

## Mendera Temple

### Chapter 24 – Full Circle

**“Yes, almost every living thing was going to die, but that was just part of the regular cycle of the multiverse and life would soon return, in all its wondrous variety.”**

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“We’re going to have lots more storage areas full of things neither of us remembers.”

The switch was close and Sikush and Chlo were dictating details of important items to the clerics, who in turn were writing the information in the clear and precise common tongue of the empire. In the temple of the flame, a whole team of artisans would etch the descriptions onto thin metal plates created by Nurigen. Some would have a second plate prepared in the old high language of the clerics. Once Herusher has suggested that perhaps other plates in other languages might be a good idea.

“If the common tongue has died,” Sikush has said, “then Mendera had died and the tablets will be someone else’s problem.”

They walked through an entire section of the stores which Sikush knew to be the Rejjacy collection, but almost none of the items were catalogued or labelled. He muttered and pointed at nothing in particular.

“This is a good example Chlo. Acres of stored objects, many dangerous weapons and yet little is known about most of the items.”

Chlo used the fabric of the multiverse as her memory; it was the only practical way to hold the almost infinite amount of data. Once the multiverse wiped itself during the switch, her memory and much of her personality went with it. Sikush could remember a surprising amount of obscure information, but his recall was often unreliable. The metal plates in the temple held the essential information that he considered invaluable to the empire. The problem was that the tablets of essential information now filled a massive area of the temple and yet the imperial store still held billions of unrecorded items.

“We both know why the Rejjacy items aren’t recorded,” said Chlo, “they died out a million switches ago and much of their technology is far too dangerous to use.”

He nodded at her, pointing to a box he wanted pulled out of storage.

“I have noticed,” continued Chlo, “that you often don’t document areas you’d far rather were forgotten.”

A small handle was in the box and he twirled it around, while it made a buzzing sound.

“Then why don’t we get rid of it all Chlo ? Load the entire Rejjacy section onto a shuttle and send it into a bubble universe that will soon cease to exist. Let the multiverse wipe it clean.”

The handle he held seemed to defy the laws of physics, growing into a large weapon, which made an odd peeping sound. Sikush expertly put it on his shoulder and brought up the sighting apparatus. He swung the weapon around, putting the sights on a distant part of the stores.

“I can use this Chlo, but I have no idea what it is, or what it would do if I fired it.”

A twist of his wrist and the weapon was once more just a harmless handle, which he put back in its box.

“Dangerous and a mystery Chlo. I think we should get rid of it all.”

The blonde version of Chlo vanished and the original Chlo, the organic version appeared. She kissed him on the cheek and held his hand. The group of clerics look bemused by it all, but so far, none had dared to complain about the eccentric behaviour.

“Firstly,” said Chlo, “you know far more about most of the forbidden sections of the stores than you admit. Secondly when Estrid went to Ixir, most of the items she took came from the Rejjacy area. Without the body shield, the young Estrid would have died in the Ixir slums.”

Chlo put the box he’d been playing with back into stasis. She told the clerics to label the item merely as a dangerous weapon of unknown effect.

“So you’re saying we should keep everything again ?” Asked Sikush.

“Storage space isn’t a problem and it might be useful one day.”

The next area held several important items and the gene bank that belonged to the old one. Several probes had been fixed around it, so that the old one could see it from all angles any time he wished.

“I can’t see the old one letting you forget about this.” Said Chlo.

“Indeed, the empire will owe him a huge debt. I will remember and seed his people across several new bubble universes. The multiverse needs variety, human kind has been the dominant life type for far too long.”

Chlo was giving him one of her long searching looks, but he didn’t really want to tell her why the empire would owe the old one so much. Hopefully she would never know.

“And the Genova,” he said, “they will be given corporeal form and worlds of their own. I have left them to wander the multiverse as outcasts for far too long.”

Sikush let out a long sigh, the next section contained the high tech developed by the Maran Group, before they broke up. It was some of the best tech ever seen in the multiverse and needed to be catalogued, but there was a huge amount of it.

