

Mendera Temple

Chapter 19 – Leng

“There were worlds beyond that narrow band of black, many worlds, it was written on metal pages and the metal books were never wrong.”

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“I think it’s getting hotter.” Said Hol.

They were only half a mile from gateway and the gargantuan walls seemed to fill their world, reaching high into the air above and miles to their left and right. Up close the walls looked more than symbolic and Kittara knew the heat ended at the wall, inside them the city of Leng had a climate much the same as Mendera. She knew this, because she’d spent a very long time preparing for her trip and had read just about everything in the forbidden archives.

“It’s a bit different to last time,” said Hol, “what happens now ?”

“I assume they’ll open a door. We should walk a bit closer.”

The heat stops at the wall. Kittara considered all the things in the multiverse that were just accepted. Like gravity, water existing as a liquid at all, ageing, entropy and the heat stopping at the wall. It sounded more like the deliberate intervention of something very powerful, yet it was just accepted as one of those things. Where they were, wood became charcoal in seconds, yet barely half a mile away, there was an almost pleasant climate.

“We accept far too much without question.” She said.

Hol gave her a long suffering and infuriatingly sympathetic look. She never asked her if she was alright, but the look said it all. Kittara was going crazy again, they were on the 7th rift, again.

“They’re opening the large door.” Said Hol.

“I wonder who’ll they send to escort me in ?”

“Do you think Neosto will come himself ?”

“No, he’ll wait in his palace in the city.”

Something inside her ached to be the other side of the wall, something very dark, but still part of her. All those years sat in front of the flame, where had she drifted off to ? Kittara trusted Sikush when he said the crawling chaos was securely locked inside his prison, but perhaps some malign influence could have affected her. Something so small as to be untraceable, but she’d been exposed to it for countless billions of years. The other alternative was that Kittara had always contained the darkness..... that terrified her.

“It’s his banner Kittara.”

Kittara looked and it was definitely the banner of Neosto. It wasn’t just a great honour, it was unheard of. She saw him coming through the doorway, his personal guard on either side. He looked quite large and imposing, far more striking than Sikush. She took hold of Hol’s hand.

“You need to go now, only I’m invited here, you may not be safe.”

“I’ll be fine. Once you go inside I’ll go back through the gate to the 6th rift and make my way home from there.”

It sounded reasonable, but Kittara suddenly felt very worried about Hol and hugged her, much to Hol’s surprise.

“You are coming back Kittara, aren’t you ?”

Something in her did feel at home, it even resented the demons who now occupied Leng. They were newcomers, it had been there before demons had even existed.

“I promise I’ll be back, but you have to leave now.”

Kittara easily pulled a hole in reality, a huge gaping purple hole that seemed to pulse with life.

“You’ll come out at the well, now go.”

They had a farewell hug and Hol stepped into the portal and was gone. Kittara closed the hole that would have taken her back home and waited for Neosto to arrive.

“Sikush was right about your ego.” She muttered to herself.

She was stood there, gradually sinking into a sand dune and now alone. From the door in gateway, Neosto seemed to be bringing most of the demon army, all in their finest regalia. Drums seemed to be their favourite instrument and there were thousands of them, forming a melody, of sorts, with countless demon horns. It was like the famous attack on Mendera in the 1st age of the temple, but this time they were coming to welcome her, an enemy.

At last a face she recognised apart from Neosto. Silky riding some kind of six legged beast and it didn’t seem keen on being ridden. Kittara hadn’t hidden her loathing of the female chaos invoker, but now she was actually pleased to see her. The demon army poured out in their millions and began to form a circle around her. Above her strange flying creature filled the sky, some with demons sat astride them. Kittara had never heard of the demons using winged creatures in such a way and she was keen to find out more.

Eventually the army seemed to fill the 7th rift, their numbers incalculable and they thrived in the heat. Kittara had never seen an army so numerous since the Dracc and she began to understand why Sikush had worked so hard on building a lasting peace with Neosto.

