

Ripples from the Past

Chapter 21 – The Fortress

“The RM9 was heavy, ludicrously heavy and the Empire had long since stopped producing it. Delmus had seen one during a training session on Arcadia and fallen in love with it, the way people fall in love with clockwork devices and old methods of transport.”

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Using the main drive to slow down, probably ran the same risk of ripping the raptor apart, as hitting the atmosphere at speed. Marius stopped looking at the warning notices on the screen. He knew his raptor was damaged beyond economic repair. No doubt the empire would salvage the wreck, recycling the alloy hull. There wasn't going to be a gentle landing, just a controlled crash. Ironic in the extreme if he was to die during re-entry, after destroying the Terak command vessel. Life wasn't fair though, nor were the Gods. Once again he chose to offer up a prayer to the Goddess Frey, who was supposed to be far gentler than Yraag and less demanding.

“Mighty Frey, I have done my duty. Please return me to the love of my family.”

His craft hit the atmosphere and began to vibrate. There was the procedure to eject the pilot and his life support pod. That meant drifting to the ground in complete darkness though. Maybe as much as half an hour completely cut off from the outside world, until the pod hit the ground. It made sense to eject now, he was well aware of that. Half an hour swinging below parachutes, in complete and utter darkness. No....A good part of him would rather die than go through that.

“Marius AGS1497 to base. Are you picking up my Ident ?”

Nothing, he'd already tried several times. A broken comms system was one thing, but if his Ident wasn't broadcasting, they might think he was an enemy vessel. If any were left ? He hadn't seen an operational enemy craft on his screen in quite a while. Something broke away as the heat outside built up. There wasn't much attached to the outside of an imperial raptor. All essential though, not a single thing on a raptor was there simply for decoration.

‘Pilot ejection recommended.’

Came up in flashing red letters on his screen. Marius decided to ignore it, hoping he wasn't about to die as a ball of flame in the sky above Tranquillity. The longer he could put it off, the less time he'd have to spend trapped in the dark. As if by magic the flames vanished, showing him the surface of Algaria, the best part of fifty miles below. No details yet, though he could see the plain between mountain ranges, where Tranquillity had been built.

‘Pilot ejection recommended.’

“Yes, I know, stop pestering me.”

Silly to argue with an automated system, especially as the audio controls had stopped working some time ago. They were one of the yellow warning boxes on his screen. His raptor was dropping like a stone and beginning to tumble. A few gentle thruster blasts and was in a stable position, but still dropping far too fast.

‘Automatic jettison of the pilot in..... 5....4.’

Marius had been outwitted by the AI system, which wasn't even working at a quarter of its full potential. There was probably a way to turn off the auto-eject, he just hadn't been taught it. No time to find it by digging through option screens, as he was plunged into total darkness.

‘1.... Ejecting pilot.’

The screen vanished, as extra pieces of shielding moved around him, forming a silent dark cocoon. Acceleration as small rockets took him away from the main body of the raptor, with its AI system and external audio-visual devices. He was now alone in the dark silence and knew he might go insane before the escape pod opened. All sensation of movement stopped, as parachutes deployed to cushion his fall. Marius tried to will himself into unconsciousness and failed.

"If I live and I'm sane, I will never get in one of these things again." He muttered.

He thought of his wife, actually filling his head with the memories of nights full of memorable sex, when they'd both been fit, young and full of hormones. No good, he still drifted back to the feelings of being trapped and isolated.

"Do you trust me?"

He was going mad, the voice seemed to be coming from someone near him and that was impossible.

"Who is that?"

"You called upon me..... Do you trust me?"

Had Frey come to torment him? Marius still wasn't sure if he totally believed in the Gods, but he was ready to be convinced. Besides, if it was just a voice in his head, what harm was there in playing along with his own insanity?

"I trust you Mighty Frey."

"Then sleep."

He must have instantly gone into a deep sleep, which lasted for some time. He awoke to find the pod open, daylight entering the doorway. There was a red light pulsating right in front of him, the homing beacon had begun to transmit his position. Training had prepared him for landing in an escape pod and he fell into the correct routine without thinking about it.

"No pain from broken limbs, no blood oozing from anywhere."

He looked good to go, so he stood up and walked out of the pod. He was about five miles south of Tranquillity, right in the centre of a famously wet and muddy marshland. If the ground anywhere near had been firm, he might have bent down and kissed it.

"I'm home and safe." He muttered "A walk through the mud will do me good."

