

## Tales of Nurigen

### The Importance of Breakfast

**“I saw dark angels, the genuine thing. Now they’re all gone, but they were twice your size and ten times as strong.”**

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Sventa quite liked being one of the almost legendary group who’d known and fought with Kittara. It meant instant respect throughout the empire and rarely having to pay for meals in restaurants. She didn’t tell people about the times they’d argued, or the times Sventa had fed on those Kittara had told her not to. Sventa had decided that total truth didn’t apply to people who were almost legends.

“Class G43 are assembled.” Said Haan.

“It’s their final lecture before graduation. What thought should I send them off with ?” She asked.

“Your lesson on discipline while under fire is always well received.”

She sighed and Haan looked nervous. She’s trained him and he respected her and feared her. She’d trained them all, all the converted dark angels and they all feared her. The emperor, The Chalné, had put her in charge of the dark angel training academy and she’d done well in the role. Graduates from her academy had low mortality rates in combat, were consistently honoured for loyalty and valour.

Most importantly they had never gone rogue or fed on the people they were sent to protect. True the converted dark angels weren’t as strong as The Damned, but the people of the empire had taken to them and their regiments were welcomed on most planets.

“Is a final lecture enough Haan, should I try to engage them more ?”

“Well I couldn’t say..... it’s hardly for me to.....”

He was muttering, his tail held tight against his legs, a sure sign of stress. Maybe she’d been mixing too much with humans, but Sventa wanted to send this batch of graduates off with more than yet another dry and boring lecture. Hol appeared in the corner of her room, she was going to give the graduates a brief talk on how much the empire appreciated their service.

“Just the person,” said Sventa, “should I try to engage them more Hol ? Perhaps give them something a bit more personal to take away with them ?”

Hol was looking at her as though she’d gone mad. Haan was scrunching his wings up so tight that he was in danger of damaging them.

“Your usual stuff on discipline and valour seems to go down well.” Said Hol.

Usual stuff indeed. Sventa left her rooms with Hol and Haan following her. The academy used part of Leviathan as the eight mile long craft orbited Mendera. Sventa liked having the students on board a space vessel, it gave her more control over their living space. Not for her the luxurious barracks and cushy living seen elsewhere in the empire. Her graduates may not like her, but they were likely to live longer because of her training.

“I heard G43 set a record.” Said Hol.

“Yes. Seventy five started and seventy five have graduated. No drop outs and no deaths from stupidity.”

Death from stupidity, that was what Sventa had told a grieving Genova family once. Their child had been chosen for conversion and had died within a year. He’d failed to properly unload a blaster and it had taken half his head off. Chlo could perform wonders of healing, but not even she could raise the dead. Could she have been kinder, should she have been kinder ? There was a viewing gallery above the lecture hall, a place for visiting dignitaries to watch the lessons.

“Let’s watch them for a moment.” Said Sveta.

They kept to the back of the gallery and watched the students below, listening to their comments. Sveta knew their names, all their names. She knew that Male 17 was Filip, who was far too arrogant for his own good.

“Our last boring lecture,” said Filip, “tomorrow we’re bad ass dark angels.”

Sveta had begun numbering them to make them think as a single unit and to keep egos under control. Each had a number on their chest and they were only ever referred to by number. Male 17 had been a nuisance to her and his trainers, but problem kids often made the best warriors.

“What do you think the mercs are doing right now.” Asked female 22.

There was a lot of cheering, the rivalry with the mercs who policed Mendera City was legendary. The Chalne tolerated quite a lot of mischief in the holy city, even fighting, as long as no one actually died.

“They’re probably having a talk on the importance of breakfast.” Shouted Filip.

More cheering until Sveta stamped her foot and they all saw her watching. There was instant silence as the student warriors moved to their own desks and stood to attention. Sveta walked down the metal stairs and into the lecture hall.

“Imperial commander in attendance.” Shouted Haan.