Neosto walked through the lines of his troops, Silky still on the beast, which now seemed better behaved. She dismounted and joined Neosto as he walked to within a few feet of Kittara and gave a slight bow. Silky also bowed to her, as did every single one of the millions of demon warriors who surrounded her.

“Kittara of Mendera,” said Neosto, “welcome to Leng.”

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“They call it Nest Town.” Said Delmus.

He’d brought equipment to Charadask, but Luri hadn’t seen the area around the nest for a very long time. The demons had not only moved into the area in a massive way, they’d created a whole community.

“It was just a fort when I was here before.” She said.

A fort with a garrison meant security and then settlers had followed. Traders and services of all kinds had come to sell to the settlers and before you knew it..... Luri was looking at a serious demon community, complete with several stone buildings. Stone is hard to get out of the ground and shape. Stone meant commitment; the demons were here to stay.

“They’re friendly,” said Delmus, “and they almost worship Charadask, even bring him food every day.”

Knowing the kinds of things the insect like sorcerer ate, Luri wasn’t too keen on seeing what his new found admirers fed him. She’d been told of the strange truce Neosto had called, but it was a different thing entirely to walk through the streets of a demon town and remain unmolested. The children came out to stare at the old enemy, but the adults did their best to ignore them.

“This is going to take some getting used to.” She said.

They’d left a wide area around the nest clear of buildings, but they’d erected several makeshift temples to their gods and there were a large number of burials. Unlike Mendera, the demons

marked the burial places of their dead, usually with symbols made out of animal bones. There were hundreds of marked burial mounds around the nest.

"It's not almost worship Delmus, they really do worship Charadask."

It took them a while to walk through the maze of small temples, each with a few demons inside, making offering to their various gods. Some of the offerings were quite small, but they saw a living Farrag beast being tied to a post, prior to having its throat slit. There were guards now at the entrances to the nest, but they just turned and looked the other way as Luri and Delmus approached.

"I always get a bad feel about this place." Said Delmus.

Luri merely nodded at him. The demons had primitive beliefs and if they really did see Charadask as a god, they would follow him anywhere. An unstoppable leader at the head of a huge fanatical army. Luri shivered, they had seen that scenario so many times before. Just inside the entrance hall and several demon shamans were set up there, receiving offerings and casting spells over the sick. The walls were covered in writing, some of it in blood.

"I can read most of this," said Luri, "they talk off offerings to the great one, I'm guessing that would be Charadask."

The hall stank of decay and it was a relief to walk out of it and down the nearest passageway.

"At least this is still clean." Said Delmus.

They encountered no more shaman, or demons of any kind. It looked like Charadask had given his worshippers a line they weren't allowed to cross. The nest was huge, but he didn't seem to have added any new levels or major rooms for a while. It took them nearly thirty minutes to get to the central control room and the sorcerer was waiting for them.

"I noticed the demons actually worship you now." Said Luri

How a giant spider spoke so clearly always amazed Luri, but his laugh was certainly not human. His laugh seemed to echo through his carapace, giving it a completely alien sound.

"They started worshipping me long before Neosto had the fort built here."

He was now tapping his feet on the floor and moving around them.

"I've killed them and eaten them for so long. Do you know I actually destroyed a regiment of their elite troops?"

"I did hear about that." Said Delmus

The sorcerer led them through two hallways and into a large chamber, comfortably furnished for humans.

"Yes, I have killed tens of thousands of demons," he said, "yet I still live. It was almost inevitable that they would begin to worship me."

There was food and drink on a low table and two other rooms leading off, both bedrooms.

"I wasn't sure if you shared a bed," said Charadask, "I've noticed Menderans can be rather fussy about their sleeping arrangements."

Kittara had told Luri that he had slaves in the Nest, mainly humans captured on the 1st rift. They were essential to the running of the place, so Luri chose not to be offended when one of them offered her a drink. After all as Kittara had told her, it was a better fate being a slave than being eaten by Sventa.