The city of Tranquillity had three obvious fires, judging by the places smoke was rising up into the sky. Debris was guaranteed to have hit the city, hulls made of alloys and ceramics designed to survive the heat of hitting the atmosphere at speed. Only a mile from him, a wrecked hull had driven itself into the ground, creating a small crater. It towered at least three hundred feet into the air, so burned out that it might have once been an Algarian craft or an enemy.

"It might have been so much worse."

And it looked like he wasn't walking home, a military shuttle was some way off, but it was heading straight for him. Marius still wasn't quite a believer, but he raised his arms up, stretching, pointing his fingers up to the sky.

"Mighty Frey, hear my oath. I will build a shrine in your honour, outside my house."

Crap! What harm could it do? He'd heard someone, even if it had been a psychotic episode, brought on by panic. Still.... The voice had been very clear and he had slept when told he would. At that moment, his head was full of wondering how he'd be rewarded and if there might be a promotion on the way.

"Maybe even more money." He mumbled.

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Without Pug their faithful Farrag beast of burden, it would have taken them months longer to reach the trail into the mountains. The creature didn't move that fast, but he pulled their cart all day at a

slow steady pace. They'd even become used to his constant bad mood and keenness to eat just about anything. He'd taken the sleeve off Mo's jacket at one point and a piece of skin from his arm. "It was an accident, he was just being playful." Had been Rhian's comment.

Thanks to his ability to pull their cart for hours without a rest, they also seemed to have lost the angry tribespeople they'd stolen him from. Mo wasn't taking chances though and he and Silky still took it in turns to keep watch during what passed for night on the 1st rift. They both still considered Rhian and Kerr as good space pilots, but a liability on the rifts. Mo was looking at the steep trail, leading up into the mountains.

"Pug will be able to walk anywhere we can." He said. "Farrag can climb better than most two legged creatures. But we'll need to leave the cart here."

"He'll probably just run off, we can't risk loading him up with our supplies." Said Silky.

"Pug has a soft spot for Rhian." Said Kerr. "He'll probably follow her anywhere."

Their stolen Farrag did seem to like them, if he could be said to like anything. He was currently bellowing and snapping his jaws at a few flying insects circling his head. Bellowing and biting seemed to be his way of dealing with all of life's problems. The trail went through miles of thorn scrub and they'd have enough problems, without trying to pull an angry Pug on the end of a halter. Mo made up his mind.

"We can't leave him tied up." He said. "Pug will just have to be left to follow us or run off, as he chooses. That means we'll have to carry everything on our backs again, at least for a while."

Glum faces but no arguments, as they collected all their kit together and allocated it according to strength and experience. That meant him and Silky getting the most weight to carry.

"I'm sure we didn't have this much stuff when we left Mendera." Said Rhian.

"Having Pug has spoiled us." Said Mo. "Even if he did eat half my jacket."

Everyone chuckled at his misfortune and they were a team again, even if they were now each carrying a lot of weight. He led, with Silky behind him, in case they ran into anything nasty in the mountains. After a few minutes he looked back and saw Pug following Rhian, like some kind of huge smelly pet. If he was still with them the following day, he might load their beast up with some of the heavy kit. Pug was bellowing about something though, he always seemed to have a grievance to complain about.

"He'll give away our location to anyone with ears." Said Silky.

"Trying to shut him up is like trying to stop rain falling or the wind blowing." He replied. "Besides, I think there are few who bother climbing the trails into these mountains."

The thorn scrub was probably upsetting Pug, the constant scratching at his thick hide. If it wasn't that it would be something else annoying him. It was kill the beast or let him bellow. Mo didn't think Rhian would ever forgive him, if he let Silky turn Pug into a pile of ash. Mo ignored the noise and concentrated on following the path, without getting his skin punctured by thorns.

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There were doors everywhere and they'd already opened two without finding one of the guard creatures. So much stress for everyone, readying themselves for battle, only to find empty rooms and passages. They had found a partially flooded room with some equipment spares, which The Watcher seemed quite happy to find.

"Not a waste of effort, these will be useful." She'd told them.

Mainly it was just more corridors found behind those two doors. Yet they had to prepare for battle once again, as Hol rotated the lock the way The Watcher had shown her.

"Careful Hol." Said Mingal. "I feel something behind this door, something.... Bad."

Celli would have made a sarcastic comment if she'd been there, but she was still recuperating back near the pool. At least she was awake and healing now, no longer a potential sacrifice for The Watcher.

"We've rehearsed this so many times." Said Hol.

"Too many times." Muttered Albas.