That was her, though Sveta was never comfortable with the title. She walked to the pre-prepared table and someone had put a standard issue Ion blaster on it. Whoever had setup the room had assumed she’d give her usual speech about keeping discipline while under fire.

“Remain standing for a moment.” She said.

The Chalne converted the Genova into dark angels and they were all volunteers, or volunteered by their families. That meant they tended to be either fanatics who saw it as a kind of holy duty to serve the empire. Sveta loathed those. Or they were ego driven sociopaths in search of fame and glory. They tended to make the best warriors. They all wanted to stand out, to counter the uniformity of wearing a uniform. There was no set hair colour, so Sveta looked out at seventy five heads of hair, all in different and bright colours. It had once been disconcerting, but she now found warriors with bright yellow and pink hair quite amusing.

“I heard someone say you’ll all be bad ass dark angels after graduation.”

They all tried to stand to attention even more, Filip looking decidedly edgy.

“I saw dark angels, the genuine thing. Now they’re all gone, but they were twice your size and ten times as strong. A well trained dark angel could take on one of The Damned and win. You are not bad ass dark angels and you never will be.”

Female 8 was actually crying.

“But... You are just about the best this academy has ever turned out. Seventy five started and seventy five finished. You should be very proud of yourselves.”

They were happy, even Haan was looking slightly more comfortable.

“I am very proud of all of you.”

Hol began to applaud and quickly everyone in the room was applauding. Sveta waited for the applause to end.

“You can all be seated now.”

Hol gave her brief talk on how valued the dark angels were by the empire and then she left the room. Sveta moved to the front of the table and sat on the edge. She noticed one or two of the males giving her long legs an appreciative look. Sveta was an immense age, but she still looked no older than when Kittara had created her in the City of the Lost God. Her hair was white ever since visiting the wastes of eternity, but she still had numerous lovers.

“Someone mentioned the importance of breakfast. That reminded me of the time the great Herusher himself was saved from almost certain death, by a good breakfast. You won’t find what I’m about to tell you in any official history, but it happened. I know, because I was there.

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The Star Wanderer was the largest passenger cruise craft in the Danos system. Five thousand passengers could enjoy the wonders of the galaxy in perfect safety. Over fifteen hundred crew and another five hundred robotic devices, toiled round the clock to make their cruise experience the memory of a lifetime. That wasn’t just the sales hype; the craft was always top of the customer satisfaction tables. No wanderer class space cruise vessel had ever had a passenger fatality due to an accident. Then on the 2<sup>nd</sup> of the month of Medener, in the Danos year 14,456 the entire population of the craft died.

The robotic devices reported in as usual, the on board computer reported the position of the craft with pinpoint accuracy, but as to living organisms on board..... There seemed to be none. The authorities were slow to react, after all it had to be a systems failure, didn’t it ? The Danos security services sent one of their X class vessels to check things out and it picked up disturbing images from the interior of Star Wanderer. Images so disturbing that none of them were ever released to the public. The commander of the X class vessel was an experienced officer, but even he had seen nothing like it. His report to headquarters was professional and accurate, but the sound of one of his crew crying could be heard in the background.

“We patched into the internal cameras. The main computer is still online and life support is functional. But the passengers and crew.....they seem to have been cut to pieces. Every camera shows body parts and walls covered in blood. It’s like they’ve been pureed.”

Back in Pannoz, the capital of the system, no one quite believed it. They told the armed forces to send more craft to the area and a more senior officer. A fleet commander and an attack wing of twenty craft were sent to inspect Star Wanderer. At the same time the X class craft was ordered to send a party on board to verify what the cameras were showing. They only just survived long enough to close the airlock. Three men, cut to shreds, their organs ripped out of their bodies, their blood splattered over nearby cameras. That recording too was kept back from the media and the public. The commander reported in, this time they listened and believed.

“They all had high definition body cameras, yet all we can see of their attacker is a few blurred lines and a hint of an arm. Whoever, or whatever killed my men moves at incredible speed and must be immensely strong.”

