

Ripples from the Past

Chapter 6 – The Grimoire

“May Chaos always pass you in the night.” – Ancient rift greeting, origin unknown.

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Chlo sometimes understood why Kittara had hated the clerics. Actually hate was too strong a word; she'd harboured an intense dislike, which had carried on for countless millennia. The term Cleric no longer meant anything particularly clerical; they were just the race of people, descended from the original clerics who had arrived on Mendera at the beginning of the 1st age of the temple. Thin boned, weak and pious to the point of being annoying, they hadn't changed much with the passing of billions of years.

Chlo had been disappointed that they, the great multitude of praying annoyances, had been the core race of the new holy city and ultimately the empire. The Chaln  had always predicted that the clerics were perfect for Mendera City and he'd been right.

“Religious zealots, who will never question their fate. Sworn to be jailers of him, the crawling chaos. Pious and free of greed, envy or ambition Chlo, the perfect worker ants for our new world.”

The clerics ran everything, from the Imperial Bank to traffic control, for the ever growing number of visiting freighters and space hotels, full of pilgrims and tourists. If you needed anything from a government department on Mendera, it was almost guaranteed that a cleric would deal with your request. Chlo sat on top of it all, providing the lattice of communications that linked it all together, while the clerics were the face of Mendera.

“Plus they'll work for free and consider it an honour.” Sikush had said.

A tongue in cheek comment. Despite his cynical words, The Chaln  made sure the clerics had the best schools for their children and decent homes to live in. Once the Imperial Bank had more money than it knew what to do with, he introduced a kind of dividend. A payment to every citizen, purely for being a Menderan citizen. Quite a small sum at the beginning, it had grown, until citizens were generally wealthy people, who could choose whether they worked at all. Most did choose a career though and those annoyingly pious clerics, still thought it was an honour to serve Mendera.

“Look Chlo ! You can see it too, I'm not going crazy.” Said Moss.

“Move closer to the last gamma burst.” She replied. “I want to check the activity.”

Moss Denish Orvin Mellin, was probably the most intelligent cleric of his generation. That made him incredibly useful, but also meant he could be a real pain in the backside. He'd asked for and been given Grey Walker, the most advanced space craft ever built. Unusually for the empire, it had no military capabilities at all, everything was designed for survival and research. Grey Walker was rare, the empire usually copied the technology of others, simply making it more reliable. Grey Walker was all empire though, designed by Chlo and capable of surviving in the most inhospitable of places. Its design tolerances made it capable of just touching the event horizon of a black hole, though that was banned because of the temporal implications. It could easily survive in a stellar nursery, which was where it was currently moving towards the location of a previous burst of gamma radiation.

“It's all there Chlo, data from everything we've examined over a twenty one day period.” Said Moss.

“There is no hydrogen ingress, no addition of energetic particles. I really don't quite believe it myself, but the Menderan universe is now a closed system.”

Moss wasn't aware of the knowledge from previous multiverses, the forbidden knowledge. One of the reasons for keeping the clerics of The Temple of the Flame, inside the temple grounds for their entire life, was to prevent several great secrets from becoming public knowledge. One of those great secrets was that one day, Mendera itself would end. All the bubble universes would close and the multiverse would begin anew, with worlds that no one could even comprehend. Closing the ingress of hydrogen and fresh energy was just the start and it would take billions of years, but their universe was dying. The thought of her own end didn't trouble Chlo; it just surprised her that it was happening so soon. Moss had at least two dozen fellow scientists on board Grey Walker, more than enough to check and re-check his assumptions. It was just buying time though; her own benign probes were confirming his data.

"This is too big to announce without the necessary checks and peer reviews." She said. "Spend the next fourteen days checking your results, before putting your finding before the Imperial Council."

"But we need help with this now. Other stellar nurseries need to be investigated, right across the empire. I need to inform the council now, it's my duty!"

He was right of course, it was his duty. It would cause so much panic, even if it was something likely to happen a long time in the future. Prophecies of doom were bad for stability and Sikush wanted a stable empire. She linked with him, needing him to make any decisions that might mean her overstepping her usual boundaries. Grey Walker was advanced, but had no weapons. An attack by bandits maybe, all the crew lost and sadly mourned. It was one option to keep Moss quiet, but a drastic solution.

