

Mendera Temple

Chapter 5 – The Many

“It was said that chaos creatures still visited the ruin to worship unmentionable deities.”

Sikush had explained to Kittara that she wasn't really needed to show Aukar around Annill. After all there were many other members of the Guard who'd been there recently and then there was her reputation for upsetting deities. Sikush had given her that look, the look that told her to stay away, that he didn't want her adding complications to an already difficult task. So of course Kittara had spent hours working out a good excuse for going.

“Ojetin was always talking of your work.” She said.

“Really ?” Said Nurigen.

It was a lie of course. Ojetin had been a staunch pacifist who refused to wear even the most basic of armour, but Kittara knew how to appeal to people's ego.

“Yes, he was talking about the excellence of your weapons on his final expedition.” She said.

She could see Nurigen was beaming at her, but she knew she had to play this one carefully, the idea had to appear to be his. Of course being his daughter's best friend helped.

“And of course Aukar is thrilled with the armour you made for him,” she continued, “and of course the blade you presented him with.”

“Has he mentioned it to you ?” Asked Nurigen.

She was on safer ground. Aukar had been telling everyone how good the armour was and how much he loved the razor sharp curved sword that Nurigen had created for him. Completely unlike any other Nurigen blade, it was light and perfect for close quarters fighting.

“Yes all the time,” she said, “Alyz must have told you ? He shows the sword to everyone, even says the best Terak weapon makers couldn't have made better.”

Kittara was a natural empath and she felt Nurigen's mood chill when she mentioned Alyz. New recruits to The Damned are usually given a few hundred years of light duties, so that they can be with their families as much as possible. Nurigen though was immortal and the duties of being one of the elite Guard weren't compatible with normally family life.

“I haven't see Alyz in a while,” he said, “I think she's working on something for The Chalné.”

Nurigen only referred to Sikush by his official title when he was annoyed at him, so Kittara knew family tensions were building.

“Will Alyz be going to Annill with you ?” She asked.

She knew the answer and hated to play her friend's father, but in a way she knew Alyz would almost expect it of her.

“No. It appears she's needed elsewhere and I'm to go to Annill without her. It appears Sumahn-Nerish has deigned to forgive me, so The Chalné says I don't need her to keep the peace.”

Kittara didn't need to be an empath to feel his mood, the perfect moment was approaching.

“Oh, he said that ?” She said.

“Why, what have you heard ?”

Kittara pretended to take a great interest in a part finished blade on the bench.

“Well deities can be fickle,” she said, “they aren't like us. What they forgive one moment may upset them the next. It would have been ideal to send Alyz with you, but if she has essential work elsewhere ?”

He looked agitated and Kittara pretended not to notice.

"A fine blade," she said, "it will be superb when you finish it."

"It will be a lighter blade, similar to the one I made for Aukar. Perhaps you might like it when it's finished?" He asked.

She had him, he wouldn't be offering her a priceless gift unless the favour she wanted to badly to do for him was about to be requested.

"I would put it to good use," she said, "and if there's anything I can do to repay the favour?"

Nurigen walked over to her and put his hand on her arm. She'd never seen him show much affection towards Alyz, but he smiled at her and rubbed her upper arm in a manner he obviously thought was affectionate.

"Are you busy?" He asked. "I mean, could you perhaps accompany me to Annill? I would feel much more comfortable about going if you would."

On the inside she was dancing and cheering, but she looked at him without showing any emotion.

"There is Estrid to look after." She said.

His face fell, but the general fondling of her arm became more intense.

"But she looks after herself these days and my other duties can wait. Yes I will come with you to Annill."

He was actually hugging her. It wasn't that it was a long time since she'd had anyone give her a paternal hug, it had never happened, ever! Kittara found the experience strangely pleasant and while her best friend's father hugged her, she made her plans. She just hoped the fighting around Annill would be as ferocious as Chlo had hinted it might be.

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"He liked you, he rescued you." Said Faarlh.

They'd been talking for some time and Luri liked the warmth of familiar memories, even though they were of so very long ago. Most of what her brother had told her made sense, but occasionally it just confused her.