She let everyone laugh for a few moments; it helped to relieve the tension. He had a point, two doors expecting trouble and finding none, was worse than facing one of the creatures.

"I want everyone ready as I turn the last wheel." Said Hol. "If we have to do this another dozen times, we will."

Stern faces watching as she opened the lock and pulled the door towards her. Movement in the corridor beyond the door, lots of movement. At first it looked like a tangle of arms and legs, straightening up to run at her.

"There are two of them." Said Hol. "We prepared for this, you know what to do."

There wasn't much room in the corridor to back into. Hol remained in the centre of the doorway, offering herself as a target for what had once been guards, constructed by the sorcerers and bio-viziers of Leng. Two long muscular arms and two massive legs, linked to a furry body. Red fur, the colour of rusting iron. Worst were the faces, which looked so unsettlingly human.

"Come on then, me first!" Yelled Hol.

"Stun them both if you can." Shouted The Watcher.

From the safety of distance of course. Hol was going to stick to the plan they'd rehearsed. The first creature would be killed as quickly as possible, leaving them the second one to subdue and stun. Simple if the creatures hadn't been huge, strong and armed with razor sharp claws.

"Shield spell released." Said Mingal.

Good, her skin was tough, tough as old boots as Delmus had once described his own skin. It was nice to know the creature couldn't bash her about too much though. The creatures seemed to behave like cattle, using their sheer bulk to trample over enemies, stomping them into the ground. Cattle didn't have claws though, to finish the job of killing their enemies. The first creature hit Hol hard, but she didn't move, not an inch.

"For the empire." Shouted Juno.

It sounded so strange to hear the common battle cry of The Damned, shouted out in the bowels of Ancient Leng. Juno and Albas hacked at the brute, as it used claws and weight in an attempt to crush the life out of her. Mingal was supposed to be up next, using a spell to disrupt whatever brain the monster had in its head, turning brain to mush. The second creature wasn't playing by their rules, biting its own friend, dragging it backwards so that it could get a chance at killing the feeble looking enemies, who had just opened the door. The guards fighting each other ruined everything.

"Do we wait and see who wins?" Asked Juno.

"No, they might both die, stupid damn things." Said Hol.

She hurt from the stomping, despite being tough as old boots and the shield spell.

"To me!" She yelled. "Kill the one I attack, as best you can."

Hol leapt at the nearest of the creatures with fur the colour of rust. It might have been the one that had attacked her or it might not, the guards looked identical. She thrust her Nurigen blade into its back, twisting the blade as it bit in deep. Most living things would have been dying, yet the guard turned and took a swipe at her. Fast, amazingly fast for a big creature, faster than just about anything she'd ever fought.

"Damn thing moves like the wind." Shouted Mingal, as if reading her thoughts.

He'd ignited its fur with a fire spell and its chest was a mass of flames. The creature seemed more angry than hurt, aiming another claw swipe at Hol. There was a way to kill it she'd been thinking about, though it didn't come without risks. The tears of The Damned were powerful, not designed to be used in confined spaces. Kittara had once used just half a dozen to destroy an entire enemy bunker, in the early days of the empire.

"Fall back !" She yelled. "Take cover if you can, I'm going to try something."

How far to let the spell build was the crucial decision. Luri had invented the tears, long before becoming one of the Gods. Hol felt for the structure of the multiverse all around her, folding it up, pulling it inwards, winding it up into a rotating tear drop of power. She let it build, hoping she wasn't about to kill them all and destroy Ancient Leng. The guard wasn't giving her time to ponder, swiping at her continually with its huge claws. The second guard was actually trying to climb over the first to get at her. Supposing both died ? Hol was committed to a course of action though, the tear had built up to what she hoped was the right amount of power.

"By the eight great demon gods of old..... Please work." She muttered.

An odd thing for a warrior of Mendera to say, calling on the old demon gods. Quite a few of The Damned did it though. Hol released the tear, which had been silently rotating in front of her eyes. She sent the spell deep inside the guard, letting it go deep into the monster's torso. There was a strange sucking sound, as if reality was pulling itself apart. She'd never been that close to a tear detonating before, to know if the sound was normal.

"Ohh... too much Hol..... too much." She thought, as the sound deafened her.

The intense noise of the detonation in that confined space left her finding it hard to hear anything, even the sound of her own voice. The guard was dead; there was no question about it. Hol was covered in the shredded parts, of what had once been its internal organs. Ears still ringing, she turned and saw her army of three, all covered in gore, but still ready to fight.

