

Tales of Nurigen

Kittara and the Tree of Life

**“Like pilgrim’s withered wreath of flowers
Plucked in a far-off land.”**

- Lewis Carroll

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“Another story about Kittara, please uncle Nurigen. Please !” Begged Elva.

He wasn’t even her real uncle, in fact the girl sat cross legged on his favourite rug was no relation of his at all. He’d had two daughters and one had died quite young. The other had been converted into one of The Damned, the immortal warriors who’d kept the Menderan Empire in control of the multiverse for far longer than he cared to think about. Alyz, his beloved Alyz. Once converted she was unable to bear children, it was part of the price of being granted immortality by the emperor, The Chalné.

“An immortal could have enough children to populate a galaxy. There will be no children born to The Damned, there will be no dynasties founded by The Damned.” The emperor had once told him. Of course his good friend the emperor had neglected to mention that once given immortality, he too would be unable to father any further children. Or had he ? Nurigen had to admit to himself that many billions of years of time and resentment may have distorted his memory of the event. He still felt as though The Chalné had tricked him into accepting immortality, but a part of him knew that too was a distortion of the truth.

“My dear Elva, I’ve told you every story suitable for your age.”

The girl who was no real relation was about ten years old and her appealing eyes suddenly changed. He couldn’t have said how, perhaps her eyes narrowed, perhaps her brow furrowed. She looked upset and about to cry.

“Then tell me an unsuitable story.”

Elva’s parents had been clerics, everyone on Mendera seemed to be clerics, there were millions of them. True they went out to educate the empire and were much more productive than they used to be. But Nurigen still had a natural distaste for all that religious fervour.

“I know old friend religion is ruining the temple.” The emperor had once said to him.

They’d both laughed, but for a long time the clerics had been a spectacularly humourless bunch. Then there had been the 4th war against the Aumashy and Mendera had been reduced to a few smouldering ruins surrounding the Temple of the Flame. The prisoner beneath the temple had almost been released and the emperor had banished the surviving Aumashy. There had been tens of thousands of deaths among the clerics, including Elva’s parents.

“Pllllleeease !” She pleaded.

“Let me think.”

He leant back in his old but comfy chair and looked at the ceiling high above. The problem with most of the stories about Kittara was that they contained a lot of evisceration and sex. He’d cleaned up a few, but it was becoming harder to find a story he could edit without ruining. He moved his gaze down and her eyes were wide and excited.

“You’ve thought of one, haven’t you ?” She said.

She got up and ran to a door at the back of lounge area and whispered to whoever was there. Her sisters ran into the room and soon all three were sitting on the rug in front of him. Edia was the

youngest at only eight, but Nina was thirteen and understood some of the nuances of the stories he told them. Elva was his main fan though, she was already clapping her hands in joy.

“Are we going to hear about Mo again ?” She asked.

“No, not Mo this time.”

“The clerics,” said Nina, “I bet it’s about the awful clerics.”

Nurigen had to chuckle at that comment.

“No, this is a story that Kittara wouldn’t want told, so you have to promise not to tell her.”

“Kittara is dead silly.” Said Elva.

Nurigen arranged the cushions on his chair and examined the three eager faces in front of him.

“Someone like Kittara never really dies,” he said, “you have to promise !”

“I promise.” Said Edia.

“Of course I promise Uncle Nurigen.” Added Elva.

Only Nina was holding out, her eyes almost boring into his face.

“It’s silly, people don’t come back. If they could our mother would have come back.”

“You’re right Nina, but Kittara is different to most people. You have to promise me that if you ever meet her, you’ll never tell her that I told you about The Tree of Life. Otherwise I can’t tell you the story.”

“Stop being a nuisance Nina and promise.” Said Elva.

Nina began twisting her hair about, something she did unconsciously when she felt harassed.

“Alright, I promise.”

“Then I’ll tell you the story of Kittara and the Tree of Life.”

“Does she slay evil monsters ?” Asked Edia.

“We’ve had stories like that, but this is a story where Kittara seeks for a priceless treasure.” Replied Nurigen.