"Order him Chlo, in my name. If he still refuses to obey..... I'll send a few of my elite guard to handle it."

She looked at Moss, who was totally unaware that the remainder of his life, might amount to no more than a few seconds. It all depended on his next answer.

"The emperor demands your obedience!" She said. "You will not pass on any data to the council, until you have verified it over the next fourteen days. Is that clear?"

A simple bow of the head saved his life and that of his colleagues.

"Of course Chlo. I can understand, an event of this magnitude... we will verify our data."

She was relieved. Not that Sikush would use her as his assassin, she was far too good at it. She'd been designed to be the perfect weapon, picking up her morality, or lack of it, from whoever she served. There were consequences if she was used as a weapon, terrible consequences.

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Sikush was asleep when Chlo had touched minds with him. He'd woken and thought through the consequences of disposing of Moss and all the data he'd collected. Grey Walker was almost irreplaceable, it would be a terrible loss. Mainly though, he liked Moss and his fiercely independent group of scientific researchers. They probably wouldn't have believed it, but annoying or not, he was very much on their side. He wasn't that surprised, when a naked Chlo, pushed his bedsheet aside and joined him. They'd known each other long enough for her actions to not be seen as in anyway rude or inappropriate.

"Killing Moss for doing his job so well, must be a last ditch solution." He said.

"Good!"

Using Chlo would always be a last resort, when everything else had failed, even The Old One and his terrible weaponry. He pulled a sheet over them and remembered Panajaram and its consequences. It had all happened many switches before, but it was so ingrained in his memory that it would never be forgotten and there were records in the forbidden store. Panajaram was one of those awkward

non-Empire worlds that kept needling at the edges of the Empire, a raid here, a kidnapping there. There was nothing inherently evil about them or anything to mark them as a pariah planet, they were just very high maintenance.

"I could teach them a lesson." Chlo had told him.

He'd seen the damage Chlo had caused on her own world and knew she was probably intended to be some sort of super weapon, yet since joining him in a kind of symbiosis she had never shown the aggressive side of her nature. He'd assumed the old Chlo was a blank page waiting to be written on and that the Empire had given her a new set of basic moral parameters. That assumption proved to be wrong ! Not that the Empire was perfect, it did glory in war, but there were definite ideas about proportional response and the protection of civilians.

"Give them a rap over the knuckles." He'd told her.

Chlo had gone to Panajaram with a few warriors and warned them that any further incursions into Empire held space, would be severely punished. Within a few days they'd sent a significant space fleet to cause disruption to a key trade route. Chlo reacted by destroying almost their entire fleet and she thought the job was done. Panajaram given a severe beating, no more problem. She failed to understand their mentality and their internal politics. Their planet had its first ever global government and President Montello was trying to keep together the old hundred or so nations with thirty languages. Any sign of weakness and the great experiment of global government would be over. He sent a highly skilled and well trained invasion force to take over the nearest Empire mining planet.

"Chlo, this needs sorting out." He'd told her.

Sikush had still thought that it was just a skirmish over a piece of territory no one really needed and after a bit of sabre rattling the problem would go away and again he was wrong. Chlo used the warriors of the Empire to retake the mining colony, so President Montello sent a larger force to a heavily populated Empire planet, to appease his internal critics. The escalation continued until the Panajaram forces used nuclear weapons to take over a major planet of the Empire.

"Now you need to use large numbers of warriors Chlo, we need a quick solution." He'd told her.

"It will all be over in no more than three days." She'd replied.

Sikush had assumed Chlo would use the entire might of the Empire to crush the Panajaram armed forces once and for all. Three days later he realised his error. There had been complete silence from Panajaram and there were whispers on the rifts, about huge ripples of reality disturbance being felt across the multiverse. Without saying a word to anyone Sikush had gone to Panajaram, only accompanied by Chlo in her original organic form.

"What have you done ?"

