

Chronicles of Mardoun

Chapter 4 - The Old One

“The forbidden books say Chaos is imprisoned for eternity, yet will rule again one day. I see no conflict in those two concepts” – Cleric Ojetin

The Multiverse does some very strange things and the two large voids are among the strangest. Somewhere a galaxy exploded, or a black hole disintegrated and for some unknown reason a void was formed. At first just a few lights years in diameter with no planets, not dust, no molecules, nothing ! Then the void expands and grows until emptiness almost impossible to cross is formed in a particular bubble of the multiverse.

There is the smaller void which is merely 500 light years across, but is still like a predator trap catching any star ship trying to cross it. Such craft end up as dead wrecks endlessly drifting towards a system on the other side of the void that will probable have ceased to exist when it gets there. Then there is the Great Void. Travelling at ten times the speed of light you'd die before travelling even a small way across it. Up to a few hundred light years from the edge there are small numbers of dead craft that had no idea they were heading into the Great Void. Worse than quicksand once you realise the error you're too far in to turn back and countless thousands of beings have died hoping they just might reach the other side. Towards the centre of the Great Void is nothing, or nearly nothing.

Almost at the exact centre and moving at an almost sedate 75,000 metres per second is what looks like a derelict craft of huge and unsettlingly alien construction. It is about 5 miles long and 3 miles wide and high, and it has no symmetry at all. Bulges seem to extend from it at random on one side and almost organic looking tubes extend out for nearly a mile on the other. It looks very old and dead. Not that you could look at it. If you could cross the huge distances involved and find this very tiny needle in an almost infinite haystack, then the 3 Imperial needle class automated protection vessels would kill you before you saw them uncloak.

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The Chaln  appeared at the rear of this craft with his guards just behind him.

“The Old One can help if asked and this craft is completely unknown to anyone”, he said to the women as they made their way to the control room.

When The Chaln  had first discovered this craft it had been by accident. He often used the Great Void as somewhere to travel at colossal speeds for purely the fun of it. It was an Imperial Leisure pursuit to hurtle along at 10, 20 or 30 times the speed of light with no observable effect on your surroundings, or painful collisions with suns or planets. To do this safely he had Chlo run a low priority scan of the entire void so that any large obstacles could be mapped and perhaps removed. At first only various derelict craft were found, but then close to the centre was an old craft that still had power and signs of activity. When Chlo went aboard to investigate an assortment of traps and robot guards were sent against her and she had informed The Chaln  that designated wreck #6667.34 was worth looking at.

There had been no living beings on the craft and after a few attempts to attack him The Chaln  finally got the computer system to relax and tell him about the mysterious craft. Not that the computer which they called “The Old One” knew much. The craft had a rudimentary fold space technology and had simply been told to arrive at a point in space and look for a planet that could support the lives of the creatures it carried in its DNA banks. Anything else it knew had been lost in the entropy of countless billions of years travelling across the Great Void. Memory circuits had failed, the fold space technology had crumbled until all that was left was a base

computer programme with the destination and the momentum the engines had given the craft before they had run out of a fuel a very long time ago. The DNA bank was held in a crystalline matrix and appeared to be in pretty good condition, so The Chaln  decided to aid the Old One on his long quest. Chlo had linked herself into the craft and repaired his memory and all the non essential functions that had ceased to work. Not that anyone knew where he came from. The DNA stored looked almost insect like and the type of planet he was told to look for seemed pretty inhospitable to most life forms. Hot, dry, high methane atmosphere. They certainly wouldn't get much competition for their "Ideal" world.

After the strange alien craft had been almost rebuilt and had all its core activities linked to an auto repair system put in by Chlo, the Old One was still nervous. No matter what was updated some part of his ancient AI was anxious and worried about his precious cargo.

"Like an old woman", Kittara often said.

On one visit the Old One asked if he could be upgraded with weapons a bit more powerful than his own energy burst cannons.

"On one condition", The Chaln  told him.

"I'll give you weapons more powerful than any in the Empire and total control over their use, but there is a price".

If the old one could ever be said to be happy he was happy now and he gladly agreed to the conditions set.

"One day I may have need of your services. I require a solemn oath that you will use your weapons and those of the guard ships I give you to fight any enemy I ask".

It was quite an oath, but the Old One gave it gladly. He was then given three needle class automated protection craft to be his constant companions.

