

Ripples from the Past

Chapter 35 – Change (Final Chapter)

“A hurricane was now heading towards the portals, a hurricane carrying dust and sand with it. The wind became a storm, which hid everything at the base of the mountain. Chlo heard the sound of many things screaming and the frequent crack of lightning.”

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Sikush had listened to Tejan, while she'd described events at the fortress in some detail. The army of millions relentlessly advancing sounded the stuff of nightmares, but it had been expected. Minraver staying there had been a mistake of course. Far too easy to upset the delicate balance of the multiverse.

“I only saw a few of the creatures.” Said Tejan. “They were beginning to break through the gates as I left. I saw one huge brute push over a section of the wall. We have to return with reinforcements.” By we, she meant him of course. At one time he'd have become angry and commanded her silence on the matter. He doubted if sending the reserves would help, it was probably already too late. So easy to shut her up with an order, but she deserved his honesty.

“There will be no reinforcements Tejan. Sending the reserves would just mean more thousands of deaths to mourn.”

“But..... If you went there yourself.....Minraver is timid, but you could....”

“No Tejan, you are wrong.” He snapped. “Minraver isn't timid, she shouldn't have been there. I will tell you what you don't really deserve to hear, but remember your oath. Not one word of what we discuss is to be repeated to anyone.”

“Yes, of course. I wouldn't ever break my oath of loyalty.”

Normally he'd never have explained himself to a junior member of his elite guard. He liked Tejan though and expected her do well, perhaps even becoming commander of a garrison one day. Sikush hoped that by giving her details now, she'd simply follow his orders in the future. It was flawed logic of course, Kittara still questioned everything.

“First though, did Kittara give you a message to deliver ?” He asked.

“Yes and she made me repeat it back. If things look hopeless she will send him into the wastes. The children will be sent beyond gateway.”

“Ahh, good that makes sense. Though of course I still hope the war will be won by the deities. As for myself and Minraver ? We will take no further part in this war, though her warrior angels will fight hard to slow down the enemy.”

Oh that look on her face, he was no longer her hero. She'd probably wonder for the rest of her life if she should have ever joined The Damned. It was so difficult for anyone to understand the importance of the balance, if they'd lost friends in battle.

“I hate to question you, but why ?” She asked. “Two eternal fighting together. You could destroy the creatures attacking the fortress... All of them, quickly and easily. I know you could.”

“We could Tejan, but a terrible price would need to be paid. The multiverse has helped a little, pointing various people in the right direction. To many it seems as though the multiverse is highly eccentric, perhaps a little insane. There is a purpose though and the balance is always protected. We're just lucky that without intelligent life, the multiverse is effectively deaf, dumb and blind. Though recently I've started to think that it needs our emotions as well.”

“Kittara told me it feeds on our regrets. So it wouldn’t stop you killing the monsters, saving Hol and shutting the door to the other multiverse ?”

“Not stop, no, it never stops anything. There would be a need to reset the balance though. They might use Luri, pushing her further into the darkness. Talk of good and evil is nonsense, everything is areas of grey. Imagine Luri wishing for more power though, with Delmus at her side. It would all seem to natural, so obvious it would happen. It would be the multiverse though, promoting pieces in the never ending game.”

“Luri maybe, but you really think Delmus could become a traitor ?”

“Who would have thought Nurigen would betray us ? I was just giving an example though. If not Luri it would be another power rising out of the darkness. Imagine what a dangerous place the multiverse would be then Tejan, with a dark power to match that of the eternal....”

“Hmmm... Perhaps. So you’re going to do nothing ?”

Kittara had infected Alyz with the need to question and now it seemed as though Tejan was going to be the same. He sighed, but it was how he’d seen the great experiment progressing. Soon The Damned might be able to run the empire without him.

“I wouldn’t say nothing. We only have two deities involved in the war because of a lot of early groundwork and sacrifice. I still regret letting the sentinels loose on Luri, but it was an essential part of the plan. Now we must allow those deities to win the battle in their own way.”

“Or lose.”

“Yes, that is a possibility. You will change into your best uniform and pick a dozen of the reserves. You will then ask Commander Yerli for permission, before patrolling Temple Square. You will smile at the tourists and answer their questions. If asked how the war is going, you will reply.....?”

She was bright, perhaps too damn bright. There wasn’t a look of confusion in her eyes for even a fraction of a second.

“I will say the war is going well and we are hoping for a quick victory.”

“Perfect.”

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Pug saved Rhian’s life, though she hadn’t appreciated it at the time. By some miracle her arrow had partially blinded the enormous reptile, but its screams of pain had just brought more monsters to the area around the well. There had been confusion during the fight, Pug bellowing, Kerr shouting and swinging a long handled wood axe. Some of it was hard to remember after Pug had been too eager to get at one of the small silver creatures. He’d knocked her over and the order of events became difficult to remember. She clearly saw Kerr die, but couldn’t remember exactly when. There had been the time when she’d been unconscious of course. Half an hour, an hour... It was so hard to collect her thoughts.

“I’ll go for help.” She muttered.

A silly thing to say, Kerr was dead and beyond help. Kerr Firass, captain of the cargo vessel Melak Sunrise had been crushed by something huge and heavy. His face was just about recognisable, but he was dead and going to remain that way. There was no sign of Pug, though she doubted if their friendly Farrag beast was still alive. She vaguely remembered seeing him attacking several strange blue creatures, each of them having hundreds of electrified tendrils.

“Someone is still defending this dreadful place.”

It was darker than it had been, many of the fire pits had been trampled, braziers overturned. It made it easier to see the fire spells being used by someone further back and higher up the mountain. Someone was still defending his jail, the large vessel half buried in the ground. More spells, brighter

trails of fire lighting up the fortress. Instinctively Rhian headed towards the defenders, hoping to avoid the enemy. She was in almost total darkness, when she saw one of the silver creatures leading two twenty foot tall reptiles. They passed her by in the dark, reminding her of a rift saying Silky had often used before they went to sleep.

“May chaos always pass you in the night.”

“Where is that from Silky ?”

“No one really knows, but it’s been said by the rift people for a very long time.”

The defenders were doing quite a lot of damage, she passed the burnt remains of scores of dead monsters. At one point she had to climb over the body of a dead tentacle creature. It had to be easier of course, to defend a smaller area. Easier to use concentrated fire on an enemy, more ferocity born out of desperation. Rhian trudged towards the highest part of the fortress, hoping the surviving defenders recognised her as a friend.

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Luri had told him the strange orb wasn’t a cure for the deadly fungus, yet the survivors of his ill-fated expedition were all looking better. Dava could even stand on her blackened feet.

“They’re trying something again.” She said. “Some of their human mercenaries are setting up a device on a tripod.”

“I doubt if they’d risk a heavy weapon so close to the essential machinery.” He replied.

What were they up to now ? Delmus wondered where the creatures kept finding fresh mercenaries to attack them, they’d already killed so many. His RM9 recharged itself from any and all locally available power. It seemed to like the alien technology around them, constantly indicating it was at full power. He turned it on, causing it to make a loud humming sound.

“See them run, they know what that sound means.” Someone said.

Delmus held the weapon close against his shoulder and fired, looking forward to seeing the cone of energy clear the passage. It hit something though, dissipating into a wall of heat which quickly cooled and vanished.

“Crap ! The device is some sort of screen.” He muttered.

“Is it possible to block that much energy ?”

