

Mendera – Empire

Chapter 21 – Sentinels & Birthdays

“The opening of Xeodz had been a huge success and despite a drunken Sventa and several fights, no one had actually died.”

Chlo had watched, it was what she enjoyed doing, although the temptation to help was almost irresistible. She'd watched as the Old One had hit the atmosphere of the mining planet hard, very hard. Those on board the ancient craft just knew that an important artefact was deep in the mines, but Chlo was certain it was a sentinel. If any omnipotent force could be said to have multiple personality disorder, then the multiverse had it.

Even Chlo had no ideas where the central nucleus of the what she called 'they' was, but 'they' seemed a very apt name. One moment they were throwing deities into the mix to restore the precious balance and the next they were offering a sentinel to them, if they were quick enough and ruthless enough to get it. Even some of the high level clerics found it difficult to accept a nebulous multiverse as the ultimate creator and many still secretly thought of The Chaln  as the one true God. There had been an imperial cult of sorts in the 3rd age of the temple. They'd appeared harmless enough, so Sikush had been tolerant, if a little embarrassed at being the target of their worship. They'd even built a small town and temple complex far to the south of Mendera. Then their numbers grew until they were a large enough cult to wield real political power. Still Sikush was tolerant. “They may be a little intense, but could people who worship me be a serious problem ?” He'd once asked her.

There had been no warning, when Sikush refused to accept deification for about the twentieth time they'd tried to invade the Temple of the Flame. Many pilgrims had died, quite a few clerics and over a thousand members of the cult were killed by the Guard. Their town had been reduced to a ruin, which was now preserved and made a good picnic spot for families. Very few of the people enjoying a picnic there now knew who had built the ruins or why. Since then The Chaln  hadn't tolerated any similar cults.

“Don't lose them.” She heard in the part of her mind Sikush shared.

Easy to say ! The instant one of the Maran Group miners had exposed the sentinel all hell had broken out on the planet and she was finding it hard to look through all the reality disturbances. Sikush had sent three Genova through the grey to see what was happening, but they'd just kept babbling about the intensity of the sentinel when they returned.

“The light, the light, too much light.” Was all they kept saying.

Chlo had seen the one called Baby destroy the Maran Enforcer craft and had been relieved that the wreckage had fallen well away from any of their team. It was supposed to have been a quick in and out mission, but now it had become a full assault on Maran armed forces. Chlo had seen Qunan Arje killed by Salom  to save Sventa and now the group, or what was left of it were approaching the ruins where the sentinel lay. Not that the ruins were what they seemed, they were of course an impossibility. Architecture, stones, inscriptions all from at least a hundred switches before ! The only way such a thing was possible was for the ruins to have been dragged through the wastes and only 'they' could do that. Chlo wondered if the entire planet had been pulled through ?

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Sventa fed on the dead miner and felt her flesh knit back together. The liver was the best food, but the heart and blood were also very good at restoring her health, as long as the kill was fresh and this one was very fresh. Arje had badly damaged her wing, but now it was healing well and almost all the holes in it had closed up.

She put her head deep into the miner's chest cavity and tried to drink as much of the fresh blood as she could. A piece of liver she'd missed caught her attention and after eating it her right wing was completely healed. She knew from experience that the lungs and kidneys might taste good, but they had no restorative powers. There was the body of Arje, which tempted her, but Salomé would want to take it back if they could and she owed the young warrior her life. Sventa pulled her wing as hard against her right shoulder as she could and followed after the others. She passed inscriptions on the walls and shuddered ! She knew the language and had heard of the long dead race who wrote it and if ever a peoples could be called evil incarnate it was them.

"Can't you heal yourself completely ?" Asked Estrid.

"It doesn't work like that, it never did. I can heal others, but not myself."

She looked around the chamber and noticed the dead bodies, all far too old to be of any use to her. Some she could smell decomposition the flesh putrefying, such a waste of food. Ojetin sat himself on one of the fallen stones and looked at the small black rock in the centre of the circle.

"It's not very big," he said, "Perhaps Sventa could take it back ? Then we can hide in the mines and hope we get picked up another day."

Sventa wondered if she was the only one to hear the call of the sentinel ? She'd been watching Estrid carefully for any sign of an act, but it was obvious that the child personality had no idea about the virtually unstoppable goddess that lurked beneath the exterior. As a Genova, or at least part Genova she was drawn to Estrid, but common sense also made the dark angel in her want to stay close to the most powerful person in the group.

"Let's have a look at what caused all this." Said Estrid.

