

Another tale from Nurigen, official archivist of the Great Menderan Empire.

Kittara And The Artefact

A short story of 15,900 words, set in the Menderan Universe. It's a time of peace in the twelfth age of the temple. Times are good, the empire is thriving. That doesn't mean that the imperial guard have nothing to do. Kittara is given a mission to find a certain artefact.....

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~ Part 1 – Mo ~

Mo, known as Mozim when he'd been born on the planet Ixir. Ixir was gone, as were the several other planets the population had moved to. Time did that, though time no longer had any effect on him. Mo had been granted immortality for doing a favour for The Menderan Emperor, The Chalné. It had been a huge reward, but it had been a massive favour. Mo had found a sleeping God.

"No matter how hard we work, the jungle keeps trying to overgrow this place." Said Silky.

"Part of me thinks temples look better with a few vines coming through the walls." He said.

Mo was part demon, though his mother had been born on Ixir. She'd fallen in love with a demon, though she went to her grave without ever admitting it. Officially she'd been taken in the night and brutally used by a man she didn't know. It had taken Mo a long time to find out the truth.

Mo had a strange walk, because his legs had joints in place where no Ixerian had joints. On the whole though and wearing a cloak, most never thought of him as a hybrid. Over the course of an almost uncountable number of years, Mo had acquired wealth and status. He'd also been imprisoned at least a dozen times and been so poor, he'd eaten vermin caught in the sewers of Mendera City.

"The angle of the two suns is almost perfect, Mo." Said Silky.

"Tomorrow, in the morning." He said. "Just a little after second sunrise. We'll hold the ceremony then."

Actually, time had done something to his joints, he was stiff until he'd been awake for a few hours. Nothing dreadful or worth seeing a physician about, but it took him a while these days, to be flexible. Mo found himself enjoying trimming vines and cleaning the ancient temple. It was therapy for his stiff joints and satisfied his spiritual side. Yes, the best slum runner Ixir had ever produced, had a spiritual side. He'd even been a holy man for a while.

"I like this world, are we going to name it?" Asked Silky.

"No, we never named the others. Name it and it will go on record somewhere. It'll then be claimed by the empire, or worse, one of their enemies. Mostly they won't bother with the place, there are an almost limitless number of lush tropical planets. If they find something worth digging out of the ground....."

"Oh yes, we've seen a few planets ruined by mining." Said Silky. "You're right, we'll leave it unnamed."

It was what they did, exploring uncharted galaxies for ancient temples to unknown Gods. Only enough tidying and general maintenance to make it possible to hold a ceremony. Mo was no longer a holy man, but he'd found something to fill his immortal life. With Silky, he was trying to find and bring back to life, every ruined temple in the multiverse. Impossible of course, but he was enjoying

the challenge he'd set himself. Luckily, being a converted chaos creature, an immortal invoker from Leng; Silky would always be around to help him.

They were a strange couple, Kittara had predicted they'd fight and kill one another. But it had to be love, as they'd been together for so many billions of years, that whole star systems had been born and died. From her long tail to her stubby wings, Mo loved Silky. There were certain cities and entire planets where she wasn't welcome, but they'd long ago worked out where to avoid.

"Someone is here.....Walking beside the river." Said Silky.

Mo found it endearing, the way she wrapped her tail around her left leg, when she was anxious. Her tiny wings fluttered too and her heart would be beating far too fast. Mo liked to think he was no pushover in a fight, but Silky was a highly skilled invoker. Despite her anxiety, she could do things to an enemy that would make a Shelzak demon puke. He kissed her neck.

"Calm my dear, it may be a friend." He said.

"Here ! No one ever comes here...Not for countless millennia."

Silky's wings didn't stop fluttering when Kittara walked into what was left of the ruined temple, though they did slow down. Kittara and Silky had shared a bed for a while, though that had been a very long time ago. Kittara had been in Leng then, learning the darkest of the dark arts. Weird for one of the imperial guard to have a relationship with a chaos creature, almost unique. Neither of them seemed willing to talk about it.

"So, you've found another pile of stones to re-sanctify, or whatever it is you do." Said Kittara.

"We just open a conduit to allow whatever wants to be here.....To be here." Said Mo.

"Something always comes.....Always." Added Silky.

Once a dark presence had claimed a temple in part of a galaxy with a bad reputation. That had been a one off and for all Mo knew, they had no right to expect every temple to be claimed by beneficent Gods. After all, several of the most ancient of the Gods, had been far from pleasant.

"Supposing something nasty arrives ?" Asked Kittara.

"Then we respect it's right to be here." Said Silky.

Kittara was a converted creature herself, perhaps that was why she and Silky had been briefly drawn to one another. All the imperial guard were converts, reborn at the edges of reality. Given immortality and then expected to risk that immortal life, to defend the citizens of the empire.

Officially there had never been renegade imperial guards, no rogues. Mo knew differently, though he was one of a tiny number to know that a few of the guards had turned traitor.

"Alright, no preamble, no small talk." Said Kittara. "I'm looking for a stone that may be in this temple. I know the symbol on one side and on the other, is a clue to the whereabouts of the artefact I'm looking for."

Mo knew that as with all of the imperial guard, the damned as they were unofficially known; she'd been offered to choose how she looked after conversion. Kittara hadn't chosen anything exotic, just the usual two arms, two legs and the torso recognisable as the general appearance of the clerics, the main population of Mendera City. A head on top of course, a very attractive head with black hair that shone. In an age when skin tone could be changed as easily as the next fashion, Kittara had kept the black skin of her ancestors. Her skin was as black as ebony and as shiny as her hair. Yes. Mo had been her lover for a while on the original planet of Ixir. It hadn't lasted for long and had ended with her threatening to kill him. Sadly, not a rare way for his relationship to end during that period of his life.

"Great, I love treasure hunts." Said Mo. "What is this artefact you're looking for ?"

"I can't tell you."

“Who wants you to find it ?”

“I can’t tell you.”

“Yet you expect us to examine thousands of stone blocks.” Said Mo. “That’s being pretty rude, even for one of the imperial guard.”

“Ignore him, he’s having one of those days.” Said Silky. “What is the symbol we should look for ?”

“A lightning flash with three orbs beneath it.”

Mo was becoming angry. All the years they’d known her and Kittara was keeping things from them.

“Don’t help her.....If she doesn’t trust us, let he search on her own.” He yelled.

“You’re being silly. I’m sure if she could tell us, she would.”

With that, the love of his life began looking at the stone block closest to what was probably an altar. Kittara headed for a large heap of damaged stones, while he fumed. It was no good, he had to join in the search out of boredom. The planet had a day that lasted forty-one Menderan hours, with eighteen of those in daylight at that time of the year. Just as well the days were long, it was close to fifteen hours after beginning to search, when Silky yelled for them. She had a strange loud noise she could make at the back of her throat. There was no mistaking the sound.

“I’m coming.....Once I can find you.” He yelled.

The temple covered a large area, most of it rubble that only hinted at the size and splendour of the temple’s past. Kittara arrived at the same time he did. Silky was pointing at an intact slab of stone about the same size as herself. Getting it out of the pile would be awkward, but not impossible. Mo had gained no special augmentations with his immortality, but Kittara had the strength of a wild Farrag beast on heat.

“Look, a lightning flash and three orbs.” Said Silky.

Her voice altered when she was excited, there was trace of an accent from Leng. Silky was strong too, for her size. She pulled the stone out of the heap, causing the whole pile to collapse. They all coughed, while waiting for the dust to settle.

“There’s writing on the other side.” Said Mo. “Not a language I know.”

“Not a tongue I speak either, which is rare.” Said Silky.

The other side of the stone was covered in deeply carved characters, about thirty lines of writing. Sadly, it seemed that with a combined age of numberless billions of years, none of them had ever learned that particular language.

“I have a three-dimensional recording device.” Said Mo. “We use it to record the ceremony at every temple. You’re welcome to use it to record the writing.”

“We have spare memory cubes.” Added Silky.

“Thank you, I’ll record it and show it to Chlo.” Said Kittara. “She knows every language from every world.”

After recording the words, Kittara shattered the stone. It seemed she didn’t intend anyone else to know what was written on that ancient slab of stone.

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~ Part 2 – Chlo ~

Chlo had several different parts to her identity. First and foremost, in her mind, she was an organic female creature who lived, breathed and enjoyed the company of males. An ordinary looking woman, though some called her pretty, who’d look perpetually young. Not really immortal, more accurately Chlo was unchanging. Unchanging was a very different thing to being immortal. She’d known Kittara had just arrived in Mendera City. Now, the most troublesome of the imperial guard was trying to contact her on a private channel.

'I need to see you Chlo, face to face. Can I come to your apartment ?'

Chlo was called Chlo because of a line of characters her original creators had fixed into the skin on her neck. Not a tattoo, it was part of her cell structure and impossible to remove. Unreadable to the imperial guards who'd found her, apart from the first three characters, which looked like Chlo. It was rumoured that Chlo had based her appearance on a young Hol Azreemy, the first of the guard to find her. Unlike most rumours about her, that one was true.

'Why do you need to a face-to-face meeting ?'

Even on a private link, Chlo felt Kittara sigh before answering. Out of all the hundreds of thousands of imperial guards, only Kittara ever dared to sigh at her.

'You know why Hol.....Bring me inside.'

