

## Ripples from the Past

### Chapter 33 – Warriors of Erasmus Seven

**“Sventa pulled herself up and leant against the wall. The chamber looked like a mad man’s fantasy, though she had woken in far stranger places. The room was large, the ceiling domed and a sizeable flock of Vargouilles were flying around the dome.”**

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Commander Casto Yerli was better known than he had ever been before. The first of his announcements had been broadcast to not only Mendera, but to the entire empire and it was only the first announcement of many to come. Thousands of worlds, trillions of sentient beings, all now knew his face. He actually found himself strutting a little as he walked through Temple Square with six of his senior militia officers.

“So far only two pilgrim families have asked to leave.” Said Jenda. “There have been a few private craft arriving to take home the Pesallia Group diplomats. All three ambassadors, their families and support staff. But they almost use a rainy day as an excuse to go home.”

He laughed at Jenda’s joke; she was his first born daughter. Many worlds discouraged nepotism, but not Mendera.

“Family tends to mean trust and loyalty.” Chlo had told him. “The Chalné has no objection to your daughter becoming a squad leader.”

Both his sons were members of the militia too, though he doubted if either of them would rise far. Jenda had inherited his looks, which wasn’t good. To make up for it she’d inherited her mother’s brains, which was.

“No looting must happen, none at all.” Said Yerli. “This is Mendera City and we will have order, no matter what.”

“Yes sir, I understand.” Said Jenda.

Of course she did, he’d given her a private briefing the night before. Any looters would be described as coming from unaligned worlds, no matter where they came from. If there was evidence of organised looting, the perpetrators would.....Disappear.

“When are we expecting the attack to happen ?” Asked Mohr

Mohr was a senior officer, who might well be the leader of the militia one day. Only after Yerli had decided on a retirement date of course. Mohr wasn’t the best officer he had, but the best were Algarians and the leader always had to be a local, the descendant of generations of clerics.

“Two days I’ve been told. We need to be alert at all times though.” Said Yerli.

“Yes sir, of course sir.”

A few smiling pilgrims walked past, all looking perfectly happy. Some were calling it the Menderan Spirit, the ability to be strong in the face of any threat.

“Patrol the merchant’s area.” Said Yerli. “If we get any trouble tonight, it’s likely to start there.

Remember we’re not tolerating any lawlessness, zero tolerance is the order of the day.”

“Yes sir.”

Mohr led and they were all supposed to follow, yet Jenda remained where she was. Nepotism was one thing, but ignoring orders was something else entirely.

“You have your orders.” He barked.

“I just wanted a private moment..... It is important.”

They sat on one of the benches in front of the statue of Kittara. Anyone else and he'd have fined them for insubordination, but upsetting Jenda meant upsetting his wife.

"Quickly, you need to join the others." He said. "What do you wish to discuss?"

"They're still bringing in the pilgrims father. Whole shuttles full of families are arriving today and more are scheduled to arrive tomorrow. Did you tell The Chalne how dangerous that was?"

"Of course I did, you saw my announcement. We can't force people to leave Mendera."

She was actually shaking her head at him, as though he'd said something stupid. Too clever by half, that was her trouble.

"For some reason the invasion isn't being taken seriously by our leaders. Surely you can see that father? You must know what's going on."

"No, I am your commander and you will not talk to me like that." He shouted. "Unless you no longer wish to serve in the militia?"

"I do father, I do.... We talked about this before."

"At home I am your father. When you are in uniform I am your commander. Enough of this nonsense, join the others."

He did put his hand over hers and his daughter did kiss his cheek before leaving. She ran off to catch up with Mohr, reminding him of the tiny child she used to be, running off to join her school friends. Jenda was grown now though and had her own circle of friends. She might not mean to betray a trust, but in reality he knew that the old saying was true. A secret can only truly be a secret, if it's known only to one person.

"This is something else you must never tell a living soul." Chlo had told him.

