

Mendera Temple

Chapter 18 – A New Age of the Temple

“Do you still intend to go past gateway ?”

“To Leng you mean ? Yes of course I do, and beyond.”

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“I will be back Emp, I promise.”

Kittara had spent half the night in front of the flame in the temple and she'd said her goodbyes to Sikush. There had been talk of a large group of friends going with her to the 6th rift, but she'd told them she was going to use a portal to get to gateway. It was a lie, she was going the long route, but she wanted to go alone. Arriving with a group of The Damned, a deity and a dark angel didn't seem right. She prodded her now very old Menura cat in his tummy and enjoyed hearing his friendly purring sound. Estrid's cat had made it to about eighty thousand years old before dying, but Emperor Xeod was now over half a billion years old. His fur was completely grey and he no longer ran very far, but otherwise he seemed good for another half billion.

“You still want to go alone ?” Asked Sventa.

“Yes, it will give me a few days to get my thoughts organised.”

“You've had half a billion years !”

Sventa was gone, entered the grey and vanished. There had been days of tension, Sventa had even talked about finding her own home. Kittara put Emp on the ground and took a last look at her garden and hoped the Kittara that returned from Leng still appreciated it. Estrid was more controlled, but there had still been a strained goodbye the day before. Sventa was upset at losing someone she'd thought of as a sibling for years, but Estrid was worried about what might return with her, how much darkness might enter Mendera.

“Hol would like to see you.” Said Chlo.

“Allow her access.”

Hol was wearing full uniform and carrying weapons and a large back pack.

“I'm not letting you go alone.”

“I really want to do the journey on my own.”

Hol put her pack on the floor and opened it, bringing out a piece of redish brown rock.

“I picked this up outside gateway, the last time we went there. Call it a tradition if you like, our trips to the 7th rift, but I'm coming with you.”

Kittara nodded and laughed as she picked up her own backpack and weapons.

“You'll miss the celebrations for the 15th age of the Temple.” She said.

“There'll be another.”

Another last look around and a final rub of her cat's head and she was ready to go. Chlo was going to look after her house and Sventa had promised to give Emp as much company as he could stand.

Kittara moved her reality to the roof of the well sentinel temple, Hol arriving with her.

“You'll be back soon enough.” Said Hol.

“Who will I be then though ?”

It was the 1st morning of the 15th age of the temple and Mendera was filling with clerics from all over the empire and many worlds beyond. In many ways it was a perfect time for Kittara to be away, but she was going to miss the carnival atmosphere of the great celebration. They entered the well rift gate together and arrived at what had once been a deserted village.

“Think they can come and go as they please !”

The fertile land was being farmed again, by the people of Ixir. Not that they went by that name now, they referred to themselves as the chosen and believed a nonsense about being given the 1st rift by some kind of beneficent god. In a way of course they were right, but all mention of being saved by the empire had vanished from their history over the last half a billion years or so. The City they now called Haven and only the extremely wealthy were allowed to live within its walls.

“I haven’t been this way in years,” said Hol, “do they attack us these days ?”

“No, they just glare and use insults, some quite inventive.”

A group of farmers were eyeing them up and looking hostile, though Kittara knew none had ever offered any real violence. Sventa had hunted them for millennia and they associated her with the Guard, it was hardly surprising that they weren’t welcome. There was even the change in the air now, it was beginning to smell of old Ixir.

“We’ll fly to the rift gate.” Said Kittara.

Kittara rose into the air and climbed to over a thousand feet, Hol following her. The rift below was crammed with the countless billions of the chosen. They had left areas for cultivation, but the general impression of the 1st rift was of drabness and grey buildings. Kittara flew fast, heading over the mountains and towards the rift gate to the 2nd rift.

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“Who do you think will start a rebellion ?” Asked Sikush.

He was in his robing room behind the Grand Council chambers and Jen was helping him fit into the ceremonial robes and ornate crown. Chlo had found the items in the imperial store and they were in perfect condition, but the robes didn’t seem to hang right.

“I think you’ve put on weight.” Said Jen.

Alyz was looking through a gap in the door and examining the councillors and other dignitaries who’d been invited to the big event.

“The Maran Group,” she said, “they’ve been wanting a fight for a very long time.”

Herusher was on the floor of the chamber and trying to bring everyone to order, though it was proving a hard job.

“The Maran’s have their own problems,” said Jen, “they’re not the power they once were.”

The robes were on and Sikush felt slightly ridiculous, but the start of a new age required fancy dress and a certain amount of indignity.