The local sun was far darker than when he'd last visited the planet a few years before, but that didn't really matter as the entire planet was now lifeless. There was no atmosphere, the vast oceans had gone, not a single living bacteria existed in the vacuum of space which now went right down to the surface of Panajaram. Sikush could see a few blackened ruins of buildings, but they looked like they'd been there for billions of years, and yet three days before, over four billion had called the planet home. Even the two moons had gone from the sky and the planet had shifted several degrees on its axis.

"They are no longer a problem." Chlo had told him.

He looked deep into her mind and still found Chlo, but she was now in a very dark place. He'd given her the gift of being able to manipulate reality and she'd done terrible things with that gift, things he didn't want to even think about. The Empire rarely talked about reality manipulation, but it was the

key to their success. Why use huge amounts of energy to move a craft through space when you can simply move its reality to where you want to go ? Why generate electricity when you can manipulate reality to create a power block with a perpetual electrical potential ? Everything they did used reality manipulation, it was such a part of everyday life that they used it almost unconsciously, but never for destruction, until now.

“It’s my fault Chlo, I should have instructed you better.” He’d said to her.

He held her as she looked into his eyes for a clue as to her error, and he realised that Chlo was the ‘perfect weapon’. She was a permanent blank page that would adapt to any situation and use any and all means to achieve the set goal. It took him many thousands of years and a lot of patience to bring Chlo back out of that dark place, back to being the smiling girl who often shared his bed. He was determined that no matter what might be on the way, there would never be another Panajaram.

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The command structure of The Damned was only rigid, once they were fighting an enemy. Around Mendera, it tended to be quite flexible. In theory, Jen was commander of the imperial guard, but she too was one of the elite and the elite thought of The Chaln  as their commander. On the whole, if you were a member of the guard, with a job to do in Mendera City, you just got on with it.

Hol arrived back at The Temple of the Flame, at around dawn. She was accompanied by over five hundred of The Damned, fully equipped for a full and comprehensive survey of every room and passage in the temple, all of its hundred square miles or so. It was a little over an hour before Desa Ubari came looking for her.

“What is the meaning of this ? Tapping at walls, disturbing the business of the temple !” Screeched Desa. “It stops ! It stops immediately.”

She’d arrived on a throne attached to a platform and several long poles. Normally reserved for leaders of the temple who were too sick or too frail to walk, the throne was lifted up and carried along by six of the strongest clerics. It was all for effect, Desa was fairly elderly, but relatively healthy and fit. It crossed Hol’s mind that getting the contraption down the stairs must have been awkward, they were currently over a mile beneath the surface of Mendera.

“There are discrepancies in reports to the Grand Council.” Replied Chlo. “I have full authority to investigate those discrepancies.”

Desa seemed to forget she was held aloft by the not so strong arms of half a dozen clerics. She leant towards Hol causing her throne to list to one side, like a ship in a heavy sea.

“I will not put up with this ! You will be reported ! Anyway, what discrepancies ?”

“A structural integrity report is required annually.” Said Hol. “Yet it’s been several decades since you submitted any kind of survey report.”

Hol knew it was a technicality, no head of the temple had ever submitted the surveys on time, some hadn’t submitted any during their entire career.

“What !? You have the nerve ?!” Yelled Desa. “My predecessor didn’t carry out a survey in over two thousand years. Every stone here was put in place by Thrax, it’s the most solid structure in the multiverse.”

“Then there are the anomalies in the census reports.”

That hit home, she saw Desa sit back in her throne and let her temper subside. Desa knew there was something wrong; it was quite likely she’d had her own suspicions for many years.

“We’re here to serve the temple Hol, not fill in forms. There might be a few discrepancies, but they’re errors, nothing more.”

"I looked at your birth and death numbers for the last twenty years." Said Hol. "Add opening census numbers and it should give your current population. Chlo counted your people last night Desa and you're nearly a hundred short."

"Chlo scanned the temple, without my permission !"

"Fuck your permission Desa ! A hundred clerics missing and you're all locked in here for life. Where did they go Desa ?"

"I'm going to summon The Chaln   ! I will not be spoken to like that, by..... a gutter urchin. You will regret insulting me Hol Azreemy, you will regret it !"