“Those silver things are clever.” He said. “Weaponised fungus, now this. They probably spent the last few days inventing something to shield them from our weapons.”

“They’re back, with another tripod.” Said Dava.

Delmus stood up, holding the RM9 against his hip. The mercenaries in atmosphere suits didn’t run or even look worried. The cone of energy from his weapon was blocked and turned into heat before being dissipated in some way. Dava used her Yakkie and it didn’t even make the screen glow.

“We’re in trouble.” She said. “They’re setting up another two devices. I’m guessing they’ll then push them along the passageway.”

They could only watch, as the mercs set up six of the devices, before beginning to push the impenetrable shield wall along the passage. The devices looked heavy and the mercs were wearing cumbersome atmosphere suits. They weren’t going to win any medals for speed, but the shield wall moved inexorably closer. Delmus fired twice more, hoping to overload the devices.

“No good, we’ll have to wait for them to reach the chamber.” He said. “They’ll have to spread out then and we may see a chance to get past the shields.”

“We have explosives Delmus, enough to take out the passage walls.”

“They might damage something essential and destroy the whole planet earlier than planned.”

Dava was giving him the sort of look usually reserved for humouring slightly crazy relatives. After all, dreaming about a conversation with a deity was hardly reliable intelligence.

"We're going to do it sooner or later, fire the RM9 I mean, at everything that looks important. Does moving the time forward a little really matter that much?" She asked.

At one time he'd have agreed with her, but he'd seen Luri in the dream and knew she wouldn't let him down. She had given him the orb, it hadn't arrived out of thin air.

"No!" He snapped. "We have a good defensive position and we will continue to defend it for as long as we can. When the enemy reach the chamber we will see if swords can penetrate the shield wall. Those are my orders."

"Yes, of course Delmus."

"Luri will be here, I trust her and she will be here before it's too late."

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By the time Sventa was fit to travel, the enemy were sending robots to attack them. Luri wondered if being honest about Haan had been a good idea, Sventa was still not even looking at her.

"Damn those silver things are clever." Said Estrid. "They've build robots that resemble my creatures made of mud and they're almost as strong."

"We need to move before they design something better than us." Said Luri. "Are you ready to go Sventa?"

Still no answer, but she had nodded at Estrid. They were in a hurry, but Luri had to insist on Sventa talking to her. The dark angel's life might well depend on her reacting to what was said to her.

"I'm sorry about Haan, but it was the right decision. You have to talk to me though, even if you hate me."

"She's right Sventa." Said Estrid. "A lot of people are relying on us and we need to communicate."

"Fine, say something worth hearing and I'll reply. How are we getting out of this room?"

"Through the floor." Said Estrid.

"Just like that?" Asked Sventa. "You made us walk down stairs for days."

Sventa was obviously upset, but Luri couldn't understand why. When Estrid shrugged, it really did look like Sventa might attack her.

"Calm down, are you alright?" Luri asked her.

"Fine, how are we going to do this?"

"My creatures of mud will stay here, but all of us need to be together." Said Estrid. "The Vargouille will follow us through the hole I intend to create in the floor."

Luri still felt sorry for the Lummel, it had been a mistake to bring them. They had spears with hardened tips, but they were still effectively only armed with sharp sticks. They all moved closer to Estrid, who began to turn, pointing her finger at the floor as she turned.

"Be ready, there might be a long drop." Said Estrid. "I'll try to cushion our fall, but be prepared for a hard landing."

Luri braced herself, bending her legs, prepared to hit the floor below at some speed. Sventa did the same, while the Lummel remained standing. There were pipes under the floor and cables, but Estrid's pointing finger behaved like a laser, cutting through everything.

"Now, we're on our way." Yelled Estrid.

A large circular section of the floor fell away and they went with it. There wasn't a normal sized room or chamber below, they were falling into a much larger chamber, the floor at least eighty feet below them. Luri ordered her Vargouille to drop with them and deal with any enemies they might

find. There was something about the screeching of two dozen of the flying beasts, which she found comforting.

"They're dying, this must have been a sealed chamber." Said Sventa.

No time for more conversation, their circle of floor hit the ground hard. The Lummel cried out, as they fell over and took the fall badly. Estrid helped the Lummel, but Sventa was off, hunting what looked like human technicians.

"No, you'll run out of our air bubble." Yelled Estrid. "Come back, we need to go through this floor next. No time Sventa, no time for anything."

The Lummel hadn't broken anything, but they both needed help to move to an empty section of floor. It seemed they had broken into a sealed air filled chamber. The technicians were all dying a dreadful froth coming out of their mouths. The alien atmosphere outside wasn't just unbreathable, it was obviously toxic.

"I found these on them." Said Sventa.

Sventa was back, watching Estrid cut through the floor again. She'd found ID cards on two of the dying technicians, both stating that they worked directly for Chelac Nurigen.

"I see it now," said Luri, "that's why he was so valuable to them. He wasn't just part of the Menderan inner circle, he could hire mercenaries and technicians from all over the empire. There'd be no comments or suspicion aroused, even if he hired them by the thousand."

"Brace yourselves." Shouted Estrid.

Luri just had time to see that they'd broken through into a vast chamber for indoor agriculture, before they were crashing through the branches of fruit trees.

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Minraver thought she had to be hallucinating as she saw a human woman clambering over the scorched and blasted bodies of the various strange beasts, who were still attacking them. Quite a small female human carrying a long handled axe.

"It's Rhian." Shouted Mo. "I'm amazed she survived the attack on the guard house."

Mo was there, though Hol was still supposed to be on her way, with the surviving Algarians. The undead had arrived in dribs and drabs, but there was still no sign of Silky and her shadows. The tribespeople were there, the rift warriors. They'd arrived in large numbers and obviously thought of themselves as defenders of Kittara and the children. They looked formidable, but refused to obey her orders, no matter how much she shouted at them.

"Protect the woman." Minraver ordered her Genova. "Bring her to me."

"Look after her; we've been through a lot together." Added Mo.

Her once confident and unbeaten angels were now cautious. Too many of them had died, about two thirds of those who had arrived in her space fleet. Little could harm the Genova in their own multiverse, but the attacking creatures were from a past existence which obeyed different rules. Their claws and lightning bolts had killed her angels by the thousand. A dozen of her warriors cautiously left the relatively safety of the highest place in the fortress and returned with Rhian.

"I'm so glad to find someone still alive." She said.

"Did Kerr make it?" Asked Mo.

"No..... Is Silky safe?"

"Not yet, but I'm sure she'll turn up."

"Take her to see the children Mo." Said Minraver. "I'm sure they'll be pleased to see her."

They left, exchanging stories about Silky and her ability to survive just about anything. It made sense to send them to where Kittara was planning her last stand. Minraver's angels currently held a tiny part of the fortress and that was shrinking all the time.

"It's the sheer numbers of these creatures." Said one of her officers. "The portals are still open, they're still pouring through. We kill a thousand, another ten thousand take their place."

"We are buying time." Said Minraver. "Every minute we can hold them back, gives more time for entire planets to be evacuated and more time for the deities to break the link to past realities. Even if we all die here today, we must protect his jail for as long as we can."

"It will be done."

Her warrior angels were brave, veterans of many battles against a wide variety of different foes. She felt pride as they joined together to send another wall of fire against the attackers. Ultimately it was futile of course, the creatures were still pouring onto the rift. It bought time though and time was what it was all about. The bodies of their enemies had become a hot smouldering wall, which was another obstacle for the attacking creatures. It all bought time, more precious minutes.