Chlo had been a weapon, the ultimate weapon of a long dead peoples. Maybe she'd fulfilled the purpose she'd been designed for and killed all life in that dead, dark galaxy ? She didn't know, she just knew she'd been alone and without form, for a very long time. The empire had created some original technology, both electronic and biological. Mostly though, they were very good at modifying existing ideas and inventions. Even the famed imperial raptor craft had been designed by another, older civilisation.

The Chaln , the emperor, had seen her potential. It had taken a long time for total trust to grow between them, but eventually he'd given her control of everything. One part of her identity became the intelligence which controlled most of the Menderan empire and many things beyond even the reach of the empire. Like a computer, but much more than a computer.

There was a saying among the population that where one of the imperial guard could go, a thousand could follow. She'd been granted a gift by the emperor, the means to alter reality. Chlo used that to move the guards around the multiverse. There was another line to the saying that said where the guard went, Chlo would follow. She named new worlds, before analysing what was there and organising settlement if it was appropriate. To some it was mindless bureaucracy, but empires crumble without their bureaucracy.

'Alright.....I'll bring you to my door.'

Her apartment was at the rear of the barracks for the imperial guard. A huge structure that covered nearly a sixth of the space inside the city walls. Chlo had designed and furnished the apartment in the style of her original creators. More accurately, her few lingering memories of their comfortable homes. Why had she decided to live in the barracks ? At the time she'd still been getting used to Mendera City and the barracks had felt safe. Chlo opened the outside door to her home.

"I know the language." Said Chlo. "You'll need Sventa to go with you."

The open channel for communication went through Chlo, another of her duties. Of course, she'd seen the recording of the characters on the stone slab. Private channels went through her too. In a very real sense, she was the eyes and ears of the Great Menderan Empire.

"What does it say ?" Asked Kittara.

"First tell me who sent you to find it ?"

"I can't do that."

Not really an impasse, Chlo hadn't expected her to answer the question. It was probably the emperor, though she wasn't certain. He sometimes acted on his own and often it felt he was doing it to annoy her.

"What do you know about the Orb ?" Asked Chlo.

"I can't tell you."

“Then I will tell you, only what you need to complete your task. The Orb is an arcane device of immense power. To find it without dying in the process, you will need Sventa. She will also be able to read the message on the stone, though don’t expect too much. I expect Sventa will want a little quid pro quo when it comes to information.”

Kittara sat down without being invited. Very impolite and she knew that Chlo was a stickler for polite social etiquette.

“I need to know everything in the message, Chlo. It’s really important.”

“It’s him, isn’t it ?” Asked Chlo. “Sikush is sending you on another personal quest. He really shouldn’t do that without involving me.”

Sikush was a pet name for the emperors, known to many, but only used by a select few. Chlo hoped that using it might help her get more information. Deep down she knew it wouldn’t. Getting Kittara to talk if she didn’t want to, was like trying to open an Algarian clam.

“I can’t tell you any details about my task.” Said Kittara.

They were friends, good friends. The guard, the damned, needed Chlo to do their job, but she also needed them as the empire’s boots on the ground. Plus, Kittara was like her, one of the few who’d survived a Switch, the end of just about everything. After an almost unimaginable period of time, the multiverse wiped itself and began again. Knowledge of the time before a Switch was considered to be forbidden knowledge. Even knowing about the Switch, was forbidden knowledge. Surviving such a thing and working together for so long.....It had to bind people together. Chlo poured wine into two glasses she’d moved instantaneously from her kitchen, filling them with a rare red wine from Pineus.

“It’s called the Orb of Arcadis.” Said Chlo. “Arcadis was a rogue occultist and sorcerer from long ago, three Switches at least. When the City of the Lost God still prospered, he was said to have visited dark places and retrieved many items of power. The Orb was the most powerful, though even I can’t tell you what it did. Some forbidden knowledge is stored in the imperial archive, or the vaults below the Temple of the Flame. Most though, almost all knowledge of times before each Switch, is lost.”

“Thank you.” Said Kittara. “I have a few things to collect and put in my pack. Then I’ll go to Erasmus Seven and talk to Sventa.”

“Be careful, Kittara. Items from a previous multiverse, don’t always obey the physical laws of this one. There may be risks involved and when you find the Orb, don’t be tempted to use it.”

“Thank you for saying when, rather than if. I have no intention of using the Orb.... Anyway, I wouldn’t know how.”

“Good.” Said Chlo.

They drank quite a lot of wine and being old friends, they hugged before Kittara left. Chlo wondered if she was saying goodbye to her friend for the last time and hoped she wasn’t. Kittara was almost indestructible, but the Orb was from a past multiverse. Plus, from what she’d heard and seen in the temple archives.....The Orb of Arcadis had power that went beyond being merely legendary.

“Be careful Kittara, be very careful.” She muttered to herself.

It was forbidden, but so was sending Kittara on a private quest. The more she thought about it, the more she became certain that the emperor was playing a personal game of some kind. Chlo moved her physical form to the Well of Souls, just outside the Mendera city walls. Families went there for picnics and to play games in the park that surrounded the ruins. They never knew or guessed, that real power still lurked in the ruins and the gateway to other worlds still worked, if you knew how. Chlo knew how, of course she did. A few hand gestures to open the way, though she had no

intention of doing any more than sending a message. Sikush wouldn't like her doing it, but once it was done, Chlo thought she had done all she could to help her old friend.

~ Part 3 – Sventa ~

No one had wanted Erasmus Seven. It had been an imperial mining world, reduced to being a place where old spacecraft went to be recycled. On top of its naturally occurring toxic materials, which were many, breaking apart military spacecraft had added some pretty nasty materials to the toxic mix. Plus, for some reason Erasmus Seven had always had a high level of background radiation. Science clerics had blamed emissions from its sun, though no one was certain.

All in all, it was the kind of planet no one would wish on their worst enemy. There had even been a long-standing joke about government employees who were totally incompetent, being sent to Erasmus Seven for their next posting. Hot, with a sun that scorched the skin, yet never produced the right kind of light to produce a decent harvest. It was a hot, toxic hell with high levels of background radiation. Useless, unless you were dark angels looking for a world of your own.

"I'll walk back from here." Sventa told her pilot.

Air transport of some kind was essential, there were few roads on Erasmus Seven. Dark Angels had wings, which they used to move around their towns and cities. Longer journeys were easier in personal transports, though they weren't ideal in bad weather. There were electrical storms on the planet, that scared the Gods, or at least that was a local saying. Bad storms, sometimes accompanied by thick abrasive dust clouds.

Erasmus Seven was a hell to most, but the dark angels loved it. They had a natural resistance to radiation and were immune to most of the toxins, poisons and other pathogens that were fatal to most citizens of the empire. They'd even learned to harness the power of the storms, to provide over half of their energy needs. The Chalne had given them the planet to be their home in perpetuity, for zero cost. They'd put up a statue of him in their capital to show their appreciation.

"The nav system is showing a storm on the way, a big one." Said her pilot.

"I'll be fine."

Sventa watched the transport rise into the air and head north, towards her palace. She'd been appointed as queen of the dark angels, when no one else wanted the job. He'd appointed her, the emperor. That alone had caused many of her dark angel sisters to challenge her. Sventa had met over a dozen in combat and not a single one of her challengers had lived.

"He was right, that looks like a bad one." She muttered.

No one used their wings with a storm on the way, unless they were crazy. That left her with a ten mile walk in a severe storm. Not that she was worried, Sventa was tougher than most of her kind. Taller, with larger wings and as some thought, more innate aggression. Her subjects were the result of millennia of living on the rifts. Soft living with plenty of food. Gradually the softness had bred itself into them and their descendants. Not Sventa though, she'd been created in the old way, at the shrine to the dark angels, in the City of the Lost God. Created by Kittara, though that was a very long tale indeed.....

"I knew you'd walk, especially with a storm about to arrive. Your bravado is likely to be the death of you, sister Sventa."

Sventa had been expecting a challenge from Aishar for some time. There was nothing personal, no genuine hatred for one another. Aishar was ambitious and Sventa held the title all dark angel females aspired to....She wanted to be Queen. It was all normal, a useful cleansing of the bloodlines. Fair too, usually.....Though Aishar had arrived with several of her friends, which definitely wasn't fair.

“Are you challenging me to single combat ?” Asked Sveta.

“I am.”

“Then you seem to have a strange idea of single combat. Send your friends home.”

“I don’t think so.” Said Aishar.

She could have easily beaten Aishar, but there were five of them. Five wasn’t an impossible number to fight and the approaching storm would confuse her enemies more than her. If she was being honest with herself, her odds on surviving the coming fight weren’t good. But where was the fun in worrying about the chance of dying. Sveta was a dark angel created in the old way. She thrived on battle and beating impossible odds.

“Come on then.....Who wants to be first to die ?” She yelled.

No males facing her, the ruler was always female, always a Queen. There had only ever been female dark angels, created by ancient magic, by powerful sorcerers. Then a kind of miracle occurred, though no one understood how or why. It was rumoured the Leng had been involved, though that might have been a lie. Suddenly there had been male and female dark angels on the rifts and they were able to breed. Males as tough as the females, though they were never allowed to rule. A lesser form of dark angels evolved, with less strength and size, but still formidable fighters.

“Ten thousand imperial credits, to whoever removes her head from her shoulders.” Shouted Aishar.