She was carried away on her throne, at a fairly slow speed. It did look impressive though, being carried along by half a dozen very sweaty clerics. Desa had the ear of some senior councillors and she had the right to summon The Chaln  . Normally only used at times of great emergency, Hol could only remember the right of summons, ever being used twice before. In part of her mind she was dreading finding dead bodies, but her purely selfish side, hoped they did, or her next posting might well be clearing out the storm drains. An hour later she received a shock. Not the expected dead bodies, but a whole section of secret tunnels and rooms.

"We only found the door after hacking most of the wall down." Said Albas Ruuni. "The tunnels end at a shrine, right up against the side of..... his jail."

Not the famous Albas from Ixir, hero of so many battles in the early days of the empire. He'd fallen, protecting a frontier planet from raiders. His name lived on though, as many male members of The Damned took the name of Albas.

"They've actually hung up oil lamps." Said Hol.

"And lined the walls with stone. This isn't a simple hole in the ground Hol, this took organising and years to build."

The oil lamps were unlit, yet the floor looked clean and fresh swept. Using lamps, she explored every room, noting there were beds for at least twenty people. Finally the tunnel led down, ending in a room of some size. Up against one wall, was a chaos shrine. Everything went back to Chlo, every picture, every sound, even the smell of incense. By the time Hol had reached the shrine, there was a low muttering from her group. He was there, The Chaln   and Chlo was with him.

"Desa has had the audacity to summon me." He said. "She can wait. What have we here Hol ? What sort of abomination is this ?"

"I expected to find the dead clerics Sikush..... But this....."

Whoever had created the shrine, only had the supplies brought in to the temple to work with and the indigenous brown rock. With some skill they'd carved the two horned symbol of chaos, draping it with fresh Ashunt blooms and other offerings. Sikush moved closer, examining something inserted into the stone itself.

"Teeth, probably the teeth from the bodies you hope to find." He said. "Use whatever resources you need Hol. A thousand of the guard, fifty thousand if you have a use for them. Find the root of this cult and dig it out !"

"I blame myself." Said Chlo. "I should have seen something."

"We gave them autonomy Chlo, they are the clerics who serve the temple." Said Sikush. "Who would ever have thought a few would become..... infected by this nonsense."

He ran his hand over the wall, watching it shimmer as it touched the forces, which kept the prisoner securely locked up. Hol knew the prison had to be secure, or they'd all be dead. Sikush raised his hand to strike the shrine, but never delivered the blow.

“No, it needs to be thoroughly examined. Only symbolic, few survive who could actual breach the barrier holding the crawling chaos prisoner.” He said. “You’re going to be busy sorting this out Hol and I should go and see Desa.”

He never had a chance to go anywhere. There was a commotion in the tunnels, someone had arrived from the party searching the cloisters area.

“We found bodies in the vegetable garden.” Someone was shouting.

It turned out that jumpy one shoe, had a real name. He was Arran and might well have owned a second name, if Sventa had cared enough to ask him for it. She was unhappy with his answers and becoming dubious about getting anything useful out of him.

“Come on, I told you what I know.” Said Arran. “You promised to let me go, somewhere outside of the empire, where I can get a decent drink.”

He’d become quite confident and talkative, once he realised he was unlikely to be anyone’s lunch. Too talkative really, some would have called him mouthy. At least the planet he’d brought them to had a breathable atmosphere, as long as you didn’t do anything too strenuous.

“You’ll go when I’m happy you’re telling us the truth.” Said Sventa. “The scorch marks from the Red-Top planet hoppers are clear enough, but you say Laundry landed over there ?”

She pointed towards an undisturbed field of green, some kind of grass.

“Yes, his shuttle hovered there, while he talked to Hogni.” Said Arran. “Then he took off and must have gone back to a larger craft that remained in orbit.”

“Let me get this clear, the leader of the Red-Tops, a guy called Hogni, met Carl Laundry. And later you heard he was head of the Laundry Foundation, right ?”

“Yeah, some major crime syndicate I heard.”

