

Mendera – Empire

Chapter 19 – Gateway

“Will we die ?”

“Perhaps, but would you rather be anywhere else right now ?”

“Will she be alright here ?” Asked Delmus.

Chlo could see why he was a bit unsure. They were in one of the grand rooms of a rarely used section of the palace. A room about fifty feet, by a hundred feet, full of treasures that would have most collectors of antiquities swooning. The pictures along the east wall alone would have made the reputation of most galleries in the multiverse.

“I have other places, but this feels right for her.” She replied.

Yes she had other places. Deep beneath the barracks were several rooms only accessible to her and Sikush, rooms with terrible guardians and shielded against all but the most powerful of entities. But to put the child in such a place ?

“She just looks so..... well exposed !” Said Delmus.

In the centre of the room had been a statue of The Chalné, she remembered it had been a gift from the people of Arcadia in about the 2nd age of the temple. Sikush had about twenty or thirty thousand gifted statues dotted around Mendera, so she’d put it in the storage vaults below the palace. Not that he was vain about such things, definitely not. Nearly all the statues and pictures of various kinds were in private or seldom used locations.

“Seeing myself looking back at me in public buildings is a bit irksome.” He’d once told her. Irksome, it was one of his favourite words for things he found a complete pain in the backside but was too polite to say so.

“She’ll be safe here Delmus. I won’t allow anything to disturb her long sleep.”

The statue had gone and in its place she’d put a shining white stand of the best Ventellan marble and on that stand, surrounded by the light green haze of a stasis field was the Moon child, Estrid. The windows were open, bugs flew through the room, it all looked very open and insecure. But both she and Delmus knew that the royal palace on Mendera was the 2nd most well protected structure anywhere. The first of course was the Temple of the Flame. How long would Estrid be here ? Perhaps many billions of years, until the time was just right for Kittara to take an interest in her. Mendera would still be the same though, nothing ever changed in the Holy city. The bugs flying past the flapping curtains would be different, but everything else in the room would be unchanged and unchanging.

“Is she sleeping ?” Asked Delmus.

Chlo turned to look at Delmus and thought about spending some time in bed with him once they left the palace. Luri had gone straight to Sikush to take up her place by his side, but Delmus had stayed with Estrid, concerned about her safety. He returned her smile in a way she knew meant they definitely would be getting hot and sweaty fairly soon.

“You can never really put a God into stasis,” she told him, “they exist outside the confines of time and can walk the wastes of eternity. An odd thought will cross her mind, a few mutterings of the multiverse will disturb her. So yes in many ways she is sleeping, but the physical body of the child will remain unchanged.”

She ran her hand through his hair and kissed his neck and was rewarded by feeling his heart beat faster.

“Do you want to know what fascinates me ?” She asked him.

Unfair of her of course. Delmus was now only really thinking about her famous technique and near legendary stamina, but he made a valiant attempt at answering the question.

“That twenty seven clerics of the Tree of Life had to die ? I thought the child had to be pure !”

Oh Delmus ! She was only a little disappointed. All those billions of years, yet she often thought that all The Damned needed to be given a peek at what lurked just inside the wastes of eternity. If they survived the experience they’d talk far less about purity. True the powers that built the pure vessel for Estrid’s essence had been far from pure, but the clerics had given themselves willingly, even with the knowledge that their souls would be consumed too. That self-sacrifice had made Estrid the most special child in the Multiverse, but that was her story and not for Delmus to know.

“Her name silly.” She told him.

She stepped behind him and used her left hand to pull open his trousers, while her right felt for what was inside. He was ready, after weeks of enforced abstinence he was erect and red hot. But not here and not yet, first a bit more teasing before she took him to her home.

“Estrid means beautiful Goddess in the old language used by the Holy Warriors at the time of Mardoun.”

He was listening, but his hands were now delving into her robes and finding her moist spot.

“Listen !” She pushed him gently away from her.

He smiled at her knowing that he was soon going to get the treat he longed for.

“Over time and on hundreds of worlds, thousands if not millions of young girls will be called Estrid and those people will associate the name with a beautiful goddess. Isn’t that amazing ?”

“How do you know this Chlo ?” He asked as he undid her robe.

“The deities aren’t the only ones to walk the wastes.”

He gave her the look she’d seen others give her. Yes she knew she could be a little scary, but a little squeeze on his dick and he would forget about those feelings.

“I have a small confession.” She told him.

“What ?”

She noticed a sand storm coming in from the west and raised the cities storm shields, then she moved herself and Delmus to her bedroom in the barracks. Finally she allowed him to remove her robes and underwear.

