

Mendera – Empire

Chapter 11 – Oaths, Friends & Enemies

“Don’t be the one having your genitals sent home in a bag !” – Herusher

Chlo was home. She had a suite in the Imperial palace, but the rooms she had at the rear of the guards barracks always felt like home to her. The barracks were a huge structure, going down over a mile into the crust of Mendera and it wasn’t a pretty building.

‘No one would want to see the inside of it twice.’ Sikush had once remarked.

It was an ugly building with an undeserved reputation as the dungeon of the Empire. True there were areas to keep prisoners in safe and secure surrounding, otherwise known as cells, but they were rarely used.

The bays deep in the buildings bowels were used all the time. Chlo had built in shielding to stop any kind of reality disturbance or temporal anomaly, so the Guard martialled themselves in the bays before being sent on missions. Not that there were any missions now. It was almost mid-morning in Mendera and the assembled movers and shakers of the Empire were getting ready to hear Kittara sworn in as one of The Damned.

“What’s the problem Chlo ?” Sikush asked her.

He was in his rooms, getting ready for the great event, but she felt the need to show him something over their private link.

“The area of influence is over a mile wide now and stretches backwards and forwards temporally for several millennia.” She told him.

Chlo was sat quietly, looking out of her windows at the area of trees that met the city wall about half a mile away. She couldn’t remember much about Enfellan where she’d been created, but she remembered the furniture in the room where she’d gone for ‘education’, she remembered the few ornaments around the room. She’d taken those few memories and created a suite of rooms for herself that was comfortable, yet with a definite alien feel. The problem was that Chlo saw time perfectly ! Very few did see time in a correct fashion, most just saw the present in some sort of linear progression and assumed that was it, that was all there was.

“I can’t let her killed by something silly Chlo,” Sikush began, “until she’s stronger, she needs his protection.”

Chlo had always seen time perfectly, seen it as part of an endless strip running in front of her eyes, every bit of it changeable, every bit of it open to inspection. Coupled with the ability to manipulate reality, which Sikush had given her, it gave her almost god like power. There had been a brief period when she’d acted like a God, his personally God to do his bidding. Now she saw the flaws in that time of her existence and she was content to be his eyes and ears. But an aspect of a deity was in Mendera city, following Kittara everywhere and it worried her.

“I won’t be able to see you !” She told him.

She’d be next to him, or rather her blonde haired construct self would be, but she couldn’t see forward in time where the aspect walked and that worried her. Most people who didn’t see time correctly deluded themselves with talk of paradoxes. The multiverse thrived on paradoxes, just stuck tape over the cracks and ignored the smaller ones.

“Relax, it’s an aspect of Tomma-Goran. He’s on our side.” He told her.

Chlo referred to the multiverse as ‘they’ and she wasn’t sure that they weren’t up to something. If a potential paradox built up to a point where it threatened the fabric of the multiverse, they dealt

with it. Often that meant folding up huge areas of a bubble universe. Chlo wasn't sure if her time locks could reverse a folding up of the Menderan bubble.

"They'd never do that Chlo, they just want balance."

They shared a mind, so she shouldn't have been surprised at him answering her thoughts, but she gave an internal jump.

"Look after the people Chlo, I'll be fine."

Chlo leant back in the chair and looked at the millions inside the walls. They'd be fine, she could stop them falling off walls or committing suicide or dying from fucking a Shelzak demon, but those outside the walls ? They were outside her remit and she knew that several thousand of the billion or so visitors would find weird and unpleasant ways to die over the coming month.

~ ~

Kittara was impressed and it now took a lot to impress her. To her left was Sikush in his Imperial robes and on her right was Jen, who was similarly dressed in her finest, lots of gold threads and precious gems. Nothing was fabricated, every gem, every piece of precious metal was bought for the occasion and the economy of the Empire had grown 1.1% because of the occasion.

"Everyone looks so different in their fancy dress." She said to Sikush.

Everyone was there, every president or leader of every planet in the Empire and from many planets that weren't. Enemies had even been invited to attend and as on other occasions it gave an opportunity to heal old wounds.

"Herusher was made for these occasions." Said Sikush.

Kittara Had wondered why the Grand Council main hall had been built to such a grand scale, normally only the first few rows of seating being used. Now she saw it in all its glory, with rank after rank of seating full of the dignitaries of the Empire. All of them seemed pleased to see her, even the Maran Group president, who was beaming at her and raising his hand. Onto the floor of the house walked Herusher. Not using the podium provided, he walked to the exact centre of the chamber and began his speech.