There was a huge problem, though she didn’t want to tell Arran, in case she really did drop him off somewhere the empire didn’t run. Carl Laundry was dead, long dead and his foundation. It was like another weird message from the past, or a confusing threat. Hol had killed Carl, blown his head apart with an Ion blaster. That had all happened so long ago, that there weren’t enough zeros to show the years, or too many to be meaningful. Carl had died on Ixir, a dead planet, which had once had a very bad reputation.

“Over here my president.” Called Seren. “Crushed plants and a slight indentation in the ground.”

“See ! I wasn’t lying.” Added Arran.

“No you weren’t Arran, maybe you aren’t going to be lunch after all.” Said Sventa.

She left him looking far less confident, as she walked over to where Seren was running her hand through the blades of grass.

“Expensive shuttle.” Said Seren. “It hovered, probably for quite some time. That means either impulse lifters or Menderan tech. As we can assume Mendera didn’t lend anyone a shuttle...”

“Impulse craft are only routinely used by one planetary group.” Said Haan. “The Pesallia Group.”

“They only have a confederation of three planets and are usually peaceful.” Said Itzel.

Arran wandered up and sat on the ground.

“Maybe they’re not all peaceful.” He said.

Sventa shrugged at Haan, their prisoner, and or source of intelligence, might be right.

“Did you hear this Carl talk ?” She asked.

“No, they kept me over there and told me about it later.”

“What did you see, exactly ? Anything might be useful.”

“He limped a bit and wore an expensive jacket, the kind with silver buttons that caught the light as he moved about.”

“Hmm, latest fashion on Pesallia 2.” Said Haan.

“Well done Arran, you just earned yourself a trip out of the empire.” Said Sventa. “You’re coming with us to Pesallia 2.”

“Hey, that’s not what we agreed. You owe me !”

“Fine, consider yourself upgraded to hired help. Don’t try to run away though, or you’ll be straight back to being lunch again.”

Seren leered at him in a particularly unsettling manner.

“And I’m always hungry.”

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Mo liked to get away from the constant surveillance of Mendera City. Normally Chlo’s watching was useful, no one fell off a roof in Mendera City. The sick were cured in their beds as they slept, pregnant mothers watched over round the clock. Chlo was like a beneficent angel, watching everything and caring for those in need. Apart from when there was a bit of a flap on and then Mo felt like a fish in bowl. He wasn’t under house arrest and he had a very expensive and comfortable personal shuttle. Silky was bored and looking for a diversion, so he’d invited Kerr Firass and Rhian Dess, to join them for a few days in Redemption. They were bored too and hadn’t needed much persuasion. Mo had told his pilot to stay low and keep their speed down, so that they could enjoy the scenery below.

“I didn’t realise the desert was so large.” Said Rhian. “Still miles and miles of dunes, as far as I can see.”

“Then the Nikar Mountains and Redemption is three hundred or so miles north of them.” Said Mo.

“Many traders still take ten days over doing the journey by road. It’s a tough trip.”

“I’m happy to get a few days somewhere different, until they find us a freighter to fly.” Said Kerr.

“Redemption must be a small town though it’s not on the tourist info screens.”

“You know it as Novra-An.” Said Silky.

Mo hadn’t intended to confuse his guests. He had fallen into the trap, of thinking that all empire worlds spoke Menderan and many didn’t.

“Sorry, the common tongue has brought the empire together, but robbed us of our history.” He said.

“The clerics who spread out and founded the cities of Mendera, tended to give places names that reflected..... their holy attitudes. Novra-An means Redemption in Menderan.”

“Novra-An to the north and Surgal to the west, which means Destiny.” Said Silky. “The early settlers found good farming land to the East and founded Cana-Ohm, which means Absolution.”

“Wow, I never learned any of that at school.” Said Rhian. “What about south of Mendera City ?”

“To the south is the Ocean.” Said Kerr. “Even I know that !”

“The great Southern Ocean.” Said Mo. “Calmis-An, which means Sacred Water.”

“Now that is something I read about at school.” Said Rhian. “But as a legendary name from historical fiction. I suppose it’s real, like demons, rifts and Silky’s wings.”

“And my tail, never forget the tail.”