“There was no insult in you both leaving the Temple of the Tree of Life. I just made it up annoy Luri.”

Delmus laughed as he carried her to the bed and pulled off his own clothes. Yes there was also the advantage of getting a very worked up Delmus with several week’s worth of unsated libido, but she’d let him work that out for himself.

“You’re a bitch Chlo, but a wonderful one.” He said.

As she gave most of her attention to what Delmus was doing between her legs she still let a small amount of her mind wonder whether Kittara had reached Gateway ? Hol she’d almost written off, the chances of her surviving were tiny, but if Kittara died ?

“Deeper !” She shouted.

Oh, he really had built up a lot of unsated libido.

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Kittara looked over Hol for anything that might be melting on her. They’d buried anything non-essential at their last camp, including the expensive but useless sword Hol’s parents had given her.

“You seem ok,” she told Hol, “nothing melting or about to explode.”

Nothing burst into flames of course, there was no oxygen in the atmosphere on the 7th rift. The heat could melt many metals, but anything wooden was just reduced to charcoal. Their uniforms were designed for high temperatures and the demon blade was of course back where it had been created. Hol had a ring that had been in her family for generations.

“I’m not leaving it here. If it burns it fucking burns.” She’d said.

It had obviously been well made as it showed no signs of being damaged by the heat around them.

“How hot is it ?” Asked Chlo

How hot ? Given the lack of a recognisable atmosphere and the fact that the heat seemed to come at them from everywhere it seemed a fairly meaningless concept. No matter which way Kittara turned the heat seemed to be driven by a fan into her face.

“Hot enough to bake bread, if we had any.”

At least there had been no welcoming committee and all her tears had disturbed was red sand.

Dunes of red sand were everywhere and seemed to continue right up to the shimmering purple haze that marked the edge of the rift. Her mind tried to overlay the Mardoun memories over the land, but nothing was the same. Why should it have been ? The 7th rift had been wiped away in the switch and everything here was new. The cracked barren earth was now sand, endless miles of sand.

“Over there,” she told Hol, “over there it came up from under the ground.”

Hol was looking at her as though she was going crazy, perhaps she was, everything was so different, but of course only Mendera never changes.

“There are bones,” said Hol, “something has managed to live in this hell.”

Bones there were, huge bones sticking out from various dunes. Huge bones that meant large creatures had once walked across the arid hot wastes of the 7th rift. On one airless moon a creature the size of a temple had attacked Kittara, so she no longer wondered at the places life could survive in.

“We should move on.” She told Hol.

Inside her was a pointer she didn’t really understand and it was aiming her at Gateway and telling her it was still thousands of miles away.

“Will there be patrols ?” Asked Hol.

“No, I don’t think so. They’ll come out to fight us, but even the demons don’t like spending long in this place. Behind the wall it’s cooler.”

Again Hol was giving her ‘that’ look. Should she tell her about all the time spent reading in the temple, reading the forbidden texts ? She would when they rested at the end of the day and she’d be honest about a few other things. Hol had the right to the truth before she died.

“And I suppose you know where to go and how far it is ?” Asked Hol.

“There.” She pointed.

“About twenty thousand miles, you’ll see the gates when we stop tonight.”

Kittara rose into the air and hung there at about fifty feet checking the tightness of her uniform, Hol rose into the air and did the same.

“Any hints ?” Hol asked her.

“Yes. Don’t pee. You’ll be engulfed in a cloud of steam.”

They both laughed and moved in the direction Kittara had indicated, they travelled very low and very fast.

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“We lost Izzel boss and one of the new guys is wounded.”

So just one dead and one wounded and that was one of the kids. The leader of the Assassins Guild was pleased and his people liked him to be pleased, they tended to be better paid and have longer life expectancies if he was pleased.

“The dealer is alive ?” He asked.

Diggio was not only his second in command, but also a long term friend, but even he knew the importance of giving the boss what he wanted.

“Yes boss, he’s in the back room.”

The leader of the feared Assassins Guild walked past the dead and felt some pride at his people killing at least a dozen well paid body guards while taking so few casualties among their own ranks. When he’d first come to the system he could remember clinging to walls and watching his hired mercs get cut to ribbons. Yes there were always more mercs, but now he had a permanent base, a decent lifestyle and an organisation to be proud of. There was only one drawback to the fame.

“So my friend what have you done with my equipment ?” He asked.

There was no use in calling it an Astrolabe, the locals had no notion of such a device. To them it was just a piece of fancy equipment that the leader of the Assassins Guild would pay a small fortune for. That was the cause of the drawback.

“You had it,” shouted Diggio, “we have picture of you taking delivery.”