"Excellent and most splendid members of the Empire, we are here today to solemnly witness the oath to the Empire given by citizen Kittara, upon taking up her position as a member of the Guard. I ask....."

Kittara knew the speech would go on for some time, so she started to examine the crowd seated around her. Where there Genova flitting in and out of the highest rows ?

'Holy groupies' Sikush called them, but what could they want with her ?

"The offerings of money you have bestowed upon Citizen Kittara....."

Kittara felt something pass through her, something dark but not malevolent and she gave an involuntary shudder.

"You'll be fine." Said Sikush giving her hand a squeeze.

Was it just nerves ? Kittara had the strangest sensation of being watched.

~ ~

Abijah had been given the Champions Tournament to oversee and as an Arcadian, albeit a very long time ago, she was determined it was going to go like clockwork. The problem was that like most things in the Empire, it was rigged and unfair.

"No ! You have Lucien down as your 3rd ranking, so he can't fight on day 1."

They always tried to bring in the weaker warrior earlier, leave their best fighters until the opposition was tired. The Arcadians should know better and she was going to give them a long lecture on the spirit of the tournament. Was it them though ? Her mood had more to do with an upset Babak

wondering why she'd come home just after dawn with the smell of musk on her. He wasn't jealous, never once complained about her sexual encounters, but she had promised to be back in their bed for the night. Instead she'd done the most incredible things with a part demon, part dark angel from the Parisi Brothers brothel.

"Lucien is being backed by Alyz you know ?!"

The official couldn't have chosen a worse moment to try and name drop. The tournament was officially for the whole Empire, yet Arcadia always had half the allotted places. True Ventella considered a fight to the death barbaric and refused to take part, but more accurately it was the Arcadian Champions tournament. On top of the rigged numbers, the Guard didn't help by having favourites, who they trained and hyped like crazy. All unofficially done of course, but Abijah hated it. Why wasn't it the fair tournament it used to be ? Then it occurred to her, it could be.

"You're going home on the next shuttle. I'll be asking the Arcadian team to appoint a new manager." She said.

The man looked startled, almost as though he couldn't believe what was going on.

"But the first fight is in three hours !" He replied.

"Not my problem, be off Mendera or I'll hand you to the mercs."

Abijah suddenly felt better, she was going to make this tournament the best and the bloodiest for a very long time. No stopping for the slightest scratch, no retiring hurt. When the champion stepped onto the winner's podium in a month's time they'd be a worthy winner and they'd be leaving forty eight dead opponents to be buried.

~ ~

Luri had managed to get two seats in the ambassadors section. It appeared the Maran ambassador had been recalled home unexpectedly with his assistant, so Chlo had allocated the seats to Luri. She was now squeezing Delmus' hand so tight he was afraid his fingers might break.

"Isn't she beautiful ? I never had a proper initiation like this." She said to Delmus.

Herusher had just finished and Sikush was inviting Kittara to step onto the podium and take her oath.

"What is she doing ?" Asked Delmus.

Kittara ignored the podium and walked into the centre of the floor, to almost the same spot where Herusher had given his speech.

"Citizens of the Empire." She began.

Instantly Chlo picked up the words and amplified them. Not only that, she translated them and converted them to local dialects and accents. Each person in the chamber heard Kittara's words not only in their own language, but also spoken like someone from their own neighbourhood.

"Citizens of the Empire. I freely give my oath to protect each and every citizen of the Empire."

Kittara wanted to add a waiver about drug addled men from the Ixir slums, but decided it might spoil the tone.

"I give my oath to obey all orders given to me by The Chaln  and his appointed officials."

Now she was going to go off script a little. Alyz had been working on a new oath, for the elite who guarded Sikush, so Kittara decided to include some of it. Few of the crowd had ever heard the oath before, chances are no one would notice.

"I also give my oath, of my free will, to protect The Chaln  against all enemies and to give my life to protect him if necessary."

Luri gulped.

"Oh dear. That wasn't in the script." She said.

The crowd loved it anyway and the billions watching it live all over the Empire went wild. Inside the chamber the reception was somewhat cooler, but they were wise enough to know Kittara was fairly unstoppable. They all rose to their feet and gave her an ovation. Not the longest on record, but long enough for the situation.

“Thank you.” Said Sikush.

He’d walked over to her and was now holding her hand as he led her along the hallway towards the crowds waiting outside.