He was trusted now, updated with everything happening in the war. Some of those briefings terrified him, while others were simply mystifying. Yerli was determined to remain trusted, even if it meant keeping a professional distance between him and his daughter. He knew what the empire was planning for Aukar and his Terak warriors, but he'd die before divulging the secret.

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Finding food wasn't hard when you can create a portal to just about anywhere. Kittara needed the right kind of food though, the correct mix of nutrients to feed the human warriors at the fortress and the nonhuman. Not poisoning anyone was harder than it sounded when it came to food in a large and varied population.

"Perfect." She muttered. "And all inside containers and ready to go."

Stealing from the Pesallia Group had been her first, second and third choice. Not just because they were an unaligned planetary group with an attitude, but because their nutritional requirements made their food just about perfect. It didn't hurt that she was getting a little revenge on Pesallia 3. There were few kids in the empire who hadn't been given a music system manufactured on Pesallia 3, which had stopped working the moment the guarantee ran out. Kittara felt she was inflicting a little payback for all those kids. Sikush would probably have gladly given her enough food to feed everyone in the fortress, but stolen food always seemed to taste better and theft came with zero paperwork. Kittara read the label on a large stack of boxes.

'Reconstituted animal protein from various sources 55%.'

"Yummy." She muttered.

There was a list of preservatives as long as her arm, but those were an essential part of creating dehydrated ration packs for the various Pesallian mining colonies. Everything was in the rations to keep body and soul together and Pesallian colonists seemed to thrive on the stuff.

'Synthetic vegetable protein with added organic catalysts 75%.'

It said on another stack of boxes. Kittara didn't want to think about what made up the missing 25%. It was all good food though, which sold for a small fortune on the grey market. Not that she was going to sell any of it; there were a lot of hungry warriors at the fortress.

"Time to get Gesse and his friends."

Kittara had left them about a mile from the Colony Logistics Base, while she reconnoitred and dealt with the alarms and obligatory security cameras. Not that the Pesallians would have known what to make of the huge revenants. She appeared out of a purple portal, quite close to Gesse.

"Perfect, just what we need." She told him.

"Any guards to be dealt with?" Asked Gesse.

He asked with a tone of voice, which didn't leave any doubt about what he meant by dealt with.

Pesallia 3 might sell crap electronics, but she didn't want to kill any of their guards.

"This is a forward supply base on an uninhabited planet Gesse. The supply warehousing is almost completely automated. There are a few engineers and about fifty military personnel, all safe inside a compound about half a mile away. No one expects raids on food stores."

"I understand, we are ready." Said Gesse.

She wrapped them up in her cloud of grey mist, depositing them inside the warehouse. Gesse could read and probably knew the food was ration packs, but any food is good food, if you're hungry enough. Tempting to simply grab a dozen full containers, but Hol had asked not to be informed on details. Metal containers with 'Pesallia Mining' on the side were probably details Hol didn't want to see, or at least be able to plausibly deny.

"They colour code the containers." Said Kittara. "Green, red, blue and for some reason silver. We need the contents of about four of each. That does mean a lot of hard work, removing the boxes from sixteen large containers."

They could have survived on less than that, but she had Gesse and four of his revenants and several hours until the engineers were likely to turn up for work. He didn't ask why they simply couldn't take the full containers, which pleased her. Not asking daft questions implied trust, knowing that she wasn't working them hard for no reason.

"We were created for heavy work." Said Gesse. "Sometimes even dangerous work."

They piled up the boxes, while she transported them to the fortress. The plan had been for Juno and Albas to guard the supplies, but there were just too many hungry warriors. The Algarians in particular, had the look of soldiers who'd been on half rations for too long.

"There is plenty more on the way." Said Kittara. "Let them take what they need."

Kittara wandered through the various warehouses while the revenants emptied containers. One was the returns holding area, though most of the crates and boxes were quite dusty. A green gritty dust on that planet for some reason.

"Been a while since anything was actually returned." She muttered.

