

## Ripples from the Past

### Chapter 23 - Louelle

**“Minraver quite liked the city of Tranquillity. The population did come out and stare at her angels quite a lot, but it was all done out of curiosity, rather than distrust. Like Mendera, the Algarians had a near pathological hatred of tall buildings. You could see the skyline, a rare thing in some of the towering cities of the empire.”**

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Silky had left before full light, to investigate what manner of creature was quietly observing them. Mo should have remained with the others of course, the humans who still didn't see or hear well in the air of the 1<sup>st</sup> rift. It was still a good day when neither of them had a coughing fit. He'd briefly woken Rhian from a deep slumber, telling her he was going after Silky and that she and Kerr weren't to follow him. Mo had made her repeat it back and just hoped she remembered when she woke. As full light arrived on the rift, Mo began to climb, doing what he did best.

“Now I'll catch up with you.” He muttered.

Once he was up and onto the ruined roofs and walls, he became a slum runner again. No one was faster at getting across a city unseen, or a ruined fortress. Actually one person had beaten him with her speed through the slums of Ixir and that had been Kittara. Up crumbling walls with ease, over the top of roofs getting ready to collapse, all without making enough noise to let anyone know he was there. Mo easily caught up with Silky, though the one she was watching grabbed all his attention.

She was right out there, on a ruined battlement he'd have thought twice about running over. Female by her face and small naked breasts. Her arms looked human, but her torso didn't end in a pair of legs. A long serpent's tail was wrapped round the battlements, holding her securely in place. She appeared to be watching the morning light, as it lit up the rift. Quietly she watched, as though deep in meditation.

“Can't be, they're all dead.” He muttered.

Mo scrambled down the wall, heading for where he could see Silky below him. She too was watching the serpent creature, so engrossed that she didn't feel him approaching. She turned when he was a mere ten feet away from her, raising her dagger high.

“Shush, it's me.” He whispered. “It's a Kiyoh isn't it?”

“You should have stayed with the others.”

“I woke Rhian and told her to stay put.”

“Then they are almost certain to come tramping after you, making enough noise to waken a sleeping Thraag.”

Mo looked over the wall Silky had been hiding behind, making sure the Kiyoh hadn't moved.

“It is though isn't it?” He asked. “I heard the last one had died, before the people of Ixir were given the 1<sup>st</sup> rift as their new home.”

Just the last foot of Silky's tail was twitching, a sure sign of agitation.

“Yes it is a Kiyoh, which gives us a problem. They're highly powerful creatures with uncertain allegiances. She might turn out to be a friend, or a foe.”

Mo risked another look and the Kiyoh had her arms raised, as if praising the light of a new day. “What do you think it's doing?” He asked.

“Brooding is my guess.” Said Silky. “From what I remember, they’re really into a lot of intense brooding.”

“Brooding about what ?”

“The meaning of it all, whatever ‘it’ is.” Said Silky. “They’re famous seers, maybe they see things to brood about, that we don’t.”

“We’re also capable of moving quickly and silently.”

A pleasant voice, which made him jump. It was there, just a few feet away, its long tail curled beneath it as a seat. A tail long enough to sit on and leave plenty to stretch out behind it for some distance. Silky raised her hand, as if to cast a spell.

“Are you here to guard it ?” Asked the creature. “Just the four of you ?”

It was said with a look and tone of disdain.

“You were expecting us ?” He asked.

“Not you in particular, but I did feel someone was being sent. We Kiyoh are indeed famed seers, as your chaos invoker well knows.”

Silky’s tail was beating a steady beat against the ground, her tiny wings fluttering.

“I am not his creature.” She said. “My name is Silky, once adviser to Neosto, last of the emperors of Leng to carry the royal bloodline.”

“I am Louelle and I offer you my apology, Silky of Leng.”

Louelle actually gave a slight bow in the direction of Silky, greatly reducing her agitation.

“And I am.....” He began.

“Oh, I know you Mozim, slum runner of Ixir. Or at least I’ve seen you mentioned in the carvings on the sacred walls.”

“Really ? What sacred walls ?”

Normally no one knew him, or if they did, they were usually angry and threatening some kind of violence.

“Guarding what ?” Asked Silky. “Someone else has talked to us about guarding something.”