"Who?" She asked. "I have no idea how I escaped the catacombs."

Her brother looked at her as though she was lying. For the first time the undead seemed to sense his unease and began to move towards her. Faarlh waved them back and they instantly obeyed.

"You must know. If not why do you serve him now?" He asked.

Her head swam and vague memories of a man in robes burning rows of the undead and carrying her out of the catacombs came into her head. Sikush? He'd never mentioned it to her, as far as she knew they'd never met until Optilion was destroyed.

"Are you talking about The Chalné?" She asked.

Her brother had never been the strong one, in any way. She could remember being his shield when they were in the catacombs. Fending off the numerous creatures looking for a meal, holding him while he wept. He was taller now, almost as tall as her, but there was still a vulnerability about him.

"You really don't remember?" He asked.

"No," she said, "there was a man in robes, but I can't recall his face. Then I was with a group of traders out on the rifts. They treated me as one of their own, had me taught the ways of their people. In the end I forgot that I had ever been anything other than a nomad of the rifts."

Faarlh looked like a forlorn little boy again.

"And you forgot about me."

Her childhood still felt like a dream, even with her brother in front of her.

"It felt unreal," she said, "but I didn't forget, I chose not to remember."

“It was Herusher who rescued you. You must see him all the time, yet you don’t remember him rescuing you and ignoring me ?”

How could she have forgotten, but now her brother gave her the name it all fell into place. Herusher, lover of the female eternal Minraver and her odd job boy. Had she been one of Minraver’s tasks for her lover ?

“I don’t really remember,” she said, “but now you’ve said his name, there is something about the angle he holds his head, perhaps it was Herusher. He’s never mentioned it, but the switch will have affected his memory and it was a very long time ago.”

Faarlh sat on the dusty stone table.

“What is this switch you mention ?” He asked.

She was shocked he didn’t know, but of course he’d been in the catacombs since before the last switch and had survived because he and the undead were in the 1st rift. How did he even know about Herusher and The Damned ? She guessed someone must have been bringing news to the undead, probably the meddling sorcerers of the City of the Lost God. She settled herself on the grubby floor and brought up her knees in the same way she’d seen Kittara do thousands of times. “I have much to tell you brother, about the multiverse and you can tell me of your plans for the undead.”

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Alyz had gone alone to see the Old One. Of course Chlo was with her, always there as a link in her head, as long as she was in their part of the multiverse. But she’d been given the task by Sikush and she liked the ancient craft, cared about him in her own way. In a way his various neuroses and obsessions reminded her of her father.

“Is this a good time ?” She asked.

She had no idea what constituted a good time for a space craft that was billions of years old and had nowhere really to go, but she always asked, it seemed polite. Alyz sat herself in the main pilot’s seat and looked at all the gauges and dials. Most of them were there just to make the Old One feel comfortable and all of them were showing systems that were in perfect working order.

“Yes Alyz, it is a good time. Estrid told me you’d be coming.”

Estrid seemed to getting everywhere, but like everyone Alyz still thought of her as a sort of surrogate daughter of Kittara.

“What did you think of her now ?” She asked.

There was a pause, a long pause. Chlo had told her that all the memory of the ancient craft was now routed through imperial circuits, he could think at light speed. But for some reason the long pauses had become a part of his psyche. Alyz obtained a long cold drink from Chlo and settled back in the chair.

“Still polite and charming, despite all that power. She seemed a bit put out, is that the correct expression ? About being used as a messenger by Sikush, but she was happy to spend some time here, asking about my journey.”

She did seem to make a perfect messenger, Alyz just hoped Sikush wasn’t over using her.

“Sventa came with her,” said the Old One, “a strange companion for a deity, but they do seem to be very good friends.”

Alyz often wondered the same about Sventa, but like Kittara she never really felt there was any true darkness about the fallen Genova.

“I have a favour to ask, a big one.” She said.

There was a pause and she noticed several of the warning lights go amber, he was monitoring the mood of his own memory registers. Alyz wondered if he had a journal with stars against the good mood days ?

