

Ripples from the Past

Chapter 26 – Not a Ragged Child

“It was getting to her, talking to colonists whose only interests were various forms of root crop blight and the evils of different types of weevils. The shack door she’d just banged on, was opened by a woman of considerable age. That was what detrimental migration did to a planet, only the sick, stupid and old didn’t move somewhere else, anywhere else.”

∞

Kittara had taken Tejan back to the barracks, to a room not unlike the one she’d once been allocated, but had rarely used. She’d been considered too wild and feral for the barracks. He’d taken her into his home, The Chalné himself, giving her space and a little freedom to play with, in her own section of the imperial palace.

“Was your room on this floor ?” Asked Tejan.

“No, one floor up, though I didn’t use it for long.” Said Kittara. “I ran off a couple of times, so they put me under lock and key for a while.”

“You ran away ?”

Kittara had to chuckle at the expression on Tejan’s face. As if anyone would try to run away from the fame and fortune, not to mention immortality. It had been a rough time for her, ending with her being virtually imprisoned in The Temple of the Flame, for an entire millennia. That had been a blessing not a punishment, though it had taken her a long time to understand that.

“I was wild creature then, barely more than a ragged child. They ran out of threats to control me and locked me up with the clerics to gain some focus. Luckily that worked.”

“I can’t imagine you ever being a ragged child.”

“Nor can I, now. That was all so long ago.... It feels as though it happened to someone else. So, where is your escape pack ?”

“Here in a cupboard, but checked over regularly.”

Food, water and a few changes of clothing, all packed into a backpack. They were allowed to pack whatever else they liked, as long as it could be jammed into gaps. Kittara had always packed a wicked looking demon blade, in case of emergencies.

“Pick it up, we need to be going.” Said Kittara. “Can you follow me as I move my reality ? I’m not sure what they teach you now, or when.”

“Yes, Jen trained me by trying to lose me out on the dunes.”

“Did she succeed ?”

“No, not even once.”

“Good, follow me to the imperial palace.”

Not to his favourite veranda, not after such a long separation and there had been her death. She couldn’t simply just turn up as though it was an ordinary day in Mendera City. He’d know she was on her way though, there was that part of his mind that was shared with Chlo. If Chlo knew something and wasn’t trying to hide it, he’d know. She moved her reality to the Red Garden, a slow ten minute walk from where he’d be.

“I don’t know the palace well, where are we ?” Asked Tejan.

“The Red Garden, my favourite of all the gardens. I couldn’t just appear near him, not after so long and the way we parted.”

The garden was the same yet different. More bugs among the flowers, he'd talked about doing that. There in the middle of a patch of red rift grass, something caught her eye. It was a pack, meant for her of course, no doubt put together by Chlo.

"Bless you Chlo." She muttered.

"How did she know you'd come this way?"

"She's Chlo and Chlo sees and knows all. Anyway, if I'd come in through the Blue Garden, she'd have just moved it to there."

It was her pack, the one she'd used to go to Gateway, all that time ago. Of course it was just a copy, complete with a demon blade shoved down the side. The backpack was a nice touch, a welcome home gift that was actually useful. Not that going to help Mo was anything like travelling to Gateway, to shout defiance at the entire demon army.

"Is it the pack?" Asked Tejan. "You look.... Different since picking it up."

It did make her feel different, but the reasons were complex and personal. She might have told Tejan anyway, if she wasn't still trying to understand the feelings herself.

"It just occurred to me that I'm here, alive and free of being cursed by prophecy.... For now at least."

They walked, or more accurately she walked, while Tejan had to run to catch up with her. Soon they were outside the large open glass doors, which gave access to his veranda, the place where he dealt with most of the business of running the empire. Tejan stopped following her.

"Do you want me to wait here? I don't mind... If you'd like to be alone with him."

"No, you need to become one of the elite, it's important."

Through the open doors and past the table where he ate breakfast. He was there, stood out by the pool, waiting for her.

"I can't believe I'm actually here." Said Tejan. "The emperor's personal rooms."

"Sit and ask Chlo for a drink or something. I won't be long." Said Kittara.

"Take as long as you need."

Kittara had her own plans for spending time privately with him. Sex mainly of course, her body ached for him, for his dick to be thrusting inside her. It wasn't that his dick was huge, or that he'd learned secret ways to please women, by being alive forever. He was hers, she felt a genuine ownership of him and all his intimate bits. He might have shared his bits with lots of other women, but she still claimed ownership of him, his dick, his balls and most of all, his love. Strangely they didn't even embrace. They stood, simply looking at each other with a fierce intensity.