"Neosto provides the food and drink," said Charadask, "only the best and always fresh."

Luri sipped the drink and it was an excellent wine, probably stolen during a raid on the chosen.

"You seem very friendly with the demons these days," said Luri, "you used to hate them."

Again there was the laugh, or more a cackle, that made his outer shell vibrate.

“A means to and end Luri. Sevril-Narge has all my hatred, there is little left for anyone or anything else. Once my trap has caught her, the demons will have served their purpose.”

Luri looked around the place that was going to be their home, for who knew how long. It was comfortable, but she needed to be outside, feel the rain on her face. Delmus had just come out of one of the bedrooms and he was trying to smile. It was a cage. Admittedly it was a cage they’d entered willingly, but a cage none the less. Sikush had given them their orders.

“You can go outside, but try not to upset the locals and you must stay close to the nest. No trips to see Mo in Tandalla, or weekends in Annill.”

They were stuck there, the cage had closed around them. For some reason Charadask was getting quite agitated and tapping his claws on the floor very quickly.

“Besides,” he said, “when I use the trap it will probably kill every demon in the town outside.”

He seemed to concentrate, his head moving back and forth from Luri to Delmus.

“To be honest, there is a chance we may not survive either.”

Luri took a huge gulp of the truly excellent wine.

“I knew it !” Said Delmus.

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Commander Sweyn had grown up on a farm and had attended Hendell academy, the place where the Kivar send their gifted children. The place they learned how to lead warriors, the best warriors in the multiverse. Of course the empire might have argued that The Damned were better, but now the Kivar were fighting for Mendera.

“Good to have you aboard.” He said.

“Thank you commander.” Said Chlo.

Gifted had a lot of meanings, it depended on where you were in the multiverse. Gifted to the demons meant someone in touch with the ancestors, on Pineus it always referred to an artisan of exceptional skill, but to the Kivar it often meant being good at obeying orders. Chlo was pleased that Commander Sweyn was so gifted that he’d convinced a great many of his teachers, that he was absurdly good at taking orders. In truth she knew he was a superb tactician with a real flare for knowing when to take calculated risks. His IQ was way above the norm for a Kivar and it was a miracle he’d risen so far in the military. Chlo approved of him, she approved very much.

“Just don’t dent any of my fleet.” He said, smiling at her.

He trusted her, she liked that. She’d often known the captains of barely flying derelicts, who’d constantly questioned her, but Sweyn trusted her with his fleet, all of it. Over a millions craft, though many were water tankers and supply craft, there was even a two mile long hospital ship. At the front of the fleet were its teeth, hundreds of thousands of heavily armed fighters. Everyone on the flight deck of the Kivar flagship was watching the Menderan news on a variety of screens and devices. Sikush had just appeared to make an announcement.

“Citizens of the empire, I am saddened to announce the betrayal of the New Keo Group.....ultimate act of betrayal..... removal of New Keo from the empire.....”

Chlo knew it all by heart, she’d heard him rehearse it many times, she’d even added a sentence or two. Eventually he came to the part that affected the Kivar fleet.

“...we are fortunate to have the Kivar fleet to defend Mendera..... generous offer..... Kivar made core members of the empire by imperial edict.....”

There was a lot more, most of it damning New Keo for every kind of vile act, most of it was nonsense. To attack an enemy requires justification, no matter who you are, no matter how powerful. The screen carried on showing scenes of New Keo attack craft massing at four different

points, preparing to attack the empire. None of that was faked. A comms operator was talking to the Kivar home planet, not on a screen, but on a headset. President Mikan Gheen was giving his order for battle to commence and it had to be over a highly secure method of communications. The comms operator pressed a series of buttons on her desk, entering the official code to begin the war. "We have confirmation of order 886-442 sir." She said.

It was her turn now, Chlo reached out, feeling the edges of the fleet and preparing to pull every craft through reality. The New Keo Group had lost that ability once they'd been kicked out of the empire. They had a crude faster than light drive, but it would still take them a relatively long time to move their fleet. Sweyn was looking in her direction.

