

Mendera – Empire

Chapter 15 – For the Empire

“She felt the weight of the demon blade against her back and it felt good, especially where the metal caressed her bare skin.”

The Multiverse does some very strange things and the two large voids are among the strangest. Somewhere a galaxy exploded, or a black hole disintegrated and for some unknown reason a void was formed. At first just a few light years in diameter with no planets, not dust, no molecules, nothing ! Then the void expands and grows until a void almost impossible to cross is formed in a particular bubble of the multiverse. There is the smaller void which is merely five hundred light years across, but is still like a predator trap catching any star ship trying to cross it. Such craft end up as dead wrecks endlessly drifting towards a system on the other side of the void that will probably have ceased to exist when it gets there.

Then there is the Great Void. Travelling at ten times the speed of light you’d die before travelling even a small way across it. Up to a few hundred light years from the edge there are small numbers of dead craft that had no idea they were heading into the Great Void. Worse than quicksand once you realise the error you’re too far in to turn back and countless thousands of beings have died hoping they just might reach the other side. Towards the centre of the Great Void is nothing, or nearly nothing. Almost at the exact centre and moving at an almost sedate 75,000 metres per second is what looks like a derelict craft of huge and unsettlingly alien construction. It is about five miles long and three miles wide and high, and it has no symmetry at all. Bulges seem to extend from it at random on one side and almost organic looking tubes extend out for nearly a mile on the other. It looks very old and dead. Not that you could look at it. If you could cross the huge distances involved and find this very tiny needle in an almost infinite haystack, then the three Imperial needle class automated protection vessels would kill you before you saw them uncloak.

“It may not have been a suicide attempt, but she would not have survived.” Said Tomma-Goran. Sikush could see Delmus trying to look unconcerned about being in the main hold of the Old One with the great deity who’d created the City of the Lost God. Luri was perched on a very old packing crate and still managing to look calm and confident. Even Luri was affected by the jitters of war though. She’d actually asked him if he was going to pull out the dark power from her to use in the battle against the deities. Perhaps they’d all been too sheltered of late ? A good minor war with the Kivar was what they needed and it would give the empire more stability.

“She’s very strong now. I was thinking of using her in the Kivar war and leaving her to protect herself.” Said Sikush.

He’d meant it as a question. An aspect of his old friend had been protecting Kittara for a long time, sometimes even against herself.

“Yes,” said Tomma, “when Estrid arrives my presence might have been detected anyway. From what I’ve seen it will take quite something to kill her now.”

The hold was the perfect place to meet, even if it was a bit untidy and dirty. The centre of the great void was just about as in the middle of nowhere that the multiverse did. Kittara had a strange relationship with the Old One and he often referred to her as the impudent girl. Would he relate any of the conversations he’d heard with the deity to Kittara ? There was little chance of it, but he’d explain the situation to the ancient craft before he left. The Old One really did seem to have only

one real concern though and that was getting the DNA bank of the race that built him to a new home.

“Take your protection away from Kittara and accept my thanks.” Said Sikush.

He noticed Delmus look surprised as the deity gave him a slight bow, he was a bit surprised himself.

“Is there anything else you would have me do ?” Asked Tomma.

Sikush felt the weight of the whole plan on his shoulders. Converting an angel, caging a god, taking on the multiverse itself ! But there were more immediate worries.

“Can you keep Sevril busy until we’re ready to fight her ?”

The deity nodded and started the swirl that meant it was leaving, but then Tomma stopped and shouted.

“And I’m still not on your side.”

As the sound of laughter died Sikush approached Luri and Delmus. He needed both of them to fight the Kivar, but one of them had to take the man from The City of the Seven Hills to the rifts. Which one ? He sat on the packing case next to Luri and realised that she might look composed sat on it, but he looked slightly ridiculous.

“I really need you both against the Kivar,” he said, “but Delmus will have to take Dolen to the rifts. Go alone and destroy anything that gets in your way.”

He’d judged it right. Delmus made a pretence of being sorry to miss the battle ahead, but Sikush could tell he loved the idea of a one man mission, he’d probably take his beloved RM9. As to Luri ? She moved closer to him and she looked happy, more than that he felt a contentment about her, she enjoyed being part of the imperial court.

