

Ripples from the Past

Chapter 3 – Always Someone

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

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The Chaln  meant Guardian in a language that no one had spoken for a long time. A length of years so long that the number was meaningless, too long to be comprehended. That was the problem with being one of the two eternal, everything changed apart from you. The group of old friends were all safely on Mendera, Sveta had even brought a young male dark angel with her. It seemed he was likely to be sought out by the darkness beyond gateway. The Chaln  thought the entities that inhabited the darkness probably had better things to do, than scour the multiverse for a low level military administrator. Mo was the hardest to keep under control, but he always had been. Two months had passed since Delmus had returned from Pineus Eight and everyone was becoming restless. It was a relief when she finally arrived, though her appearance still shocked him.

“I realise you’re not her.” He said. “Yet you look exactly like her, even the walk.”

She remained silent, walking across the floor tiles of his favourite place in his palace. The veranda which overlooked his pond and the garden, containing plants from all over the empire. She pulled back a chair on the opposite side of his breakfast table and sat down.

“Sikush, you were her one true love. If I may call you Sikush ?”

“A name given to me by an old friend on Garanesh. You’re welcome to use it.”

He wanted privacy to talk to her, yet knew privacy was a personal indulgence he had to resist. It would have been so easy to turn off his link with Chlo, but there had to be a witness to their conversation.

“Who is it beneath that face I loved ?” He asked. “Who are you ?”

“You know if you think about who would have access to so many memories. I even remember you sending a poor scared angel to find her. Left beaten and tied to post, yet you knew how important Kittara really was.”

The truth rose out of somewhere in his unconscious mind. Once he realised the true nature of his visitor, he wondered why he hadn’t known much earlier.

“Yes, yes of course.” He said. “Obvious really.”

“I’ve helped you, hindered you and sometimes even sent enemies your way.” She said. “But always in the interest of maintaining the balance. Now something serious is happening and it requires something not just rare, but unique.”

She talked like Kittara, the same emphasis on certain vowels. He put his hand on hers, as he would have done if it had really been Kittara sat at his breakfast table. She didn’t move her hand away, which was interesting.

“You mean we’re going to work together ?” He asked.

“I’ll give you information and point you in the right direction, but I can’t help directly. The deities were my usual conduit into your world, but several have been destroyed and those that are left..... Let’s just say that they aren’t being cooperative.”

“Hiding you mean ? Yes, they have been doing that for quite some time.”

He felt Chlo in his mind, watching and waiting. There would be hundreds of The Damned communicating with her by now, maybe thousands. All of them waiting to come to his aid, if needed. Not that they'd be of any use against his morning visitor.

"Hmmm." She muttered. "The problem is that I know you far too well. Anything useful I tell you will get etched into those metal books of yours, to be used to subvert my will. Maybe at some point far in the future, but you will use it."

He had to laugh at that remark, but not unkindly.

"Of course I will, I'd be stupid not to use any useful information you grudgingly give me. Anything that might aid me to keep him in his prison. Him, the crawling chaos that has only one thought, to control everything, all of reality. I've ordered millions of warriors to their deaths to keep him in his prison."

"And me ! You sacrificed me !"

Her hand was holding his now, her fingers gripping his with some strength.

"That is the problem with pulling on someone's memories like a coat." He said. "You get everything, including emotions you'd rather not feel."

"So much regret !"

"No, you're misreading her memories. Kittara never regretted her sacrifice, any more than she felt as though I'd used her. She went willingly, knowing it was her destiny."

She did pull her hand away now, looking at him as though he'd hit her.

"She was affected by him, but of course you know that." She said. "All those hours spent sitting by the flame, right above his prison. He got into her mind. You should watch for signs of treachery among the clerics."

"Chlo already watches for any signs of subversion." He replied. "Kittara put herself in close proximity to his prison though, for billions of years.... Yet I will tell Chlo to increase her checks on the clerics."

"Good ! There is the cycle of eternity, the cycle which ends everything, including the eternal." She said. "It is part of the balance and normally I wouldn't interfere. There are signs though, that someone has managed to interfere with the cycle, starting it early. You know what that means ?"

"Yes of course, chaos will escape his prison and distort reality in his own twisted image. Who is doing this though ? So many who might be able to do such a thing are gone. Even the great bug goddess herself, Sevril-Narge has boiled away into eternity."

