

## Ripples from the Past

### Chapter 20 - Marius

**“Like the rifts, the wastes went on for miles into the distance, all the same ruined landscape. The rifts had an edge though while the wastes just went on and on, until everything became too small to see. An infinity outside of space and time, where nothing existed, or was supposed to exist.”**

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It was a risky, perhaps even a foolhardy thing to do. Sikush had been feeling a need to it though, almost as though something was pressing the action upon him. Sharing part of his mind with Chlo was useful and gave him access to her memories, but it also allowed her to access his. What memories were now genuinely his and his alone ? He was finding it harder and harder to be certain as the years went by. As for reality ? Sikush had seen enough to know that reality was as fluid and malleable as any other dimension.

“Wake up and look around you and accept were you are and what surrounds you as reality.”

Tomma-Goran had given him those words of wisdom. The huge reptile deity had been his friend for years beyond number, yet he was now dead, boiled away to nothing in the wastes of eternity.

Tomma had sacrificed himself to rid the multiverse of just a little evil. A tiny amount in the grand scheme of things, but enough to move the balance ever so slightly towards....Light versus dark, good versus evil, the names really didn't matter. Tomma had lured the bug goddess into the wastes, Sevril-Narge herself. He'd known that her own enormous ego made her vulnerable. He'd dared her to follow him and she had, dooming them both to an unpleasant death. Sikush had actually felt the balance of the multiverse move slightly towards the light. Some parts of the rifts became green and pleasant places for the first time ever. The empire flourished and grew as never before.

“Tomma, you were the noblest sentient being I've ever met.” Muttered Sikush.

Now Sikush was about to look for the exact place where Tomma had died. Not just as an act of respect, he had other reasons.

“One of the metal tablets on Mendera talks of the Wastes of Eternity, terrible places outside of the multiverse. Areas of chaos where even Gods have been known to boil away into oblivion. Impossible of course, but a secret uttered there might, just might be heard by the distant future.....Or the distant past.”

A cryptic clue whispered into his ear by the multiverse, while in the form of Kittara. The multiverse didn't say anything just for the sake of it, even the pauses were probably significant. He'd given up on trying to get straight answers out of the multiverse and decided to see if his organic form really was inviolable. Sikush had decided to walk alone into the wastes of eternity.

“We were never created, so in theory you can't be unmade.” Minraver had told him. “Though I do think it's a foolish risk to take.”

“You're crazy !” Chlo had yelled at him.

Poor Chlo had cried and demanded to come with him. Of course she couldn't....There had to be someone left to help Minraver rule Mendera if he was boiled away to nothing in the wastes.

“If you die, part of my mind will die with you..... All those memories.”

“I know Chlo. I think it will be fine though, just a little unpleasant.”

She'd never be the same of course, if she lost that part of her mind they shared. That made him feel guilty, a rare emotion for him to feel.

“What do you even hope to achieve ?” Chlo had asked.

“To be heard.”

Even where he'd come to was unpleasant, a place where few had visited. The end or beginning of everything, though past and future had no meaning at the edge of eternity. Some highly advanced civilisations had used prodigious amounts of energy and resources to travel to the end of time. Only to find out too late that simply arriving there was suicide. Nothing was supposed to be there and even he could feel the discomfort of the ultimate void, trying to pull his body apart.

“I saw a vast desert waste.” Luri had told him. “I was there for only a very short time, though I remember rolling dunes of white sand and barren rocky outcrops.”

Luri, then a deity had only survived for a few seconds in the wastes and would have been destroyed if Sventa hadn't been there. Sventa had nearly died, but she had been given a trick, a one way and one time method to drop back into reality. Sikush had no such trick, he'd have to force open a way home.

“It's all a delusion created by your own mind of course.” Sventa had told him. “I saw a landscape ravaged by fire. Trees burned to stumps, buildings reduced to piles of rubble, some still smouldering. All nonsense, there is probably nothing there to see, nothing at all.”