“So Chlo, do we do it alphabetically or just start on the first shelf ?”

“Most important first, start with the upgraded Ion drives.”

Sikush put his hand on a crate, about eight feet long and covered in handle with care signs.

“Maran Ion drive core #67.8.....”

Chlo interrupted him, which was rare and startled the clerics.

“What did you tell Nurigen to do with the Chronicles ? He’s been working on them for so long, you even helped him by describing her final battle. They should go into the temple.”

Sikush almost dismissed the clerics, but this was one of the few chances they had to get out of the confines of the temple, so he sent them to wait out of earshot.

“I instructed him to destroy it all. This is a better drive core than we use in the raptors Chlo, we should use it for the next fleet.”

Chlo wasn’t in a mood to be distracted.

“Destroyed ! After all that work to record everything that went on around her. When she returns it will make her task so much easier.”

“That is the problem Chlo. Others have had it easy, been given all the answers. Most didn’t survive the trip to gateway. Kittara was left half dead and tied to a stake by angry villagers and then her life got even tougher. That is why she was the best, why I ordered Nurigen to destroy the archive.”

Chlo sat on a dusty box, bring her knees up and resting her chin on them.

“The chronicles are his life’s work. Will he even obey you.”

Sikush chuckled and gave one of his most winning smiles.

“Nurigen delights in disobeying me. He sees it as his way of punishing me for cursing him with immortality. I can say with some certainty that he will only destroy part of the chronicles.”

It was Chlo's turn to chuckle.

"As you obviously know, what will he do?"

"Nurigen has been seeing a lot of Silky. Let's be honest about it, she is fairly irresistible, even to a high level curmudgeon like Nurigen. She of course wants weapons from him, but also some of his secrets. Fairly soon he will give her the parts of the chronicles he considers essential and he will get her to deliver the metal books to Mo, for safe keeping."

"Where is Mo?"

"I've had Sventa keeping a discreet watch on him for years. Mo is now in an old fort on the 1<sup>st</sup> rift, high in the mountains. He has a good contingent of loyal warriors and plenty of supplies, certainly enough to last until the switch settles down."

Chlo jumped off the box and grabbed his robes, putting her face where he couldn't avoid her gaze.

"I know you. You ordered Silky to share Nurigen's bed, this is your plan!"

"The essential parts of the chronicles will be looked after far better if Mo thinks they're stolen and he thinks they need hiding from everyone, including me."

Chlo gave him a long and passionate kiss, before calling for the clerics to re-join them.

"What was the power output on the #67.8 core?" She asked.

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The view was good from the battlements of the old fort and the air was clear. Probably too clear and low in oxygen for Mo's warriors, but Silky knew they'd acclimatise fairly quickly. Silky recognised the architecture of the fort as demon, but from a time before the chosen had walked the rifts.

"Good spot," she said, "easy to defend."

"There are traps and alarms in all the gullies and paths. No one is going to sneak up on us and a large force wouldn't come this high into the mountains." Replied Mo.

The chosen, as the people of old Ixir had called themselves, hadn't done well out of the change in the balance. More water on the rifts meant floods and floods meant less land to grow food. The empire had transported huge amounts of food to the 1<sup>st</sup> rift, but then the water borne diseases had begun.

"Are their many still out there on the rift?" She asked.

"Yes, millions. Demons too, who've come through mountain passes from the north. They're congregating in settlements, thinly spread out across the rift. Still fighting of course and raiding each other for supplies."

"It sounds like the rift always used to be." She said.

They walked into Mo's quarters and closed the heavy door to keep out the biting wind. The large metal crate was where Silky had put it.

"I hope it's important," she said, "it's so damn heavy, nearly tore my arms out lifting it."

Mo digested the knowledge that Silky wasn't trusted to know everything in Mendera, but he guessed she must have at least some idea about what she'd been carrying. She'd arrived through a portal about an hour before, cursing the weight of the object she carried.