"There is always someone Sikush, we both know that. Every time someone with real power dies, there is always someone waiting to take their place..... always."

She picked up his drink without asking and sipped at the now cold infusion of herbs. For a while his guest just stared at the veranda tiles, while remaining quiet and still.

"You'll need help." She said. "There is one deity who might be of use, even if she has a little too much of the darkness about her for your liking."

"Luri you mean ? I haven't seen her since the start of the new switch."

It was her turn to laugh.

"You think a deity can't hide herself from you and Chlo ? She's been seeing Delmus regularly for quite some time. Get him to see her and persuade her to help. With a deity on your side, you just might stand a chance."

"Anything else ?" He asked.

"Be ready for anything. I'll be back once Luri is in Mendera City."

She vanished without putting the cup down, letting it fall to break on the floor. Chlo was instantly in his head, desperate for information.

“You obviously know her, who was that ?” She asked.

“Someone who normally never talks to us Chlo. That was the multiverse, pulling on Kittara’s memories like a discarded cloak.”

He heard her gasp, but not in his head. She was there, standing on the veranda and looking worried.

“Crap ! Things must be serious.” She said.

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Commander Firass liked his vessel, which was just as well, as he lived on board for about ninety percent of the year. At half a mile in length, the Melak Sunrise wasn’t the largest container vessel in the Melak fleet, but she had one big advantage. She was just on the permitted length to land at the rear of the merchant’s zone. It was a tight fit, but all the Sprint Class vessels were designed to fit on the southern end of the landing area. Sprint Class was just a fancy name of course; her top speed was fairly pedestrian compared to many container delivery spacecraft.

“I don’t know why you look forward to a week in Mendera City.” Said Rhian. “It’s boring, nothing but clerics and old buildings.”

Rhian was his second in command, with authority to land the craft in the event of an emergency. Just a fancy way of saying in case the commander died or went crazy. It had been known to happen, there was a saying that container craft pilots died at their command consoles.

“I may be old Rhian, but I can still appreciate the attractions near market square.”

She pulled a face and snorted at him. They were friends really, which was just as well. The Melak Sunrise was fully automated with only a crew of six to look after the robotic loaders.

“Ohhh, you’ll catch something nasty one of these days.” Said Rhian. “An itch even the DocStick won’t cure.”

He chuckled, but they both knew he wouldn’t. Sex was safe within the Menderan city walls, as were many other activities. Chlo monitored just about everything, even making sure the bits being inserted weren’t going to kill or maim the insertee. It was all done in the background, so there was no feeling of being spied on. Well, not much of a feeling.

“Vessel Ident MSUN 1456, please verify commander and second in command.”

The automatic solar system protection system around Mendera. Chlo of course, one of her many background services that kept the planet safe and secure.

“Commander Firass.”

“Flight Officer Rhian Dess.”

“Voice recognition confirmed. Please decrease speed to minimum, while scanning takes place.”

He pressed a button on the console and moved his finger in a downward motion over the console, until the speed was the minimum to maintain forward motion. The drives kicked in a second or so after his command, causing him to slide forward on his seat.

“Been doing the job for thirty years.” He said. “Decelerating into a solar system still feels strange.”

“Old tech inertial dampers.” Said Rhian. “You don’t feel it on Wanderer Class ships. Why are they messing us about anyway, we have an empire Ident ?”

The Sunrise was really just a half mile long tube of an immensely strong metal alloy, braced and engineered to be rigid enough to deliver millions of tons of cargo. It wasn’t that high tech, the real thing that made her special was a small box fixed to the wall, just behind Rhian’s head. The link to Chlo, which gave them the ability to instantly travel to all the empire worlds and many that were still unaligned. It was also their Ident, an identification signal that said they were a friendly vessel, trusted friends of the Menderan Empire.

“The back office told me Mendera has been checking everything for a while now.” He said. “Probably just their way of letting us know it’s their solar system.”

“It’s all bullshit !” Said Rhian. “We’ll be late landing now, maybe miss our slot and get stuck in orbit overnight.”

He thought of Rhian as some kind of unruly daughter, or maybe kid sister. A kid sister who would probably be commanding her own craft with five years, but still prone to making a drama out of every minor crisis.

