

Ripples from the Past

Chapter 17 – Beyond Gateway

“The drone seemed to have developed a lean to one side, which wasn’t cured by cleaning out its thrusters. Luri gave up trying to repair it, the lean didn’t seem to stop it from bobbing about and following her.”

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The majority of the citizens of Mendera were descended from clerics, most still taking pride in being called clerics. It was hardly surprising that they had their own way of dealing with death. On Mendera death was a private matter, belonging to the family of the deceased. No extravagant funerals, no grave marker and definitely no media present. Very few exceptions were granted to the rules. Those from other planets who died on Mendera could be taken home by relatives, or accept that their funeral was going to be a low key affair. One of the few exceptions was the mass grave out near The Well of Souls. There was a plaque honouring the fallen, though it was quite small and difficult to find. Not so much an empire denying death, but accepting that death was ordinary and came for everyone, eventually. One rare exception to the rule was the death of a hero of the empire. Not just an ordinary hero of course, but one who’d died protecting Mendera City. Sikush stood next to Minraver and watched a simple wooden coffin, being lowered into a hole up against the city wall. The only thing to mark the occasion as special was the huge crowd and the large numbers of important state officials attending.

“I can understand a state funeral for Crit Imada.” Said Minraver. “But a public execution immediately afterwards..... It seems a little barbaric.”

“Not an execution, they each have a weapon to defend themselves.” He replied. “I could have put them up against The Damned if I’d wanted an execution. They’ll fight the militia, who aren’t used to fighting with edged weapons.”

“The militia haven’t been in a cell overnight, with little to eat.”

She knew why there had to be a public display of retribution, so why was she being awkward? No one could hear them of course, the entire conversation was taking place over their private channel of communication.

“The citizens need to see the blood of their enemies.” He said. “You know as well as I do, that there is nothing quite as good for public morale, than seeing an enemy killed in front of your eyes.”

He was officially there as head of the Menderan religious system. A senior cleric waited for his approval to cover Crit’s coffin in several feet of soil. Sikush nodded his approval and the crowd actually cheered. A strange and inappropriate response from a population unused to state funerals.

“Will they cheer the executions with just as much enthusiasm?” She asked.

Sikush moved closer, holding her hand. There had been a miniscule change in the structure of space around them. He was worried that it signified her departure.

“Please don’t go.” He said. “The empire needs to see us together, side by side. I need you too, with me right through these troubles.”

“We are stuck with each other my brother, until the end of eternity.” She said. “Though I would rather not be here today, to witness this..... No matter, I will stay. I have said it before, I worry that in studying the workings of the darkness so well, that you’ve become infected by it.”

He wanted to laugh out loud, but the entire empire was watching the funeral of a great hero.

“Of course I’m touched by darkness.” He said. “That is why the empire has grown and thrived.”

Hy Astar came forward, ready to say his words over the grave of his fallen comrade. Already famous, his face would now be seen by the trillions of sentient beings, who made up the citizens of the empire. Others too would see the transmissions, outer worlds, even the planets of those considered enemies. Hy was about to experience a new level of fame, almost deification by public demand.

“He’s perfect as a hero.” Said Minraver. “Handsome, yet his flaws show through the good looks. A tortured hero, every woman in the empire will fall in love with him.”

“And quite a few of the men.” He added.

Poor Hy, he’d lost faith in himself and quite a few other things, when Crit had died. He’d talked to Chlo, quite an in depth interview. He was a little crazy of course, but most good warriors are. His delusions helped him cope with the dangers, but once he lost faith in them..... Hy was unlikely to go back into active service in the militia.

“What will you do with him ?” She asked.

“Nothing for a while, he can work at being famous. Eventually I’ll make him ambassador to one of the more comfortable empire worlds. He’s earned it.”

Hy was sincere in his eulogy and sincerity always showed. The perfect pauses in just the right places, the way he held his head, his posture. No coaching had been required. The crowd loved him of course, though most refrained from cheering as he finished.

“It wasn’t all a delusional state.” Chlo had told him. “Something got into his head, pushing him in just the right direction. Even he now knows that.”