Not a huge sum, but it would buy a house on Erasmus Seven, or a top of the range personal transport. Enough money to make all of them charge her at the same time. They were wearing armour, but Sveta had skin the colour and texture of brown leather. As tough as chain mail, it took a good sword thrust to penetrate her hide. The first to attack used an imperial blaster rather than a blade, which was also outside of the rules of combat. By spreading her huge wings and beating them just once, Sveta could go straight up at a decent speed. The blaster shot missed her, but hit one of her attackers.

“First rule.....Know where everyone is.” Yelled Sveta.

The wounded dark angel might have lived, if Sveta hadn’t swooped down and wrenched her head from her body. Sveta had a sword in her belt, but preferred to use her claws at close quarters. Another blaster shot missed her, but they were learning. The energy bolt found the radioactive sand of Erasmus Seven, rather than another dark angel.

“She’s making fools of you.....Kill her.” Shouted Aishar.

“Come and face me, coward.” Said Sveta.

Sudden and unexpected moves could work and Sveta had never been good at cat and mouse fighting, especially as she seemed to the mouse. She flew straight at Aishar, her sword held up, ready to strike. Two of the dark angels moved in front of Aishar, making it impossible to get to her. Dark Angel Queens had immense power and access to the imperial banking system. If Aishar lived to become Queen, the families of all those with her, would be wealthy and influential, for several generations. Those with her would gladly give their lives, knowing their families would be extremely well looked after. Sveta killed one of the two in front of Aishar, by cutting her body almost in two. A blaster bolt had found her though, it was certain to happen, eventually.

“That’s it.....Kill her, we’ll feed her carcass to the Growlers.” Yelled Aishar.

A hole the size of a fist in her left wing, coupled with intense pain. Pain she could handle, but her wing would take time to heal. Another couple of holes and flying would be difficult. The odds were better though than they had been. An unexpected yet familiar voice, grabbed everyone’s attention.

“That doesn’t look a fair fight to me.” Said Kittara. “Would you like a friend to fight at your side, Sveta ?”

“Actually, I think things are turning my way.” Said Sveta.

Of course she needed help, but even the offer had to be dealt with according to rules and etiquette. Sveta was the Queen of the dark angels. She couldn't be seen to accept an offer of help, too readily.

“Stay out of this, it's not your fight.” Said Aishar.

A mistake to talk to one of the emperor's elite guard in such a way, Kittara would never let such an insult go unpunished. Strange really, Sveta had always thought that when Aishar made her move, she'd make a better job of it.

“I insist on helping you old friend.” Said Kittara.

Kittara was small, as small as a teenage cleric's child on Mendera. In a crowd she'd look as though she still had some growing to do, but she was as big as she'd ever be. Dressed in the uniform of the damned, with long dark hair longer on one side than the other. Kittara didn't look physically impressive, though she had a certain something. When she entered a room, people noticed her. Of course, the Nurigen blade on her belt was recognised just about everywhere. She was an unstoppable force, armed with a blade made by the best maker of swords, the multiverse had ever seen. Hardly surprising that Aishar's surviving friends dropped their weapons.

“Are you withdrawing from combat ?” Asked Kittara.

Her two friends nodded, but Sveta had to give Aishar a little respect.

“I still claim the right to single combat.”

“Then I accept your challenge.” Said Sveta.

Sveta hadn't survived to reach an age too huge to easily count, by underestimating her enemies. She instinctively moved backwards, just as Aishar lunged at her with a wicked looking short sword. A demon blade by the look of it. It would bite friends with the same eagerness as it bit foes. Another breach of the rules of civilised combat, if there really was such a thing.

“Watch out, she carries a demon blade.” Said Kittara.

“I had noticed.”

As they moved around one another, trading blow that the other easily blocked, Sveta felt disappointed. She'd always thought that if Aishar had made her move and won, at least she'd have been defeated by a worthy adversary. The truth though was that Aishar had relied on tricks and rule breaking, because she was only a mediocre fighter.

Sveta could see the major weakness of her opponent and it was so bad, she felt insulted that Aishar had dared to challenge her. Aishar was watching her blade and blocking attacks quite well, but she was ignoring Sveta's claws. Time after time, Sveta could have killed her opponent, but let her live a little longer. Eventually she became bored and boredom gave birth to anger.

“Enough, it's time this nonsense was over.” Said Sveta.

As Aishar dodged another sword blow, Sveta grabbed her opponent's face just in front of her left ear. She tore with her claws, removing Aishar's eyes, ears and her entire face. Her enemy became a screaming creature with no face. The sound was dreadful, even to a veteran of too many battles to number. Sveta spun Aishar around and drove her sword in hard, right between her opponent's wings. It was over, Aishar's heart was cut in two and stopped beating, before her lifeless body hit the ground.

“She wasn't very good.” Said Kittara.

“Yes.....I always assumed she'd be far better than that. Come on, walk with me. I'm assuming you have a reason for being here ?”

Sventa had no idea if Aishar's surviving friends would take her body to her family. If the contest had been fair, she'd have made sure the remains were buried in the Temple to Yraag, the God of war. The challenge hadn't been fair though, so Aishar's body could rot where it fell, if it wasn't claimed. Truthfully, Sventa had no concerns about the remains of the dark angel she'd just killed. She briefly looked over her shoulder and Kittara was following her. The storm was close now, the first few lightning bolts illuminated the horizon.

"Where are we going?" Asked Kittara.

"I'm going home.... Why are you here?"

Kittara could have taken them both instantly to Sventa's home, though she'd never suggest it unless asked. Kittara had a way about her, which Sventa knew well. They were both too tough to become victims of a thunderstorm, even the epic storms of Erasmus Seven. It might take a while, but they would make it to her house. A palace actually, quite a grand affair.

"Chlo sent me, I have need of your knowledge of dead languages." Said Kittara. "I need your help too, at least according to Chlo, if I want to survive finding the artefact I seek."

"What is this artefact?" Asked Sventa.

"Chlo called it the Orb of Arcardis....I have a message about it, copied from the ruins of an unknown temple."

"The Orb of Arcardis indeed, you'll be looking for the monster of Lake Misogon next. I feel you've been sent looking for something that no longer exists. Can I see this message you copied?"

"It'd be easier using a screen at your home." Said Kittara.

"Come on, it's only a bit of storm." Said Sventa. "Push up a screen, show me the words in this dead language you found."

The bit of a storm had become a full-blown dust storm, on top of the thunder and electrical storm. Actually, the darkness helped them both see the screen Kittara created. Chlo actually, though as always, the users of her systems received all the appreciative comments.

"Wow, that resolution is incredible." Said Sventa. "Yes, it really does seem you're looking for the genuine article, though it still might have been destroyed or hidden somewhere no one will ever find it. Who sent you to find the Orb?"

"I can't tell you." Said Kittara.

"It'll be the emperor, he's the only one crazy enough." Said Sventa. "You're sensible enough, but he always has been able to get you to do anything. Has he at least told you what the Orb does?"

"I have no idea what the artefact was created to do." Said Kittara.

"Well....I suppose you have to say that. If he really did send you looking without warning you.....It's a dangerous artefact from a long dead multiverse, Kittara." Said Sventa. "Of course, I will now have to join you in the search."

A large bolt of lightning hit the ground quite close to them, turning the sand to something that resembled molten, grubby glass. Sventa thought that maybe, just maybe, insisting on walking had been a bad idea. Too late now though, she'd look an idiot if she changed her mind.

"Where do we start looking?" Asked Kittara.

"We start by going to Algaria to see Tad Dunne. He's carried out several expeditions to find dark artefacts. He has no idea about prior multiverses, but he might know who was looking for the Orb and where. That's part of the risk, someone else is bound to be looking for it too. Some of these artefacts have whole teams looking for them, like fans or stalkers."

"I remember Tad, he ran the Algarian air defences." Said Kittara.

“That was his great, great grandfather, Kittara.” Said Sventa. “Not everyone is immortal and measures their age in tens of millennia. Tad is a normal Algarian, with the usual two-hundred-year lifespan. He does know a thing or two about artefacts though.”

There was a blanket of dust between them and her house. So, tempting to ask Kittara to take them to her palace. They could be there in seconds, but Kittara would tease her about it until the sun over Erasmus Seven grew cold.

“Then we should go and see Tad Dunne.” Said Kittara.

“You’ll need to be a little patient; I will need to make arrangements for my absence. If I vanish just after an attempted assassination, all sorts of rumours will hatch out. A day, two at the most and we’ll be in Tranquillity, the capital of Algaria.”

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~ Part 4 – Tad Dunne ~

Visitors to Tranquillity were often surprised by arriving at such a modern city. Lots of gleaming towers with an entire area zoned as a business district. There was even a row of superb hotels along the north bank of the river. Algaria had a reputation for being backward looking. The ancient temples and buildings were still there, the new parts of Tranquillity had been deliberately kept well away from the historical areas. They were there though and the tourists still arrived in huge numbers. So many, that strict controls had been put in place to protect Algaria’s millions of years of historical heritage. The stories about some temples being built by an elder race were considered to be just tales for gullible tourists. Tad had no idea who’d built some of the oldest buildings and he’d become a bit of an expert of the subject. He had theories though, lots of them.....

“They won’t go away, Tad.” Said Dava. “One claims to be your friend from way back at college on Mendera.”

Dava was a wonder, worth her weight in gold. His PA for many years, with a real knack for keeping the day-to-day problems out of his in-tray. Sometimes he relied on her so much, that he’d zone out entirely. Tad had two loves, the history of Algaria and his wife. Actually three loves, like his father and his father before him, he was the commander of the planet’s air defences.