The drawback was the nature of the local people to badly want what someone else wanted, a sort of super machismo, but the women had it too. Mo the leader of the Assassins Guild wanted the piece of fancy equipment, so keeping it from him gave the current owner of it a certain standing. Plus the Astrolabe had become the only piece of hard currency in the shit hole of a system. You paid a couple of million for it and you could guarantee some other dealer would give you over two million when you sold it on. The trick was surviving and selling it on before Mo caught you and this guy had just failed. As Diggio carried on with the usual threats Mo held up his hand for silence.

“I don’t have time for more of this fucking crap !” He shouted.

His men looked confused and a little scared, this wasn’t the usual routine. They threatened the guy, then they beat him up a bit before threatening his family. Cutting was always involved eventually, then he’d talk and they’d kill him. It was tradition and the members of The Assassins guild liked their tradition.

“You know you’re going to die don’t you ?” Asked Mo.

The man nodded, his eyes looked scared but determined. Mo just wanted to get to the bit where they had the next target to go after.

“So tell me what I need to know and save yourself a lot of pain.”

Mo could feel his people getting restless, but he’d dealt with the last minor insurrection very firmly indeed. He could still surprise them with his speed and countless billions of years helping Kittara had honed his fighting skills and some would say darkened his soul. What was the name of the guy before Diggio ? Rohm of course ! Poor Rohm had looked so sad as Mo pushed the blade into his spine and gave it a twist. Chlo had taught him tricks to remove whole blocks of information from his memory.

‘If you try to remember everything for billions of years you’ll go mad.’

But he had kept the sad look in those eyes. He’d killed four of his best men, which was very costly after the years spent training them, but he’d now had blind obedience for a generation.

“What does it do ?”

Mo was shocked, no one had asked any questions at all before. He looked at the dealer and waved his men away as they moved forward to strike him. No one questioned the boss !

“The machine. If you’re going to kill me what does it matter if I know ?”

Mo did know, though he hadn’t for countless years. One morning he’d woken up realising another planet in the system had been colonised and that the planet had been a barren rock when he’d arrived. Had he been in this awful system that long ? Chlo had come to see him and sensed his depression. She still came to see him, though these days he no longer needed huge amounts of imperial gold to hire mercs.

“It is important.” She’d told him.

“Is all this just to keep me out of the way for a while ?”

By now even he was beginning to think of a billion years as ‘a while’ and a few million years as almost the blink of an eye. Chlo had told him why the astrolabe was so important and the story of Charadask who had built it. Mo wiped much from his memory, but that story from Chlo was etched deeply into his mind, far too deeply to be wiped away even if he wanted to.

“Let me cut the bastard !” Said Diggio.

Just a certain look from Mo and his trusted friend was silent again. Why not tell the dealer the truth, or at least part of it ? He’d be dead soon and his men would think it was all nonsense.

“Used properly, in the right place, by the right person, it will destroy a God.”

The dealer with his death approaching seemed to know it was the truth and a sense of calm came over him. Fuck ! That was the last thing Mo wanted.

“Cut him until he talks.” He told his men.

Once he’d hated watching the cutting, but it was expected of him. For a while he’d actually enjoyed it, like getting his own back on the whole shit hole system by torturing one member of it. Now he barely took an interest, it was all part of the job. Chlo brought healing salves and unguents which the men applied to any cuts that looked ‘bad bleeders’. Not that any of them had seen Chlo, well seen her and lived. Her involvement was secret and as far as his men knew the salves were dark magic that Mo paid a small fortune for. With skill and his men were very skilled, a victim could live for three or four hours in constant pain, though most talked within the hour.

“Deeper, hurry it up.” Mo told Diggio.

Mo eased himself back in the chair and angrily wiped a blood spatter from his trousers.

“Sorry Boss.”

He relaxed and remembered Chlo telling him about a great holy man called Charadask. It appears he started having visions in his sleep, visions that had a habit of coming true. To the clerics in the temple where he lived he was just an oddity, a harmless holy man who seemed just a little closer to the Great Ones than them. The mistake he made was allowing some of his visions to be printed and then broadcast over the rudimentary radio service the planet had developed. Radio waves don’t stop at the atmosphere, or at the edge of the solar winds, they keep going, heading further out. Eventually they reached someone, or something that didn’t like what it heard.

“A chaos creature came for him.” Chlo had told him.

By then he was very old, a few years would have seen him buried and forgotten, but someone wanted vengeance. The chaos creature had stroked him and turned him into a grotesque creature, part insect and part something else, something that was against the rules. But that is the problem with using chaos creatures, they are almost impossible to control and they love their games. The resulting hideous chimera should have lived for a few hours in unbearable pain before dying, but it hadn’t. Genova have been called holy bugs, they find it almost impossible not to be drawn to spiritual energy, like bugs to a flame. A Genova came to the blinding light of disturbance to the multiverse and found a dying Charadask.