“So brave.” Said Luri as she got to her feet.

“She’s just put a large target on her back.” Said Delmus.

~ ~

Babak was standing in Bay 1 waiting for the signal to move off. Bay 1 was huge anyway, but Chlo had stretched the reality of bay 1 under the barracks so that it could comfortably accommodate twenty thousand of the Guard. They’d done something similar last time, but no fuss had been made about the march of The Damned, no advance notifications. When twenty thousand of them marched out of the portal, blowing demon horns and marching in step, the crowd would go wild. True they might panic first, but either way the effect was going to be awesome.

“To your places everyone.” Said Alyz.

With Herusher busy Alyz had been entrusted with the job of leading the Guard out and she was taking the responsibility very seriously. Babak found his place and fixed the banner he was carrying in its mount.

“Ready ?” Shouted Alyz and she stamped her foot.

“Ready.” Replied the twenty thousand as they stamped in unison.

A blue spinning portal opened up behind Alyz. The demon horns started up just as they marched into it.

~ ~

Kittara walked hand in hand with Sikush along the hallways towards the main doors of the Grand Council building. It was a hot day, but Mendera was always hot and as usual a sand storm was coming in from the west. Chlo would keep it away from the revellers though.

“Even the head of the Imperial bank is smiling,” Said Sikush.

He was and at her ! Along the hall were stood the people who kept the Empire running, the civil servants, the bankers, the off duty mercs and they were all grinning at her and waving furiously. It was all a bit overwhelming. The last time a crowd had shown this much interest in her, she’d been tied to a stake and having hot knives jabbed at her. Then they were outside the door and the sun seemed very bright after the comparative gloom of the council building.

“Here they come.” Said Sikush.

The crowd had been kept clear of the square in front of the chamber and now a strange haunting wail had started about two hundred yards away. Then a faint blue light appeared and The Damned started to appear, marching eight abreast, playing demon horns and marching in step. More and more of them appeared, until the full twenty thousand filled the square, the wail of horns drowning the noise of the crowd.

“Amazing.” Muttered Kittara.

She’d known they were planning something, but the sheer scale of twenty thousand of her fellow Guard, all marching in step was impressing her and now it took a lot to impress her. Sikush wasn’t going to lose the moment though and as the Guard came to a halt the ground shook.

“Earthquake !” One of the ambassadors shouted.

Kittara noticed Sikush was trembling slightly, like someone using all their strength to lift something up. Then the area of the square furthest away from them started to crack, the ground shifting. A golden light appeared from nowhere and the smell of flowers filled the hot breeze.

"The Genova are here to salute you." Sikush told her.

These weren't the usual shadowy non corporeal angels that seemed to infest the areas around the sentinel temples. For a brief period Sikush had granted them full existence, had pulled them fully into the Menderan reality. Kittara noticed that many of the women were incredibly beautiful, with flame red hair and skin that seemed to glow. The children ran about in groups, all pointing at her and laughing. There seemed to be dozens of Genova, all trying to get her attention and a brief touch of someone solid.

"What do I do?" She asked.

"Just enjoy the moment."

Kittara did just that, she wandered among the angels, letting them touch her. The children started prodding her and it felt like being tickled.

"What are they doing?" She asked.

"Trying to cure the dark spot in your soul."

Until then the angels had been silent, but an older woman had spoken. As she moved forward the other Genova parted to allow her through, the children gazing at her with small amount of fear in their eyes.

"But The Chalneé doesn't want you cured."

The old angel looked deep into Kittara's eyes before walking away and disappearing out of the strange rift in reality Sikush had created.

"Who was that?" She asked

"That was Juliet, you'll be spending many years with her, eventually."

So that was Juliet! Kittara wondered why an angel had become the trainer of The Damned? The portal started to close and Kittara allowed all the young Genova to touch her before they headed away and back into becoming shadows again. Once child was crying and as Kittara comforted her a tear fell on her arm.

She was in the dream again, the one she'd been having all too regularly, but this time she wasn't Mardoun. On either side the Holy Warriors were strung out to the horizon with Sikush behind her. This time she was there as herself and it was the future she was seeing. How she knew that was outside her understanding, but she knew with certainty she was about to die.

"Bring me back!" She said to Sikush over their private link.

The crawling chaos was pulling itself from the ground, destroying friend a foe with equal ease as it came. Kittara knew she had to stop it, knew she was the only one who could slow it down just long enough. Long enough for what? She felt Sikush behind her, giving her strength, showing her the beast caught for eternity in the chamber below the temple.

