

Mendera Temple

Chapter 4 – Charadask

“How daft he looked, legs spread on the cold tile floor, his balls shrivelled. At least her genitals were safely tucked away inside, where it was warm.”

“Who built this place ?” Asked Mo.

They’d come from a different direction to the usual path and had skirted a rocky plateau to the south. Charadask had obviously been busy, the Nest looked a lot cleaner than when Delmus had last been there. The rock surface looked brighter, there were a few new entrances at ground level and there wasn’t a sign of dead demons or their body parts.

“Large carnivorous insects is the best theory” said Luri, “but that was a long time ago. There have been many different inhabitants since then and none of them pleasant.”

There were just the three of them now. Ubari had wanted to come, they’d almost had to tie him to his sick bed. In the end though it was just the three of them who stepped into the gateway carved into reality by the rift manipulator and come out a mile or so from the Nest.

“He can be a bit strange.” Delmus told Mo.

Sikush had his own way of communicating with the insect like sorcerer and Estrid had been there a few times, Estrid seemed to get everywhere. What they’d heard wasn’t encouraging and it appeared Charadask was becoming increasingly eccentric, as some called it, or raving mad as Delmus referred to it. As they started to walk across the flat area around the Nest, they all felt the strong low frequency vibration.

“Estrid says he’s cutting out a whole complex down there.” Said Luri.

There was no sign of guards or devices observing them, but as they approached the Nest a large sliding door moved silently to allow them access to a corridor at least thirty feet high and the same wide. Gone were the narrow snaking insect corridors Delmus had negotiated and in front of them was a long straight and well lit corridor that wouldn’t have looked out of place on Mendera.

“Do you know what he’s building ?” Asked Mo.

“No,” said Luri, “our orders are to give him the object from Astrolabe and then leave him to get on with whatever it is he’s doing.”

A door on their left gave off a slight hum as it slid back into the wall to reveal a corridor going down at a gentle gradient.

“Down ?” Asked Mo.

“Down.” Said Luri.

The corridor curved as it went down, with numerous doors along each side. Eventually after descending several hundred feet a door, again on their left, showed them another corridor leading down.

“None of this was here last time.” Said Delmus.

There were no side doors at all now, just a corridor curving as it descended. Eventually they came to another set of door that opened as they approached. The party emerged into a cavern of immense proportions with an underground river at its centre. They heard a strange tapping sound and Charadask appeared from the other end of the chamber.

“You’re late,” he said, “Estrid told me you were on the way, but that was months ago.”

The creature still moved as though operated by clockwork and Delmus was still surprised how such a human voice could come from what looked like a giant spider, a giant clockwork spider. Mo just stood with his mouth open, staring at the creature.

"We had a few things to look into on the way." Said Delmus.

"Like the undead walking the rifts." Added Luri.

Mo still said nothing, but he seemed fascinated by the physical form of Charadask.

"Oh those," said Charadask, "so hard to kill for so little edible tissue."

The creature made a spitting sound and started to click its legs on the rock floor of the cavern.

"This way."

Charadask led them through caverns and chambers, along natural underground rivers, all the time going deeper and deeper into the fabric of the rift. Eventually he stopped in a huge chamber at least five hundred feet high and full of webs that folded over each other to form what looked like a gigantic fishing net. The creature patted one of its eight legs on top of a control box, the only thing they'd seen so far that in any way resembled technology. Looking as though it had been carved out of the rock the box had several levers, buttons and holes on it.

"Here," said Charadask, "put what you brought here."

Luri took off her back pack and carefully removed the golden cylinder and put the rounded end towards the hole in the box. The creature made an annoyed rasping sound, so she turned the cylinder around which seemed to please him. With a reassuring click the cylinder fitted and a low humming started to fill the chamber.

"Charging the catcher now, but it will take a while." Said Charadask.

"How long will it take?" Asked Delmus.

As he asked the question he could see the sorcerer looked angry.

"It will be ready when it's needed," said Charadask, "now if you've no more stupid questions I have a lot to do."

They turned to leave, but Mo looked back at the creature.

"We've come a long way," he said, "can you at least tell us anything about the undead?"

"Me tell you !!..... Me !!"

