

## Mendera – Empire

### Chapter 16 – Antuum

**“There would be casualties with over half a million warriors in the air over Antuum, most of them Arcadians.”**

“Next time I’ll let them kill you !” Said Delmus

He already hated Dolen and they’d barely started across the 1<sup>st</sup> rift.

‘Trust him a bit, get to know his first name, work at becoming his friend.’ Luri had said.

Less than an hour into the mission and Delmus hated the man with a frightening intensity. Why was Dolen so intent on causing trouble at every opportunity ? They’d entered the first rift near the abandoned village and Dolen had only spoken to him twice, once to call him an arse and later on to call him a fucking arse. It was as if Dolen wanted to be killed by demons. Unless Delmus was constantly watching him, he used every opportunity to give away their position, or try to run away. This time Dolen had shouted at two Dredger demons and Delmus was forced to kill them both.

“Do you want every Demon this side of Gateway looking for us ?” Delmus asked him.

Silence. Dolen just continued to glare at him with the same look of mocking insolence. Delmus hit him hard in the centre of his chest and sent him to the ground, landing hard on his rear.

“Stay there !” Ordered Delmus.

He sat on the floor cross legged and looked at Dolen as he explained a plan that he was beginning to seriously consider.

“We can’t go on like this,” he began, “we’ve four, maybe five days travel ahead of us.”

Dolen dusted off his trousers, but remained sat on the ground.

“Do you know which bit of you I think is important ?”

Silence again. Luri had toughened the man’s skin with spells and lotions, but the 6<sup>th</sup> rift was still going to be painful for him. Delmus began to hope it might be agonising.

“Your torso. The arms and legs might be useful to you, but I think whoever we’re meeting at the Nest just needs the mojo you’ve got in your chest.”

No words, but Dolen looked at him and seemed to be listening.

“I could hack off the legs and arms and the head of course, then strap what’s left to my back for a far easier journey. True you might be a bit ripe by the time I get there and there is the chance some of the Mojo might leak out, but we can’t go on like this.”

Delmus brought a sharp dagger out from under his tunic and started to hum in an unsettling kind of way. When he looked up he could see he had Dolen’s full attention.

“So are you going to behave, or do I start cutting ?”

Delmus made a move towards the man and for the first time saw a genuine emotion in his eyes and it was fear.

“I’ll co-operate.” Said Dolen.

Delmus gently tapped the dagger on Dolen’s leg, just above the knee.

“Are you giving me your word on that ?”

“Yes.”

Delmus had started off bluffing, but he had to admit to himself that the plan did have its merits, if only he could be certain a dead torso was acceptable to whoever was at the Nest. With a dead Dolen he could even risk using the rift manipulator that Sikush had given him for emergencies.

'For your return only and then only in an emergency, it will kill an ephemeral.' Sikush had said. Remembering the conversation the implication was clear. Dolen was needed alive. "Get up, we've a long way to go." He said.

~ ~

Abijah kept her feet as the huge flagship of the fleet was hit by a few million tons of Kivar star ship. Had the Kivar planned to use their craft to ram the empire vessels in suicide missions, or were they reacting to the situation? No one was quite sure, but the inertial damping whined as the huge craft was pushed a hundred yards sideways and almost collided with the tallest building in Abalexis. The blaster fire was never ending as the operators just found fresh targets wherever they found themselves, now they were wiping out squads of the local guard who were trying to bring order to the streets below.

"Order isn't what Sikush wants." Abijah whispered to herself.

She watched the battle screen and another large empire craft had plunged to the ground killing all on board. No matter how good the armour and the shields, once the crew were killed or panicked by a suicide attack from a large Kivar craft, the destruction of the empire vessel was inevitable. Abijah noticed that all of the destroyed craft were piloted by Arcadians. The flagship was still being controlled by Chlo, who steered around the tower at speed and brought her course back towards the main military complex for the city.

"We're continuing the mission?" She asked Jen.

"Yes of course. In a short time we've brought their capital back to the stone age."

The Kivar were the only high tech civilisation they'd come across that could bring their huge space craft into the atmosphere and hover them in the atmosphere in much the same way as the empire did. Instead of manipulating reality they used prodigious amounts of energy, but the result was the same. On the screen Abijah could see dozens more huge craft heading for them, passenger craft, enormous freighters, even automatic fuel carriers.