"I called for you in the wastes." Said Sikush. "Time doesn't mean anything there, but it felt like I called for an immense period of time. I felt someone answer, someone who felt like you."

"I knew someone had called from there and it brought me to the temple and the children. The call stopped or I couldn't feel it anymore. I sought out anything that felt familiar and found Mo, guarding a ruin on the 1st rift."

Again they just looked at each other, as though neither of them knew how to touch the other without causing an emotional explosion.

"Do you still use the sanctuary in Qasit?" She asked.

He smiled at her and nodded, understanding the question behind the question. He held her at last and brought his cheek against hers.

"Are you mine Kittara, really mine again?"

"Always."

He took them both to Qasit, the strange fragments of a world stuck between worlds. He'd once told her a great secret, that Qasit was the remains of what had existed before everything else had come

into existence. It was the world from before eternity, or at least a few stubborn shards of it. Bits of forever that refused to go away, places where time had no meaning. He took them to his small palace in Qasit, his sanctuary. They could spend days there, weeks, even years and not a second would go by in true reality. If there was such a thing as true reality ?

~

~

Aelfraed had been correct; fire was effective in dealing with the Terak. Hol watched her fireball set the huge flying creature alight, causing it to shriek, though perhaps more in anger than pain. Hard to kill though, it kept trying to reach her, until its burning wings could no longer carry its weight. It just about reached the edge of the rooftop, before falling the last few feet as a tumbling ball of flame. The Terak still managed to get up on its feet, war axe held in its claws.

“Damn they’re hard to kill.” Muttered Mingal.

“Not if you hack at them a few times.” Said Celli.

Celli had the size and strength to stand against an unwounded Terak warrior. The wounded, still burning creature didn’t really stand a chance. It took about six or seven blows from a wicked looking blade though, for the Terak to finally die. Hol was beginning to understand why they had seen so few Terak bodies during their journey to Leng.

Juno and Albas were now on a different section of the roof, using their swords to good effect. The real battle was taking place at ground level of course, between the Menderan reserves and the vast mercenary army of dredger demons. The huge machines of war were taking their toll and there was the rare sight of Menderan dead. Not even one of The Damned, can survive a direct hit from a boulder weighing several tons.

“Someone needs to organise a strike against their catapults.” Said Mingal.

Hol had no idea who was leading the reserves and without a link to Chlo, there was no way of finding out. Without the common channel it was hard to organise an attack on the huge machines of war, which had already severely damaged the merchant’s area of Leng. Hol felt a need for action, the need to use her own initiative.

“We’re someone Mingal, we’ll do it.” She said.

Celli and Mingal both looked excited at the prospect of getting out of roof protection duty.

“What about Aelfraed’s orders ?” Asked Celli.

“I told Neola we’d protect Leng and we will.” Said Hol. “None of us answer to Aelfraed, plus Albas and Juno can remain on the rooftops. Half the invocers in Leng seem to hurling fire from the roofs, I doubt if we’ll be missed.”

Hol ran towards the stairs, the other two running behind her. She had to collect together the best of the reserves and do it quickly, before the catapults were in range of the imperial palace.

“How do we find our warriors ?” Asked Mingal.

“I am one of the elite Mingal, a commander of the guard.” Said Hol. “All will know my face and most will obey my commands. I helped train some of the best.”

Like Mendera, the old buildings relied on feet on stairs to reach the ground. The clean square in front of the palace was now marked by fire, large scorch marks marking where someone had used fire against the invaders. Bodies too, though not as many Menderan dead as Hol had feared. The reserves were fierce warriors, but lacked experience in warfare.

“You !” Hol shouted at a group of about twenty of The Damned. “Follow me, there is a job to be done.”

Smiles from warriors desperately needing leadership and orders to follow. Not just the twenty followed her, the word was spreading.

“Hol is here, Hol Azreemy.” The voices called. “She has need of good fighters.”

“Where is she ?”

“Follow us.”

They picked up others fighting in the streets, even the invocers of Leng answered her call for warriors. Quite a few dredger demons, joined her too, appearing out of basements, eager to fight their treacherous brethren. By the time they reached the first wave of attackers, they were a lethal, unstoppable force. They fought as one, they behaved like one, they had but one purpose, to serve the famous Hol Azreemy. She who had gone to Gateway as a mere recruit and shouted defiance at the mighty demon army. Mingal looked at her and then altered his gaze to look behind her, peering over her shoulder. She saw a look of almost awe in his expression. Surprising, since converted chaos creatures rarely showed emotions of any kind.