The creature started to jump about tapping its eight legs on the floor, almost as though he was having a temper tantrum. Then he pointed a sharp claw straight at Luri.

"Ask her she'd been there, I can smell it on her. Been to the catacombs and escaped, unknown that, but this one has done it. Ask her how, ask her why!"

Delmus turned to look at Luri, seeing the look of dejection on her face.

"Sorry Luri," he said, "but if it's true, he has a point."

"It's true," she said, "and if I come out of the Necropolis alive I'll tell you everything."

~ ~

"Are you sure we're in the right place?" Asked Hol.

"Show's what a few million imperial credits can do." Said Albas.

The express elevators from the comfortable reception area on the surface had taken just a few minutes, despite having to change at level 15. The air still had a slight smell, but there was no longer the distinct sulphur smell that seemed to be everywhere on Ixir.

"Are they scrubbing the air on the whole level?" Asked Hol.

"Yes, and adding a bit of extra oxygen to perk the customers up a bit."

They walked away from the bank of elevators, all busy with tourists of all ages and moved to the small park where the now cleaned up underground river on level 33 ran. In front of them at the

other side of the parking area for personal transports was a huge sign above a very neat looking hotel complex that said 'Xeod's'.

"We even have a baby clothes shop." Said Albas.

Hol hadn't been to the levels on Ixir in sometime and the transformation of the area around Xeod's was astonishing. Gone was the river of toxic sludge and the surrounding decaying housing. Now the reconstructed Xeod's stood at the centre of a shopping area, with everything from fast food to top of the range fashions on offer and there was indeed a branch of 'Ixir Babies' where tourists could get nappies with Xeod's written on them.

"The roof has been reinforced and the entire complex now brings in more revenue than the Moglas East Mall." Said Albas.

"It's a bit fucking clean !" Said Hol.

A few passing women tutted in her direction and pulled their children hastily in any direction away from Hol. Albas just grinned at her.

"Seriously," she said, "is it just another hotel and mall now ?"

Albas led her over a concrete bridge that now crossed the pleasant river and walked her through the lines of parked family transports.

"Wait until you see inside." Said Albas.

The double set of doors had no less than two smiling doormen who opened the doors to reveal an expensive looking carpet leading to a large lounge with a reception desk on the right. A passing girl in the hotel uniform with Xeod's on her breast pocket smiled and wished them both a good day.

"You run this place now ?" Asked Hol.

"No. There's a full management team, but Princess left me her stake in the place, so I spend a few days a month here, just keeping an eye on things."

They walked across the lounge and into a bar area with a stage attached and Hol expected to see a few show girls doing a dance routine. Instead a children's entertainer was keeping a dozen or so kids happy with a puppet show.

"We don't even serve alcohol until night now." Said Albas.

"So you got back together," said Hol, "you and Princess I mean."

Albas carried on walking past the bar and through another set of doors that revealed a large heated pool with several hotel residents enjoying a dip in the crystal clear water.

"No, not really, though we always kept in touch. I received a note she'd left with her will, asking me not to sell Xeod's and to keep the name. Strange really, she had family, but I got everything."

"Did you make it..... so clean and dull ?" Asked Hol.

Albas laughed and walked towards a set of stairs on the other side of pool.

"Don't be fooled by appearances," he said quietly, "we still cater for adult appetites."

Down the stairs and two very solid looking men were at a set of doors that they seemed to be guarding. Hol could see both of them were wearing concealed armour and weapons, though most residents of the hotel would simply have thought of them as stocky.

"Sir." Said one of the men.

The doors were pulled back and they entered a long corridor that sloped down as it went off into the distance. It was well lit, but Hol felt the safe and clean feel of the hotel melt away with each step she took.

"This used to lead to a weapons warehouse, but now it takes clientele seeking our 'special' services to the annexe. Everyone knows where the annexe is and what goes on there, but as long as it's kept well away from the shoppers and kids we can operate in peace." Said Albas.

They passed a well-dressed man going in the other direction who nodded at them and then a party of three dressed like Ventellan's.

"Business looks good." Said Hol.

The corridor went up and another two guards were in front of a doors with 'Xeod's' in bright red lettering written on them. Through the doors and they were straight into the bar area, with several tables full of happy looking businessmen and surprisingly a few women in suits too. Walking among them taking orders for drinks were several young women dressed in what looked like just their underwear.