“No one is going to get our slot.” He replied. “They just need to look us over. Can you really say you know the contents of every container we’re carrying ?”

“No, but it’s all checked before being loaded.”

He allowed himself a small chuckle at that. Checking meant a small number of overworked security teams, running a hand scanner over the outside of container.

“Come on Rhian, we both know how easy it is to get contraband on board. And people, I can still remember that Algarian you had a bit of a thing with. Where did we drop him off ?”

“Ok ok, I’ll sit still and be patient.”

The scanning used two automated drones, both of them causing the proximity alert system to flash yellow lights on the console. Half an hour to scan everything, fairly quick considering the number of containers they carried. Nothing got past the scanners, nothing at all. If anyone was trying to get a friend past Menderan Migration Control, they’d be met by a large and angry group of people from the Mendera Militia.

Napping was a criminal offence if you were in command of a Melak space vessel, a crime punishable by the loss of two fingers. It didn’t stop him from drifting off while the scanners worked. Someone was prodding him, none too gently.

“Wake up boss, we’re cleared to proceed.”

“Oh, thanks.”

Rhian handed him a cup of something hot and went back to her own seat. He looked long and hard at his second in command.

“What ?”

“Do I have to worry about the militia after we land Rhian ? Anything you need to tell me, any friends of yours we’re giving a free trip to Mendera ?”

She glared at him, but her face quickly changed to a smile.

“Not this trip, I promise.”

“Good.”

The energy fields were invisible, even their own scanners looked right through them. They had clearance though and Commander Firass had complete faith in the Menderan security systems.

“You take us in.” He said.

“But I’m not qualified, it would be illegal.”

“So is taking a nap... get it done Rhian. Just don’t bump into anything.”

There was no real risk in letting her land his precious but old vessel. Her hands moved over the console quicker than his, her reactions quicker. She even knew most of the flight manual by heart.

“Revised landing time is..... seven hours.” Said Rhian.

Rhian hadn’t set a course or speed before their on board computer was flashing proximity warning lights and becoming rather anxious about something. He was being shown the view from the rear of Sunrise and something was there.

“Where the hell did they come from ?”

“Must have de-cloaked and slid in behind us” Said Rhian. “They weren’t there five seconds ago. I checked the rear, always do.”

“I believe you Rhian. Call Mendera and tell them we need help.”

There wasn’t the reassuring background buss from their comms system.

“They’re jamming anything other than local.” Said Rhian. “Now if we had a newer craft, with better comms.....”

“I know.” He replied. “We’re flying a geriatric container vessel, built before you were born and designed a good twenty years before that. We’ll just have to wait and see what they want.”

The craft behind them wasn’t that small, it just looked small compared to their bulk. Some sort of variation on the imperial needle ships, it could well have a crew of over a hundred. It hung onto their tail, as they moved very slowly into the Menderan solar system.

“We have our weapons locked on you. Don’t deviate from your original flight plan.”

A female voice, could have been from any one of a dozen empire worlds and quite a few others.

“What do you want ?” He asked.

No reply, he looked at Rhian and shrugged. Mendera wouldn’t be worried, craft often took a few minutes to increase speed. Crews often made a meal while the scanning took place, or used the time in other ways. They had a few minutes before anyone became concerned about them.

“You’ve been told ! Keep to your flight plan and we’ll follow you down.”

“There are other checks and security system.” He said. “You’ll be spotted before we get anywhere close to the inner planets.”

“That’s our concern. Move !”

“Blow us up while you’re that close and you’ll go with us.”

Rhian looked scared, crap he was scared ! A new voice now, male and angry.

“We can burn a hole through you, from stem to stern and let the vacuum of space turn you inside out. Now move that pile of crap !”

He moved his hand and swiped it upward over the console. A green light came on to show him the main plasma drive had just briefly come to life. Still a little slower than normal, but they were on their way.

“You talk to them.” He said. “Tell them they need to move back so we can fire the drive properly. Go on about a plasma backwash or something.”

“They’ll never believe that.”

“You won’t know unless you try. I have an idea and it requires them to move back a bit.”

The position of the protection barrier was a secret of course. All commanders who regularly delivered goods to Mendera had a good idea of where it was though. The spot where you were told to slow down, the place you were allowed to accelerate back to full speed and in between..... He had a fairly good idea where the barrier was, but there were few clues and only one point of reference.