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The Empire had the best technology in existence and most inhabitants of the Empire mistakenly assumed the Empire had developed it. In fact none of the super high tech gadgetry was developed by The Chaln  or The Empire, it was all in effect stolen from other civilisations now long gone. Why develop your own technology when you're eternal ? The Chaln  was immune to the Switches when the Multiverse resets and had seen an infinite number of civilisations come and go, some with truly awesome space craft and weaponry. He simply stole ideas and improved them by making them auto repairing and almost invulnerable.

The Needle ships were a good example. Developed well back into the age of forbidden knowledge they were fast, invisible when cloaked and armed with weapons capable of vaporising whole planets. Add the Imperial ability to switch reality to appear anywhere and a near limitless power source and they were a truly spectacular weapon. Their AI quickly learned the neurosis of the Old One and they darted around him, now cloaked, now appearing a light year in front of him, then appearing by his side. Of course there was never any enemy to fire at and there never would be, but for the first time in a very long time the Old One felt content.

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Then today his friend who commanded those impudent girls had arrived.

"My friend I am in need of your service", he had said.

Chlo could have fed the details straight into the Old One's memory, but The Chaln  wanted not just his acceptance of orders, but a belief in why he was being asked to go to war.

"We've known each other a long time and I know your first concern is with your task to find a home for your people".

The Old One carried on listening, but he was getting a bad feeling.

"You can't take the Needle ships where I need you to go, but you have your own new weapons and a chance to try them out".

The Old One was now getting concerned, yet his oath had been sincere, so he kept listening. "There are some mercenary troops that I need to transport to a planet in a neutral part of the Iskvi galaxy in another part of the multiverse. Chlo can show you how to change reality to get there and give you navigation data to find the planet".

Kittara could feel the Old One getting agitated, which was the first time her empathy skills had worked with an AI presence.

"I will come with you and bring a dozen other of The Damned and we will give our lives if needed to protect your DNA store".

The Old One was old, very old, but no fool. He knew the capabilities of the Damned and that a dozen were just about unstoppable. Part of his Chlo upgrade had been instantaneous communications with her. This meant that through her he could communicate with the Imperial Guard and The Chaln  in real time no matter where they were. Another bonus was a link to the Imperial news broadcasts and the truly huge number of channels of entertainment from the entire Empire. Some of the porn channels had confused him, so many creatures desperate to insert bits of themselves into other creatures, even if the bits weren't designed for insertion. He had seen many news items about The Damned in action, they were peak time entertainment in much of the Empire. There were even absurdly expensive foot high figures of your favourite Imperial guard that you could buy. Cast in platinum and other precious metals and when you pressed one of the 5 or 6 jewels on the base you got a high definition screen appear above the figure showing one of their best battles.

He'd seen the one used in the advert for the Kittara figure. She was standing alone in the ruins of an unnamed city, her uniform tattered and covered in the blood of others. In her hand was a long dark blade of metal that shimmered blue and silver as it moved, a demon blade she told him when he asked about it. The sky around her was filled with smoke from the burning city and it looked like the action was over, but then from the ruins appeared hundreds of creatures. He recognised them as the Kivar, now allies of the Empire and with that recognition he guessed which battle he was watching. A very long time ago, so long that to most inhabitants of the Empire it was now a legendary battle between almost God like creatures, the Empire had entered a bubble of the Multiverse and started the usual campaign of recording and subjugation.

Then they had met the Kivar and had been stopped. Not delayed in expansion or caused minor annoyance, but stopped by having fleets destroyed and entire new colonies wiped out. The Damned had arrived in small numbers and their near legendary invulnerability had been shown to be a myth, they died. Not yet in hundreds and they killed great numbers of the Kivar, but the enemy kept coming, seemingly with no regard for their own survival. First 20, then 30, then over 100 of the Imperial guard perished. Yes the Kivar had lost tens of thousands, but the shock and awe of the Imperial guard relied on its reputation for never being beaten and in a few short months the Empire had seen hundreds of them die in high definition on prime time entertainment.