"Someone is fighting their way through..... A lone warrior."

Minraver looked and felt the presence of one of The Damned. It had to be Albas, using two swords to cut his way through the enemy. He hacked and slashed like someone possessed.

"Help him ! Use your fire spells." She commanded.

It looked like he was going to be caught between two of the strange blue molluscs, but he leapt over them and ran towards her angels. It left his back exposed and he might not have survived, if her Genova hadn't protected him with a wall of hellfire. Covered in blood, uniform in ribbons, he still managed to strut as he walked towards her.

"I've never seen one of The Damned fight with two swords before." She said. "It looks to be a very effective way to fight."

He held up a sword with the famous mark of Nurigen on the blade. No matter that Nurigen had betrayed them, his weapons would always be prized and sought after.

"This sword belonged to Juno." He said.

Later she'd ask him for details, if there was a later for any of them. For now, it was enough to know that Juno was dead.

"Go back as far as you can, right up to his jail." She said. "There is food there and some friends who will be very pleased to see you."

"Is Hol here ?"

"No, not yet."

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Chlo was travelling across the 1st rift the hard way. In her true organic form, using various demon devices to look for just the right kind of settlement, before transporting herself to it, or at least close enough to observe from a safe distance.

"Perfect, completely perfect.... If he'll agree to it ?" She mumbled.

She didn't mean Sikush, he was highly unlikely to agree to her taking such an active part in the war. The multiverse had told her she needed to be dark though, darker than she dared. By he she meant the Shaman stood in front of his home, a yurt made out of wooden poles and animal hides.

"Look at me standing here, on my own." She muttered. "See how harmless I am and send someone to talk to me."

It was part of the way things were done on the rift. She stood quite still for as long as it took. She'd already tried two other settlements, but neither of those had been anywhere close to perfect. In one

the shaman had been far too young, his essence too weak. She'd moved too soon at the other and they'd begun to fire arrows at her. Chlo was still strong and fast, with a few tricks up her sleeve. There was a genuine risk in what she was doing though.

"I must be patient, I will be patient."

The tribe had probably arrived to investigate the craft falling from the sky. They'd stay for the metal in the debris though, it was a rare commodity on the rift. Being close to the enemy portals made the settlement perfect, as long as their shaman was strong enough.

"Please send someone..... I am in a hurry."

It felt like an hour before the boy arrived in front of her, though it might have been less. Always someone barely past puberty and they always stood just within shouting distance. Maybe youngsters were seen as expendable, or perhaps it was all part of the game. Chlo wasn't sure, but she knew she had to appear to be harmless, totally harmless.

"Why are you here ? Go away." Said the boy.

"I am a humble traveller who has travelled far, to seek the wisdom of your shaman."

The boy ran off and talked to the shaman, though Chlo doubted if he'd repeat her message accurately. The shaman was looking at her again, as were most of the rift people in the settlement. They were all armed with bows and spears, weapons they could use to great effect.

"Please let him not be a fake or too weak." She mumbled.

He was doing the strange two handed beckoning movement, which looked as though he was shooing her away. Now was the time of real danger, as she slowly walked through a settlement of well-armed rift people. They'd already be jumpy of course, because of the metal beasts falling from the sky and nearby portals. Chlo walked carefully and slowly, even a trip might be seen as an act of aggression. Eventually she was stood quite close to the shaman, close enough to feel he had enough power for her purpose.

"Who comes here to seek my wisdom ?"

"I have come from Mendera, looking for one such as you. My name is Chlo and I don't come empty handed. I have a great gift for your people in my pack, a priceless gift."

He looked at her for several seconds, probably trying to decide if she was crazy. Crazy people might well walk the rift, but he'd obviously decided to trust her, even if only a little.

"I would be honoured if you would enter my home, Chlo of Mendera."

The yurt was quite spacious inside, with ornate rugs covering the floor. There was a proper way of welcoming a stranger into the home of a tribal shaman and it included drinking a foul warm liquid and an hour of small talk. Chlo smiled and put up with all of it. She owed it to him, as he might well be about to die.

"Now, tell me what brings you here to see me ?" He asked.

"You must have seen the portals at the base of the mountain ?"

"Yes, though the strange creatures ignore my people. They seem intent on attacking the fortress at the top of the mountain."

"Some of my friends are in that fortress and many rift warriors."

"Then I pity them, but can do nothing to help them. I hold some of the Great Spirit within me, but not enough to stop the huge creatures, or close the portals. How do you think I might help you ?"

Oh, so careful, anything sounding vaguely threatening and he might shout for the warriors who were probably waiting outside. Chlo decided to show him the gift she'd technically stolen....Actually there was no technicality about it, she had stolen the book. Not that anyone was ever likely to miss it though, even if it was the last copy in existence.

“May I show you the gift I bring your tribe ?”

“Yes, please do.”

She took off her backpack and carefully opened it, showing him the inside so he could see she wasn't about to pull out a sharp blade. The book was in a simple cloth bag, which she removed before placing the book in front of him.

“I know of Mendera of course, but had no idea there were such treasures there.”

He'd know the words on the cover of course, the language of old Ixir. It was now the sacred holy language of the descendants of the people of Ixir, the rift warriors. The shaman was looking through the dictionary, the last full dictionary of the Ixir language in existence.

“Where did you acquire this book ?” He asked.

Time for honesty, though she could imagine warriors with sharp spears running into the yurt, ready to impale her.

“I stole it.... You have my word though, that no one will come here looking for it.”

“Thank you for your honesty Chlo, but why me ? Why bring me this gift ?”

“It is not for you, but for your tribe. Compensation for taking their shaman away from them.”

He looked wary, but he wasn't shouting for help. As she'd hoped the ancient book had him almost mesmerised.

“I knew there had to be a price for such a gift. Where do you wish to take me ?”

“There is no threat in what I am about to say. If you say no I will seek another shaman, but the book will go with me. May I know your name, your true name known only to your family ?”

“My name is Jinken, also the name of my father and his father. I begin to suspect I won't like your request, but tell me anyway.”

The problem was that she was beginning to like Jinken. If only he'd been arrogant and moody, it would have all been so much easier.

“I have the power to change reality in my own world.” She said. “Here though I suffer as all visitors to the rifts suffer. My powers may not work at all, or work poorly. In some cases the results may even be unexpected and dangerous. I need to inhabit your body, use it to house my essence for a while. Then I will be able to shut the portals, slam them shut so that can't be opened again. Closing the portals may also leave the creatures here without instructions. Still dangerous of course, but not intent on destroying the fortress.”

He was smiling at her, but he knew, she could tell he knew.

“I am assuming I won't survive what you'd like to do ?”

“No, your essence will be driven out by mine. When it leaves, your body will die.”

“Thank you for being honest with me. My tribe will lose their shaman, but gain a gift of unimaginable worth. As for me..... I will begin the next cycle of life a little early....”

“There is something else, though it is still uncertain.”

“Today really is a day of riddles and wonders Chlo. Tell me what is uncertain ?”

He hadn't shouted for help after being told she wanted to kill him, so telling him the rest just seemed polite.

“I can slam the portals closed, but I can't close the links to other times, other existences. That is for the Gods themselves to accomplish, if they are able. If the war is won there will be others to lead your people and show them the right path.”