"They've even left the passengers on board." Said Jen.

A huge passenger craft was heading straight for the front of the flagship. At least a mile long it was bigger than them and probably weighed twice as much. The empire craft were built for war, but the pleasure vessel had at least a dozen swimming pools, five casinos, two ballrooms and several thousand passengers. Abijah expected Jen to run, to order the flagship to move its reality elsewhere, but Jen didn't say a word. Chlo just turned their vessel slightly into the oncoming pleasure craft, much as you turn towards a stranger on the street who looks to be about to bump into you. This bump though was between two enormous vessels travelling at speed and Abijah felt scared and trapped. To run was unthinkable, Sikush would never forgive her, but she felt so powerless.

"Hold on everyone. Imminent collision." Said Chlo.

No warning lights, no sirens, no panic. It was the empire way and Abijah felt comforted by it. Then the passenger ship hit them and the lights flickered for a second as the inertial dampers fought to keep them on course and lost the battle. The floor tilted to about sixty degrees, which was no problem for The Damned, but Abijah could see why the Arcadians had been defeated by these tactics. The hull wouldn't break of course, nothing could get through the shielding, but scramble the crew and the craft goes down. She looked for Nurigen and was relieved to see Alyz had a good firm hold on him. The screens showed fire outside as the passenger craft ruptured and began to fall to the ground just a few hundred feet below. Escape pods started to fire and a few might clear the buildings, but most simply hurtled into nearby buildings causing more damage than a blaster bolt. Very few of the passengers were likely to remain alive to tell their grandchildren about the great sky

battle over Abalexis. There was no avoiding the tower now as they were pushed into it, sending the top forty floors crashing into the surrounding streets. There had been no intention to kill civilians, but they must have died in their thousands as the rubble crashed into the surrounding buildings and streets full of people trying to escape the destruction. As the flagship crashed into yet another building Chlo managed to right it and bring it back up to the height needed to clear the city. Abijah noticed another smaller imperial craft rolling over as it crashed through several blocks of housing. Rolling over ! No one could survive that. But then she noticed it pull itself out of the debris and start to climb, its blasters finding anyone in uniform. City guard, soldiers, emergency services, they were all fair game to the withering fire. On the screen Abijah saw that half the crafts crew had died, but they were still carrying on with the mission.

“Big one coming our way.” Said Jen.

Below them the carnage was everywhere, yet both sides were still telling the news channels that only a few civilians had died. Abijah realised that neither side would look good if the truth were known, so there was almost a conspiracy to play down the casualties.

“Must be the biggest yet.” Said Chlo.

Abijah looked at the front screen and for a split second she froze. Aiming to hit them head on was a bulk freighter. On its own it would have outweighed them, but Chlo was showing it as full to the brim with edible seeds. Enough to make all the bread the city needed for a year and then some, probably half a billion tons and all of it headed straight at them. Surely they could avoid it ?

“Hold course.” Said Jen.

“Are you ready ?” Asked Chlo.

The question was expected, but it still caught her by surprise. She tried to keep the tremor out of her voice as she answered.

“Yes. Where does he want me to go ?”

Abijah couldn't remember being so relieved in her whole life. She was getting out of being a sitting duck in a shooting gallery.

“We've had several of the Guard killed in the business district. Try to find out what's going on and stop it.”

Abijah quickly looked for the area on the common channel, frantic to move her reality before the bulk storage craft hit. It now seemed to fill every screen and even Nurigen had lost his permanent look of happiness at being on board.

“Be careful.” Abijah heard Chlo say as she moved her reality to the business district.

~

~

Melin was happy. Some might have seen being used as a messenger by Sikush as an insult, but the head of the temple saw it as a chance for a bit of an adventure. For a start he never usually went anywhere without at least four trainee clerics, two note takers and two senior clerics to fend off any impertinent questions. Yet today he was headed through the market district completely alone.

“Melin ! You're a fool.”

He glared in the direction of the insult to find a senior priest of Mantusha smiling at him. He smiled back and gave a small wave. Of course the Mantusha were all heretics surely destined to die in fiery torment, but for today Melin was in a good mood and liked everyone, even heretics. The market was busy considering the war had started, but of course it would never effect the streets of the holy city.

“Looking for company ?”