“Kittara you mean ? Yes, you must mean her.”

“You’ve seen Kittara ?” He asked.

“Felt her more than seeing. She’s gone now, well beyond the places I can feel.”

“So, what are we guarding ?” Asked Silky.

“You weren’t told ?”

Mo just looked at his feet, while Silky shook her head. It had happened again, conned into yet another mission for the empire.

“You’d better come and see.” Said Louelle.

Mo was wondering how she managed to move through the fortress. It was as if the seer swam, making large S shapes with her body and tail, to swiftly move along the paths and through the rooms of the ruined fortress. Eventually she stopped in the room where they’d buried Nurigen’s famous metal pages. It had been partly dug up, but the crate didn’t appear to have been opened.

“Oh, we know about the books written on metal.” Said Silky. “We were the ones who brought Nurigen’s archives here.”

“No, not that..... This.” Said Louelle. “I cleared some of the soil away, to make sure it was undamaged.”

There had been another building behind where they’d buried the crate. A ruined building of course, but there had been three walls and the start of some stairs. Someone had been busy, the building was now gone and the one behind it. There were several spoil heaps, where a hole had been dug in

the dry rocky soil. A hole to bury the prison where the crawling chaos was held captive. Not that he'd ever seen it of course, few who were still alive had. It was obvious what it was though and part of him had been expecting to find it.

"I can feel it, feel the darkness it holds." Said Silky.

"Now, about those sacred walls that mention me?" Asked Mo.

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Delmus and his small army of newbies reached the enemy facility, without any further attacks. He put the RM9 over his back again and looked into the crater he'd made in the side of the artificial hill. There might have been a fire down there, if there'd been any oxygen in the atmosphere.

"The stairs look reasonably intact." Said Dava.

Falling stone blocks had badly damaged two large freight elevators, but the stairs did still look useable. A ten foot or so drop to where they now started, but that was nothing to a member of the imperial guard.

"Always a hole in the ground." He said. "I long to explore an enemy facility on ground level, maybe even in a tower."

"Towers can collapse." Said Trey.

There was no arguing with Trey's logic, but the hole in the ground looked deep and dark. Delmus couldn't remember find anything pleasant in such places, ever. He'd once ended up buried under a mass of living insects, in a very similar situation.

"The elevators and stairs are built for people like us." Said Dava. "So they can't be anything too different from us, whoever they are."

She was right, the spacing on the steps wasn't quite right and the elevators a little too wide for their height, but it all hinted at creatures like them. Nothing incomprehensible from an alternate dimension.

"This isn't a race and we've no backup." Said Delmus. "So take the stairs slowly and be very careful." There were quite a few clerics on Grey Walker, but Delmus wasn't relying on them as a rescue team. With no link to Chlo, they really were on their own. Delmus dropped onto the stairs and began the journey down, the others strung out in loose formation behind him.

"There might be civilian workers." He said. "Only engage the enemy if you're fired on."

It was all standard training, but he felt the need to tell them. They'd all have been in action before, even if only clearing bandits from outlying planets in the empire. There was something about the awkward way they descended the stairs though, which didn't inspire confidence. A few of the elite members of The Damned had muttered about falling standards among new recruits. At one time there had been half a million years between the selection of new members. Now he was leading a group who seemed to be from the same year's intake.

"There's a yearly intake now." Juno had once moaned. "It's an insult to those of us who were sought out and selected by the Genova."

A sign of a decadent empire some said, but Delmus still had faith in the process of selection. Dava and Trey might not have been selected by the angels, but he'd still rather be fighting with them, than any other warriors in the empire. The Kivar had been good of course, but they were long gone.

"Movement below." Someone said.

A flash of a blaster, the fire going well clear of the stairs they were descending. Answering fire from the guard's Yakkies and then silence. All of it, the attack and probable death of an enemy, in just two or three seconds. His newbies had done well.

"It looks bulky." Someone said.

Their attacker had used the cover of a power junction box, to lay in wait for them. She wasn't bulky either, just a human female in an atmosphere suit. Her body began to fall apart as soon as they removed it from the suit. The effects of the high heat and a few nasty compounds in the atmosphere. At least they had a name, from an ID card, which was rapidly disintegrating.