Several crates had 'Farming supplies' stencilled on the sides, the red return stickers disintegrating from age. There was also an entire container full of wooden fence posts. Kittara pulled the tops off a few crates, finding axes inside, large metal hoes, wood saws and huge hammers. The boxes might have farming supplies written on them;

"But I see weapons ideally suited to the 1<sup>st</sup> rift." She muttered.

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In many ways it was a good time to have their defences tested again, the human warriors had just eaten. Hol had tasted the rations Kittara had brought and the food tasted fairly good. There was the aftertaste of over processed protein, but it still tasted pretty good. The downside to Louelle saying

an attack was on the way, was the drowsy feeling a good meal brings with it. Kittara was still away liberating supplies, but forty thousand warrior angels ought to be able to handle anything.

“Wake up ! Battle commanders to your posts !” Yelled Hol.

“This time it will be worse, something far more dangerous.” Said Celli. “I can feel it.”

It was their first real test of a new system, a fresh way of organising their troops. Some of Minraver’s angels went to the wrong place, though she quickly corrected the error. Louelle had slithered down the gatehouse tower and across the first of their new defensive ditches.

“I can see nothing from here.” Said Hol. “Come on Mingal, we’re going to the front wall.”

“Is that wise ?”

“Our enemy is testing our defences. If the main enemy force was attacking, I’d be right there.... At the front line.”

“But with respect, you’re the leader now. You should remain in a defended position at the rear.”

She ignored him, mainly because he was right. It was frustrating to be reliant on seers and runners to know what was going on. Hol strode through the lines of defenders, pleased by how ready and alert they all looked.

“Louelle has stopped by the new earthworks.” Said Mingal. “I can feel her agitation.”

Feel was good, but not as good as seeing with her own eyes. There was a ruined building about halfway to the front wall. It hadn’t been repaired and served no purpose, but it had stairs which reached its still solid roof. Hol ran up the stairs, leaving a panting Mingal to run after her.

“I can’t see Louelle, but I can see most of the front wall from here.” Said Hol.

Kittara must have left instructions, or maybe it had been Gesse. Her uninvited guards didn’t need the stairs, they clambered up the side of the building. Two of the revenants, who stood behind her without saying a word. Hol wanted to send them away, but their presence appeared to comfort Mingal.

“She’s out near the new earthworks, pointing at the ground.” He said. “Louelle is actually scared about what might be about to arrive.”

“How long until it’s here ?” She asked.

“Not long at all. It makes sense Hol, for them to attack the new earthworks. Our enemy seems to sense areas of activity, where lots of our people have been particularly busy. We could use that against them.”

He stopped there, feeling what she was feeling too. The portal didn’t open, it smashed open their reality. Hol had seen and felt it only twice before and each time it had taken the full power of an eternal to make it happen. Did they face an enemy with that kind of power ?

“Oh, this is going to be bad.”

Mo was by her side, though she had told him to remain near the well. It was a vast optical and mental illusion of course, though knowing that didn’t stop the fear. It was as if reality was being sucked into a single point, just beyond the main gates. There was even a popping sound as reality snapped back to reveal something she didn’t recognise or understand. It looked as though the portal was still open, creating a myriad of sparkling colours.

“What is that thing ?” Asked Mo.

“Something struggling to survive in our reality.” Said Mingal. “It might not survive long, yet I sense it has enormous strength and power.”

“They always do.” Said Mo. “We never get weak and feeble enemies.”

Hol saw Louelle come slithering over the main gates as though they weren’t there, before returning to her favourite lookout place, on top of the right hand gate tower. Her ease at scaling the wall

worried Hol, as their enemy probably controlled creatures who could scale the wall with a similar ease.

"It's on the move." Said Mingal.

The creature was huge, towering above the walls of the fortress. The kaleidoscope of colours effect was fading, revealing a monster consisting mainly of long agile tentacles. It had a head, one with three small forward facing eyes. Hol had seen something like it before, but only in carving on walls, from the days of the Old Gods.