“You need to move back a little.” Said Rhian. “Or your systems will fry once we run the plasma drive at full power.”

It worked ! No reply to the message, but they’d moved back. He just hoped they’d moved back far enough.

“Strap yourself in.” He said.

“Oh crap ! Don’t forget how old this thing is.”

He pulled the belt over and hit the button twice, just tight enough to hold him in the seat and still be able to breathe.

There was just one true point of reference, a gas giant planet that filled about a tenth of the front view screen. For some reason known only to the Menderans, they'd called the beautiful blue planet, MGC 9. Time was the other factor, how long it normally took to get the all clear to go to full speed. Commander Firass knew roughly how long he had by the vessel's clock and how big MGC 9 would be on the screen. He pushed the engines up a little.

"If we try to go through at full speed, they'll vaporise us." Said Rhian.

"I know, have a little faith. I'm turning Sunrise off, so she's not tempted to stop me."

Wanderer class didn't have the large red button on the console, the one protected by a red hood. Someone though, probably an engineer, had known that someone might need to turn the damn computer off. He pulled the split pin out of the cover and lifted it.

"You're not supposed to turn it off." Said Rhian.

"They put that button there for a reason Rhian and this is it."

No klaxons, no shuddering as the craft ripped itself apart when he pressed the button. All that happened was that half the lights on the console went dark. He moved the engines to full and felt a slight vibration as the Sunrise began to accelerate.

"This takes me back a bit." He said.

Rhian was just watching him, a look of pure terror on her face. He used the old fashioned way to set instructions for the engines and navigation. The great unknown was the exact time for things to happen. He hated to admit it to himself, but much of it was pure guesswork.

"You'll rip her apart." Said Rhian. "She's old and you'll tear Sunrise in two."

"They made them to last when they built the Sprint Class, she'll do it."

Commander Firass looked at his list of pre-set commands and waited until the outer edge of MGC 9 was just touching the edge of the forward view screen. He pressed the start button on his list and wished the Sunrise had been built with better inertial damping.

"Here we go, hang on!" He yelled.

A dozen directional thrusters were mounted along the left side of the craft, spread out to reduce the torque at any one point. Not designed to reverse the ship, or run at full power together. They were all aimed forward and used at full power. He saw MGC 9 move across the view screen as the enormous craft swung around. He caught site of Rhian, clinging to her chair. The thrusters on the right hand side now, firing to the rear and at full power, turning the Sunrise in her own length.

"What are you doing ? We will fire on you."

The male voice again, more fear than anger in his voice. The massive plasma engines kicked in at full power, until the unknown needle craft collided with them. He saw it happen on the rear view screen, though there was no sound or tremor from Sunrise. Half a mile is a long way to be from the engines and their craft was far more massive than that of their enemy. Even a good pilot travelling that close would have found it hard to avoid them and their pilot hadn't seemed that good.

"They're going to hit the barrier Rhian." He said.

He hoped she was watching as the needle craft spun and headed for the invisible barrier. Sunrise had an imperial Ident, but they were no longer in their shadow. Travelling that fast and with no Ident, it was only going to end one way. The needle craft hit the barrier and was vaporised in just a few seconds. He heard Rhian cheer as their enemy was reduced to nothing but hot gas and plasma.

"I told you this old girl could do it." He said.

"Turn the computer back on." She replied. "There must be dozens of cracks in the outer hull for the systems to fix."

He pressed the button, quickly suppressing the inevitable warning klaxon. They were in bad shape but they'd won. He tried to connect with Mendera and was rewarded with the usual crackle as the comms connected.

"Ident MSUN 1456, we have an incident to report. An intruder tried to follow us through the barrier. They were destroyed, but our main drive is damaged beyond repair. We're currently drifting and in need of help."

"Incident already picked up. An imperial attack wing has been sent to assist you and investigate."

"Thank you Mendera."

Rhian was grinning at him and he had to grin back at her.

"An entire attack wing, for us !" He said. "We are honoured."

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Early evening on Mendera and Mo's personal shuttle had just put down on the roof of The Chaln e's palace. The shuttle was a new personal extravagance as Mendera was full of free to use public shuttles. He had more money than he knew what to do with and Silky had wanted to travel around Mendera in style. Mo always felt a strong desire to please the various females who had shared his life. There was always the nagging feeling that they found him a huge disappointment.