“Let’s go and talk to the Old One about deities and confidentiality.” He said.

Sikush moved his reality to the control room of the ancient craft, with Delmus and Luri arriving a fraction of a second after him.

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The local population of Mendera had been warned, but Chlo was still concerned about panic in the Merchants area. When an attack wing had arrived as part of a celebration on Pineus the crowd had bolted and over fifty had died in the crush. That event was at limited volume and at a minimum ceiling of three thousand feet. This attack wing was coming in hard at a height that would barely clear the roof of the western sentinel.

“They’ll arrive over the Well.” She announced.

She felt the need to point even though the four with her knew exactly where the Well was. Herusher was there and Alyz. Nurigen had arrived with Alyz, uninvited really but no one was going to ask him to leave. Then Jen had arrived, as it was her role to command all the attack wings on the day. They’d all seen the attack wings in quiet orbit around the largest of the Menderan moons, but seeing one in action was a completely different thing. Chlo felt the area inside the city wall and realised that just about everyone was looking at the sky above the Well. Then a hole seemed to appear in the sky.

“How many craft in attack wing 1 ?” Asked Nurigen.

He hadn’t been to the briefing, but that gave her a chance to talk them through the key points.

“One hundred and five, all piloted by at least one of the Guard.”

Nurigen had invented the metal that the attack wings used, in fact that nearly all imperial craft used. Should he have been at the briefings ? The problem was that he was becoming increasingly vocal about not wanting to be in Mendera and everyone was hoping Sikush would let him wander back to the rifts.

“Here comes the first.” Said Alyz.

Through the tear in reality came the front end of a space craft over a quarter of a mile wide and twice that in length. On either side of it were two imperial raptors and they were coming in very low. "They'll skim the top of the tower." Said Nurigen.

Above them a small tower rose up from the roof of the temple and the large craft did seem to be coming in perilously close to it. Then craft suddenly rose up a few feet and dropped back down again. The resulting boom of displaced air hit them like a wall and the noise was incredibly. Then the raptors started to let off electrical discharges against the hull of the bigger craft. There was no technical reason for this, it just gave a flash of lightning to go with the boom.

"Imagine the effect on an enemy city." Shouted Herusher over the noise.

Then three of the large battle craft came through three abreast and began to almost beat the air with their sudden movement. The shock waves became so intense that Chlo had to hold onto Nurigen to stop him being blown over.

"Incredible !" He shouted.

For the first time in months he had a sparkle back in his eyes. Chlo looked around Mendera and so far no one was getting in a panic, but the children in the cleric school were hiding under their desks. So far only a fifth of the attack wing had come through. The first large craft was now directly over them, blotting out the sun and giving them almost complete darkness on the roof. In the dark Chlo just made out the metallic rasp of the hull scraping the top of the tower. Then the sentinels started to scream and Chlo felt the whole of Mendera catch its breathe.

"Fucking amazing." Shouted Alyz.

Then eight of the larger craft came through together and virtually all daylight was blocked off, leaving darkness with the odd beam of sunlight all the way from the Well four miles away. The air started to quickly feel chilled and the lightning bursts seemed to come from everywhere. Chlo could see a market trader trying to launch his craft without any pre-flight checks, while in the school the children were screaming.

"Do I stop it ?" Chlo felt for Sikush and asked.

"No. We're sending a message to the empire."

Chlo understood. For so many generations the citizens of the empire had known relative peace, even The Damned had forgotten the shock and awe of an attack wing. It must seem like a legend to them, but now the empire would see it all, courtesy of her link to the news channels. The booms were now cracking trees in gardens, even walls in the 4th ring, but it could all be repaired. Chlo put the market trader to sleep and turned off his shuttles engines. She could stop anyone from dying, but she couldn't remove the fear and anxiety.

"Boooooomm."