“Does she find it ?” Asked Elva.

“That is for to you to tell me when I’ve finished the story.”

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The clerics in the Temple of the Flame were always a little wary of Kittara. She often swore at them if they got in her way and she had been known to clear everyone out of the shrine room. Over time the shrine room had almost become her private domain. A few younger clerics came to watch her as she sat opposite the eternal flame and contemplated her position in the multiverse. The flame was in the middle of the giant rock plug, which sealed the crawling chaos in his prison below. There were many other seals and forces keeping him there, but the giant stone was tangible, it spoke of the effort needed to imprison chaos, all those countless billions of years before.

Elsewhere in the vast temple, which occupied five square miles of Mendera City and descended over four miles deep beneath the surface, Kittara did tolerate the clerics. After all, over two hundred thousands of them populated the temple and it was their home for life. Unlike her they couldn’t leave, it was forbidden and those born within the temple walls knew no other life. Usually Kittara showed a certain restraint when she was reading in the vast ancient archives, but she was scaring the clerics by actually throwing the ancient metal books around the room. Eventually it was decided to inform the head of the temple and sometime later Morna Laocia was brought into the archive room on a chair carried by over a dozen high level clerics. For most heads of the temple, the chair was simply an affectation, a badge of office. But Morna Laocia was very old, over six thousand years had elapsed since her birth. The chair had become her only way of getting around the huge temple complex.

"Kittara, what are you looking for child?" She asked.

Kittara looked up, a curse on her lips, but then she smiled. Morna was an old friend, they'd once spent hours digging through the shelves of ancient knowledge, looking for tales of lost treasures. Morna had been a child then and Kittara had been sent to the temple for ten thousand years as a kind of punishment. Years they'd spent delving into knowledge best forgotten, much of it in languages unreadable to them.

"Sorry, I seem to have made a bit of a mess." Kittara replied.

"Messes can be tidied, but what knowledge do you seek?"

"There was a metal tablet by Wrath-Bib-Tie, I distinctly remember it. It dealt with a rumour about the Tree of Life."

There were a lot of half hidden smirks, finding the Tree of Life was a famous quest that many had undertaken, but was none had succeeded.

"That is a myth Kittara," said Morna, "and Wrath-Bib-Tie only ever wrote in a demon language that none have been able to read for..... well a very long time."

Kittara held up a silver metal tablet that hadn't corroded or changed since the words had been etched on it, more billions of years before than anyone could easily comprehend.

"This mentions him," said Kittara, "and it says Wrath was considered a remarkable seer. Luri taught me a little of the ancient demon languages, enough to understand the titles and a little of the contents at least. Now I know the ancient demon tongues perfectly."

Morna signalled to her staff to help her off the chair. She was probably the most frail person Kittara had ever seen, yet her eyes still glittered with intelligence. The elderly cleric actually rubbed Kittara's cheek, as though she was soothing a fractious child.

"Oh Kittara, I can only guess at who has been teaching you such things and the price you had to pay."

Kittara could never tell her about the hybrids on the rifts who'd taught her dead demon languages. Some had just wanted imperial gold for their knowledge, but others! Kittara had darkened her soul to gain the ability to read the forbidden texts. Something inside her seemed to know the metal pages of etchings by Wrath-Bib-Tie were important.

"I regret nothing." She told her old friend.

"Your memory is good Kittara, but I remember the tablet you seek and it was far lower, right down in the lowest level of the archive. Come, I'll show you."

They moved slowly, the two dozen clerics and Morna on her chair. Every set of stairs seemed to take an age and some areas of the archive had poorly lit stairs. Kittara helped and eventually they were in the deepest of the archives, over four miles below the city streets of Mendera City. It was hot and dry, perfect for old archives, but hell for the clerics.

"The surface fans barely stir the air this deep." A cleric noted.

"A mile or so that way."

Morna pointed and the clerics lifted her chair and suffered in the heat. Kittara recognised nothing, but it had been a long time ago and she had visited a lot of the obscure parts of the temple. It was dusty in the deep archives, obviously none of the clerics were keen on cleaning in the oppressive heat. In one corner Morna told her people to stop and she climbed out her chair.