"Why isn't Minraver attacking? Send a runner, tell her to attack." Said Mo.

Hol had no runners, they were in the command area she'd abandoned. Not that she'd have sent a runner if she'd had one.

"Minraver will be examining and accessing the creature." She said.

The Genova attacked the monster with spells rather than swords and bows. Over a hundred pointed at the creature, while intoning spells in a loud enough voice for Hol to hear.

"That'll finish the brute." Said Mo. "I saw Sventa once turn an assassin to nothing but burnt dust, just by touching him. A hundred Genova..... It will die very quickly."

It didn't die, though the monster did writhe about and move back a little. It made no sounds though and Hol could see no mouth or ears on its head. There were signs of burning and a terrible smell filled the fortress, yet the creature refused to die. One of its tentacles moved with incredible speed, crossing the outer wall to strike a formation of the warrior angels. The tentacle carried a storm with it, electricity danced among the Genova, throwing about fifty of them to the ground.

"Did you see that?" Asked Mo. "The brute brought its own lighting storm."

"Minraver's angels are tough." Said Mingal. "Look... They're already rising from the ground to fight back."

Most were rising but not all and Hol remembered a few secret meeting with Louelle in the early hours, while all but the night watch slept.

"When the battle begins, you can expect to lose a tenth of your forces in the first morning. I see terrible creatures Hol, monsters long gone from our multiverse." Louelle had told her.

Louelle had refused to give any details of the upcoming battle, or even if they were likely to win. It seemed that her future and that of everyone else in the fortress was hidden from her seer's gaze.

"It's attacking the Algarians now." Said Mo. "Let's see if Tad Dunne can maintain discipline while under attack."

Another of the creature's tentacles brought death by electrocution to the fortress. The Algarians felt the wrath of their enemy and very few of them were rising after the attack. The stench of burnt flesh filled the fortress, but this time it was their own warriors who were burning.

"Minraver is reacting too slowly." Said Mo. "Her angels should be attacking."

"Quiet Mo." Shouted Hol. "Be critical before the battle if you must. During the battle we must fight as one."

Minraver had moved angels from a different part of the fortress, forming a wall of several hundred Genova. They all raised their arms and began to intone a spell, a different one this time. Instead of fire, the tentacles closest to the wall appeared to be freezing.

"A strange tactic, but it's working." Said Mingal.

The monster wasn't finished though. The undead were there, willing and able to fight, though the current battle was for the users of magic. The huge creature obviously didn't care who it killed, combatants or those merely waiting for their day to fight. A tentacle lashed through the undead, bringing its lightning to their ranks.

“Louelle joins the fight.” Said Hol. “The Kiyoh are legendary fighters.”

Louelle had been keeping to her tower, but she’d obviously decided it was the right moment to use her usual state of anger to good purpose. A Kiyoh in a rage is a terrifying thing, even the undead were moving away from her. Louelle slithered along the fortress wall and over the main gates, her serpentine body rippling as she moved at speed.

“She’ll kill the thing.” Said Mo. “We could do with another thousand like her.”

Hol tended to agree, but there was only ever one Kiyoh at a time on the rifts. The angels were still making a concerted attempt to freeze the thing solid and with some success. None of its many tentacles were attacking, or even moving.

“Minraver’s people are killing it.” Said Mo. “I knew they would.”

Hol didn’t bother to reply, she just sighed and promised herself to have a long talk with Mo about the etiquette of what to say and not say during a battle. Louelle had reached the closest point on the wall to the monster, lifting herself up on her tail.

“She is going to shriek at it.” Said Mingal. “I have heard about such things, but never hoped to actually see it happen. It is said that the shriek of a Kiyoh can shatter walls built by the Gods.”

Hol had heard a lot of claims for Louelle’s powers and watched in awe as the Kiyoh stood upright on the last few feet of her enormous tail. She had to be standing at least eighty feet high when she began to shriek.