Another cluster of eight craft now appeared in the small amount of light still getting through and the process of booms and lightning started again. Against an enemy they'd be using blasters on automatic against ground targets and less than .01% of those below ever survived. Halfway through and the impossible huge flagship of the wing started to appear. Twice the length and girth of the other craft it seemed to touch the ground as it came through and gradually climbs to clear the temple.

"It'll be close !" Shouted Nurigen.

He seemed as excited as a school boy and Chlo was glad that something had broken through his lethargy. The sentinels were still screaming and now the various Menderan enclaves of the members of the empire were trying to contact her.

“Is this part of the plan ?” “Are we in any danger.” “Our priest is weeping tears of blood.” “There are angels here, walking through walls.”

Chlo ignored them all and let the show continue. She put another merchant to sleep who was about to launch his shuttle straight at the side of the flagship. She desperately pleaded with the eight great demon gods, who she didn’t believe in anyway, not to let anyone actually die.

“I can see light.” Said Herusher.

The last of the attack wing had come through and to the north the first of the craft were vanishing through a tear in reality just above the city wall. Still though the craft continued to boom and the lightning continues to buzz and crackle until the very last of the craft had gone and the tears slammed shut. The air was still cold and Chlo saw a small tornado destroying someone’s much loved garden in the 6th ring. She allowed the tornado to continue its destruction as it would look great on the early evening news.

“Everyone alright ?” She asked.

They all nodded at her and Herusher was looking at the slightly buckled top to the tower. The sentinels had stopped screaming, but in the distance Chlo could hear a woman hysterically screaming.

“How many of those craft are you sending ?” Asked Nurigen.

“Eleven hundred and five.”

They all looked impressed.

“So you’ll need eleven hundred of the Guard to pilot them ?” Asked Alyz.

Chlo looked at them and realised the numbers had never come up in the briefing.

“No. I will be sending Jen with eleven hundred attack wings consisting of one hundred and four craft each.”

She could see that everyone except Jen, who had seen the figures was shocked.

“Tell Sikush that I have to go with them.” Said Nurigen.

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Kittara lay in bed watching Mo as he looked out of the 40th floor window. He’d been good in bed, very good and she now wished she’d slept with him when he was younger. True sex isn’t all about back muscles and hard dicks, but they certainly played a big part. She had a good long look at his naked rear and if he’d ever managed to straighten those legs completely he’d have been a very skinny eight footer. Then there were the tufts of hair, grey tufts now. One seemed to come out of him in a grey shock of hair just above a small residual tail. He heard her laughing and looked around.

“Mo. You are grotesque naked.” She laughed.

“All part of my charm.” He replied with a bow.

She got up and looked out of the window with him, the better part of Ixir lay spread out before them.

“It all looks so different.” He said.

Mo knew this wasn’t the same planet that he’d called home. Ixir had moved six times by now, each time the population moved to a new planet with fresh resources, by the empire. All planets died and the usual practise was to simply ignore the fact and call the new planet Ixir, or Ventella. Only the control freak Maran’s used a numbering system. When she’d explained this to him he’d hit on something that many clerics find hard to grasp.

“Only Mendera is constant,” he’d said, “only the holy city goes on forever, unchanging and constant.”

Now she'd brought him to Ixir for a look around before she went to war and he became once again the owner of the best emporium on Mendera, but at least no longer in stasis for most of the time. Mo seemed entranced by the view of Norraine below them and the scar a fallen tower had left on the beautiful city.

"Next they'll dig down." He said.

The leisure complex they were in had been built by a Ventellan consortium and was a well-built solid structure that should last for at least a hundred years. The problem was that the Ixir government had grabbed it for the much needed imperial credits it brought it and had passed little back to the Ventellan consortium that built it. Slowly external investment and expertise was avoiding Ixir and their own expertise was all too often shoddy and downright dangerous. Fifteen hundred had died when the Bank of Ixir building had collapsed and no one believed the official story about a terrorist attack.

"They will," said Mo, "you watch. They'll put the people in underground housing."

"Come on, let's get dressed." She replied.