Of course there was nothing, only the delusion of a world your mind expected the barren wastes to be. There was nothing really there, it was what lay outside of the multiverse, outside of any version of reality. Was it just an edge, or an ultimate jail wall, to keep even deities from straying too far? Not that the multiverse was going to give him an answer to that question. It troubled him that the multiverse might not even know the answer and might be just another prisoner, trapped within the walls, the wastes. He'd never talked to anyone about such thoughts, even Minraver.

“Time to move.” He muttered.

There was no time though or any medium to create sound. His mumble was soundless, that close to the edge of everything. Somewhere slightly in front of him, or behind, in the past or maybe the future, lay the wastes. No trick, just an ability he had to shift his own reality outside of the multiverse. Sikush approached the edge of everything and carried on going, into The Wastes of Eternity.

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There was something magical about popping out of the atmosphere of Algaria and seeing space filled with tiny dots of light. Usually the transition from upper atmosphere to space was gradual, but for Marius it happened quickly, adding to the feeling of wonder. One moment he was accelerating hard enough to cause the outside of the raptor to glow red, as it hurtled through the atmosphere. The next moment he was away, out in space and bidding farewell to the pull of gravity from the planet below.

“Happy hunting Marius AGS1497.” He heard from defence command.

On his own, able to pick his own targets at will. The dots of light were stars of course, or at least most of them were. Some were enemy craft, reflecting the sunlight off their hulls. A lot of the dots of light were chaff plates, or rubbish shot out of airlocks to confuse the Algarian planetary defences. An eye movement up to the far left of the screen and a slight squeeze of his left hand on the control paddle and all those annoying pieces of junk could be gone from his screen, made invisible by his onboard AI. Dangerous though, if you were flying an imperial raptor, which didn't have strong inertial damping. He'd seen one hit an old power loader, chucked out as a decoy by raiders near Phlot. Steel with titanium strengthening struts, that old loader must have weighed three or four tons. The raptor survived hitting it at speed, but the pilot had been pureed. Marius left everything on the screen and just used his eye movements and left hand to highlight known enemy craft. Just

about all battle commands were by eye movements, confirmed with small hand gestures. Difficult to learn, but perfect in a fast moving battle.

“That is a lot of potential targets.” He muttered.

The battle was only just beginning and he was still accelerating towards it. There was a little debris at the edges of the enemy fleet, which would get worse as the battle progressed. Marius knew what to do, he’d been well trained by instructors on Mendera.

“When faced with a multitude of targets, pick one and stick with it.” He’d been told. “If another target appears right in front of you, ignore it. No matter how irresistible and important a target it looks, keep to your original choice.”

Marius knew why, it was why large groups of flying creatures moved about in flocks. Not only was a hungry predator likely to decide another of your flock looked tastier than you, the sheer number of potential meals created its own confusion.

“A predator will switch targets again and again.” The instructor had told him. “Sometimes ending up with no meal at all. Stick to the target you chose and keep attacking until it’s gone, or you are.”

He wasn’t going to be tempted by all the small craft, Marius wanted to take apart something huge. He had an imperial raptor and knew how to fly it. There had to be something big out there among the enemy, a flagship of some kind, or a mile long refuelling and repair ship. He’d been ignoring background chatter, until something from defence control caught his interest.

“..... Ceramic hull. To repeat; the large craft that just dropped into normal space, is believed to be the Terak command ship. All the Terak craft appear to be using hardened ceramic hulls, so adjust your weapons accordingly. You will have to guide missiles in; they won’t lock onto a ceramic hull.”

Marius didn’t need missile lock, raptors were designed to get in close and rip enemy craft apart, exposing their crew to the near vacuum of space.

“That is my target.” He muttered. “My succulent meal, my catch that can’t be allowed to escape.”

No name on his screen, just an ident next to a half mile long Terak craft. Not that impressive looking for their command craft, but it was surrounded by small fighters. Marius selected the target and confirmed an engage command, only to have a yellow caution box appear.

“Oh no, not today..... No cautions today.”

A lone raptor, not part of a swarm, he doubted if his AI system rated his chances that high. He didn’t want to look at the caution before dismissing it, but his eyes felt drawn to it. Crap ! He was only given a fifteen percent probability of success. He was still accelerating towards the enemy fleet and another caution box was coming up on something much closer. He was only being given a twenty percent survival rate against a small mercenary needle craft, which was heading straight at him. His own AI was beginning to give lots of caution notes on the screen, all effectively telling him to run away or come back with a few friends.