"Xeod's classic we call this place." Said Albas.

One of the girls, a brunette wearing an almost fluorescent pink bikini came up to them.

"Hi Albas," she said, "do you and your friend want a table ?"

She gave Hol a long appraising look from head to toe.

"Or maybe a room ?"

"No Dhali, behave yourself. We're here to see Quinn."

The girl gave Albas a cheeky grin and wandered off in search of more appreciative company. There was a stage and as they passed a young woman was performing a dance with a snake that would have gotten her five years hard labour on some frontier worlds. Hol smiled at Albas.

"Nice to see Xeod's hasn't been totally sanitised."

"You can still buy most pleasures here, but no one forces the girls to do anything they're not comfortable doing. Any clients who are over aggressive can find themselves in the slums with a broken leg."

Along one wall were intimate cubicles and as they passed Hol noticed a woman in a suit holding hands with one of the girls and in another two men were exchanging lingering looks.

"We can cater for all pleasure," said Albas, "at a price of course."

Most citizens of the empire had no idea that Sikush part owned Xeod's and would have been scandalised if they'd know, but none of The Damned found it strange at all and Hol was tempted to try a few of the offered pleasures herself once the meeting was over. Albas approached a door with 'staff only' written on it and pressed his hand against the reader next to the door. A fraction of a second later the reader buzzed and the door smoothly opened.

"Top of the range imperial biometrics. Works on palm print, DNA and a sensor in the frame looked at my retinas." Said Albas.

The corridor past the door was less opulent and felt far more business-like. Gone were the plush carpets and bright colours and they were in what was obviously the corporate side of the operation. Their footsteps echoed off plain tiles floors and the doors they passed were all numbered, some bearing names, 47 – E Schlotti – Maintenance. After a few turns and another set of doors with biometric scanners, they came to a door with 136 – Quinn – General Manager.

"Is Quinn his first name or last ?" Asked Hol.

"I don't know," said Albas, "everyone just calls him Quinn."

Albas knocked briefly on the door before opening it and walking inside, closely followed by Hol. The man at the large solid looking desk placed across the far corner of the office got to his feet and approached her.

"I've seen you on Chanel 77 so often, I feel I know you." He said.

"I get that a lot."

He put out his hand to shake hers, a strange anachronistic piece of behaviour that only seemed to exist on Ixir. Hol shook his hand and decided that she quite liked Quinn.

~ ~

“Kill him and let me feed.” Said Sventa.

Estrid saw Chenad flinch and decided she wasn't going to prolong his life indefinitely after all. It wasn't that he seemed to expect her to behave in a certain way; she could have lived with that. It just didn't seem fair on him to drag him through the millennia with her. Fairness ! Another strange concept for a deity, but she'd been dealing with a lot of new concepts and feelings recently.

“You don't want me to kill him Chenad ?” She asked

They were in the yellow garden of the palace and many of the blooms were at their best and it was another hot sunny day in Mendera City, yet Chenad seemed very distressed.

“No I don't..... it would be..... Inappropriate.”

Sventa had grudgingly brought her a live raider and not just any raider. Lying on the ground and glaring at Estrid was the leader of the raider group that had been harassing merchant shuttles in the Piso sector. He'd been parted from all his weapons, several blasters, two grenades and four knives and then his hands and feet tied.

“Why not ? He's a raider, a bad person.”

Estrid easily pulled the ropes loose from the raider's feet and hands and stood him up, her left hand gripping him around his throat and just about allowing him enough air to survive. Again Estrid was annoyed that Chenad looked disturbed.

“It's..... unbecoming.....” Said Chenad.

“So if Sventa kills him that would be alright ? I've looked into his memories Chenad and he's killed a great many citizens of the empire. Raped some, left others crippled for life. Yet you'd ask me to spare him ?”

A myriad of tiny yellow insects were taking the nectar from exquisite yellow flowers, everything around them was serene beauty, yet Estrid could find no serenity in Chenad and it confused her.

“If he must die, then please let Sventa do it.” He said.

Chenad would be allowed to return to his people, she could feel the anguish in his soul and had no wish to subject him to an eternity of such suffering.