“You look fantastic.” Said Alyz.

“I look like an idiot.”

He looked down at layers of purple and red robes and sighed. Thankfully after today it could all go back into stasis in the store for another eight hundred billion years, give or take. There was the sound of something heavy being struck on the floor, Herusher’s signal that his council were ready for him. Alyz held the door open and he carefully walked into the council chamber. Silence greeted him and not a word was said as he took several minutes to slowly walk to his chair. He remained standing, looking at the crowded tiers of seating in the huge chamber.

“Thank you,” he said, “for attending the start of the 15th Age of the Temple.”

Now there was cheering and quite a lot of genuine smiles. Everyone loved state occasions, the grander the better. That was why he’d chosen this day to change the structure of the empire, a structure that hadn’t changed since..... well since almost forever. When the cheering stopped he continued.

“This occasion needs to be marked and how better than by increasing the core members of the empire. There are now more than six thousand planets under the protection of the empire, so it seems fitting to increase the core planets from five to twenty.”

He paused and there was applause, many of the representatives of the lesser members of the empire getting to their feet. After all, their planet might be invited into the inner core one day.

“Menura has been filling the gap left by Ixir for some time,” he continued, “it seems only right to ratify their position and bring the following fifteen planetary systems into the core council.”

He read the list of names very slowly, allowing cheering and applause after every name. They knew the list of course, the empire had been working on today’s events for millions of years. Nothing was every decided on the day of a vote, that could mean the unthinkable, the empire losing a vote.

Sikush had been working on the core and the other planets for some time, softening up views, encouraging a more open view to expansion of the council and of course, good old fashioned bribery. There was no chance of a no vote on expansion of the core. The only unknown was who would start a rebellion, he knew someone would.

“Please attend to the voting instructions,” shouted Herusher, “all those saying yes to expansion of the core empire please signify.”

The chamber looked very quaint and old fashioned, but in reality Chlo counted the raised hands and instantly put a count into not only the language, but also the local dialect of the councillors, before feeding the information into their head sets. There had been the occasional recount, but today the raised hands were 95% of the councillors present. This wasn’t a core vote, this was for the entire council of member planets, there were no vetoes or blocks by abstention. Herusher didn’t even bother asking for an indication of no votes.

“The imperial motion is passed,” he said, “from today the fifteen new planetary systems will join the core council.”

He’d won and in future it would be far easier to guarantee getting what he wanted from the core council. Getting a majority out of the fifteen new members would be easier than manipulating the long standing members. Sikush rose to his feet and caught Herusher’s eye.

“Silence, the emperor speaks.”

Very few knew what he intended to say and he saw a sea of confused faces in front of him.

“There is a matter I’d like to deal with as part of the expansion,” he said, “Menura has never asked for an enclave on Mendera and in fact removing the Ixir enclave caused problems, there were quite a few deaths. I did think of an amendment to the rules so that the new members have no right to an enclave, after all you can travel to the furthest reaches of the empire in under a day.”

He paused and there were lots of nodding heads, most of the council resented core members having millions of their citizens on Mendera. But Sikush hadn’t quite finished.

“That though would seem to be unfair,” he continued, “unless the existing enclaves are cleared and the populations in them sent home. I would like therefore to amend the empire structure so that no member planet may have an enclave on Mendera and that all existing enclaves should be removed within fifty years.”

It caught them by surprise and he hadn’t given them any time to discuss the idea. Even Herusher was unsure if a vote was needed and he was looking straight at Sikush for a clue.

“Please put the removal of the enclaves to the council.” Said Sikush.

It was outrageous and he knew it, but he wanted the enclaves gone. The councillors were in a good mood, they wanted to leave the chamber and get on with the celebration and they seemed in a mood to say yes.

“Please attend to the voting instructions,” shouted Herusher, “all those saying yes to the removal of the enclaves please signify.”

The councillors were confused, many seemed unsure of what they were voting on, but the hands went up and Chlo announced that 96% of available votes were for yes. There would be a few objectors, perhaps a few mutters about fairness, but the vote had been won.

“Now I’ve taken up enough of your time,” said Sikush, “and I have duties at the temple to attend to.” There was a lot of cheering, mainly from the new core planets, but the councillor from Ventella gave him a knowing wink. Sikush walked slowly back into the robing room, where Jen helped him out of the heavy and uncomfortable robes.

“So, it’s the New Keo Group.” Said Alyz.

“Really?! I am surprised.”