“Fuck it !”

Marius, the guy close to retirement, who didn’t really believe in Yraag the God of war, found himself turning off the caution system and preparing to fight to the death. There was something deep within him that he didn’t understand, some distant race memory that was over riding his desire for self-preservation.

“We may meet today after all mighty Yraag.”

There was a way to deal with small and annoying needle craft, if you had an imperial raptor to fly. It wasn’t a method taught by any Menderan instructor, but Marius had listened to The Damned, as they’d talked of their past triumphs. He switched just about all of his craft’s energy reserves to the

forward defence screens and accelerated towards the enemy, before saying a short prayer to the Goddess Frey, who was a lot less demanding than Yraag.

“Please let the old stories not be all lies and bravado.”

He ignored the Ion blaster fire from the needle craft, raptors were constructed well and had layers of imperial alloy armour. Plus Marius could see the front energy shields were absorbing most of the hits. It was a game of chicken in space craft and there wasn't time for anyone to blink first. The closing speed was so high, that he only just had time to close his eyes, wondering if he'd ever open them again.

“I'm too old for this.....”

And it looked like he'd be continuing to get older, at least for the time being. The raptor was unharmed, all system working, yet his rear screen showed him an expanding cloud of debris, that had until recently been an enemy needle ship. So, ramming them did work, though his front screens were down to only forty percent efficiency. There should have been a little flaring at the edge of his screen, a small automated confirmation of his kill. It seemed that turning off the cautions turned off everything, even the 'well done' notifications. It seemed so unfair.

“If I survive, I'm going to complain to the Menderan tech people.”

He was much closer to the Terak command vessel now, close enough to attract the attention of its small defence craft. Marius felt more confident, he had just won in a fight that even his AI thought was unwinnable.

“Enemy reinforcements, dropping into normal space at coordinates.....”

His own command talking and Marius realised he'd been ignoring everything apart from his own battle with the needle craft. That was good though, that was how the Menderan instructor had told him all the best raptor pilots behaved. He took a second to look at the screen, the entire screen.

“Crap, there must be thousands of dead.....” He muttered.

Debris was everywhere and a lot of the craft were now being flagged up as damaged, assumed destroyed. The notifications kept changing, switching operational vessels from both sides, over to showing no life signs, to assumed dead and derelict. No sounds in space, just the steady flash of plasma and Ion weaponry. Marius should have been terrified, but something made him carry on chasing after the Terak command vessel.

“Ceramic hulls are lighter than metal alloys.” His instructor had once told him. “That tends to mean better acceleration and manoeuvrability, but at the cost of lost strength.”

That had been then though and the newer ceramic hulls were as tough as imperial alloy, maybe tougher. There was no question of ramming a half mile long vessel, not if you hoped to be going home after the battle. He was going to rely on an insanely high closing speed and the rotating Ion blaster turret on the bottom of the raptor.

“The Spirit of Yraag has been destroyed.....Vengeance warriors of Algaria, we need vengeance. Rush to death, rush to meet the enemy, lest someone takes your place.”

No, he wasn't going to be depressed that the flagship of the Algarian fleet, was now being flagged as a lifeless derelict. He'd known people among the crew and now they were gone. Nothing was going to change that, certainly not changing course to attack the craft that had destroyed The Spirit of Yraag.

“Don't be the predator that misses his target.” He muttered.

He activated the turret and that would be it, his one and only action in its running. The target had been selected and acquired. The onboard AI knew how to use the Ion blasters in the turret, far better than he did and with far greater accuracy. His job was simply to avoid the defending fighters

and defence blasters of the Terak command ship. At that moment, Marius knew the AI had been right about his chances, he was going to die. He was going to take a lot of the enemy with him though. As the enemy vessel grew larger, filling his entire screen, he muttered the famous litany to Yraag, or at least the one bit he knew by heart.

“Great and mighty Yraag. Let me not know the damnation of dying from old age. I rush to my death in your honour, hoping for a place at your table.....”