"Oh Mo, the view is beautiful."

"Yes, we're on the highest building in the city." He replied.

Mendera City was spread out before them, a jewel of twinkling lights, with huge spacecraft hanging in the air over the city. Full of pilgrims of course, from all over the empire, but nowhere was perfect. Even Kittara had learned to live with the constant flow of pilgrims.

"How many people do you think there'll be ?" Asked Silky.

"Difficult to say, these evening meals tend to be an informal gathering." He answered. "Members of The Guard come and go, others show up at random. I do believe the crew of that container transport have been invited. Could be a dozen people at dinner, maybe fifty."

"Doesn't that make discussions rather confusing ?"

"Yes, very. Sometimes though, the best ideas are born out of that confusion."

Stairs to descend the five floors to the ground level, lots of stairs. No lifts, moving stairways or gravity shafts. Mendera prided itself on being unchanging, stairs were everywhere. Every corridor they walked through was decorated with priceless art, paintings, sculptures, all gifts given to the emperor by adoring or fearful worlds. Silky kept stopping to admire the paintings.

"This is beautiful ! Can we come back Mo ? To look at it all properly."

"If you want, I have full access to the palace. There's miles of corridors though, piles of this stuff. I doubt if Sikush ever looks at any of it. I was actually tempted to turn some of it into coin once, if you get my meaning ?"

The glint in her dark eyes told him she understood his meaning. Silky even playfully thumped him on the arm with the end of her tail.

"Oh Mo ! Once a slum runner, always a slum runner. I suppose your conscience stopped you ?"

"No ! I just didn't want Kittara sat on my chest, with a demon blade at my throat."

The stairs ended near to Sikush's favourite veranda, giving them the opportunity to survey the room. Twenty or so people, all there to join the emperor for dinner. Most looking comfortable, a few looking lost and out of place.

"I think he invited the entire crew of the container carrier." Said Mo.

"They were very brave. Come on my dear, let's mingle."

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The meal had gone quite well and Sikush was pleased. One of the crew of the Melak Sunrise was an augmented male from a planet Mendera was still technically at war with, but even that had been laughed about over a few glasses of good wine.

"I can't think of many planets we haven't been at war with." He'd told his guests. "Sometimes more than one war."

The crew of the container vessel had been taken out into the gardens, to be filmed receiving their awards. It had to be the gardens, the number of media people wanting to attend had been huge. There had been the usual thank you given from the people of Mendera and various honorary, but meaningless titles. Money of course, everyone liked Imperial Credits. Not enough to change their lives, but enough to buy quite a few things to make it more comfortable. He'd deliberately steered Commander Firass and his second in command, away from the crowd.

"How long are you likely to be on Mendera?" He'd asked.

"Two days or so." Replied Rhian.

"My vessel has been declared beyond economical repair." Added Firass. "Once the containers are removed, they'll cut her up and send her off to Pineus for scrap. Sad end for a good vessel."

"Very sad." He agreed. "Would you like to stay here longer?"

"That would be nice, but they want us on the next Melak vessel to arrive." Said Firass.

"A wanderer class." Added Rhian. "Diverting especially to take us home."

He liked them, liked them both.

"At one time in less enlightened ages," he said, "they'd have believed heroes like you had been sent as gifts from the Gods. Sent to be in just the right place at just the right time."

They were smiling at him, indulging a crazy emperor's foibles. It had been a long time since living deities had walked the streets of Mendera City. Long enough for such things to be thought of as merely legends.

"Mendera has a fleet of modern freight carriers." He said. "We always need good crews and I feel we owe you much more than a few imperial credits. Think it over, but please stay for a while. I can arrange things with your company, make sure you're paid while you're here. Will you both stay?"

"I'd love to." Said Rhian.

"Well...yes fine." Added Firass.

Another advantage with being in the garden, was the opportunity to send the crew back to their various hotels and lodgings, without having to ask them to leave. No embarrassment, no awkward moments, to make sure only the right people remained at his dinner table. Sikush walked up a flight of winding steps from the garden and through the invisible barrier. Inside the temperature was a good ten degrees cooler than out in the garden, the humidity tolerable.

"Time to get down to business everyone." He called.