"She worked for us, for the empire." Said Dava. "At least she did about a year ago."

Delmus took the card, reading the information, before it crumbled to nothing in his fingers. The woman had been an empire tech scientist, working directly for the famous Nurigen. That was until she'd resigned for some reason. The card just gave a termination of employment date.

"All paths tend to lead to Nurigen." He said.

They were on a landing, with just a large power junction box and an empty cupboard. The stairs looked to go down a very long way into the darkness below.

"They know we're here by now." He said. "Someone drop a flare down there."

Not a flare, Dava was obviously keen to show off her magic skills. She created two small balls of white light, before sending them down the shaft. It took a count of forty, for them to become just specks of light in the distance, but they had stopped.

"That's impossible." Said Trey. "It can't be that deep. Nothing is that deep."

"Don't be silly Trey; it wasn't gravity pulling them down." Said Dava. "And the atmosphere is cold here and thicker than Ornea Soup."

She was right of course, but the bottom did look to be a long way below them.

"We need to keep going." Said Delmus. "Stay alert and keep to a steady, even pace. It might take us two days to reach the bottom, maybe three."

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Minraver quite liked the city of Tranquillity. The population did come out and stare at her angels quite a lot, but it was all done out of curiosity, rather than distrust. Like Mendera, the Algarians had a near pathological hatred of tall buildings. You could see the skyline, a rare thing in some of the towering cities of the empire. She'd been sent as an ambassador or sorts, though the real ambassador was about to arrive. Hy Astar had no diplomatic skills, but he was the perfect person to send as Menderan ambassador to Algaria.

"Ident PH14755 transport has just released the ambassador's shuttle."

She was stood in the traffic control building, with its view of the entire spaceport. Hy was late, something about his transport link being delayed. No matter, there was still time to greet him, before their lunch with Marius. The Menderan hero meeting the local hero, it was the perfect way for Hy to spend his first day on Algaria. There would be a joint meeting for the press to attend afterwards and plenty of photo opportunities for the media.

"Hy Astar's shuttle will land in just over two hours."

"That won't do." She said.

The poor traffic controller looked perturbed. He obviously didn't want to upset her, but shuttles arrived and landed within the laws of physics.

"His speed is at the maximum permitted for....."

Minraver put her hand on his shoulder and smiled at him.

"I meant that I will go to him." She said. "I'll leave my Genova here as the official reception party for the ambassador."

She could see the traffic controller about to start quoting rules at her and the angels looked restless. Before they could all begin to complain, she moved her reality to the main cabin of Hy's shuttle. It was spacious, a type 43 military shuttle, authorised to carry a hundred armed warriors. Did Sikush

realise Hy had claimed it as his private transport ? Still, Hy was a hero and things like borrowing shuttles, matched the persona the empire wanted to see. He was through a set of doors, sat at the controls. Not that there was much for him to do, the craft would land itself.

“Don’t be startled.”

“That’s alright, they just told me to expect you.”

She’d seen him before of course and Chlo was right. The sparkle in his eyes was gone, the insanity that had carried him through many dangerous situations, was also gone. Not cured, Hy had just lost faith in his hero narratives, after the wrong person had died the heroic death that was supposed to be his. The charm was still there though and the good looks. Chlo thought his benign insanity might return one day, though Minraver doubted it.

“I thought this would be a nice opportunity to discuss your duties.” She said.

“Yes, shall we sit in the main cabin ?” Asked Hy. “Would you like a drink of some kind ? I think the chiller is still fairly well stocked.”

He was fussing, as she followed him into the main cabin and sat down at the large oval table.

“I did wonder when they said you were coming on board...” He carried on. “The shuttle.... No one actually gave me permission to....”

“Oh no, no Hy, use it as long as you want, make it your own. I’ll let Chlo know, but I have a suspicion it was meant for you.”

“Meant for me ?”

“Not in any cursed by prophecy way Hy. It’s just that I have noticed that when people think they’ve gone slightly rogue.... Sikush or Chlo are often the culprits. Was this shuttle left for a while near where you walk every day ? Did it seem unused, so you decided to put it to use ?”

“Yes, exactly like that.”

“Then you were steered towards it. They have a habit of doing things like that. As if running the empire wasn’t interesting enough for them.”