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Seesha was sat near the flame, while Mix lay asleep on the dusty floor. The true flame, the eternal flame which had burned since the great battle had been won, yet the room was ignored and rarely cleaned. Hol had talked about bringing the room with the true flame back into use, but that was before she'd vanished on some sort of mission.

“It's just not right Mix.”

No good, their morning walk around the city had worn him out. Mix was in a deep sleep and nothing looked likely to wake him out of that slumber. Seesha resented his apparent indifference though.

“Did you hear me ?” She yelled. “The flame that has burned since the crawling chaos was locked away in his prison, yet no one comes here but us. They don't even brush the floor.”

No good, he was even snoring a little. Mix was supposed to help, but she could easily brush the floor on her own. First she ran her hand through the flame, happy that she felt a little pleasure, rather than pain. It was her way of ensuring she hadn't brought anything nasty back from the outside world, no spiritual contagion. She picked up the old wooden handled brush.

“I suppose I'll need to do all the work !”

Still no answer. Seesha was careful not to hit him with the brush though; he still looked small for his age. She'd stop feeling quite so protective as he grew, she knew that. He'd always be her baby brother though, even if they both lived to be six thousand.

“They rarely cleaned the place in my day.”

It was like a whisper carried on the wind, yet the words had been clear. Seesha looked around and there was still only her and Mix in the room.

“Did you hear that ?”

Still sleeping, the boy was useless. The door had been jammed open for as long as anyone could remember, so she could see the hallway was empty. An imagined voice probably, brought on by being in that place. Seesha carried on brushing, until she saw Mix was awake and staring at her.

“Good, you're finally awake. Pick up the other brush and help.”

He lifted his arm and pointed at her.... No above and behind her.

“Look.” He said.

If only she'd looked up, but no one ever does. There right up against the ceiling, hung a woman wearing the uniform of The Damned. She was upside down, so gravity had caused her clothing to fall down, revealing long black legs, while obscuring her face.

“Is she real ?” Asked Mix. “Should we go and leave her alone ?”

“No, don't go. I've driven clerics from here before and always regretted it.”

The woman gently lowered herself and turned so that her clothing fell back over her body. The face was dark, darker skin than Seesha had ever seen before. She'd only ever seen pictures of one woman who'd been that black.

“Gloriously black.” Hol had once told her.

Their new friend curled her legs under her and sat next to the flame, running her hands through it.

“That feels so good, which is surprising. I am just about the most powerful creature of darkness you are ever likely to meet.”

“Seesha, scared Seesha..... Can we go ?”

Poor Mix, wanting to run away. She held his hand firmly, just in case he did run away and shout for help. Seesha was becoming anxious, but her curiosity was greater than her fear. The woman had just run both arms through the flame and still lived. How evil could she be ?

“I am Seesha and this is my brother Mix.... Who are you ?” She asked.

“I’m not sure, though I do remember this place. All that whispering from the one below, all that darkness being pushed at me ever so gradually for such a long time. It did him no good of course, that darkness he gave me was actually a gift, though it took me a while to realise it. That darkness was the difference you see..... Between winning and losing.”

“Seesha.”

“Stop pulling Mix, there’s nothing to fear here.”

Brave words and braver than she was feeling. There was something very strange about the woman, some things beginning to remind Seesha of the holy texts she’d read when just Mix’s age.

“Nothing to fear you say Seesha.” Said the woman. “Foolish words considering how much residue his presence has left behind. The clerics always hidden away to protect them from the evils of the outside world. Ironically the worst evil was here, growing and spreading, little by little. Less now he’s gone, but there is still a lot of badness here..... Delicious, I can taste it.”

“Seesha, scared Seesha..... Bad lady !!”

He was crying, so she held him, kissing the top of his head. Seesha had an idea forming in her head, even if it did seem to be an impossibility.

“Are you Kittara ?” She asked.

Mix actually stopped struggling to run away, at the mention of that legendary name.

“Perhaps I am.” Said the woman. “Or I will be, once I know who is calling for me and who is carrying out an invocation in Leng. Then I might become Kittara, or maybe not. I was called for so I came, though I’m not sure why I came here.”