“Tad, I need a decision.” Said Dava. “Do I get them tossed out of the building ?”

“Sorry, I was thinking.” He said.

“I knew you weren’t listening. One is in the uniform of the imperial guard, though she refuses to give her name. The other is called Sventa and she’s the one claiming to know you from college. She’s a dark angel by the way, the toughest I’ve ever seen.”

“Have you still got them on the screen ?” He asked.

“Oh yes, I’m not releasing the yellow alert until they’re gone, or you decide to see them.”

“Push the feed over to me.”

Tad wondered why Dava hadn’t recognised Kittara. Yes, she’d changed her hair colour, but surely everyone knew the almost legendary Kittara. The empire was at peace though and had been for quite some time. Warriors like Kittara only tended to be on the newsfeeds when times weren’t peaceful. As for Sventa...He hadn’t studied with her, she’d been his teacher. There had been a time when all new military school recruits, had at least six months having their skills honed and polished by Sventa.

“I’m surprised you didn’t recognise Kittara.” He said.

“What ? Yes, I see it now.....Crap, how did I miss that ?” Said Dava. “She’s changed her hair colour, hasn’t she ?”

“Yes, and she’s looking down to avoid the cameras. I know Sventa very well, she was one of my teachers at the imperial military school. Change their status to visiting VIPs and have them escorted to.....The best available meeting room.”

“The garden would be nice; no rain is predicted for today.”

“Yes, good idea, Dava.” He said. “Have them shown to the garden and offered refreshments.”

His predecessor as commander of air defences, had been a ‘my door is always open,’ kind of commander. Loved by everyone, but that wasn’t Tad’s way of doing things. He’d spent the first two years trying to keep his office door firmly closed. Then he’d found Dava and become almost a recluse. He could walk the corridors of defence command, without being harassed by people wanting to run their ideas past him, or moan about the problems with current HR policies. He could focus on what mattered and the chiefs of staff appreciated his style. He got things done, after a period where his predecessor had achieved very little. Being an efficient near recluse, also gave him time for his historical research projects.

Tad walked into the garden and felt instantly refreshed. The cool breeze and clean air were far better than the best aircon could manage. His guests were sat by the fish pond, drinking what looked like herbal tea, while nibbling at something.

“Kittara, so nice to finally meet the legend.” He said. “My family still have pictures from when you worked with my great-great grandfather. If you’d introduced yourself, the problems in reception could have been avoided.”

“My business here is private.” Said Kittara.

“And of course.....I know Sventa from military school on Mendera.” He said. “You’re both very welcome here, though you probably didn’t come to drink tea.”

“Good, straight to the point.” Said Sventa. “I was worried you might have become a small talk person, a waffler.”

It was rude, but Sventa was famous for being blunt. He had to chuckle at her comment.

“Out with it then, what can I do for you ?” He asked.

“This message was found on a stone from a temple wall.” Said Kittara. “Sventa believes you can read the language.”

Kittara pushed up a screen that was about four feet across. An AI had obviously been at work on the image, the characters were sharp and incredibly clear. He knew the language and that it had never been used by any known civilisation. That alone, had created a minor obsession with the language he was looking at.

“Oh.....That is the longest complete text in those characters, that I have ever seen.” He said. “It’s amazing, where exactly did you find it ? Can I see the stone it was found on ?”

“Unfortunately, I had to destroy the stone.” Said Kittara.

He wanted to strike her and might have done, if it hadn’t been likely to lead to a huge diplomatic incident. Tad found himself trembling at the thought of something so rare, so precious, being lost forever.

“Why ? It can never be replaced, ever.”

“You’re a soldier, you must know that orders must be followed.” Said Kittara.

“How did you learn to read a long dead language ?” Asked Sventa.

“Chlo of all people, she sent me a page written on a metal plate.” Said Tad. “I had to return it to her immediately, after copying it. It only gave me a few pointers on translation into old Pesallian, another dead language. Old Pesallian is reasonably well known though and I was constantly finding

fragments of text in the caverns of Tejan. It took a while and I don't know everything. I am able to translate everything on the stone you found."

"Please, tell me everything the message says." Said Kittara.

"I can do better than that, my AI now knows the language. I simply push your text to the AI and.....There, you have a translation into modern imperial. I had to name the ancient language. Once you involve an AI everything has to be named and categorised. I call the language on the stone Ancient Unadarian. Not that it's anything like Unadarian, but that used to be the oldest known language in the multiverse."

The translation mentioned the Orb of Arcadis and that it was just one of the arcane devices created by the long dead sorcerer. It glossed over the dreadful purpose of the Orb, as if assuming readers would already know. There was a pointer to another message in a certain location.

"I can't read these words, are you sure that section is in new imperial?" Asked Sventa.

It was and it wasn't, the AI had done its best to come up with a literal translation. The cavern of the dead lady was actually a pretty good attempt.

"It means the Caverns of Tejan." Said Tad. "They're in the far north of Algaria, so I hope you both like cold weather. There's some unpleasant wildlife too. All in all.....Not a place you'll find many tourists. I know, I've been there on many occasions."

"You must realise.....You have to come with us." Said Kittara.

Tad hadn't really thought about it, but she was right. He was not only the current authority on Ancient Unadarian, he also knew the caverns like the back of his hand.

"Alright I'll come, but we'll be on our own." He said. "The caverns are closed in the deep cold of winter, even the guards are brought back to Tranquillity. They used to remain there, until one was found frozen solid while on duty."

"There isn't time to wait for the Algerian spring." Said Kittara.

"Fine, I'll be ready to leave in say.....Ten days." Said Tad.

"Make it five days." Said Sventa.

Tad realised it at that moment. Any key decisions and they'd gang up to effectively out vote him.

"Fine, five days." He muttered.

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~ Part 5 – Estrin-Okanan ~

She was the most powerful of the Gods. More towards the light than the dark, though she hated the notion of good and evil deities. Like magic, her power could be used to good or ill, but at heart, all power is neutral until used. Sevril-Narge, oh she had been bad, there was no arguing about that. Some had called her the bug goddess of the rifts; due to the huge insect army she'd created. Sevril had died though, destroyed not by a fellow deity, but by the intelligent creatures that inhabited the multiverse. Several of the Ancient Gods had died, or had boiled away to nothing in the wastes of eternity. Of course, the creatures who inhabited the multiverse in their billions, still sought her help. They filled their temples and prayed to her, or screeched at her during times of need.

After Tomma-Goran had died, something had died inside her. Tomma had built the City of the Lost God and in many ways, he'd been the best of them all. He'd definitely been the one who thought most of the mortal creatures. Estrin had decided to hide for a while and stop answering the incessant pleading of her worshipers. Didn't they realise that she was hurting too? She'd slept for billions of years, hidden so well that none should have found her. The slum runner had found her. Mozim, known as Mo to most. He'd been far cleverer than he liked to admit, too damned clever.

"Not far off now, just two more passageways." She muttered.

Estrin could hear them approaching, the ones who came for her help, even though they weren't yet aware of it. Sveta she knew well, they'd gone to council club nights together in Mendera City. Yes, even deities aren't immune to lust and passion. Estrin still fondly remembered those nights of sexual excess. She'd been called Estrid then, a name they'd still know her by. From being a cloud of glowing energy, she took on the shape of Estrid in her late twenties. She then cradled the vase in her hands and waited for them to arrive at the centre of the caverns of Tejan. She could hear them moaning about the intense cold and the amount of rubble they were having to clamber over. On the whole, Estrid liked the intelligent life forms who roamed the multiverse, especially the ones who were now quite close. Not surprising really, as like them she and all the other Gods, were a creation of the sentient multiverse. Kittara entered the chamber first, blinking as Estrid created a ball of light up against the chamber's ceiling.

"You all took your time." Said Estrid. "I've been sat here for hours."

Chlo had been the cause of her being there, though none of them could know that. Chlo had thrown a message into the Well of Souls and she'd heard it. It seemed the Orb might be found and that was too terrible to ignore. No mortal creature could be allowed to possess the Orb.

"Estrid !" Yelled Sveta.

The dark angel flew, quite an achievement with her wingspan in such a relatively small chamber. They hugged, though Estrid was determined all the gossip about where each of them had been and with whom, could wait until later.

"You look no different, Sveta." She said. "Then again, you probably never will."

"You don't either....In fact you look a little younger." Said Sveta.

"Sometimes I do get the continuity wrong."

They laughed and hugged, with Kittara joining in. Estrid had once appeared to Kittara as an eight-year-old girl. She'd taken on the persona of a settler's daughter on a colony planet. Originally only for a short while trying to help Kittara get to where she needed to be. Then there had been a particularly dangerous visit to Ixir. But that was all a very long and involved.....

"You'll need this, it's the next message." Said Estrid. "I'm just giving you this in the hope you'll be sensible enough to bury the Orb somewhere and forget it exists."

The male Algerian was looking intently at the vase, the way a starving man might look at a table full of food. Estrid knew who he was, she took an interest in all who entered those particular caverns. It was nice though, when Kittara introduced him.

"Estrid.....This is Tad Dunne. We wouldn't be here without his help."

"Ahhh....A genuine mortal." Said Estrid. "Born on Algaria by the look of him."

Estrid prodded him gently in the chest. For some reason that always scared people, from Mendera City, all the way out to the seventh rift. She had no idea why it scared them, but it amused her. Tad actually knelt in front of her.