A few hours later the attack wing arrived and of course.... The commander decided to send fifty battle hardened troops onto Star Wanderer.

“My people know what they’re doing,” he told Pannoz, “probably just a few stowaways picked up en-route, we’ll soon sort it out.”

They died and so did the next hundred he sent. The Danos system weren’t members of the empire then, they were flirting with membership, but nothing formal had been put in place. To their government though, Star Wanderer sounded just the sort of thing for The Damned to sort out. Chlo received the request for assistance and almost immediately the emperor approved the request. Sending the elite immortal warriors of the empire to sort out the problem was good for the image of the empire. Chlo put the assignment on the common channel and flagged it to Herusher.

Herusher was not only the chief trainer of The Damned, he was also commander of their elite, the force within that protected the emperor.

“You’re not going anywhere until we’ve had breakfast,” said Juno, “send someone to do it, delegate.”

Herusher rarely entertained and almost never slept with anyone from the Guard, but he had a thing about Juno. He looked old and he looked ugly. Herusher could have looked young and handsome, yet for some reason he chose to look like the oldest and ugliest man on Mendera.

“It’s how I feel inside.” He’d once told the emperor.

Juno didn’t care, or perhaps she liked old and ugly. She shared his bed on a semi-regular basis and breakfast was always followed by a sexual encore.

“We know the importance of breakfast.” He said with a grin.

Pril had recently been accepted into the elite. The woman from the outer empire had proven herself in many battles and Herusher had no doubt that she’d sort out the problem. He allocated her to the task and gave her permission to take two others of her choosing. Three of The Damned was a huge force for such a routine affair, three could take over an entire planet on a good day. Herusher kissed Juno, not realising that he’d missed death by the merest whisker.

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“Can I see the recordings ?” Asked Pril.

They had quite a lot of information now and Chlo analysed it all and came to the conclusion that there was just one creature on the Star Wanderer. One very strong and very alien creature. The commander of the attack wing had gone to his quarters, his career over. A hundred and fifty of his best men ripped apart, all with no results. It was the commander of the X class vessel who was now helping Pril.

“We all have ridiculously long names, everyone knows me simply as Ganaan G.” He said.

“So Ganaan G, how did you get this to sort out ?”

“That’s what we do in the X class vessels. The military try to grab the credit, but it’s us who investigate new worlds and deal with anything nasty we find there. This time it looks like something nasty came looking for us.”

Pril liked him and Chlo was telling her the Danos weaponry was fairly good. Not as powerful as imperial Ion weapons, but capable of killing most things.

“So, what happens next ?” He asked.

“Normally Chlo would use probes to find the enemy, but there are no life signs on the vessel. We could turn off life support and remove oxygen from the air inside, but I doubt that will do any good against this thing. We’re left with the usual approach of going on board and seeing what attacks us.”

“That’s what we did.”

“Yes, but we’re a lot tougher.”

Chlo had dozens of benign probes on the Star Wanderer and she was feeding them all onto screens on the X Class vessel. On one a shape so vague that it might have been smoke or a shadow, ran along a corridor.

“What the hell is it and where did it come from ?” Asked Ganaan G.

“That is someone else’s job. I’m just the go out and kill it girl.”

Pril linked with the other two members of The Damned and they moved their reality to deep inside the lifeless cruise vessel. The lights were still on, the speakers were still putting out soul destroying mood music. It was all so ordinary, if it hadn’t been for the blood and body parts that carpeted the floor.

“Stay alert and return to Mendera if you’re hurt.” Said Pril.

They heard something coming, the sound of feet running over hard floors in the distance. As the unknown alien creature of smoke and shadow appeared, Pril let loose a disruption spell against it. Normally she'd have used her blade, but it seemed a being best attacked with magic.

"Nothing seems to harm it Chlo."

Was the last thing Pril ever said. She'd been through two switches, lived for longer than two entire multiverses, yet she died in seconds, ripped apart with two of her fellow warriors. Chlo looked at the grey blood of The Damned mixing with the red of the humans and put a block on any other imperial forces trying to enter the Star Wanderer. Jen and Alyz were sent to see Ganaan G, they were considered indestructible.