They laughed and Mo filled their glasses with perfectly chilled wine. It was sad that Mendera seemed to be consigning so much of its history to the waste bin of myth and legend. It was probably what all races and worlds did, without even realising it.

“I have no great affection for the past on Mendera.” He said. “But I can’t help feeling sad that children will grow up, thinking it was all nothing but myths and legends.”

“Like Mo, the legendary Slum Runner.” Said Silky, teasing him.

He’d often put his sanity down to not having fits of melancholy. Mo had trodden the ground of a great many worlds, for countless billions of years. Many of the immortals who’d walked those world with him, were dead or quite mad. It wasn’t an easy thing to cope with immortality, the sights it brought. Nurigen was right, immortality could be a curse. Or more accurately an addiction, because curse or not, Mo wasn’t going to give it up. For once, he watched the dunes go by below and felt mildly melancholic.

“The dunes of the 3rd rift are better.” He mumbled.

“Sorry Mo ? Missed that.” Said Rhian.

He hadn’t realised he’d muttered it that loudly.

“Mendera is beautiful, but the dunes on the 3rd rift, stretch for over thirty thousand miles. No proper landmarks, few sources of water. As far as I know, only one person has ever walked out of the deserts of the 3rd rift.”

“I bet it was this Kittara you’ve told us about ?”

“It was and that was a very long time ago.”

“I’d love to see the rifts Mo.”

He looked at Rhian and wondered if she might be the solution to his current problem. Not an ideal solution, but they were both certified space pilots. His mood lifted, ever so slightly.

“You might be able to visit the rifts, if we can get to Medrona.” He said.

He heard Silky gasp.

“You’re thinking of taking them with us ?” She asked. “That’s madness, they’ll die.”

“No ! Nonsense my dear. My people, the entire population of Ixir, were spread across the 1st rift and they have survived there quite happily.”

“Yes, the ones that weren’t eaten !”

“Sventa just hunted a few, hardly enough to warrant such a statement.”

He’d almost forgotten that their friends were witnessing their argument. Kerr just shrugged at Rhian, who seemed to have been given the job of talking for both of them.

“I’d like to see the rifts Mo, we both would.” She said. “Tell us what’s involved in this scheme of yours and we’ll either agree to go, or we won’t.”

“Oh yes !” Added Kerr. “I have no problem at all, with telling you to fuck off, if it sounds too crazy.”

“It all began.” Said Mo. “When I agreed to steal something for Nurigen.”

“The Nurigen ?!” Asked Rhian.

“Oh yes, the famous Nurigen himself, needed my expertise as a thief.”

“What did you steal for him ?” Asked Kerr

“Strangely enough he wanted me to steal and hide something of his, one of his most precious possessions.” Answered Mo. “I successfully stole a part of his famous Grimoire. The best part, the section dealing with prophecy and arcane powers.”

“Wow !” Said Rhian. “Was it a huge book ?”

“About seven hundred pounds in weight.” Said Silky. “I ended up carrying it.... In a crate !”

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Hol moved her reality, to follow The Chalné and Chlo to the surface. The diggers and delvers had reached the vegetable garden, their sensors telling them that more than animal manure was fertilising that year’s crop.

"We've found over twenty bodies, most of them look to have been no more than teenagers, maybe a few in their twenties." Said Juno. "There are also fresh unregistered burials in the cemetery. Record keeping seems to be almost non-existent, so the whole graveyard may need to be dug up." Again, not the famous Juno, hero of the Kivar wars. Another keen newcomer to The Guard, who'd decided to take the famous name as her own.

"This is worse than I thought." Said Hol. "Where is Desa ? She should be here."

"We'll go and talk to Desa later." Said Sikush. "Let's have a look at one of these bodies, a reasonably fresh one."

"One over near the statue looks a new burial." Said Juno. "The ground looked freshly disturbed, so we started digging there."

It was where Mix had hinted that Hol should look. She saw him and Seesha, just part of the crowd of worried and confused clerics. It was their friends and relatives, who were being dug up. Sikush seemed to understand, as he knelt next to the shallow grave, of a young boy.