"It told me why." He kept saying, over and over.

The chaos creature had told him truth, very great and dangerous truth. The visions of Charadask had been shallow and had only hinted at great things, but the chaos creature had given him some of the greatest truths. Of course the hideous creature should have died, but it didn't. The angel took the broken heap of fused DNA and something else to a person capable of healing it. The rumour was that Sikush had taken the dying creature to Qasit, but even Chlo seemed unsure of the truth. Never ever tell anyone a great truth unless you make sure they're going to die ! A near indestructible Charadask began to have more visions, deeper vision helped by the something else that was now part of it.

"The something else built the astrolabe." Chlo had told him.

"What does it do ?" He'd asked, who wouldn't !

"Nothing, but hidden within it is a secret that can unmake Gods !"

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"Do the gates actually open ?" Asked Hol.

They'd come across a shrine of sorts a few miles from the wall, how far from the wall was difficult to say, but Kittara thought less than a hundred. With no horizon and no atmosphere the gates could quite easily be seen, and banners hanging limp on the walls.

"No. The gates are carved of solid stone, they're just symbolic."

"Like the door on the Temple of the Flame ?"

"No that does open, we opened it once in the 2nd age of the temple, but it hasn't been opened since."

Hol looked upset at her lack of knowledge and went off to explore the ruins of the shrine. Kittara almost told her to be careful, but decided that would make things worse. They'd seen the shrine where none should be, but it had turned out to a chaos shrine of enormous age, only the chaos sign in the mosaic floor giving away its original use.

"Can we rest here ?" Asked Hol.

"They know we're here, but they're waiting for us to move."

"How do you know that ?"

Kittara wasn't sure herself how she knew with certainty that everyone who mattered beyond the wall was waiting on her next move. She also knew the right time wasn't for several hours.

"Intuition ? Perhaps someone in there is telling me ?"

The heat was oppressive, so they both sat against a ruined section of the shrine and looked towards the wall in the distance. With no horizon they could see the wall stretching unbroken for thousands of miles in each direction. At over a hundred feet high and made out of what looked like white marble, it dominated their view.

"We're out of touch with Chlo, how do you remember so much ?" Asked Hol.

"Chlo says I remember too much, says I'll go mad."

Kittara made a face and they both laughed. A slight breeze came from the direction of the wall, but it just seemed to intensify the heat.

"Who will they send ?" Asked Hol.

"Someone famous with probably two senior warriors."

"Famous ?"

"Their equivalent of Alyz or Jen."

Kittara could see Hol looking at her feet, should she offer her a way out, tell her to run for the rift entrance ?

“Anything else ?”

“Most likely they’ll send a few hundred thousand low level demons out first to soften us up. Not intended to kill us, they see it as a kind of compliment.”

“Where are our hundred thousand low level warriors ?” Asked Hol.

“We don’t fight like that.”

“Why the fuck not ?”

They both started to chuckle at the sheer impossibility of their situation. Kittara just hoped they’d put on a good enough show to strike a little more fear into demon hearts. As to surviving !?

“Anything else you want to know ? This may be the last chance.” Said Kittara.

Hol gave her a strange look, but nearly everyone gave her strange looks.

“At Remembrance,” started Hol, “the Genova set off to look for Abijah, but she died billions of years ago ?”

Kittara hated talking about temporal anomalies, it made her head hurt. Chlo had tried to explain the nature of non-convergent cause and effect once and the top of her head had nearly come off.

“Chlo is the expert, but although Abijah died a long time ago, her soul didn’t start its journey until Sikush started tracking it.”

Hol looked unsatisfied with the answer and Kittara wished she’d never offered to explain.

“So the essence can’t move until Sikush sets it off ?”

Even with two hours of explanation from Chlo Kittara still hadn’t fully understood, but she was determined to give it a go.

“Not always it depends and cause and effect don’t always converge.”

Kittara was enjoying herself now as Hol had the same pained expression she normally had when Chlo explained things to her.

“Sikush setting the soul off isn’t always before the soul arrives at its new home. There is no need for one to follow the other, well not always.”

“Did they find you by sending the Genova like that ?”

“No. Sikush always claims I was found by accident. He was using the angels to look for likely recruits to The Damned.”

“He claims ?” Asked Hol.

Kittara gently cursed herself, her long held reputation for being quiet and secretive was crumbling.