“What is this favour ?” He asked.

Where to start ? Alyz knew he had a link to the imperial data through Chlo, so he’d understand the concepts of what she wanted to tell him.

“The void keeps growing,” she began, “and this bubble universe shows no sign of shrinking. Chlo now thinks you won’t get across the void before the next switch occurs.”

There was a very long pause and a lot of the memory registers showed amber lights, one even briefly flicked onto red. When the voice of the Old One came back it sounded very old.

“I am assuming Sikush has a solution to this problem ?” He said.

How often had her own father asked her that very question ? She was getting a real sense of Déjà vu.

“There were several solutions discussed,” she said, “but two seemed the most likely to give your DNA bank the best chance.”

She gave the Old One a moment to digest that and for a few of the amber lights to go back into the green.

“The first solution has always been there. You’re placed in orbit around a planet suitable for the DNA and your quest is over. You can then, if you agree, help me with this favour I require.”

There was hardly a moment’s delay before he asked.

“And the second solution ?”

“That I take the DNA bank and take it to the imperial vaults. Then you’ll be free to help me, if you wish and the DNA can be held in stasis and used for seeding after the next switch.”

There was a very long pause and Chlo told her the Old One was using close to 90% of his computing potential to think about the options, if thinking accurately described the way he worked.

“Please describe this seeding ?” He asked.

It was at the core of imperial policy and there had been many objections to seeding, but Sikush would never hear a word against it.

“When the bubble universes have settled,” she said, “the empire seeds them with our DNA, people DNA. Two arms, two legs, a head and genitals, the sort of people we all recognize. The multiverse is big though and other creatures do evolve, but by seeding, the multiverse is always mostly people who look like us.”

There was no pause at all.

“And what would happen to the DNA I carry ?”

“It would be seeded in several star systems in a few different bubble universes. The creatures that develop may not look like the beings that created you, but they would have a good chance of being the dominant life force in those systems.”

He was sobbing. At first she thought the sound was cooling pipes, but there was a definite metallic sobbing sound.

“I don’t remember who created me,” he said, “all the memories are gone, the circuits crumbled away long ago. Chlo has shown me simulated pictures based on the DNA, but they mean nothing to me.”

She let him sob for a while, there was no other task more important for her to carry out and she found the stillness of the great void..... settling, yes that was the word, settling.

“Yes,” he said, “take the DNA store and put it in your vault. Then I will do this favour for you.”

Now it was her turn to pause, as she picked her words carefully.

“There is a chance you might not survive this,” she said, “even with the armour and weapons Chlo has given you, there is a high probability you’ll be destroyed.”

Now there was a sound she instantly recognised, his odd laughter.

“One thing about talking with Chlo,” he said, “is the realization that eventually nothing survives. One day the switch will get me, so why not help you. Now tell me what it is you want me to do, then you can take the DNA store with you to the vaults.”

She knew part of the plan Sikush had told her not to mention to the Old One and she knew there was a chance that he might escape the next switch, but for now she just said.

“This is what I need you to do.....”

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It seemed to take Luri a long time to get to one of the entrances to the necropolis, even with one of the more sprightly undead to guide her. They all looked at her, the undead, not with hostility, but with some strange kind of expectation. Her guide stopped and left her to walk up the final few steps and into the dull light of day on the rift.

‘I stink.’ She thought to herself.

Enough of the undead or The Many as her brother called them, were giving off the stink of decomposition for it to fill the whole underground area. It was on her skin, in her hair and even for a battle hardened warrior it was becoming hard to take. They were all now watching her, all the hundreds of undead milling about on the surface nearby. What did they want of her ?

Luri saw a plant she recognised, the leaves used to add a pleasant scent to soaps. She pulled the entire plant from the ground and rubbed its leaves into her skin, then into her hair. Anything to get rid of the stench of death. She eventually dropped the barky stem of the plant and walked towards the ruined house where Delmus waited. What would she tell him ? Certainly not the story about Herusher saving her from the catacombs, at least not until she’d had a chance to talk to Sikush about it. She stepped over a broken timber and was once more in the ruined dwelling, with Delmus and Mo looking at her.