The girl was attractive and well dressed and under different circumstances ? But today he was in a hurry, so he politely told her he was in a hurry, which of course he was. He found the emporium fairly easily, the brass plate on the door looked freshly polished.

"I'm expected." He told the boy who answered the door.

'Buy a few things, Chlo will reimburse you.' Sikush had told him.

Melin was shown into a viewing room and asked what he was looking for ?

"A few minutes with the owner."

It had sounded much more clandestine that morning when he'd said it in front of the mirror and of course he'd forgotten to buy a few items as cover for the visit.

"Oh and a copy of 'Demon Bestiary' by Vogle if you have it ?"

Everyone vanished and Melin hadn't even been offered the usual fine food that he'd been told about and he'd asked for a book that was rarer than Gonnofi droppings. Today wasn't going how he'd hoped and Melin was beginning to realise that perhaps a dull and repetitive lifestyle was the best thing for him.

"Why do you wish to see the owner ?"

The strange stance gave Mo away and of course the bearing. No emporium assistant would ever seem so confident.

"To give you this."

Melin passed over the sealed letter and waited as Mo read it through, gave him a very strange look and then read it again.

"You'd better come into my quarters. Oh and we do have a first edition of the book you wanted."

~ ~

There were so many of them, always so many of them and they fought well. Abijah had started off fighting a few yards from two others of The Damned, but they'd both moved out of sight and only the flash of Ion weapons showed where the Kivar warriors were trying to kill them. The business district had been reduced to rubble, with just a few lone buildings left standing. It reminded Abijah of cities they'd helped after a great flood had passed through it, but this time the flood had been withering blaster fire from above.

"More coming from your left, about sixty." Chlo told her.

The buildings once so colourful and tidy were now no more than uniform piles of dusty debris and running from behind one pile of rubble came yet another group of Kivar soldiers. Abijah admired their discipline, especially as she knew they no longer had any contact with their command structure. They had no idea if they were winning, on the verge of extinction, or if they were the last few Kivar warriors, but on they came. To her right she saw a flash like lightning as the female member of the Guard came under attack. What was the girl's name ? Juno, yes she'd picked up Chlo calling her Juno just before they'd moved apart in the battle. To her left had been a male, but she had no idea who he was, just that there seemed to be a lot of fire coming from where she assumed him to be. If there was any super weapon in this area, she was yet to see any evidence of it.

She felt for the spell to create tears of the Damned and several began to grow in front of her face. She was nowhere near as good with them as Kittara, but they still got the job done. One she sent to the rear of the approaching Kivar and enjoyed seeing about ten of them reduced to bits of organic debris that splattered their comrades. On they came though, seemingly oblivious to danger. Abijah ran to meet them and drove her blade deep into the chest of one, before spinning around and decapitating another. Then she moved herself to their rear.

"You won't find me there." She shouted.

Several of them, all male had started to concentrate Ion fire on where she'd been. Could they understand her ? The survivors all turned her way, so understood or not, the shout had worked. Every Kivar warrior she'd seen today had been male, but she knew they did have female warriors. Later she'd ask Chlo about that, but now she punched her sword hard into the back of the nearest warrior and felt it cut through his spine.

"Aaaaarrgghhh."

A scream ! A long scream of pain before he fell to the ground. The first sign of pain or fear she'd heard today. Once more she moved and avoided the concentrated fire of twenty Ion weapons. Another tear of the Damned sent to where she'd been and another dozen Kivar went to meet their maker. Did they believe in a maker, a God of any kind ? Abijah promised herself to learn more about them later, but for now she kept stabbing and moving until just one of the warriors was left alive.

"Juno could do with support." Chlo told her.

Damn ! She'd wanted a little time to examine the lone survivor, perhaps even talk to him. There was something in his eyes as she drove her weapon into his throat. Not fear, no not fear, but a look of sadness and something else ?

Junetherano, or Juno as everyone called her wasn't far away, so Abijah ran rather than moving herself. It gave her more of an opportunity to view the scene and far less chance of arriving in the centre of an ambush. Abijah had been learning from Kittara and Luri, watching recordings of them in action and she'd learnt a lot about how to survive a street fight. She approached where Juno was fighting and found her surrounded by about a hundred Kivar in what looked like the remains of a ruined Piazza of some kind. It must have looked nice once, but now the trees were just a few green leaves hanging from burned trunks and the pretty table awnings were piled up in corners as though a hurricane had been through the area.