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"Pannoz are suggesting sending the Star Wanderer into a nearby sun." Said Ganaan G.

"Seems a bit drastic." Said Alyz.

Alyz was trying to appear calm, but things had been buzzing on Mendera. The death of an elite was a once in several millennia event and there was talk of Herusher being disciplined by The Chaln .

"It looks an expensive piece of kit." Added Jen.

"But you lost three of your own. Maybe we should simply blow it apart." Said Ganaan G.

Pril had survived long enough to give them some useful information, Chlo now had a wavelength linked to the creature, she could track it. It wasn't perfect, but it gave them their first break.

"We may well end up destroying the craft," said Jen, "but even that might not kill it. We need more information and Alyz runs a bit quicker than I do."

"We don't even know if it's always corporeal." Said Alyz.

Ganaan G was looking at her as though she was crazy.

"Solid," said Alyz, "can it walk through walls, or does it have to follow corridors."

"I know what corporeal means. It's already killed Pril, you can't go on board that death vessel."

Chlo appeared in her original organic form, the form left as some kind of future weapon by a long dead race of beings. She looked like a human girl of about nineteen. She looked lost and vulnerable and she was neither of those things, Chlo was the AI that controlled the empire.

"I can put you close to it and pull you out if things look bad," She said to Alyz.

"You don't have to do this, just vaporise the entire vessel." Said Ganaan G.

Alyz drew the blade her father had created. It was a long thin Nurigen sword with a slight curve to the blade. Created two switches ago, the multiverse no longer understood how to deal with the metal; it had no place in current reality and was impervious to the effects of age and damage.

"If it lives, this will cut it and it will die." Said Alyz.

She looked towards Jen.

"If by some chance I don't get back....."

"Don't worry, I'll tell your father."

Alyz laughed.

"I was going to say. Vaporise the whole damn vessel."

Alyz was old, even for one of The Damned. She'd been on Mendera when Thrax had built the original holy city and she'd seen him killed by the first demon invasion. Alyz was actually worshipped as a kind of deity on some primitive planets, much to her amusement. She'd been partnered with Kittara for an entire switch and had learned a lot about being a warrior. She looked at Chlo and simply nodded that she was ready.

Chlo moved her reality to about ten feet from the creature and it looked to be sleeping. Obviously it was alerted by sounds, or perhaps movement. Alyz had simply appeared in complete silence and the

monster that had killed over seven thousand people, just stood there. She looked it over, knowing Chlo saw everything through her eyes and it was all invaluable data.

"It's not organic, but that doesn't mean it isn't a life form." Chlo said in her head.

It really did look to be made of a constantly shifting cloud of grey smoke. There was a head with two darker spots that might be eyes, but nothing that looked like a mouth. It moved on three legs, spread under it in a tripod shape. Four long arms ended in rows of sharp claws, she knew already how effective they were as weapons. Alyz believed in a strict code of combat, but the creature had killed a vast number of unarmed civilians. No warning or challenge was given, she swung her Nurigen blade, connecting with the lower part of its body.

"It bleed Chlo !" She shouted. "It bleeds."

Not really what most people would recognise as blood, just a fine cloud of particles that hit the ceiling and created a dark grey stain. To Alyz though the stain meant the creature could be hurt and if it could be hurt..... it could be killed.

Hurt or not, it was still very fast and it was on Alyz and clawing at her flesh in a fraction of a second. She'd hadn't felt anything penetrate her flesh in a very long time, but the claws of the creature went in deep and made her gasp. Alyz saw her blood spraying the corridor wall and knew she had to get out of the creature's deadly embrace. She couldn't swing her sword, so she grabbed at one of the arm clawing at her and it felt solid. It may have looked like a creature formed of smoke, but its arms were solid enough. Alyz had strength of her own, she twisted the arm she held, feeling the creature loosening its grasp. She twisted and threw with all her might sending the monster crashing off the corridor wall. Alyz ran, that was what the experiment was all about. She ran and took the first corridor on the right, then left and into what looked like some kind of cafeteria. Alyz heard nothing, but two steps into the room and the creature was on her back and ripping into her flesh again.