Who though, or what ? They didn’t know and that was rare.

“How many members of The Children of the Wilderness, did you round up ?” Minraver asked.

“Seven, all known terrorists.” He replied.

Minraver knew that none of the seven were involved in the attack on Mendera. They were terrorists though, who’d attacked other empire worlds. All the bodies recovered from the attack had been examined by Chlo and one had been identified by their DNA, as being a cousin of a known senior official in The Children of the Wilderness. Not enough evidence to convict anyone of even the smallest crime, but the citizens of the empire needed retribution.

“We need to watch it all and look happy throughout.” He said. “The public need justice, but will have to make do with retribution, for now.”

A tournament circle had been hastily constructed, slightly larger than the average diameter. One of the terrorists had been given a good quality sword and shoved into the circle. Sikush had seen such things before, they rarely tried to use their weapons to escape, or hurt the crowd.

“They all believe they stand a chance to win their freedom.” He said. “Once every few centuries, one will actually win, reinforcing the belief.”

“It is barbaric, but I will remain and smile for the newsfeeds.” She said.

The first terrorist was completely outmatched by a member of the city militia. He fought hard, but guts and determination are never a substitute for skill and training. He was hacked apart and the crowd loved it. He held Minraver’s hand and felt her sorrow. Yes it was barbaric, but the citizens of Mendera didn’t need to hear about retribution in some faraway place, they needed to see it done.

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For creatures born out of fire, Sventa’s dark angels were probably a bad choice to guard miners on Boomers. Even dressed in nice warm suits, they still walked around awkwardly, as if the cold was getting into their joints. All in the mind of course, though knowing that didn’t stop the effect. Chlo had offered to send more of The Damned, but pride forced Sventa to refuse.

"I don't care how much extra training it takes Haan." She ordered. "I want our people out there and behaving as though they were born on a planet with a surface temperature of minus two hundred and fifteen."

"One crater bottom has a recorded temperature of minus two hundred and twenty one, though no one knows why it's so cold." Said Haan. "We're also having trouble keeping the weather drones operating. It's almost as if..... the planet itself doesn't want us here."

Itzel actually coughed, they all knew the dangers of such rumours, once they became lodged in the minds of the miners. If they were having unnatural problems, it was probably because of Haan. He was still marked for death by those best left unnamed.

"No more of that kind of talk." She said. "If there is a curse over this place, we probably brought it with us. Not your fault of course Haan, but we have to do our best to keep the miners safe."

All of their drones were still working, but playing up. She had one locked on Arran, knowing that using him as an example would motivate her people.

"There ! Look." She said. "A mindless Red-Top thug, being more use than any dark angel. If he can do it, my warriors can. We have one guard for every five miners. There is no excuse for any miner to die. Get my dark angels looking and feeling comfortable, or I'll bring in someone who can."

At that moment she meant it and Haan knew it. He actually bowed to her, something he'd stopped doing years before.

"Of course my president, it shall be done."

He left, Itzel following behind, acting as bodyguard and communications officer. Sventa was left with Seren, who was shaking her head.

"That was a bit hard on him." She said.

"You usually say I'm too soft." Said Sventa. "We've already had two minor explosions, our warriors need to be around the miners all the time, watching for problems. A power pack warmed up a pool of liquid just enough for it to become gaseous. It promptly reacted in some way, causing a minor explosion. Imagine if that power pack had been an imperial power cell, left on the ground overnight. Even the lights in the mines have a brown halo around them."

"This is the worst place I can remember visiting." Said Seren.

"So, do you want me to tell Mendera that we're pulling out because we're a bit scared of the cold ? Do I tell them the war can't be won, that they'll have to surrender and give up ?"

Poor Seren was getting the full force of her frustration. They'd known each other a long time, Seren would get over it.

"No, no of course not my president. We will learn to love the nitrogen haze."

"And the strange gasses bent on killing us."

They laughed, though Sventa was about to stop her old friend from laughing.