She let Mo shower while she simply shimmered into a clean dress. Mo tried to get her into the shower with him, but they only had a day on Ixir for Mo to visit his roots, even if that had all been on a different planet. Give Mo time, she thought, a few billion years and the idea of whole populations simply shifting planets will seem normal to him. As Mo dressed she considered getting Chlo to handle their checkout, but she'd promised Mo the full tourist experience and checkout was all part of the fun.

"Nothing like a lot of insincere toadying to start the day." She told him as he buttoned up his shirt. They picked up the few possessions they'd brought and headed for the express people transporter, while a clever piece of AI checked all the fixtures and fittings were still in the room. Not that the police were ever involved, nothing so sordid in the seven star, fifteen rosette hotel. Guests were simply charged four times the going rate for anything they stole or damaged. As the transporter gently dropped them at the reception desk, Kittara wasn't surprised to see children point at her and a general buzz of conversation start up.

"Are we popular, or do we run?" Joked Mo.

Kittara had heard that in certain parts of the empire The Damned weren't as popular as they used to be, as though impending war was some kind of contagion, but Ixir was still one of the oldest and loyal members of the empire. Several young girls were in replica uniforms of the Guard, had they known she was there? Of course they had, her presence must have been on all the teen links within seconds of her checking in.

"The fourteen year olds are the worst." She said to Mo.

A group of three girls at the dangerous point just past puberty approached her, all dressed as her, one even had a Guard tattoo mark on her shoulder. This was their one chance to do something to get noticed, to have their fantasy fulfilled, to be discovered as the next immortal convert to The Damned. Some would just ask to have their uniforms signed, but occasionally one would pull a three foot sword out of her cloak and that could cause a lot of trouble, even on Ixir.

"Can you sign my tunic? Please."

These three were polite and seemed to be harmless, so Kittara took the offered marker pen.

"Is it really you?" One of the girls asked.

They were all looking at Mo and they seemed confused, he was hardly the companion they'd obviously imagined her having.

"I'm her mascot." Said Mo.

Kittara wasn't in the mood for theatrics and anyway she was on holiday. If the damn girls didn't want her signature, then so be it. As she turned to talk to the girl on the checkout a small hand pulled at her arm.

"Sorry." Said the girl.

The eyes looked sad, the young figure was already starting to get the short squat look of Ixir. Kittara smiled at her and wrote 'For the Empire – Kittara' on the back of her tunic. After the girls the crowd moved forward, babies' tops, young girl's skirts, old men's shirts; Kittara signed them all. It took nearly an hour and by the time she and Mo walked out onto the street she realise they'd never checked out or paid the bill.

"Is your life always like that?" Asked Mo.

The crowd had followed them out, so Kittara kissed Mo. Kissed him in the way that would have made a courtesan blush. The crowd went completely silent and she moved their reality to the slums. They arrived next to a dirty river that smelt of human faeces and something worse.

"Home sweet home." Said Mo.

Kittara watched him as he trod carefully to avoid the puddles beside the river. Was this the best slum runner in Ixir, or had she turned him into something soft and effete?

"This isn't much different to my old home," said Mo, "the three levels of walkways, the same flat brown tiles on the roofs."

Mo seemed lost in his own thoughts and completely oblivious to the dozens of locals who had come out of the slums to look at the stranger in his fancy clothes and Kittara. Mo seemed to move through them like a ship through a calm sea, like a visiting potentate home from a long exile.

"Let's look at the next walkway up." Said Mo

The slum dwellers parted to let him climb the stairs and Kittara noticed that although he moved quickly, he kept stopping to brush the rust from the stairs off his clothes. Then they were stood on the narrow walkway high above the ground and a woman thief made a grab for Mo's money purse. He was quick, wickedly quick. Her severed hand lay on the walkway and the woman was blinking in disbelief at the sharp narrow blade that had appeared in Mo's hand.

"Sloppy." Mo said to her.