"Get it off you and I'll bring you back." Chlo was telling her.

Instead of slowing down, Alyz ran faster, scattering tables and chairs as she ran. They wanted to know if the creature could walk through walls, so she'd decided to find out. Alyz had accelerated to around forty miles an hour by the time she'd crossed the cafeteria. Just before hitting the metal wall at the other side, she turned and rammed the creature into the wall. Something gave, not the feel of a breaking bone, but something in the monster had been damaged. Alyz turned and grabbed it by whatever passed as a throat for the creature. She squeezed, ignoring the claws that were sinking a good four inches into her back.

"Nothing Chlo, no expression, no sign of pain. Is it even alive ?" She shouted.

Alyz kept her eyes on the expressionless face of the monster and kept squeezing. Its grip on her back loosened just a little and Alyz brought up her sword arm and rammed the Nurigen blade into its body. Alyz turned and threw the thing of smoke through the air, watching as it hit the serving area the other side of the room. The dark flow of particles that seemed to be its blood spirted out, leaving a dark stain over the shiny clean metal. Still it was on its feet, barely slowed down. It was up and hurtling at her again, its claws aimed at her face.....

"You might have beaten it, but I doubt you'd have survived." Said Chlo.

Her sword arm was still raised, her left hand in a defensive position, but Alyz was once again on the control deck of the X class vessel.

"You look terrible." Said Ganaan G.

She did. Her grey blood with swirls of green was running down her legs and creating a puddle on the floor. Her uniform had been shredded, leaving far too much of her body exposed for polite company.

"Don't worry, I'll heal. Did you get your answers Chlo ?"

"I did wonder if it might be some kind of automatic surveillance device, but it's definitely alive. The Rejjacy developed a life form scale. The scale is very old and crude, but it has stood the test of time remarkable well. Using the Rejjacy scale there is a ninety seven point two percent probability that we're dealing with a sentient living organism."

A young woman in military uniform entered the control room and whispered to Ganaan G. He took her out of the room and Chlo used the opportunity to bring a medical bot onto the craft, to heal Alyz. It took a while to get Alyz healed and into a new uniform, but Ganaan G still hadn't returned. "So Chlo, I'm guessing by the way it let Alyz slam it into a wall, that our mysterious predator is always corporeal." Said Jen.

"Yes. It followed the corridor at every turn and as we saw, it can't go through walls. It may look like smoke, but it is very solid."

"If it can't go through walls, we may have an advantage." Said Alyz.

Ganaan G came back into the room, accompanied by two of his officers.

"I tried to avoid this," he said, "but they want to vaporise the Star Wanderer. I managed to get them to give us another six hours, but then the Danos fleet will destroy the vessel."

"The empire respects the will of the Danos government, but now that we know this creature can't walk through walls, we may have an advantage."

He looked at them, his gaze going around the room.

"What advantage?" He asked.

"We have a Sventa." Said Alyz.

"What is a Sventa?!"

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Sventa was the dark angel created from a Genova by Kittara. Genova were known as angels to most human creatures. They'd long since lost their home and wandered the multiverse as wraiths, only able to keep corporeal form for brief periods of time. Sventa had been created by adding a whole city of dark magic and memories to a Genova. Kittara had even called upon the great eight demon deities and they had responded to her summoning. The Chaln  often said there was no real evil in Sventa, but there were plenty who'd have disagreed with that. Sventa kept one very useful angel power, she could move through the grey between worlds and realities. Sventa could go anywhere, places even The Damned couldn't access. Sventa had even visited the wastes of eternity, but that had nearly killed her and had left her with pure white hair. Like all dark angels Sventa had two large wings that looked like grey leather and a long prehensile tail. She also had the hunger for human flesh, especially a healthy, disease free human liver.