She began walking towards the hollow in the centre of the circle when another tremor sent her crashing to the ground. Sventa dropped to the ground and cursed as pain shot up her damaged arm.

"Something is breaking through." Said Sventa, pointing to the far end of the chamber.

It was as though the rough wall of the cavern was melting, opening up to allow a bright red light to come through. Ojetin looked as though he'd passed out, his head looking straight at the ground.

Estrid was fiddling with the items in her shoulder bag pulling out something metallic as a huge grey arm appeared through the opening in the wall. It was followed by a feline looking head, and then a long grey body with eight legs.

"It feels like a Demon," said Sventa, "but I've never seen one like this."

The creature seemed to have clothing on or armour. There were straps and pieces of metal, but none of it seemed to cover it properly, or look complete. As the thirty foot long creature finally emerged from the portal it was followed by at least twenty feet of lashing tail.

"I've never heard of a grey demon." Said Sventa.

"Well it's not getting that." Said Sventa as she walked towards the rock.

Then the creature lurched towards her and started to scream. A long high pitched scream, which hurt their ears and seemed to get right into their heads. As the screaming continued Ojetin seemed to fall forward, but they'd have to look after him later, if there was a later. Sventa felt dark power arriving, saw what the others could not, a huge vortex of power reaching from a distant point. Then it arrived and Kittara was among them and holding her hands to her ears.

"Kittara !" Shouted Estrid.

"Don't worry about me, shoot that fucking thing."

"It's doing no damage." Said Estrid, as she fired her Yakkie again and again at the creature.

Sventa felt for her Genova side the side of her that could turn creatures to dust by merely pointing in their general direction. The power that had once held the crawling chaos itself at bay.

Her arm started to glow and she pointed at the creature's rear legs and the screams of battle turned to screams of pain as it seemed crippled. Its four hind most legs were buckled over and it was trying to move forward by shuffling its body. The most worrying thing was that the monster wasn't even looking at Sventa. It was giving a look of intense hatred at Estrid and was doing everything it could to get near her.

"Can you hit it harder Sventa ?" Kittara asked.

"I'll try."

Sventa's whole body lit up with an orange glow and the creature screamed again. At the same time Estrid threw a dark metal star into the air. The object seemed to hang in the air a few feet above Estrid, and then it hurtled at the creature and hit it full in what seemed to be its chest.

"Have you got any more those ?" Said Kittara.

"No, just the one."

The creature screamed and a grey ooze started to flow from a wound in its upper body, but still it crept towards Estrid. Without saying anything Estrid started walking towards the centre of the circle, and Kittara started to follow her. Sventa could see Kittara having a private mental battle with something, pointing her sword straight at the child's back, but she had to keep her attention on the creature. It should be dead of course, long dead, very little could survive the attack of an angry Genova. Yet it lived and still tried to crawl its way towards Estrid.

"But you made a mistake. You missed something very important !" Kittara shouted at the creature. Estrid looked nervous and Sventa just hoped the warrior won her mental battle with the creature. Estrid slowly edged her way towards the sentinel and picked it up. None of them could have picked up the object with bare hands and lived, yet Estrid just held it in her hand as if it was just a harmless rock.

"You just don't get it !" Kittara yelled.

Sventa kept pushing lethal amounts of energy into the grey creature as she watched Kittara hurtle towards it, the sword that exuded darkness held in front of her. As Sventa watched the warrior drove the sword deep into the creatures head and then collapsed in a heap right in front of its jaws. Again the creature should have died, but it simply shook its head to dislodge the sword and lifted its huge right arm.

"No." She heard Estrid whisper.

Down came the arm with incredible force, right in the centre of Kittara's back. Dust flew up and the warrior seemed to be pushed inches into the rock floor. So powerful was the blow that dust and loose rocks started to fall from the roof of the chamber. The monster began to lift its arm for a second blow.

"I said NO !"

The voice was no longer Estrid's. The child seemed almost mesmerised and unaware of the words coming out of her own mouth. She lifted her left arm and made a slashing movement with her index finger in the direction of the creature. The monster was moved backwards as its head split in two and Sventa stopped attacking it. If anything could survive what Estrid was doing to it, then they were all fucked. Estrid brought her finger back in the other direction and a major vessel of some kind must

have been broken, as thick grey ooze started to pour from the creature and soak Kittara as she still lay unconscious. Sventa moved to help Ojetin, only to discover he was dead and may have been dead since the first tremor sent him down onto his knees.

"Enough Estrid, it's dead." She called to the child.

Estrid ignored her and picked up the pace, slashing her finger from side to side until little was left of the creature's head apart from sticky grey mush.

"Enough ! Estrid it's dead !" Sventa shouted.