"Take us to target 1 please Chlo."

It was as if they hadn't moved, the green and blue planet was just suddenly there, as was the New Keo fleet around it. Emaard the locals called the planet, Chlo had catalogued it when the New Keo Group had found it. She'd mapped it and added it to the empire registry. The population was quite small and spread out quite thinly, so they should all survive the debris of the battle, when it inevitably crashed onto the planet.

"They're not firing on us sir."

"Probably still trying to work out who we are. Begin the attack."

Chlo had done her bit, now it was up to Sweyn and his highly efficient fleet. Chlo watched as the ground defences began to recognise the fleet and the barrage of energy weapons began. Jen would have handled some minor points differently, but the Kivar fleet did it by the book, the empire book. They'd have filled the sky with chaff if they'd been invading the planet, but they were only interested in destroying the fleet.

"Don't give them time to organise."

Chlo was listening into their battle commands and had to admit that the Kivar wing commanders were very good. They seemed to be having it all their own way, concentrating fire on targeted New Keo vessels and then moving on once it was destroyed. Chlo could already see over a dozen derelict enemy craft falling towards the atmosphere of Emaard, or stuck in decaying orbits.

The New Keo fighters were old technology, but they did find targets and two Kivar fighters disintegrated and became more space trash for the fleet to avoid. A large Kivar vessel was hit, one of their invincibles. Chlo watched as an entire section of its hull was blasted away, yet its weapons carried on firing. The heavy fleet was now catching up with the fighters, craft with automated ion turrets and multiple drones. Quite quickly there was a direct hit by a drone on a New Keo refuelling craft and it became just a huge ball of super-heated particles. Several smaller craft were destroyed by the explosion and others collided, trying to avoid the debris.

"Concentrate on their command craft." Ordered Sweyn.

Now it was five heavy Kivar craft against the New Keo commanders craft and there could only be one outcome. There would be mopping up to do, but fairly soon the battle would be over. Then they'd move to target 2 and do it all over again. Target 4 was the one that interested Chlo; they'd be fighting above the New Keo home world itself.

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Mo wasn't just allowed to land on New Keo 88, he'd been given a VIP welcome. The local population on the 88th planet to be declared the home world of the New Keo Group, called it Vargrist, which meant eternal in a language no one had used for millennia. All worlds used dead languages to name important things, it seemed to imbue a certain gravitas. Mo needed a full name for his business dealings, as Kittara had once told him.

“Only children, musicians and The Damned can get away with just a first name.”

Mo had chosen the name of Mozim D'Ixir as his name, it looked respectable on his business letters and reminded him of his roots. The emporiums had become a vast retail empire, which thankfully he did little to run. From baby clothes to funerals, food to booze, D'Ixir Retail could provide it and provide it at a very competitive price.

“Looks like they're expecting trouble.” Said Maarika.

His PA was right, she usually was, Mo tended to only hire the best. The shuttle hub they'd landed at was called simply 88x and it handled most of the off world traffic. There were a lot of military about and a lot of scared looking people. Maarika sent one of the junior members of his staff off to find out some information. Mo of course knew what was going on and about the attack on the New Keo fleet, but he wasn't about to tell any of his entourage. He liked them and trusted them, he even felt a bit guilty about keeping them in the dark. But he wanted them to act genuinely concerned and of course know nothing if they were ever interrogated.

“I'm sorry sir, it looks like we'll be a little late.”

He liked the sir. In private she called him Mo, but with no added endearments. Mo had finally learned that love and business make a poor mixture and Maarika was just an employee and no more than that. A group of heavily armed men were pushing the frightened crowd aside and heading straight for Mo and his people.

“The president sent us sir, we're to ensure that you arrive on time.”

“Thank you, but one of our party went to seek help.”

“She is already on our shuttle sir.”