“Their councillors rushed out as the vote was taken,” said Alyz, “you missed them in all the smiling faces, but Chlo noticed their exit and the looks on their faces.”

He removed the crown of office, pleased that it was going back into store for a very long time. The time lines were giving odd results, it was all the deities causing mayhem in their machinations against each other. Chlo could see a rebellion in the empire, but not who caused it. He linked with Chlo and asked for Herusher and Jen to be at the palace after he’d performed his duties at the temple. War with New Keo! It was unexpected and the Guard were in the wrong places, he’d guessed at the Maran group and he’d been wrong.

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“Delmus, get out of the shower or we’ll miss everything!”

Luri was back on Mendera and hopefully back for some time. Annill had been a victory for Kittara and the Genova, but Luri had been the commander of the cities defences. To the people of Mendera and the empire, Luri had won the day against ridiculous odds. At first Luri had argued, but the fame did make getting resources for Annill easier, so she used it for all it was worth.

“Where is my bag with the underwear?” Asked Delmus.

He was clean and almost dry, but completely naked.

“We’re in Mendera now, get your clothes from Chlo.”

They’d been away so long that Luri sometimes felt like one of the wide eyed colonials from the outer planets. The noise of the common channel in her head was so strange after the peace of the rifts and both of them kept forgetting Chlo was there. Delmus shimmered and was in a crisp new uniform.

“I didn’t realise how much I missed Chlo.” Said Delmus.

He stood in front of her mirror and admired the creases in his uniform, in Annill they’d settled for clothes being clean and relatively free of holes.

“Babak must be missing clean uniforms already.” Said Luri.

After several millennia being trained by Herusher and Sikush, Babak was now the commander of the Annill army and he was made for the role. Something of a recluse with a real talent for tactics, he was a far better military leader than Luri. Nurigen had stayed with him; the weapon smith had always been more at home on the rifts, than in Mendera City. Three generations was all it had taken to restore Annill to its former glory and for the population to recover.

“The Council meeting will be over,” said Delmus, “we could go to the temple?”

Sex had been their downfall. Sex and several bottles of a particularly strong brew they’d drunk on a Ventellan freighter. Not that either of them remembered why they’d been on a freighter, but the party there had been memorable.

“Or we could go to Merc Square and watch the clerics proclaim the start of the new age?”

Delmus smiled at her.

“Fewer speeches and lots of food and drink stalls.” He said.

They moved their realities from the barracks to Merc Square. Moving reality was something else they hadn't used for a very long time and Luri tripped and bumped into a tourist from Pineus. Not that it mattered, everyone was in a party mood, which meant being fairly intoxicated. Delmus found a stall selling a vile blue liquid, but it had a high alcohol content, so he bought two large glasses of it. One distinct advantage of being one of The Damned, was being able to eat or drink almost anything, in the knowledge that it was unlikely to harm you.

“Did we miss the proclamation?” He asked the stall holder.

“No sir, they seem to be a bit late.”

Then the doors that never open began to open, they were some distance away, but they could hear the grinding of the doors over millions of years' worth of dirt and grit. Five of the Guard per door it took to force them open and the crowd started to look into the corridor beyond the doors. Statues of previous heads of the temple, murals of famous scenes from empire history, but not this empire. These were scenes commissioned in the days of Thrax and they were of battles when the empire was on Optilion and the capital city was Garanesh.

“It brings back my first time,” said Delmus, “when Sikush gave me the tour of the temple by foot. It took us all day, but I still remember every word he said.”

“There was no temple for me. The holy of holies was then on board Leviathan.” Said Luri.

The crowd was getting a bit too close, a bit too curious about what was inside the doors. The mercs formed into a line and pushed the crowd back, but still the atmosphere was friendly and cordial.

“The clerics from inside are coming out.” Someone shouted.

The population of Mendera were used to the clerics who wore plain brown robes, or maybe dark green. The clerics who were usually quiet, sedate and often a little boring. Out of the doors came several hundred young clerics in bright yellow robes. It was the only opportunity any cleric from the temple ever got to go outside and they were making the most of it. There was laughter; there was a great deal of energy and enthusiasm. Then the tone changed completely as the head of the temple was carried through the doors on a throne attached to long poles.

“Who is this one?” Asked Delmus.

“A woman this time,” answered Luri, “a descendent of Ojetin I believe.”

The poles holding the throne were long, there must have been at least a hundred senior clerics carrying her out onto the square and the crowd moved back. Finally the throne was lowered to the ground in the centre of the square, some stalls actually had to be lifted out of the way.