“You were gone so long,” said Delmus, “I was about to use the rift manipulator to get help.”

She sat on the floor, still smelling the undead on her, she longed for a long hot bath to remove it.

“How long was I gone ?” She asked.

“Three days.” Said Mo.

Three days ! Yet to her it only seemed to have been the day before that she’d left them, but she and her brother had talked for a very long time ago. Delmus put his arm around her shoulders.

“What happened to you, you look awful ?” He asked.

She looked out of the hole where the window had been, they were all still looking at her, hundreds of pairs of expectant eyes.

“What the fuck do you want me to do ?” She screamed.

Mo had her now, had her by the shoulders and was looking into her eyes.

“What happened in there Luri ?”

“I met my brother.”

The mist in her mind started to lift and she realised most of the smell of death had been in her head, though not all and she still badly needed a change of clothes.

“What brother,” said Delmus, “you don’t have a brother !”

Why not agree and deny the last three days ? It was so tempting, but eventually the unstoppable horde her brother called The Many would destroy every living thing in the Multiverse.

“Have you got a drink Mo, a real drink ?” She asked.

He always had a decent bottle of something in his pack and this time he didn’t wince as she took a large gulp of it.

“I was a child in the City of the Lost God,” she began, “I’ve no idea who my parents were, but I had a bother, no HAVE a bother called Faarlh. We appeared to be wealthy and well dressed, but the people who looked after us were quite poor. At the time we were young and just accepted it, but now I assume our parents must have paid them to look after us.”

“Perhaps there was a purge,” said Delmus, “there always seemed to be purges of the ruling class in the City.”

She took another long drink from the bottle and enjoyed the feeling as her mood mellowed.

“You might be right,” she said, “though for most of my life I’ve never thought about it much. Now I can control the Chinnura in me, but then it surfaced if I felt threatened. A few local children were slightly burned when they bullied me, but the real trouble started when their parents tried to run us out of town.”

“You had a brother then ?” Asked Mo.

“Yes. He was younger than me, never seemed that strong, but when the mob came for me he fought them all. In the end they threw me into the catacombs and him after me, the people we’d come to think of our parents helped them.”

“He’s still alive,” Said Delmus, “that must have been billions of years ago ?”

She started to cry as she answered him.

“Perhaps that place did something to him, but he’s still alive and now he’s down there, leading the undead in the necropolis. I never went back for him and I’m not sure why.”

They were both soothing her now, Delmus offering her some clean water from his pack to wash her face.

“What does he want ?” Asked Mo.

The rest of the multiverse to go away ? Luri still didn’t fully believe what her brother had asked for, but she’d promised to pass on the demand to Sikush.

“He wants the rifts, all the rifts, just for The Many and for all eternity.”

Delmus coughed.

“He must be fucking crazy !” He said.

Perhaps he was, but with seventy million or perhaps more of the undead behind him, would Sikush take a chance on that ?

“We need to get back to Mendera quickly,” she said, “we’ll need to use the rift manipulator.”

Delmus nodded at her and pulled the square gold coloured box from his pack.

“You go, take Mo.” He said as he handed it to her.

Of course there was the last place Sikush had asked them to visit. Sikush rarely gave orders, but his requests were always important and someone needed to check the ruins.

“You’re not coming with us ?” Asked Mo.

“Luri understands,” said Delmus, “there is somewhere I need to go and I’ll get back to Mendera through the rift gates.”

Luri used the device to rip a hole in reality large enough for her and Mo to fit through and they were gone, leaving Delmus to work out the quickest route to the ruins of Ingar Gols on the 3rd rift.

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“I don’t expect any of them work anyway.” Said the Old One.

Alyz had received a message that the work detail were in the corridor outside the DNA bank store and that they needed the Old One to lower the defences. Far from being harmless and not working, Alyz knew they were some of the best defences in the multiverse and could even damage one of The Damned.