Mo and his team were hurried past the queues for connecting flights that might never arrive and out into the open air. In the private government landing area was a shuttle, but the word shuttle didn't do it justice. The Flash 487 had been given military shielding, upgraded engines and a frightening looking array of front and rear weapon pods.

“Where are you taking us ?” Asked Mo.

The officer leading the soldiers didn't even break stride to answer.

“My orders are to take you directly to the president.”

They were at the shuttle and the outer doors were rolling back.

“Where is the president exactly ?”

“At his secure command centre sir, we will be there in two hours.”

His entourage looked worried and uncomfortable as they were shown to what was obviously military style seating. No entertainment screens, no pull down food trays, the seating was basic and efficient, definitely not designed for tourists.

“Why are they taking us to see Yukko ?” Asked Maarika.

Mo shrugged at her.

“It's election year and D'Ixir Retail does employ a lot of people.”

Mo kicked himself for saying the words, it was a daft naïve answer and Maarika knew he was far from naïve about the politics of New Keo. She looked at him and Mo tried to just look scared and confused. Sikush had been right !

“It's election year Mo,” he'd said, “offer President Yukko a hefty donation in return for easing the way for a few new prime locations for D'Ixir Retail and he'll do anything to meet you.”

Even Mo had doubted if he'd get an invite to the presidential bunker, but it was amazing what politicians would do for a few million credits in an election year. The shuttle headed east and Mo noticed the slight fogging of the view, they were traveling fully cloaked. Chlo would already have

heard the two hour flight time and now she'd have a direction. By the time they landed Chlo would already be briefing the assault team.

"You need to be close to the President," Chlo had told him, "be close to him when the Kivar attack."

"You've a better view than me," said Silky, "I'd love to see the great square from my windows." Neosto's palace was beautiful, Leng was beautiful, Kittara hadn't really expected that. She'd been shown their great library and the college of invocation where she'd be taught while in Leng. It was all so incredibly beautiful.

"We should have canals in Mendera City," she said, "and much more water."

There was a canal of clear water outside her window and a large ornamental pond in the centre of the great square. Everything was so alive and..... that word again, beautiful. Plus Leng was larger than Mendera City, much larger.

"I lived in dread of coming here for so long. I always worried that I'd die, be disintegrated as the legends say, but now that I'm actually here....."

"You feel at home."

"Yes, very much so."

The architecture was very much on the same style as Mendera, but Thrax had used the same style as the City of the Lost God and perhaps that city had been built in the style of Leng. There were lots of domed roofs and everything was built quite low, it was rare to see anything over three storey's high. Water was the key ingredient, it flowed everywhere, bringing green life to everywhere it touched.

"Do you want to start work tomorrow, you could leave it a few days. Give you time to settle in." Said Silky.

Settling in wasn't a problem, Kittara felt far too settled in, as though she was returning home. She looked past the temples, past the gardens and arboretums, past the miles of beautiful marble buildings, even past the city walls. In the far distance, thousands of miles away a darkness filled the gap between the ground and the sky.

"I'm keen to get started, tomorrow will be fine."

Kittara knew the rifts well, there was no full night, or what you could call a proper daylight. The plants had it best on the rifts, a constant ultra violet wash that made most rifts that had water, very lush and fertile. Silky looked to be unsure about telling her something, so she smiled at her and moved a little closer. It was odd how Silky's musky perfume that had once repelled her, now seemed so normal.

"The staff and students at the college should be fine with you," said Silky, "but if you have problems with any individual, please let me know."

Everyone seemed friendly and the city was beautiful, but Kittara knew the ways of the demon court.

"What will happen to anyone who I complain about?"

"They will be replaced."

Kittara grabbed hold of Silky, pushing her against the balcony rail and kissing her.

"Tell me the truth, what happens to them."

"Death." Whispered Silky.

It was as Kittara had guessed and she'd have to be careful about asking Silky to be truthful. Neosto doubtless has ways of hearing much of what was said in his palace and honesty probably led to brutal punishment. Kittara turned Silky around, enjoying the feel of her body against hers.