The woman came around at him a gleaming dagger in her dirty hand and a crazed look in her eye. Mo pushed the blow easily away and lifted the screaming woman up and over the railing. There was a brief scream as she fell and then the sickening sound of breaking bones as she hit the stone pathway below. There was a shadow in a doorway and a rushing shape as the woman's accomplice, perhaps her partner sought revenge. Kittara kept back and allowed Mo his moment. The man ran full on down the walkway and looked certain to cut Mo in half with the machete he held high in his right hand. Mo side stepped at the last moment and thrust his thin blade up into the man's throat. Up the blade went, through the tongue, into the mouth and then on through the roof of the man's mouth and into his brain. Mo gave the blade a quick twist and his assailant fell dead at his feet. A good move and one Kittara had taught him a very long time ago.

"It's just respect." Said Mo.

He knelt beside the dead man and started looking through his clothes for valuables. Yes this was respect. To walk away without removing everything of value was almost as bad as not eating an animal you'd hunted. Mo even remembered to look in the groin area and was rewarded by finding a purse with a few flat Ixir steel coins in it. Worth next to nothing, but to the man they'd obviously been very precious, so Mo added them to his purse. Kittara was watching the stairs, but no one else

seemed anxious to try their luck against the stranger or his guard. Mo stood and leant on the rail, looking thoughtfully at the green stinking river below.

"This was never my home," he said, "even if it was the same planet and the same river. That was just somewhere that Mozim passed through on the way to becoming Mo the emporium owner."

It seemed too soon for Mo to be going through the kind of introspection she'd been through after a few hundred years of being an immortal, but he had been in stasis for a very long time.

"So where is home Mo?" She asked.

She thought he'd probably say his rooms in the emporium, with his collection of pornography and regular visits from the best courtesans Mendera had to offer, but his reply surprised her.

"Home," he said, "is sat by the pool in your garden, watching angels float through the force wall and scare the life out of the pilgrims."

Kittara took hold of his hand.

"Had enough of Ixir?" She asked.

He nodded at her and looked very tired, so she moved their reality to her house in the 1st ring.

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Chlo had been stood in the dark for quite a while, or rather the blonde haired construct version had. The AI that was Chlo was as busy as ever running the technology of the Empire and navigating the one hundred and fourteen thousand craft of the attack wings towards Antuum, home planet of the Kivar. Chlo started to turn on lights and life support systems as some of the crews would appreciate warmth and air, even if they didn't technically need it. Chlo wondered if Sikush had acted as an agent of evolution in creating the only creature that could ignore the breathe reflex? Then she remembered The Damned weren't the only ones to possess that talent. There was a strange seven legged mollusc type creature that could suspend breathing for days on end, but then it did live on a planet where chlorine clouds wandered randomly over the surface. Now where was that?

Designated planet #99553.7, yes that was it.

"It's a bit cold Chlo." Said Alyz.

Alyz had brought Nurigen and they were both early. Chlo acknowledged their arrival with a nod and used benign probes to look at Antuum. The craft hadn't been detected, of that she was sure. All activity on the planet was normal and military communications traffic was low.

"What is activity on the planet like?" Asked Nurigen.

Chlo ignored him. She liked him and was glad he was on board, but Jen was the fleet commander. Besides she was putting a live update on the common channel which Alyz could see and read back to him.

"Gets above herself that one." She heard Nurigen mutter.

On the planet Chlo could see the main barracks of the Kivar military getting ready for the day. The warriors were almost like the legendary giants that most human races seem to have in mythic stories. Dark skinned, twice the size of most men, immensely strong and fast. Twice the reaction speed of even the best Arcadian warrior. No match for The Damned of course, but Chlo could see why the empire planets were getting anxious. Chlo powered up the main battle screens and accelerated all the craft slightly in their journey towards the planet. For two days Chlo had been the only person to come on board any of the craft, but now the Guard were gradually taking up positions to fly the craft against the planets defences. Was a surprise attack by cloaked craft fair? Chlo thought that shock and awe lost most of the shock if the enemy had seen the craft approaching for three days.

"Status Chlo?" Asked Jen.

"I still have control," said Chlo, "I will relinquish on your command."

Chlo felt a slight vibration under her feet as the millions of tons of flagship moved about 1 degree up range at her command. Then Chlo realised the vibration was just her reaction to the extra power loading and no one but her had felt it.

"Hit the atmosphere hard !" Said Jen.