"Now." Was all Abijah said to Juno.

The order of events was complex, yet after billions of years the communication via Chlo was now almost without an exchange of language. It was almost like a reflex and within a tenth of a second Juno was standing behind the Kivar and a large tear of the Damned was where she'd been. The explosion mixed Kivar parts with street furniture and the whole blood stained mess flew hundreds of feet across the Piazza. Without a word Juno joined her in killing off the survivors, who were again all male.

"I'll help Obi." Said Juno

Obi, yes Obi was the male member of the Damned she'd seem and Abijah remembered spending a very pleasant night with him once. It had been at a Council Club night and she'd been in the mood for someone new, someone most definitely not called Babak. She remembered he'd had a really nice dick and it had stayed hard for hours. Abijah realised Juno had gone and the last Kivar warrior was looking up at her, his leg twisted at an impossible angle and blood pouring from a wound in his side. He must have been in agony, yet there was the same look of something else besides fear in his eyes.

"Why only males ?" She asked Chlo as she kicked his Ion weapon away.

"The females are lighter and faster, perfect for flying their fighter craft. Nearly all the female warriors we've seen today are being used as pilots, but be careful ! A few are hiding in the rubble with high powered sniper weapons."

Abijah pulled the helmet from the wounded Kivar and knelt next to him.

"Can you understand me ?"

He nodded.

"I can heal you, but you have to tell me how you're killing us ?"

It was a long shot she hadn't expected to work and the look on his face told her the warrior wasn't going to tell her.

"If you seek death," he said, "go to the stadium."

She'd expected the voice to match the body, expected it to be deep, guttural, in some way beast like. But it had been pleasant to the ear and now she could sense she'd never hear it again. The warrior had bled out and his heart had stopped.

On the common channel Chlo had already marked the stadium and it was close by.

"Kittara will be with you soon." Said Chlo.

Chlo had simply meant for her to wait for Kittara so that the two of them could go together, but Abijah saw it as the favoured one taking over her mission, getting her hard earned glory.

'Not today.' She thought to herself as she moved her reality to the area in front of the stadium.

Another paved area, less destruction than most of the places she'd seen so far. A few posters still on the walls, which thanks to Chlo she could read.

"The Thunderers ! Champions for eight years, can they make it nine ?"

The local sport wasn't the usual nonsense involving a ball and ridiculous rules about moving it about that most worlds seemed so fond of. Abijah knew the Thunderers were a team of hand to hand fighters and she'd have enjoyed watching them, but looking at the ruined doors of the stadium and the spiral of smoke rising from its centre, she knew they weren't going to make that ninth year as champions.

"A lot of Kivar in there, a lot of movement." Chlo told her.

She should have waited for Kittara, perhaps called for Juno to join her, but all Abijah was thinking about was the high definition link that she knew Chlo was putting out to the news channels. Abijah steeped through the doors to the stadium, just as Chlo started putting a five second time delay on her coverage of her. The delay would be seamlessly edited into a flash back sequence of her rescuing Juno, but Chlo was beginning to see strange things appearing on Abijah's temporal line.

The hall just inside the doors was huge, with more posters extolling the virtues of everything from wrestlers to various music acts that used the stadium. There were a few dead, most looked to be either the old or the infirm who hadn't been quick enough to escape the trampling of the stampeding crowd.

In front of her were turn styles, but to her left she saw movement as two young civilians ran through a distant door. Abijah had never seen Kivar civilians other than in recordings and as she wasn't against the clock on this mission, she followed them. Through the door and she no longer needed Chlo's directions, the smell of scared male and female was unmistakable. Abijah had hunted many difference creatures on lots of different planets, but the smell of hot scared girl always remained strangely similar. The other smell had a tang, like testosterone, definitely the boy. She went through a door and into another public area with several other doors leading off. They'd taken the third door on the left, the smell of sex and fear was now almost filling her head.

"Grrran nehen kreshan !"

The words were nonsense to her and sounded far more bestial than the voice of the warrior.

Perhaps the warriors were formed from an educated upper class ? The room was obviously some sort of cloakroom and the woman who worked there was lying dead over the counter. There seemed to be no wounds to her body, but Abijah was far more interest in the couple lying against the far wall.

"Grrran nehen kreshan !" The boy said again.