Children now feared the coming of the Kivar and merchants no longer wanted to invest in trading colonies in that part of the multiverse. It was decided by The Chaln  and the Grand Council that an example must be made and the Kivar home planet was to be attacked by five thousand of the Damned. The Empire had strange and often contradictory ideas on morality and would resort to barbaric torture to gain intelligence, yet the Damned had a golden rule. They never targeted civilians. In fact they often put up force fields around areas of civilian housing so they could destroy the strategic military areas of a City. They threw everything at the Kivar home planet. Imperial attack wings were rarely seen and the Empire used space craft only for trade and transporting large amounts of stores around. An attack wing consisted of over a

hundred assorted craft ranging from small fast raptors to huge half mile long cruisers. All the craft had formidable fire power from energy weapons that never ran out of power and almost impenetrable shielding.

The Kivar had never seen an Imperial battle wing before and when over a thousand battle wings appeared and started a bombardment of their military bases they were, for a while thrown into a panic. Then around 5,000 of the Guard attacked power plants, water facilities, Communication centres and military bases with the aim of reducing the planet to the stone age. Despite the ferocity of the attack the forces did their utmost to keep civilian deaths to a minimum, which in their terms meant one casualty was too many. From other encounters the Kivar knew that by getting many of their troops to concentrate their fire on one of The Damned they could kill them. They successfully started to use this technique and it was one such attack that targeted Kittara.

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Kittara could have called for help, in fact she'd held back Sikush from coming to her aid and now he was leaving her to do what she was good at while he attacked the main Kivar army barracks. She didn't move from where she was and she knew that Chlo would be recording her in high definition 3d from at least a dozen angles by now. Chlo fed everything to the entertainment networks and recorded every member of the Guard while they were in action. Not just to provide entertainment, but also so mistakes could be analysed in case things didn't go well. To Kittara everything was quiet, she ignored the chatter going on from the others involved in the war and they didn't want to distract her. She knew billions of citizens of the Empire were now glued to screens at work and at home to see if she survived the battle. Why was she playing to the crowd? It wasn't just for the fame, though she did enjoy being the centre of attention, nor was it to give positive morale boosting footage to the Networks. Deep down Kittara knew she not only liked to kill, but she wanted billions to watch her do it and she wanted them to have a small amount of fear when they saw her.

Still the Kivar grew in number until around 200 were in a circle around her and still she didn't move. Her uniform was tattered and covered in blood and even that she left untended for the networks. Let them see her partially unclothed and covered in the blood of their enemies, let them see how a real warrior lives and fights. Then the Kivar started firing their energy weapons all at once towards her and she was impressed. Their weapons had quite a punch and she could see why some of the Guard had fallen, but Kittara wasn't an ordinary member of the Guard. After a few minutes of withering bursts of energy they stopped firing and in front of them was an unharmed young woman dressed now in very little, who was quite calmly observing them and working out who was giving the orders. Then in her left hand appeared a small disc, no bigger than a large coin, which she threw at the ground at her feet.

Instantly a force ripple moved out from her and grew in power until it hit the circle of Kivar warriors. Some were killed outright, but most were just thrown off their feet as the ripple moved on and brought down already ruined buildings for several hundred yards. Then with demon blade in her right hand she moved.

Her first target was the commander of the group and she plunged the blade into his chest, then with lightning speed she was among them, Just a blur she moved from warrior to warrior. No wild flailing of her weapon, no large scything movements, she used the blade the way a roman centurion used his gladius. She punched with it. A neck here, a chest there and all the time moving too quickly to be targeted by their energy weapons. She was halfway around the circle of Kivar warriors and they started to regroup and aim their weapons at her. It would have been very easy to feel for the command to engulf them in all in fire, but she knew that by now half the Empire was watching her.

She switched her reality to behind the troops and punched her blade into five of them before they realised she was there and then a rare swirling move that took the heads off another four. They didn't break though and Kittara was beginning to gain respect for the Kivar warriors. She was now really enjoying herself and moved among the remaining troops punching her blade into vital areas of their bodies until just one remained alive.

She moved around him edging him back to the centre of the circle of his dead comrades. This had to be an epic moment she thought. The lone trooper dropped his energy weapon and took a small ceremonial blade from his belt and faced her and again she wondered at the courage of these people.

Her head and body was now covered in blood and slowly she drew the demon blade along the ground and when she was certain she had the full attention of the Empire she struck. Her blade hit the warrior between the legs and sliced him in two right to the top of his head. As the two halves of his body fell to the ground she raised her sword, stamped the ground and screamed "For the Empire".