Chlo could see Nurigen getting agitated and Alyz trying to keep him quiet.

"But we're early," he said, "Kittara won't be on board."

"Change of plans, we're going early." Said Alyz.

There had been no need for her explain, the orders were clear for all to see on the common channel, Nurigen just hadn't bothered looking. Chlo looked for Kittara and found her enjoying a long cool drink in her garden. They never had needed her for the first wave, the later close quarters killing was her strength. Chlo checked and there were still a good hundred of the craft without Arcadian crews. Chlo could have crewed all the craft, but Sikush had wanted them fully crewed and piloted by flesh and blood crews for the attack.

"Leave them to fight as they wish," Sikush had said, "they'll put the fear of the empire into the Kivar."

There would be casualties with over half a million warriors in the air over Antuum, most of them Arcadians. Chlo could have piloted all the craft and there would be no casualties. She could have shifted the reality of the planets axis by 5 degrees and wiped out the population in a second, but she could understand why this war had to fought by people. Even though most of her was AI, there was enough of organic Chlo there for her to understand valour and honour.

"Five minutes to atmosphere." Said Chlo.

Still some craft with no full crew and Chlo could see The Damned bringing them from Mendera. Jen could see the status on the screens and most commanders would have been worried, but Jen had been through countless wars on countless planets.

"Turn off cloaking Chlo and light us up nice and bright." She ordered.

As the last crew arrived Chlo turned off all cloaking and the Kivar defences finally saw the imperial fleet. Not that the fleet would have filled the sky, just a small part of it over their southern ocean. Once attacking craft would pack out their bays with old generators, worn out engine parts, even shuttle craft that had seen better days. The whole mix of unwanted garbage was thrown out into space by hydraulic rams just before they entered the atmosphere to give the defenders more targets to distract them and a much bigger wow factor. Now the empire craft can hit an atmosphere at truly unnerving speeds and the garbage has become specially built disposable panels, but the theory remains the same. Chlo still controlled all the craft and just as they hit the atmosphere she turned them all flat to the atmosphere and released tens of thousands of chaff plates. To the people of Antuum it must have looked as though every craft in the empire was crashing through the atmosphere of their planet.

"An hour until they need us." Abijah said to Babak.

Chlo noticed that Abijah still treasured the jewel encrusted gold dagger that Sikush had given her as a reward for doing so well with Juliette. Doing so well ? Chlo knew that Juliette had given Babak a glowing report, but had been strangely reticent about Abijah.

'The most ambitious woman I've ever met.' She'd once told Sikush.

The craft were now heating the outside atmosphere so that it was hotter than the Antuum sun, great flames of ionised gas were blotting out the ground on all the external screens. Chlo could still see though, her probes unaffected by the hell their entry was inflicting on the planet's atmosphere.

“Kivar fighter craft, forty of them, just below us.” She put on the screens.

Then the heat wave had hit them and the forty craft and their pilots became just more ionised gas following the imperial attack wings down to the surface.

“Are we ready for you to disengage Chlo ?” Asked Jen.

Chlo looked at the craft of the attack wings and all were showing crew that were alert and ready to go. No one had passed out during the entry or been injured, but then the empire prided itself on the quality of its inertial damping technology. The pilots of the small raptors would have bounced a bit, but they were all piloted by The Damned. There was no checklist, no mindless bureaucracy, Chlo simply said.

“They’re ready.”

Chlo told all the crews they had control and simply let them go. Several wings headed for various military facilities, aircraft hard standings and communications establishments, but the majority followed the flagship as it headed towards the capital city. Jen looked at Chlo and gave her a wink.

“Next stop Abalexis.” She said.

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“It’s begun.” Said Kittara.

She put down her drink and left Mo in the garden while she moved her reality to her room at the top of the house. They’d both known the moment was coming for her to go to war, even if it had come a few hours sooner than originally planned. On her bed was her Nurigen blade which she intended to fix on her back, with the demon blade right next to it. There was time to shower, so she shimmered out of her clothes and enjoyed the hot water cleansing her skin for several minutes. No personal time today, no lingering oral sex with a Chlo construct, she was going to war and needed to keep her focus.