"You see there, the darkness in the far distance?"

"Yes," said Silky, "the darkness is always with us, but no one ventures into it."

Kittara kissed her neck and ran her hands over her body, discovering that Silky wasn't wearing anything under a very thin dress.

"That is where I need to go Silky. The darkness calls to me and I know a few have been there and returned."

In Tandalla she'd once talked to a rift dweller who'd been into the darkness. He'd been driven quite mad and relied on the temple to feed him, they viewed him as some sort of prophet. The interesting thing was that the crazy man had talked of a guide for his descent into hell. The guide was from a race who regularly went into the darkness, were almost at home there. Kittara handled Silky quite roughly, enjoying the wetness growing between her own thighs.

"What do you know of the Lummel?" Kittara asked.

"The rift walkers are a legend, no one goes into the darkness."

It was a lie, or perhaps Silky really didn't know. Kittara had done a lot of reading in the temple and the Lummel were talked of in several old books, though they were never described in detail.

"I will ask Neosto tomorrow," said Kittara, "he must have visited the worlds that exist in the darkness."

Silky was getting breathless, her hands beginning to explore Kittara.

"No, I have never heard of Neosto going to those worlds...."

Silky suddenly went rigid, Kittara could feel her skin going cold to the touch.

"Though I'm sure the great Lord Neosto could rule those worlds if he so wished."

So Neosto could listen to events in her rooms, probably was listening. Kittara had no wish to see Silky turned inside out for insinuating that Neosto wasn't able to enter the darkness, but it certainly sounded as though he couldn't.

"I'm tired," said Kittara, "you can leave me now."

"Oh I thought."

Silky was looking at the nearby bed and lifting her dress, as if to remove it. Kittara held her hand and gave her a gentle kiss on the cheek.

"Another time, definitely another time, but I need to sleep."

Silky left and Kittara went back to looking at the darkness in the distance. There were worlds beyond that narrow band of black, many worlds, it was written on metal pages and the metal books were never wrong. She also felt the pull to visit those worlds, almost a pull to return home. Kittara made her mind up to learn as much as she could in Leng, no matter how long that took. But one day she'd find out about the Lummel and then she'd go into the darkness and visit those worlds, even if it did cost her sanity.

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Target 2 was a gas giant that no one had bothered to name; NK732-0066 was its New Keo official ident. The fleet had obviously heard about the attack on Emaard and they'd spread out, formed a long drawn out line that was moving to a higher orbit.

"They're expecting us sir."

"Spread out to match their moves," ordered Sweyn, "don't let them circle us."

The New Keo flagship had a slight flaw in its fusion vessel, Chlo could feel it. The technology was sound, but very out of date. She ached to reach out and help that flaw grow, just push it until it collapsed. But this was a battle of sentient creature against sentient creature, she understood that. If she took a hand in the battle, nothing would be settled, no pecking order would be set in place. Chlo now understood such things far better and she knew that New Keo had to be beaten by people, for

there to ever be a lasting peace after the war. Then Jen was in her head and asking how the battle was going.

“They’re learning Jen; we might be a little later at target 4 that I expected.” She said.

“Not a problem, Mo is where he needs to be.”

Everyone liked Mo; he was that kind of character. Even when Sikush had been upset by him selling weapons to their enemies, there had been no serious thoughts of killing him. Chlo calculated his chances of surviving the attack on Vargrist and they didn’t look good, but he’d known that of course.

“Can you move the 3rd battle group Chlo ?”

The Kivar female looked young, but Chlo knew they didn’t promote fools into the ranks of their commanders.

“Yes of course, where do you want them ?”

The commander drew a rough circle on a tactical screen and Chlo instantly moved over a thousand craft into the heart of the battle. From sitting on the edges of the battle to hell in an instant, some of the warriors would be pleased, but many would be terrified.

“We’re losing Legend.” Someone shouted.