“I will need to talk to the headman, but I shouldn't be too long. When I return you may use my body to close the portals.”

“Thank you Jinken.”

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Hol was later certain Silky and her wraiths had saved her life and the lives of many others. Gesse was still with her, though many of his revenants had died. Hol had taken her people into one of the few solid buildings, which had effectively become a trap.

“Those..... Things in shells.” Said Gesse. “The electricity in their tendrils kills everything, nothing is immune.”

“I’ve seen them before, on the 7th rift.” Said Hol. “They’re creatures born out of the fires of chaos.”

“Do they have any weaknesses, can they die ?”

“Probably, though I don’t know what kills them. They’re slow though.... If we can get out of here and run, we can easily keep ahead of them.”

The building had seemed a refuge, but now the solid stone walls were a curse. There was just one entrance and the mollusc like creatures were swarming around it. Hol had used a few tears of The Damned to clear a path, but the creatures were there in staggering numbers. Any she killed had another ten waiting to replace them. Tad Dunne was with her, still in command of the surviving Algarians. They’d fought bravely, but they weren’t that suited to fighting with hand to hand weapons in an atmosphere which stung their throats. Out of over two hundred, Tad had barely a dozen fighters left to command.

“We’ve checked the basement and this entire floor.” He told her. “If there is another way out, it must be very well hidden.”

Hol had a plan in mind, though it was dangerous. It was a plan born out of desperation, to be kept until there was no alternative. They had reached that moment which required desperate measures.

“I can use a tear of The Damned to blow out the wall opposite the entrance.” She said. “It may well cause the building to collapse, so we’ll need to move quickly after the tear explodes.”

“That is a dreadful plan Hol.” Said Gesse.

“Can you think of a better one ?”

“No....Do it.... Let’s get out of here.”

Hol was winding up the energy around her, spinning it into a tear of power, one powerful enough to blast through a thick stone wall. There was a commotion at the entrance, the sound of a voice she recognised.

“She’s alive.... I’d know that voice anywhere.” Said Gesse.

Silky had a distinctive voice, especially when she was shrieking orders at her army of wraiths and shadows. Hol had assumed most of Silky’s creatures had been killed by lightning bolts, but there were a surprising number of them outside. Hol arrived just in time to see a wraith turn one of the molluscs into a pile of grey ash.

“We’re learning all the time.” Said Silky. “Getting better at killing them and avoiding them killing us.”

“It is so good to see you.” Said Hol.

Her small wings were damaged, her tail missing the last foot or so, and she was filthy. It was Silky though, still alive and killing the enemy.

“They react slowly so we need to move fast.” Said Silky. “My wraiths will move like the wind and you need to keep up.”

“The Algarians have a wounded warrior.”

Silky simply shook her head.

“You need to leave here now, before more of the monsters arrive. There are always more of them, always. Run with me Hol, because I am going now.”

Hol knew there was no alternative, no way to carry the wounded warrior as they ran for their lives. The idea of never leaving anyone behind, always had to be weighed against the risk.

"We're leaving!" Shouted Hol. "We'll be leaving at a run and we're leaving now."

She heard Tad shouting at his Algerian warriors and knew he'd understood the situation. No one complained, not even the wounded fighter being left behind.

"Follow me and don't stop." Said Silky.

They ran, with Tad still hollering at his fighters to run as if the devil himself was snapping at their heels. The huge monstrous creatures were still scared of the wraiths, even sometimes moving aside to let them pass. Silky had been right, they were slow to react. By the time the tentacle creatures had created and used a lightning bolt, they were no longer there. As long as they kept running, they stood a good chance of surviving to reach.... Where ?

"Where are you taking us?" Asked Hol.

"The highest point, where his jail is. Mo is there and the remaining defenders." Said Silky.

Hol would have loved to ask about Kittara and the children, but Silky was running ahead of her. The large tentacle creatures seemed unassailable, huge monsters standing at least a hundred feet tall. Hol had that magical moment, seeing one killed by the touch of a wraith. It screamed, even though Hol could see no mouth to scream. As it must have known it was dying, the brute gave a long scream of despair. It became nothing but dust, which fell on them like strange dirty rain. Now Hol understood why Silky looked so filthy.

"Not far, not far.... Run.... Keep up." Yelled Silky.

Silky ran through gaps in the fallen creature, but sometimes there was no alternative to scrambling over the dismembered remains. It wasn't fun, wading through a hundred yards of bloody body parts, even if they were the remains of a hated enemy. Eventually Hol saw Minraver's warrior angels and there was a wall of flame being hurled at the enemies behind them. They were safe, even if they were covered in the blood of their enemy.

"Mo, I should have known you'd find somewhere with food." Said Hol.

There he was, a bowl of something in his hands, as though they were all at a picnic.

"Unlike many here, I need to eat... Or I'll die."

Hol expected Silky to kiss him, or at least hug him. Instead she did something so strange, so out of character, that Hol wondered if she was hallucinating. Silky held Mo's head at a weird angle and breathed into his mouth, while reciting two lines in the dark language of Leng.

"Silky, have you gone mad?" Asked Hol. "What are you doing?"

Mo was unconscious, limp in Silky's arms. She threw him over her shoulder as though he weighed nothing at all. There was a look of such sadness in Silky's eyes.

"I'm sorry Hol, but I'm not losing him. She will get him killed, her, Kittara. He has no sense when it comes to her. I'm taking him away until the war is won, or..... It's all over."

There was a spinning dark portal, which enveloped Silky and they were gone. The wraiths seemed unconcerned, grouping themselves around Gesse. Hol felt glad that Mo and Silky were away from immediate danger, but sad that there were two less friends in the fortress. Her mood wasn't helped by the look on the face of Albas as he approached her. More bad news, she was certain of it.

~ ~

Estrid had assumed the floors they had to drop through would mainly be corridors, built to uniform height. The problem was that the Vargouille weren't able to communicate in any spoken language. Luri had seen the chamber they wanted to reach as an image in their minds, but there was no other information. A few clues about distance and position and that was all.

"This looks like their robot assembly line." Yelled Sventa.

Estrid tried to cushion the fall, yet the section of floor crashed into the ground. It was another sealed chamber, being opened up to the atmosphere of that strange world. The human technicians died quickly, but not painlessly. The atmosphere had to be corrosive in some way, producing a nasty white froth, which came out the noses and mouths of the technicians.

"I wish there had been another way." Said Estrid.

"Them or us.... And the robots don't need to breathe." Said Sventa.

An indoor farmland, then they'd fallen into a chemical laboratory, before crashing into the robot assembly chamber. The facility had to be for more than linking that existence with the Menderan multiverse. It was probably a huge off-world research complex, though there were more important matters to think about.

"The robots are strong, the Vargouille need our help." Said Luri.

The robots were the same humanoid looking robots they'd seen several floors above. Most Empire worlds used similar looking robots. The head was always slightly too large of course, to house the advanced optics. Blue outer skin and no ability to speak, they were mainly used for mundane repetitive tasks requiring strength. Like beating the life out of unwanted visitors.

"No time to create my creatures." Said Estrid. "We'll need to do this ourselves."

Luri was holding her hands up, fingers spread out.

"Touch me, do the link."

"It might not work here."

"We can try."

It worked, as soon as their fingers touched. They each transferred their power to the other, but none of their weaknesses. They each became themselves, plus the best of the other. Estrid felt her skin toughen, her muscles become stronger. She was certain she'd even grown taller.