"I'm going to supervise them." She said.

She left the craft's control room and walked along the corridor, her boots ringing against the metal floors. She could have taken herself straight to the DNA bank, but she actually enjoyed being on the Old One, it all seemed so peaceful.

"Four of them," Chlo told her, "all very good at their job and you had sex with one of them, once." Alyz never knew whether to ask Chlo not to give her snippets from her past, they were rarely detailed enough to be useful and she had a suspicion Chlo was teasing her.

"Which one?" She asked.

There was a chuckle in her head and as she turned a corner, they were there, two men and two women, all in the uniform of The Damned.

"Let's see how memorable it was," Chlo said to her, "see if you remember who?"

They were all from off Mendera squads of The Damned, rarely seen at the centre of the empire, but it was now a very large empire. There was talk of quite a few new faces being seen in the market place, perhaps Sikush was bringing them in to let them see the famous Holy City of Mendera? Anyway none of the keen fresh faces looked familiar, but one of the men was giving her a certain smile.

"Guessed yet?" Asked Chlo.

They were about to move the precious cargo of the Old One and Chlo was playing games! Alyz ignored her and led the four helpers into the DNA store.

"Once I unplug the power link the DNA will be useless in 30 minutes," She told them.

The male who'd been giving her a certain smile looked at her.

"Chlo had us carry out the transfer a dozen times in simulation," he said, "no time did it ever take more than a minute."

No it wasn't him, though she was grateful that Chlo had made them practise it so many times. They were members of The Damned after all, even if they were guarding the back of beyond most of the time. They should be able to do this in their sleep.

"Positions people." She said.

The DNA bank looked like a large tower of glass dishes, four feet across and each of them three inches thick. In reality the glass was an advanced ceramic that could survive moderate explosions and temperatures from molten to just above absolute zero. The problem was the power to the device and once she disconnected the main and four backups, the DNA had to be put into stasis very fast.

They moved to their allotted positions around the device that weighed over seven hundred pounds and waited for Alyz to give them their instructions.

"Remove the locking bolts." She said.

This was going to take a while. At the bottom and top of the device were metal plates and they were fixed to the structure of the craft by bolts, eighteen of them. Chlo had never updated this part of the craft, so the bolts were insanely old and even with the best tools in the multiverse, they were taking some budging. As Alyz watched one of the females strain with a bolt on the floor she recognised the look on her face.

"Her?" She asked Chlo.

“Yes her. I knew you’d recognise her when she started sweating.”

How long ago had it been ? Two ages of the temple at least. The girl was a new recruit then and they had one night at the Council Club. All Alyz really remembered was how wonderfully firm her breasts had been.

“This one is too corroded, it’s not going to shift. I’ll cut it.”

The other female had obtained an ion cutter from Chlo and was using the fine beam to cut the bolt out of the bulkhead.

“Do you remember me ?”

She quickly obtained the name from Chlo.

“Yes Pril, of course I do. A wonderful night at the Council Club.”

The girl was beaming at her, so much pleasure given by such a small lie.

“I’ve got it ! All bolts are now free.”

It was her turn now and Alyz released the backups first. The thick cables fitted into connectors on the wall and they were all surprisingly easy to disengage, considering it had been billions of years since anyone had looked at them. The main power supply was a huge fibre cable, a good six inches across that was fixed to the bottom platter of the device. Alyz got onto her knees and looked up at the connector.

“It’s badly corroded.” She said.

Badly corroded wasn’t adequate to describe it. Not only did the two metal flanges look almost welded together by corrosion, but a strange bacterial substance had covered the connectors in a good two inches of what looked like yellow puss. It seemed a miracle the power supply to the DNA bank hadn’t failed years before.

“Can I help ?” Asked Pril.

Alyz just shook her head and asked Chlo if the connector was ever likely to be needed again.

“No,” said Chlo, “I can power it through the four backup connectors quite adequately.”