“I just hope she remembers we’re her friends.” Said Mingal.

Everything was shaking as Louelle’s shriek vibrated the entire reality of the 1<sup>st</sup> rift. Warriors fell over as the ground behaved as though a massive earthquake was taking place. Walls rebuilt in a hurry began to suffer and even poor Pug was bellowing in fear. The monster was getting the full force of her yell though. There was no gradual effect.... One moment it was there, towering over the fortress walls. The next it shattered into thousands of tiny frozen fragments.

“Yes, what did I tell you ?!” Shouted Mo.

Mingal was cheering too, it had been a dramatic victory. Hol left the building without commenting on the destruction of the monster from a world long gone. She didn’t need a seer to tell her that they’d probably lost a hundred fighters in that one battle. Hol was so deep in thought that she hadn’t noticed Mingal was still beside her.

“That was probably their last test of our defences.” He said. “We can expect the main battle to begin very soon.”

Good, she was eager to come to grips with an enemy who’d been fighting them on their own terms for far too long.

“Tonight I will tell the children their true destiny.” She said.

Mingal actually gave her a slight bow. He was a converted chaos creature who’d had his conditioning altered to fight for the empire. Hol was sure of his loyalty. Very few would know of her conversation with Seesha and Mix, not even Juno and Albas.

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Sventa had given one of the Lummel a hand held blaster. They’d mastered the art of firing it amazingly quickly, but not the skill of aiming it. She taken the weapon back after realising she was just as likely to be killed as the enemy.

“Leave them be Sventa.” Luri had told her. “They will find a use for their spears when we find the right place.”

Their enemy had changed tactics, sending strange monsters to rend apart Estrid's creatures of mud. The new enemy looked reptilian, using teeth and claws to fight their small deity created army. They were having some success, but Estrid easily replaced any of her creatures who were destroyed.

"Without the new Vargouille we'd be in trouble." Said Sventa.

"Yes, they're performing well." Said Luri. "I thought they'd go crazy in confined spaces. They crawl along the ground quite well though and are marvellous at clearing the large chambers."

There were now a lot of Estrid's creations and Luri's Vargouille. There was such a large force of creatures created by Estrid and Luri, that Sventa rarely had a chance to fight. The Lummel peeped in their strange language she didn't understand and the deities kept whispering to each other. Sventa was beginning to feel left out of things, ignored and unappreciated. A dark angel is a dangerous enough creature when in a good mood. In a truly foul mood.....

"That's not a good idea Sventa." Yelled Estrid.

No, if they wouldn't include her in their plans, she'd fight who she wanted to fight. Sventa elbowed her way past Estrid's creatures of mud and began using her claws on the green reptile monsters. It felt good to fight and kill, it was what dark angels were good at. It made her feel in control again, as she ripped the head of a creature which resembled a six foot long sand lizard.

"Quick, she'll run out of air." Shouted Estrid.

Good, let them run after her for a change. It felt so good, so wonderful, so right... As she used her teeth and claws to rend flesh and bring a painful death to the creatures sent by their enemy. They arrived just as she was becoming bored with so many easy kills. The silver flying creatures who were almost certainly the real enemy, the Terak of the future. They might be very tough and clever, but their small size didn't help in a face to face battle.

"Evolution can be a bitch !" She shouted.

Estrid was yelling at her to pull back, but Sventa was having too much fun. The silver creatures were tough, but she'd managed to kill a good dozen of them without any real trouble. They seemed to have a hierarchy, with some slightly larger ones keeping away from her. Sventa hated that of course and was determined to destroy them. As she used her claws on the silver creatures, one leapt up onto her shoulder, squirting a green slime into her face.

"Bastard thing !"

It died, but she didn't feel well. Sventa fell over and curled herself into a ball. The dreadful silver things were attacking her and she didn't have the strength to stop them. Her head hurt and there was an odd tickling in her throat. She awoke to find Estrid muttering to Luri yet again.