As her blade reached its apex the few tatters of her uniform fell from her breasts and she heard Sikush say on their private channel "Perfect".

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That image is still the biggest selling image of any of The Damned and was reported to be on the bedroom wall of 90% of young boys across the Empire. The bogeyman had been slain and the citizens could go back to their lives feeling safe once more. The cost of the brief war had been immense for the Kivar people. Not that the Empire stayed to loot or colonise, a point had been made and the Empire simply left and went home.

Three million Kivar warriors had died in the war and nearly everything that makes a modern technological society had been destroyed. There was no power, no running water, no mass communications and worst of all they'd then been ignored. Not even thought of as worthy of subjugation. Not that the Empire had come away unscathed. Officially 407 of The Damned had died and over 200 space craft had been destroyed, but it was rumoured that true losses had been much higher.

Shortly after the brief war the Kivar had requested to become allies of the Empire, not members, but allies. The official reason stated was that as fellow warriors who had not targeted civilians the Kivar considered they were natural allies rather than enemies. There was also the thought around the Empire that they knew when they were beaten. The Chaln e chose to accept the request at face value and added the Kivar as associates of the Empire and created a directive to the effect that "True warriors never attack civilians". It was flowered up in terms of the weak and vulnerable, but basically it meant the Guard and the Kivar could fight side by side with a common agenda. That alliance has stood the test of many billions of years and Kivar military craft are still the only ones in the Empire allowed to hover over Mendera City.

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The Chaln e was quite surprised by the offer Kittara had made to the Old One, it hadn't been part of their game plan, but he nodded his thanks to her. The Old One accepted the offer of Kittara and twelve of The Damned as a guard for his precious cargo and agreed to use his craft to aid the Empire.

"The problem is," he said to the Old One, "is that I've just violated a truce with the New Keo Group by eliminating the slavers on EK 4867".

The Old One had seen the whole battle in 3d and was quite impressed by the whole matter. "They were a blight on the entire area", he continued, "but I've already had to apologise for

destroying one planet in their sphere of control, so I can hardly be seen to send mercs to a planet they have a large colony on”.

It was at times like this that Kittara wished the elderly computer had a head to nod, or a chin to rub. It was difficult to judge how he felt with no body language.

“So, I assume you want me to take these mercs there as no one will recognise this craft?”. The Chalne and Kittara both breathed a little easier and Alyz summed up their feelings by saying. “There are days Old One when I could lick your circuits”.

There then followed several hours where they discussed the plan and finalised the role the Old One would play in it. As they were about to leave The Chalne looked at his companions and simply said

“Ring?” and when the reply was in the affirmative they headed for Ring.

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Another common held belief among the citizens of the Empire is that the now standard 36 foot diameter fighting ring was invented by the Empire. In fact in the early days the Guard simply used any open space to practise and warned spectators to keep well back. Then Chlo had found a dead planet in the HH567 cluster that had a few strange ruins. Chlo kept developing and for billions of years had been running a low priority array of probes to find all intelligent life in all bubbles of the multiverse. It worked quite well and a great number of planets were brought under the protection of the Empire or watched until they managed to reach a state of technology where they were worth bothering with.

Life isn't rare in the Multiverse, in fact it's hard to find a planet with water that doesn't have some form of life. There are enough green planets with oceans and basic life for every citizen on the Empire to have a dozen each and there would still be billions left over. The really rare thing was intelligent life. So rare that The Chalne had decided long ago that eventually all planets with intelligent life must be found and evaluated and Chlo had been given her long term assignment. Chlo already used the fabric of the multiverse for a memory store and power source and one day Lurisiana one of the oldest of the Guard had postulated an idea to her.

“The multiverse contains planets with life, so the multiverse knows where they are, so use the multiverse to tell you.”

From this simple idea Chlo developed a link into the fabric of the Multiverse to find intelligent life by looking for systematic changes, which meant buildings, roads, broadcast communications etc. The project was a huge success and now the Empire is confident it knows the whereabouts of 90% of intelligent life and Chlo is hoping to make that 100% in the next age of the Temple. One strange planet with mixed signals was in the HH567 cluster in the same bubble as Mendera. On investigation Chlo found old ruins and some carvings in a language she had no record of and some very odd life form readings.

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“The planet is haunted”, she told Sikush.