"It's for her," he said, "for when she comes back."

The note in the crate had told him how important it was. Mo was already thinking of somewhere to hide it, somewhere safe, but somewhere she would think of looking.

"I have a good cook," he said, "you must stay and eat with me. And we can talk about how to leave a trail of breadcrumbs, that only one person will understand."

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"Rift rot has got into the fucking thing." Said the loader driver.

Hol thought bad maintenance was more likely than rift rot, they had only been on the 1<sup>st</sup> rift for less than a day. Other teams had swept the rift for friends of the empire that wanted to be brought to Mendera. Hol and Delmus just had the bad luck of taking the last food shipment before the switch.

"If it won't move, we'll just leave it here." Said Delmus

The loader driver cursed the machine and kicked it, but he didn't seem ready to dump the huge piece of equipment.

"My boss will kill me if I don't get it back." He said.

It started up, the huge tracked vehicle moving slowly forward and towards the rift gate. The empire had hired a dozen of the machines, with their civilian operators. Just a huge empty platform on eight large caterpillar tracks. Add a Maran drive core and it made an efficient way to take tons of food to the city by the great river. High technology lasted mere weeks on the rift, but the loaders were crude tech with a high tolerance to decay, usually.

"Let the other loaders go first," said Hol, "the rift gate will be twitchy anyway. I'll help you through."

The ruined village was a ruined village once more, the last few millennia had been bad for the people of the rift. The city was full, the walls offering protection from the various raiders looking for food and supplies. Not gold anymore, gold is useless once everyone is just looking for enough to eat. A few people had asked to return with them to Mendera, but they were no longer picking up strays from the rift. There had been a slight scuffle as they left the city, but no one had been seriously hurt. The loader still sounded as if something drastic had happened to the front two tracks.

"Your choice," said Hol, "dump it or take it through?"

"It's not worth dying for." Added Delmus.

"We've done a lot of miles together," said the driver, "it won't let me down."

Everyone else had gone through the gate, so Hol hung onto the side of the loader.

"Don't rush," she said, "just get us through."

The huge machine rumbled over the ruined road, sending loose stones clattering off into the scrub. They entered the rift gate and there was the usually melting away of reality, as they were pulled towards the well. Then the vast loader shuddered and stopped as the front drive shafts snapped. Hol had never seen anyone get stuck in a rift gate, but Delmus had and he often delighted in telling her about it.

"I saw a group of demon traders get stuck in a gate on the 6<sup>th</sup> rift Hol. They were shredded, along with their waggon, the whole lot was spread over the rift like confetti."

The loader was being torn apart and the driver was trying frantically to get it moving. Hol grabbed him, ignoring his spluttered complaints and ran along the front of the loader, jumping into space as the vehicle was destroyed. For a second reality refused to knit together, but then she landed heavily on grass and realised she was at the well. The driver landed heavily on his back, winding himself. Delmus helped her to her feet and then he sent the other loaders off to their parking area, behind the trader's district.

"Where is my loader." The driver asked.

"It'll be spare parts spread over the rift by now." Said Delmus.

The driver was still taking huge gulps of air, but he seemed unharmed.

"Thank you for saving my life." He said to Hol.

"No problem, our friend Abijah used to say it was a tradition. No one dies today."

"Who?"

"It doesn't matter. See if one of the other loaders can give you a lift into the city."

The driver ran off, climbing onto the side of another vehicle as they slowly headed towards Mendera City.

“Will we get like that ?” She asked.

“Like what ?” Said Delmus

“We’ve known so many people Delmus, lost so many. When Chlo wipes everything from her memory, will we lose it too ? I hope we don’t forget everything.”

Delmus seemed to be in a dream, looking at the Kivar fleet, which was suspended in the air just a few miles from the city. When he answered it was obvious he’d given the matter some thought.