"Get all this screened off Juno." He said. "And have someone move the crowd back. Tell them they'll know something, when we know a bit more about what went on here."

The teeth were gone of course, that much had been expected. Chlo knelt the other side of the dead boy, running her hands over his body. Hol had seen some ghastly things as one of The Damned, but the boy was upsetting her. He was one of her people, a Menderan cleric.

"Parts of organs are missing." Said Chlo. "I have no idea why anyone would want a third of a liver and half of his intestines, but cults can be a little..... Illogical."

"Desa should be seeing this." Said Hol. "These are her people, she was responsible for their safety." Sikush stood up and put his hand on her shoulder.

"I agree Hol." He said. "We'll leave Chlo to help the search team, while we go and have a serious talk with Desa Ubari."

They had to walk across the square, to get to Desa's rooms. The Guard were trying to move the crowd on, but every fresh rumour was bringing them back to stare at the digging. They parted to let Sikush through, some actually touching his sleeve. He was the head of their church after all.

"I hope we can avoid digging up the entire graveyard Hol." He said. "I have several friends there, who deserve to be left in piece. Talk to Juno, try to minimise the upset caused to the community."

Hol had been following Sikush and listening to Juno and he was reminding her that it was her operation, she was the one he'd given the task to, of finding the cult, if it existed. They now knew that it did exist ! Hol shouted at a few of The Damned, to get the screens up as quickly as possible.

"Beautiful rooms," she said to Sikush, "a definite perk of being head of the temple."

"Yes and Desa isn't likely to have them much longer."

All the walls and carvings were as put in place by Thrax. A work of art really, rather than just rooms, but one the people of Mendera would never see. So old that the current Multiverse didn't know how to deal with it. Everything, even the finest details, were unbreakable, destined to last forever.

"Desa ?" Hol called.

She wasn't in the lounge area, so Hol thought she needed to be more assertive. She led, going through the empty dining room, past the small kitchen and along a corridor to the bedrooms. Desa had three bedrooms, though no one in living memory had ever used the spare rooms.

"Probably for the best Hol." Said Sikush. "Her family would have been destroyed by her dismissal, which I intended to carry out today."

By family he meant the clerics who lived outside of the temple. Countless generations who proudly boasted of sharing ancestors with the great Desa Ubari. Desa was dead ! In a half filled bath of warm water, which was now red with her blood.

"If only we'd come to see her a little sooner." Said Hol.

"She wouldn't have thanked you Hol."

The blade she'd used, had been dropped on the floor by the bath, a sharp antique weapon. It had done the job though, opening up both her forearms from elbow to wrist. Hol pulled the lever to empty the bath, while she used the common channel, to call for a medical crew.

"At least it must have been quick." She said.

"We can do nothing for her Hol." Said Sikush. "Come on, we'll sit in the lounge and leave the clean-up crew to remove her body with a little dignity. We need to talk Hol."

Was she going to be punished for screwing up ? As far as she knew, she'd done nothing wrong, but that didn't mean she hadn't. A lot of clerics had died, most of them only just about out of puberty. Someone had to suffer for that and it just might be her. Sikush didn't follow her into the lounge. Hol turned and wondered why he was hovering by the door.

"Etiquette Hol, these are your rooms now." He said. "Am I invited in ?"

"Yes, of course ! My rooms ? Mine ?!"

Sikush sat in one of the straight backed chairs, which Hol knew were fairly uncomfortable. He indicated that she should sit in the ornate rocking chair, which Desa had used as a kind of throne, when receiving visitors.

"The temple needs healing Hol." He said. "It may not seem it to you, but I've seen you heading in this direction for quite some time. I don't usually like the word destiny, but with your family background..... I think you were destined to be Leader of the Temple of the Flame."

"I'm honoured of course, but I'm just not sure....."

"I want to go out and announce that I've appointed you as leader, give them something to feel good about. Only if you want it though Hol. Will you accept the position ?"

So many thoughts were competing for space in her mind. She'd be able to keep Mix and Seesha safe, and the other young clerics. Her life as a member of The Damned though, it had all meant so much to her.

"Will I still be one of The Damned ?" She asked. "One of your elite ?"