"Chlo could use your help with this Danos business." Said Sikush.

Only friends and intimates could call the emperor by his pet name of Sikush and Sventa had shared his bed on countless occasions. She'd heard about the Danos incident, but like everyone, she assumed the vessel would be completely destroyed.

"Why do they need me?" She asked.

"Politics Sventa. Danos has been flirting with the empire for years. If we can kill this creature they are likely to join. If however they need to destroy their famous cruise vessel Star Wanderer because we failed. It will put back their membership for generations. As a last resort the empire could induct the Danos system by force, but it would be nice if they joined voluntarily."

"What are my orders Sikush?"

Sventa had an odd relationship with the empire in those days. She saw it as an almost holy duty to protect Sikush, but she felt no real loyalty to anything as nebulous as the idea of empire.

“Not an order,” he replied, “I’m asking this as a personal favour. Join Alyz and Jen, look at the information they have and then kill this creature. If of course, it can be killed.”

“Why might I succeed if they have failed ?”

Sikush stood and held her hand, before kissing her cheek.

“You can move through the grey, it appears this monster can’t. Take no risks Sventa, if it seems too difficult, simply turn down the task and return to Mendera.”

He was playing her of course, he knew her pride would never allow her to do that. He’d asked for a favour and if necessary, she’d give her life to complete that favour.

“There is a time factor.” He said.

“I’ll go now.”

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Sventa didn’t go straight away, she went home, to her house in the 1<sup>st</sup> ring of houses around the temple of the flame. Kittara had bought the house, but Sventa had been left it in her will, if a set of instructions left with Chlo could be called a will. Sventa sat at the kitchen table and pulled up the information on the Danos incident onto the view screen. She didn’t have the direct connection to Chlo that The Damned enjoyed, so she wanted to do a little homework.

“I knew their X class vessels sounded familiar.” She muttered.

They didn’t just help out settlers and deal with aggressive life forms, they collected samples and not just archaeological. One team had almost netted Sventa when she was on a hunting trip. She read a bit of history on their various exploits and noticed they’d recently been in what the empire called the Septin Spiral. It was all beginning to make sense. Sventa felt for Alyz and Jen in a way that Genova had always sought out friends, even though she didn’t understand how the sense worked. She felt them, perhaps smelt their essence, over unimaginable distances. Sventa moved herself through the grey and appeared to jump out of the craft’s hull and onto the control deck. Ganaan G had seen a few things that day, but even he jumped back as the dark angel appeared.

“Thank you for coming Sventa.” Said Alyz.

“I heard you have a problem needing my expertise.”

She was making Ganaan G and his crew nervous, which suited Sventa; she suspected they’d been lying from the start.

“You’ve seen the recordings,” said Chlo, “it can’t chase you into the grey.”

“I’d still like to watch the recordings with Alyz again and perhaps Ganaan G can give us his opinions on the creature he found ?”

It was a bluff, but it worked. The crew of the X class looked awkward and Alyz was obviously surprised.

“What do you know that you haven’t told us ?” Asked Jen.

Ganaan G was talking to a woman with a science officer badge on her shoulder. It was her who seemed to have been given the job of talking to Sventa.

“We didn’t catch it, as if we could cage such a monster. It wasn’t even our craft, but another that found the egg.” She said.

“It was a fossil, no one even considered it was viable.” Added Ganaan G.

“Was it found in the Septin Spiral ?” Asked Sventa.

The room hushed and Chlo even groaned.

“The empire has several forbidden zones for civilian vessels and the Septin Spiral is even closed to our military,” said Chlo. “there are too many spatial and temporal anomalies in there.”

"Habnah Y is my science office. She knows everything Pannoz knows about the egg, which isn't much." Said Ganaan.

His science officer acknowledged the introduction, but didn't look happy to be the centre of attention.