The Kivar fleet had destroyed hundreds of craft in the New Keo fleet, but one of their own main vessels was falling apart and crashing into the upper atmosphere of the gas giant. The Legend of Antuum was known simply as Legend to the Kivar and it had always seemed indestructible. It and its crew of over five thousand were dying and there was nothing they could do, except watch the craft disintegrate as it hit the thick upper atmosphere.

“If you must.”

Sikush had been in her head and he’d answered a question she’d never have dared ask. Chlo put out an invisible benign probe, sent it hurtling through the battle, past craft using unimaginable fire power against each other. She ignored the dead and dying, all her thoughts were on that flaw and how easily she could turn that flaw into a disaster.

Her probe was in the reactor room of the craft, the engineers seemed busy but relaxed. Into the reactor chamber itself, surprisingly dark and cool. Then the vessel, where a fusion of Helium 4 created enough energy to lift the several million ton space craft off the ground and into space.

“The tiniest of cracks.” Chlo muttered to herself.

The female commander looked at her but said nothing, they were getting used to Chlo and her eccentric behaviour. Her probe was showing her the crack in the vessel, if a flaw less than a micron in length could really be called a crack. The workmanship was good, the probability of the flaw causing a fatal collapse of the vessel was tiny, but Chlo had a way with reality.

“What just happened ?” Shouted Sweyn.

Every screen went momentarily blank as the external sensors shut down to avoid damage from the sudden glare and gamma burst. As the screens came back they showed a glowing cloud of plasma where the New Keo flagship had been.

“Did someone get a direct hit on them ?”

The flagship had taken twenty of their own craft with it and two Kivar fighters. A lot of Kivar craft had been attacking the flagship and they were all claiming the fatal shot, but Chlo knew the truth.

“Calm, calm down,” shouted Sweyn, “carry on with the attack.”

Chlo was pleased. The battle was as good as won, some of the New Keo support vessels were actually heading away from the battle. Best of all the timing was now looking better, for the time Mo would be close to the president.

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"I think they owed us a decent dinner, after today." Said Maarika.

They were not only invited to dinner with the president, they were on a table barely twenty feet from him. It was a bunker though. They might call it the presidential secure command centre, but the reinforced concrete and titanium bracing struts screamed bunker. A very comfortable bunker, with a famous chef and a spa, but still a bunker over a mile down into the crust of Vargrist.

"Today was bad," said Mo, "but I have heard of people being surgically altered and turned into bombs."

They'd all been given hours of tests and scans. Some of it was very high tech, but there had also been some very old fashioned probing, some of it quite brutal. Mo still found it painful to sit and he felt huge sympathy for the female members of his staff. Once the blood tests had come back clear they'd been allowed to mingle with the other guests in the bunker.

"The food is almost worth all the tests." Said Maarika.

A nameless official had found Mo and given him profuse apologies and an invite to join the president for dinner. Mo assumed there would be a small dinner group, but it seemed several hundred people had also been invited.

Talk of war was everywhere, a few pictures of the destroyed fleet at target 1 were already being shown on screens. It appeared that Chlo had taken away their use of instant travel, but not instantaneous communications.

"Nothing wrecks morale better than an endless flow of bad news."

Mo remembered Sikush saying the words to Chlo at one of their meetings. Mo felt no sympathy for President Yukko, he'd taken a gamble to gain power and he'd lost. But twenty feet was very close and Mo had been promised a brief personal meeting with Yukko later in the evening. He'd been ordered to get close, but surely there was such a thing as too close.

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There was no Chlo there to help her dress or tell her how to work the rather strange washing and toilet facilities. Kittara had risen early, so she'd taken the time to discover how everything worked. The bathing system worked well and there was plenty of hot water, but the hole in the ground she was supposed to squat over appalled her.

"I might be here for years." She muttered to herself.

By the time she was fully dressed in her usual uniform a slave was entering her rooms with covered ceramic pots.

"Food and drink. If you want anything special let me know tomorrow."