“Some entrance.” Said Delmus.

There was no retirement age for the head of the temple, you served in the role until death and then you were buried within the precincts of the temple. Nelus the 18th was a very old lady and she was having trouble standing up. A young girl cleric in yellow robes came forward to help her and Luri recognised Estrid only a second or so before the crowd realised who it was. As she helped Nelus to her feet the deity seemed to glow from within.

“People of Mendera,” said Nelus, “listen well, for this is not a date created by men or women, or any other living beings.”

Her voice was firm and heard by most, those at the back of the crowd watched it later on the news channels.

“The multiverse itself has decided this date,” she continued, “I therefore declare today as the first day of the 15th age of the temple.”

The crowd went crazy, some offering drinks to the young clerics. It took the arrival of a small group of the Guard to regain order and eventually Nelus the 18th was carried back into the temple and the huge doors were closed and sealed.

"I thought Sikush decided on the date?" Asked Delmus.

Luri winked at him and bought another two glasses of the truly awful bright blue drink.

"But I'm sure he had divine inspiration." She said.

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"A bed for the night would be nice," said Hol, "but the decision is yours."

They'd made good time across the 2nd rift and now they were looking at the great walled city of Quron, the start of the great pilgrim's trail that ended at Tandalla on the 5th rift. Kittara hadn't been to Quron in a very long time, but the region looked the same. A mixture of nomadic peoples and local tribes who made a hand to mouth living from their Shuud, a herbivore that lived on the local grasses. Shuud had a skin and fur that made very good clothing and their sweet tasting meat was highly sought after. Apart from agriculture, the main employment in Quron was as thieves and assassins for hire. Name any of the blood wars and an army of mercenaries from Quron had fought in it.

"They're not that keen on outsiders," said Kittara, "I'd like a bed, but we may have to fight our way out in the morning."

"All the better." Said Hol.

A few simple spells and their long cloaks and they became just two more travellers starting along the pilgrim route. The gates of the city were wedged open and hadn't been closed in centuries. There were bandits on the rifts and a few surviving undead, but no one had launched an attack on Quron itself in living memory. A bored looking guard was leaning against one of the huge city gates.

"Can you recommend a clean tavern with rooms?" Kittara asked him.

Without her link to Chlo, she was relying on her own language skills and her Quron tongue was perfect, but perfect for many centuries before. The Guard gave her a long hard stare before answering.

"Clean is rare," he said, "but The Zealot's Rest is better than most and they don't charge visitor rates, if you get my meaning. Go down the main road through the city until you get to a square with two large trees, then ask again."

They thanked the guard and left him leaning against the gate, but they knew he was staring at them as they walked away.

"He'll remember us." Said Hol.

"As I said," said Kittara, "they don't take to strangers in Quron."

The city smelt of strange spices and animal dung and the mixture wasn't entirely unpleasant. Most of the buildings were two storeys high and built from a local stone, but a few buildings went up to four or even five floors and they were often decorated in colourful tiles.

"Some of these buildings look better than Mendera," said Hol, "I never realised rift cities were like this."

"Few are Hol, but Quron has made its money from fighting other people's wars. This city isn't the usual collection of mud huts you see on the rifts."

They found the square with its two large trees and the tavern was easy to spot by a large clean sign hanging over the entrance. Three floors and made of brown brick, the tavern looked solid and well looked after.

"Do you know any Quron?" Asked Kittara.

“No, only about four words and two of those are insults.”

“Looks like I’m doing the talking again then.”

In Tandalla the population was mainly hybrids, but in Quron they still valued pure bloods and the owner of The Zealot’s Rest was a huge pure blood Dredger Demon. Skin the colour of wet mud, four arms and two muscular legs, you didn’t mess with pure blood dredgers.

“We’d like a room for the night,” said Kittara, “and food.”

Dredgers could be hard to sex, but Kittara knew this one was a dominant male and he’d twitched at her old fashioned use of language.

“Travelled from far have you ?” He asked.

“Far enough.”

The dredger grunted at her, but they agreed a price on a room with two beds and it appeared they had a dining room that opened in an hour or so.

“Open to anyone, our food is famous.” He said.

No one offered to carry their packs, so they climbed the stairs to the 2nd floor and found their room. There were no locks on any of the room doors, locks were technology and technology tended to fall apart on the rifts.

“It’s clean,” said Hol, “and it is only for one night.”

“We can buy a tent and some bedding tomorrow.”