"Sre amnit donara senela onamba." She said.

She pulled at the power of hell itself, as Neosto had taught her. But taught her when? Her mind seemed to be wandering, separating from the vision of herself who was casting unbelievable amounts of power at the oldest of evils. Then she fell, the future self, or was it the past.

"Are you ok?" Sikush asked.

The Genova had all gone and he was standing next to her, helping her keep on her feet.

"Angel tears are potent, especially those of the children."

Kittara looked at him and knew beyond doubt that she'd seen her own death.

“You kept your promise, brought her back, brought me back didn’t you ?”

The Damned were still playing the demon horns and were preparing a return march to please the adoring crowd. A large group of visiting nobility were heading towards them, there could be no lengthy explanations.

“Yes I did,” he said, “it broke many rules, but I brought you back.”

~ ~

Alyz had done well and she was thoroughly enjoying herself. Behind her she could hear The Damned marching, all perfectly in step. At first the crowd looked a bit concerned at the horns, but they quickly realised who it was and now they were cheering.

“The crowd love it ! Sikush said go back for another pass.” She heard Chlo tell her.

Another pass ! The plan had been to stop for a quick burst of the Menderan anthem as they came down the stairs and then disperse. Alyz saw Kittara hand in hand with Sikush on the stairs and knew they’d be great friends, in fact probably already were. There was something odd about the girl, some part of her that always seemed elsewhere, but she was a good warrior. Above all she already seemed fiercely loyal to Sikush and that was what really mattered. An early member of the new elite Alyz was trying to set up ? Herusher had just appeared outside the council chamber and he was grinning at her and now, yes definitely waving. Holy demon grandmothers everywhere this was going to be one for the record book, Herusher waving !

“Don’t disperse, we’re going back the other way !”

Alyz put the command on the common channel and Chlo made sure all the twenty thousand saw it. If they could organise the subjugation of a major planet in five days, Alyz was sure a little change in the march would be easy.

“Keep playing, now turn !”

As one they kept marching on the spot and turned. Now Alyz was behind them, so she moved herself to the front of the Guard and gave the order to move forward. In front of her she could see the angels just appearing, saw Sikush bring Kittara to see the angels in their true form. Alyz was a little jealous, but like most of the Guard she mainly viewed the Genova as a pest. They got in the way on state occasions and frightened the visitors.

“Slow !”

She gave the order to avoid the sound of over a thousand demon horns arriving just behind where Kittara was having a quiet moment with the angels. Then the smell of fresh blooms hit her and she was a child on Arcadia again. Her father Chelac Nurigen was holding her hand and telling about the days when the angels had destroyed the great darkness. Perhaps she would revise her view of the Genova ? Her father had been a good story teller, she must ask Chlo where he was now.

“They’re going to the tournament,” Chlo told her, “in a minute, then you can disperse.”

Alyz acknowledged the order and enquired about her father.

“He’s on an outer world, non-Empire, I keep him up to date on gossip.”

~ ~

They’d arrived at the tournament to find Abijah arguing with the new Arcadian team leader. Sikush had told her the day was hers.

“Go where you want, the city is yours.”

“Can I watch the start of the tournament ?”

After time spent with the angels this couldn’t have been more of a contrast. The crowd loved the fights, especially since Abijah had been promising the news channels that this time there would be no fake wins.

'Each contest will only end by a clear win. The opponent must be dead or physically unable to continue.' Abijah had told the assembled media.

Even Sikush was having trouble parting the crowd and the mercs had to convince a few revellers to move aside, in their own unique way. A few scuffles started, but eventually Kittara found herself stood against the rope square that had been constructed for the contests.

"Lucien has been put in the first contest." Sikush told her.

Lucien was a great favourite of The Damned and Kittara knew a great deal of money had been bet on him. Not that any of the Guard needed the money, but winning meant taking money from the Ixir gambling agents and everyone hated them.

"Is there a problem?"

Sikush was talking to the Maran team leader. Kittara had seen him around and she recognised a political thug when she saw one. If he was a contest organiser then she was a Ticka worm's niece! She moved closer to hear the conversation.

"Ahh, your child is coming to listen."

It was a clear insult. No one insulted the emperor with impunity, and it was an act of supreme stupidity to insult the new member of the Guard on her big day.

"I'm sure you'll apologise for that remark." Said Sikush.