“Go now and collect your possessions,” she said, “you've taught me well and I owe you much, enough to realise I must let you go. Tonight you are to return to Uah Trin.”

“Yes mistress.”

Chenad walked off towards the section of the palace he'd been living in and Estrid gave him a few minutes to depart. The raider was still struggling for breath, so Estrid dropped him gasping to the ground.

“Will you teach me now Sventa ?” She asked.

Sventa had been giving all her attention to the raider, but she fluttered her wings slightly and looked at Estrid.

“Yes, but Kittara might be angry if I taught you..... certain things.”

Estrid gave the raider a kick, only a gentle kick, but she heard his thigh bone snap and heard his scream. How easy he was to hurt, to stop, for someone who'd killed so many and caused so much suffering.

“I'll talk to Kittara and make sure she understands.”

The next stage always fascinated her and she never tired of watching it, the transformation from living, squirming, screaming life..... to being food. Estrid ripped off the raider's shirt and dug the nails of her right hand deep into his body. Through skin, layers of muscle and finally through his chest

bone and into his heart. The screaming stopped and Estrid could hear Sveta making her trademark chirruping sound.

"I know you're hungry, won't be long now."

Deeper Estrid pushed into the body and then her nails came down, through lungs, then the liver and finally through his intestines and out just above his hip bones. She let the body fall on its back and beckoned to Sveta to enjoy the fresh meal.

~ ~

"There are guards." Said Luri.

The Necropolis was still in ruins, but there were a few new boundary walls and other signs of recent repair work. They were very close to the edge of the 6th rift and not far away the edge rippled with purple fire where it fought a constant battle with the wastes of eternity, fought against nonexistence.

"I thought it would be.....well bigger." Said Mo.

"Nine tenths is below ground." Luri replied.

The location wasn't very awe inspiring. No huge castle on a mountain top, no miles of smoking volcanic landscape. The Necropolis stood at the fork where two small rivers joined and the land was green and fertile. If it hadn't been for the groups of undead walking around the scene would have been idyllic. They'd found a long abandoned dwelling of some kind to hide in, but in truth the walkers in rags were showing no interest in anything other than getting into the ruined Necropolis.

"The legend is that the Lords of Chaos built it as a resting place for their servants, but no one really knows who built it." Said Luri.

"How do we get in?" Asked Delmus.

They were close enough to see that some of the undead were grouped around each entrance, watching and examining any who entered the building.

"I go," said Luri, "and I go in alone."

"You can't go in alone!" Said Delmus

Mo just looked at her in disbelief as she checked that her cloak hid any sign of her uniform. She gently brushed a loose lock of hair away from Delmus' forehead.

"I have to," she said, "if you go with me you'll die. You're both very brave, but if you kill a thousand another thousand will take their place. No matter how skilled or strong you are, they'll eventually pull you to pieces. You've already seen how tough they are."

Delmus grabbed her wrist and seemed intent on not letting go.

"But they'll pull you to pieces if you go alone." He said.

"You can't go alone." Muttered Mo.

"They won't harm me, as long as I don't make any aggressive moves and all they can see is just another cloaked figure." She said.

Outside the sky was getting slightly darker as what passed for night of the rifts began to fall. It didn't really matter as Luri could see in almost complete darkness and the aurora like purple glow from the ridge edge gave enough light to find her way around.

"How do you know they won't kill you?" Asked Delmus.

"Because they didn't before! I lived among them for years as a child and they never harmed me, in fact they seemed to cherish me in some odd fashion."

She held up her hand as the questions started to form on Delmus' lips and pulled herself free of his grasp.

"I promise to explain more when I return." Luri said.

She stepped over a few fallen pieces on timber and slowly made her way towards the Necropolis.

~ ~

'Slap, slap, slap.'

Chlo quite liked the sound her bare feet made on the stone floor of the corridor. She could have stopped the sound, walked above the floor, put on shoes, or simply moved her reality to her destination. But she chose to do none of those options and turned into another darkened corridor.

'Slap, slap, slap.'