They put their packs in a large wardrobe and pushed their weapons under the bed. The view from the window was just the wall of another building, you needed to be on the 3rd floor to see over the roof tops.

“Do we go down to eat ?” Asked Hol.

“Of course, I’ll put sealing spells over the door and window.”

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“You’re really saying that all our forces are being used ?”

Sikush sat in his favourite chair on his favourite veranda and listened to the two people he was trusting to run the Menderan forces. It appeared that the deities were causing problems on the edges of the empire.

“There are no direct attacks on the empire,” said Jen, “but some planets get caught in the cross fire, often simply by a natural catastrophe being triggered.”

Herusher was the quiet one who simply sat there, glum faced, waiting to put his own point of view. Herusher looked so old, Sikush never had understood why he’s chosen to look old after conversion to the damned and now he looked even older. Luri had once remarked.

“In the Guard everyone can look young and beautiful, so Herusher decided to look like that ?!”

Jen on the other hand was becoming very animated, as she tried to explain how over three hundred thousand of the best warriors the multiverse had ever seen, had been used up in peace keeping operations.

“We’ve always known there could be a problem,” said Herusher, “relying on a relatively few extremely powerful warriors. We saw the risk with the Dracc.”

Sikush reached for his drink while he thought the matter over. He was tempted to convene a full meeting of his advisers, but they were all enjoying the celebration and it might be a very long time until they next had a chance to enjoy themselves.

“Why are we spread so thin Jen ?” He asked.

Chlo appeared and a screen appeared out of nowhere that started to fill with a list of planet names and the numbers of the Guard deployed.

“We’re being bled dry of resources,” said Jen, “over three hundred separate incidents, right across the outer worlds. They request assistance at what appear to be natural disasters, or an incident indirectly caused by the war between the deities.”

He was looking at the numbers and realising his virtually indestructible army was being spread so thin that it was useless as a fighting force.

“We trained a force where five or six could subdue an entire planet,” said Herusher, “but peacekeeping and emergency aid requires thousands. We can’t refuse to help and if we send too few of the Guard, we risk destabilising the outer empire.”

He saw the numbers and there was no arguing with the logic of where his army had gone.

“They’re very good at,” added Jen, “considering they were never trained for, or intended to be used in this way.”

“Do we have any reserves?” He asked.

The numbers came up on the screen, they were down to a mere five thousand of the elite as a garrison on Mendera.

“The minimum garrison number. A number you set yourself Sikush.” Said Chlo.

They’d defeated the Kivar with five thousand, but that would leave Mendera undefended and there was something about the numbers on the screen that bothered him.

“Are these events connected Chlo?” He asked.

“Unconnected events in different bubbles of the multiverse, most are unforeseen side effects rather than a direct attack on the empire,” said Chlo, “some are likely to be genuine natural disasters, the chance of them being.....”

Sikush put up his hand to interrupt her.

“I’m sorry Chlo, but humour me. Run timelines for each event while we finish our drinks, look at patterns, calculate the probability of there being a design behind it all.”

Sikush slowly sipped his drink while Jen and Herusher looked worried, Everyone was trying not to stare at Chlo as she sat cross legged on the floor. They knew she was hurtling along timelines and carrying out almost impossible calculations based on probabilities. It took longer than it took Sikush to finish his drink, it was two hours before Chlo looked straight at Sikush.

“They’re very good,” she said, “so good they nearly hid it from me, but yes there is an 80% probability that these events were created, seemingly at random, to deplete our forces.”

Chlo began to slowly pace up and down the room, but Sikush didn’t pace, he thought the problem through. He’d anticipated something like this when Kittara left for her time beyond gateway, he’d even planned to use such an opportunity to settle a few old scores.

“At least two of the deities are working together on this.” Said Chlo.

“I think we can use names,” said Sikush, “Sevril and Tenneth are making their move, and we are left with nothing between us and the imminent attack from the New Keo Group, which consists of, Chlo?”

More numbers came up on the screen, ground troops, various classes of star ships, numbers of special forces, mercenaries recently hired.

“That is a hell of a force.” Said Jen.

“Their technology is fairly old.” Said Herusher.

“It doesn’t matter when you’ve that many troops.” Said Sikush.

He linked with the part of Chlo that shared his mind and changed a plan he’d put together a very long time ago, something he’d talked over with Babak when they’d both had time to play a game of what if.

“There will be no war committee,” he said, “no outward sign that we’re aware that we know there is a plan behind events in the outer empire. We don’t bring any of the Guard back, we don’t use any of the reserve. To anyone outside of this room it will appear that it is business as usual across the empire.”