Chlo translated it as 'Fuck off asshole' and Abijah allowed herself a long relaxed laugh. She liked the Kivar and she hoped that in future they might become allies, or at worst trading partners. The boy was lying over the girl, trying to cover as much of her as he could. He had a small knife which he waved in Abijah's direction while telling her to go forth and fornicate.

"I will in a minute." She told them.

She shook her head and waved her hand from side to side and she felt them relax. They were both big, far bigger than her and the boy was frantically trying to get between Abijah and the girl. The girl didn't look very appetising to her, but for all she knew she might be the belle of Abalexis. Abijah caught a look at herself in a mirror and understood some of the fear. A lot of her uniform was gone and her skin was covered in blood and Kivar tissue. A really seriously disturbing area of green ichor covered her left breast.

"Fuck !" She said to no one in particular.

Which Kivar bodily fluid was light green ? She could have shimmered into a new uniform, but she decided the blood and gore look was just what the networks wanted. Waving to the two kids she made her way back to the turn styles.

"I recommend waiting for Kittara." Said Chlo.

Abijah ignored her and destroyed the gate with one kick. Once through she was in a tunnel that came out in the north seating area.

"How many warriors ?" She asked.

"At least two hundred and lots of civilians, you can't use area affect spells."

She could see lots of Kivar surrounding the exit from the tunnel, so she moved her reality behind them. At least ten died by her sword before they managed to get twenty Ion weapons aimed at her, then thirty, then fifty. Abijah could have run, but part of her was curious to know how strong she'd become after billions of years of training and toughening. There was also a small part of her that did crave the dark peace of death.

"More ! More !" She screamed at them.

Any warrior that dared approach her died, but she let the massed ranks of armed warriors fire at her until nearly a hundred were firing a constant beam of Ion particles at her. Her uniform was gone and her skin was a strange blotchy orange colour, but there was no pain. All they'd succeeded in doing was to give her an all over tan. There was nothing they could do to her and now it was her turn. All that was left of her kit was her sword and that was badly pitted. Bear foot and naked she ran at the Kivar, kicking, punch and stabbing at them. One she caught with a kick to the knee and heard him scream as his leg bent the wrong way. Another warrior ran away with one of his eyes dangling against his cheek, another knelt on the ground trying to push his internal organs back into his abdomen. Abijah fought like a crazy woman, until none of the Kivar stood to face her.

"Is that the best you've got ?" She screamed.

She knew the news channels would be loving it, knew she'd already earned herself another kind of immortality, the kind that comes when your feats in battle become legendary.

"We'll fight you."

The voice was calm, the words spoken in Menderan. On the terraces above her about thirty of the Kivar with a light blue flash on their helmets were aiming weapons at her. These weapons looked different, had a kind of antenna dish apparatus built on the back of them.

"For the Empire !" Shouted Abijah.

She shimmered into a new uniform and calmly walked towards the Kivar.

~

~

“Do you know the contents of the letter ?” Asked Mo.

The letter was impossible, yet he held it in his hand. The emperor, Sikush himself was asking him for a favour and the emperor never did that, it was unthinkable. Asking a favour meant the emperor being under a debt of gratitude to the person doing the favour, owing them a favour in return. If Mo was reading the letter correctly, then Sikush was going to owe him big time.

“Most of it,” said Melin, “mainly so I could act as an intermediary.”

“If you’re not in a hurry, would you care for some food with me ?” Asked Mo.

Melin seemed to be delighted to be asked and it gave Mo a chance to really take in the implications of the two short pages. He was being asked to go to a certain star system and recover a certain artefact, an astrolabe that was critical to a project Sikush was working on. So far there was nothing unusual, well not unusual if you did odd jobs for the Menderan Empire.

“Will you require us to stay ?” Asked Sophie.

Mo looked at the girl with her eyebrow raised in an obvious question and then he looked at Melin, who he realised was looking over the other girl, Selina. He wouldn’t share Sophie with the cleric, but yes a night that ended with Sophie in his bed sounded ideal.

“Later. Give us an hour after serving the meal and bring a bottle, no two bottle of the best Ushong sparkling.”

He made a mental note to give Sophie a little extra treat. He knew from experience that if girls like Sophie felt unappreciated they were likely to vanish with half your stock.

“Could I freshen up ?” Asked Melin.