“There are thousands of them behind us.” He said. “There are even high level demons among their number.”

“Good, we’ll need every one of them.” She replied.

They were cutting a path through the enemy ground troops, but some of those following her were beginning to become involved with their own battles.

“No!” She yelled. “To me ! To me ! Once their machines of war are destroyed, we can enjoy killing the Terak.”

It was amazing how the word spread, shouted from man to man, woman to woman, demon to demon. Quickly her force came together again and ran at the mighty enemy catapults. Detailed orders were impossible and unnecessary. Those who could drenched the enemy in flames, while others used weapons which fired bolts and arrows. By the time Hol reached the first catapult, everyone was using swords and axes. It was brutal and bloody work, hacking through those defending the machines of war.

“No mercy ! They’d have shown us none.” She yelled.

There was no time anyway, to try and take prisoners. Every enemy needed two or three of her warriors to take them prisoner and make sure they were disarmed. It was the simple economics of war, which meant it was far easier to kill everyone. They didn’t know what to do once they reached the catapult, surrounded by the dead bodies of its Terak crew.

“Let the sorcerers through, anyone who can wield fire.” She ordered. “Give them cover as they burn this damned thing.”

They just needed experience, this was their first catapult needing to be destroyed. There were others and they’d get better at it. There’d be less of them by then of course, though they hadn’t lost too many of the precious Menderan reserved. There’d be less of the enemy too, some were already running away, back towards Gateway.

“They are the ones to pity.” Said Celli. “Aelfraed’s warriors will eventually capture them all and their deaths will be slow and cruel. Kept alive and in agony for years, contemplating their own entrails.”

“They made a choice to go to war.” Said Hol. “Many dying today were given no choice at all.”

Mingal joined the magic users, those with the skill to invoke the flames of hell. The catapult was soon a twisted mass of burning metal. Her forces wanted to spend a while basking in their own victory, perhaps loot a few of the fallen Terak. Hol couldn’t allow them the time though; there were still several other catapults, slowly but inexorably moving closer to the imperial palace.

“We’ll kill and loot when the job is done !” She yelled. “To me ! To me !”

There were no grumbles or complaints, as her army came together and ran towards the nearest working catapult.

~ ~

Nurigen watched the catapult burn with a strange green flame and knew the battle was lost, probably the entire war. He'd known there was no chance of victory, once the Menderan reserves had poured through the portal. Tens of thousands of the best warriors in existence, even if they were still fairly green. The strange thing was Aukar's attitude.

"Good Chelac, the Menderans have come to face us in battle." Said Aukar. "This will now be a truly memorable victory for my army."

A mixture of hubris and self-delusion, from the leader who simply didn't believe his army could be beaten. It made his next move easier, far easier. There was a few seconds when Aukar might have a slight chance of killing him as the injector did its work. In his current state of elation, the leader of the Terak might not even feel the drug being injected.

"Truly a marvellous victory." Said Nurigen. "The Menderan reserves, wiped out on the rifts. Proof that The Chaln  has lost his touch. The empire worlds will be turning on him within a day, two at the most."

Rubbish of course, but it was what Aukar wanted to hear. The leader of the Terak looked almost ecstatic, when he should have been planning a tactical withdrawal. Nurigen had planned for failure, all good tacticians do. He'd been given access to everywhere, including the workshops and medical areas. Not that the contents of the injector would kill Aukar, just paralyse him for an hour or so. By then, Nurigen would either be dead, or safely in his stronghold on the 2nd rift.

"I knew I was right to make you my Ezzagory. If you want the remnants of the empire to rule, those worlds will be yours." Said Aukar.

It had all been a wonderful dream, which just might have become reality. Nurigen now knew he'd never be walking through the burning ruins of Mendera City. He put the injector against the back of Aukar's hand and held the button down. Aukar just seemed mildly surprised.

"What are you doing old friend?"

Nurigen moved quickly, stepping away from any potential unpleasantness. There was none, just Aukar looking at the slight indentation in the back of his hand. Three seconds, four at the most and he'd be incapable of moving at all.

"Nothing fatal, I owe you that much." Said Nurigen. "You'll be paralysed for a while, nothing more, though I do recommend that you sit down, before you fall down."

"But..... Why?"

The Terak were nearly all muscle, even their voice box. Nurigen heard the question, but it had been barely understandable.