There was no time to spare, so Alyz reached into her tunic and brought out a small, but very sharp looking blade. Her father had taken over a year to make it, when they’d both been living out on the rifts. He’d promised her there was no armour even invented that could stop that blade. As Pril gave a slight gasp, Alyz held the cable and hacked at it with her Nurigen dagger. It parted as though it was made of paper.

“Power disconnected.” Chlo informed her.

There was half a second of alarm sound before the Old One turned it off.

“Take the weight.” Said Alyz.

They easily lifted the heavy device and Alyz put both her hands on it.

“Use Chlo, sync on me.” She said.

Alyz moved her reality to the imperial store below the imperial palace on Mendera and the device and the other four moved with her. Some would claim that nothing is ever instantaneous, but their movement was close enough and the DNA bank was safely on Mendera. Chlo was a few feet away from them and pointing at a gap in the storage bays.

“Over there,” she said, “on the stone base.”

They shuffled sideways until the device was above the stone base, where they gently lowered it into place. No need for bolts, once it was in Stasis it was almost impervious to harm. The group moved out of the bay and the familiar green glow of a stasis field enveloped the device.

“Under a minute.” Said Pril.

The group looked expectantly at Alyz and she realised they were waiting to be dismissed. Had she ever been that keen ?

“Thank you,” she said, “you can go back to your other duties.”

Pril hung around for an extra few seconds, perhaps hoping for an invite to renew their intimacy, but Alyz wasn't in the mood.

“Must have been memorable.” Said Chlo.

“There seem to be a lot of new faces on Mendera, anything going on Chlo ?”

Chlo put a note on the common channel saying the Old One had been given a visual of his DNA bank, safe and sound on Mendera and that his refit would now begin.

“Sikush has brought in another ten thousand, housed them in places where the population aren't going to notice them. He's just being cautious.” Said Chlo.

Inside Alyz was buzzing, ten thousand of The Damned was a huge force.

“Any reason for the caution,” she asked, “I've seen nothing on the common channel ?”

The true numbers of The Damned were now only known to Sikush and Chlo. It may seem strange that millions can come to each initiation, yet the numbers are forgotten. But the timescale between new members is truly staggering and even the famed Maran Group record keeping breaks down after hundreds of billions of years. Rumours had the numbers at a quarter of a million, but Nurigen had told his daughter he thought there were many more.

“No,” said Chlo, “just a precaution. You may see more unfamiliar faces, Sikush is talking about putting another twenty thousand on board Leviathan.”

Chlo was gone, vanished to go about her duties, leaving Alyz staggered at the information. She was about to put in a request to see Sikush, but realised Chlo would see it and might delay it. No she'd wait the few days until Council Club night, Sikush was always more amenable and talkative when he was naked and horizontal.

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For someone who'd been told he was going back to Ixir, Mo looked incredibly happy.

“So Herusher, why were you rescuing young girls in distress ?” Asked Sikush.

Luri was now rested and well fed and allowing the drink in her hand to relax her. Herusher was looking much discomfited by Sikush's teasing, which she was quite enjoying.

The portal had delivered Mo and her to the old village near the City of the Lost God. There had been a brief misunderstanding with a party of bandits, but after Luri had killed a few the problems had been resolved. Sikush had seen them immediately they entered Mendera City and hadn't seemed at all surprised about her brother or Herusher, he was always full of surprises. He'd told Mo he was off to Ixir to run the resistance and despite an outward show of reluctance everyone knew he was happy as a wortle bug with two tails. As to her story, he'd simply said;

“We'll talk over dinner.”

Dinner was now over and Luri realised they were now at the point where most real government happens, during the after dinner drinks.

“It was a request from Minraver,” said Herusher, “I was to take Luri to a family out on the rifts, but it was so dark and there had been no mention of a brother. I'm sorry Luri, but I never even noticed him.”

So all those years of hate and paranoia by her brother had all been because of a genuine and understandable mistake by Herusher. Luri sighed and wondered how many terrible wars had been fought because of such errors ?

“And you never thought about mentioning this to Luri ?” Asked Sikush.

Herusher was squirming, but she understood about being a cog in a very large wheel. For some reason Minraver had asked him to rescue a girl, her, from the catacombs. After that it was no longer his concern, she could identify with that.