“A planet on our own doorstep that you've missed for a few billion years that might contain intelligent life and now you say it's haunted”, he replied.

Only he could get away with being mean to her. Anyone else and she'd leave them to stew and eventually they apologise because no one could function without her. She chose to ignore the tone in his voice and went on,

“The planet has a ring of stones 36 feet across that appears to have been a fighting arena. It has an effect, like Demon blades, it may bring out the warrior in some”.

Now she had his interest and the next day The Chalne took a party of six of the Guard and Chlo to examine the ruins. To say the ring had an effect was putting it mildly. None of the Guard had showed any ill effects, but it certainly enhanced the warrior spirit and feelings of aggression.

Ordinary citizens of the Empire who spent more than a few hours there had developed deep psychosis and a few had killed themselves before Chlo could intervene. In the end the planet was banned to all but the Guard and hidden behind Imperial cloaking devices. The inhabitants of the planet had never developed space travel and from the carved records Chlo discovered their whole society was based around warrior skills and the ring they had found. For some reason a spirit or ghosts of the long dead inhabitants of the planet lingered on, sometimes showing as a life form and sometimes disappearing completely.

Why this haunting happened was a mystery, but it quickly became obvious the spirits liked Kittara.

It had to happen. The Guard visit a planet with a ring of stones devoted to warrior skills, two of them had to step into the ring to try it out. The two were The Chalné and Kittara and as they entered the ring they felt the welcome. This wasn't a place for casual walking, as they entered the ring they knew it was for serious combat. Countless thousands of the inhabitants of the planet had fought and died in the ring and their blood had flowed into the ground. Sikush and Kittara went through their usual repertoire of her trying to take his head off while he defended himself.

Ring quickly became a favourite recreation place for the Guard who never stepped into the ring unless they meant to give the session 100%. The 36 foot ring was quickly accepted as the standard for the Empire and exported to countless other worlds. The original ring itself was cleaned and lighting was brought in and a few annoying shrubs & bushes removed, but otherwise the site remained much as they found it.

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The Chalné sat himself on one of the permanent seats around the ring and Chlo created a jug of iced water in front of him. He didn't need to drink or eat, none of them did, or sleep. Part of the conversion to being an immortal member of The Damned was that your body no longer needed to breathe, eat, drink or carry out many other bodily functions most life forms take for granted. However because you don't need to do something doesn't necessarily mean you won't do it or gain pleasure from doing it. So The Chalné took a long drink of iced water and looked at his two female companions.

"So who's going to fight the old man first?"

It was his now standard invite and he knew Alyz would accept first so that she could sit back and enjoy the longer fight with Kittara he had next. He walked to the left of the ring and there was a slight shimmer as he shifted reality to wear a light loose fitting trousers and tunic of the same material as the girl's uniforms. Alyz walked to the right of the ring and when she shimmered she was wearing a very short skirt of some kind of animal skin and a tunic of the same material. She was also wearing metal bracers on her forearms and a silver metal neck guard which extended down to her breast bone. They were both now carrying long wicked looking blades known as Nurigen swords pulled from the reality of their own weapons stores.

Nurigen was the weapon smith of the Holy Warriors from the forbidden age and he'd managed to create a material that looked like metal, but was almost unbreakable, very light and kept an edge so sharp that you could cut through a concrete wall with it. Nurigen blades were a priceless relic of forbidden knowledge and only eight were known to have survived and all of those were in the hands of members of The Damned.

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They both entered the ring and spun the swords around in their wrists. Alyz nodded and they began to walk around each other and prepare for the fight. The format was always the same, Alyz would do her best to get a hit on him with her blade while he defended himself and tried to strike the metal guard she wore on her chest. Alyz looked very soft and feminine and it was easy

to underestimate her and that had cost many enemy troops their lives. She screeched and hurled herself at him, her sword meeting his with a heavy crack. In the trees around the ring the trees began to crackle with a light blue discharge that looked like tiny lightning. The spirits of the ring approved of this combat and were coming to life.

The Chaln  took a swing at Alyz and she'd gone, but they were just warming up and he rarely managed to score a hit on her. They circled each other taking the odd swing and getting their arms used to the movement of the blades again. Then Alyz simply said

"Ready?" and he nodded and things stepped up a gear.