Suddenly a dozen of The Damned appeared amongst the crowd. No easing in or asking the mercs to clear the way. They transferred their realities into the crowd, sending people tumbling and increasing the tension.

"I see nothing to apologise for."

It was a trap of course, Kittara could see that. Someone would have to fight the Maran champion, it was now a matter of honour, being played out in front of the billions watching live on the newscasts. There could be no question of fighting the manager himself of course. Killing an overweight Maran in a few seconds would make The Chaln  look like a tyrant.

"Call your champion, this matter must be settled." Said Sikush.

Kittara noticed Alyz had appeared, sending an Ushong street trader tumbling, his hot pies landing in the dust. Abijah too was on her feet and looking hopefully at Sikush. Everyone wanted to kill the Maran, but Sikush approached Kittara.

"If I let Alyz kill him their champion they make us look like bullies." He whispered to her.

Kittara guessed what he was about to ask and she felt a tingle. It started in that wonderful area between her legs and moved up her body in a wave.

"I won't order you, but as a newbie it would look better if you fought him."

Kittara lost all sense of appropriate behaviour and kissed him hard on the lips.

"Yes! Thank you." She said.

She watched as Sikush told the manager that Kittara would be facing Grak in the contest area. It wasn't what he was expecting and she saw a look of doubt on the man's face. Kittara had seen Grak in the city, but she'd never seen him fight and there was no time to look at any recordings.

"Any instructions for me?" She asked Sikush.

He held her and put his mouth right up to her ear.

"His family will be watching, kill him with honour."

~ ~

Abijah had hoped Sikush would choose her to fight Grak, but she realised Kittara was a perfect choice. By killing their champion with 'the child' the Maran Group were made to look stupid. She saw Grak appear from the nearby Maran pavilion and he was ready for a fight. No last minute

putting clothes on or warm up exercise, he was in his full contest uniform and ready to go. So the whole thing was staged ! Still Abijah hoped Kittara would make the contest last. Grak was just a good warrior obeying orders and his family would watch the recording of his final contest over and over again for years to come.

“Pull back ! Pull back ! A sword arms distance from the contest area.” An official was shouting.

“A child’s arm.” A voice replied.

There was some laughter and Abijah knew that the contest was needed. Let them see ‘the child’ take down the best, officially the number one Maran fighter.

“You know the rules,” she told Grak, “no end of the contest while you’re both able to fight.”

There was no need to tell him, they both knew this contest was to the death.

“I know the rules.” Said Kittara.

Abijah noticed Grak sizing his opponent up. She did indeed look like a gangly teen, but Abijah had seen her move, seen her kill tough opponents in seconds.

“She can’t use that.” Said Grak pointing at her sword.

Someone, probably Alyz had given her a Nurigen blade. It was obviously outside of the rules, but before Abijah could take it from her Kittara offered it to Grak.

“Do you want it ? I’ll use your blade.”

It was the perfect thing to do and the crowd watching it on large screens roared their approval. The ratings on the news/sports channels were now breaking all records at 2.1 trillion.

“No. Just use a proper sword.” Replied Grak.

“She can use mine.” Said Abijah offering her sword.

Kittara looked around the crowd and approached an Arcadian trainee fighter.

“Can I use your blade ?” She asked him.

“Er yes, of course, thank you.”

“I’ll bring it back.”

It was pure theatre and the crowd was loving it. The roar from the crowd at the screens over half a mile away could be heard at the tournament.

“Will this sword do.” Asked Kittara.

It was a plain metal blade and a few good hit would break it, but it met the rules of the contest and Abijah gave her permission to enter the contest area. With both contestants standing a few feet apart Abijah decided to get things started.

“No rest break.” She shouted.

The crowd roared and she waited for the noise to die. If this was going to be a piece of theatre, Abijah was going to join in.

“No end to the contest while you can both fight.”

More applause and shouts from the crowd. There was no derogatory ‘child’ remarks now.

“If either of you go through the ropes fighting stops.”

A few mutters from the crowd. Most of them were now eager to see blood on the dust of the contest floor.

“Are you ready ??” Abijah shouted.

“I am !” Shouted Grak.

Kittara just nodded and waved her sword at Abijah.

“Then begin !”

~

~

Kittara had expected Grak to be much better. His first lunge was weak and she could have removed his head right then. Instead she moved to one side and easily avoid his blow. This was the best Maran had ? Even as her old self she could have taken him.

“Remember the news channels.” Chlo said to her.