“I see.”

He didn’t not really, she could tell by his expression. He did at least remember to put a few drinks out on the table, though none took her fancy.

“Are the others not joining us ?” She asked.

“There are no others, I travelled alone.”

She felt again and there were definitely two other people on the shuttle. Warm blooded human creatures, small or perhaps even children. She stood up, pointing in the direction of a row of cupboards.

“Then I suspect you have stowaways.” She said.

He drew a blaster quickly, obviously something he’d become good at through years of practise.

“Where ?”

“Put your blaster away Hy, I feel fear and childish thoughts.”

Minraver went down onto her knees and opened the cupboard, seeing two sets of scared eyes looking out at her.

“And who might you be ?”

“See, you got us into trouble Seesha.” Said the boy.

A boy and a girl, climbing out of the cupboard and looking very stiff. The name meant something to her, though Minraver wasn’t sure why.

“Seesha and you must be Mix ?” She asked.

“I knew we’d get into trouble.”

“Shut up, you wanted to come as much as I did.” Said Seesha.

Seesha and Mix, the names hit her consciousness like a hammer, but why? Minraver felt light headed for a moment, watching fracture lines in the multiverse roll across her vision. They quickly faded away, but she knew the children arriving on Algaria, wasn't an accident.

“No one is in trouble.” She said. “How long have you been in that cupboard?”

“I'm not sure.... All the way from Mendera City.” Said Seesha.

“Too long.” Added Mix.

“I left Mendera orbit about four hours ago.” Said Hy.

So long, how had they? She remembered the bucket in the cupboard.

“You poor children.” She said. “First you must need a bathroom to clean up a bit. We can then talk about what to do with you.”

Why had they hidden on the shuttle? A question that the look in Seesha's eyes answered, every time she looked at Hy. The girl would only just be on the awkward side of puberty, but she seemed well and truly smitten by the hero of Mendera City. Minraver instructed them not to lock the bathroom door, before leaving them to do whatever they needed to do.

“They have to be sent home.” Said Hy. “I've seen her with the others, waiting outside the palace gates. Sometimes she had the boy with her, sometimes she'd be alone.”

“Then tell her you remember her, it'll make her happier than you could possibly imagine.”

“They have to go back.... They must have parents who will be worried.”

What he was saying made sense, but Hy could never know her suspicions.

“How did they get into the shuttle?” She asked.

“Well as it's not really mine. I couldn't set the personal bio-lock. Besides, no one enters an imperial shuttle without permission.”

“They did though, the two children. I wonder why they were both suddenly so brave?”

“They're kids and kids do weird things.”

They came back, with faces red from being rubbed with towels. Drinks next, they both loved the junk food and drink from the shuttle's chill box.

“You must be clerics.” Said Minraver. “Just about everyone on Mendera is a cleric.”

“We're from the temple... They let us out.” Said Mix.

Seesha grabbed his arm, squeezing it enough to make the boy wince.

“Don't be rude.” Said Seesha.

“You Mix probably aren't old enough yet, but Seesha must remember the oath taken to serve the temple and the eternal?”

“I remember it!” Yelled Mix.

“Stop being a nuisance Mix.”

Minraver quite liked them and their odd double act. Were they really that important, two kids? Estrid had told her a few times that it was the little people who won wars, but children? The signs were never wrong though, the fracture lines in the fabric of the multiverse. The two children were instrumental in something huge, something large enough to change..... Everything.

“You took an oath to serve the eternal, though I will send you home if you wish?”

“No, not yet.” Said Seesha, blushing as she looked at Hy.

“I remember you waiting for me, morning after morning.” Said Hy. “You must have risen before sunrise. I'm sorry, I should have at least said hello.”

Well done Hy, the girl looked likely to burst with joy. They'd probably both agree to travel with her, for quite some time.

"Would you both like to join Hy and myself for lunch?" She asked. "We'll be meeting Marius, the famed destroyer of the Terak command vessel."

"Us? Really?" Asked Seesha.

"Yes and travel with me for a while, as I visit the other empire worlds. If you'd like to?"

"Yes please." Said Mix.

Seesha was still giving Hy that look, the look every girl gives her first crush.

"We will be on Algaria for a few days first of course." Said Minraver.