“So what does your brother want ?” Sikush asked her.

“He wants the rifts,” she said, “all the rifts, for just him and The Many. He’s very keen on the 1st rift as he knows it’s usually untouched by the switch.”

Sikush was giving her one of his long hard looks.

“So he knows about the switch ?” He asked.

“I told him, before I realised he might want the rifts. I’m sorry.....”

Sikush smiled at her and held up his hand.

“What’s done is done Luri,” he said, “the question is, do you believe him ?”

She remembered her brother and his hatred for the entire multiverse as he remained trapped under the City for all those countless years.

“No,” she said, “he’s lying to gain time to rebuild the necropolis and deploy The Many. I believe he still intends to destroy all life in the multiverse.”

Chlo appeared as if on cue and sat herself on the floor beside Sikush, her dark eyes examining Luri.

“And our prisoner beneath the Temple,” said Sikush, “do you think he’d leave him undisturbed. If he managed to capture Mendera ?”

Everyone was looking at her and there was no doubt in her mind.

“The sorcerers of the City will have told him of our prisoner,” she said, “and I believe he will see it as his duty to release it. In fact his main aim may not be to find a home for the undead, but to find a way to release the crawling chaos.”

Sikush stood up and looked out of the palace window at the perfect Menderan evening. The sky was clear, the air balmy and it seemed impossible that anything could disturb the Holy City, the city that never changed.

“Annill is the key,” said Sikush, “I’ll take Aukar there very soon. Alyz can remind Tomma-Goran that now would be a good time to delay the new batch of Dracc. We don’t need another enemy while we deal with the Undead, or The Many as Faarlh calls them.”

He looked straight at her.

“And you Luri. You are going to tell me everything you can remember about your brother and those years in the catacombs, every singly tiny detail.”

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Delmus had forgotten how hot and dry parts of the 3rd rift could be. The last living creature he’d seen had been hundreds of miles back, a lizard of some kind. Delmus must have looked like a good meal and the creature had put up a good fight. Since then there had just been the monotonous trudging over dry packed soil and long dead scrub. The problem was that he couldn’t simply fly there, everything looked the same even from just a few hundred feet up and he wasn’t that sure where he was going.

Luri was the real navigator, she could have looked at the scribbled instructions and have them there in no time, but Delmus had to see clues, landmarks, anything to be seen that said ‘here is Ingar Gols’. There had been two other ancient religious sites they’d visited. Luri had performed the activation ritual and they waited and waited, then waited some more. This was before they’d been the centre of a caravan, when travelling with Stinky was almost fun. No one had appeared at either of those places, but Sikush had said it was important, so Delmus levitated fifty feet into the air and looked around.

“Maybe, just maybe.” He muttered.

There was a lot of heat haze, the air almost boiled off the baking ground, but to his right and about twenty miles away or so was a glint of something white. The instructions for finding Ingar Gols mentioned a lone surviving pillar of white marble, so Delmus said a silent prayer to the eight great demon Gods and flew towards the flash of white. Caution made him halt a mile away from the lone pillar, but he knew it was the right place. Very old were these sites, from the very first millennia of the new multiverse. It was said that chaos creatures still visited the ruin to worship unmentionable deities. Delmus doubted that, but he slowly lowered himself to the ground and covered the last mile on foot.

Nothing there, nothing in the way of living things, nothing much in the way of ruins. There were a lot of loose stones on the ground, there was no one for thousands of miles to take them away and build houses out of them. All that was standing was the lone pillar, a very worn altar of grey stone and half a wall. Delmus used what was left of the wall to shelter from the hot wind, while he consulted the notes Sikush had given them.

‘Altar stone marked at centre with two Yolokem symbols.’

Yolokem is a power symbol, very ancient but still used on some ritual carvings, even in Mendera. There were two of the symbols on the altar stone and Delmus knew he was in the right place. Not that he really needed it confirmed, Ingar Gols was the only ruin, or building of any kind in tens of thousands of square miles. Delmus drew his Nurigen sword to perform the activation ritual, which Luri performed with total confidence, but made him feel slightly ludicrous.