“Full battledress Chlo.” She said.

There was a shimmer and Kittara stood dressed in the fresh uniform of The Damned, but Chlo never did it up tight enough. Kittara pulled at the straps and laces until she could hardly breathe, but as she didn’t need to breathe it wasn’t a problem. She liked her uniform and boots as tight as possible, so that it didn’t flap about or get in the way when she had to move quickly. The Nurigen she picked up and kissed the blade before fitting it across her back and pulling the webbing tight. The Demon blade was her insurance, just in case. In case of what ? Kittara had survived billions of years and thousands of battles by making sure she had extra kit, just in case. She was tempted to feel for Sikush on their private channel, but he was busy with the preparations for war, so she moved her reality to the short corridor in the Temple of the Flame that she knew so well. The door was slightly ajar, it always was. The door was put up by Thrax and his doors always hung perfectly, yet no one ever closed the door to the flame chamber.

“Would you like us to leave ?”

“Do as you please.”

Damn clerics, she hated the young ones when she needed to gain focus. Their minds had the attention span of wurtle bugs and that seemed to infect her when she needed tranquillity. They’d go of course, they always did. She sat cross legged in front of the flame and felt the stone beneath her with both hands. Really felt it, gave it a long hard rub to reaffirm its permanence. The young clerics seemed scared by her intensity and stumbled from the chamber.

“Tell Lewin I need to be left alone.” She told them.

They looked confused. Was it still a Lewin as the chief cleric ? His family seemed to have held the position for billions of years, there had even been two female Lewins. Now that had caused a furore

at the time, a woman as head of the temple ! Kittara chuckled and remembered that Melin was now head of the clerics. Never mind the young ones would understand her meaning and pass it on. Kittara allowed herself to float two feet above the stone and reached out for that certain something that she only seemed to find here. There was no voice, no sense of a presence, seen or unseen. From somewhere inside herself the words she'd begun to think of as her personal anthem started to come into her head. She seemed to be rolling over and looking at the flame.

'This is all that is real. This is all that matters.'

'A billion deaths. A billion worlds destroyed.'

'Only this matters. Only this is real.'

'If it is released. Everything else will die !'

In her mind she remembered asking Sikush about the words. She'd given up asking the clerics anything a long time ago, they just talked in riddles and nonsense.

'He's there for eternity Kittara, but then he will be free for a time. It is part of the cycle and cannot be changed.' Sikush had told her.

There for eternity, but could be released will be released ?! None of made sense to her, but when pressed Sikush had told her.

'The cycles can be changed. It is possible for someone determined enough and who could get past The Damned and the eternalists to release him, but that would never happen.'

'Why ?' she'd asked, foolishly expecting a sensible answer.

'Because he's in there for eternity.'

Her head hurt, but somewhere in her deepest self it made sense.

"Kittara."

She heard the voice, a gentle female voice and blinked and wondered where the wall in front of her had come from ?

"Kittara. They need you."

She realised she was upside down and hanging several feet from the floor. Righting herself she saw Chlo in front of her and quite a bit of equipment on the floor.

"You're terrifying the clerics again."

"Good."

She looked questioningly at the assorted knives, garters, belts etc on the floor.

"Just in case." Said Chlo.

Kittara picked up a wicked looking boot knife and tucked it into the top of her right boot, then several garters of disruption grenades went under her skirt and onto her thighs.

"Sikush said I'm to give news of you priority transfer to the news links."

Kittara knew what that meant. She had to kill Kivar, lots of Kivar and kill them in spectacular and convincing fashion to reassure the watching masses. She fitted a belt of throwing knives to her right upper arm, just in case. She looked herself up and down and decided she'd do, but one last thing. She picked up a red scarf and tied it loosely around her neck. Make sure the punters can identify the main act at all times.

"Right Chlo. Where does he want me ?"

"The main barracks in Abalexix."

Kittara nodded and noticed several clerics had worked up the nerve to look around the door. She bowed to them and shouted.

"For the Empire !"

Then she moved her reality to the main barracks in the Kivar capital.

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