..... They can be ready in less than an hour.”

“Good, get it done.”

Ten green skinned Aumashy bio-constructs, complete with tentacles and truly terrible weapons. If that didn’t open a few closed mouths on the planet below, nothing would.

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Delmus had seen the reports about the small silver coloured creatures. One had survived a great many attempts at killing it, before being destroyed by Mendera’s automatic Ion blasters, designed to control the growing growler problem. Even then, Chlo had put the creature’s remains into stasis. No one was sure if the creature the size of a child’s doll, was now dead, or just stunned in some way.

“They do seem to be tough little fuckers.” Chlo had commented. “Probably silicon based life, though I can’t be certain about that.”

No DNA according to the reports he’d seen and very little in the way of internal organs. A mystery creature who had been staggeringly hard to kill. There’d be lots more of them somewhere of course. That was what nature did, DNA or no DNA. Nature always found ways for life to multiply and adapt, even small strange forms of life. He now knew the silver creatures were definitely an enemy, the attack on Sventa hadn’t been personal or a one off.

“There are dozens of them.” Said Dava. “The Yakkies kill them, but it can take a while, seven direct hits for one.”

Poor Dava, forgetting she didn't have anything left of her right arm below the elbow. He'd seen her try to pick up a few things with a hand that no longer existed. It had to be hell for her.

“Did you see Chlo's report on these things ?” He asked.

Trey was with her of course, they were inseparable. Their relationship reminded him of his own with Luri, so he was ignoring it for now. They were both giving him their guilty look, which he'd seen far too often.

“Were we supposed to look at it ?” Asked Trey.

“Yes....Look I know the common channel is full of general chatter, but you need to learn to skim and read the important stuff. A new hard to kill enemy is important.”

“Sorry.” Said Dava.

“No problem, you can learn while you kill them.” Said Delmus. “They can use outer shells that look like people, so be prepared for that..... Go on, don't stare at me... Kill them.”

They both ran off, Dava already stepping up the power on her Yakkie. The creatures were small, but they had battle skills none of them understood. One of the recruits had been paralysed for a few minutes, after one of the things had touched her. There had been one or two other unaccountable wounds, as if the creatures could inflict damage with their minds alone. One thing was certain, those wounded would have been dead, if they hadn't been members of The Damned.

“Damn things, like annoying tiny Terak.” He muttered.

He noticed the tiny residual silver wings, as the creature leapt at him. They were quivering, as if the thing was attempting to use them to fly. Delmus used his Nurigen blade to stab and slash, though it took several deep stabs to stop the creature moving. He looked at the dead silver body and wondered if the creature was a form of Terak. Not what the Terak had been, but what they were to become in a future multiverse.

“Is this small monster and its kind pulling all the strings ?” He muttered.

It was one of those strange moments, when the truth shines through all the intervening crap and distractions. Delmus just hoped he lived long enough to put his theory on the common channel. There was the sound of fighting in the distance. Delmus ran, following the sound of Yakkie fire and the shattered bodies of their enemies. Dava was fighting well for a one handed warrior, but his team of trainees was surrounded by the silver creatures and a few human mercenaries in combat armour. Delmus took the RM9 off his shoulder, smiling at the chance to use the weapon again. It was a little overkill, but he'd aim safely away from his own people.

“Oh, I do love this damn weapon.” He muttered.

His finger pushed the single control switch on the powerful energy weapon, causing it to give off the wonderful crackle and hum, as it built up power. He aimed it and was about to fire, when a headache caused him to slump to the ground. Not a normal headache, it was too painful to ignore, as it demanded his total attention.

“Those bastards, what weapon is this ?” He muttered.

“Delmus, you can't use that weapon in there. You mustn't damage the machinery.”

He knew the voice, her the woman and living God he'd loved for countless millennia.

“Luri ? Is that you ?”

Poor Dava, looking at him down on his knees, his face almost touching the floor. They were going to think the strange silver things had taken him out of the battle.

“Damage the machinery and you’ll die.” Said Luri, inside his head. “You, the clerics in Grey Walker and your entire team, you’ll die. Probably the miners on Sessana too. Don’t fire the RM9 in there. Do you hear me ?”

He did and he was certain she’d found a way to talk to him, even if it was incredibly painful. An idea was forming in his aching head, an idea he needed to confirm.

“Will it stop their plans to destroy Mendera ?” He asked. “The truth Luri, will it ?”

“Yes, but you’ll die..... Don’t die and leave me alone Delmus.... I love you. We have a plan, to destroy the same kind of engines connected to Boomers. Come home Delmus, we’ll be ready to try our plan... just a few days from now.”

Oh, the love you card and played at the critical moment. It always won of course, the love you card trumped anything and everything.

“I’ll find these machines and dig in Luri.” He said. “I’ll give you seven days to destroy the engines connected to Boomers. If you can’t, I’ll use the RM9 until everything here is destroyed.”

“But you’ll die.”

“Only the eternal expect to live forever..... I love you.”

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