Yes the news channels needed a good show. She used her sword the way most people thought swords should be used. She ran at Grak and swung her sword in a large arc to end at his neck. Of course he avoided the blow, a child could have avoided it. Around her though the crowd screamed for more. A few more attacks from Grak, one actually came within a foot of her. No wonder the Empire needed The Damned. Kittara was bored now, it was supposed to be ‘her day’ after all.

“Can I kill him ?” She asked Chlo.

A brief pause.

“Sikush says do it with style.”

She’d been still too long, been day dreaming, or so it looked. Grak rushed at her, his sword coming around for a swipe at her head. Instead of avoiding him she stepped towards him, using her left hand to easily push his sword away. At the same time she punched her blade hard into his chest, felt it go through bone and tissue. She was now right up against him, as close as a lover.

“That is how you use a sword, you fucking moron.” She whispered to him.

She didn’t pull the blade back, she followed him down to the ground, twisting the blade as they fell, watching the life go from his eyes. Slowly she stood up and gave his body a long low bow.

“For the Empire !” She shouted.

She held the bloody training sword high above her head, the blood dripping onto her face. The crowd were going crazy and the legend of Kittara had begun.

~ ~

“He was awful.” Said Luri.

She and Delmus was watched the whole fight from the roof of the western sentinel and Luri wasn’t impressed.

“She could have killed him on the first pass.” She continued.

Delmus leant on the parapet and he wasn’t so sure about how bad Grak had been. You don’t win over two hundred contest without getting a scratch if you’re useless.

“Are you sure he was that bad ?” He asked.

“You watched it ! It was easy !”

Luri was getting angry and he was looking forward to a few long Menderan nights with her and of course a tub of libido enhancing unguent. The last thing he wanted to do was upset her, but he had to state the obvious.

“Maybe,” he began, “just maybe she’s just about the best there is.”

He saw that look on Luri’s face. Don’t let it become a fighting tussle he pleaded silently to the eight demon gods of old. Not that he believed in the demon gods, but his back still hurt from the bugs and he’d appeal to anyone for the night to end up in a friendly tussle.

“You might have a point.” Said Luri.

There was a grin on her face as she approached him and felt between his legs.

“And why young man, was this pushing at your uniform ? Was it trying to get my attention ?” She asked him.

By the eight great demon gods he was always horny around her these days. He was thinking of getting Chlo to add a loose cloak to his uniform.

“Here ??” He asked her.

He allowed her to push him onto his back on the backing hot roof. Not his back again ! Then she began undoing his trousers and he forgot all about the scars the bugs had left on his back.

“Why not,” she said, “it’s a day to play.”

As her tongue started to lick the top of his dick, Delmus just hope she’d remembered to bring the jar of unguent. Later he’d get Chlo to do something about a mattress.

“Slower.” He said.

~ ~

Herusher was arm in arm with Minraver and all he wanted to think about was having her in his bed for the next month. They were in a part of the palace that no one was using and laying on the grass.

“So many moons,” said Minraver, “it’s beautiful.”

“hmmm.” Was all he could think of saying.

The day had gone well and Kittara was now safely at her grand party in the palace. The Maran incident with Grak had ended well and it had shown Kittara that often friends have to be watched as closely as enemies.

“The sentinels are muttering.” Said Minraver.

They’d both known the moment was coming, that Sikush had invited their most powerful enemy into their midst. It was a long time since the demons had attacked Mendera, but the monument was still out there by the well, and Thrax had died. Herusher wondered how Sikush communicated with the demon world ? Of course everyone has dialogue with their enemies, it was an essential of war and he’d often laughed at regimes who denied talking to their enemies. True there had been few demon attacks on the Empire, but to invite Neosto here !

“I don’t want to go either, but we must.” Said Minraver.

He’d been day dreaming and Minraver was on her knees looking down at him. He stood and had Chlo put him in a new uniform, one without the grass stains and crumpled tunic. Minraver of course looked sensational, she always did. Herusher felt old ! People said they felt the years on him and although he still loved his job, he felt the years behind him, as though they pulled on him like a ball and chain. Sikush never felt old to him, perhaps that was part of being an eternal. Mind you he’d managed to disarm Kittara in a practise session the other day, so he wasn’t doing too badly. Was Kittara really trying though ? It was difficult to tell with her, there always seemed to be hidden layers.

“Are you day dreaming ?” Minraver asked.

“Perhaps a little.”