"That's it, what I've wanted to see for so long." Shouted Sventa. "Gods fighting and looking like Gods."

"You could help." Said Luri.

"No, this I want to watch and enjoy."

Estrid hit one of the robots and instantly enjoyed it. There was something wonderfully cathartic about wanton destruction and no one was getting hurt. The robot probably wasn't happy, but Estrid ignored that possibility. She hit another and another, loving the way she could turn them to useless debris with a single blow.

"This is..... Wonderful." She yelled.

She picked a robot up and used it as a club. Now she could destroy three or four of the robots with a single swing of her makeshift club. She felt ashamed of her own joy, but that didn't diminish the sheer joy of destroying fifty or sixty enemy robots. Only the peeping of the Lummel made her pause. The Lummel are an eccentric people and one was telling her the details of standard deviation principles. The other was informing her that if standard deviation was used, they could already be too late to complete their mission.

"Everyone get together, we're going down again." Yelled Estrid.

She shook off the extra power, becoming just herself again. Once they were all in one place, she began to cut another circular section out of the floor.

"This should be the last time." She said. "The device is only just below us."

They fell, but not very far. They were in a corridor, the hole in the ceiling just a few feet above them.

"There..... There is it." Said Luri.

She was pointing towards a chamber not that far away, where a large piece of machinery was slowly revolving.

~ ~

Chlo considered herself to be a good judge of people and she had no doubts about Jinken's sincerity. That didn't stop her feeling for her blade, as two men walked into the yurt with the shaman.

"Don't be concerned, they're here to look at the book." Said Jinken. "They will also take care of what needs to be done..... After your essence has left my body."

Judging by their physical similarities, she thought the men were probably the headman and his son. There were no introductions; the headman seemed only interested in the book. They muttered a lot, all three of them.

"We need to do this." She said to them.

More muttering, but it seemed the priceless book was accepted as genuine. The headman held it against his chest, as Jinken lay down on his bed.

"I am ready Chlo. I have told them others may come to take my place."

Chlo lay on the floor and hoped the headman was trustworthy. There was no real way of knowing without trusting him and there was no time to get to know him. Her essence was about to leave her body, leaving it empty and defenceless for a while.

"Once again, thank you Jinken."

Chlo expelled her own soul, the essence which made her far more than just an AI. She'd talked Jinken into dying, without being certain that any of her plans would work. She wasn't a creature of the rifts, her body had developed and evolved on a planet which had been destroyed long ago. Luckily her soul found Jinken without any problems, entering and taking over his consciousness. The body which had been his was now hers. There was no pain involved, just a short sigh as Jinken began the next cycle in the endless movement of souls. Chlo carefully stood up and was instantly surprised by the extra height she now had and the heaviness of the borrowed body. She pointed at her body on the ground, now an empty vessel, waiting for the return of her soul.

"Harm my body and there will be consequences." She said.

The headman looked terrified as he shook his head. So much of the Great Spirit dwelt within the shaman's body, she could see the into headman's mind. The book was all he cared about and the fame possessing it would bring. The fool believed he'd become the leader of all the rift people, but Chlo knew another would fill that role.

"Keep your people in their yurts until it is done." She said.

The voice was hers, or maybe she was just imagining it. It was the first and probably the only time she'd taken over the body of another and wasn't sure what to expect. She walked outside and carried on walking until she could see all the portals, still open, still spewing terrible creatures onto the rift. She held her arms up, pointing at the dark sky.

"I call upon the deity who is now gone. I call upon the power of a dead God, a lost God, a much loved God. I call upon the spirit of Tomma-Goran."

Sikush had told her about finding the essence of the dead deity in the wastes and about releasing it. It didn't need much of that essence to close the portals, the smallest trace would do. There was no answer to her call, yet there wasn't time to be patient.

"Tomma.... Hear me ! I need your help to stop the death of my friends. I need just a little of your power to stop him being released, the prisoner we've fought so hard to keep locked up."

There was a slight movement in the still air, a hint of something red and hot moving towards her.

"Ohhhh....Thank you old friend. I even thank you for the pain."

It had hurt, the pain of something hot being plunged into her. That wasn't unexpected, just about everything important came with a little pain. There was a rift saying that child birth was painful, to show that it wasn't a trivial thing. Now she had the power of a God within her and more than she'd hoped for.

"Foul creatures from dead worlds." She yelled. "You are not wanted here.... Be gone."

It started slowly, the wind blowing past her on its way towards the portals. Quite quickly it began to rattle the structure of the tribal yurts and pull up dust from the ground.

"May your essence cleanse this place Tomma-Goran."

A hurricane was now heading towards the portals, a hurricane carrying dust and sand with it. The wind became a storm, which hid everything at the base of the mountain. Chlo heard the sound of many things screaming and the frequent crack of lightning. When the storm lifted it took the darkness with it, the mountain was lit by the light of what passed for late afternoon on the rift. The portals had gone, as had all the creatures on the lower slopes. Higher up on the mountain she could still see rank upon rank of the monsters, though they didn't appear to be moving.

"I have done what I can." Chlo muttered. "I hope it is enough."

She walked back to the shaman's yurt, to reclaim her body and return home to Mendera.

~ ~

It was almost too easy. There had been three of the silver creatures in the chamber, but her surviving Vargouilles made short work of them. They were there, in a large chamber lit by a soft reddish light. At its centre was a huge beam with a sphere on either end. It seemed so harmless, so insignificant, yet destroying it would break the link to the Menderan multiverse.

"Is that it?" Asked Sventa. "We went through all that to reach..... This!"

"It is a small piece in a vast and complex machine." Said Estrid. "Some sort of conversion device I think, though its purpose is immaterial. Destroy it and the machine stops."

"What then?"

"We leave here, very quickly Sventa." Said Luri.

"Will this multiverse cease to exist?"

"Some of it will, perhaps this entire multiverse will never have existed." Said Estrid. "There is a chance that the existence where Delmus waits will also be destroyed. Nothing is certain or predictable, even to a deity. Come, there is no time to lose."

"I will stay." Said Sventa.

"No, the Lummel will stop the device." Said Luri. "It is why they came with us, it is for them to strike the blow and regain their honour."

"Then I will guard them."

Luri had seen the moment approaching and had already discussed it with Estrid. Sventa probably believed she was offering to make the ultimate sacrifice, while really it was more complex than that. She probably thought Haan's death had been her fault and sought to balance the cosmic scales. Luri had already decided to intervene. She grabbed hold of Sventa, pinning the dark angel's arms to her side.

"We're going to rescue Delmus and the others Estrid. Good luck." She said.

"I will give you as long as I can." Said Estrid. "If we're attacked I will have to let the Lummel use their spears on the device, so hurry."

Sventa struggled and cursed as Luri pulled them both into the gaps between realities. So much pain as Luri pulled them both through the places where even deities weren't supposed to go.

“Stop struggling Luri, it is too late. I feel that world already shrinking, trying to suck us back. Be still so that I can concentrate.”

Time meant nothing, Estrid might have waited for half an hour or just a few seconds. The vast machine had been stopped and that multiverse was being shrunk to nothing, turned into something which had never existed. Luri felt it trying to claim her and Sventa, pull them back into that destruction.

“Oh it hurts Sventa, it hurts.”

“Will Estrid survive ?”