He looked at three expectant faces, even Chlo was unsure what he had in mind. Good, if she couldn’t guess, then neither would Sevril or the damn New Keo leadership.

“Mikan Gheen the current leader of the Kivar is on Mendera and will be attending a formal dinner in the palace this evening. I will ask him for a private word after dinner and I want you three to attend.”

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“Couldn’t we buy a beast of some kind to carry all this ?” Hol had asked.

Kittara had smiled at her.

“Luri and Delmus once did that and from what they said it wasn’t fun.”

They did have a lot to carry now, with a tent to sleep in, various bed rolls and of course the packs they’d started with. They could carry it all quiet easily, but it was awkward to carry and might make fighting difficult. That was a problem as a dozen heavily armed fighters were waiting for them half a mile outside the city gates.

“The guard at the gate or the sulky tavern owner ?” Asked Hol.

“Either of them, or someone on the street who liked the look of our boots.”

Who had told the bandits they were worth robbing they might never know, but the group in front of them looked serious. It was supposed to be a quiet trip, a chance to contemplate on what might await her beyond gateway, but she was dropping her gear onto the dry ground and reaching for a weapon.

“I could incinerate them from here if you like ?” Said Hol.

It was tempting, but they hadn’t ambushed them or come up from behind. The bandits were facing them and obviously had some warped sense of honour when it came to a fight. Kittara dropped the rest of her kit and decided on her demon short sword, it hadn’t tasted blood in quite a while.

“Leave one alive,” said Kittara, “he can carry the tent.”

The fight lasted less than a minute and would have been quicker if they’d decided who to leave alive in advance. Kittara took the heads off two large dredgers, only to see Hol ignore two others who were coming up on them fast.

“Which one did you want ?” Called Hol.

“Green boots will do, he looks strong.”

They incinerated the bodies, they didn’t want to leave a trail of bodies behind them on the rifts. Green boots was a dredger hybrid of some kind, but he seemed docile after seeing his friends killed so easily.

“One has a decent ale in his water bottle.” Said Hol.

They even gave green boots some of the excellent ale before loading him up with the tent and prodding him to keep in front of them.

“Are you going to kill me ?” He asked.

“Not if you do as you’re told.”

Kittara put the bed rolls around his neck, it was quite a load, but he seemed to cope quite well.

“What are we going to do with him,” asked Hol, “we can’t take him all the way to gateway ?”

Green boots half turned and seemed interested in their conversation.

“Don’t worry Hol, the first time we pull him through a portal it’ll probably kill him.”

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The formal dinner in the palace was going very well. Only heads of planets were invited, presidents, kings, queen, self-styled emperors, even a few holy patriarchs who'd seen the sense of joining the empire. Every person sat at various tables in several connecting halls was the leader of an entire planet, or their plus one. There was a pecking order of course. The core planets were in the main hall with Sikush, a few very well thought of leaders were actually on his table. Then the lesser planets were in other rooms and might just see Sikush through an open doorway, if they were very lucky. Thousands of people from thousands of different worlds, all fed just the right dish that Chlo knew they'd enjoy and more importantly wasn't in some way toxic to them. There was no sharing of food on these tables, no tempting someone with the 'to die for' dish you were enjoying. Your delicious food might really be to die for if eaten by a being with a different DNA structure, or one of the few who didn't have DNA at all.

"Superb Chlo, better than last time." Said Sikush.

Most of the guests around the table laughed, but he hadn't meant the compliment as a joke. Chlo smiled, the original version of Chlo, the one he'd invited to sit on his right side at the dinner. Around the rooms many thousands of versions of her were looking after the guests. Versions that all looked unique, yet were all Chlo and capable of doing everything the original could do.

"There were far less guests last time." She whispered to him.

She was right, last time they'd just used the side halls and the main banqueting hall had been used for live music and dancing. Chlo informed him that everyone seemed to have finished eating so he stood up, it was the signal that the meal was over. Tables would be moved, an area for the elderly to sit would be created and the main floor of the hall would be given over to several live musical acts. Then there would be dancing that would last most of the night.

"Did you move the music schedules?" He asked Chlo.

They were walking now, heading towards the halls for the lesser planets and the leaders not fully members of the empire. In one of those halls was Mikan Gheen and his partner.

"Yes," said Chlo, "the Menuran singer is moved to quite late in the night. She was actually quite pleased when I said it was at the request of the emperor."