"Yes, I'd like to travel with you." Said Seesha. "Our parents will already be worried though."

"I'll have them informed. Now though, you have to be honest with me, completely honest."

They were both nodding at her, but honesty with children tended to be flexible, moulded by consequences and the amount of trouble they might be in.

"This question might well be the most important question asked today, by anyone, anywhere in the entire multiverse. Do you understand?"

Two nodding heads. They wouldn't really understand, but they'd know it mattered by her mood and tone. Even Hy was looking a little anxious.

"Where did you go, when you left the Temple of the Flame? And who took you?"

"We went on a boat ride, right out to the large lake." Said Mix.

Seesha didn't answer, she knew what they were really being asked.

"I mean before the doors were unsealed." Said Minraver. "No one is in trouble, but I need to know."

"Hol took us, as a reward." Said Seesha.

"Where to?"

"A market here on Algaria once and the market on Mendera."

"And to see Celli." Added Mix. "She gave us some nice things."

"She's a demon, a real live Shelzak." Said Seesha.

It was all interesting, though all the places sounded safe and fairly mundane. They'd been somewhere else though, somewhere important in the grand scheme of things. It was the only explanation for the fault lines.

"Where else? I need to know about everywhere."

"We learned to swim." Said Mix.

"In a beautiful ocean on a world with two suns." Added Seesha.

"Does this planet have a name?" Asked Minraver.

"No, just an imperial Ident." Answered Seesha.

"Nobody lives on planet Mix." Said Mix.

It had to be there, but it wasn't. She hugged them, one after the other, feeling them for anything that might have hidden inside their bodies or minds. There was nothing there, just two very ordinary kids.

"Is there anything else you remember? Something strange, maybe even if it was really nice?"

"There was the nice man who gave us dinner." Said Mix.

"Who was that?"

"A Boatman on the canals, after the doors were opened." Said Seesha. "He was really nice and his mother cooks the best Nurag Garn on Mendera."

"His name is Seb." Added Mix.

A seemingly harmless encounter, yet she felt light headed again, as the multiverse flashed swirls of energy at her, which none of the others could see.

"Tell me about Seb and his mother?" She asked. "Everything you can remember."

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Albas Ruuni could tell the new watcher was in pain, but there was little any of them could do about it. Celli had tried a few simple healing spells, but they'd begun to interfere with the conversion of Neola into something strange and rather hairy. An inhabitant of the original Leng, or so Neola had told them. It seemed strange that demons had once had just two arms and fur covered bodies, but Hol hadn't wanted to discuss it.

"Maybe Leng wasn't built by the demons." He'd suggested. "Neola looks to be turning into something older than the demons, something more primitive."

"Now isn't the time and place for such talk." Hol had snapped at him.

So they'd watched as Neola had coped with going through the horrific change. At one point the demon princess had wandered as far from them as possible. They'd heard her screams, but knew there was nothing they could do to help. Neola had been brought back from death to fulfil her destiny. Eventually the creature stood beside the pond, looked nothing like Neola, daughter of Neosto the last true demon emperor of Leng.

"I have a last change to go through, in many ways the worst." Said Neola.

"Can we help?" Asked Hol.

Neola looked nothing like a demon, or a human. Short and covered in brown fur, with claws and a very human face. She looked like a small version of the guard creatures. Albas wondered if the guards had been created by skilled bio-viziers, or perhaps they were the last inhabitants of an even older Leng, buried even deeper than the one they occupied. Everyone seemed to have a different theory about the origins of Leng, even the Gods had different views on the subject. Albas stopped his head from aching over it, by simply ignoring it, for now. If he survived to see Mendera City again, he'd visit the Temple of the Flame and consult the ancient books.

"I was intended to do all this alone." Said Neola. "If someone could hold my cloak for me and cover me as I leave the pool...."

"I'll do it." Albas said.

Hol was already there, but two holding the cloak would make it easier to cover, whatever Neola became once immersed in the pool of black viscous fluid. It was a way of helping Neola, after hearing her suffering for so long.

"Thank you....This shouldn't take long." Said Neola.

Hol held one side of Neola's cloak, while he held the other. The naked creature who stepped out of it, looked like nothing he'd ever seen before. Slowly, as if scared of what might happen, Neola waded into the pool. She never turned to look back at them, as she vanished into the dark oozing pool.