The child turned towards her, the eyes unseeing, the finger raised.

"Estrid it's me, Sventa !"

The young body started to shake and rocks started to fall from the ceiling, but eventually Estrid was back behind the eyes and smiling at her friend as she pushed the sentinel into her sack. As Sventa knelt beside the body of Ojetin she noticed Kittara get up and shake the worst of the debris off herself before picking up her sword and examining the mutilated monster. Should she tell her what had happened ? No, let her assume she'd killed it before passing out.

"Can he travel ?" Asked Kittara as she walked over to them.

"He's gone."

"Gone ?"

The dark angel was genuinely upset, as she kissed Ojetin's cheek. For the first time since her conversion a fresh corpse didn't provoke the hunger in her.

"He's dead Kittara."

Sventa pulled the helmet off the cleric and gently laid him down on his back and folded his cloak over him.

"Was it that creature ?" Asked Estrid.

"No, I don't think so. He was very old and it was just his time."

The child seemed to have no memory of what had happened, which was just as well. A potentially angry goddess was the last thing they needed. Another tremor hit the cavern and large stalactites of rock started to fall from the ceiling high above them. Luckily most of them fell in the area of the cavern where the creature had weakened the wall.

"I'm not leaving him," said Kittara, "I'll carry him over my shoulder."

Then the same thought occurred to both of them.

"Sventa, Salomé is still in here, just outside the doors."

"I know, I saw her sitting there."

Kittara looked at Sventa's broken wing and really didn't like asking her, but she had to get Estrid to safety.

"Can you try to get her out of here ?"

Sventa looked drained and keeping the monster tied down must have weakened her, but she smiled at Kittara.

"I'll try."

Then she ran off towards the doors out of the cavern, her damaged wing flapping awkwardly. Another tremor took Sventa off her feet, or she might have run straight past where Salomé was laying under dust and rubble.

"Salomé can you move ?" She asked as she pulled the worst of the rubble off her.

She was out cold, but still alive, so Sventa picked her up and shifted her into a reasonably comfortable position over her shoulder. Moving through the grey might kill the leader of the

fighters, but being on the planet once Maran forces landed definitely would. Sventa pulled them both into the grey and headed straight through the wall in the direction of the Old One.

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Charadask pulled the head off yet another high level demon and ate it with little relish, there was so much chewing for so very little brain tissue worth digesting. They'd obviously decided that defeating him was some sort of holy war and fresh groups of them continually interrupted his meditations by trying to kill him. True the fresh food was convenient and it was food that came to him, but the constant interruptions meant that work on the great dream catcher was falling behind.

"I promised the eternal." He said to the mutilated bodies around him.

Charadask noticed one of the bodies had a spark of life left in it, good ! Not much life, but enough to suffer for the outrage of putting him behind schedule. He grabbed one of its limbs, but decided ripping it off might speed up its demise. He ripped an arm off a dead Dredger demon, it was a good arm, a stout arm, it would make a good club.

"Bastard !" shouted Charadask, "you made me late in the work I promised to do for Sikush. If the dream catcher isn't finished they'll be serious trouble....."

He stopped ranting as he realised the target of his bile was dead.

"Bastard !"

He gave the body one more hefty blow and then started to meditate. The web had to be just right, no margin for error, oh no. He began clicking his claws on the cavern floor while he meditated and rubbed the loose material off his rear spinneret.

"Now it will be perfect." He muttered to himself.

Lifting his rear off the ground he started to spin silk, fine silk, enormously strong silk. First he repaired the damaged section from the last attack, then he began enlarging the web. He was happy now ! Very few people had ever been kind to him, but he remembered a young Genova girl holding him tenderly and taking him to see the eternal when he'd been close to death and in so much pain, so much pain ! Now Sikush had told him there would be an opportunity to repay that debt.

"A Genova now converted to a dark angel," Sikush had told him, "she will have need of your aid. I will send her to you soon, very soon."

Charadask would be ready !

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"Coincidence, or did you prompt her ?" Sikush asked Chlo.

It was Estrid's 18th birthday and Chlo had put on a long black dress, which revealed more of her figure than if she was naked, which is of course what black dresses are designed to do.

"No. Luri found the device hidden in the astrolabe about an hour before I was going to 'accidentally' find it."

So a bit of genuine good luck, they needed it. The fate of Ojetin had been in the balance whenever Chlo had looked along the timelines, but it was a pity he'd died. They had buried him against the wall of the Western Sentinel, there was no marker, there never is, but everyone knew where he was. Tomorrow he was going to convert the physical form of Estrid to a Menderan and he was only about 80% sure he could do it without freeing the goddess inside. Pain was the key, how good was the girl at handling pain. He suddenly realised Chlo was trying to get his attention.