The Guard don't tear muscles, or twist joints, even the biology of how they sense position has been augmented so they never get dizzy. Alyz moved so fast it was almost impossible for the eyes of most creatures to see it. She punched her blade at his neck and with a micro second to spare he blocked the blow. She carried on attacking him and he carried on blocking her attacks until he noticed she was a little slow in moving back after an attack and there was the sound of his blade gently scratching over her neck guard.

The lightning in the trees grew in intensity and now blue flame rippled along the edge of the ring. Alyz went into a fury and landed heavy blow after heavy blow on his blocking blade. After several minutes of this she calmed and he relaxed his stance and smiled at her. She smiled back and moved towards him and they shared a long fierce kiss. They then turned to face the watching Kittara and bowed to her. The lightning crackle diminished, but this was only the warm up bout.

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He sat down and in his mind found the link to Chlo and a long tall drink appeared in front of him and a plate of his favourite fruit. Chlo could duplicate anything and no one on Mendera ever needed to worry about food and the essentials of life, but nothing was ever duplicated that would ruin the market for anyone selling the genuine article. It wasn't good for business and the Empire survived by trade. The Arroya fruit he loved had been bought in barrels from a trader the year before and held in stasis in the vaults of the Imperial palace ever since. Chlo simply moved the reality of the fruit from there to the plate in front of him, after of course peeling and quartering it for him. Alyz had a similar drink, but Kittara never ate anything before a fight and she looked particularly determined today.

"I see you're attracting the usual interest", he said to her.

Kittara looked and at the rear of the ring several glowing shapes were forming. Angels some called them, but they were known as Genova in the books of the Temple. Strange creatures who seemed to bleed through dimensions while never truly existing in any. Not immortals and some could be seen to be younger than others, but always indistinct and vague in shape. The Menderan's thought they were holy creatures and The Chaln  always treated them with respect, but Kittara had little time for them.

"All that potential and they do nothing with it", she had once said to him.

They had appeared at her initiation celebration and Sikush had pulled a few fully into some sort of real existence. They were beautiful creatures with shimmering blue eyes and small stubby wings, she could understand why they were often called angels. One had even given her a gift of a few flowers from a far off dimension, but they quickly withered and died.

For some reason the Genova liked Kittara, they considered her as marked by prophecy and they followed her to strange out of the way places. Only the Empire had the ability to shift reality and move between the bubbles of the multiverse, yet here were the angels watching her.

"Do you want me to pull one into this reality?" He asked her.

She said no on their personal link. They made her shudder, like a reminder of bad times. An angel had found her for him when she was left to die and she wanted to forget the times when she was vulnerable.

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The Chaln  stood up and moved to left of the ring and Kittara moved to the right. Her right hand made a gesture and Chlo pulled her blade out of her store in her home on Mendera. She realised she'd requested the Demon blade and decide to keep it. They moved right up to each other in the centre of the ring and she made the usual remark about taking his head off and he replied.

"You can try little girl".

There was no warm up and Kittara launched herself at him stabbing at him with the demon blade while he did his best to block and move out of the way. Other members of The Damned began to appear around the ring as they realised Kittara was putting on a bit of a show. The lightning in the trees increased and the crackling became louder. They were a blur moving round each other with Kittara constantly trying to find a way to touch him even slightly with her blade, while he defended himself and waited for her to make a mistake. At one point she tried to land such a heavy blow that she slightly lost her footing, but before he could make use of the opportunity she sprang away and came at him again.

They carried on like this until after half an hour they both came to a halt just looking at each other. They smiled at each other and met for a long intimate kiss and then raised their blades and touched them together above their heads. Instantly what looked like lightning came down from the sky and hit the raised blades, but unlike lightning it carried on for over a minute. By now several hundred of The Damned had arrived to watch the fight and they began stamping the ground in unison to show their approval. Waves of blue flame spread across the ring and poured up the pair to meet the lightning from above. The spirits of the ring approved of the contest and they were showing it.

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The Genova watched from a distance like moths drawn to a flame. They saw the fault lines in the multiverse, the lines through space and time that led to events and people marked by great prophecy. The lines around the one who had the soul of Mardoun were so strong that to them she shone like fire. They could almost hear the multiverse groan and creak as it tried to handle the huge probabilities and changes in reality she would or might cause. They adored her like holy groupies and were almost drunk on the disruption to the multiverse around her. She was truly marked by prophecy, perhaps cursed by it.