"What do you think will happen to her?" He asked Hol.

He thought she was going to snap at him, but her expression softened.

"I have no idea, but we owe it to her, not to look shocked by whatever comes out of that pool."

Albas had a head full of question to ask and it looked like they'd be left holding a cloak for a while. Hol's mood seemed friendly, so he decided to risk voicing a few of his thoughts.

"The lessons we're given can't be right Hol." He said. "Mendera and the 1<sup>st</sup> rift can't be the only places untouched by the switch, when the multiverse begins anew. Look at this place Hol, there are cities above us and below, some probably older than Mendera."

Albas thought Hol was simply going to ignore him. Her face looked blank, as she watched the viscous liquid in the pool, as it moved around.

"There are some legends which are simply wrong." Hol said. "Even the famous metal books in the temple do contain inaccuracies. Mostly though, when the words of Sikush and the Gods themselves seem to contradict each other.... And this is only my own opinion. I think it's because there are different versions of the truth."

"Versions of the truth... Surely truth is truth, fact is fact." He said.

"Next you'll be saying reality is always the same reality, yet we know that can be manipulated." Said Hol. "If you really want a headache that lasts for weeks, ask Luri to explain how the past and the future are really just different sides of the same coin."

His head was already aching, but he was going to seek out Luri when he returned home.

"I think truth is as malleable as reality." Added Hol. "There can be various truths, all valid, yet often contradicting each other."

"That doesn't make sense Hol."

"I know, but no one ever said the multiverse makes sense. Not even the Gods."

It looked like a bubble in the liquid, until it rose out of the pool. Albas knew he had to avoid looking disgusted, but it was going to be hard. Still two legs, but the thing rising out of the pool, had two stubby malformed arms and hands with three fingers. Several long tentacles came out of its side, each ending in a claw.

"She looks like the pool." He said.

"Shush, we owe her some respect."

Neola, if it still was Neola, had skin that writhed and oozed about, just like the pool. All of her seemed to be made of the same dark liquid as the pool. The head was worse part though, no eyes, mouth or other facial features. Albas closed his eyes for a few seconds, to regain his internal calm.

"Here, this way." Said Hol. "We have your cloak ready."

The black featureless face changed, becoming a face that looked neither demon nor human. The eyes looked like Neola's though.

"Thank you."

The voice was the same as the previous watcher's had been. Too high on the vowels, as though a device was being used, rather than the vocal chords of a living being. Hol wrapped the cloak around Neola, helping her tie a belt around the centre.

"I am unused to these limbs, but I am a quick learner."

"Do you need the sphere?" He asked.

"No! One day I will need to enter that.... Thing. I intend to leave it as long as I can. For now, this form will support itself enough for me to get around."

Places moved against the cloak, where no person should have things to move. It was either the tentacles or her undulating skin, he understood that now. Not that knowing made it any less troubling.

"Is there anything else we can do for you Neola?" He asked.

"Watcher, I am now the watcher. I am now to wait as the millennia pass by outside, deep in slumber most of the time. You'd find my existence very boring, so it's time to create a portal for you all to leave."

"We can't just leave you here." Said Hol.

"You will and you must. Though I suspect you will return one day, to share a bottle of wine and ask about different versions of the truth."

"You heard?"

“Yes I did and you will return, I feel it as surely as I feel the Terak army approaching. You must go Hol, immediately.”

The watcher seemed to sweep past them, her cloak swirling behind her. She stopped in the centre of what had become their living space, the largest clear space they had.

“I’ll send you to Aelfraed..... Oh, how I’d love to see her face, when you all appear in the entrance hall of the imperial palace.”

“But Celli needs time to heal.” Said Mingal.

“Nonsense, Aelfraed can heal her when you arrive.”

No arm waving, just a few words in the tongue of Ancient Leng and a swirling green portal appeared, which was already sucking in some of their equipment.

“Hurry.... Aelfraed can replace anything you might leave behind.”

“Goodbye..... I will return one day.” Said Hol.

“I know you will..... Now you all need to leave, now.”