"There Kittara, the red shelving. I remember you being very excited by the pictures."

Yes, Kittara recognised the red tint of the stone the shelves had been dug out of. Right at the bottom of the shelves and partially covered in dust were the two tablets that had caused her to learn not just ancient demon, but also ancient tongues of other races long forgotten. It was the pictures,

pictures etched into impervious metal, pictures of a tree, the tree, the tree of life itself. Kittara had visited the Shrine of the Tree of Life, she been there on numerous occasions. There were lots of trees there, the gardens and grounds seemed full of them. She'd once asked about 'the tree.' "Oh that, it's just a myth. There never was a real tree of life." The head keeper of the Shrine had told her.

Kittara wasn't silly and she seemed to be able to draw on a vast ocean of knowledge from somewhere she didn't fully understand. She knew that all myths and legends contain an element of truth. She regularly shared a bed with the emperor, so regularly that she was permitted to use his private name of 'Sikush.' Once, after they'd spent several hours enjoying each other's bodies, she'd asked him about the tree of life.

"There was a tree, of course there was a tree a long time ago and it was in the gardens of the shrine." He'd told her.

"What became of it Sikush?"

He was hot and sweaty, basking in the afterglow of a night of truly sensational coupling. Kittara had chosen her moment well and Sikush was in the mood to be truthful.

"It died and its guardian was taken back into the wastes of eternity."

"So it's gone forever?"

"There is a rumour of a single seed, but no one has ever found it."

"And the Guardian you mentioned is gone forever?"

Kittara was interrupted from her memories of the past by Morna getting down on her hands and knees and digging in the dust. It could easily have been six thousand years before, two bored friends looking for adventure in the forbidden archives.

"They're here, the Wrath-Bib-Tie tablets." Said Morna Laocia.

She was holding them in her frail hands as though they weighed a ton and Kittara gave thanks that her body would never suffer the indignities of old age. Morna put the tablets on the ground and used the edge of her robe to wipe the dust of ages from them.

"Can you read the language?" Asked Morna.

"As well as I can read the common tongue of the empire."

It was all there, written beneath the pictures of a large tree with oddly triangular leaves.

"Tell me, tell me?"

Morna was an excited child once more and Kittara read the story on the tablets to her. She read about the strange blight which had destroyed millions of trees, including the Tree of Life, which everyone had wrongly assumed was immortal. She read of the fearsome guardian set over the tree, and of it being absorbed back into the wastes of eternity.

"It mentions a seed," said Kittara, "a single seed that was placed in a location of ultimate safety."

"Where Kittara, where did they put the seed?"

Kittara read and part of her wanted to shriek.

"They put it in a vault, in the deepest part of the great hive. They took the seed to Umvara, to the planet of the Nagivara."

Morna was giving her a concerned look and rubbing her cheek again.

"You can't go to that place Kittara, not for a something that is likely to be just a myth."

It was forbidden to pick up the head of the temple, but Kittara ignored the rule and lifted her old friend up and sat her gently back in her chair.

"It's not a myth Morna and I will be going to Umvara, how could I not go?"

"Then I pray that you return to us alive and well."

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Kittara could move her reality almost anywhere, but she still used an imperial needle craft as an orbiting base around the planet Umvara. It was just so alien down there, nothing fitted what was normal for a human based lifeform.

“Do you need any help ?” Chlo asked over their private link.

Chlo the AI that ran and still runs the technology that keeps the entire empire functioning. Chlo would watch and monitor Kittara and send help if it was needed. That was the rule if the assignment was an official order from the emperor, but this was a private venture. The rules were far less certain, there was a lot of scope for ambiguity and bad communication.

“No Chlo, I don’t want to put anyone else at risk. Morna Laocia still thinks I’m chasing after a myth.”

“There was a tree Kittara, but I’ve never heard of this seed.”

It was depressing, Chlo had heard of just about everything. Kittara looked at the even green colour of the planet Umvara on the craft’s observation screen.