She stopped next to a statue of herself, one of the very few in existence and sculpted out of the live rock by a long dead Arcadian artist of some fame. Sikush had commissioned the work and she knew it was one of his favourite pieces of art in the palace. She put a light up against the ceiling and examined the sculpture, then she sent up a benign probe so that she could see herself as others saw her. Or was that a philosophical impossibility ? She wondered.

She had been clothed for the statue sittings, but the likeness was a good one. Then she looked at herself and realised that in her true form, original form, preferred form, her hair always made her look like an Ixir street urchin. True few people wandered the imperial palace on Mendera completely naked, but she was certain there was not one bit of gravitas in the way she looked and it worried her.

'Slap, slap, slap.'

She had bored of the statue and carried on walking towards his room, the room where she was expected to share his bed. Normally she'd have been excited at the prospect of the steady thrusting that gave so much pleasure, but she found herself stopping by another piece of art.

"You're just killing time." She told herself.

'Slap, slap, slap.'

She saw a slight movement through a window and checked with the surveillance systems, only to discover it was a harmless flying creature looking for an insect supper. She'd just checked her own systems, got worried and checked in with.... herself. Chlo sat her bare behind on one of the priceless antique chairs in the reception room and steadied her nerves. It wasn't as if Sikush blamed her.

"Minimise the damage Chlo, use whatever resources you need." He'd told her.

No one had said 'it's only Ixir' at any of the meetings, but she knew they were probably thinking it. How much time and effort was the place worth after all ?

'Slap, slap, slap.'

She was on her feet again and finally opening the door in her mind to her real feelings. Had she thought 'it's only Ixir' and had that made her incautious during a public broadcast ? She had done terrible things in the past, killed millions, no billions without any concern at all, but never again. It was him, the feelings were his fault ! If Sikush hadn't given her a certain look she might not be walking barefoot and worrying about harmless night feeders.

'Would he think she was evil if Ixir was destroyed ?'

'Slap, slap, slap.'

She was in the corridor with no doors, the one that went past the room that only he could grant access too, and her of course, Chlo could get anywhere. The imperial bedroom where he was waiting for her, waiting for the pleasures of coupling. She needed good news and knew that Albas and Hol were meeting with Quinn. Just a few moments and the time lines might look better. Chlo sat her bare bottom on the cold tiles and rocked slowly backward and forward. If the time lines looked good he might not be..... disappointed.

~ ~

"We bought most of the property this end of the level," said Albas, "got it cheap, no one else wanted it. Then that is, now we could sell it for quite a sum."

Xeod's was expanding and they were stood in the half finished, new two hundred room extension and looking at the ruins nearby that would be a new aroma therapy salon in less than a year.

"We've ten times the space for expansion that we'll ever need," said Quinn, "maybe twenty times."

The construction team had finished work for the day and none of the residents were allowed anywhere near the fenced off area, clearly marked by glowing signs as 'New Extension'.

"Can we talk in private?" Asked Hol.

Quinn led them into the site office, with the usual assortment of mismatched dusty chairs and battered furniture. Hol was pleased to see that despite having full access to Chlo, the construction team still had drawings on the wall of various stages of the construction.

"A bit dirty," said Quinn, "but we can talk in here."

Hol chose the edge of a table covered in stains from various ad hoc lunches the builders had brought in, while Albas and Quinn sat themselves on chairs. Hol brought out a drawing that Chlo had prepared for a meeting a few days before.

"We'd like you to get a team you can trust started on this." She said.

She handed the drawings to Quinn and saw the puzzled look on his face. Her hardest job was going to be judging how much to tell him.

"We don't expect you to do it all," she said, "you still have Xeod's to run. We'll bring in various experts as and when needed, but you know people from the levels, people who can keep their mouths shut."

"You show a shaft right through the ceiling," said Quinn, "straight through to level 34. You can't cut through the ceilings, they're too tough."

"Chlo can do it." Said Albas.

"Are you sure?"

"Who do you think built the levels?" Asked Albas.

"We, the empire, have bought level 34 as a storage area, we'll even have a few containers of power cells shipped in for show," said Hol, "no one will suspect that the true entrance is through Xeod's."

Quinn held the drawing up and squinted to see some of the fine print.

"What will you really be doing on level 34 then?" He asked.

Hol decided to ignore the question.

"Are you still involved with illegal weapons Quinn? Any contacts with the underground?" She asked.