"They've cleared out some of the old workings." She said. "We should take a few guards and make an appearance. It'll be good for morale."

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Hol kept them still and in the same place for quite some time, while she watched the terrain around the shimmering hole in reality.

"Look again Mingal, there are always guards here, always." She said.

Mingal did his trick of looking half asleep, while mumbling words in a language none of them understood. It was the third or fourth time he'd scanned the area, shaking his head yet again.

"Nothing, no demons, no chaos creatures, not even a growler." He said.

The hole in the rifts was like an aurora, reaching up from the ground and disappearing into the sky. It glowed an angry red and orange, like flame. There was more purple mixed in with the orange than Hol remembered, but that had been a long time ago.

"Is it safe to enter?" Asked Celli.

"If it was safe, they'd have sent a party of clerics." Said Albas.

Hol simply looked at him, until he apologised.

"I'm sorry Hol, careless words..... Sorry."

"No problem. The ground is rough and we may be attacked." Said Hol. "It's important to stay together, in case something follows us through. It's unlikely demon warriors will follow, but a chaos creature will. We need to be together to deal with one of those."

"How do we deal with one of those?" Asked Juno.

Hol had never seen Mingal give a genuinely warm and friendly smile before, but he did then.

"Carefully Juno, very carefully." He said.

Hol led the way down a gentle slope. The ground looked like broken volcanic lava and had looked like that for billions of years. A place where nothing grew, where the normal laws of the multiverse didn't apply. There was heat coming from the aurora, quite a bit of heat.

"Check each other." Said Hol. "Anything flammable or likely to melt onto your skin, should be left here."

Celli gave her dagger a look of anguish, before throwing it on the ground.

"The hilt is wood and leather." She said.

Backpacks were gone through and a surprisingly large heap of belongings was going to be left behind. Hol carried out a final check, satisfying herself that no one was taking anything likely to be hazardous in the heat of the 7th rift.

"It is strange, I still sense no watchers, no guards." Said Mingal.

"About time we had some good luck." Said Celli.

"We need aid from Leng." Said Hol. "If they have been calling in their outer defences, it might be bad luck."

Hol was going to lead, but realised the heat might deter Celli. Not The Damned or Mingal of course, but even Shelzaks weren't happy with searing heat.

"Everyone keeping walking, I'll follow you." Said Hol. "It is very hot, but only for a second or so."

A slight lie, the heat was intense for nearly a minute, or at least it had been on her last trip to Gateway. No one needed persuasion to enter the hot flames, even Celli walked into the aurora with confidence. Hol felt hotter than she could tolerate, for less than a minute.

"Don't fight the heat." She said. "We've two days travel ahead of us, maybe three, all in the heat you feel now. Don't hyperventilate and don't get tempted to drink all our water right away."

Celli looked fine, as did Mingal, although his hat was turning to cinders as she watched. It was Juno and Albas who looked uncomfortable. They were both trying hard to breathe an atmosphere alien to the one they were used to, an atmosphere as hot as an oven.

"Listen to me, both of you." She said. "This is what The Damned were created for, to fight the ultimate battle on the 7th rift. You can handle the heat, trust me. In many ways you've arrived home."

Albas relaxed first, perhaps remembering that he didn't need to breathe at all. Juno took a while longer, before getting her breathing under control.

"I'll be fine now." She said. "I just need a long drink."

“No !” Yelled Hol. “We don’t drink, we don’t need to. All our precious water is for Mingal and Celli. We merely get the privilege of carrying it for them..... Understood, not one drop.”

Albas nodded at her.

“Yes, I understand.” Said Juno.

They were on the 7th rift, a place rarely visited by outsiders. It literally was hell, the place most living creatures knew about from deeply implanted race memory. Behind them shimmered the red and yellow gateway, while in front of them lay thousands of square miles of broken ground and sand. Fissures in the ground too, some emitting wisps of what looked like smoke. Poor Mingal was still holding the remnants of his hat.

“You looked better in the hat.” Said Celli.

“You’re no oil painting to me either.”