“Hol has put herself on Kittara watch,” said Chlo, “so you have at least one of The Damned waiting to give you backup, if you need it.”

“Thank you Chlo, I hope I don’t need it.”

Hol Azreemy, the only child of a cleric family to be selected as a member of The Damned. Hol was also winner of the Kittara lookalike contest and dressed and even changed her hair colour to look like Kittara. It was flattering to receive such hero worship, but there were occasions when it became annoying. There was no malice in it though and Kittara had a great deal of respect for Hol Azreemy as a warrior.

“Watch me Hol,” Kittara muttered, “and if I need your help, I’ll take you to Gateway one day. We can shout at the gates together.”

Kittara moved her reality to the surface of the planet and everything was covered by plant life, it even covered the vast oceans with rafts of knotted vines and ocean going plants. The air was so high in carbon dioxide from volcanic gases, that no human could survive breathing the atmosphere for more than a few seconds. Kittara though wasn’t born human, she’d been converted as part of the transformation to being one of The Damned. She didn’t need to breathe, or eliminate bodily waste, or sleep. If she didn’t want to that is. Kittara actually found most bodily functions pleasurable, especially sex and sleep, or rather a long sleep after vigorous and prolonged sex.

“Nearest hole in the ground Chlo ?”

Kittara could have hovered in the air at a thousand feet or so and found it for herself, but it was easier for Chlo to spot the nearest entry to the Nagivara hive.

“About two miles due south of where you are.” Chlo told her.

Kittara lifted herself into the air, another gift conversion had given her. At about five hundred feet she sped south, watching the canopy of green for the sign of an entrance into the ground. Everything was the hive on Umvara, one single dominant life form living as one huge community. The hive filled the outer crust of the planet with millions of entrances on every continent.

“Spotted it Chlo.”

The Nagivara used chemical to keep the plant life back from the entrances to the hive. Nothing too strong, they relied on the plants, much as humans do. The plants were kept back far enough so that the Nagivara could fly out of the hive with no obstructions. This was especially important during mating seasons. The entrance to the hive was a hole, a large hole in the ground with no obvious signs that a living and reasonably intelligent organism had created it.

“Just don’t touch anything !” Said Chlo.

Kittara knew the Nagivara were one of the mysteries of the multiverse. There was no other intelligent creature that seemed to be part plant and part animal. They had green skin and created energy from sunlight, but they also ate plant material in huge amounts. They flew, built complex homes in the hive and showed a high level of intelligence. Yet the empire still found it impossible to communicate with the Nagivara. How do you communicate with creatures that use a mixture of pheromones and body movements to communicate ? They were also strong, large and dangerous when roused and the main thing that roused them was messing with the hive. Kittara dropped into the hole and let herself descend slowly for over a mile. She ignored all the side entrances and eventually her feet touched the bottom of the entrance hole.

“We both know where this seed will be.”

“Under the Queen’s chamber, or actually in it. If it isn’t, it’s as good a place as any to look.”

Answered Chlo.

Chlo marked the position of the Queen’s chamber on the common channel they shared, that way Hol would know where she was going. It was deep into the crust of the planet, about six miles below where Kittara stood and over a hundred miles north. Not that north really meant much in the labyrinth of the hive. Luckily the passages had to be wide so that the twenty foot long Nagivara could pass through them, so Kittara had no difficulty moving at speed towards where she wanted to go. Simply moving her reality to where she wanted to be wasn’t an option in the hive, the Nagivara were easily agitated and thousands of huge agitated insects were dangerous. Kittara suddenly appearing anywhere near the Queen was likely to cause a global panic and she’d face millions of annoyed and aggressive creatures.

“They seem indifferent to me,” she told Chlo, “I’m happy with indifferent.”

Close up the Nagivara looked a little over twenty feet long, their wings extended well past the end of their bodies. Eight jointed legs moved them at speed along the tunnels and compound eyes used every bit of the slight glow there was from bio-luminescent fungae. They looked in the direction of Kittara as she passed, their heads turning in her direction, their jaws snapping. She knew that as long as she left them alone, they would leave her alone.