"You've lost Aukar, you just don't see it yet. It was madness for Sikush to send the reserves to Leng, complete madness. He's always been a bold leader, but such a move..... To aid his old enemy in such a way. Leng will come out of this war stronger than Mendera. Madness, pure madness."

The leader of the Terak had ignored his suggestion about sitting. Aukar fell, crashing to the ground, banging his head on the stone floor. Nothing bad enough to harm a Terak though, they were all muscle, sinew and hard bone. There was still that look in Aukar's eyes though, still questioning why? Nurigen knelt next to Aukar, actually placing a chair cushion under his head.

"I do crave death old friend, or at least I did." Said Nurigen. "Sometimes I'm still not sure if I've fulfilled my destiny. I've lived through two version of the multiverse, yet still wonder what I'll do when I grow up. Do you ever feel like that?"

No answer, just those awful reptile eyes looking at him.

“Soon you’ll realise there is no victory for your army, only death. Your generals will then demand my death, which you’ll agree to. Not a quick dignified death, I could almost appreciate that. No, I’d be kept in agony, losing all control of my bodily functions. That is not how I see my death Aukar, going out screaming, my clothes soiled with piss and shit.”

Nurigen left the room, pretending to have a conversation with Aukar, as he opened the door.

“... Yes..... I’ll get the device old friend...”

The guards outside the door ignored him, he was their Ezzagory, their Warlord. He could come and go as he pleased. Nurigen swaggered along the corridor, almost daring anyone to question his intentions. He had a small blaster in his pocket, which he transferred to the palm of his hand. His own conversion of a standard blaster, he was good with weapons. Just the required circuit board, plasma generator and power pack, wrapped up in insulating material. It would only fire five or six times, but that had to be enough. He’d never win a pitched battle with the Terak guards.

“You have a visitor Ezzagory.” Said the guard outside his rooms.

Fuck ! But no plan ever works perfectly, he knew that. The unwanted guest was one of the generals who hated him, actually going through his personal belongings.

“There is no need for that.” Said Nurigen.

“Aukar may trust you, but I don’t. I’ll search where I like.”

Nurigen needed a few personal items, or he’d simply have left. Part of him was also fed up with taking abuse from the Terak. He walked closer to the general, before aiming the blaster at the centre of his face and firing. The general died instantly, his body falling into an untidy heap of wings and claws.

“Damn, now just four shots left.” Nurigen muttered.

The box under his bed was the same kind technicians used to carry tools and spares. It contained the few possession he didn’t want to lose. Nurigen added the golden devices which had been weighing down his pockets. One he kept in his jacket pocket, as it was the key to getting him out of the Terak base. Again there was a fake conversation as he opened the door to his rooms.

“... This is outrageous.... I will be talking to Aukar...”

Nurigen was becoming more confident with each set of guards who didn’t try to apprehend him. He swaggered again and walked towards the stores. Not the ordinary stores, the special stores where some priceless technology was kept.

“A great victory Ezzagory.” Said a passing warrior.

Idiot, they almost deserved to be wiped out. Nurigen walked through the doors of the stores and carried on, walking right up to the caged area, which was monitored by several cameras. This was the moment he’d built the small blaster for, this was the awkward bit of his plan. He knew the Terak technician behind the wire cage.

“I need the rift device again, piece fourteen, seventy four alpha.” Said Nurigen. “You know it, the small gold coloured box I was looking at yesterday.”

“We’ve got so much, little of it labelled. If I let you in, can you find it yourself ?”

Perfect, the outcome he was hoping for. The gate was opened and closed behind him. Eventually guards would come crashing into the stores and the gate in the cage, might slow them down for an extra minute. Nurigen took the rift manipulator off the shelf and aligned it up with marking on the device he’d brought with him. Good, blue sparks, which showed it was still working.

“Hey, you can’t do that in here.”

Nurigen hadn’t aimed for long enough and the blaster needed to be fired from far closer. The technician had a scorched right side to his face and looked angry. Chelac Nurigen fired twice more,

both shots hitting his enemy in the face. He tried to fire a few more times to be certain, but the blaster was dead, the power pack depleted. The technician was dead though, lying on the floor with grey smoke spiralling up from his ruined face. That would have been seen of course, all of it, every blaster shot. Nurigen had two or three minutes until guards came shouting and crashing into the stores. He'd noticed that guards everywhere, seemed to think creating lots of noise was part of their job description.

"Where are those artefacts I noticed?" He mumbled.