"The other one..... watch out..... is still....." Shouted Juno.

Hol couldn't make out the words, but all of them pointing was good enough. The second creature looked unharmed and it was climbing over the dead guard to get at her. Hol was tired, covered in things she didn't want to think about and a long way from the place she considered to be her home. Something inside her decided enough was enough. If it died they'd have to find another one.

"This fight ends now." She yelled.

Hol ran at the creature, climbing over the dead one, her Nurigen blade held up high. She saw confusion in the creature's eyes, enemies had probably never run at it before.

"Hol....we..... need alive." Someone was shouting.

So tempting to ram her blade into one of its eyes and twist, but Hol really didn't want to go through the whole process of finding and fighting another guard. There might be three behind the next door, maybe even four. She turned her blade, hitting the monster between the eyes with the pommel, as hard as she could. Its eyes continued to look at her, as the guard creature fell backwards like a felled tree. Had she killed it ?

"Mingal, is the fucking thing still alive ?"

She had no idea, its body and how it survived in the barren corridors was a mystery to her. Mingal placed his hands on the creature for a few seconds, before looking pleased at what he'd discovered.

"It still lives." He said.

Relief was her first thought and then the need to get it bound up. They had its legs and arms securely tied, before The Watcher decided it was safe enough to join them.

"Good, good." Said The Watcher. "Now drag it over to the pool."

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Silky sat in the dark, waiting and watching for something she just knew would appear. Of course Rhian and Kerr had wanted to build a fire, but Mo had agreed with her.

“No, we’re on the side of a mountain.” He’d told them. “Everyone on the 1st rift will see our fire.”

So they sat in the dark, nibbling on cold rations. Pug was fine of course, plenty of thorn scrub leaves to keep him happy. Silky wasn’t popular, Rhian hadn’t talked to her since they’d picked a place to spend the night. No one liked cold rations and sleeping in the dark.

“There, I knew they’d still be following us.” She said, pointing.

“Still a long way off.” Said Mo. “A good seven days journey, even for tribespeople.”

“I can’t see anything.” Said Kerr.

“Turn your head, use just the corner of your eye.” Said Silky.

Humans and their poor eyes and ears still amazed her. How had they become the dominant intelligent life in the multiverse ? They couldn’t even see in ultra violet light.

“I see it, a tiny spot of light in the distance.” Said Rhian.

Kerr took a little longer, before announcing that he saw it too. Silky saw the fire quite clearly, even though it had to be at least a hundred miles away.

“Are you sure it’s them ?” Asked Rhian. “The ones we stole Pug from.”

“Yes, we killed quite a few of them and stole the most precious thing they possessed.” Said Silky.

“That stinky thing ?!” Said Kerr.

“We stole their honour when we stole Pug.” Said Mo. “Nothing will stop them now. They’ll have worked themselves up into a fervour about it all.”

“They will now feel a sacred duty to recover the beast and kill us all.” Added Silky.

“Crap ! What do we do ?” Asked Kerr.

Silky knew of course, though the others might not find the solution very palatable.

“We will have to kill them all of course.” She said.

“Or they might not find us.” Said Mo. “The mountain trails are notoriously hard to follow.”

Lies of course, to relieve the others and enable them to get a few hours sleep each night. Silky knew the people around that campfire would never stop and they’d eventually find them.

“What do you think Silky ?” Asked Rhian.

“He’s probably right, it’s a large mountain range.”

Now she was doing it, lying to make the humans feel better.

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Delmus wasn’t as anti-technology as most of The Damned. He quite liked using powerful energy weapons like the RM9, which was banned on most civilised worlds and a few uncivilised ones. Even Algaria had decided the risks to civilians from backwash was too great. That meant the infamous weapon was banned there. When the famously warlike Algarians had banned the RM9, its days as a popular weapon were over. Not that Delmus cared about such things as backwash or the rumours about radiation sickness connected with the weapon. He could just about lift it with one hand, though many found it too heavy to carry at all.

“Come here my beauty.” He muttered.

A present from Luri, she’d been back to his rooms in the barracks in Mendera City, to fetch the bag containing the much loved weapon. There had been two bottles of decent drink too, and a few porno memory cubes.

‘See when you get back – Luri.’ She’d left on a note.