“I’ve never been completely sure it wasn’t part of one of his plans. He can be incredibly annoying about only telling you so much of what is going on and expecting you to patiently wait to be told the rest.”

“So you find him annoying too ?”

“Oh yes, he can be the most annoying person I know !”

“Did you ever do anything about it ?” Asked Hol with a twinkle in her eye.

Kittara thought to herself ‘why not, we’re probably both going to die anyway.’

“You do realise Hol, that if the demons don’t kill you I may have to. There was one occasion when I’d only been with The Damned a short time and Herusher was trying to have me destroyed.”

“Herusher was what ?!” Shouted Hol.

“That might have been part of a plan too, I’m not quite sure now. I was a complete nightmare to be around. Couldn’t get the idea of having so much time to get things done, the voices in my head were always disturbing me.”

Kittara paused to look at Hol and found a wide eyed teenager looking back at her.

“So one day when I found ‘him’ much more annoying than usual I attacked him. Threw myself a good fifty feet through the air and knocked him flat on his back.”

This time the teen had her mouth wide open and seemed to be in shock.

“This was back in the days before Chlo had civilised me and we’d had the hundreds of conversations about appropriate behaviour. I wasn’t wearing much and certainly no underwear and there I was sat on his chest and holding a dagger up in the air and wondering what to do next.”

“Fuck, fuck, fuck ! Were you going to kill him ?”

“No. I’d taken an oath to protect him and there I was straddling him and holding up a dagger. The trouble was that he kept laughing at me and that made me even more angry. Then around the corner came the Ushong ambassador with his entire retinue. They saw me with the dagger, shouted assassin and started screaming, all of them.”

“How did you get out of that ? Did you get arrested ?”

Kittara suddenly felt very calm. Kill him indeed, even then she loved him.

“No. Sikush sent me study in the Temple of the Flame for ten millennia and it changed me completely, gave me focus.”

Even at a distance of a hundred miles the sound of demon horns came to them from beyond the wall and large flying creatures could be seen patrolling the sky over the wall. To Kittara it was all about the few standing against the many and in her own mind they’d already won. There were a lot of very scared creatures behind the wall.

“Why do you say the Kivar have no souls ?” Asked Hol.

It was an unexpected question and one she didn’t want to answer, at least not now.

“Survive the battle and I’ll tell you.”

She sensed a chaos creature in the dunes to their right, an invoker no less. It was just watching them and posed no threat, if she wanted to Kittara could have turned it to ash with just a thought. There was however an etiquette to these things and no challenge had yet been given, so she let it live, for now.

“How large is the city beyond the wall ?” Hol asked.

“Huge, far bigger than Mendera City. It’s broken up into sections for the various creatures and the skills they use. Most people think of it as a demon city, but in fact pure blood demons only make up about a half of the population.”

“And the rest ?”

Yes it was time to be completely honest with Hol, she owed her that much.

“I’ll tell you when I come back from studying there.”

A quick look told her she had Hol’s complete attention.

“When the next age of the Temple starts I’m going beyond the wall. I’m going for many years and I’m going to be taught the dark arts by Neosto himself.”

There it was said and couldn’t be undone. If the girl died there was no harm done and if she lived ? Kittara would have a new confidant.

“So why are we here, doing this ?”

Was she going mad ? She’d seen many question coming about when was she going, was Sikush sending her and why, but not the most obvious question. Was it just the self-indulgence of a crazy woman ?

“I’ve always felt part of a greater plan, someone else’s greater plan. Despite only finding out about going past gateway at my initiation I’ve thought. No it’s stronger than that, I’ve always been certain Sikush has been planning this for a very long time.”

“So you’ve come here to show them you’re not a puppet ?” Said Hol.

There was the sound of lightning beyond the wall, but not natural lightning. Spells being perfected, or someone being punished for not spotting them in the rifts ?

“How did you find out at your initiation ?”

Kittara knew it was still too early, so she rested her head back against the ruined stonework.

“I was at a party being thrown in my honour at the palace. We were all having a good time, I’d even allowed the drink to work on me a little. Then I heard the sentinels screaming in my head and someone said a demon was trying to gain an entry through The Well. One of the grand council shouted that it was a big one trying to get through.....”

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Luri enjoyed the Violet garden best of all, most of it was private and underground. She’d always been surprised how many violet coloured plants and fungus there were in the multiverse, and how many of them Chlo had managed to cultivate in the special gardens beneath the imperial palace. Most outsiders thought colour was a bizarre way to categorise a plant collection, but once you were surrounded by acres of violet blooms you understood.

“Wow beast among the beauty.” Councillor Enuem said.