Time might be short, but he'd been coveting three pieces of demon technology for months. He put them in his toolbox and turned his attention to the gold devices once again. First he hid himself away, hiding behind a cupboard towards the rear of the caged area. Lining up the two gold devices was easy, but the correct finger positioning had been designed for long fingers on seven fingered hands. He held the two devices together, while holding onto his toolbox and trying not to think of the guards hurtling his way. It wasn't an easy task and no matter how much he concentrated on his home on the 2nd rift, he didn't seem to be going anywhere.

"Shit demon tech!" He spat.

Nurigen closed his eyes and pictured his home, with its yellow walls and small welcoming garden. It was probably overgrown by the now, the entire house might have been destroyed by looters. It was a fixed point though, somewhere far better to be than the Terak base.

"Oh shit."

He heard the wave of noise coming along the corridor, as the guards ran towards him. Nurigen kept his eyes tight shut, trying to concentrate on nothing else, except his home on the 2nd rift. He tried not to hate the guards, or think obscenities about them, even as they crashed through the doors to the stores. Quiet, as the lack of an obvious enemy confused them.

"Anaes is dead! Anyone got a key to the cage?"

Quiet followed, quite sinister and worrying silence. Were they sneaking up on him? Nurigen felt a cool breeze on his face and opened his eyes. He was about a mile away from his house and safely on the 2nd rift.

"Damn, those ancient demon scholars knew how to build tech." He muttered.

The tickle began at the back of his throat and the feeling of nausea. He was going to have to acclimatise to the rifts again and the well water was likely to make him ill for weeks. Nurigen didn't care though, it was all infinitely preferable to having a Terak general, sticking red hot needles into his genitals.

~ ~

Alyz walked along the dusty single path that linked the shacks on Menura Oasis and felt disappointed. No one seemed scared of the ten green skinned Aumashy bio-constructs, complete with tentacles and truly terrible weapons. The locals still had links to the empire's newsfeeds and a few strange creatures didn't bother them at all. The main problem seemed to be the general state of apathy, among the few settlers left on the planet.

"No, nothing strange happens here." She was told. "Nothing at all happens here, ever."

The population had moved from mining to subsistence agriculture and the main concerns now seemed to be bugs that ate their crops, blight in their crops and things that rotted their crops. They'd also invented their own names for most of the things they grew, which wasn't that unusual in farming colonies. It was annoying though and added to the dull tedium of it all.

"We'll go to every shack again Chlo, but this place is dead." She told Chlo, over a private link. "The kindest thing the empire can do is relocate everyone here."

“But you said the multiverse indicated that Menura Oasis was important.” Replied Chlo.

“I know, but there are only a few colonists left and they seem on the wrong side of the IQ bell curve. They put seeds in the ground and let nature do the rest.... That is the extent of life on this rock.”

“No wonder the young get pissed off and leave.”

“I’ll give it a few more days and hope we find something Chlo. I’ve sent over a thousand drones out, to completely map and scan every inch of this planet.”

Chlo disconnected and Alyz realised she’d knocked on one shack door, at least four times since she’d been there. What did they say was a definition of insanity ? It was something about doing the same thing over and over again and expecting a different result. At least all the wonderful empire comms worked on the planet. She connected with The Old One.

“Have the drones found anything yet ?” She asked.

“No ! If they do, I will tell you right away.”

Great, a techy computer to add to the general unpleasantness of the day. Alyz would normally have ignored his mood, but she felt as though something important was eluding her. It didn’t improve her temper.

“Do that !” She snapped. “And use your precious needle ships in the search.”

“Is that an order ?”

“Yes !”

It was getting to her, talking to colonists whose only interests were various forms of root crop blight and the evils of different types of weevils. The shack door she’d just banged on, was opened by a woman of considerable age. That was what detrimental migration did to a planet, only the sick, stupid and old didn’t move somewhere else, anywhere else.

“I already told you what I know, which is nothing.”

“Can I come in anyway ? It looks set to be one of those days.”

“Fine, but don’t bring them with you.”

The old woman was pointing at the creatures she’d brought down to the planet with her. One of the bio-constructs was dripping something green and viscous out of what was probably a nostril. They followed her and would protect her without regard for their own survival. So far though, she hadn’t managed to stop them following her everywhere.

“They’re my guards and they take their job seriously.” Said Alyz. “It’s a decent looking day, do you mind coming outside ? We can sit on your front step and talk.”

None of the locals ever refused her and it didn’t seem to be out of fear. They might bitch and moan about her questions, but she was probably the only exciting thing to happen to their shack town in decades. They sat on the grubby wooden step.