Was she forgiving him or was he forgiving her ? Delmus didn't really care, now he had his RM9 and something to watch during his off duty hours. The clerics tested each other's memories to pass the time, actually betting small sums on who could remember what. The advanced onboard AI was the final judge and arbiter of who had won the bet. They were snobs, looking down on Delmus whenever he voiced an opinion. Their lifespan was around five thousand years though, six thousand if they were lucky. Delmus could remember hangovers that had lasted longer than that. There were times when he wasn't sure if immortality was all it was cracked up to be, but he'd been around for so long..... just trying to work out a rough number of years made his head hurt. He didn't need book learning to teach him history, he'd lived through most of it. He'd won every game, upping the stakes until he owned Ojetin-Nerish's house on the shores of Lake Misogon. Delmus was no longer invited to join their evening games, but they treated his opinions with much more respect.

"Please let me need you today." He told the RM9.

He still remembered Chlo giving him the RM9, when he was about to enter an enemy bunker on the planet Tengellen. He still remembered the worried look she'd given him, before letting him have the weapon. Chlo had appeared carrying it. She'd leaned her head to the side and given him a quizzical look.

"Trust me, it's a guy thing."

The RM9 was heavy, ludicrously heavy and the Empire had long since stopped producing it. Delmus had seen one during a training session on Arcadia and fallen in love with it, the way people fall in love with clockwork devices and old methods of transport.

"It will jam on you." She'd said as she handed it to him.

Besides the main barrel it had at least five prongs sticking out of the front. He seemed to remember they were part of the recoil protection system. The body of it was made from beautiful polished titanium and the only control to be seen was a large switch with 'live – off', on it. The stock was wood, real wood from a hardwood tree, not the artificial crap most weapons had these days. Best of all the RM9 weighed more than most of the women he'd recently dated. He adjusted the straps and swung it over his shoulder, now he was ready for anything.

"Delmus, we're there. Your presence is requested in the control room."

A voice from the comms system on the wall, a female cleric who owed him about five thousand imperial, because of betting against him. Everyone knew Xanash the 34th was the last demon emperor, didn't they ? He almost felt bad about taking her money, almost.

"I'll be there right away."

The corridors were shorter now that Grey Walker had been restructured for maximum hull integrity. There were still noises though, as the nothingness outside, tried to pull the craft apart. Odd noises to hear on a spacecraft, the kind of noise made by loose floorboards and old wooden stairs.

"Nothing to worry about." Ojetin-Nerish had told him. "Degradation of hull integrity is barely noticeable."

That sounded to him like something you ideally didn't want to degrade at all, not even the smallest bit. It was their craft though, so he hadn't bothered arguing the point. Delmus entered the control room, where everyone was looking at a screen set into a table in the centre of the room. Four of the clerics and two of the junior members of The Damned, who had arrived with him. All of them intent on looking into the screen. No one seemed to notice the RM9 over his shoulder, not one comment. Delmus felt slightly disappointed.

"It's a planet of a sorts." Said Ojetin-Nerish. "Definitely where the gravitational pull is coming from, the one keeping Boomers in a stable orbit."

There it was, a quite ordinary looking planet. The narrative above the screen was telling him it had a gravity of about one and half times imperial standard. Tiring for most to walk around on, but The Damned were trained to work in a wide variety of planetary environments. No solar system there, which meant no sun to orbit. Nothing there but a solitary planet. Not stationary of course, nothing ever was. It was probably hurtling along at relative speed to something or other, as was Grey Walker. That was the problem with relative speeds. You never noticed it, until you ran into something.

“They have three orbiting artificial suns.” Said a Cleric. “Very advanced tech and very expensive.” So, whoever was down there wasn’t short of cash. The screen was showing a few unpleasant compounds he recognised in the atmosphere and a few he didn’t.

“What’s the atmosphere like ?” He asked.

“Primitive, like a new born planet. No oxygen and plenty of corrosive chemicals in the air.”

He and the other members of The Damned would be fine and there never had been a plan for any of the clerics to leave Grey Walker. They would land on the planet of course, Grey Walker was a research craft and designed to land just about anywhere.

“Do you think they’re down there, the enemy ?” Asked one of The Damned.

“Unlikely it’s their home planet.” Said Delmus. “But someone must be down there to operate the tech and you don’t need three artificial suns for a lifeless rock.”

“You might get a chance to use your RM9.” Said Ojetin-Nerish.

Good, his toy had been noticed. No oceans down there, just mile upon mile of dead lifeless rocks, constantly bathed in a corrosive rain. Even the temperature was a scorching three hundred degrees.

“Just like home, nice and cosy.” Muttered Delmus.

“We can land now or do a few more scanner orbits.”