It was making some sense to Seesha, who had read extensively about the life of Kittara. Most young female clerics saw the long dead warrior as a hero figure. Mix had stopped crying to look adoringly at the woman with skin the colour of obsidian. One thing in the conversation had lodged itself in Seesha’s mind.

“You said he’d gone, but he can’t be.” She said. “The multiverse would have returned to chaos, we’d all be.....”

“Dead, yes of course he’s still in his prison, it’s just been moved somewhere else. I have no idea where, but I’m sure it must be somewhere safe.”

Seesha just couldn’t allow herself to believe it. Hundreds of thousands of clerics, all dedicating their lives to keeping the crawling chaos in his prison. It couldn’t all have been for nothing, could it ?

“Why would someone move it ?” She asked.

“To keep it safe I expect, though I have no idea who did it or when. There is a residue here though, lots of wonderful darkness which I can absorb to be more..... me again.”

Mix had lost all fear of the woman, actually moving towards her and rubbing her arm.

“You are real.” He said.

“Oh yes Mix, very real. Keep this room clean, it means a lot to me.”

“We will.” Said Seesha.

The woman who was on her way to becoming Kittara, sank through the stone floor and vanished.

“Wow.” Said Mix.

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Sikush knew everything he was seeing and feeling was created out of his mind, what he'd expected the barren wastes to look like. There was even an atmosphere to breathe, a medium to carry the sound of his footfalls and mutterings. Everything was real though, or as real as anything really is. He could feel the ground beneath his feet, taste ash in the air, see the ruined trees all around him. He tried to change the terrain by force of will and failed.

“That would have been too easy.” He muttered. “I am here, inside the wastes. I am now part of whatever this is and must make do with what there is.”

No horizon, which didn't surprise him. Like the rifts, the wastes went on for miles into the distance, all the same ruined landscape. The rifts had an edge though while the wastes just went on and on, until everything became too small to see. An infinity outside of space and time, where nothing existed, or was supposed to exist. Sikush felt the wastes pecking at his flesh, trying to pull him apart and failing. It was hurting, but the pain was tolerable.

“Remember it all, so you can pass the memory on to Chlo.”

He did have a plan, beyond simply arriving in the wastes and surviving the experience. For a while though, he just turned around, taking in the scorched ground, the fallen trees and the outcrops of broken rocks. It looked like an active landscape, perhaps ruined and pulled apart by volcanic activity. In truth he knew it was how he'd always imagined the wastes would look. He remembered every detail, knowing Chlo would never forgive him if he didn't.

“Now to find your old friend.”

His voice sounded strange, but still recognisable as his. Sikush needed to find the exact place where the deity Tomma-Goran had died. Impossible of course, that place was created by the minds of those there at the time. Sevril-Narge, Luri and Sventa, all contributing to how the landscape looked, all seeing something different. Impossible to find that place, yet it didn't surprise him to come across it quite quickly, as if by accident. Small crystals that twinkled green as he approached, all that remained of his old friend. Sikush knelt down and scooped up the crystals in his hands.

“I miss you Tomma, the multiverse misses you. We are greatly in need of your wisdom.”

Sikush never cried, it was well known. No matter who was lost in battle, he'd never been known to shed a tear. He had cried for Kittara, but that had been in private. He cried enough for two tears to drop onto the crystals, causing them to change from green to yellow.

“Forgive me Tomma, but I still need your help.”

Tomma was gone forever, there was no coming back once a deity boiled away into the wastes. There was residual power in his remains though. Sikush stood up and held the crystals high above his head.

“Kittara !” He yelled. “I need you, the multiverse needs you. Hear me and return !”

“Kittara !”

“Kittara !”

He kept on calling. How long would it take ? He was reconciled to remaining there, tolerating the pain, until there was sign that his shouts had been heard. Time had no real meaning in the wastes, so he knew there was a chance he'd be there for what seemed to him, a very long time.

“Kittara ! I need you. I once asked if you were mine and you replied ‘Always.’”

“Kittara ! Return..... Always is the most dangerous word in the multiverse. It means now, all of the past and all of the future. Hear me and return to keep your promise.”

“Kittara !”

“Kittara !”