“Think back, think about any strange visitors.” Said Alyz. “Think right back to when you were a child. Did anything odd take place here, something everyone talked about for weeks ?”

“We had a proper delivery of mail about ten years ago. Printed catalogues for seeds and bulbs. A few folk thought we must have received it all by mistake.”

Alyz had heard all about the great mail mystery from several of the colonists. No use getting snappy though, that just made them silent and sullen. Alyz used her best smile on the old woman.

“Anything else ?” She asked.

A boy child wandered up and climbed onto Alyz’s knee. He looked about four and she’d seen him a few times before. He’d obviously decided she was safe and another adult to use as a comfy place to sit.

“Now boy, leave the lady alone.”

"It's alright, I don't mind." Said Alyz.

The boy smelt clean and didn't fidget, as Alyz stroked his hair and left him where he was. She didn't have much of a maternal instinct, but she needed to get on with the settlers.

"I've lived on Oasis for over two hundred years now." Said the old woman. "I can remember a few special occasions and times when we had regular visitors from the empire worlds. Nothing strange though, not the sort of strange you're probably asking about."

"Thank you for thinking about it though. I'm going to be around for a while. If you think of anything....."

"Don't worry dear, I'll let you know."

The boy was comfortable and made grumpy noises as Alyz tried to move him off her lap.

"Tell her about the people at the ruins Garby." He said.

Garby, the old Menderan word for grandma. Alyz hadn't heard a child use the term in a very long time.

"What ruins?" Asked Alyz.

"Oh yes, of course....My memory plays tricks and it was only last harvest or thereabouts."

"I can show her Garby."

"No, it's too far for tiny legs boy."

The old lady had obviously decided to show her where the ruins were, though she'd been told nothing about the visitors who'd been there.

"I'll show you, though I'll not go all the way. Just close enough to point."

"Why, are these ruins dangerous?" Asked Alyz.

"Ghosts.... Spooky!" Yelled the boy.

"Behave or you'll get no supper."

The boy climbed off her lap and fell asleep on the step, as though nothing had happened. The old lady pointed towards the east and began walking at a surprisingly fast pace.

"Come on then, I need to get back before the boy needs feeding."

"Who were these people who visited the ruins?"

"Strangers, tall strangers who left us alone, so we left them alone."

A mile to the east of the town of shacks, the old woman pointed toward a rare area of woodland.

The trees looked Menderan, probably introduced to supply wood for pit props and shacks.

"Keep going into the woods, always heading east. You can't miss the ruins. The trees don't grow so well there, nothing does..... Be careful, the boy wasn't lying. There have been strange things seen near the ruins."

The old lady headed back to feed the boy, leaving Alyz with her silent constructs. She connected with Chlo.

"Did you get all that? Spooky ruins and off world visitors, yet none of the locals thought it was worth mentioning."

"Altered priorities Alyz. Now, if you'd asked about the weevil menace....." Said Chlo. "There is almost no dusk on Oasis, you'll have full dark in about half an hour. You can wait until morning to visit the spooky ruins. That'll give the drones a chance to look it over."

Alyz was fed up with waiting, being told ridiculous stories about crop blight and most of all, she was fed up with Menura Oasis, or just Oasis as the locals called it. Only the old lady hadn't used the common tongue for the word, she'd used the old Menderan Agesis. It usually meant the same thing, but could mean a place of worship, usually associated with ancient ruins of religious significance.

“My guards aren’t scared of the dark Chlo.” She said. “I’ll find the ruins and give them a quick look over, before heading back to my shuttle.”

~ ~

“A very beautiful craft and the crew are truly strange, but with a unique beauty.” Said Sventa. “Slow though, annoyingly slow. I take it they know we’re chasing a deadline ?”

“The creatures are called the Lummel Sventa and their craft move far faster than you might think.” Said Luri. “We’ve already pierced the grey between worlds and we’re now travelling through a far older multiverse.”

“If only we could see something.” Said Haan. “All the windows show us is a constant darkness.”

“I can see everything.” Said Luri. “Trust me, the darkness is to protect your sanity.”

She could see what lurked in the darkness, as could Estrid. Not a place of evil, just the home of creatures from an alien multiverse. A multiverse which operated by different rules. There were now only nine of the Lummel and there had been ten, something only Estrid had commented on. A member of the crew had been an offering to something that inhabited the gaps between the worlds. A life freely given, so that they might enter a multiverse that had ceased to exist a very long time ago.

“They could try and speed up a bit.” Said Haan.