“I suppose it’s natural that we will forget,” he said, “how long does a written diary last ? Everything decays and fades, it’s why the clerics use those expensive metal books. We rely on Chlo and her memory, we rely on the common channel.”

“I suppose you’re right.”

He looked at her quite intently.

“Remember the last rebel leader of Maran 47 Hol. The one who caused us so much trouble a few ages of the temple ago. The guy who was responsible for billions of deaths. What was his name Hol ?”

Hol felt for the common channel, but it was restricted to a few last minute notices, they were just a matter of hours from the switch. Delmus smiled at her.

“I can’t remember either, but I remember the way Luri smelt when she came out of the shower.”

Hol had never really been that close to Delmus, but she kissed him now.

“And I remember how I felt when Kittara took me to gateway.”

“We’ll forget detail Hol, it’s the way it has to be. But for the people that mattered to us. We will never forget the way they made us feel, the sound of their voice, even the way they walked when they were happy.”

There was no moving through reality now, they were too close to the moment the multiverse ended. Hol and Delmus simply walked back to the city.

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“It’s going to be soon Sventa.”

Sikush had brought Chlo to Merc square and he’d sat her on a bench that was highly favoured by tourists. There was a perfect view of the temple gates and the Menderan skyline. Jen had been with them, but most of The Damned had drifted away, to be with lovers or alone with their thoughts. The streets of Mendera were almost deserted, just a few mercs doing routine patrols. Chlo had a picnic basket next to her and she was pouring three glasses of a very expensive wine.

“I can’t remember what it’s called,” she said, “but it tastes superb.”

Sventa was with him most of the time now, she seemed to consider it her duty to keep him safe.

“Will it all go, every universe ?” She asked.

“Yes, this time little will be left, I feel it. Just the Menderan universe and the 1<sup>st</sup> rift will survive. Even bits of Quasit were shrinking when I was there.”

Sventa took her drink and sat some distance away, staring at the sky. He’d grown to trust Sventa, to almost admire her predator instincts. Yes it was a bit rough on the people of the 1<sup>st</sup> rift, to be hunted and devoured, but perhaps a few more like Sventa might help the balance. Yes, he’d offer some of the Genova a choice to become dark angels and then he’d add them to his forces. The Damned had worked very well, but the plan needed adjusting and a few dark angels would be very useful. Then of course there were the old one’s people, they too might make good warriors.

“It’s all going,” said Chlo, “I can feel it all boiling away.”

He kissed her cheek and wrapped a blanket around her, but he could do little more to ease her transition. Sikush looked up at the Kivar fleet and he was glad Chlo would never see what he was planning to do. They had helped the empire when it was in need, but the fleet hanging over Mendera was an ark fleet, it contained millions of them. There had been no open threats or aggression, the Kivar had simply turned up, claiming sanctuary as he'd agreed. Over a thousand craft, hanging over Mendera, they would outnumber everyone else on the planet by a factor of ten. It was a certainty that the Kivar, the soulless Kivar, would become the dominant life type of the new multiverse.

"Better that the new multiverse is born in blood." He muttered.

Sventa was staring at him, was she giving him a disapproving look, or admiration? He didn't think she knew what was going to happen, but he wasn't sure.

"The moons are falling." Said Chlo.

The part of Chlo that controlled the technology of the empire, knew everything about the multiverse, was dying. Her brain was emptying and just the organic body would remain. He held her hand and tried to soothe her.

"Not long now Chlo, then it'll all begin again."

He felt into the part of his mind he shared with Chlo and he could just make out that barely ten universes were still there, things were approaching the final stage.

"All is darkness!" Shouted Chlo.

He was looking into her eyes when Chlo went. He felt panic, no matter how many times they went through the switch, losing Chlo always caused a moments panic. His hand was shaking as she held hers and kissed her face. Chlo going would make the Kivar relax, let down their guard. As far as they were aware, any attack by The Damned was impossible without Chlo.

"I'm sorry Chlo."