He held onto her and moved both of them to the well. It was still half an hour until the agreed time of arrival, but Sikush had wanted a crowd to form. Herusher inwardly cringed, knowing Neosto could wipe out half the city before the Guard could deal with him. Could they deal with him ? Minraver was here and Herusher had faith in her.

“They’re coming in shuttles.” Said Minraver.

He cringed again as he saw the newswoman from channel 77 on Ixir approaching. What was her name ? Merrel something or other. She’d once referred to him as the ‘mean old man of Mendera.’ Now she was walking up to him with a huge smile on her face.

“Any comments on today’s events for the viewers ?”

He was about to say no, but Minraver interrupted.

“The arrival of the demon leader will be an historic event, everyone should welcome this sign of better relations with the demon world.”

Merrel something or other was pleased with the comment and walked off to get closer to the well of souls.

"Thank you." He said

"We have to help Sikush with his little piece of theatre, it is important." She said.

Herusher started to issue orders and place his people. Not too many of the Guard, that would look like fear, but the big hitters would all be well placed. More shuttles were arriving, full of the great and the good of the empire. He hoped nothing bad happened to them, or Sikush might give him the sewer cleaning job that he threatened all the new recruits with.

"Will you stop day dreaming."

Minraver wet her finger and wiped a bit of dust from his cheek.

~

~

Kittara was having a wonderful first day to the celebrations. True she hadn't expected to have to fight one of the guests, but even that had been fun. She admitted to herself she enjoyed killing. Anyone but children, for some reason her mind recoiled at the killing of young innocents, perhaps she was softening with age ?

"Another drink ?" Asked Jen.

"Yes please."

Kittara was allowing the drink to do its work on her. Enough of the ingredients allowed through her defences to make her mellow and happy, but not enough to make her a fool. She was still having trouble adjusting to her new body, but she was getting the hang of it.

"Where is Minraver ?" She asked Sikush.

Kittara had hoped to get the chance to talk to her at the party. There had been talk of her doing work for Minraver, a few clandestine missions. She was quite keen to learn more about the other eternal.

"She's with Herusher at the well, we will need to go soon."

Then the chant had started in her head. A dull sub sonic sound that she knew could drive people insane if it went on too long.

'Get it out, get it out, get it out.' It seemed to be saying.

The sentinels were starting to scream and Kittara knew that meant a demon was trying to enter Mendera, and probably a very powerful one.

"We need to go." Sikush said to her.

He held onto her and took them both to the well, where the situation was chaotic. Some people seemed in a panic, while others were taking pictures of the well and seems quite relaxed.

"A demon is coming through the well, a big one." She heard a woman shout.

She noticed the Merrel woman from Channel 77 trying to get closer to Minraver, but Herusher headed her off.

"Neosto is coming through, but he's a friend." Said Sikush.

Friend ! Not far from them was a memorial to Thrax, killed by the demons. Yet Kittara did feel quite excited about seeing the famous demon lord. He was a fellow immortal after all, the stories he could tell, the powers he must have.

'Get it out, get it out, get it out.'

She could flatten the sound in her head, but others couldn't and she could see fear building in some around. It was worse for the people who couldn't make out the words. The sub sonic sounds kept hitting the anxiety centre of their brain, telling them to panic and flee, yet they had no idea why.

"Look, look by the well !"

It was the Channel 77 lady pointing and looking a lot less polished and cool than she usually did. By the well a small red dot was forming, seeming to rip itself out of their reality.

"Are you ready."

It was Minraver. She asked the question of Sikush and as he nodded she vanished.

"He comes to honour you Kittara," said Sikush, "you may accept any gifts he offers if you wish, the choice is yours."

"Where are the guard?" Someone shouted.

"It's coming through." A female voice, almost hysterical.

The red dot had become a huge area, about thirty feet by thirty and through it was coming an arm, a huge muscular arm.

"It's on fire." Shouted Merrel.

Kittara could hear the ripping sound as another huge arm appeared, then the demon head, followed by the rest of his body. He was covered in what looked like flame, but was really the Menderan reality and the sentinels trying to pull him to pieces.

"Is he in pain?" Asked Kittara.

'Get it out, get it out, get it out, get it out.'

The sentinels were screaming so loud that Kittara had to use a lot of self-control not to panic. Vast numbers of the crowd were cowering on the ground, but Merrel and her crew were standing their ground.

"No he isn't in pain. Let's go and see him." Said Sikush.