“Ok, no bickering until we’re home.” Said Hol. “I promise to find you a new hat Mingal. Now, where is Gateway ?”

No going into a trance, he put his finger straight out in front of him.

“There, a day’s journey away for a fast walker.”

“Two days at least.” Said Hol. “There will be fissures in the ground to walk round, even lakes of rock heated up until it melts.”

“Wonderful.” Said Celli, without a trace of sarcasm.

“There is something else.” Said Mingal. “There has been a battle where we’re heading. I sense the spirits of many dead, they are still restless.”

Hol looked at her small army and they all still seemed alert and keen to be off. No need to tell them about the fatigue brought on by the heat, or the difficulty getting any sleep. They’d soon find out all that for themselves.

“No running, no slow trudge.” She said. “Follow me and keep up a good steady pace.”

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Not everyone could be cured of diseases by Chlo, while they slept. It tended to be the pilgrims and traders who arrived on Mendera with weird and not so wonderful medical problems. Plus there was the ever present danger of a new pathogen, wreaking havoc among the population. Not just by natural mutation, biological weapons had been used in many wars the empire had fought. There had to be a large medical facility to cope with just such an eventuality, but it needed to be kept well away from the tourists.

“I can’t see us recovering anymore bodies.” Said Jen. “Most of them were in quickly deteriorating low orbits and burned up in the atmosphere.”

The surviving enemy tech was in the imperial store, being taken apart and reverse engineered by clerics who specialised in that kind of thing. The three hundred or so bodies were in the mortuary of the medical facility, which few Menderans knew existed. Deep below the Council Building, screened off from the outside world by sophisticated quarantine procedures. Even Jen would go through a decontamination procedure before she left.

“We have enough, more than enough.” Said Chlo. “Most were citizens of the empire and easy to identify from their DNA. Their families can expect a visit from various local agencies for imperial security.”

“How about the ones who aren’t from empire worlds ?” Asked Jen.

“As you can see, exposure to a vacuum doesn’t leave facial features intact.”

A bit of an understatement. Chlo looked at the room full of what remained of human bodies, once the blood boiled in the near vacuum, just a few hundred miles above the planet. Eventually the bodies would be given to grieving relatives.

"Some have implants, clearly marked as coming from Phlot." She said. "Others have their DNA on our database for breaking various laws. The really interesting ones are these six."

Chlo had put them all together, like the prized pieces in a macabre collection. Six destroyed bodies that looked like something from an abattoir, held back from the corrupting effect of time by a light green stasis field.

"One is a relative of a senior member of The Children of the Wilderness, as we all know. A native of a mining planet that still only has an imperial ident as a name. The locals call it Menura Oasis for some reason. Our dead friend here applied to join the militia once and of course.... We hung onto her DNA data."

"We executed her long lost cousin today." Said Jen. "Though I doubt if he had anything to do with the attacks on Mendera."

"A long record of fomenting rebellion though." Said Chlo. "And his very public death will have discouraged others and improved public morale. The others are interesting, by being born on the same rock that no one thought worth adding to the empire."

"I'll send a team..... No, I'll go to Menura Oasis myself." Said Jen. "I'll take a full squad and use a little shock and awe on the locals."

"While you're there, I'll begin tracing the money needed to finance the various attacks. Buying vessels and hiring mercenaries isn't cheap. Some of the cash we've found is in the form of imperial credits and those are all traceable, given time."

"So we may catch our new enemy because they needed money." Said Jen. "That seems a bit too easy."

"Sometimes it's the little things people forget." Said Chlo. "But identifying and catching are two very different things."

Jen left and Chlo noticed her changing the status on some of the more junior members of The Damned. It seemed she was going to give some new members of the imperial guard, a taste of life on outlying unaligned worlds. Dirty water, poor hygiene and little modern medicine, was what they'd find. Chlo linked to Sikush to keep him informed of her own discoveries.

"Is it a good time?" She asked.

"Always a good time while I'm attending a meeting on Algaria." He replied. "What have the bodies told you?"