Good, he liked live music and the girl had a particularly haunting voice. So much of the entertainment of the empire was recorded these days, but there was nothing quite like the real thing.

"Thank you my emperor, the food was superb."

He had to acknowledge the Ventellan, it was expected, but he really wanted to cross the room without having to stop too often.

"I'm glad you enjoyed it, the live music will begin soon."

He walked away quickly, avoiding any questions about the New Keo Group and the two empty chairs at the main table. Tomorrow the news channels would be full of gossip about it, but he'd deal with that then. As he approached, Mikan said something to his wife and walked towards the palace gardens, Sikush and Chlo following him out into the night.

"Block everything and everyone Chlo." He said.

Several of The Damned appeared and stood just outside the garden doors, no curious guest was going to find out what Sikush was talking to the Kivar leader about.

"Mikan it's good to see you, I'm just sorry you weren't in the main room."

"No need to apologise, I understand the need for a certain etiquette in these matters."

Mikan took hold of his arm, it was obvious the Kivar leader thought of him as a genuine friend.

Sikush allowed a few seconds to pass before leading Mikan to some chairs by an ornamental pond.

Sikush had no real feeling of friendship for the Kivar leader but he often thought that was one of the key abilities needed by an emperor; the ability to make everyone believe you are their real friend.

"I noticed New Keo didn't make an appearance." Said Mikan.

Chlo provided refreshments and Herusher and Jen arrived and sat themselves beside the pond.

"New Keo aren't even hiding their preparations for war," said Jen, "our probes show their fleets being armed and they are hiring mercenaries from our enemies."

Sikush was about to make a game of what if, a reality. It was a good plan though and it was all he had.

"I once visited you Mikan, with Babak and we talked about a plan involving a hypothetical attack by the Maran Group."

"But the Marans are now valued members of the empire and New Keo are about to attack." Said Mikan.

Jen and Herusher were looking confused, but they'd know soon enough about his plan.

"I am now asking you to commit the entire Kivar fleet to an attack on The New Keo Group. Once your fleet is in position I will expel New Keo from the empire and issue an imperial edict, promoting your world to the inner core of the empire."

Mikan Gheen was large, even for the Kivar. His huge frame filled the chair and none of it was fat, everything was solid muscle. He looked concerned, the first time Sikush had ever seen a Kivar looked concerned about anything.

"I will make you that commitment, we will destroy their fleet for you. But their leadership are probably already in the deep bunkers. I can't commit our ground troops to a long drawn out war."

"I have someone who can deal with their leaders." Said Sikush.

Mikan nodded and took a sip from the huge glass Chlo had given him.

"I must now ask you for a commitment old friend," he said, "we also talked of the long term future of my people. Will you now promise me that future?"

"The Arcadians once extracted such a promise from me, which I kept. It didn't work out as they hoped, there is a natural cycle to the multiverse and we interfere with it at our peril."

"We are not Arcadians ! The Kivar will never return to living in the forest and collecting nuts to eat. You will have our fleet, but I require your promise about our future."

Sikush gave a long sigh, but he took hold of Mikan's huge hand.

"You have my promise, the emperors promise."

"Good, then I must return to prepare the fleet for war."

"And I now need to tell Jen and Herusher what we've just agreed."

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"There are dunes now." Said Hol.

They stood on top of a large dune of dirty grey sand and looked at the city of Tandalla. Not the largest city on the rifts, but certainly the richest.

"They're new," said Kittara, "they started building up a million years ago, after the last drought."

They'd been on the rifts for three days since leaving Quron and green boots was now not just following them willingly, but eagerly. Part of the reason was because they fed him twice a day and the other was because to him the 5th rift was almost enemy territory. Kittara started to walk down the dunes and back onto the pilgrim road, but green boots hung back. He pulled up his sleeve to show a tattoo, the mark of the assassins of Quron.

"I'll die if you take me there." He said.

"I come here quite often," said Kittara, "I know the person who rules the place, you'll be fine."

He followed them, willingly picking up their bed rolls and camping gear. Hol was sure he'd put on muscle since they'd abducted him. That might have been imagination, but he followed behind Kittara, close behind Kittara.

"I thought Mozzrik the Usurper was the current king of Tandalla?" Asked Hol.

Kittara was often surprised by how little most of the Guard knew about the rifts. They could tell you about the minutiae of the Ventellan political system, but the rifts were the great unknown. True Chlo couldn't pop up the latest information about Tandalla on the common channel, but Kittara kept the local information up to date.