"No. We did carry on with selling a few blasters to our regulars, but that stopped a long time ago."

"Are you sure?"

Quinn gave Hol a long hard unfriendly stare.

"We have to get on with people here Hol," he said, "if someone we know well needs a weapon, we do find one for them, but it's two or three a year now, six on a good year."

"And the underground?" Asked Albas.

"What fucking underground? Once the empire started bringing in more food and rebuilding topside the underground vanished. No one rebels against full bellies and a decent home. You guys killed the underground, without firing a shot."

Quinn's story fitted in with Chlo's thoughts, but Hol was still unwilling to tell him the whole story.

"Would you like to start a new underground for us?" She asked Quinn.

Somewhere in the distance a door must have opened, they heard music which sounded loud and brash, a few voices shouting and then all was quiet again.

"If that's what you guys want, sure." Said Quinn.

There was a strange look on his face, but no endless questions, no cries of disbelief. Hol was sure she'd be able to trust Quinn and of course the empire was known for looking after its people. Hol felt the need to mention that and Quinn nodded at her.

"My wife died in the epidemic of 04, but I've two children and they've both got families."

Hol merely nodded at him, the empire would make sure his family were looked after by a legacy from a long dead relative, or a sudden lottery win, arranged by Chlo, if Quinn didn't survive their proposed venture.

"We can't give you empire weapons," said Albas, "but we'll give you enough credits to buy the best there is."

"Maran weapons are good." Said Hol, and Albas agreed.

"You could start dealing in blasters again, if you wanted to." Added Hol.

Quinn gave her another long hard look.

"Anything to cause chaos on Ixir it seems." He said.

Hol wanted to tell him the truth, that by stating in a public broadcast that Ixir would need to move planets, Chlo had caused a chain of events that would doom their entire race. But of course she didn't, couldn't, he'd never have believed her anyway.

"Have you heard rumours about project 'Life Raft' yet?" She asked him.

"I saw a politician on the news," said Quinn, "talking about using a planet in our sector and moving people there gradually."

There was a rustle outside and the sound of moving masonry. Albas was instantly at the window and looking towards the sound.

"Growlers," he said, "just a few growlers with a thrown away box of food."

"Seen some four feet long," said Quinn, "fast as we clear them out, they come in from the other levels."

Hol knew that growlers would eat everything and anything and that included human teeth. She thought they might be useful, but decided against mentioning it.

"Rumours are," said Hol, "that Life Raft will only move a select few. The rich and powerful of course and a sizeable chunk of the military, but surprisingly few civilians and no one from the levels."

"Doesn't surprise me, the bastards," said Quinn, "but the people will never roll over for that, they'll riot."

Hol knew almost for a fact they would, Chlo had told her it was as good as certain. Ixir would break up into continental power blocks again and somewhere along the line, though Chlo still didn't have an exact date, someone would start using very nasty weapons. Nuclear, chemical, biological, every nasty device Ixir had developed and there were quite a few. Chlo had initially estimated the population of Ixir after the first month of war as 'as good as nil'.

"As you pointed out, there is no opposition, no rebels," said Albas, "until you create it."

Chlo had explained to them that when an active rebellion on Ixir was discussed, the time lines showed a much better survival rate for the people of that unfortunate planet.

"Like a recipe for a cake," Chlo had said, "the more rebellion we talk about adding, the better the cake turns out."

There were no certainties and if they'd tried to explain to Quinn why it was so important to start an underground.... well he'd have thought they were crazy. Chlo herself didn't really understand why

the prognosis was so much better, with at least a quarter of the population surviving, but the time lines didn't lie.

"Some of it is disruption of the government plan for Life Raft," Chlo had said, "and some is the fact that the people are less likely to riot if there's already an effective rebellion. Why take to the streets and risk getting killed if someone else is already getting the job done?"

"Ok," said Quinn, "I'll get this base built and recruit people I know from the levels, maybe have a chat to a few gangs in the slums. But what then?"

"We have someone," said Hol, "someone good. He knows Ixir and the slums very well. Have you ever heard of someone called Mo?"

Quinn thought about it and seemed surprised.

"The name seems familiar. Didn't he die years ago though?"