She simply allowed him access to that part of her mind, far simpler than trying to explain her ideas. Her suspicions were impossible of course, but lately the impossible seemed to be happening, with frightening regularity.

"I see the logic Chlo." He said. "Someone arriving from another reality needs money to carry out their plan. The easiest way is to sell future tech, or least claim to have designed it."

"Only not another reality and maybe prior time tech." She said. "We're always saying that no one has ever matched the weapons tech of the Rejjacy."

"Hmmm someone coming through from a prior multiverse." He said. "Quite impossible....But worth investigating. Who has been claiming design rights on new tech lately?"

For some reason she held back some information, not quite wanting to believe what it hinted at.

"Us, our Menderan clerics. We're always the biggest supplier of new tech in the empire."

"So you're saying we have a traitor in our midst Chlo?"

"I'm not sure what I'm suggesting at the moment. Can you trust me to run with this for a while ? I might have to upset some of our high level clerics."

"Upset who you want Chlo, just get me some answers."

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Mo was pleased with their progress. Rhian and Kerr did have an annoying habit of wanting to stop somewhere at night. No amount of explaining about the rifts having no true night helped. To them it was dark, so they wanted to get out of the cart with its constant bumping and jostling and onto the relative comfort of the dry ground. Silky slept too, but he was sleeping less and less anyway. It wasn't the beginning of his mind going, the dementia of the immortals. Mo wasn't even sure if he believed in that anyway.

"We're all individuals." He'd once told Chlo. "Running a business empire, mind mine alert keeps." She'd chuckled with him, he liked that about Chlo. No, he was sleeping less because he was beginning to realise the rifts were shrinking. It wasn't some vague idea about the multiverse ending in billions of years time. The rift edge was closer, glowing with a brighter shade of yellow than it once had. The end might still be a long way off, but it was already having effects on the rifts, which he now thought of as home. Silky moved closer in her sleep, wrapping her tail round his arm. Only the Farrag they'd stolen seemed to share his inability to sleep. Mo could see Pug in the ultraviolet wash that always flooded the rifts. Their beast was pacing about and looking anxious. Mo kissed Silky's cheek and unwound her tail from his arm.

"Wake up my dear, I think we're about to be attacked." He whispered.

Soft living had made her a fraction of a second slower to respond. She sat up, her eyes seeing the rifts a little better than his. He watched her look about, envious of her ability to see in almost complete darkness.

"A dozen or so of them." She said. "Tribespeople, probably here to get their beast back. They don't see too well in this light, so they're probably waiting for morning. Then they'll attack us."

"I'll wake the others."

Mo might have been living in comfort for years, but he was still a slum runner deep down. He slivered over the ground on his front, making no sound at all. Rhian first, he knew she'd be the easiest to wake up. He pulled at her elbow, waiting for her eyes to open.

"Wake Kerr and get ready. We're surrounded by tribespeople who want Pug back."

"Ok, what are we going to do ?"

"Fight them of course."

Mo left Rhian to wake Kerr, hearing him spluttering at her, as she tried to wake him quietly. If the tribespeople hadn't heard the noise, they didn't deserve their reputation as the best hunters on the rifts. Silky was where he'd left her, though her wings were beginning to beat out a steady rhythm.

"They heard us waking." She said. "There are eleven of them, all armed and completely surrounding us."

"Only eleven, I almost feel insulted."

Silky nodded her head in the direction where they could both hear Kerr still complaining about being woken in the middle of the night.

"They are not fighters like us." She whispered.

"I know my dear, but I think they'll do better than you think."

As they watched, the rift did the piece of magic it did every morning. Those that lived there took it for granted, though not even the wisest really understood it. No glow as the sun rose, or suns if you lived on a planet with two. There was no sun on the rifts, the morning glow began to rise from every

edge of the rift. A glow far too violet shifted for humans to see that well, but for Mo and Silky, it was like a powerful lamp being turned on. It would take a while to achieve full brightness, but it seemed their attackers weren't in the mood to be patient.

"I can feel their tension." Said Silky. "Our enemy are about to attack."

"Then we should give them a warm greeting." He said.