"Forgive me, I haven't visited the temple since I was a child." Said Tad.

"Stand up.....On your feet Tad Dunne." Said Estrid. "If you're travelling with these two, you're a friend. Here.....Be the first to read the writing on the vase since.....It's been a very long time."

The writing on the vase told most of the story, but not quite all of it. She saw the surprise on Tad's face as he reached the name of the person who'd scratched the text onto the vase from a previous multiverse. The name seemed to excite him more than the original purpose of the Orb.

"So, where do we go now ?" Asked Kittara.

“You’re going.....Not me, this is my first and last interference in this matter.” Said Estrid. “Tad knows where to go next, if he’s really understood what these caverns have been trying to tell him. All the fragments of a language from a world that has ceased to exist.”

Poor Tad, he was frantically reading the vase again. When he asked Kittara for another look at the message on the stone, she knew he was struggling.

“There, in with the warnings about doom if the Orb is used.” Said Sventa. “I know that word and it isn’t a word in a dead language. It’s the pictogram for the City of Quron on the second rift.”

“Alright, so we’re going to Quron.” Said Kittara. “I’ve been there before and we’ll need to wear hoods all the time. They don’t like strangers in Quron. They don’t even like hybrid demons.”

“No, no.....I know we have everything we need.” Said Tad. “There will be another scribbled message in Quron, that will send us somewhere else, then somewhere else.”

“That’s how these things usually lead to the right place, eventually.” Said Sventa.

“Listen to him, I begin to understand what he means.” Said Kittara.

“I never understood a word of this language, until Chlo sent me that metal page. It all began to make sense then. I think that was deliberate.” Said Tad. “Why send a piece of forbidden knowledge to a soldier on Algaria ? I believe we need to go to Mendera and seek access to the imperial archive. I have no idea how we’d go about it, but I know I’m right.”

“Petitioning it’s called, you’d have to petition the emperor.” Said Estrid. “Ask him in the afternoon if you decide to go. Sikush can be a bit grumpy in the morning.”

“It all sounds nonsense to me.” Said Sventa. “We need to be thorough and follow up every lead. I think we need to go to Quron.”

“Yes, but Estrid is smiling.” Said Kittara.

“I will interfere no further, it never ends well.” Said Estrid. “I will just say that Mendera City is lovely at this time of year.”

“Never argue with a God.” Added Tad.

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~ Part 6 – The Chalné, The Emperor ~

He had a favourite veranda in his favourite part of the imperial palace. About midday and he was enjoying a light meal. His palace was huge, covering three square miles of the area inside of the city walls. The walls were important, they marked the extent of Chlo’s full control. Fall off a roof or suffer a critical injury and if you were inside the walls, and you were almost certain to survive. A tourist had died after falling from one of the city walls, though that was brushed away as an aberration; she had fallen outside of the walls.

“Just one of those things, shit happens.” Had been the response of the commander of the city militia.

The emperor had been told there were petitioners waiting to see him and he had pretty good idea what they wanted. Kittara was with them and keeping her waiting was a little unkind. There were traditions to uphold though and countless millennia of mindless bureaucracy. He’d had to make them wait; it was how those kinds of things were done. He could talk to Chlo without her being in the room, but he preferred to see her.

“Come and be part of this, Chlo.” He said. “You’re one of them, there’s no use denying it.”

Chlo appeared as herself, her true organic form. She had an almost limitless number of AI generated personas, but he always preferred the real Chlo, the one that looked like a young Hol Azreemy.

“Kittara was the one who involved me.” Said Chlo. “I’m assuming you sent her to find the Orb. You really should include me in all plans that involve the damned.”

“Do they all think that ?” He asked. “I never sent Kittara to find the artefact. Given a choice I’d much prefer it to stay lost for eternity.”

“Then who did send her to find the Orb ?” Asked Chlo.

“I have no idea. Kittara has her own views, based on a very long life. I trust her never to betray the empire, but otherwise.....She’s free to do as she pleases. Obviously, someone convinced her that finding the Orb was a good idea.”

“You may as well know; I threw a message into the Well of Souls.” Said Chlo. “I told Estrid it would be a good idea to talk to Kittara, and why.”

He had to smile. He really hadn’t given Kittara a mission to retrieve the Orb. But if he had, things couldn’t have worked out better.

“Estrid, now that’s someone I’d like to see here more often.” He said. “Alright, I’ve kept the waiting for about the right length of time. Bring in the petitioners.”

The emperor thought of them all as friends, yet he could see by their expressions that they’d rather have been somewhere else. Not easy to ask for favours from the emperor of the Menderan Empire, even leaders of worlds had come to see him with the same expression on their faces. There was something else though, they all resented him in one way or another. He could have ranted at them, saying how they’d all be nothing if he hadn’t taken an interest in them. Some of their resentment was justified though and only tyrants rant at their people. Besides, he knew that if he asked a favour of them, they’d agree to it in a heartbeat. Kittara was on his veranda first, sitting herself down without being invited and finishing his drink. She was going to be the awkward one, unlikely to say anything unless pushed, or ignored.

“Mo, good to see you in Mendera City.” Said Sikush. “I heard you’d become some sort of holy man. A priest in the Sentinel Temple of the South, even mentioned you to me. He was quite impressed.” Silky was a creature of the darkness, a servant of the crawling chaos. Technically, Mo’s long-term partner was an enemy of the empire Not that such things mattered between friends and the partners of friends.

“I see Silky with you and she is very welcome here. Sventa I know of course, she trained some of my best generals. As for Tad Dunne.....I knew your great grandfather from the wars against the Aumashy. A brave man, I still think of him occasionally. So, here you all are. Who is asking for a favour, who is your petition bearer ?”

“As it was my idea, I ask for your permission to look into the imperial archives.” Said Tad. “More exactly the areas containing forbidden knowledge. We seek the Orb of Arcardis, as I’m sure you’re aware. As the information I already know was on a metal page from the archives, it seems likely the current location of the Orb, is mentioned on something within the forbidden knowledge.”

“So, metal pages were made available to you.” Said Sikush. “That is actually treason and punishable by death. Not that I’m about to have you all thrown in the cells below the barracks.”

“I gave Tad the page.” Said Chlo. “To help him translate the oldest of the dead languages.”

“I guessed you had.” Said Sikush. “Chlo sees all of course, though not quite everything. The imperial archive is sealed and there are no inventories or index files. If you don’t know the right shelf and stack, you will never find anything. It’s the one place in the empire, where even Chlo is effectively blind.”

“Then we came on a fool’s errand.” Said Mo.

“Not if I come to the archive with you.” Said Sikush. “Now, this moment, I have a council meeting in the morning. I promised the city militia an extra fifty officers and some on the council object to the

extra cost. If I'm not there, they might have enough courage to vote against it. So, if we go, we go now.....Is that alright ?”

“Yes, perfect....I never expected you to help.” Said Tad.

“You should warn them, it's dangerous down there.” Said Chlo.

Sometimes Chlo could be a little too honest. Yes, he would have told them about the dangers, but at his own pace and after they were all fully committed to visiting the lower vaults.

“Yes.....Yes, of course opening stasis cubicles without knowing the contents is a risk.” Said Sikush. “I have placed some living creatures from long dead worlds in the archive.”

“And quite a few from worlds everyone avoids.” Added Chlo.

“Yes, Chlo....Please let me finish.” Said Sikush. “By its very nature, the most secure level has been used to contain a few, a very small number, of dangerous beings. Some are just not suited to coexisting with other, while some are.....What was that phrase I like, Chlo ?”

“Pathologically aggressive.”

“Yes, that was it. No harm to anyone unless released and I have no intention of releasing them. There are some dangerous weapons in the archive and a few demon devices from the wars that once plagued the rifts. There are risks, but they can be avoided by a little care and focus.”

“You once told me that what was down there was as much a mystery to you, as it is to everyone else.” Said Sventa. “You were in a mood to be completely honest I seem to remember.”

The veranda became quiet and for a dreadful moment, he thought they might all decide that finding the Orb wasn't as much fun as they'd expected. Sikush now wanted to find the Orb, to hold it in his hands. Not out of greed or to use its dreadful power. He was now the victim of something that had probably led to the deaths of more brave warriors than anything else.....Curiosity.

“He knows, he just pretends to have a vague and eccentric memory.” Said Chlo.

“Enough chatter....If we go, we go now. Are we going ?” Asked Sikush.

“If course we are.” Said Silky. “There was never any doubt.”

“What she said.” Added Mo.

Sventa just nodded and as Tad was already checking over his blaster, Sikush took that as a yes.

“Come on, there's no moving directly there.” Said Sikush. “The deepest vault is shielded against just about everything, including instantaneous travel. We walk I'm afraid. The good thing is that the entrance is in the Red Garden, which is my favourite.”

“You never waited for me to say I agreed.” Said Kittara.

She'd been sat in a corner, watching but saying nothing. Like a moody teenager, she'd just glared at him a few times. Not just the best of his elite guard, they'd been lovers for so long that the number of years was meaningless.

“Don't be silly, of course you're coming with us.” Said Sikush. “I could order you to come, if you'd prefer ?”

“No, I'll come.” Said Kittara.