"She's awake.... This time I'm telling her everything." Said Luri.

"Do that and she'll hate you." Said Estrid.

Sventa pulled herself up and leant against the wall. The chamber looked like a mad man's fantasy, though she had woken in far stranger places. The room was large, the ceiling domed and a sizeable flock of Vargouilles were flying around the dome. They were obviously enjoying themselves, some even screeching with joy as they bickered and had play fights. There were just two entrances to the chamber, both guarded by large numbers of Estrid's creations. There was currently no intruder to repel, but there had been. Parts of the floor were covered in the body parts of dismembered green reptiles.

"I feel awful, what happened to me ?" She asked.

Oh, her senses had saved the worst until last. She must have been unconscious for some time, her body had needed to get rid of urine, probably more than once. It was yet another thing to feel irked

about. Two living deities and they couldn't even use some sort of Godlike power to stop her peeing herself.

"You were infected with a fungal weapon of some kind." Said Luri. "I gave your body the ability to fight it off, which should give you immunity to it. I'd still avoid contact with the creatures though." Sveta wanted to walk around, but her head was still spinning a little.

"How long was I unconscious for?" She asked.

"About a day." Said Estrid. "We're locked into a bit of a standoff situation. They can't get past our guards, but we couldn't leave until you were fully cured of the fungus. Not that we've been idle, we've sent out Vargouilles to find the chamber we sought."

Sveta got up onto her knees and decided to remain there until she felt a little less nauseous.

"Did you find it?"

"Yes, about six floors directly below us." Said Estrid. "There are things we wish to tell you before we leave this chamber Sveta, important things."

"Things that might make you angry, but you have a right to know." Added Luri.

"Every day seems to compete with the last to make me angry. Just tell me."

"Firstly there is the question of what happens when we destroy the machinery linking this multiverse to our own." Said Luri.

Ah, the conversation where they tell her it was a one way trip for her and probably the Lummel too. Deities might survive the sudden collapse of a large area of reality, but she didn't think she would.

"If it's about this being a suicide mission? I already guessed that."

There was a noise at the entrance to her left, as two bright green lizards attempted to break through their guards. They fared no better than all the others, becoming more dismembered reptile parts on the floor. Sveta caught the odour of decay from that part of the chamber and realised there were worse things than smelling of stale urine.

"No Sveta, we hope you will survive, though our Lummel have already made their preparations for death." Said Estrid.

"Estrid will remain here to destroy the machinery, the Lummel guarding her." Said Luri. "I will take you to where Delmus is waiting and bring you all safely to Mendera City. Hopefully it will work, but I will need to move quickly through two disintegrating realities. It will be hard to accomplish and we may all die."

"And what happens to you Estrid?"

"I have no idea and that is the truth. I'm sure you've seen enough to know that even deities rarely live forever. I may live, or it may be my fate to die in this place."

"Thank you for being honest with me." Said Sveta.

"There is one other thing." Said Luri.

"Now, you're telling her now!" Snapped Estrid. "Why not wait and see if any of us survive?"

"She needs to hear the truth."

"What about?" Asked Sveta.

"I need to tell you about the death of Haan."

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The 1<sup>st</sup> rift was almost a pleasure to cross, if there hadn't been so much of it. The water in the rivers always seemed to be fresh and safe to drink, the sandstorms had gone and there were even a few wild orchards, a left over from the days when human farmers had ruled the rift. Aukar's warriors preferred meat of course, but his Dredger mercenaries would eat just about anything.



“Losing warriors to sandstorms one moment, living off the land the next.” Said Dhūlen. “The rifts truly are strange and inexplicable. Our warriors are happy though, some have asked permission to form a hunting party.”

“Then let them old friend, fresh meat will do them good.” Said Aukar.

Aukar heard some of his Terak warriors singing a drinking song, a favourite from the barracks back home. The 1<sup>st</sup> rift had been the tonic they’d needed, a green land with rivers, wild animals to hunt and a passable climate. His people even seemed to have recovered from the shock of a world with no horizon or sun in the sky.