“Maybe, maybe not... Even such a powerful deity may be destroyed by such forces.”

Luri succeeded in resisting the pull of a vanishing multiverse. Once they were in the grey between worlds she could move more quickly, yet it looked like a wall of fire waiting ahead of them.

“I’m sorry Sventa, this will be very bad. The gaps in reality are small and closing.”

Luri felt for Delmus, concentrating on finding his essence in an entire multiverse. Was it the multiverse before the current one or after it ? It wasn’t something which mattered for the rescue and she realised that all ideas of past and future are ultimately meaningless.

“I’ve found him..... Pull your wings in tight.”

It felt like flying through liquid flames, pulling herself and Sventa through narrowing gaps in reality. The multiverse was using its precognition, preparing for what it new was going to happen. Poor Sventa, Luri could see the edges of her wings burning, yet could do nothing about it.

“We’re almost there.....”

It was a strange landing into a bizarre situation. They were surrounded by smoke and Sventa was cursing all eight of the old demon Gods, personally and by their full names. They tumbled into several humans wearing atmosphere suits, who were moving unknown devices mounted on tripods.

“Luri, kill them..... They’re trying to screen the device.”

It was Delmus yelling at her, he was still alive. No time for celebration though or even a kiss, there were half a dozen of the enemy to be dealt with. Luri needed to do something quick, which usually meant something dark, nasty and brutal.

“Shaadiaah.” She shouted.

A single word in the language of dark power, the oldest language spoken in the places of true darkness. It started at their feet, a rising area of burning which was moving quickly. Less than two seconds later, the enemy were nothing but ash smudges on the floor.

“They were so close.” Said Delmus. “If they’d managed to.....”

“You may spend hours giving me all the details, but after we’ve left here.” Said Luri. “All those who wish to leave this place need to stand around me..... Now !”

There weren’t many left of the team Delmus had taken to that world and one of the survivors had to crawl on her knees.

“Touch me, arm or leg, it doesn’t matter, just touch me. Do you have explosives ?”

“I do.” Said Dava.

“Set the timer as low as it will go and throw it at the device as we leave.”

“It can be set at five seconds.”

“Perfect..... Is everyone ready ?”

A few mutters, a few hands holding onto her very tightly. There could be no quick pull into the grey, there were too many of them. Dava threw the explosives at the device, as Luri enveloped them in a cloud of dark energy. There was fire around them as Luri moved them all through the grey between

worlds, but not enough to do any serious damage. There might be a few burns, but she was going to get them all home in one piece.

~ ~

In many ways the young clerics had kept her sane. Kittara ran her hand gently down Seesha's cheek, trying to wake her without startling the girl. She and Mix had reacted to all the terrors far better than many adults would have done. They'd both cried when the story of Albas discovering that Juno was dead, had spread through their makeshift camp.

"He said Juno died bravely." Seesha had told her brother.

It was worse than that of course, though everyone had kept the truth from the children. Albas had barely recognised the body as Juno. He probably wouldn't have known it was her, if hadn't been for her tattered uniform and the sword near her body.

"What..... Do we need to run now?" Asked Seesha.

"No, come out from under your blanket, there is light in the sky again."

Hol was getting her people organised, though there were a lot less warriors than there had been. Kittara could see Hol pointing at the monsters who had been so intent on wiping them out. Some were still attacking, but most were wandering around, as if confused.

"Concentrate on the ones attacking us. Yelled Hol. "Don't antagonise the ones that aren't."

Minraver's warrior angels must have been fatigued, yet they were still able to send spheres of flame at the creatures still trying to reach their camp. Kittara wasn't sure about letting any of the brutes escape. Their numbers were still huge and if they escaped onto the rifts, they would almost certainly wipe out the rift people.

"Light again..... What does it mean?" Asked Seesha.

"It probably means the worst is over." Said Mingal.

Mingal on his feet again, though he was leaning against the stairs. He'd used fire spells against the attackers until collapsing from mental fatigue. Kittara had thrown a blanket over his twitching body, hoping sleep would heal him.

"Are you feeling better?" She asked him.

"A little, though it may be a few days until I can bring another spell out of my mind."

"The monsters are just wandering about." Said Seesha. "Those two tentacle things just bumped into each other."

"They're fighting each other.....Cool." Added Mix.

The two, hundred foot tall tentacle beasts were fighting one another, despite the attempts of a silver Terak to separate them. The silver creature was pushing and prodding, though it was too far away to hear if there were any verbal commands.

"Oh no you don't." Muttered Kittara.

She felt tired and there was real physical pain involved in creating just a small tear of The Damned. She sent it flying at the silver Terak, enjoying the moment its body became a cloud of vaporised body parts.

"I think the one on the left will win." Said Seesha.

Free of the influence of their master, the monsters were fighting each other in earnest. They were using lightning bolts and battering each other with their tentacles. Their battle was brutal, with huge lumps of blue flesh falling to the ground.

"Oh....."

The monsters had stopped fighting and Kittara knew why, she'd felt it too. There had been a bright light in her mind and a glimpse of Estrid, before the sight on an entire multiverse ceasing to exist. Estrid had once lived in her house, there was still a bond between them.

"That is.....No....."

"Are you alright ?" Asked Mingal.

"Don't you feel it ?"

They didn't, the children were looking at her, as she held onto Mingal. Kittara closed her eyes for a few seconds and regained her balance. The feeling of dread though, that wouldn't leave her.

"I saw..... I think Estrid might..... But not a deity, they can't....."

"Lean on me Kittara, you need some sleep." Said Mingal.

Once she'd felt the balance of the multiverse shift a little. That had felt as though some massive cosmic cog wheel had jumped a tooth. What was happening now felt larger than that, huge. The sort of event that few would even understand. Even Minraver didn't seem to feel the great cosmic shift.

"Look.... The monsters are burning." Said Mix.

"Even their dead are being consumed." Said Mingal.

It wasn't fire consuming the creatures, though it did look as though they were being purged by flames. They were melting, falling apart, before simply ceasing to be. The larger body parts became small pieces, which became dust, which vanished in a burst of red light. The effect was so bright, that she could see Rhian covering her eyes.

"They're being consumed." Said Mingal.

"No Mingal, they're ceasing to have ever existed." Said Kittara.

The confusion was leaving her mind, taking the fatigue with it. Estrid might be dead, she knew the deities could and did die. For now though there were more immediate matters to attend to.

"Look after them Mingal, I'm going to find Juno's body. Then I'll find Celli and Kerr and the body of everyone who died here."

The monsters might have vanished in red flames, but the destruction was still there, easy to see in the afternoon light.

"I'll come with you." Said Seesha. "From what you said, it is my destiny to see far worse."

It was tempting to take her, but she was still a little young to see what needed to be done.

"No, stay and get washed and changed. Collect all your things and say your goodbyes to everyone."

"We're leaving..... So soon ?"

Kittara knelt and hugged them both. She knew what it was like to be cursed by prophecy.

"Yes, I will take you as soon as I get back. Your destiny is not a thing to be feared. In a few years time, sooner than you might think, you will have children of your own. I will visit you and tell them of your exploits."

"Silly." Said Mix.

"We'll be ready." Said Seesha.

Kittara strode through the camp, spotting Albas leaning against a wall and looking sorry for himself.

"Albas..... Get together any who can still walk. We're going to bring back our fallen."

"You can have all my Genova." Said Minraver. "Are you sure it's all over ?"