"No, he just hasn't been around here much. He's a lot of experience at organising underground networks and when you're ready we're hoping he leads the organisation." Said Hol.

Hol didn't tell Quinn that so far no one had found Mo to ask him if he'd like to run the rebellion on Ixir. Mo was somewhere out on the rifts and even Sikush wasn't sure exactly where. Hol and Albas stood up as the meeting seemed to be over and Quinn led the way out of the construction site.

"Can I offer you people anything before you leave," he said, "all on the house of course. We've a new girl from Ventella who is a bit special, or maybe you'd like to watch the show?"

Albas shook his head, but Hol surprised them both.

"I'd like Dhali if she isn't busy," she said, "and I'll watch the show later."

~ ~

He was there with her and the timelines hadn't settled down. He was naked and carrying two glasses, but she'd didn't really want his company. Silently he put the glass next to her and then sat opposite her in the hallway. How daft he looked, legs spread on the cold tile floor, his balls shrivelled. At least her genitals were safely tucked away inside, where it was warm. She picked up the glass and tasted the drink, an old Ushong wine, priceless and perfect for the occasion.

"Sshhhhh." She said to him.

He'd shown no sign of speaking, he just sipped his drink and looked at her while his skin got goose bumps and his testicles became even more wrinkled.

Chlo looked down the timelines and the numbers were fluctuating, but they looked good. She concentrated and pulled in all non-essential services. Across the multiverse empire shuttles stopped in flight, a great many civilian communications were cut and for two minutes none of the millions of commercial broadcast channels were available. She noticed Sikush give her a questioning look as he noticed the disruptions. Fuck him, she had to be certain. She pushed herself up the time lines and the survival rate for the peoples of Ixir was now steady at sixty percent. There was no sign of the planet itself surviving, just a good chunk of the population. Chlo pushed further ahead, trying to use brute force computations to make sense of the growing uncertainty of the times lines billions of years in the future. She gasped and looked at Sikush.

"You can't!" She said.

"I can," he replied, "now turn everything back on again and come to bed."

~ ~

Luri had no trouble getting past the guards, they never even looked at her. Once she was down the stairs she'd expected the underground necropolis to be in better condition than the surface buildings, but she was wrong. Armies of the undead were pulling at piles of fallen stonework and the first two sets of steps down she tried were completely blocked. It was a strangely quiet world. There

was the grunting of the undead as they heaved at stones far too heavy for any human to have moved, but there were no spoken sounds, not a single word. It was obvious they were working to a plan, so obviously someone or something was directing their actions. Luri was fairly certain she knew who, but she was hoping to be proved wrong. At least the undead seemed to need light to work and there were numerous oil lamps stood in corners or held to the wall by straps and nails.

She found a set of clear steps leading down, at the top of them was one of the undead trapped by a large slab of stone that had crushed its foot. Luri watched the creature trying to free itself and making a pitiful whimpering noise for a while before she decided to help it. She used all her strength to lift enough of the stone enough for it to pull the crushed bone and sinew that had once been a foot, free of the stone slab.

“Are you alright ?”

She’d spoken out of habit and the creature looked at her with eyes that didn’t seem to have any understanding. Then a hand with long sensitive fingers gave her shoulder a quick squeeze, before the undead creature limped off to start lifting another huge slab of stone. The crushed foot hardly seemed to hamper its work. So there was still something there, some last vestige of the mind that had once dwelt in the creature. Luri was pleased and started to avoid the creatures less as she realised that for whatever reason, they obviously didn’t view her as a threat.

Down, always down, she had no idea how far. There were rumours that the Necropolis was a copy of the underground catacombs of the City of the Lost God, but Luri had already seen enough to know that was false. She’d spent several years in the catacombs and knew they were far smaller and didn’t go down into the ground nearly as far as she’d already come. Everything was so damp now !

Everywhere dozens of the undead were pulling loose stones out of walls and trying to rebuild, but with the constant running water and the slippery floors they were fighting a losing battle. She noticed many of the undead had expensive looking clothes under the rags, they must have been fairly new inhabitants of the catacombs. All of the creatures had the familiar healed up holed in their heads from the conversion, or conditioning as some called it. On some there was little outward sign, but on others the holes looked like someone had used an ice pick on their heads.