“Let’s get down there.” Said Delmus. “We’re not going to get the job done from orbit.”

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There was a firm belief that no member of The Damned had gone fully rogue, ever. Some might have gone off mission slightly, or used their skills to settle a personal grievance, but none had ever turned traitor, or killed another member of the imperial guard. Juno had been around long enough to know that wasn’t quite true. There had been two minor rebellions by a few members of The Damned, both written out of the official history of Mendera. Small scale rebellions, but they had happened; she’d been there and seen it happen. Not that she was feeling rebellious, just tired, dirty and a little unappreciated.

“No, No !” Yelled The Watcher. “It needs to be upright and right at the edge of the pool.”

“Fine, but it was your idea to drag it, rather than using rollers.” Said Mingal.

“Juno, stay awake !” Yelled Hol. “One of its feet is jammed on a pipe.”

“Sorry.”

Juno had to use all her strength to bend the pipe out of the way. There was no question of damaging the creature, the offering to whoever it was going to be sacrificed to. Juno just wanted a clean uniform and food that didn’t look like slime. Water that didn’t have a yellow tint to it would have been nice too. Not that she was anywhere near close to going rogue though, her vows forbade that. Her vow to serve the empire and the vow a long time later, to serve the emperor as part of his personal guard.

“Great Juno, now push him this way a bit.” Said Hol.

Why always her ? Albas only had one claw to push into position and he’d messed that up twice. It was her vows though, forcing her to obey without question.

"Is that the right spot?" She asked.

"Yes, now Mingal and I will try and lift his head." Said Hol.

Actually no, it wasn't her vows forcing her, or anything to do with her conversion to being one of The Damned. Those were just rumours among the citizens of the empire. That the conversion created something less than real people. Automatons to serve the empire. No! Juno knew that wasn't true, she was quite capable of refusing to obey orders and had done it in a few minor ways. It was just that The Damned were her family and Mendera was her home.

In a multiverse where everything seemed to be constantly changing, Mendera was a fixed point, the one place that had been the same since..... Almost forever. That was important when you didn't change, your immortal body untouched by the ravages of time. Juno rarely thought of why, but she now understood why she would always be loyal to the empire and Sikush. It was the only home she had, the only people she thought of as family. The Watcher was spinning about in her metal sphere, usually a sign she was happy.

"Perfect..... Now you all need to move back." Said The Watcher. "Apart from the one who will wield the sacrificial blade."

Hol of course, she had the ugly brown dagger in her hands. Juno was surprised and pleased, when Hol handed her the blade. It felt warm against her palm, strange for something made of metal.

"You can wield the blade." Said Hol. "You've earned that. Not like Albas, who kept pushing the wrong way."

Poor Albas looked so upset and it wasn't really his fault. His right knee had been crushed in the fight with the guard creatures. Not that she said anything about that to Hol, she was too busy feeling happy and proud.

"Fine, Fine." Said The Watcher. "Whoever is using the blade, wait for my command to slay the beast. Then you must cut deep and fast. One stroke of the blade only..... I suggest you cut its throat."

The beast was still unconscious, which would make it easier to deliver a killing wound with just one stroke. The others had moved back, leaving just her and the sacrifice beside the pool. She could hear The Watcher though, as she began to recite the words of the required ritual.

"Sident, Sident, movrae argental."

Juno knew enough of the dark language to know that it wasn't a summons or a request. The Watcher was having the audacity to demand the attention of those that dwelt in the never ending darkness.

"Sident, Sident, amorentil, nevesh."

There was a vibration beneath her feet and ripples began to move across the thick ooze in the pool. Juno didn't sweat, her body controlled heat by different means. It might have been imagination, but the hand which held the sacrificial blade, began to feel sweaty.

"Sident, Sident, leminah, augmeni."

More ripples across the pool and a layer of mist the colour of freshly polished silver, began to form. Juno was so busy watching the mist build, that she nearly missed the command.

"Now! Slay the beast." Shouted The Watcher.

Juno climbed up the creature, gripping the fur on its chest and pulling herself up. She leaned in towards the face which looked so unsettlingly human. No words, no restraint, no pity for the guard creature. She jammed the blade in hard, before ripping it right across the beast's throat.

"Excellent! I feel it dying." Shouted The Watcher.

Strange for blood, the liquid rolling down the creature's chest looked as clear as fresh water. Juno jumped back onto the ground, watching gallons of the beast's blood, as it entered the pool.

“Sident, Sident, margano, humenda, svegah.”