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~ Part 7 – The Imperial Archive - Lower Levels ~

Silky noticed Chlo walking with them, in her true organic form. Not that she'd be able to use her control of technology in the deepest archives. If The Chalne said just about everything was screened out, that would mean Chlo's abilities too. She'd be no more, nor less, than an ordinary woman with just her fists and a blade on her hip. Silky loved that kind of fighting, her claws and tough hide made her almost designed for battle.

“The red garden was nice.” Said Silky.

"Yes, I never get to see it as often as I'd like." Said the emperor.

Down they went, often descending stairs with a size that didn't suit her stride, or the size of her feet. The others were having problems too, on steps that had probably been designed for creatures not entirely human.

"How old is this place?" Asked Tad.

"The deepest level was here when we arrived, it's older than Mendera City." Said the emperor.

"The planet has survived for many switches." Said Kittara. "These caverns are probably from an age we know nothing about."

"I've put lights in the main archive, but deep down.....Even the dust is from another switch." Said Chlo.

When the solid stone stairs showed signs of cracking apart, Silky knew they were probably getting close to the main repository of forbidden knowledge, the holy of holies of the Menderan religion. Besides containing scrolls written by the Gods themselves, it was a place full of other wonders. Silky felt her wings vibrating with anticipation.

"I've been here before, in the third age of the temple." Said Mo. "We were looking for something. Kittara was with us, I remember that much, but it was a very long time ago."

"Did you find what you were looking for?" Asked Sventa.

"I'm not sure, though I remember we woke up an angry statue of some kind." Said Mo. "My mind refuses to go back that far, but I think several of the clerics with me never made it."

"What do you mean by never made it?" Asked Silky.

"They died, something in there killed them." Said Kittara.

They'd reached a heavy stone door and the emperor was telling them they'd be on their own, on the other side of the huge stone door. They were deep below the capital city of the greatest empire in the multiverse, yet a few feet away from extreme danger.

".....go back or enter the deep archive. I never asked you do this, in fact I don't recommend it.....So, are you all coming, or have you come to your senses?" Asked The Chaln .

"I wouldn't miss it for the world, maybe several worlds." Said Silky.

"She's crazy, but she might die without me." Said Mo. "I'm going in there."

"Enough of this, let's get the door open." Yelled Sventa.

Sventa pushed and Kittara helped her, but the door didn't start to open until the emperor added his strength. It made a screeching sound, as the heavy stone door, moved over centuries of dirt and dust. It opened to reveal nothing but darkness. There was also the smell of stale air.

"The air was a bit stale when I was last here." Said Mo. "It was alright though, no one was asphyxiated."

"Did you remember how they did die?" Asked Tad.

"No, not exactly, but I remember it was after opening something best left unopened." Said Mo.

The emperor walked a few feet past the door and began producing balls of light in his hands. As each one reached a brightness too intense to look at, he sent them up to the ceiling, where they hung like strange fruit.

"Some of you may find you still have some powers." Said The Chaln . "You're limited to the power we brought in here. So, don't be surprised if your favourite spell no longer works. As it's my archive, I have no such limitations."

"I quite like fighting with just my claws." Said Silky.

It was a huge room, almost full of shelving. Some of the shelves had collapsed and rather ominously, a few of the artefacts crush under the broken shelves, were giving off electrical sparks.

"I'd forgotten how huge this place is." Said Mo.

"One of over twenty such room." Said The Chaln . "Sadly, my memory isn't what it was....I sometimes wonder if it ever was, what it was. I'll do my best, but we may be here for some time."

"All nonsense, he knows every item in here." Said Chlo.

"No, I do wish that was true."

"Don't be fooled by him, it's all an act."

The dispute seemed so real, yet she was a minor level empath and could feel no genuine animosity between them. Was the greatest emperor in the multiverse just pretending to have a faulty memory ? Silky hoped he was, for all their sakes.

"I know it won't be here, this a technology archives, mainly Aumashy inventions." Said The Chaln .

"We need to keep moving, to the third room. Straight on, we need to go straight on."

"What won't be in here ?" Asked Sventa.

"I'm not sure.....I'll know it when I see it."

The second room and the emperor did the same trick with the light orbs. There must have been earthquakes in the distant past, or some kind of other disturbance. Very few of the shelves were intact, leaving the floor covered in debris.

"No alternative, we'll need to walk through the broken shelves." Said Chlo. "Watch out for large green glass containers. They're stasis vaults and even a small one may contain a huge creature."

"Are there many creatures stored down here ?" Asked Silky.

"Not as many as there once were." Said The Chaln .

"There was a time when he kept half a million of his enemies stored here." Added Chlo.

Silky was beginning to understand it, Chlo was his conscience. She'd known they shared part of his mind, though few knew that. Silky had assumed the shared mind was to do with memory, though maybe it also shared higher functions. Her mind stopped wandering when Tad shouted.

"Damn, I tried to move so fucking carefully." Yelled Tad.

A green glass container had gone over and it had cracked. About three feet tall and thin at the top, it reminded Silky of the containers the Algarians used to transport wine. A green heavy gas was coming out of the crack.

"Move back, it could be anything, though I guarantee it won't be friendly." Shouted Kittara.

"They're never friendly, I remember that." Said Mo.

"Oh, you're not really helping." Said Silky.

Something huge was there, as the gas coalesced into something solid. Silky knew a high-level pure blood demon when she saw one and this one was huge. A male going by its bulk and the bulge in its clothing. Not a penis, demons had a different kind of genital plumbing. The usual four powerful arms and two muscular legs. Hybrids could often be stupid creatures, but high-level demons were smart. Someone must have been in a hurry to get him into stasis, he was still carrying two wicked looking blades.

"A pure blood demon and well-armed." Yelled Silky.

"I remember him, one of Neosto's kin, a cousin I believe." Said the emperor. "Good with a sword....A full warlord in the Army of the Forty Thousand, though his name escapes me."

"Any weaknesses ?" Asked Sventa.

"Not really, stasis won't even leave him feeling groggy. Just keep hacking at him until he dies."

Silky knew demons, even though very few pure bloods remained. No one had defeated them, there had been no attempted genocide. They'd simply died out over the course of a few millennia. It

happened and although the magnificent specimen in front of them wasn't the last of his kind, it seemed a pity to kill him.

"Any chance of putting him into another glass jar?" Asked Silky.

"None at all." Said Chlo.

The demon began to walk towards Mo, swinging its swords as it went. Mo was part Genova; angels as most knew them. Only a tiny part, but other demons could sense it. To a pure blood Mo would be an abomination, something to be destroyed. Silky wasn't having that, she used her tiny wings to get into the air, landing on the brute's shoulders. Once there, she used her small but razor-sharp teeth. She bit into its neck, right above the major arteries. Biting and chewing through neck muscles wasn't easy, but she'd killed another demon that way. There was a problem with having four arms, all those extra sinews and muscles made it hard to get a hand round to crush her. Dropping its swords might have helped, but Kittara was now hacking at him.

"Careful, Silky." Yelled Mo.

"She knows what she's doing." Said Kittara.

Kittara saved her life, keeping the pure blood too busy to deal with the awful biting pest on its shoulders. The blood in her face was unpleasant, though it didn't stop her biting and chewing her way through its flesh. Tad fired a blaster two or three times, but high-level demons laugh at blaster fire. Sikush understood her plan, she knew he would. Memory problem? If he had a bad memory, she was a Farrag Beast's aunty.

"Keep it busy, Silky will bring it down." Yelled Sikush.

Silky kept biting and chewing, until the wonderful moment when she was drenched in blood. Cool blood, demons tended to be cold blooded. Pure green blood, that poured out of the dying demon. Silky had to leap free, to be sure she wasn't crushed under the brute. They were all clustered around the demon, as it took its last breath.

"And that.....Is why we're careful when walking close to stasis cubicles." Said Sikush.

"It's not Tad's fault, this place is a death trap." Said Sventa.

"Exactly.....I did warn you all." Said Sikush. "That excitement has done wonders for my memory, I know where it is now, the Seer's light. Come on, follow me."

After creating a light globe above his head, the emperor went through two more rooms with everyone stumbling behind him. There was enough light, just about, to avoid bashing into shelves, or trampling objects on the ground.

"We've gone past where you mentioned." Said Sventa.

"He does it deliberately as part of his confused genius persona." Said Chlo. "Don't fall for it, or even worse, find it appealing."

The emperor, The Chaln , or Sikush to his inner circle, carried on as though no one had said anything. Something was glowing as they entered the room full of a forbidden knowledge. As Sikush pushed light globes up to the ceiling, the glow became lost.

"I saw it, I think." Said Mo. "A glow, right in the middle of the shelves."

"Yes, I noticed it too." Added Silky.

"I've heard of the Seer's light." Said Kittara. "Nurigen once told me it's been glowing since the beginning of time."

"Nurigen is a fool." Said Sikush. "A wise fool, but still a fool. The multiverse had no beginning and will have no end. Time is forever."

He'd stopped in front of a quite ordinary looking plain glass sphere, the kind used as a seeing glass by fake seers at carnivals and fayres. It glowed slightly, though it took good eyes to see it. Silky could see the glow as she stretched out her hand.....

"No ! It'll kill you." Shouted Sikush. "That's why it's been placed here, far too many lives had been taken by this dreadful artefact."

"This place is nothing but rooms full of horrors." Said Tad.

"I can only say it so often, I did warn you." Said Sikush.

As if risking the fate, he'd saved her from, the emperor picked up the glass sphere. He looked into it for a while, before smiling and nodding his head.