Behind a force field a strange creature with dozens of spindly legs was trying to peck at them. Many strange creatures were kept with the plants in an attempt to give the visitors to the gardens an appreciation of the various native habitats that had been locked away behind force fields.

“He seems very keen on taking a bite out of you.” She replied.

The councillor was dead of course, or would be in a few minutes. A pity, she quite liked him, but she had her instructions. Sikush never ordered an assassination and rarely even asked for one as a favour.

“Kill one asshole and there’ll be ten worse to take their place.” He’d often said to her.

Enuem on the surface was a pacifist and they’re always bad for business, but she knew that in reality he realised the financial benefits of long protracted conflicts and the boom years that usually followed. Not conflict inside the empire, no that would never do, but there were always outsiders who needed putting in their place.

“Where are you taking me.” He asked.

“Not much further, the grass over there.”

His hand went between her legs and she was really tempted to at least give the condemned man a final fuck, but she had other places to be. He was an asshole of course, but all politicians are.

“Are you sure it’s private ?” He asked.

“No one ever comes here.”

Not quite true. The grass she was leading him towards still had a buttock mark from where Delmus had spent time with her just a few nights before.

“Take your trousers off.” She said.

She had him, there was no escape for him, but he was oblivious of the fact. He had to die so that a less empire hostile councillor could replace him on the Grand Council. The Maran Group were a pain at the best of times and an ambitious dick like Enuem could, just maybe cause a war between the various parts of the empire.

“You’re sure you were discreet ?” He asked her.

She just nodded, of course she’d been discreet. The councillor was very much involved with a very rich lady, who was essential to his career. She hadn’t mentioned seeing him to anyone except Chlo and she knew he would have told no one.

"I'm sorry." She said.

As he looked up she stabbed him twice in the chest. It had to look like a frenzied mob attack, so as he choked and screamed she spun him around and used a different blade to stab him three times in the lower back. Still not savage enough ! He was crying out, but there was no one to hear him. A change of weapon again and Luri expertly used the scalpel to cut open his lower belly.

"Why ?!" He shrieked at her.

"You were inconvenient to the empire."

She held him until she felt his heart stop and then she moved them both to a dirty street in the worst part of the slums of Ixir. Luri quickly dropped his body into the mixture of faeces and mud in the gutter and moved herself back to the garden to pick up his clothes.

"The slums of Ixir claim another victim." Chlo said on their private channel.

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"What do you want me to do ?" Asked Hol.

They were just five miles from the gates and there was no mistaking the activity beyond them. There was the constant sound of demon horns and drums and strange winged creatures flew to within a mile of them before turning back towards the city. The ground itself seemed to vibrate from the sounds of machinery hidden deep underground.

"Use distance spells, lots of them," said Kittara, "you can't move your reality here, but you are faster than most of them and you can take to the air. Don't rely on that though, a lot of the creatures coming out of the city can fly. Just keep moving about and stay alive."

Kittara waited for Hol to check her equipment and nod at her before standing on a dune and shouting at the gates. Her voice sounded firm and seemed to carry a long way and she knew they'd be listening.

"This is Kittara from Mendera. I came here as Mardoun and slew your ancient ancestors, now I've returned to challenge you again. Has anyone the courage to face me ?!"

Quiet, complete silence, even the flying creatures had vanished.

"Will we have to wait long ?" Asked Hol.

As if to answer her two side doors next to the gates opened and creatures with banners started to march out. The doors must have been fifty feet wide and as many tall and quite quickly the sand in front of the gates was covered in low level demons carrying banners and horns.

"I recognise the banners. Oh no, they're sending Xeod the Ancient !" Said Kittara.

"Is he really tough ?"

Kittara watched as the ancient immortal demon took up position behind the rows of low level demons and began shouting orders, though they couldn't hear his words.

"There is a prophecy that I will kill off the entire Xeod blood line. He's obviously going to be really keen on proving the prophecy wrong."

"So if there's a prophecy," said Hol, "you're going to win, aren't you ?"

Kittara just looked at her and shrugged. It was an old demon prophecy well known on the rifts, but of unknown origin. Always nice to have a prophecy on your side, but Kittara wasn't going to rely on it. More horns and drums as the two senior warriors arrived with yet more low level demon foot soldiers. The real worry was Xeod though, for one thing he was huge. Thirty, maybe forty feet long he'd gone back to walking on all six legs. The problem was striking a mortal blow on such a huge body, she'd almost need to cut a door in his flesh and step inside to get a major organ.

"How many do you think ?" Asked Hol.

“A hundred thousand at least, maybe more. They’ll be slow, I’ll fry most of them before they get within a hundred yards of us.”