“One of them gave his life so we could enter this place.” Said Estrid. “No more talk of slow Lummel please, or speeding things up. We arrive when we arrive.”

“I had no idea.” Said Haan.

“Just be patient, we’ll be there in a few hours.” Said Luri. “Though Delmus was lucky and at least he’s on a real planet.”

She hadn’t talked to them about the strange world they were heading for. Her own senses were limited in that multiverse, but she saw a strange reality, very similar to the rifts. Flat, if flat had any real meaning where they now were. No air either, though that could be dealt with. The Gods had been intended to be adaptable, coping with up no longer being up, worlds without symmetry, worlds that worked to different physical laws. Luri could see a few problems ahead for Sventa and Haan though.

“Are we heading for a world that isn’t a planet ?” Asked Sventa.

“One more like the rifts, though there is little atmosphere there.” Answered Luri.

“How will we breathe ?” Asked Haan.

“You’re travelling with two living deities.” Said Estrid. “I think that dealing with a lack of air, will be the least of our problems. They will see you clearly now Haan, the things that dwell in the darkness. Keeping you from them will be our main concern.”

~ ~

Hy Astar was settling into his new diplomatic role quite well. He had never expected to do any of the real work of an ambassador, but found that he was quite good at networking on Algaria. The kids helped of course, instant conversation starters, even if the usual first words were;

“Oh, what delightful children, are they yours ? You look too young.”

Actually only one woman had added the too young part, but he liked to think they all thought it. Seesha had changed too, becoming far less adoring. That was good of course, though he did sometimes miss her hanging on his every word. She’d been around him quite a lot though, travelling to various Algarian cities with her brother and Minraver. It’s hard to keep a crush on a hero you’ve seen get a little too drunk, eat junk food and heard break wind. They were good friends now, but the

worship had gone out of her eyes. Mix was Mix though and still greeted most of their trips with 'Wow' or 'Cool.'

Hy would never have admitted it to anyone, but he'd built up paternal feelings towards Seesha and mix and felt very protective of them.

"No, that's crazy ! You can't take them there." He yelled.

Yelling at Minraver felt strange and might well be a little dangerous, yet he found himself doing it.

"The rifts ! Most of Mendera think they're nothing but a legend." He added.

"Calm yourself Hy, I'm very fond of them too." Said Minraver. "I'm simply taking them to where they'll be safe and fulfil their destiny. Kittara will be there and several other famous warriors, even a Kiyoh."

"Kittara..... She's alive and not just a legend ?" He asked.

Minraver ignored him and looked out of the window of the hotel suite they'd been allocated. They were in the southern hemisphere of a planet only just admitted to the full imperial banking system. They were VIPs and being given the best the planet had to offer, like the top floor suite in the best hotel.

"I sometimes think Kittara is both a legend and alive." Said Minraver. "She knows the children are marked for something and wishes to keep them close to her. That means them joining her on the 1st rift."

"I could go too.... I'd prefer to be fighting in this war than talking about it." Said Hy.

"No, your work is vital, even if you don't see it that way. Remember your oath to serve the empire Hy, especially the part about obeying orders. There may be friction among the empire worlds and Mendera can't fight on another front. The reserves have already been deployed."

That surprised him. Everyone assumed the reserves would be kept back to defend Mendera itself.

"Really ? The reserves have been sent into battle ?" He asked.

"Yes, though not all of them, not yet. That is why The Chaln  is relying on your charm and silver tongue to calm fears in the outlying worlds. I'm relying on you too Hy."

She was teasing him of course and flirting a little. All being said and done to keep him in line of course, but her words still made him feel better about his new role.

"May I ask ? Where were the reserves sent ?" He asked.

"I'll tell you if you promise to stop talking about your job not being important. Do you agree ?"

"Yes, of course Minraver.... My sincere apologies."

"The fully trained reserves have been sent to aid the city beyond gateway. Mendera's old enemies needed our aid, the demons."

It felt as though his head might explode. So much that he'd considered to be myth, was turning out to be true, facts kept hidden from most of the population.

"I would never ask why, but I am confused." He said.

Minraver actually laughed, a loud genuine laugh.

"Me too sometimes, but it seems my brother was right and there will be a victory to celebrate. I fear that Aelfraed will soon realise her forces are strong enough to test the borders though. I worry that the old enemy will begin to be a problem yet again."

"Who is Aelfraed ?" He asked.

"That is a long story for another day." Said Minraver. "I can hear two rather excited children in the corridor. I just hope they're ready to leave."