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Marius didn't want to disturb the weapon turret, which was committed to firing everything it had at the Terak command vessel. Imperial raptors were fitted with two Ion cannons though, right at the end of each of its stubby wings. They could only fire forward and could only be moved around a few degrees, but Marius activated the hand control and aimed at one of the enemy fighters approaching at speed. He moved his hand ever so slightly and fired, both Ion cannons together.

"Crap ! Maybe Yraag is with me today."

The fighter had blown apart, its own fire missing Marius completely. He'd never been that good with the Ion blasters, few were. They tended to be ignored in favour of the weapon turret. Marius had managed to destroy an enemy fighter, with weapons he'd rarely used. It had to be an omen of some kind.

"Be with me today, let me be your strong right arm mighty Yraag."

He wanted to add a promise to build a shrine to Yraag outside his house if he survived. That sounded like blackmail though and blackmailing the Algerian God of War, seemed a bit risky. When the second fighter was destroyed by fire from his Ion cannons, Marius became convinced he'd been chosen to bring vengeance to their enemies.

"I will soar in the wind. I will bring death to our enemies."

He'd never read that many of the holy texts since becoming an adult, but he knew the words had come from somewhere in the teachings of Yraag, even if they were jumbled up a bit. As Marius easily destroyed another four enemy fighters, he was convinced that the deities of Algaria were protecting him. His own craft was still perfect, no damage at all. He'd seen the screens flare a few times, but there wasn't a single warning coming up on his screen. It was impossible, a miracle. A proximity warning briefly flashed, as he dipped under the huge enemy command craft.

"Whatever happens now, the children will be proud of you." He muttered.

Who knows, the Tranquillity high council might even name a public building after him, maybe several if he actually destroyed his target. The fighters dropped away as he went along the underside of the half mile long enemy vessel. Raptors weren't that large and by staying close to the hull of the Terak craft, he was safe from fighter fire and the weapon turrets that might have given him problems.

"Is this really happening ?" He mumbled.

Strangely a lot of people in the multiverse, tenuously linked together, had asked much the same question that day. It was too good to be true, but he was travelling fast, his weapon turret blasting huge holes in the ceramic hull of the Terak craft. Too close to the enemy really, only his speed was saving his raptor from being pulverised by the flying debris he was creating.

"So many souls for you this day, mighty Yraag."

It was all there on the rear screen, vast pieces of the enemy craft's hull and interior, being ripped apart and thrown into space. Small bundles of clothing too, with people in them, all dying fairly quickly once they were in space. Creatures designed to live on the ground, safely beneath an atmosphere with just the right amount of oxygen. Leaving that thin covering of gases was always a throw of the dice and today their enemy had thrown snake eyes. All too quickly he was out from under the enemy vessel and hurtling away, while trying to zig zag, to avoid enemy fire. There was none.

"I actually..... Fucking did it!"

Craft that size rarely blow apart. A lot of small explosions and debris being thrown out by the internal air pressure. A spacecraft half a mile long creates its own mass attraction, its own small



amount of gravity. Debris hung around, gradually being pulled back towards what was left of the once mighty Terak command craft. It was dying though, the crew and troops onboard dying with it. How many souls had he taken for Yraag ? Fifty thousand, maybe a hundred ? More if the vessel had been carrying soldiers meant to be invading Algaria. Now they were all dead, their blood boiling in their veins, turning them into freeze dried horrors, which might orbit the planet forever.

“I have no pity, they came to invade, to kill, to take what wasn’t theirs.”

The battle was still going on, but Algaria had won. His screens were showing far fewer vessels from his own side than there had been, but the invaders had almost vanished from the space above Tranquillity. His screen flickered, yet there hadn’t been a single warning about any damage to his raptor. A chilling thought refused to go away.... How much of the warning system had he turned off ? Marius headed for home and turned on the caution notification and wished he hadn’t.

“Just get me home.” He muttered at the raptor.

Everything had major damage, including the life support systems. Either he’d turned off too much, or the designers had really messed up the whole caution system. Crap ! Not wanting to be bothered every few seconds, didn’t mean he didn’t want to know that the heat sink for the raptor’s drives was about to disintegrate. Life support, weapons, the three independent drives, all showing an imminent risk of failure.