"Yes, of course. There will be times when I need you for other things, but your main duty will be to keep the temple safe. Once Desa has been mourned, we can have an official appointment, maybe even open the doors and parade you around the square on your throne. It's not normally done for new leaders, but we can start a new tradition. Will you do it Hol ?"

There were hundreds of thousands of clerics within the temple grounds, three hundred thousand, six hundred and fourteen, according to Chlo's recent count. Hol didn't share any of her DNA with them, after being converted to one of The Damned. She thought of them all as family though, a family that badly needed a new matriarch.

"Yes Sikush, I will become head of the temple. I was scared of being stuck here for a thousand year and now I may be here for much, much longer. I do it willingly though."

"Good, good, let's go outside and let them know the good news."

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Alyz wasn't worried about the giant hybrid, or his assortment of cut throats and thieves. They were all likely to be badly trained, learning how to kill out of necessity. The rifts could be a difficult place to earn a living and many took to banditry. Delmus began to walk away, heading towards the centre

of The Ring of Volkin. Alyz knew why he was moving away and kept pace with him, while still facing the bandits.

“They’re running away !”

The common tongue, twisted and corrupted by millennia on the rifts. Alyz knew the language though, some of the bandits were descended from the people of Ixir. She and Delmus were running away, but not from them. They hadn’t even seen the chaos creature yet, but it was getting closer. In any sane world, a few street level thugs, would have been running away from two members of the Menderan Guard. Time takes away cultural memories though, the bandits had no idea who they were. One took a swing at Alyz, with an axe normally used to cut wood. No killing him though, the bandits were valuable as something to keep the chaos creature busy. Even Kittara had been wary of the chaos creatures. Alyz used her sword to cut the head off the bandit’s axe, before cutting a deep furrow across his face. He screamed and bled, which was good. Just about everything nasty on the rifts, was drawn towards noise and blood. Always blood, everything came down to blood.

“We should be going now.” Said Delmus.

The bandits still hadn’t seen the danger behind them and Alyz didn’t feel inclined to tell them. Chaos creatures often toyed with their victims, which might give them time to escape. A hybrid with a sword swung it at Delmus’ head and missed, of course. They were really the lowest of gutter bandits, almost an insult to have to deal with them. Delmus cut off the hand that held the sword, causing more screams. Finally the bandits seemed to realise they were outmatched and tried to withdraw from the uneven contest. No good the chaos creature moved towards the huge hybrid leader.

“Alyz ! Stop gawping and move !”

She couldn’t, curiosity was holding her on the spot. Luri had once told her about chaos creatures and their ways. They could change an organic being into something dreadful, or seem content with a few minor cosmetic changes. Sometimes a creature became so deformed that it died, though most of their victims survived, at least for a short time. The corruption didn’t stop with physical characteristics, internal organs were altered too. The hybrid began to scream, as his face appeared to melt. No, not melt, change, as he was given another eye. Not an eye like his other two, but a yellow eye, like that of a lizard.

“The worst are those that look almost normal.” Luri had told her. “Those are often changed inside, their minds twisted in dreadful ways.”

Alyz began to run after Delmus, remembering one particular story Luri had told her. It was no fireside story, to enjoy after a little too much Ushong. It had actually happened, Luri had been living with the tribe when their headman had been attacked.

“He looked bad, his right eye frosted over, his jaw badly deformed.” Luri had said. “Otherwise he seemed the same man, until almost a whole season had passed. Then one night, he used a blade to gut his wife, before doing the same to his children.”

She ran faster, when she saw the hybrid giant, was being turned into some kind of huge reptile. Chaos creatures looked so harmless, like a wandering priest, complete with robes and eyes that glowed red if they were annoyed. Not that any wandering priest, had the ability to constantly hover, their feet never touching the ground.

“They aren’t fully in our reality.” Luri had told her. “The conversion used by the invokers of Leng, anchors them here, turns them into slaves.”

Delmus was in the centre of the circle, moving his hands about, while he spoke several lines of a language she didn’t know. A portal opened and she followed him through it, glad to not have to see the final form given to the bandit leader. No one deserved that fate, no one.

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