As the morning glow brightened, Mo allowed the strange joints on his legs to straighten. He turned from being fairly short for a human, into a giant standing a good eight feet tall. His clothing was too short, exposing his powerful demon legs.

"Come on then !" He yelled. "I haven't eaten fresh meat in days."

Add the light reflected off his dagger blade and he became a frightening sight for any enemy. The tribespeople still ran at the camp, but he noticed they were trying to avoid him. They ran round him and found Silky with her sharp claws, enormous strength and spells that could turn flesh to dust. Mo picked the largest warrior he could see and pointed at him.

"You're first !" He yelled.

Some spoke the common tongue, most didn't. Not that it mattered, the tone and aggression conveyed enough meaning. His opponent had a spear and moved it about as though he was practised in using it. Mo was fast though, faster than he looked. A great many had died, astonished at how fast he could move.

"Rhian needs our help." Shouted Silky.

Great, just great. A tribe of angry people trying to get their hairy creature back and now he had to babysit the humans. His anger at the general unfairness of life helped. It gave him enough anger to ignore the spear and step past it, driving his dagger into his opponents shoulder. The man would live, he wanted him to. Mo wanted the warrior alive, but noisy.

"I'll come back and eat you later !" He yelled.

Mo picked the man up and threw him away from him and high up into the air. He threw him higher than he'd intended to. So high that Mo heard bones snapping as the warrior hit the ground. Good, the man began to scream and would probably scream for some time. The tribespeople were obviously attached to Pug though, they weren't running away.

"Mo, stop messing about." Called Silky. "Rhian needs help."

A comment that deserved a rude answer, until he saw Silky rip an enemy warrior in two with just her claws. When Silky was in that kind of mood, he generally avoided insulting her. He heard Kerr yell out in pain and ran towards the low scrub, near where Kerr and Rhian had been sleeping. Not there, the noise of fighting coming from near where Pug had been tied up.

"Mo, here..... Over here." Rhian shouted at him.

Good, they'd managed to stop the tribespeople from getting their hands on their beast and the cart. There were two dead enemies on the ground, though Kerr was bleeding from a wound in his arm.

Rhian was fighting like a fury, using her blade like an expert. They both needed help, but Rhian looked to be trying to fight off three of the enemy warriors.

"Who do I eat first ?!" He yelled.

At least one of them spoke common, he could see it in the woman's eyes. Mo used his blade and his strength, to drag the enemy warriors away from Rhian and kill them. No mercy, none of them could be allowed to return to their village alive. They'd just return another night, with more warriors the next time. As he killed the last enemy attacking Rhian, she gasped and pointed at Kerr.

"Mo ! Look !"

The woman standing over Kerr looked old, too old to be sent out with a war party. Perhaps she was used to handling Pug, he certainly seemed to remember her. There was a look on the woman's face, as she lifted her spear, aiming to drive it into Kerr. Not hate in her eyes, but a look of triumph. Too far away for Mo to get to her before Kerr was skewered.

Pug obviously remembered his past life in the village though and not with affection. He'd already broken free of the tree he'd been tied to and ran at the woman. He bellowed as only an angry Farrag can bellow. There were probably children in distant villages, who heard the fearful sound and shivered.

"Good old Pug seems to have decided to be on our side." Said Rhian.

Kerr had obviously been forgotten, as the old woman ran from the angry Farrag. Pug was in no mood to forgive and forget, easily catching the woman, before stomping her to death. Mo expected the beast to simply carry on running, but it returned to where it had been tied up for the night.

"None of them can escape."

Silky shouted, as she ran past them, pursuing an enemy warrior. Dead warriors were strewn everywhere, a few wounded still screaming.

"I'll help her." Said Rhian.

"Not a good idea." Said Mo. "Better to leave Silky alone for now. We'll tend to Kerr's wound."

"But she'll be fighting alone."

"Silky has needs, she feeds on what she catches. You won't enjoy watching that."

"Oh, I thought the eating people thing was just a joke." Said Rhian.

"Sometimes it is, but not today. Let's look after Kerr."