“Oh.... If only I’d known.”

Maybe not knowing had been a good thing. Throughout the battle he’d been certain his craft was being protected by a beneficent deity. If he’d know it was falling apart ? Just maybe, the real gift from the Gods, had been in hiding the truth from him. Marius didn’t accelerate, his craft might not survive the sudden jolt and the drives might decide to pick that moment to fall apart. He aimed his raptor with small directional thrusters and drifted towards the atmosphere. Marius was going to live to see his wife again and he’d done his duty.

“I’m going home.”

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Hol had to admit to herself that she had no real idea what the watcher was doing. She never told that to anyone else of course, they needed to have complete faith in the ancient inhabitant of Leng. “I gave you the words, chant them when I point at you.” Said the Watcher.

They’d fixed machines none of them understood, created evil smelling potions and poured a multitude of liquids into the pool. The pool seemed to be the key to everything, though the Watcher never properly explained anything. Estrid had sent her to see the Watcher though, so Hol trusted that every strange act they performed was necessary, vital to bringing Kittara back.

“The pool is all, doorway in, doorway out.” The Watcher had muttered at her, quite a few times. To Hol the pool looked like a hot writhing liquid, with the consistence of molten pitch. It looked like a gateway to some kind of hell and probably led to nowhere nice. As for the Watcher ? She felt like someone The Damned should be chasing with drawn swords, but Estrid had told her to trust the Watcher. It was all very confusing and Celli was still in a coma of some kind.

“I can’t read this language.” Said Juno.

The Watcher actually made a hissing noise, obviously annoyed.

“I’ve told you several times. The writing is how the words are said, you do not need to understand what you’re saying. The resonance of the words, lubricates the spell. Understand ?”

Lots of nodding heads, but of course no one really did understand. More evil smelling liquids went into the pool, before the Watcher began to intone a very long spell. Occasionally she’d point at Juno

or Albas and they'd read the next line on the parchment they'd been given. Not Mingal though, it appeared his aura wasn't right or something.

"Chaos invokers can confuse the spirits." The Watcher had said.

The ritual went on and on, far longer than an old style cleric wedding ceremony and Hol usually fell asleep during those.

"You now Hol..... a hand in the pool and call her name."

Fear as she knelt by the side of the pool and pushed her hand into the hot dark liquid. Hol had no fear of death, but Leng was a place of evil, even if they were now allies. There were those with the power to steal your soul in Leng and imprison it forever.

"Kittara !" Yelled Hol.

"My friend, the one who took me, then a novice, to Gateway.... We need you."

"Kittara !"

It all happened so quickly. A mist began to build up in the centre of the pool, which coalesced into the shape of a naked woman. A face formed and looked her way.

"Kittara."

It was her and actually smiling at her. Only for a second or two, before vanishing completely. They'd known it was early days and there would need to be a lot more rituals and invocations. It was still a disappointment though, just seeing Kittara for such a short period of time.

"See, she's back, her soul no longer wanders through the dark places." Said the Watcher. "Still a lot to do to bring her fully back and make her corporeal, but it's all happening far more quickly than I anticipated. Actually it's as though someone else was..... No, there are none left with that kind of power. Now we must prepare for tomorrow's sacrifice."

There was only them there, no animals at all. Hol had been through every habitable room and apart from a few insects, they were the only living things in Ancient Leng. The word sacrifice hinted at something truly unthinkable.

"What sacrifice ?" She asked.

"There has to be a sacrifice or the darkness will never release her memories of those powers.

Without her memories, Kittara will be useless to us, to you. There is Celli, who is grievously wounded and likely to die anyway. It might almost be a mercy to....."

"No." Snapped Hol. "Celli came with us and will leave with us, even if I have to carry her."

"Your choice of course. In that case you will need to open other doors, until one of the creature who used to be guards is found."

"We had one of those already." Said Albas.

"Oh, a dead one will never do, the sacrifice needs to fresh and alive before sacrifice. You must capture one and stun it for me."

"How do we do that ?" Asked Juno.

"You are the warriors..... Think of something. Or of course there is Celli."

"No !" Shouted Hol. "We'll find you a guard and stun it."

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