More quiet and then Xeod was shouting in their direction as the massed ranks of demons set off over the sand towards them. A few flying creatures came from the top of the wall, but Kittara would deal with them when they got closer. At last she could take care of the chaos invoker who was now less than fifty yards from them. A small concentration on her part and he’d been reduced to ash and the enemy had one less pair of eyes watching them.

“Some might come from under the sand, watch out for them.” Said Kittara.

In the distance Xeod the Ancient was beginning his march towards her and he had at least a dozen high level demons in his troupe, things were going to get sticky when they arrived. Kittara was about to send fireballs against the first of the flying creatures, but Hol beat her to it, sending a good twenty of the bat like monsters crashing into the dunes. Of course Kittara could have simply killed Xeod with a tear of The Damned and created a door for them both to get back to Mendera, but that wasn’t honourable and most importantly it wasn’t the way to show Neosto she was her own woman. Kittara started to build tears in front of eyes, quite small tears and send them into the advancing low level demons. It was carnage, with thousands dying instantly, but they were after all just there for effect. The real problem was Xeod and his two top warriors.

“Go to the top of the dune to your right.” She shouted at Hol.

The girl was getting too close, was far too keen on looking after her, but she needed to take care of herself. Another wave of the giant grey bat creatures came in low and Kittara burnt them all to cinders before they came close. Tentacles appeared beneath her feet as a strange half mollusc beast tried to drag her down into the sand. Kittara instantly took herself up to about fifty feet and dropped a disruption grenade on it. From that height she could see the main demon force was still some way off and she felt frustrated.

“I’m going forward.” She told Hol.

As she moved towards the tens of thousands of low level demons she saw Hol take to the air and follow her. No, that wasn’t what she’d meant, but Hol was an adult and allowed to make her own decisions. Kittara landed in the middle of the demons and started hacking at them with her Nurigen blade, while to her right she saw Hol using disruption grenades to great effect. If the girl dies she was certainly going out in style.

She saw the two senior warriors split up, one heading for Hol, she still had no idea who they were.

Then she saw the one coming towards her had a black metal sabre a good fifteen feet long.

Bentagan, it had to be Bentagan and he was using the sabre to clear his own low level demons out of the way.

“Bentagan ! You get no better looking.” She shouted.

It was a cheap remark, he still had a nasty scar on his face from the last time they’d met. To her right she could hear demons screaming, which was good, it meant Hol was still fighting.

“This time I’ll gut you little girl.” Bentagan screamed at her.

The demon was now crushing and hacking any of his own soldiers who came between him and Kittara and seemed obsessed with getting to her. Kittara ran at him and caught him a good blow to the right side of his body. But he was very quick and caught her with the edge of the sabre as she went past, sending her crashing through rows of low level demons. Kittara coughed and rose into the air, cursing the sheer number of enemy soldiers who made moving about the battlefield almost impossible. She sent off two disruption grenades to thin them out and headed back towards Bentagan. He was finished, grey green ichor covering the ground as it came from his body. She had

wanted the fight to go on longer, but Xeod was her main objective and he was still behind tens of thousands of his troops.

“At least finish me off bitch.”

He was obviously in pain, so she gave him his wish and finished the job of cutting him in two at the thorax. There was no sign of the other senior warrior or Hol, perhaps she'd taken care of him before dying ? Then she heard a roar as Xeod called for his men to make way for him.

“Send them home Xeod ! Fight me one on one.” She shouted.

Xeod tried to get to her, she tried to get to him. One particularly nasty spell of his had two of his own high level demons writhing in agony for minutes. In the end Xeod held up his hand and ordered his troops home.

“Just you left I see.” He said to her.

“Go fuck yourself.”

There were no recordings here, no famous last words, no tutting vapid journalist on Channel 77 to moan about her coarse language. Xeod charged at her and sent fireball after fireball at her.

Bentagan's sabre hadn't pierced her flesh, but somewhere inside she felt badly bruised and that slowed her down. One fireball caught her and burned off most of her tunic. She quickly pulled a garter of disruption grenades off her hip and sent them flying at Xeod and to her surprise they seemed to catch him off guard.

“Sometimes it's the simple things.” She remembered Herusher saying at training sessions.

One of his main back legs looked badly damaged and when you're a large demon weighing four or five tons that's serious. He went sideways and crashed into a dune, driving himself into the sand and then seemed stuck there. Kittara saw her chance and ran at the only part of him she thought she could damage, his face. Her Nurigen cut deep into the flesh and almost took his entire jaw off, but he had a demon blade and unusually for a top tier demon he seemed to know how to use it.

“Silly.” She said to herself as she tumbled over in the sand.