The words made Juno shrink down and almost hug the ground. A demand shouted at the darkest of the old dark Gods, who had never quite left the deepest and darkest of places. The Watcher had to be very confident and unimaginably powerful, or just stupid.

“She is here !” Yelled The Watcher. “Kittara no longer walks the dark desolate places.”

The silver mist grew in depth and intensity, rising up out of the pond. It formed a shape, which became obviously female. The woman raised her arms and pointed at Juno.

“Thank you.”

The voice broken and unrecognisable, but again there was no mistaking a female voice. Noises behind and above, as the rest of the group came right up to the edge of the pool.

“Is it her Watcher ?” Asked Hol. “What do we do next ?”

No answer, the ritual had probably drained her strength. The silver colour dispersed to reveal a face above the naked body of a young woman. The face looked like the etchings made so long ago, that even knowledge of them was forbidden. Juno had seen them though, in the lowest levels of The Temple of the Flame.

“It is her..... It’s Kittara.” She said.

Did she need their help ? The Watcher was still silent, as Kittara looked at them all, while remaining hovering over the centre of that dreadful pool.

“Thank you.... All of you.... I must go, he needs me.”

The woman she was certain was Kittara, sank into the dreadful ooze in the pool and vanished. Juno remembered The Watcher saying Kittara had left Leng that way in the past. The Watcher was still silent.

“Is that it Watcher ? Have we succeeded ?” Asked Hol.

Nothing, not a sound in reply. They grouped round the silent metal sphere, Mingal resting his forehead against the metal.

“I feel no life there, no essence.” He said. “That last line of the ritual was so dangerous..... They may have taken her life in punishment.”

“The top unscrews, I remember from when she entered it.” Said Celli.

All thoughts of death forgotten as everyone greeted Celli. Still leaning on things to stand upright, but looking reasonably well again.

“Can you show us ?” Asked Hol.

“I’ll try, though someone might need to catch me if I fall over.”

Celli remembered the right place to apply pressure and the top unscrewed. A long thread that took a while for them to unscrew, until the top finally came away. Hol looked inside and put her hand in, bringing out what looked to be blackened ashes.

“That’s all that’s in there.” Said Hol. “The Watcher is dead.”

~ ~

Mo had taken the last watch, which always left him with a headache, a full bladder and feeling irritable. Silky had taken over from him, just as the light levels on the rift began to rise. A new day, which didn’t fill him with glee or optimism.

“I need to pee.”

“Don’t wander too far.” Said Silky.

He left her to potter about and get the others ready for the day, while he looked for a spot out of view, but within shouting distance. A rocky outcrop without the usual covering of thorn scrub, looked ideal.

"I am never leaving my home in Mendera City again." He muttered.

Knowing it was a lie of course, he became bored after a few months of soft living and he was far too easily distracted by anything offering a little excitement. Squatting was the norm out on the rifts, it maximised any cover and gave him a few moments to ponder on the day ahead. He heard something moving through the bushes.

"Probably another damn growler." He mumbled.

It probably wasn't, they hadn't seen a growler for quite some time. Mo tidied his clothing without standing and surveyed the area as best he could. The sounds were coming from the other side of the rocky outcrop. Mo pulled a nasty looking blade out of his belt. It wasn't a growler, his ears told him something on two legs was stepping towards him, pushing the scrub aside as it moved. There was no alternative, he ran round the rocks, holding his blade up and ready for a downward thrust.

"Oh, not you again." He said. "Please don't tell me to run again. We're on a mountainside, there are few places to run to."

The creature borrowing the body, face and memories of Kittara was stood there, smiling at him in a very infuriating manner.

"You never were good at mornings Mo."

"Yes I know you have all her memories, all the times I made a damn fool of myself. It still hurts to see you using her body like a..... Parasite. What do you want?"

Hardly the way to address someone who had effectively saved his life and Silky's. The problem was that she was right; he really was terrible at dealing with the first hour or so of the morning. She walked right up to him and kissed him hard on the lips.

"Mo, for one of the cleverest people I ever knew, you can sometimes be so stupid."

"Kittara?"

"Guard what you find in the fortress Mo, guard it for me. I will be back for it as soon as I can."

She was instantly gone, leaving him with a slightly damp patch on his lips and a worried feeling.

"Crap Kittara." He muttered. "What have you left me to guard?"

Was it really her though? He ran his tongue over his lips, remembering how she'd tasted. There was no doubt, Kittara had been the genuine article. Silky came to find him, after he'd been sitting on the rocks for a few minutes.