"It's over."

~

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~ From future timelines ~

Despite moaning about their trip to the rifts, he was actually enjoying himself. The 1st rift was different since the war, which had ended twenty years before. The Terak were there now, slowly building towns and ridding large areas of growlers. There was also a new city of the rift people, though that was a long way from Nara-Odil and the ruined fortress. Having six dark angels as an escort helped his mood of course. Mo could relax and enjoy the trip, without worrying about what might want them for lunch or attack them for the hell of it.

"There, I can see the hulls of Minraver's crashed spacecraft." Said Silky.

"I'm glad we didn't come alone." Said Mo. "The fortress has gained a bad reputation."

It had been a long walk from the ruined temple at Nara-Odil, but Mo really was looking forward to the walk back. It wasn't that the rift was any greener, or the air smelt better. There was just a new sense of purpose, since Seesha had become the leader of the rift people and built her city.

"Do you still feel it calling to you?" Asked Mo.

For most couples that would have been a strange question, but they weren't an average couple and Silky saw and felt many unusual things. The egg had started calling to her five years after the war, yet she'd known the time hadn't been right.

"The egg's calls are becoming more urgent, it needs to hatch." Said Silky.

"We're under orders from President Sventa to keep you safe." Said Itzel. "If anything happened to either of you, I'd have to move to the Pesallia system. Let us go first."

"Yes, yes of course.... Just don't harm the egg." Said Silky.

It was strange to see the fortress again. Apart from recovering the dead, it hadn't been cleaned up or rebuilt in any way. As in all wars, not all the dead were capable of being found. To Mendera it was a holy place, a sacred war grave. Rift scavengers didn't respect such things though and the fortress had become home to a wide variety of carrion eaters.

"No, you're going the wrong way..... It's this side of the wall." Said Silky.

Mo felt sorry for Itzel, vague movements of her arms was Silky's idea of detailed direction.

"Tell them my dear, use your words." He said. "Describe where Louelle left her egg."

"Poor Louelle, she must have realised the situation was hopeless." Said Silky. "There, the trench on the outside of the walls, it goes down very deep. Her egg is right at the bottom."

"Stay here, we'll make sure there are no nasty surprises down there." Said Itzel.

"Just don't hurt her precious egg."

Itzel took two of the dark angels with her and they must have been quite thorough in their search. It took them some time to reappear out of the trench.

"Nothing dangerous down there, but we didn't see an egg."

"Don't worry I'll find it." Said Silky.

Mo followed Silky as she ran into the trench, creating a light orb spell, which hovered above them.

She didn't stop until they were at the lowest part of the trench, the surface at least thirty feet above them. She began to dig her sharp strong talons into the trench wall.

"Not a good idea." Said Itzel.

"She's right my dear, the trench has no supports. Go very carefully and slowly." Said Mo.

Silky, the strange female creature he loved, actually growled at him. She did dig with more care though. When the hole was about three feet into the side of the trench, she began to pull something out.

"It feels me, knows why I'm here..... See Mo, it begins to hatch."

The egg was smaller than he'd imagined, with a leathery skin. It was less than a foot across and moving around in Silky's hands. He didn't have a chance to ask how long before it would hatch.

Something was breaking out of the leathery shell, making hissing noises as it came out into the world.

“Oh Mo, isn’t she beautiful ?”

“Yes my dear, very beautiful.”

Mo saw a small serpent, hissing at him and baring its teeth. If Silky wanted him to see the creature as beautiful, he’d agree with her. The new born Kiyoh looked nothing like Louelle, but many creatures looked strange at the moment of birth. Mo thought that human babies were particularly grotesque.

“Where do we take it now ?” He asked.

“Her Mo, all Kiyoh are female. We don’t take her anywhere. She’s going home with us, to be brought up as though she was our own child.”

The tiny serpent attempted to bite him as he tried to touch it. Mo wondered how many nasty bites he was likely to suffer, before the Kiyoh reached adulthood.

“If she is likely to fit in anywhere, it’s the merchant’s area of Mendera City.” He said. “We will take her home and treat her as our own.”

~ ~

Kittara was asked to dictate the meeting at the start of the 24th Age of The Temple.

“So it can be etched on metal plates for the imperial archives.”

The senior cleric had told her. At first she’d claimed to remember little after such a large passage of time. When pushed she’d told the clerics that the meeting had been private and none of their concern. Her memory of that meeting with Sikush was actually rather good, almost every word etched into her brain.

“So you showed Seesha the five vessels inside the jail ?” He’d asked her.

Time had less meaning for immortals, but she remembered Seesha still being leader of the rift people. Mix was with her course, commanding her warriors. Clerics lived for about five thousand years, so the meeting couldn’t have been that long after the war.

“I showed them both and told them about being cursed by prophecy.”

“Did you tell them they had the real vessel, the one holding him, the crawling chaos ?”

Why had he waited to ask her ? That had always puzzled her.

“No, I was honest. I told everyone they might have the real jail, or one of the four fakes. It really didn’t matter to any of them, even Aelfraed, Empress of Leng.”

“Give them all a vessel, a jar that might contain the ultimate apocalypse, the end of everything. It not only gives their city or temple a huge boost, it also takes the pressure off Mendera. A new enemy will appear one day, that much is certain. They will have the task of attacking five well defended holy places, rather than just one.”

Why was he repeating her plan ? She’d done it all without telling him, but she had given him the details shortly after the war.

“Refresh my memory Kittara, where are the five vessels ?”

“But you know, it’s now common knowledge.”

“Humour me, please. Where are they ?”

She was trying to keep calm and hold the secret in an imagined box in her mind. He’s given her complete authority to do with the jail as she pleased. A little insurance for the future had seemed wise, even if it was probably treason.

“The first is here of course, back under the Temple of the Flame in Mendera City.”

“And the second ?”

"In Leng, deep below Aelfraed's palace."

"You sent the third to where?"

"Why are you going through all this?" She snapped. "If I've done something wrong, just tell me."

"There is a purpose to this, where is the third vessel?"

"I gave it to the children. We even found Pug at the base of the mountain, pulling up roots and bellowing at nothing in particular. They took him to pull the cart. Amazing really, that in a few short years, they'd built a city to rival any in the empire."

"Yes, they did well and their children all turned out well, except that one of course."

"Oh yes, that one. The rest will give the rift people good leaders for generations to come."

He was looking at her in an odd way again, as if doubting her.

"Yes Kittara, a solid line of hereditary leaders. But of course they never were cursed by prophecy. A good lie though, it stopped any arguments and probably got them through the bad years."

"You knew?" She asked him.

That was the infuriating thing about him, or one of the many infuriating things. Most of the time the people of the empire thought he was omniscient, when really he was bumbling along in a state of confusion. Sometimes he wasn't bumbling though, he really knew what was going on.

"Oh I knew, but the favourable outcome far outweighed a small lie. The second to last vessel Kittara, the fourth. Who got that?"

"The Lady of The Shrine, the Silver Lady. We had another long conversation, about how we could almost be sisters. She's happy, her small part of the City of the Lost God has been rebuilt. Pilgrims stop there now, on their way to Dix Tandal."

"Which brings us to the fifth and final vessel."

"The most difficult choice, but I needed to decide quickly and there weren't many other options. The fifth vessel was given to Algaria. It currently resides in a crypt below the Temple of Yraag in Tranquillity."

"All good choices, but where did the sixth vessel go?"