“The scouts have returned half mad, talking about being bewitched.” Someone shouted.

All soldiers are superstitious types who have a habit of always believing the worst and his warriors were no exception to that rule. Aukar had already decided to have the scouts flogged, before they’d even given him their report. What they saw was for his information only and not something to be talked about with the lower ranks.

“Have the scouts brought to me.” He told Dhūlen. “And do your best to calm things down. I often think soldiers are more superstitious than old women gossiping at the market.”

Aukar had some rough maps and knew they had a mighty river to cross, which was close to an abandoned city. There was a mountain in the way though, rising up with sheer cliffs to several thousand feet. He could just about see ruins of some kind on the side of the mountain. Aukar had hoped the scouts had information about what lay beyond the river, but they seemed almost hysterical.

“There is a Terak army waiting to attack us, thousands of warriors filling the sky.” One said.

“Did you also see this army?” Aukar asked the other scout.

“Yes I did.... Thousands of Terak, four times our number, maybe more. I saw it all as clear as day.... Unless we were both bewitched.”

He’d already arranged for the scouts to be beaten after he’d finished with them. They’d be kept well away from the rest of his army for a while. Wild ideas were far too addictive to warriors who were far from home.

“Where exactly was this phantom army?” He asked.

“Over the great river near a ruined village.”

Right on top of the rift gate, which meant there was no way of avoiding whoever it was. Aukar didn’t believe in phantom Terak armies, but he believed that his scouts had seen something.

“Did they chase or attack you?”

“No.”

Aukar nodded at his personal guard and the scouts were taken away to be punished for causing needless concerns among his warriors. Ideally they’d have been killed, but he needed every warrior he had.

“What did you make of that?” He asked Dhūlen.

“They saw something, but it might have been a flock of large flying animals of some kind. We know little about the creatures who inhabit the rifts. The river won’t be visible until we get around the foot of the mountain. Then we’ll know.”

Aukar sent no more scouts, they’d know the truth soon enough. It was almost dark before they came around the side of the mountain and looked across the great river. The sky was indeed full of flying warriors, but they weren’t Terak.

“Dark angels Dhūlen and Nurigen swore to me that they wouldn’t help the Menderans, or at least not in any great numbers.” Said Aukar.

“Perhaps we can negotiate with them ?”

“They guard the rift gate, our way into Mendera City. Nurigen lied, that much is obvious, though I fail to see what he had to gain by it. One day I will find him and kill him, though he’d need to die a thousand times to pay for this treachery.”

What to do next, he could see Dhūlen hovering, the question in his eye. His old friend was too polite to ask, but Aukar knew he had to keep his warriors busy. Idle soldiers brood on every wrong, real or imagined.

“We’ll stay this side of the river.” He said. “History is full of battles lost by armies with their backs to a river. Get the dredgers to earn their keep, by building ditch and trench defences right around our camp. The Terak warriors can use the bushes and trees to build a fence inside the trench. I’m not sure how much good all that will do, but it’ll keep everyone busy.”

“It will be done.” Said Dhūlen.

If only energy weapons worked on the rifts, but they didn’t. Nurigen had told him that only a few dark angels would serve Mendera, yet he was looking at an army of at least a quarter of a million. They weren’t likely to negotiate, which meant trying to fight their way to the rift gate. For the first time, Aukar wondered if he’d ever set foot in Mendera City.

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Another night when they were up far too late. This meeting was different though, Kittara had woken them and waited while they dressed.

“Did we do something wrong ?” Mix had asked her.

“I don’t think they’d send Kittara to tell us off.”

Everything was darker now, lights might help enemies watching from a distance. Kittara had taken them past the well and past rows of warriors sleeping out in the open, only a blanket to keep off the cold night air.

“There are so many soldiers now.” Said Mix.