"That was a long pee Mo. Come on, Rhian made something that actually tastes like a proper breakfast."

"She was here, the genuine Kittara."

"What did she want?"

He liked that about the demon he'd decided to live with for the rest of his immortal life, she rarely doubted him. No asking if he was sure or certain, she simply accepted the fact that Kittara was back from the dead. Of course a little more emotion might have been nice.

"Did you hear what I said?" He asked. "It's her, Kittara. Back from wherever legendary souls go when they aren't needed for a while."

"Yes, I heard. What did she want?"

"There's something in the fortress she needs guarding, until she gets back."

"Oh Mo, you've been played by him again. Another mission for the empire."

"No Silky it's for her, she'd said guard it for her."

Silky wrapped her tail around his waist, pulling him close, folding herself as close to him as possible. She kissed him, right on the spot where Kittara had kissed him.

"I love you Mo, but when it comes to her." She said. "You can be so stupid."

~ ~

Chelac Nurigen wasn't surprised when their fleet had been destroyed in the Algarian solar system. He'd predicted it, which had made life quite difficult. There was no news of Aukar, who had placed himself on the flagship, the command vessel. Against Nurigen's pleading of course, though few wanted to remember that. For such a mighty vessel to be have been destroyed by a single imperial raptor..... It was unthinkable, unless there had been a traitor.

"There is a lot of anger." He'd been told. "You are restricted to your quarters, for now."

He'd been allowed out once, to a look at the larger screens in the command centre. It wasn't just the Terak giving him looks that said 'Traitor,' the human mercenaries had given him the same treatment. A mixture of the silent treatment, angry looks and a few shouted insults. The mercenaries had lost a lot of friends in the attack on Algaria and needed someone to blame it on.

"Never trust a Menderan !"

A thrown food tray had barely missed his head and his guards had brought him back to his quarters. His fate rested with that of Aukar. If the Terak were without their leader, they'd probably execute him just for the hell of it. Actually even if Aukar lived, his chances weren't good.

"No one likes those who foretell disaster." He muttered.

It wasn't just that many considered him treacherous. He'd been right and Aukar's generals would never forgive him for that. Someone entered his quarters and had a whispered conversation with his guards, or jailers as they now seemed. Maybe the death he craved was now close ?

"Our leader is injured but lives." The guard told him. "Aukar is alive."

Where was their gallant leader though ? He was obviously too busy or disinclined to see him. Hours drifted into days, until seven days after the defeat by the Algarians, he was invited to see Aukar. No warning, no chance to prepare.

"Our leader has requested your attendance in his quarters." The guard told him.

That meant a private audience, which might be a good or a bad sign. Chelac decided not to worry about it. Strangely for someone keen on ending his life, he didn't want to die in the current circumstances. To die was one thing, but to die labelled a traitor.... No, that would never do. He stood outside the door to Aukar's quarters, waiting for the guards to check him for weapons, yet again. The search never came, the door was opened and Aukar himself welcomed him in.

"I meant to see you days ago. Come in, come in."

Aukar looked terrible. Anyone else and Chelac would have thought they were near to death, but Terak were tough and healed quickly.

"I didn't want the warriors to see me until my wounds are fully healed." Said Aukar. "After the defeat.... They need to see me looking ready to lead them to victory.... Sit old friend, sit."

Old friend indeed. It seemed he wasn't going to be executed after all. Aukar had dressings on wounds all over his torso and one wing looked broken beyond repair. No doubt a replacement was being constructed or cultivated from Terak DNA. Aukar certainly didn't look ready to lead anyone. Chelac did as he was ordered and sat, before a servant gave him his usual drink.

"How did you escape ?"

"Six of my guards carried me kicking and screaming to an escape capsule. Two of them survived the battle and I honestly don't know whether to punish them for disobeying orders, or give them a reward."

The servant left, the guards sent to stand in the corridor outside.

"This isn't an easy thing to say Chelac, but you were right."

No answer would have been appropriate, so he just nodded and waited for Aukar to continue.

"I am going to offer you full control of all my forces, but I need an honest answer from you first."

Crap ! Here came the 'are you a traitor,' question.

"Can you win for me Chelac ? Can you give me victory ?"

"Full command, none of the generals ignoring my orders ?"

"You'll be my Ezzagory, my Warlord. Disobeying you will mean death."

It was what he'd always wanted. Chelac could almost see the flames, smell the burning, as Mendera City lay in ruins before him.

"Yes Aukar, I can give you victory."

~

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