Kerr's wound in his arm was deep, but not life threatening. It would hurt like hell for a few days though. Rhian was now an expert at washing and binding up wounds.

"I thought that was it, my time had come." Said Kerr. "I'll never call our excellent beast stinky again, ever."

"I'm just amazed he didn't carry on running." Said Mo. "I suppose he's actually started to like us."

Maybe Pug had decided to remain with them for a while, but that didn't stop him trying to kick Mo, as he attached his harness to the cart. They were packed up and ready to leave, by the time Silky appeared out of the surrounding scrub. Her claws were bloody and there was a darkness in her eyes, that wasn't usually there.

"I got them all." She said.

"We'll still sleep on the move tonight, just to be safe." Said Mo.

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Luri didn't need a suit to walk on the surface of Sessana. At first the miners had been shocked, to see a tall young woman, walking across the deep cold planet, as though heading for a picnic, or a day out somewhere far more pleasant. Now they were used to her, using her as an ally in their constant battle with the deep cold.

"Not all the underground structure has collapsed." She'd been told. "Too dangerous for miners handicapped by suits to explore, but....."

The mining supervisor had given her that look, the one asking for help, but not wanting to look too pushy. She was a living deity after all.

"Would you like me to investigate?"

"Yes, if you can take a mapping drone with you, we'll know what problems we might have getting down to the lower levels."

Luri was now three or four levels down, with a small mapping drone following close behind her. For some reason she found talking to it, helped relieve the boredom of miles of identical corridors.

"Might be level three, might be four." She said. "So much has collapsed, it's hard to tell."

The drone merely beeped at her, but everything was being relayed to the surface and passed on to Chlo. The deep cold was affecting everything, making metal girders brittle and easy to break. Luri created a small cave in, by simply touching a steel column.

"Are you alright?" Asked a voice.

"Of course I am. I'm just feeling stupid, for creating more rubble that will need to be dug out."

She'd answered before realising the voice had come from the poor drone, now half buried under rubble. She pulled it free.

"Who is this?"

"Delmus, the drone reported a cave in. Do you need me down there?"

"No..... You'll just be a nice distraction."

The drone seemed to have developed a lean to one side, which wasn't cured by cleaning out its thrusters. Luri gave up trying to repair it, the lean didn't seem to stop it from bobbing about and following her.

"Stupid thing."

"Me?"

"No Delmus, the drone. Go away and do something useful."

Kittara had once mentioned some serious automatic defences on level seven. Time and the cold had destroyed it all though, leaving nothing but a few hints of what had once been there. Half of a battle robot of some kind, a few long dead turret weapons.

"Level seven looks harmless, no sign of any working defences."

Delmus had obviously gone to do something useful, the drone just beeped at her. She found the hidden room, where Kittara had woken Aukar, the last surviving Terak. There had been hints of advanced weaponry in that room, secrets hidden for billions of years. Now the cold had joined with entropy, to turn it all to frozen rubble.

"Moving on, looking for a way down."

Down, always down. Sikush was being strange about telling her what was supposed to be hidden under the destroyed building. All she knew that whatever it was, it was hidden deep, very deep. Luri found stairs that should have taken her further down, deeper into the ancient ruin.

"Not as much damage to upper levels as expected. The bomb, device or whatever that Kittara set off, was obviously thermal in nature."

"What have you found?" Delmus again.

"There's quite a bit of space here." She said. "Come and look for yourself."

Delmus moved his reality to be with her, though he didn't look happy in the cold, no one did apart from her. She pointed to what looked like red glass at the bottom of the stairs.

"The autodestruct device on the facility seems to have melted everything." She said. "Rock, metal, everything, melted until it behaved like molten glass. You're looking at what it became when it cooled down."

Delmus ran his hand over the substance, before hitting it with a dagger. There was a screeching sound, as his blade skidded over the surface.

"Do we have to dig through this?" Asked Delmus.

"Yes and beyond it. Whatever Sikush expects to find is at least a mile beneath our feet."

She knelt and prodded the glasslike rock beneath them.