She hadn't seen her own blood for countless billions of years, but she saw it now as it seemed to pour from a bad wound to her left hip. She'd heal it later, for now she had to finish Xeod before he pulled himself out of the dune. She ran at him again, seeming to go for his face, but at the last minute she side stepped and cut off the hand that held the demon blade. Xeod tried to call out to her, but the blood pouring into his throat meant only a garbled roaring came out.

“Finish him, finish him, finish him.” A voice said to her.

It wasn't her voice, but just this once she welcomed its return and encouragement. Kittara ran around the demon and jammed the Nurigen in the back of its head, twisting the blade as she drove it in. Xeod quickly became still, but Kittara kept pushing and twisting at the blade for some time, almost refusing to believe she'd managed to kill the Ancient Xeod.

“Hol !” This time the voice was her own again.

She ran off in the last direction the sound of screaming demons had been coming from and she found the dead senior demon warrior. Dashak, it was Dashak the destroyer and almost unbelievable Hol had killed him. His head was at a strange angle and there were the tell-tale bite marks of a demon blade on his throat. Hol had done it, the newbie had killed the fucker ! The sand under her feet started to shift and a burnt piece of cloth came up and attached to it was an arm, a female arm. Kittara pulled at the arm and Hol rose out of the sand.

“You look like shit !” Said Kittara.

Her left hand looked almost severed from her arm by what looked like a bite and another bite had taken a lump off her chest muscles to reveal about three ribs. Her shoulder was also bitten to the

bone, but she was going to live. Kittara knew exactly what damage The Damned could survive and Hol wasn't even anywhere close to dying.

"One pulled me into the sand," she said, "then it seemed to run away."

"Come on," said Kittara, "I'll show you Xeod, then we can go home."

They walked across the Dunes to corpse of Xeod, which seemed to be sinking further into the sand.

"Fuck ! What did you do to him ?" Asked Hol.

Kittara walked around the body and retrieved Xeod's demon blade. It was far better than the one she'd loaned to Hol.

"Here this is yours, you earned it. They'll give us a few minutes to loot the body, it's tradition, but if we stay too long they'll send another group out."

Kittara started to cut the armour off Xeod. Only some of it would go home with them, but she was quite interested in his engraved chest section.

"Right. Tell me about the Kivar ?" Asked Hol.

"Now ! Here ?"

"Yes. I survived, even killed a big one, so tell me."

Kittara hacked off the chest armour and hung it as best she could over her shoulder. The clerics liked anything with engraving, they'd be orgasmic over it for weeks.

"They use record, send and vaporise teleportation. Have done for millennia."

Hols face went pale.

"They wouldn't ! Surely everyone knows the basic flaws in the system ?"

Kittara started towards where she'd left the body of Bentagan, just in case there was anything worth looting. Hol limped after her carrying her new demon blade with difficulty.

"Oh yes they knew the risks," said Kittara, "they had two copies of a few people where the vaporise part of the operation failed. They simple executed what they considered to be the fake person. They even had the software go haywire and send ten copies of the same person."

Bentagan had a nice looking boot dagger which Kittara pushed into Hol's boot.

"What did they do ?" Asked Hol.

"They're Kivar, the most bureaucratic race ever discovered. They held a public inquiry and executed the nine copies they considered fakes."

There was nothing left worth having on the corpse, so Kittara walked back for a last look at Xeod.

"This is insane," said Hol, "surely they realised the ultimate problem ?"

"They've been using the method for everything for millennia, sending their children to school, commuting to work, holidays, all via teleport."

Hol started to pry a gem lose from the leather straps around Xeod's head. She looked enquiringly at Kittara who nodded at her.

"All fair game, grab what you want."

"How bad is it ?" Asked Hol.

"I have a dark spell designed to show souls. I ran it on Mendera and it showed thousands of glowing dots. I was quite surprised how brightly the essences of the Genova shined."

"And on Antuum ?"

"A few visitors, but otherwise nothing, complete darkness. I think it's been a long time since anyone had a soul on Antuum."

Hol finished cutting the gem free and pushed it into what was left of her tunic.

"What did Sikush say ?"

“He said the Kivar are our strongest ally and will be needed in the war that is coming. Are you seriously suggesting I convince them they’re walking dead ?”

“He has a point.”

Kittara bowed to the body of Xeod and then in the direction of the gates. It was expected and someone would be watching. Then she used her dark side to rip a gaping hole in reality to get them to Mendera. It was risky of course, but after what they’d been through !

“Oh he has a point,” said Kittara, “but they still give me the shivers.”

As they stepped into the rip in reality a procession of dark clerics left the city to collect the body of the Ancient Xeod.

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