‘Not far now, you’ll soon be with me.’

Was the voice in her head ? Luri couldn’t see anyone other than the constantly toiling undead, yet she was confident enough in her own sanity to realise the voice had been real. Luri gently moved the hood back from the face of one of the undead, just above the left ear was a dent in the skull where the probe had entered. What had the chaos creature been, a sorcerer, apothecary, maybe even a librarian ? Left to their own devices the chaos creatures arrived out of the wastes of eternity, just stepped through the edges of the rifts. After a few millennia wandering the rifts they disappeared back into the wastes. The eyes of chaos some called them and they did kill a few of the creatures they came into contact with, turning them into hideous malformed beings that usually died very quickly. But they killed only a few and caused little harm if treated like any dangerous creature of the rifts and avoided. The inhabitants of the City of the Lost God had started to convert the chaos creatures for their own use and the inhabitants of the worlds beyond gateway had learned the skills. It involved pain, a lot of pain, but once converted the chaos creatures made powerful and loyal minions. There was also the advantage that they seemed to ignore the normal rules of life and death and remained animated and useful long after their bodies had died. Some did decay and a few had the odour of death about them, but most remained useful for what seemed like an eternity.

‘Just two more sets of stairs.’

The voice again and Luri could see the next set of stairs leading down just in front of her.

Luri remembered a private tutor her parents had hired and the dents in his head, and the tales he'd told of about the pain of conversion. To most of the inhabitants of the City the undead were just a useful part of the population, with skills they needed. Then a few of them were drawn to the catacombs and appeared to be trapped there by a force that no one could break. The sorcerers tried, tried for millions of years, but although huge numbers of the undead entered the catacombs, none ever left. That is until Kittara destroyed the ruins of the City and in doing so left a route for them to escape.

'Here, I'm in the next room, right in front of you.'

There were doors to the room, intact and made of a silver metal that showed no sign of corrosion. They were open, so Luri walked through them and found a large chamber with hundreds of the undead kneeling on the floor, all facing a raised area at the back of the room, where another creature in rags stood in front of a plain stone table.

"Come in sister, you are welcome."

The voice was now in her ears and she noticed all the undead looked in her direction as she walked towards the back of the room. She knew the voice, was now certain who it was, yet she still wanted to get close enough to see him. There could be no mistake when she killed him. Luri pulled at the ties on her cloak and let it fall to the floor, revealing her uniform for all to see. Still none of the creature attacked her and she felt no ill will from them. She pulled her blade, a large flat demon blade, from her belt and faced the creature who had spoken to her.

"Is that to kill me with sister?"

The voice was male and as the creature turned it pulled down its hood to reveal a face that Luri instantly recognised.

"Faarlh!" She shouted.

She stumbled and almost fell as the memories from her childhood filled her mind, just as they'd filled her nightmares for so many years. Some people, adults, not just spiteful children this time. They'd been throwing stones at her and then there had been flames, lots of flames and the people had died. She knew she'd done it, felt the guilt, but she'd no idea how she'd done it. They'd come for her in the night and her brother Faarlh had hung onto her, trying to stop them taking her. Her adoptive parents were there, it must have been them who had drugged her supper, just enough to make sure there were no other incidents while they bundled her into her clothes and carried her off.

"Leave her, leave my sister alone." Faarlh had shouted.

"Cause trouble and you'll go with her!" Someone shouted.

He had caused trouble, constantly trying to punch the people carrying her to the shrine where the entrance to the catacombs was. Luri remembered trying to find the switch in her mind for the fire, but she was just too tired, too woozy. Then she was thrown and fell, her last site of her parents had been of them throwing Faarlh down after her, then the real nightmare had begun.

"I tried to save you."

She was back in the damp ruined room with the kneeling undead and the grown up face of her baby brother looking at her.

"I know you did." She said.

The sword went back into her belt, there was no way she could use it on her him. Others would though, they'd have to if he meant to carry out the insane plan he'd always talked about in the catacombs.

'Let's take the undead to the surface Luri,' he'd often said, 'we'll use them to kill everyone, until there's no one left to hurt us.'

Luri walked up to him and put her arms around him and felt the warmth of his embrace.

~ ~

© Ed Cowling – Jan 2014