"There were only five."

Did he know, could he know? She was good at controlling her emotions after countless years of practise. They were both naked after hours of sex, they should have been enjoying the afterglow. A little small talk maybe, but not silly mind games.

"There is a problem, I can't remember if it was five or six." He said. "You were dying, everyone was so tired after the battle. They were all there of course, the legendary fighters of their day. All long dead now of course, we can't ask them. There is only one person who'd know for sure, Nurigen."

He was getting too close to the truth. She caressed his neck, hoping he'd prefer sex to answers.

"Minraver has never been happy with her part in the war." He said. "I know I made a few dreadful decisions, but they were driven by dreadful circumstances. The great experiment in creating The Damned has been a huge success. Perhaps now is the time to step back a little?"

"Mo would say if you stepped back any further, you'd fall over backwards."

He was laughing, a good long honest laugh.

"Yes, that is the sort of thing he'd say. I'm so glad Mo didn't move back to the rifts... Where was I?"

Yes, easing back. I really do think the eternal should begin to gradually drift away, become the stuff of myths and legends. If it wasn't for the riddle of the sixth vessel."

"There were only five." She said.

"I think you sent everyone a fake, all five of them, including the one here in Mendera. You then sent the genuine vessel to somewhere safe, somewhere only you know about. I'd be able to drift into the background so much easier if I knew."

It was a pity to waste the last part of such a good plan, but she had done it for him.

"Alright, I'll tell....."

He was waving his hand in her face, stopping her from talking.

"No, don't tell....Never tell me, never confirm there were six, not even to me."

Why had he pushed her so hard, if he didn't want the truth? The sex had been good and they hadn't talked about the vessels again. No, that talk was private.... She'd never tell any of it to the clerics who kept the archives.

~ ~

Algaria flourished after war, especially the city of Tranquillity. The vessel beneath the Temple of Yraag caused controversy, some even calling its presence there an insult to the Gods, the true Gods of Algaria. Of course that sort of talk attracted visitors, millions of visitors. When a few tourists from Phlot had seen strange apparitions, the pilgrims began to arrive. It was probably the claimed healing of a young boy, which had put Tranquillity firmly onto the pilgrim 'must visit' list. It was probably all nonsense of course, the result of a few over eager visitors, seeing what they wanted to see. As for the boy?

"Coincidence, nothing more. He was probably on the mend before he arrived."

Had been the view of the traditional media, the ones who thought the Temple of Yraag shouldn't have been used to house a relic with a dubious reputation. Not that the pilgrims believed in coincidence. Visitor numbers began to exceed the local population and Tranquillity expanded to become the third wealthiest city in the empire.

Marius and his descendants prospered of course, everyone loves to be associated with a genuine hero. There were several roads named after him and a statue placed in front of Government House. Many, many, many millennia later, children were taken to see his statue and taught about his exploits. One day people would forget of course, such in the nature of fame.

By the local year 6e 1497, Tranquillity was being called the Jewelled City, though no one could remember who'd first used the term. Sadly crime follows wealth and was too common to be reported in the media, even murders. There was one case though, which caught the imagination of the citizens of Tranquillity.

'Owner of Calech Electronics brutally killed in mystery slaying.'

Said the local news media, but they always talked about everything as though it was a huge mystery. In an age of disposable devices, Calech were a rarity, a company willing to repair old and faulty electronics.

'We can repair anything.'

Was the proud boast in the front window of their store. A store in the back streets, near the specialist alternative medicine practitioners and purveyors of legal but questionable recreational drugs. Not an affluent neighbourhood, which made Yanti Calech's six well-armed guards a mystery and local media do love a mystery.

It had been a hot night and the buildings were close to each other in that neighbourhood. Windows were left open, privacy could become an issue. One neighbour had heard a woman shouting in anger, mentioning something about vengeance. Several people had told the local police about hearing screams.

The office manager had unlocked the store and found the bodies of the six guards. The police found Yanti Calech's body in his rooms on the top floor, his throat cut from ear to ear. The look of horror on his face added to the mystery, causing the story to linger in the media for several weeks.

~ ~

If anything was ever certain about Mo, it was that he had loved his mother. She'd been born on the original planet Ixir, now long gone in the last switch, or maybe even the one before. Ixir had a different year length to Mendera and a tortuous calendar which shifted about every few years. Chlo had once calculated a Menderan date for his mother's birthday, after telling him it would change every year.

"Thank you Chlo, I'll stick to that day. It's as good a day as any to remember her."

That day was approaching and Mo felt it was the right time. Not every year, every decade or even every century, but he had a tradition when it felt right. He'd visit a temple of Nethesta and make an offering. There was a problem though, Nethesta was a deity worshipped by billions on Ixir, but that had been a very long time ago. It wasn't that Gods went out of fashion, it was a sad fact that their worshippers died out, often becoming extinct.

"The time feels right Chlo. Do you know of a temple to Nethesta ? Anywhere will do."

Of course Chlo had known, Chlo knew just about everything. It had taken a lot of research and the use of The Old One, but Mo found himself outside a ruined temple, in the middle of a hot and humid jungle.

"Ruined and rarely visited has an advantage." He said. "It meant you could come."

"Not one bit of that was appropriate or flattering my dear." Said Silky.

Perhaps, but he had spoken the truth. Take a creature with wings and a tail to most temples on unaligned worlds and you'd end up with a terrified congregation.

"Chlo said the jungle will eventually bury the temple completely." He said. "I'll find someone who can clear the worst of it away, for next time."

"Next time Mo ! You'll want to come here again."

"My mother suffered a lot during my birth. She told me the Goddess Nethesta came to her and helped me into the world. When it feels right.... I'll come here again."

Silky kissed him on the cheek, before walking towards the temple.

"A little effort and a few hundred workers and this place could be nice again, for next time. I will help Mo, to make it nice."

The inside of the temple was one large stone built chamber. The statue of Nethesta was still there, though the details had suffered from millennia of water damage. It wasn't the kind of temple he'd hoped for, but there was still a feeling of peace and serenity. Normally a priest would have placed his offering at the feet of the statue, but there were no priests.

"Why do you hesitate ?" Asked Silky.

"It doesn't seem right, there has always been a servant of Nethesta to take the offerings."

He held a simple offering of flowers, bought in Mendera City and placed in a stasis box for the long trip to that lonely place.

"I will take the offering if you tell me where it needs to be placed ?" Said Silky.

"At the feet of the statue."

"I will take your offering."

A young girl who he recognised immediately.

"Estrid, I thought you were dead.... Destroyed in that awful war."

Was it a sin to hug a living God ? He hoped not, as he held her in his arms, feeling her warm cheek against his.

“As you can see, I’m alive Mo, though it was a close thing. Now give me your offering.”

Estrid took his flowers and placed them at the feet of Nethesta. The statue changed, the features becoming clear again. The entire temple changed, renewing in some way, turning back to the way it must have looked when new. Estrid returned and held his hand.

“What happened in that other multiverse ?” Asked Silky. “Everyone thinks you were destroyed.”

Estrid put her finger to her lips, before disappearing.

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~ The End ~

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I had intended to create a trilogy. The ideas were in my head though, so it became one huge book of over 236,000 words, about 786 novel length pages. It has succeeded in getting the Menderan universe out of my head, even if only for a while. I’m sure the characters will appear again in short stories.

~ May chaos always pass you in the night ~