"I'm sorry," he said, "so much depends on Estrin-Okanan being sympathetic to our cause and if I mess it up tomorrow...."

Chlo kissed him very gently on the cheek.

"I'd quite like being a hermit in the wastes with you." She said.

Dear Chlo, perhaps they would make a good couple battling the denizens of the wastes to keep their prisoner safely sealed away for eternity.

"I was just saying the Menura Cat is on the table in the other room."

They walked into the room and Chlo opened the box to reveal a remarkably friendly female Cat, considering it had been stuck in the box for several hours.

"I hope Kittara is as forgiving when she finds out I lied to her about Estrid being mortal."

"Did you lay it on pretty heavy?" Asked Chlo.

"Estrid is just an ordinary girl, she'll be dead in a few thousand years, her essence will move on. I even let her cry about it."

Chlo gave him a look of deep sympathy.

"You're fucked! She'll kick you all over town when she finds out the truth."

That didn't worry him. What worried him was that Kittara would understand and forgive him, and that would tear him apart.

"Sventa told me Estrid nearly turned on her in the mines." Said Chlo.

She was telling him to be careful when he converted her, but he already knew that. Chlo vanished to join the party, leaving him alone to walk back to his favourite veranda in the palace. He decided he needed to see Kittara, be with her at the party. He moved his reality behind her and held her; she felt a familiar pair of hands on her shoulders and stepped back against him.

"Pity about that scar, she could be a real beauty." He remarked about Salomé.

They watched as Estrid removed a very expensive looking necklace from the box and judging from her body language, started enthusing over it. Then she tried it up against Sventa's neck, and there was more laughter. Sventa now had bright red hair halfway down her back and looked more like her old Genova self than a dark angel. Despite all their worries she hadn't eaten any pilgrims, although there had been a near miss at the opening of Xeodz. The man was drunk and he survived and the injuries had been blamed on growlers.

"Have you seen Princess?" Kittara asked Sikush.

"Yes. She's with her new guy, the police chief. Do you want to go to her?"

"Not now, but definitely later on."

The opening of Xeodz had been a huge success and despite a drunken Sventa and several fights, no one had actually died. Albas and Princess had lasted another year before having a spectacular row and vowing never to talk to each other again. Now Princess was dating the police chief who looked after security for the levels and they'd been together for the last two years. Was it love or convenience for Princess? Albas kept being inscrutable about his current lover, which usually meant she was married.

"Bring Estrid to the palace, I have a gift for her." Said Sikush.

"Now?"

"Yes, it's quieter there and she won't be away long."

He vanished, leaving her to wonder what the gift might be. She waited until Estrid had finished talking to her friends before approaching her.

"Sikush has a present for you, I'm to take you to the palace."

"What is it?" Asked Estrid.

"I honestly have no idea."

Kittara held onto Estrid and moved them both to Sikush's favourite veranda in the palace. Sikush was sat on a long sofa and next to him was a large box, with holes in the side. As he got up he kissed Estrid on the cheek.

"I thought we might be going to Qasit early?" Said Estrid.

Sikush held put his arm around her and pointed at the box.

"No, your conversion is still tomorrow. I have a present for you, go on open the box."

The girl walked to the sofa and started to pull at the lid, and a scratching noise came from inside.

"It's something alive." Said Estrid pulling her hands back.

"Open it, it won't hurt you."

Estrid cautiously pulled back the lid and her eyes lit up.

"Oh it's wonderful."

"She's wonderful," said Sikush, "I had to pull a lot of strings to get her and she's a present to Emperor Xeod too."

Estrid lifted the tan coloured female Menura cat from the box and it started to chunter at her and as Estrid stroked her, it began to sing to her.

"There are heaps of instructions that come with her, but you've helped look after Emp for years, so I'll just say, pick a name quickly and carry her around a lot so she imprints on you."

Estrid was petting the cat and examining her.

"Can I call her Ojetin?"

Kittara and Sikush exchanged looks.

"Yes, if you want," said Sikush, "I think he'd have liked that."

"Will she live forever, like Emp?"

"No, she'll imprint on you and live as long as you do." Said Sikush

He suddenly wondered what the Cat would imprint on? An omnipotent Cat that could walk the wastes of eternity? He certainly hoped not. As Estrid played with the cat Sikush leaned towards Kittara and whispered in her ear.

"Are you mine?"

She turned towards him and simply said.

"Always."

~ The End ~

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