Her brother seemed excited by it all and he loved any contact with Kittara. Hol was waiting for them near the huge, half buried vessel which contained the crawling chaos. It was the lack of people they recognised which surprised her. Rhian and Kerr had now almost become surrogate parents. Mo was there, sat on a half ruined wall. The undead surrounded the vessel, acting as guard, while all eight of the revenants patrolled the area. The strangest thing was seeing the rift people at the centre of it all, the tribespeople who rarely talked to anyone.

“Sit down, both of you.” Said Hol. “There is much to tell you.”

They were obviously going to be the only ones sitting, which wasn’t the sort of thing they were used to. They’d at least been given a wooden bench to sit on, so that Mix could hold her hand.

“What have we done ?” Asked Mix. “Was it really bad ?”

“No, you’ve done nothing wrong, nothing at all. There is just something you need to know and the enemy will be here quite soon.”

The adults muttered at each a little and Hol said something to Mo about handing over some sort of destiny. Mo then left and Seesha realised she only really knew Hol and Kittara. Everyone else there was either one of the undead or a tribal rift warrior.

“I know you’re both good at keeping secrets.” Said Hol. “What you hear tonight must never be discussed with anyone, no matter how important they might be. Do you understand ?”

Normally Mix didn’t like tension and being asked serious questions, but he actually looked excited by it all. Seesha leant close and whispered in his ear.

“Are you alright Mix ?”

“Yes.”

“Don’t be scared, just tell Hol you can keep a secret.”

“I won’t tell anyone, even myself.” Said Mix.

Kittara actually chuckled and leant against the huge fire scorched jail of the crawling chaos.

“We’re both good at keeping quiet. You can trust us, both of us.” Said Seesha.

“It is likely you will never return home.” Said Hol.

That hit her like fist in the face. Seesha had been aching to get home. Seeing Mendera City again was an idea which kept her sane in that very insane place.

“Why ? You said we haven’t done anything wrong, but you’re punishing us.”

“No, it’s not like that, it’s an honour.”

Kittara muttered something into Hol’s ear and now it was Kittara talking to them, while Hol sat where Mo had been sitting.

“No talk of punishment, this is your true destiny.” Said Kittara. “I will try to tell you everything tonight, which means you may not get much more sleep. There will be books to read, large heavy priceless book, written on metal pages. You will never know how hard it was to get them released by the Temple of the Flame.”

“How will we carry them ?” Asked Mix.

“Shush Mix, be good.”

Kittara smiled and knelt in front of Mix, holding his other hand for a second or two.

“A good point Mix. The tribespeople will carry your things, though you must read the sacred books in secret. I’m sure Seesha won’t mind reading them to you.”

“No, I’m always reading to him.”

Kittara stood up and went over to the huge vessel, running her hands around the sealed top. The tribespeople instantly dropped to the ground prostrating themselves, though not to Kittara. They were all paying some kind of homage to them, her and Mix.

“I’m going to unseal his jail.” Said Kittara. “The first time it has been opened in several eternities. Don’t be scared though, you are in no danger.”

Kittara intoned some words as she ran her hands around the entrance to the vessel. Her words were gibberish to Seesha, though they sounded quite musical, as though Kittara was singing to his jail. As Seesha watched the sealing compound which had been there for many forevers, began to fall away. Large lumps of something dry and brown, began to fall away and turn to dust, as they hit the ground.

“You can’t let him out.” Said Seesha.

“You will see, you will see. There is no danger.”

Seesha expected the door to unscrew, but suddenly Kittara had it in her hands, before laying it on the ground. Kittara produced a spark in her hands, just enough light to see by. She looked inside the vessel and muttered to herself for a while.

“All is as I remember Seesha, but it was so very long ago. Come and look inside.”

“But he’s in there.”

Kittara sighed, but her smile was still kind. She came over and knelt in front of them.

“Like it or not, this is your destiny. Come and look inside and I can tell you what happens next.”

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