"The miners will need to secure the levels above and then get digging through this." She said. "The real mining begins here."

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Their real destination was an old ruined temple not far from Gateway. All the time they followed Mingal's directions though, until the towering walls of gateway began to fill their direction of travel. Soon they passed the first bodies of demon warriors.

"A mighty battle, not long ago." Said Mingal.

"Against who though?" Asked Juno. "I see no bodies other than demons."

"Hopefully our contact will know." Said Hol.

If their contact still lived, the fabled watcher who hadn't even been described to her. They soon didn't need Mingal's direction, they simply followed the trail of dead bodies and dropped weapons.

"A full blown rout." Said Celli. "They ran without even fighting back."

"I fear what may be happening on Mendera." Said Albas.

Not just him, Hol was wondering if a similar fate had befallen the holy city. The vast demon army of Gateway, appeared to have been destroyed, without killing a single enemy warrior. It was terrifying. As the smoking ruin of the vast gates came into view, Hol took them off the demon roadway and across the dunes of orange coloured sand.

"There, the small tower of stones." She said. "The watcher will meet us there."

Celli wasn't following. She was stood in the middle of the road, looking at the burning gates.

"I know it's awful, but we should get off the road." Said Hol. "The old temple will give us some cover."

Celli just looked at the gates, as though mesmerised by them.

"The walls built by long dead Gods Hol." She said. "All my life I've dreamt of seeing this place, but to see them like this."

"The walls are indestructible and gates can be rebuilt."

"But by who? Supposing the destruction has reached....."

"Come on, we need to get off the road."

Celli seemed reluctant to follow, but eventually everyone was hidden behind the ruins of the ancient temple. For Hol the shock was worse than it had been for the others, even Celli. Hol had seen Gateway in all its glory, when a single blast of a horn could bring tens of thousands of demon warriors, flooding out to defend what lay beyond.

"How long do we wait here?" Asked Juno.

"Three days. If our contact hasn't turned up by then, we'll make our own way past the gates."

They slept little, but the hooded figure still managed to enter their camp unseen, on the morning of the third day. Hol had her blade in her hand, as their unannounced guest pulled back her hood.

"Aelfraed, I had no idea you were our contact." Said Hol.

"She isn't..... I am."

There was a second person behind Aelfraed, if it was a person. Clothed from head to foot in thick robes, the shape wasn't quite right, parts of the clothing moved where no person had parts to move. Hol only had the few details given to her by Kittara, yet she could guess who was in front of her.

"You're the watcher, the last survivor of Ancient Leng." Said Hol. "Kittara mentioned you."

"I am, though I had hoped to be long dead by now."

The voice too sounded wrong, the tone both too high in places and too low in others. There was also an unsettling wheezing noise, as the creature spoke.

"Do you know? Has Leng been destroyed?" Asked Celli.

"It takes a lot to destroy Leng, the city is damaged, yet still functions. A tenth of the city needs rebuilding, but the enemy was pushed back."

"What enemy?" Asked Juno.

"We've plenty of time to talk about that." Said The Watcher. "I think Aelfraed has had quite enough of being my nursemaid and wishes to return home."

"The city still needs my expertise, fires still rage in some areas." Said Aelfraed.

Without further explanation, Aelfraed created a portal and was gone, leaving them with the last surviving inhabitant of Ancient Leng. A creature who was wheezing and not sounding in good health.

"I can create a portal, but I'm not good at manipulating tools anymore." Said The Watcher. "You'll need be my arms, ears and just about everything else."

Hol caught an unsettling glimpse of something dark and viscous, as the creature's robes parted for a second.

"Where do you want to take us?" Asked Hol.

"To my home in Ancient Leng of course. You do wish to bring her back, don't you?"

"Yes, I do..... But can we? Is it possible?"

"Of course it is, though bringing her back early will cause problems. There will be consequences Hol Azreemy, severe consequences."

Hol wanted to ask so many questions, but The Watcher had created a portal and was about to enter it.

"Follow me if you want to bring her back." It said.

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