"A single fossilised egg was found on an airless planet in the area you call the Septin Spiral. It appeared to be extremely ancient and considered harmless. It was put into the secure storage on board Star Wanderer, to be delivered to Pannoz. Now there is reason to believe the egg may have been viable." She said.

"No kidding !" Said Alyz.

Habnah Y pressed a few buttons on the command console and a picture of a lump of rock appeared. Attached to it was a grey egg about six inches in length.

"It was small," she said, "scanning showed no embryo inside. It is now obvious that it hatched while the Star Wanderer was en-route to Pannoz."

"The spiral pulls crap in from everywhere," said Chlo, "it could be from anywhere and any point in time. It might even be from another reality."

"Now I can see why your government are so keen to vaporise the vessel." Said Jen.

They all looked at the picture of the fossilised egg, it seemed so harmless.

"You don't need to go Sventa," said Jen, "this thing might not be from our reality, it might be unkillable. Chlo can simply use a nova device on the Star Wanderer."

"That might set it free in our multiverse. I need to try, I promised the emperor." Said Sventa.

"Give her a chance," said Chlo, "I can always pull her out."

Jen nodded in agreement and Sventa moved through the grey and onto the Star Wanderer. First she needed to prove the theory about the egg, so she went through several solid metal bulkheads and into the secure storage area. Her powers weren't needed, the doors to the area had all been opened by something with enormous strength. They'd put the egg in a caged off area and that cage was in pieces. The egg was shattered, footprints in the dust showing something had walked away from it. "They even fed it." Muttered Sventa.

Only the best for the young monster, it had fed on the expensive gourmet food kept in the secure lockup. Tins of rare fish eggs, pate of endangered bird livers, ridiculously expensive fungae from Ushong. The creature had opened cans and packets and eaten vast quantities of everything it had found.

Sventa kept in the grey and felt for anything moving on the craft and found a tiny spark of life in the main passenger section, probably in the old movie theatre. All Danos pleasure craft had the ability to show old movies, the passengers found them quaint. It was there, Sventa spotted it, but it had no idea that its potential nemesis was walking towards it. It was still bleeding, or at least there was a small patch of the grey particles on the floor beneath it. The dark angel dropped out of the grey and readied herself to use Genova powers against the monster.

"You go no further ! You harm no more of my friends !" She shouted.

She used the force that had destroyed the insect like Dracc in their thousands. Nothing had ever survived the lance of pure energy she sent against the creature, even The Damned were wary of her powers. It seemed to work, the dark smoky outline of the monster became indistinct, it appeared to be melting away. It didn't scream, no one had ever heard it make a sound, but it diminished and retreated through the theatre seating. Sventa only knew it hadn't worked when the creature hit her and a claw tore off a massive section of her right wing.

"Don't pull me out Chlo." She shouted.

She wasn't going to fail him. Kittara had never failed The Chalne and neither would she. It had her now, claws tearing into her unarmoured flesh, spattering her black blood over the walls. Sventa entered the grey and lost consciousness.

She woke to find herself half in and half out of one of the theatre walls. The monster had seen her go through the wall and had clawed through metal and several layers of soundproofing to get at her. Then it had gone into the corridor and attacked the wall from the other side. Sventa was in the grey though and she could see it, but it couldn't see her. The problem was that she needed to be firmly in reality to use her powers and they didn't seem to be doing it much damage.

"I'll give you this, you're persistent." She muttered.

It was now ripping into another section of wall, not giving up on finding the creature who had dared to hurt it. It was hurt, one of its legs seemed withered and it seemed slower. Sventa was hurt too, badly hurt. Her right wing had been torn from her back and hung on by a few strands of muscle. Her body was covered in deep claw marks and if she didn't feed soon, she was likely to die. She rolled onto her back and moaned as her wound touched the floor. Sventa crawled through several walls and then briefly dropped back into reality.

"I'm assuming you can hear me Chlo. Don't pull me out, I have a plan."