As the sound of high energy fire filled the square, Sikush had to admit to himself, that he was glad Chlo would know nothing of his betrayal of the Kivar. He would tell her one day, but not for a very long time. They had to go, the new multiverse couldn't be populated by the Kivar, he simply wouldn't allow it.

"You once said you didn't want to play god."

He gripped Chlo's hand tight as he remembered the words Estrid had spoken when he'd mentioned why he was giving the old one so much power. Above him the old one and his assortment of flying lethality were destroying the Kivar fleet and destroying it with ease. No worries about fighting civilian craft now, the old one was using Aumashy technology to bring down the ark ships. Children, women the old, they were all dying, none were to be allowed to surrender and survive. Chlo was still gone, the life gone from her eyes. Normally he'd have wanted her to return quickly, but now he hoped she wouldn't return until after the battle was over. Sventa remained where she was, smiling at him and nodding her head, obviously pleased with his actions.

Something huge hit the ground, making the square tremble and then an enormous explosion somewhere even closer. The Kivar craft were falling and he just hoped none fell on the city. Over the roof of the temple he saw a huge mushroom cloud as a Kivar battle cruiser exploded and a few minutes later the shock wave blew Chlo's picnic basket across the square. Chlo was back and the old one was still firing, still bringing death and destruction to the unwanted guests.

"Eight universes open." She said.

There was nothing of Chlo there yet, just a part of her reacting to the multiverse coming to life again. The old one wasn't having it all his own way, a burning raptor craft hurtled across the sky and slammed into the ground barely a mile from the city.

"A hundred universes now Sikush and more all the time."

She was back and he looked deep into her and this version was going to be more confident than the last, but only a little. It was still Chlo, the same Chlo he'd rescued from Enfellan, so many switches ago. He picked her up and started to carry her towards the palace. The city was surrounded by burning Kivar vessels, but the old one had won the battle. There might be a few survivors, those lucky enough to be near escape pods. But they wouldn't be many in number, few survive a large vessel hitting the ground after falling from three miles up. He'd tell Chlo the truth one day, but for now the story would be that the Kivar attacked when the empire was defenceless and only the brave actions of the old one saved the day.

"I see burning Sikush. Damaged craft are landing near the barracks. Did I forget something again?"

"No Chlo, there has been a problem, but it's not your fault. Everything can be rebuilt."

There was another tremor as a badly damaged Kivar fusion drive exploded, but this time it was a good ten miles from the city. Chlo had communications and probes working now and Sikush saw the old one landing at the barracks. The craft looked fairly beaten up, but he was still intact.

"Thank you." Sikush told him.

He carried Chlo onto his favourite veranda and made sure she was comfortable on the sofa.

"I've sent a repair team to the old one," Chlo said, "was there a problem while I was gone?"

"Yes, but it's been dealt with Chlo, I'll tell you about it later."

Chlo was asleep, or at least the organic part was. The other side of her was beginning to explore, chart and analyse an almost infinite number of new bubble universes. Sventa was with him, she'd followed them from the square and was sat on the floor, her wings wrapped around herself.

"You will bring her back again?"

He didn't need to ask who she meant.

"Yes, but it won't be for some time. You will need to be patient Sventa, but I will let you help train her if you give me your word on one thing."

The dark eyes peering between the wings looked at him.

"What do I need to promise?"

Probes were showing him the various wrecked craft around the city, The Damned were helping the mercs to get the fires under control. So far no survivors had been found. It seemed no one had a clue what had happened to the Kivar, but the plans to deal with such an emergency were working well.

"You must promise not to tell her who she was and that includes telling her about the crate you left with Mo. When the time is right, I'll point her in the direction of Mo."

Sventa unwrapped herself from her wings, stood up and took his hand in hers.

"I promise."

A rather bad sand storm was approaching Mendera City from the west, but the weather defences could easily deal with it.

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"May chaos always pass you in the night"

The End

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A huge thank you to Sherry Smith, who has beta read every chapter and who fell in love with Mo and saved him from extinction in Chapter 7.