“Sorry, they’re constantly changing their tunnels.” Said Chlo.

Kittara had been following the route Chlo had put on the common channel and she found herself at a dead end. In front of her several of the creatures were busy using saliva and soil to create chambers for their eggs. Kittara turned around and turned right at the next junction. It was going to be a long journey.

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The Queens chamber was hot and humid, volcanic vents were actually spewing sulphurous gases into the air. Kittara knew of only a few life forms that could have survived in the atmosphere, yet thousands of the Nagivara toiled in the chamber. They brought prodigious amounts of plant food to the Queen and then took away her waste and the precious eggs she laid. Kittara had never seen the Queen before and she was impressed.

“Careful, they don’t seem to like you being there.”

It was Hol in her head, obviously watching her. The creatures were reacting to her presence, snapping in her direction and sending out clouds of pheromones. They were probably telling her to go back home in their language, but all Kittara got from the cloud was a sweet pungent perfume.

The chamber was large, probably over a quarter of a mile long and the Queen was at the far end. She still looked huge, her bright red body glinting in the dim glow of the volcanic vents.

“Where would you hide a seed here ?” She asked Hol.

“Right underneath the Queen.”

“There is a chamber behind her, the entrance is hidden by her body.” Added Chlo.

Kittara sat on the floor of the chamber and rested her chin on her knees, ignoring the Nagivara who fussed around her.

“Think about it, this place doesn’t make sense.” She said.

There was silence, obviously Chlo and Hol were waiting for her to continue.

“The Tree of Life died a very long time ago, probably long before this planet and its odd creatures existed. They didn’t put the seed under the Queen, they put the Queen and the Nagivara on top of the seed. They were created as its guards !”

“That makes sense,” said Chlo, “there’s nothing else like the Nagivara on any other world in the multiverse. There have probably been many different guards over the billions of years since the seed was hidden.”

“So what happens to these creatures if you take the seed ?” Asked Hol.

“I have no idea.” Said Kittara.

She was so caught up in her thoughts that she barely noticed the smaller Nagivara, who was approaching her. Kittara was about to tell Chlo about finding a different kind of bug in the hive, when the creature fired an odd looking weapon at her.

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Kittara could suddenly see light in the dark chamber, someone was pulling what looked like a web off her. Fingers, they had fingers and a ring. It was Hol’s ring, the family ring her father had given her on the day she was initiated into The Damned.

“Kittara can you hear me ?”

“Yes, how long have I been unconscious ?”

Her own arms were working now, pulling at the thick web that held her, ripping it apart.

“About a day.”

“A day, I’ve been in this web for a whole day ?!”

“It’s my fault,” said Hol, “he tried to bring me, but I kept ignoring him. I thought it might be a trap.”

Kittara rubbed the remainder of the mess out of her eyes and saw the small creature watching her. There was actually light in what looked like a small version on Nurigen’s workshop. Technology on the planet Umvara ! No one had ever suspected or known that the Nagivara had a technology.

“What did you do to me ?” She asked.

The creature exuded a cloud of pleasant smelling chemicals from glands in its skin and Kittara actually understood what it had said. The syntax was strange and it took a long time to complete a single sentence, but they could communicate.

“My name is Argle,” he said, “male of what you call the Nagivara. I needed your attention, I needed you to take me seriously, but you will suffer no ill effects from the weapon I used.”

“Is he telling the truth Chlo ?”

“Who ? I just saw that creature do a little dance.”

Kittara sighed. It was nice to be able to talk to Argle, but repeating everything back for Chlo was going to make it a tedious conversation.

“I understand his communication method Chlo. I’ll tell you everything he says.”

Kittara finished clearing the web off herself before continuing to talk to Argle. She found a work bench and sat herself on the edge of it, Hol joining her.

“How did your weapon put me to sleep Argle, that’s supposed to be impossible ?”

"We've seen your kind before, we've always been able to understand your language. Mendera has been seen as a potential threat for some time, so we designed a weapon to neutralise that threat. It is our duty, our purpose."