It had heard her, it must have been far more sensitive to sound and movement than any creature Sventa had ever heard of. She was back into the grey a split second before it crashed through the door and was tearing into the wall. Sventa was in pain, the worst pain she'd ever felt, but she had to get back to the theatre and onto the raised stage area. She could hear it, the monster, ripping up the room where she'd been. It was slower now though, her plan would work.

She climbed onto the stage and worked out which door it would come through. Sventa had access to the pure Genova powers, but they hurt her. Once she'd disintegrated a demon lord with pure Genova power, but it felt like it had burned her soul on the way through her. There was no alternative though. Sventa dropped back into reality and brought up her left hand. She felt for the power every Genova can tap into, the power of the multiverse itself. Nothing could survive that, perhaps not even her.

"Come and die you bastard!" She yelled.

It sounded like a tornado approaching, throwing debris to either side as it ran to get at her. As it came through the theatre door she hit it with everything she had, the cone of white light covering and enveloping the monster. Still it came for her, still getting closer. Sventa felt for her Genova kin and found power that was freely given. The power of millions of her distant kin entered her and was turned against the unknown monster in front of her. In the end its body couldn't resist the force and it became a cloud of tiny dark particles. They too dissipated as Sventa poured out the combined power of a million or more Genova.

"It's dead." She said to no one in particular.

She felt and there was no spark of life on the Star Wanderer, the Danos could have their craft back, the empire had succeeded where everyone else had failed. Sventa was hurting, it felt as though she'd poured acid through her own veins, but she knew the feeling would fade. Only for him, only for Sikush would she let the hated Genova powers enter her essence.

~ ~

The last lecture should have ended some time ago, Sventa had talked for far too long. She saw lots of shocked faces in front of her and then the hands starting to go up.

"No questions. You're all graduates now and ready to become warriors."

Questions, of course they'd have questions, the sort that still gave her the occasional bad night's sleep.

"You may go now," she said, "but remember to treat every assignment with caution, to not underestimate any opponent."

Most were collecting their things, a few were even going through the exit door. A few though were looking at her with their hands still raised. If she answered those questions ? No, that would open up something that needed to stay closed.

"And don't forget the importance of breakfast !" She shouted.

Haan was by her side as she climbed the stairs and headed back to her own rooms.

"If it was anyone else," he said, "I'd think that story was made up."

"I might have decided they needed a good yarn as a final lecture."

"Not you, I know you too well. I also know there is no mention of that day or the Star Wanderer on your service record."

Sventa looked at the view screen and although she knew it wasn't a window, her mind treated it as one and she watched the great desert of Mendera go by as Leviathan orbited the planet.

"It was a long time ago Haan, I was a different person then. The Danos system joined the empire a year later and no one wanted the incident to be publicised."

"But the creature..... surely someone wanted to know....."

"No more Haan, no more questions. You may leave me now."

"Yes of course."

He was at the door when she decided to tell him.

"It can go no further, you understand that. The emperor would be displeased."

Haan returned and sat in the chair the other side of her desk.

"Questions are obvious Haan. What was the creature ? Where did it come from ? Are there more ?

The Star Wanderer was seen as unlucky after the death of all its passengers. The government tried to hush it up, but it became a vessel with a bad reputation and eventually it was removed from service. It was sold and converted into a commercial freight transport, but it never performed well. I've looked up the records and it couldn't compete with the smaller purpose built craft. Just five years after I killed the creature, the Star Wanderer was in the junk piles of Erasmus Seven and being converted to metal scrap."

"A sad ending for a good vessel." Said Haan.

"Not quite the end. The salvage teams cut away a bulkhead and found three eggs, all about six inches long. Not fossilised this time, but fairly fresh."

She looked at the screen and watched Lake Misogon as it went by below.

"Did they destroy them ?" Asked Haan.

"No, the two that were intact are in stasis in the imperial store. They are an insurance policy of a kind. In case the empire ever needs to know more about these creatures. One of the eggs was broken into pieces you see, it appeared to have hatched."

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~The End~

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