~ ~

Luri and Delmus were both naked and looking over the parapet of the Western sentinel at the action around the well. No one was looking in their direction, so they sat on the edge of the parapet.

"Quite a show," said Luri, "do you think we should go?"

Delmus kissed her shoulder, enjoying the salty taste of her sweat soaked skin.

"No. I saw that Merrel something or other head out that way. That woman makes my skin itch."

They both knew it was a harmless visit that had been organised a very long time ago. Chlo had given them a lot of information on convergent time lines and probabilities, but it all boiled down to tonight being a pre booked event, so nothing to worry about.

"I wish the sentinels would shut up though." Said Delmus.

They'd both gone with Sikush to meet Neosto a few days earlier. It had been another trip through a hole ripped in reality. This time the tear had taken them to a dead planet in a dead galaxy in the Nar337 sector. There had been a lot of talk about the demon world being at risk if it went wrong and Neosto had ended by telling Sikush.

"I hope you know what you're doing!"

A lot of people seemed to be saying that to Sikush lately, but Luri and Delmus had faith in him, complete faith.

"Shall we do it again?" Asked Luri.

"Yes, but with a mattress this time."

~ ~

The demon lord was huge, a good twenty five feet tall and Sikush looked slightly ludicrous stood next to him. There was armour on the creature and a sword on a belt, but the flame effect was stopping anything being clear. The four arms were a bit strange, but Kittara noticed that only two of them seemed to move much, the back ones seemed to be some sort of throwback to an earlier form. Sikush was beckoning her to join him, so she walked right up to the creature.

"I am pleased to meet you Kittara and I hope you have a good celebration."

The voice was educated and pleasing to the ear and in a way reminded her of Sikush.

"Thank you and welcome to my big day." She replied.

The creature chuckled and smiled, the huge feline head looked swathed in fire.

"So polite, The Damned are always polite."

From his back arms he pulled a bag that like everything else seemed to be on fire.

"A present, if you'd like it?"

Kittara had no reservations in accepting the gift, she instinctively knew that Neosto wasn't an enemy, at least not for the moment. As she touched his arm to get the bag his skin felt soft, but cold.

"Thank you."

"Again so polite. You won't find my people so polite when you arrive."

Kittara looked at Sikush for an answer.

"The Chaln  has asked me to teach you," began Neosto, "to teach you the dark powers. If you wish to come beyond the 7th rift?"

Kittara has heard that no one could survive that far into the demon reality, yet she accepted straight away. The demon turned and headed back towards the tear in reality. As he put a foot through he turned.

"It might be a long time until you're ready to come to me."

Then he was gone and the tear healed up as though it had never been there. Looking past the well she could see Merrel sitting on the ground and looking petrified.

"Very few can look upon a full blood demon and remain unchanged." Said Sikush.

Kittara opened the bag and looked inside. There were metal tablets in the bag with strange markings on them.

"Talk to Luri about them." Said Sikush.

"Can she read them?"

Sikush laughed loud, a good long honest friendly laugh.

"Oh no ! Luri can tell you about Dredgers who live on the 1st rift. The Dredgers just might know who can teach you a little of the language on the tablets. In about fifteen or twenty million years you might be able to read and use your present."

Kittara began to realise what Neosto had meant by it being a long time before she was ready to see him, ready to travel beyond the 7th rift.

~ ~

The day was almost over and Chlo was once again sat in her rooms, but this time Sikush was sat with her.

"It went well." He said.

"There is trouble in the outer regions where Tenneth-Sisanath is awakening." Said Chlo.

She realised deities always caused trouble when roused, it was almost part of their job description.

"Right where Nurigen is lurking," said Sikush, "he must think the end of the multiverse is here again."

Chlo was troubled about Nurigen, he didn't seem concerned about anything these days, almost as though he wanted an assassin to arrive at Walt's bar and kill him.

"Can we send someone to pick him up?" She asked.

Sikush kissed her neck and started to undo her robe.

"Look after him Chlo and soon, very soon I'll send Alyz to bring him home. It's about time he stopped telling everyone all our secrets anyway."

Chlo blushed. Yes she'd been filling Chelac in on all the gossip, but did it matter. Everyone in that sector would be dead soon. Vaporised by Tenneth-Sisanath as she prepared for war.

"Let's stay here tonight," said Sikush, "I like your rooms."

Chlo was happy and as he moved them both to her bedroom she thought that yes, it had been a good day. Like many others though, she hoped he knew what he was doing.

© Ed Cowling – April 2013