“Awaken, awaken, awaken.” He shouted.

Delmus banged the hilt of his sword three times on the stone and then did it all again.

“Awaken, awaken, awaken.”

There was no response; he wasn’t expecting any, though it might have been nice if the hot wind had let up a little.

“It has worked, now we have to wait.” Luri had said at the first site.

Delmus wasn’t good with faith, he’d have preferred a green light to come on, or a mystic voice to say the activation had worked. But Sikush had said it was important, so he looked for a good spot to wait for seven days or so. Not that Sikush had given them a definite time scale.

“Wait a while.” He’s told them.

Luri was happy with that as an order, ‘wait a while’, but Delmus liked precision, he liked orders to make sense! At the first site they were going to give it seven days, but had waited for ten. At the second set of ruins they’d waited for twenty days as there was a decent river nearby and plenty of fresh weed for Stinky to eat.

“Ten days, max.” He muttered to himself.

About a quarter of a mile away was the only shelter from the wind he could see, a pile of boulders about twelve feet high. There was no real night on the 3rd rift, just an unpleasant twilight that lasted ten hours or so. Delmus was confident that he could see anyone who might approach the ruins at any time of day, so he walked to the boulders and rearranged some dead scrub into a cushion for his behind to sit on. After adjusting his body temperature to exactly the same as the air around him, he sat down.

He was good at this, waiting, all The Damned were. He could turn off the part of his mind that might bored and yet stay alert. When he and Luri had waited at previous sites, they’d lit a camp fire, fed Stinky, even fucked, fucked quite a bit actually. Now though he was on his own and everything about

this part of the 3rd rift was unpleasant, so he turned off his higher functions and waited. On the night of the 5th day he heard a slight popping sound and his higher functions awoke.

The woman had appeared from nowhere, but unlike The Damned her appearance had caused a slight pop as she displaced a person sized amount of air. No member of the Guard would make such a silly error, but she did appear to have moved her reality to get to the ruin and even he couldn't shift reality on the rifts. At first he thought it was a man, but then he realised the movements and body shape were definitely female, but a female who moved well, moved like a warrior. She was moving towards the altar, so Delmus silently moved in the same direction. Then he saw them, though he had no idea what they were.

"Watch out !" He shouted.

She heard him and drew a long curving blade from under her cloak. She seemed to be dressed in some kind of clerical garb, but he'd never seen a cleric who seemed so at ease with a blade. The two creatures looked like very large grubs of some kind, but they sparked blue every time they touched a dead piece of scrub. Was prey so rare that they'd developed some kind of electric stunning device ? Delmus didn't know, but he drew the Nurigen and ran to join the woman.

Back to back they stood and the hood of the woman's clothing meant he still had no ideas what she looked like, but she obviously viewed him as an ally. Round them the creatures walked. They were a good ten feet long and all six of their legs were covered in a hard carapace. The one in front of Delmus shuddered a little and a lightning bolt of electricity hit his left arm. No mortal man could have survived the bolt and the creature moved in for the kill. Delmus had little feeling in that arm, but his right arm was still fine and he brought the Nurigen down hard on the creatures bug like head. Green blood, lots of green blood, the creature pulled back and started to shudder again.

Delmus knew that a lightning bolt to his sword arm would leave him defenceless, so he rushed forward and dug his blade deep into the creature, again and again until it stopped moving. He turned to see the woman finishing off the creature in front of her and there was no sign of her being wounded at all. Delmus rubbed his left arm.

"I think it'll be hours until I get full use back." He said.

"What are these creature ?" She asked.

The woman wiped her sword on her cloak, but still had her hood up.

"I don't know," he said, "but every year there seem to be more strange creatures on the rifts."

She was now facing him and lowering her hood and Delmus thought he must be hallucinating, it couldn't be....

"Abijah." He said.

He knew the face, had known it for billions of years, before she died.

"You know me," she said, "Please, please, tell me who I am ?"

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