"Nara-Odil, the ruined temple on the first rift." Said Sikush. "In a way it had to be.....Everything comes around full circle. You'll find the Orb of Arcardis in that ancient place, though you may have to dig to find it. Silky will feel where it is....Deep down she's still a creature of the crawling chaos."

"That was a bit cruel, even for you." Said Mo.

"He just speaks the truth; I feel it too." Said Kittara. "Silky is a friend, but the chaos still lurks within her."

"I'm not ashamed of what I am." Said Silky.

"And nor should be.....Your unique sight will be useful to them on the rifts." Said Sikush. "I can't go, that might attract far too much attention, but you all need to go."

"I can't go to the rifts to dig for this Orb." Said Tad. "I have a job to do on Algaria. I'm a member of the armed forces, there will be orders to follow."

"They don't understand, Chlo." Said Sikush. "There are no coincidences....Please explain it to them. You're always better than me at such things."

Chlo didn't take it as a compliment, Silky could tell by the expression on her face.

"Sikush feels disturbances in the multiverse and as we share part of a mind, I feel them too.

Someone of power wants the Orb, though it seems Kittara has been persuaded to keep their name secret. As for all of you here.....From Kittara going to the temple ruins to see Mo, through to talking to Tad on Algaria. All part of a plan and like it or not, you all have to go to Nara-Odil. It's all of you or none.....I feel it."

"I suppose I am owed some leave." Said Tad.

"Good, that's the spirit." Said Sikush. "Chlo can use the Well of Souls to drop you at a portal on the first rift. The closest is two or three days walk from Nara-Odil, but that'll give you time to acclimatise to the rifts."

"Acclimatise.....of course." Said Tad. "I'd forgotten the stench of stale air on the rifts. The air stings your throat and as for what passes for daylight....We'll all be stumbling about for the first day."

"Not me, I'll be fine." Said Silky.

"The first rift isn't too bad." Added Mo.

"One goes or none go." Said Kittara. "Chlo will need to be with us in her true form. She's as much caught up in this as the rest of us."

"I am aware of that. If Sikush will allow it ? I will jump into the Well of Souls with you."

"Yes, of course you may go." Said the emperor. "Don't take too long over preparations. Others seek the Orb and they will pick up rumours. You have to assume someone will be watching your movements."

"It wouldn't be fun if it was easy." Said Sveta. "I've heard of Nara-Odil, but have any of you been there ?"

“I’ve been there, though it was centuries ago.” Said Silky. “Not really a temple now, since the last great demon army turned it into a fort. The last great army, who served the last pure blood demon emperor. They had their last stand there and lost, the place is full of bones. It won’t be deserted, someone or something is bound to be calling it home. We’ll need to be careful.”

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~ Part 8 – Nara-Odil, Ruined Temple – First Rift ~

On the third day after leaping into the Well of Souls, they had their first glimpse of Nara-Odil. They’d arrived across a large flat plain that was surprisingly green for the rifts. Then a wide valley that took them right up into the mountains. Kittara had seen the crumbling walls and blasted ramparts, before Mo mentioned them.

“Look, signs of fortifications.” Yelled Mo. “We’re there aren’t we ?.....We have to be there. This is the only fort we’ve seen.”

“Yes, we’re there.” Said Sventa. “Nara-Odil.....Site of so many legends.”

“In Leng, we believed the end of everything would start here.” Said Silky.

“It hasn’t changed since I was last here.” Said Kittara. “That was twelve millennia ago, maybe a bit longer. A serpent seer lived here then, a Kiyoh. They’re long lived, she may still be here.”

“You never mentioned coming here before.” Said Tad.

“No one asked.”

Kittara didn’t dislike those she was travelling with, not really. It was just that she knew the rifts, even the seventh, where the air was hotter than an oven. To her it was a gentle three day walk to get to the fort. Some of the others had taken a while to get used to the air and the light. She’d discovered there were only so many whiny people she could cope with.

“Someone has been here and quite recently.” Said Chlo.

Chlo was pushing the ashes of a fire around with her foot.

“Things have been found here, valuable objects.” Said Kittara. “There are legends of treasure still waiting to be found, so the people of the rift come here and dig. I’ve yet to hear of one getting rich from it, though there was Seren Dess. You must have all heard about her.”

“No, I’ve never heard of her.” Said Tad.

“Just one of those stories pilgrims tell one another on the road to Tandalla.” Said Chlo.

“No, not at all.....I’ve actually met Seren, though she’s been dead for a long time now.” Said Mo.

“Not that I intend to finish Kittara’s telling of the tale.”

She smiled at Mo and remembered talking to the famous Seren Dess. So, some thought it was nothing but campfire nonsense. Well....It had all happened a very long time ago.

“The short version, as we’re almost there. I can see the battlements at the top of the mountain.”

Said Kittara. “Seren was a cleric in the days when clerics weren’t that safe on the pilgrim routes across the rifts. She’s had a vision about finding a holy artefact in the ruins of Nara-Odil. Sevril-Narge, the evil goddess had talked to her, so she claimed. Centuries later I spoke to Seren and her story hadn’t changed. So, who knows....Maybe Sevril-Narge had taken to the young cleric.”

“So, what did she find ?” Asked Tad.

“These tales have a natural rhythm....Don’t interrupt her.” Said Mo.

“Ahh, what can you expect from an Algarian.” Muttered Silky.

“She never did find any relics, holy or otherwise.” Said Kittara. “She brought a few others with her and you can still see the pits they dug, if you know where to look. Bandits attacked her, despite her being a cleric. Many of her group were killed and Seren almost gave up on finding anything. Then on the last day, when they were packing up their camp, she had another vision.”

“What of ?” Asked Tad.

“Ignore him, he was obviously raised by savages.” Said Silky.

“There’s an old collapsed wall, we walked past it on the way up here.” Said Kittara. “Seren had a vision of an angel, a high-level Genova, telling her to dig there. The angel had pointed at a spot right up against the wall and Seren had dug. She carried on digging for sixty days, according to those with her. The hole can still be seen, though the ground has settled quite a bit since then. A deep hole, they had to help her line the sides with timber. On the sixtieth day of digging she found it, at around an hour after full daylight.”

“Please tell me, what did she find ?” Asked Tad.

“Don’t tell him now, serves him right.” Said Silky.

“Let her finish, my dear.” Said Mo. “We’re almost at the end.”

Kittara could see past them and down the mountain. There was dust down there, the sort of dust cloud sent up by the movement of a small army. Soon they’d have company, who’d probably be hostile. It was worrying, but not worrying enough to ruin the story for.

“Seren found nothing holy, but she did find a Star Gem. The rarest and most valuable of all the crystalline minerals in the multiverse. Several of the oldest royal families in the empire, couldn’t crown a new ruler without a Star Gem for their crown. Ventella had been ruled by regents for centuries, because no new ruler could be crowned. Seren had found the impossible, a Star Gem large enough to be cut into a dozen polished gems, maybe more.”

Kittara looked at Tad, expecting another interruption. There was none, though at the moment, only she seemed to have noticed the approaching dust cloud.

“There was no auction, Seren came to an agreement with the emperor, who was acting for all the great royal houses of the empire. No one is sure how much Seren was paid, but several trillion imperial credits has been talked about. Enough for Seren’s family to able to live like royalty for many generations.”

“Four point two trillion.” Said Chlo. “I know, my other duties include controlling the imperial banking system. Seren was paid four point two trillion imperial credits.”

“Fuck.....So it is all true.” Said Sventa.

“Every word.....And now, we seem to have unwanted guests.” Said Kittara.

There had to be a line in the dry sandy soil, albeit a symbolic line. Kittara walked toward the advancing armour and ran her Nurigen blade in a line, in front of her feet.

“None of them will pass me, that I promise to the Gods.” She yelled.

Her companions came and spread out to either side of her, though there weren’t enough of them to spread far. Chlo would have no special skills in her current form, though Kittara knew she was good with a blade. Sventa was useful, dark angels had all kinds of battle magic and she was likely to have a few tricks of her own. Mo was tougher than he looked and then there was Silky. A converted chaos creature with her skills, was capable of destroying a huge number of the approaching fighters. That left Tad, with his Algarian blaster and a few grenades. At the moment Tad was aiming his blaster at a creature behind them. It was the Kiyoh who’d been living in the ruined fort, since the multiverse had been a hell of a lot younger. Serpents with intellect, Mo had once said to describe a Kiyoh.

“Don’t hurt the Kiyoh.” Yelled Kittara. “They’re never to be harmed. They are messengers of the deities and others. I know this one.”

“Alright.....He looks harmless enough.” Said Tad.

“She, all Kiyoh are female.” Said Kittara.

He was dying to ask; she could tell by the look on his face. It had taken Kittara a long time to discover how the Kiyoh reproduced. A complicated procedure using an intense kind of magic on their eggs. Kiyoh were serpents and they did build nests and lay eggs. The magic turned infertile eggs into ones that would produce young, all of them female. Tad might have asked the question, if Sventa hadn't seen enough of the approaching army to identify them.

"They're demon hybrids, mainly Dredger, with a few Shelzak hybrids." She said. "Tough, but not too bright. The bad news is that there are a lot of them. A fucking lot of them."

"I thought hybrids had almost vanished from the first rift." Said Mo

"Obviously not." Said Kittara.