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Delmus had been teasing Alyz over something when Sikush called them to order. Several of The Guard were there, The Damned. Some invited, others turning up to simply to eat and drink a little wine. Everyone was tired and a little drunk, yet Sikush liked their meetings to be held at such times. It sounded crazy to outsiders, but the empire expanded and flourished. So many worlds that Delmus hadn't visited more than half of them and could only name about two thirds. The mightiest empire there had ever been and most of the key decisions were made after a decent meal and a few bottles of wine. Not fake Ushong, but the real stuff from the emperor's private stores.

"Carry on eating." Said Sikush. "I know some of you arrived later than others."

There would be no introductions, no working round the table, asking people to say a little about themselves. Sikush didn't work like that. There had been a long time over dinner to find out about each other, that was what his dinners were all about. Delmus knew everyone anyway, apart from the dark angel called Haan.

"He looks a bit lightweight." He'd muttered at Alyz.

"Some sort of protégé of Sventa's." She'd replied.

Hol had been invited, though she claimed not to know why. Mo he knew of course and Silky, an old ally from many battles out on the rifts. Minraver wasn't there, the other eternal, a female who rarely visited Mendera. Her absence was actually encouraging. Minraver only turned up when the situation was several notches beyond desperate.

"We have a new enemy." Said Sikush. "An unknown attacker who has tried to breach our defences. The mere fact that they are unknown to us, illustrates how dangerous they might be."

"They destroyed my home, killed my servants and seemed to vanish." Said Mo. "No bodies, even in the destroyed raptors."

"Same here." Added Sventa. "My people found no bodies in the craft they brought down, not even a speck of blood."

"That can be done." Said Chlo.

Chlo, using her true organic form to attend the meeting.

"Some sort of return to sender gadget that will fit into a warrior's uniform." She continued. "Maran forces used something like it. We're not likely to be fighting ghosts."

"I hope not!" Said Haan.

For an emperor, Sikush was quite relaxed about being talked over and having the flow of his words interrupted. He listened; Delmus had noted that over the countless millennia he had been attending such meetings. Sikush listened and thought about what he heard. A rare thing for an emperor.

"I'm going to assign various tasks to most of you." Said Sikush. "They may seem unconnected, but they are all part of the bigger picture. Hol first I think."

Hol Azreemy put down her glass and looked instantly alert. Hol was a child of a family of clerics, thought to be destined for great things in the temple. Instead she'd trained hard as a warrior and been selected to be one of The Damned.

"I'm going to tell you there is a group of traitors among the clerics." Said Sikush. "Among those who serve the flame no less. I'd like you to investigate the matter and ideally prove me wrong. If I'm right you will need to discover who these subversives are."

Traitors at the Temple of the Flame. It was unthinkable, yet no one was laughing. Hol wasn't looking happy about her new mission. Kittara had once been assigned to keep The Temple of the Flame secure and had ended up being there for close to a thousand years. All The Guard dreaded being sent to guard clerics. It was only mildly preferable to clearing growlers out of the storm drains.

"The Chief Cleric has her own internal security." Said Hol. "They are a little methodical, but thorough. They have never found any evidence of heresy or subversion."

No one else but Hol could get away with such talk. Questioning orders was one thing, but she seemed to be hovering around saying her mission was wrong. Delmus sipped his drink and wondered if Sikush would send her to clear the storm drains for a few decades.

"Desa Ubari is an old friend and a first class academic Hol." Said Sikush. "She is not a leader though. I'm sending you into The Temple as head of security for a while. I do promise it won't be for a thousand years."

Haan looked a little confused by the laughter, but everyone else seemed to understand the joke. Even Hol had joined in with the laughter.

"You have my authority to overrule Desa on matters of security." Sikush continued. "If she objects, remind her that I am head of the Menderan Church and built the temple she lives in. Dig about Hol, make waves, upset people if you have to. Prove me wrong or bring me a list of subversives."

"Yes Sikush." Said Hol.

Who next ? Sikush looked round the table, his eyes stopping on Sventa and Haan. No, he swung round and looked straight at him.

"Delmus next I think. We need Lurisia and you know her rather well."

The lies were said so often that he'd almost come to believe them himself.

"I haven't seen Luri for several Ages of the Temple." He said. "I have no way of contacting her."

Sikush and Chlo both simply gave him that long hard stare, the one that says you've been found out.