"Who gave you that duty, that purpose?"

He did an intricate dance and Kittara picked up an idea rather than a name.

"I think he means his God gave him orders, his creator." Said Hol.

"It makes sense," said Kittara, "whoever is set as a guard for the seed, they need to be constantly ready for any new threat."

Argle became very excited at the mention of the seed.

"The seed, yes the seed. It is here, would you like to see it?"

He took them into another workshop, one where other males were assembling devices of various kinds. At the end of the workshop was a simple shelf and on the shelf was a glass cover over what looked like a shrivelled nut.

"That is the seed!?" Said Hol.

"Yes I feel it, can't you feel the power?"

Hol merely shook her head and carried on looking disappointed.

"Can I touch it?"

"Yes, but please don't take it. If you take it away, all the Nagivara will die."

Kittara removed the glass cover and picked up the seed, feeling its power. Once again there could be a genuine Tree of Life at the shrine, there could be its leaves to heal the incurable. Kittara looked at Hol and for a brief second she contemplated moving herself back to Mendera, carrying the seed with her.

"Why give this to me Argle? You must know that I wish to take it."

"We have studied you and we could probably surprise you with the strength of our resistance. But in the end you could take the seed if you wished. I am the oldest, the wisest. I decided to use something else to stop you taking the seed...."

Argle used a chemical perfume and Kittara picked up compassion. They had decided to use compassion as a weapon to keep Kittara from taking the seed.

"So if I take the seed, the Nagivara are absorbed back into the wastes of eternity, just like the previous guardians?"

Argle actually shook with fear at the mention of the wastes.

"Yes, you obviously know the history of the seed. Take it and you're committing genocide on my people."

Kittara bounced the few grams of seed on the palm of her hand.

"Can you copy it Chlo, or synthesise another?"

"No. I don't even understand what it is. It looks like a seed, but in reality its likely to be some kind of ancient power, wrapped up to look like a seed."

Kittara put the seed back and replaced the glass dome over it.

"Your weapon worked Argle. I'm not about to wipe out your people by taking the seed. I'll keep your secret, no one will learn of the whereabouts of the seed from me, or the empire."

"Thank you." Said Argle.

Kittara was disappointed, but she indicated she was ready to leave and she moved her reality to the imperial needle craft orbiting the planet. Hol synchronised with her and appeared next to her at the same moment.

"Was I stupid?" Asked Kittara.

“No, you were beaten by a superior weapon.”

“My own compassion.”

“Indeed and that is nothing to be ashamed of.”

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Nurigen stopped his story and looked at three beaming faces.

“Well, did she do the right thing ?” He asked.

“Of course,” said Elva, “all those Nagivara are worth more than a silly seed.”

“She was brilliant !” Shouted Edia.

Nurigen looked at Nina, expecting her to contradict the others. She seemed to think her extra maturity required her to take the contrary view on just about anything.

“She brought back the best prize of all, her friendship with Hol.” She said.

Nurigen was surprised and pleased, he hadn’t expected that remark.

“So the seed is still there ?” Asked Edia.

“No, strangely enough it was removed by someone we all know. Mo took the seed a long time later, after the Nagivara were no more.... That is another story.”

“Tell us more of the story.” Said Elva.

“No, more next time.”

“But it is next time !” All three girls shouted.

Nurigen heard the shuttle landing outside and Chlo told him the children’s teacher had come to pick them up.

“Collect your things children, your teacher is here. And don’t forget your promise not to tell Kittara I told you about the seed.”

Oh dear, had he made a terrible mistake. Kittara was bound to return, she had to return, it was in all the prophecies. He had vowed to keep her secret and she could have a wicked temper. Nurigen opened the door onto the garden area and welcomed the teacher. The girls collected their things and walked out to the shuttle.

“Will you tell us more next time ?” Asked Elva.

“Perhaps another story.”

They were almost in the shuttle when Edia shouted her question.

“What is vigorous sex uncle Nurigen ?”

He shut the door and leant against it, chuckling.

“Oh dear,” he muttered, “I must clean up those stories a bit more.”

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