The slave was gone and Kittara lifted the lids on several of the pots and whatever was inside smelled wonderful. A smaller pot contained a brown liquid, which reminded Kittara of an herbal rift drink that was made from Ashunt leaves. There were no utensils, so she used a small dagger to scoop the food into her mouth and all of it was a delicious mystery to her.

Kittara knew she was being watched and not just by Neosto. The fear Silky had of being overheard, her breakfast arriving at just the right time. She had little doubt that a large number of people were watching and listening to her all the time. On Mendera the watching had usually felt friendly, or at worst benign. In Leng the watching felt extremely unfriendly and anything but benign. She could move her reality without a link to Chlo, even in Leng; she felt the ability within herself. But she decided to keep that a secret in case she needed the ability to escape the city.

"Are you ready to go to the college?"

It wasn't Silky this time, it was another converted chaos creature, another female.

"I'm sure I can find the way."

“Lord Neosto commands me to take you there and point out our famous buildings on the way.”
So, not a prisoner, but not free to go where she wanted either. Kittara made a point of fixing her sword to her back before they left.

“Where is Silky this morning ?” She asked.

“She is unwell and sends her apologies.”

Silky had taken a beating for talking so openly, it was obvious. Kittara could see she’d have to be very careful while she was in Leng. She might easily get someone killed, just by expecting them to speak honestly.

“I hope she is well soon.” Said Kittara.

They crossed a small bridge over a canal and then walked about fifty yards before coming to another larger bridge that led to the gates to exit the palace grounds. Everything was so green, the air so fresh, they could easily have been on Mendera.

“What is your name ?”

“My name is unimportant.”

They were almost across the bridge and Kittara could have let the comment go, but something inside her wanted an answer. She held her guide by the shoulder, bringing her to a halt.

“I am an honoured guest here, your name matters to me.”

There was fear in her eyes, but Kittara didn’t know if it was fear of her or something else.

“Yes of course, I meant no offence. My name would be unpronounceable to most, but Lord Neosto calls me Aelfraed.”

The guards at the gate stood to attention as they left the palace grounds and walked towards the market area. Kittara remembered the walk there, but she’d been surrounded by soldiers and city officials. Now she could examine the city properly and the market area was alive with the people of Leng. Traders shouting in languages she didn’t understand, foods and livestock were being sold that she’d never seen before. There were children laughing and playing. Of course there had to be children, but their obvious happiness shocked her.

“Do you like our market ?” Asked Aelfraed.

She did, the people, the smell of the foods, the general feeling of excitement about the place.

“Indeed I do Aelfraed, I could be back home on Mendera.”

Her guide went very quiet and looked over her shoulder and then to the side.

“You should be careful of using that name in public,” she said, “there are rumours of listeners who watch out for that name and punish those who use it.”

Kittara laughed, a good loud and natural laugh. Several of the market vendors looked at her rather strangely, but Kittara didn’t care.

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Chlo moved the fleet on to target 3 and noticed the Kivar seemed just as quick to initiate an attack on the enemy. She was a little surprised, they had lost quite a few craft, including a top of the range battle craft and its entire crew. They still outnumbered the enemy, but nearly every Kivar craft carried some scars of battle. Buckled shielding on one, damaged engines on another, it was truly amazing that they still showed such enthusiasm.

“I heard they’d bought Maran craft.” Said Sweyn.

Only a small number, but New Keo had bought a few high tech fighters from the Maran Group. Faster than anything New Keo could build and packing a far harder punch. They must have cost a fortune and Chlo was happy that there weren’t many of them.

“Be careful,” she told Sweyn, “I’ve heard they’re crewed by well-trained mercs from Pineus.”

There would be more Maran tech to protect their home world, more mercs, Chlo had seen the fleet with her probes.

“You heard Chlo,” said Sweyn, “concentrate fire on the Maran craft.”

They’d win of course, Chlo had no doubts about that. But target 4 was the New Keo home world.

There would be missiles from ground silos and more bought in tech. Chlo hoped that the morale of the Kivar held up when the numbers on either side of the battle were equal.

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