"We know !" Said Chlo.

Silence in the room as he wondered if the years of lying amounted to treason. He'd gone on the run from Xanash once, the last great demon emperor. Xanash didn't have Chlo though, there was no hiding from her.

"I'm sorry." He said. "Luri insisted that our.... Relationship had to be a secret."

"I knew it." Alyz hissed at him.

"Lying to your emperor is treason." Said Chlo. "Punishable by death or banishment."

Delmus simply looked up, waiting to hear his fate. Instead he saw Sikush smiling at him.

"If I banished or killed everyone who lied to me, I'd be the only person left on Mendera." Said Sikush. "We need Luri and you need to go and get her."

"I have a way to contact her." He replied. "There is no way I can force her to come. She isn't really on our side anymore."

"We really do need a deity Delmus, even a dark one. Bring her to Mendera ! Take Alyz with you, she'll keep you focused."

Delmus nodded and hoped he'd be able to persuade Luri to help the empire, while ignoring Alyz digging her elbow into his ribs.

"Smile, it'll be fun." She whispered.

The Chalné hadn't finished, his gaze shifted to the far end of the table, where Mo and Silky were sitting.

"Mo, your rather unique gifts will be needed, but not yet. Have fun and settle into your new home while you wait. Don't leave Mendera, or you're likely to have a short life expectancy."

"We won't." Answered Silky.

"I'd appreciate it if you'd befriend Commander Firass and his second in command." Said Sikush. "I'd like your thoughts on them both, especially yours Silky."

"Yes of course Sikush." Said Silky.

Mo just nodded, but it was obvious that Silky was pleased. Sikush only had Sventa to deal with and Delmus was interested in what he might have in mind for the dark angel.

"Sventa and of course Haan." Said Sikush. "Pineus isn't under my command, but I'd appreciate your help. There a mission ideally suited to your skills and that of your dark angels."

"Of course Sikush." Replied Sventa. "I once took an oath to serve the empire, one I will never break."

Haan actually looked surprised at her words. Once again Delmus wondered why she'd brought him to Mendera.

"I have a search and destroy mission for you." Said Sikush. "I know how much you love those."

~ ~

Silky waited until they were home in the rooms above the emporium, before telling Mo something that might ruin both their lives.

“What is wrong ?” Asked Mo. “You’ve been quiet all night. Sikush was even trying to give you a few compliments.”

“I know, it’s just that..... If I tell you something, will you promise not to tell anyone what I said, ever ?!”

“I need to get comfortable for this.” Answered Mo.

Once all the curtains had been closed and a few lights turned on, they sat on their favourite sofa. Mo briefly stood up and came back with two glasses of something yellow and alcoholic.

“I know we’ve already had quite a bit to drink.” He said. “It’s just that I think we might need these.” He sipped his drink and kissed her cheek.

“So, you want me to promise not to tell anyone what you might say, even though I have no idea what it is ?”

“When you say it like that ! A lot of people in Mendera City have never trusted me. If they think I was spying..... I wasn’t though, just being curious.”

“I give you my word not to tell anyone, ever. Now tell me ?”

“Sventa knows where we hid the crate full of metal pages, Nurigen’s book.”

Mo suddenly stopped smiling and looked old, very old. He drank his glass of liquor in two large gulps.

“Tell me exactly what you heard ?”

“It’s just that I could feel something between Haan and Sventa and thought they might be lovers. I followed them while the crew of that container vessel received their awards.... Don’t be angry Mo, I wasn’t spying, not really.”

“I’m not angry Silky. Just tell me the words they used ?”

“Haan asked if you were the Mo she’d often spoken about. She said that you were. He then asked and I remember it exactly. ‘Is he the same Mo who hid the grimoire in the mountains ?’”

Mo was quiet as she drank her own drink and wished he didn’t look so upset. Eventually he hugged her.

“We’ll need to move the crate.” He said. “Just us Silky, on our own. No one else can ever share the secret of the grimoire’s new hiding place.”

“Last time we had the hybrid warriors to help us.” She said.

“Yes and we thought we’d left them all dead on the rifts. Obviously one lived long enough to pass on the secret. I’ll think about a new place and then you can spin up a portal.”

“Chlo said they can locate portals.”

“They may, but this is important my love. Will you do it for me when the time comes ?”

“Of course I will.”

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