"In theory Mozzrik is the King," she said, "but in reality Mo holds the real power. He rules by the oldest and surest of methods, he is the richest person in the city and he has the largest number of armed warriors."

Green boots was keeping so close that he stepped on her heel, so Kittara glared at him until he moved a little further back.

"Didn't Sikush once offer to make him ruler of the entire 1st rift?" Asked Hol.

"Yes, but people change and I think he was fed up with Ixir and everyone on it."

The city gates were held open by huge timbers, but unlike Quron, half a dozen well-armed men stood guard just inside the gates.

"You should be careful miss," one said, "coming over the dunes can be dangerous, there are stories of sand lizards that can swallow a Farrag in one bite."

It was nonsense of course, the usual myths created to explain missing caravans and lost relatives. In truth the dunes were dangerous, but only as dangerous as they'd ever been.

"Thank you, we'll be careful." She replied.

The guards gave green boots a filthy look, but as he was obviously with Kittara they let him pass. Tandalla was now an impressive city, though under the surface much remained the same. The hotels were now far more luxurious, but they still ripped off the unwary. The merchants sold far better goods, but there was always a back room to buy all those sought after illicit items. Kittara took them past the edge of shrine square and even the statue of the first pilgrim had been covered in gold leaf.

"Where does Mo live now?" Asked Hol.

"The far north of town, you'll be impressed, everyone is."

Kittara kept an eye on green boots, but he showed no sign of running off into the crowd, he'd even started to answer to his new name. They went past the palace of Mozzrik the Usurper, with its high walls and impressive rows of guards.

"Now we head north." Said Kittara.

They passed through mile after mile of well-built and impressive housing, this wasn't the Tandalla of old, but a new and confident trading city. Eventually they came to a long tree lined avenue and in the distance was what looked like a palace. Hol just stopped and stared.

"I told you, you'd be impressed. I obtained the plans for him, from Tomma-Goran no less."

The palace was huge and made of a stone that seemed to reflect back the light. In front of them was an almost exact copy of the palace Xanash the 34th demon emperor had built himself, but few were alive who remembered Xanash. The avenue was long and the day was getting very hot. Kittara and Hol were fine, but green boots was looking quite stressed by the time the palace doors were swung open by smiling servants.

"The master is expecting you."

Their gear was taken away by willing hands and green boots was taken to the servant's quarters, though not before being thoroughly searched and warned not to cause trouble.

“Treat him kindly.” Said Hol.

For a slum runner Mo had always had good taste and everything in the palace was just the right level of luxury without looking overdone. They were left alone by the servants as Kittara was a frequent visitor and knew the way to Mo’s study very well.

“I try to visit him at least three or four times a year.” Said Kittara.

They walked through several bright and airy small gardens and then into some cloisters around a large and pleasant square. At one end of the cloisters a servant was coming out of a room with an empty tray.

“Perfect timing,” said Mo, “the drinks have just arrived, and some food.”

Even on Mendera, Chlo would have found it difficult to provide better services. The drinks were cool and refreshing, the food cooked to perfection.

“You live well.” Said Hol.

“I do. The emporiums are still doing very well, but I have a manager, so I only visit Mendera once every ten years or so. Tandalla is my home now.”

Kittara had a sealed letter which she handed to Mo. She knew it was nothing important, she’d watched Sikush write it. Just a short note about current affairs in Mendera and signed, ‘from a friend.’ She noticed Mo’s face light up as he read it.

“So, you’re really going to gateway ?” Asked Mo.

“Yes, though my pace is my own and I’d like to spend a few days here, if you’ll have me ?”

Mo chuckled and called on several servants to remove the empty plates and refill their drinks. When the servants had gone, Mo moved his chair closer to theirs and spoke very quietly.

“Do you still intend to go past gateway ?”

“To Leng you mean ? Yes of course I do, and beyond.”

Mo looked over his shoulder and held a finger to his lips.

“You really shouldn’t use that name so easily,” said Mo, “I have seen many things and there are watchers who resent its use.”

Even Hol looked serious, but Kittara was on her way to Leng and by invitation. She felt she had nothing to fear from using the name out loud.

“When I come back dear Mo, I will tell you of many more things, some might turn your hair even greyer.”

There was laughter and many more drinks. Eventually Hol went to her room, but Kittara and Mo carried on talking into the night.

“It is nice to see you Kittara,” said Mo, “and you can stay as long as you want, but now we’re alone you can tell me. What does Sikush want me to do ?”

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