Not even a chance to say goodbye, as the swirling portal grabbed him and the others, banging them against each other. Albas saw his bedroll spinning past him, before all of them were deposited into the entrance hall of the imperial palace of Leng. All around them was spotless marble, with them and their pile of kit, the only grubby blot on the perfect white surface.

“I’m bruised, but at least the air smells better.” Said Mingal.

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Rhian had no idea what the huge buried object might be, until Louelle told her it contained the crawling chaos. The chaos the multiverse had been created from wasn’t just a myth or something scientific. There really was an ancient godlike power, bent on returning everything to a primal state of chaos.

“No one would survive of course, but his followers seem to fall into two camps.” Said Louelle. “Those that realise releasing him would be suicide and think pleasing their dark lord is all that matters. Then there are various chaos cults, who seem in denial and think they will be chosen to survive. All nonsense of course, everything and everyone will be destroyed.”

She could only see the top of the prison he’d been sealed up in, but it didn’t look that strong. There was no entrance door, just a large circular cover that looked to have been sealed in place with a resin of some kind.

“Is it fragile ?” She asked. “Do we need to cover it up again ?”

Louelle laughed and slammed her tail against the side of the prison.

“No it’s virtually unbreakable and sealed up so well, that I doubt if a living God could open it.” Said Louelle. “The end of the multiverse will set him free though, which is probably why someone is trying so hard to bring about the end of everything.”

“These people, our enemies.” Said Kerr. “Can they feel where it is, the way you can ?”

Louelle sat near them, leaving her tail wrapped round the entrance to the prison that held the end of everything. Rhian had seen a lot of strange creatures, but a woman with a serpent’s tail was disconcerting. She remembered Mo telling her she’d quickly get used to the rifts and almost chuckled.

“No, I’m different..... Attuned is the best way to describe it.” Said Louelle. “I’ve also spent quite some time in this fortress, using spells to hide myself and his prison.”

“So that’s why I couldn’t see you.” Said Silky. “I was worried I was losing my touch.”

Mo seemed to be sulking, since finding out he’d been tricked into carrying out a mission for the empire. He was sat on a dusty pile of bricks, looking at his feet.

“So Nurigen’s archive is useless ?” He asked.

“No, Kittara will need those pages to fill in the gaps in her knowledge.” Said Silky.

“As long as it hasn’t all been for nothing.” Muttered Mo.

“For nothing !” Shouted Louelle. “We have his prison to guard, along with a crate of forbidden knowledge, some dictated by the old Gods themselves. The war may be won or lost on this mountaintop.”

“So what do we do next ?” Asked Rhian.

“We guard, that’s what guards do.” Said Louelle. “There seems to be a lot of tribespeople heading this way. Unusual, they usually keep to the more fertile areas of the 1<sup>st</sup> rift. I noticed them a few days ago. Are they anything to do with you ?”

“Oh, not them again.” Muttered Mo.

“We stole Pug from them.” Said Kerr.

“What is a pug ?” Asked Louelle.

“The hairy beast with the unpleasant odour.” Said Silky. “We needed a way of getting here more quickly. We stole the beast and a cart for it to pull.”

“They’ve already ambushed us, or at least tried to.” Said Kerr.

He pulled his shirt aside, to show a scar across the top of his chest. It still looked livid and they all had at least one similar scar. Louelle was looking out past the battlements, as if watching the approaching warriors.

“Hmmm, they will never stop.” Said Louelle. “Your theft of their beast will become a holy quest for them and their descendants.... This is very bad.”

“I warned them.... Told them so many times that it was a bad idea.” Said Silky. “Yet they insisted on finding some form of transport. I knew we’d have to kill them all.”

“Can’t we just give him back ?” Asked Rhian.

“No, they have to kill you now, or die in the attempt” Said Louelle. “It is a dilemma.”

They sat in silence for a while, as Louelle looked towards the main gates of the fortress. Rhian began to feel guilty for stealing Pug from the tribespeople. There need to reach the fortress quickly had been great though.

“They have been wronged, but they can’t be allowed to overrun the fortress.” Said Louelle. “Besides, we could do with a few more warriors.”

“What do you mean ?” Asked Mo.

“I am Louelle, Kiyoh and seer.” Said Louelle. “We’re very good at.... Persuading people to do things they wouldn’t normally do. You’ll see.”

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