Dredgers were the workers of the rifts, as their name suggested. Add a little human into the mix and they made tough hybrid fighters. Dredgers were famous for never running away from a fight, even if they knew they couldn't win it. As for Shelzaks....They were the toughest of the demon hybrids, but they weren't that bright. Actually, they were as intelligent as a pickled Hango root. Kittara had once jammed her blade into the head of a Shelzak. It had stood there for a few seconds, with a confused look on its face. Eventually it did fall over.

"How do you think we annoyed them?" Asked Tad.

"We could ask them." Suggested Mo.

"Yeah....Have a conversation with an angry Dredger." Said Chlo. "Let us know how that works out, Mo."

Kittara thought there were about four hundred angry hybrids running towards them. Difficult to be precise and when you were dealing with several hundred, Sventa's estimate was good enough. There were a fucking lot of hybrids. Not that Kittara had only her blade to fight them. She was an elite member of the imperial guard, one of The Damned. A cute nickname invented by one of their enemies, which they'd made their own. She began to create the tears of the damned. Small tear drop shaped spells that she lined up in front of her face. Each one could kill dozens of the hybrids. Proximity was an issue though. Make them too powerful and there was a danger of killing those on your own side.

"It's a pity we never found out where the Orb is." Said Mo.

"Behind you, the tower still standing." Said Kittara. "Doesn't the ceramic sphere on the roof look a bit fragile to you? A bit fragile to still be in one piece, in this ruin."

"Yes, I see it now." Said Mo.

"When did you spot that?" Asked Chlo.

"About halfway through the story of Seren Dess."

When Kittara saw the hybrid warlord, she knew their attackers weren't there by coincidence, or just ordinary bandits. They were being commanded by a top-level warlord and few of those still lived. Most had died during the various defeats of the Army of the Forty Thousand. She'd probably know this one's name, if his face wasn't covered in a ritual mask. His shield bore the symbol of chaos, of course it did. There were many factions of chaos, but hybrids always served one of them.

"No warlord goes on bandit raids." Said Kittara. "They've been hired by someone, probably a wealthy collector of antiquities. They're here to kill us and take the Orb, if we'd found it."

"How would they know where we are?" Asked Tad.

"Many watch The Well of Souls." Said Chlo. "Some are harmless, but some sell the details of what they see. Our destination wouldn't be that hard to work out."

"Let's see how tough this warlord really is." Said Kittara.

Tempting to use the largest tear of the damned on the warlord. That would turn his warriors into a leaderless rabble. Still not easy to defeat so many, though it would be easier than if their commander was alive. Kittara had been around for an almost unimaginable length of time, she believed that even wars needed rules. After being in more battles than she could easily remember, she firmly believed a type of etiquette needed to be followed. Soften up his warriors by killing a large number of them, before facing the warlord in single combat. She released a large tear at the closest hybrid warriors.

"At times like this, I'm glad you're on our side." Said Mo.

The tears weren't subtle, or have any variation in the damage they caused. The dozen or so warriors closest to where it had exploded, were now just a few body parts on the sandy, dry ground. A spherical explosion of purple energy had engulfed them for a second. It had been enough to kill them and pulverise their weapons.

"They're not lacking in bravery." Said Silky. "They're still running to get here. Let me kill their commander, Kittara. That will change things."

"No, not yet." Said Kittara. "It's too soon and when he feels the call to hell, my blade will be in his chest."

"I'll leave him alone, but I can thin them out a little." Said Sventa.

Sventa was larger than many dark angels, with a wider wingspan than most. Three flaps of those powerful wings and she was flying, hurtling towards the enemy. Newer dark angels no longer had the screech, or had it in a minor way. Sventa was made from the dust of a dead city, the heart of a virgin and magic, lots of ancient magic. Oh, and there had been some enchanted icons too. Quite a few had gone into the mixture that had given birth to her. As she flew over the hybrids and screeched, they were covered by a dark mist, a shadow of chaos. They died screaming, their bodies rotting from the inside.

"Oh, she's just showing off." Said Mo.

"Wait until they're among us." Said Silky. "Then you'll see what a creature of pure chaos can do."

Sventa returned with at least half a dozen arrows in her hide, which didn't seem to worry her at all. Another group of hybrids were dead, but there will still hundreds of them. Kittara used two more tears, though the moment was fast approaching. A few seconds and the enemy would be among them. There was no way to quickly defeat so many, some of her friends would die

"I see our new friend had returned." Said Tad.

He's been firing his blaster and a few hybrids had died. There was no doubting his valour, but one Algarian fighter with a blaster was never going to achieve much. The Kiyoh was back, stood on a ruined building behind the warlord and his personal guard. Actually not stood, her torso rested on her curled-up tail.

"Did you tell her about the etiquette of war?" Asked Mo.

Had she bored him about it on one of their trudges across the rifts, or on a mission to a minor empire world somewhere? She probably had, several times.

"Even war can be civilised Mozim." She said.

"Actually, that a contradiction.....Oh, forget it." Said Tad. "Your Kiyoh seems to worry the hybrids."

It probably wasn't her Kiyoh, or at least not the one that had been living there centuries before.

Their tails grew with age, reaching fifty metres in length for some. The serpent creature annoying the warlord and his warriors wasn't that large and its tail looked quite short. Kiyohs were part of the forbidden knowledge, creatures from a previous multiverse. Kittara had seen the pages etched on

metal plates, kept in the temple of the flame. Kiyoh were messengers of the Gods and only the youngest could use the most powerful battle magic.

“Their arrows aren’t hitting her.” Said Sventa. “Your Kiyoh must have called up a shield, a damned good one.”

Kittara didn’t object to the serpent being her Kiyoh, especially after it began to attack the hybrid warriors. Fire was its weapon, intense white heat that it seemed to spew out of its mouth. There were old legends on some worlds, of huge serpents who belched flames at their enemies. Old memories probably, of the time when Kiyoh were more numerous.

“Look at them burn.” Said Silky. “Come on, before it kills them all.”

Ridiculous really, they could have watched the serpent kill most of the hybrids. Instead Kittara found herself running after Silky with her Nurigen blade in her hand. The Kiyoh increased the flames it was using to turn the hybrids to ash, as though there was a competition to see who could kill the greater number.

“Damn.....She’s killed the warlord.” Yelled Kittara.

Kittara sent many hybrids to hell, though a thousand deaths couldn’t compensate for not meeting the warlord on the field of battle. The enemy were defeated and they all survived, which inevitably, was what battles were all about. Kill your enemies and go home with a few new tales for your friends and loved ones. Not quite intact, there had been one serious injury.

“Mo, you have to learn to get out of the way of angry hybrids.” Said Silky.

Mo, it was always poor Mozim. Just about every battle they’d been in together, he’d come away with a new and quite deep, scar. Silky would heal him though, there was no chance of him dying.

“Oh Mo, taking you home with a wounded arm....It’s almost become a tradition.” Said Kittara.

No stacking up the dead bodies of their enemies, there were simply too many. What the Kiyoh didn’t turn to ash, would be left for the scavengers of the rifts to eat.

“Even Growlers need to eat.” Kittara muttered.

One thing left to do before heading towards home. There was that glass sphere on top of a ruined tower. There were advantages to being small, light and nimble. Plus, being incredibly strong didn’t hurt. No stairs left, so she clambered up the outside of the tower. The glass sphere was covered in dust and the ashes of their enemies. As Kittara wiped the dust away with her arm, it was impossible not to look into the Orb of Arcadis. No one to tell her not to look too deeply, or draw out some of the malevolent energy.

“Is that it, the orb?” Shouted Tad.

“Yes, it is.” She yelled.

Kittara looked into the Orb and took some of the dark energy into herself. After the places she’d been, the things she’d done. The power felt strange and wonderful, but it wasn’t going to harm her. No going too deep and drawing out the deepest darkness, that hadn’t been part of the deal. Estrid had asked her to retrieve the Orb, before it fell into the hands of those likely to use it for evil purposes. Kittara had been offered a little of its power, as payment for her services.

“Bring it down here, we all want to see it.” Shouted Chlo.

Kittara wasn’t the only one who could easily climb the outside of the high tower. The Kiyoh was there too, watching her. No demanding the Orb, no sign of impatience. The serpent merely waited, while resting back on its tail. Kittara took just what had been agreed, a little surface energy from the Orb. So tempting to keep it for herself, but that was how the Orb had caused so many wars and been the cause of trillions of deaths. Kittara had encountered genuine evil beyond Leng and she’d come back wiser, stronger. She handed the Orb to the Kiyoh, who grasped it in her two small hands.

“Take it to her.....Tell her she was right, I was tempted.”

The serpent messenger of the Gods, nodded before vanishing. No one said anything before she’d come down from the tower.

“It was Estrid all the time, she wanted the Orb.” Said Chlo.

“Can you think of anyone better to keep it safe ?” Asked Kittara.

“No, you’re right.” Said Chlo. “Though I would have liked to have held it, just the once.”

“And then I doubt that even you could have resisted the urge to use it.”

There wasn’t much to pack up and no one seemed to feel like saying much. She overheard Tad telling Chlo that he felt used and lied to. Probably true, but there really had been no alternative. They were halfway down the mountain, before Tad spoke directly to her. He even made sure he had eye contact, before asking the question.

“Just one last thing, Kittara. This Orb we found, the one you gave away without asking if that was alright. Why was it so dangerous ? What does the fucking thing do ?”

“Just be thankful you’ll never know.” She replied.

~ ~

~ The End ~

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