Everyone had been spoiling the children, giving them local clothing, gadgets, even a few beauty treatments for Seesha. They'd begun to look more like the children of wealthy pilgrims, than the

offspring of clerics. Not today though, they'd obviously received instruction on how to dress for the rifts.

"Splendid, you both look like junior members on the Mendera City Militia." Said Minraver. "Minus the blasters of course."

"What do you think Hy?" Asked Seesha, giving a quick twirl.

"Perfect, assuming the 1st rift is hot and dry." He said. "Backpacks too, like real adventurers."

"We look wicked, the maid told me." Said Mix.

Minraver fussed, making sure their backpacks contained all the essentials for such a trip. It still felt like madness, but if Kittara thought they were needed with her, who was he to argue the point?

"Is Hy coming?" Asked Mix.

"No, I'm needed here. Look after each other though and listen to Kittara."

"I will."

"Put on your packs and hold my hand..... Yes you Mix." Said Minraver.

Minraver created a portal right there in the hotel suite, between a large sofa and the breakfast area. It was purple with dashes of black, as it rotated, occasionally spitting out greenish tendrils. He was nervous, but the children just smiled at him and allowed themselves to be led into the portal.

"I'll be back by the time you reach Felos 11." Minraver shouted, just before the portal closed.

He was alone, contemplating on how much that he'd thought was myth, was actually true. He also wished he'd asked what a Kiyoh was.

~ ~

Delmus believed in technology that moved, or at least that he could see moving. Rooms full of passive consoles and gauges didn't impress him, no matter how important they looked. He'd kept his people together fighting their way down corridor after corridor. They'd almost lost one of their number, a male from one of the outlying worlds.

"There's one of those things on his face." Dava had shouted. "I think Farhj might be dead."

The small silver creatures had been everywhere in one passageway and one had knocked out Farhj in a way they still didn't understand. The creature had stood on his face for just a few seconds before Delmus had knocked it off. Someone else had hacked it to pieces, while he and Dava examined their injured colleague.

"He's not breathing Delmus."

None of them needed to breathe of course, though most did. Breathing was like urinating and emptying the bowels. Bodily functions that brought a feeling of normality, even if you didn't need to be a slave to them anymore. Farhj looked dead, until his right eyelid began to twitch.

"Get him up on his feet; carry him if you have to." Delmus had ordered. "We need to keep moving or they'll set more traps."

Farhj had lived, though he was still reacting quite slowly. Chlo could heal him of course, if they survived to see Mendera again. How long would the clerics on Grey Walker wait for them? He had no idea and didn't want to discuss it with the others, but clerics weren't warriors and might decide to leave without them.

"Their mercenaries have stopped firing at us." Someone shouted.

"Good, that means we've arrived at where we need to be." Said Delmus.

"Where is that?" Asked Trey.

"The room with the machinery they don't want destroyed."

Just another chamber at the end of yet another passage, but the human mercenaries had ceased firing their blasters at them. The silver creatures had vanished altogether. It was nice not to be under constant attack, it gave Delmus a chance to focus on their situation.

“Run everything we have over Farhj.” He whispered to Dava. “He still doesn’t look right to me.”

“He needs Chlo, we only brought some fairly basic scanners.”

“Just do what you can for him.”

The consoles looked much the same as all the others they’d seen. Static, with no signs of doing anything, not even a flashing light. The difference was the slowly revolving device in the centre of the chamber.

“That looks old, like ancient demon tech.” Said Trey.

“Older maybe.” Someone muttered.

They’d all seen the gold boxes, capable of opening doorways to just about anywhere, even to destinations that might be fatal. The rotating device wasn’t gold in colour though, more like well-used bronze. No one seemed keen to get too close to the machine.

“What do you think it does ?” Asked Trey.

Two bronze coloured spheres about three feet across, at either end of a slowly turning bronze beam. There was an intense lance of light coming out of the top of the device, which vanished into a hole in the ceiling.

“I have no idea, but this is what we were looking for.” Said Delmus. “If we don’t hear from Luri or if we look likely to be overrun, this is what needs to be destroyed.”

They’d all die of course and the clerics would write some dreadful heroic poem about them, but no plan is ever perfect.

“Delmus !” Shouted Dava. “I didn’t even get a chance to scan him.... What do I do ?”

Poor Farhj wasn’t making a sound as he pressed his hands to the side of his head. The expression on his face indicated pain though, intense pain. Deep Inside, Farhj was quietly screaming.

~

~