“Yes of course. Selina will show you where.”

The really unusual thing about the letter was that there was no mention of a fee. True it said Mo would be reimbursed for expenses, but normally Sikush would have offered him a colossal sum. The fact that he hadn’t was the best part, it moved Mo out of being a minion and into trusted friend category. Mo realised that part of the appeal to Sikush was getting him out of the way for a while, but he’d been considering having a bit of an adventure anyway. A long search through a distant system for an artefact of immense value sounded just his sort of thing.

“Does this system know of the empire ?” He asked.

Melin had a bit of a blush to his cheeks and Selina looked impish. So a quick fumble on the way back eh ? Melin quickly settled himself and gave Selina a look that seemed to put a marker on her for later.

“No, they’ve no idea we exist. You’ll need to take a team of mercenaries.”

“I do know of a group,” he said, “they used to be members of the guild on Ixir.”

Mo knew why they were ex members of the guild and the job he’d sent them on that had caused their expulsion. He’d had to pay them quite a sum to avoid being on their death list and then there had been Kittara ! In the middle of the night he had felt her get into his bed and straddle him, a brutal demon blade held to his throat.

“Aid those who are against the empire again and I’ll gut you in your sleep.” She said.

Then they’d had several hours of hard passionate sex. He still trembled when he remembered that night and it both left him in terror and excitement. But he knew that Kittara would carry out the threat, so there was another good reason to take the mercs a long way out of empire space.

“So you will accept ? You will go ?” Asked Melin.

The girls came in with the food and a little ale to wash it down with. They were efficient and in a few minutes the plates of wonderful smelling food were perfectly arranged in front of Mo and his guest.

“Wonderful !” Said Melin.

The girls left, their attentiveness would begin later. As she left Sophie leant her hip gently against Mo and gave him a look that promised everything. If he did wake up one day to find Sophie and half his stock on a freighter headed for the arse end of the multiverse ? Well perhaps it would be worth it.

“Yes, of course I’ll go.” He said.

“Good. Good and how long before you can leave ?”

When he went into stasis for years it had taken him only a day or two to get his affairs in order, but how long was he going away for ?

“Is there any better idea of the location on the Astrolabe than just the star system ?”

“No I’m afraid not.”

“Is it a big system ?”

“Five inhabited planets and a dozen or so moons with colonies.”

Mo once again had the feeling that he was being got out of the way for quite some time.

“Seven days,” he said, “I’ll go to Maran85 to hire the mercs in seven days.”

~

~

Kittara looked at her naked breasts covered in blood and realised it was time to shimmer into a new uniform. The news channels might run aliens being eviscerated just after the early evening family programmes, but a naked breast was likely to cause them to pull the plug.

“Any more ?” She asked Chlo.

Silly question really, of course there were more, there always was more Kivar to kill. Kittara looked at what was left of the ruined barracks and wondered how any of them had survived the first onslaught from above, yet hundreds of eager Kivar warriors were appearing at the edge of her vision.

“Another hundred to the south.”

“I see them.” She replied

Underground had to be the answer, they were far to clean and alert to have been through the bombardment.

“Underground Chlo. Look for bunkers, shelters, anything.”

The advancing Kivar surrounded her and stopped, just stood there looking at her. This was new; most of the previous waves had either run at her, or tried to fry her with concentrated Ion beams. One group had tried a new weapon on her, but that too had failed and the squad were now part of the ever growing heaps of Kivar organic material that surrounded her.

“Deep.” Said Chlo, “very deep there are shelters.”

“Can you get me into them ?”

“Yes. But he may need you soon.”

Of course he needed her ! For the first time in several ages of the Temple, The Chalne was involved in the ground war. At that moment he was advancing through the government district at a deliberate snail’s pace. Daring any Kivar who had the balls to come and meet him. Where was she ? Standing in the ruined barracks waiting for yet another Kivar squad to attack her. True this group had the blue flash on their helmets which seemed to mark them as some sort of elite, but she really wanted to be by his side. She felt tears of anger beginning to fill her eyes.

“Attack me you useless fuckers !” She screamed at the soldiers.

Had one flinched ? Yes, Kittara was certain he had. If only she could get them to run ? Now that would be a great piece for the networks, that would put Abijah well into the B list. Not that Kittara had any real dislike of Abijah, but once someone starts being competitive it’s almost impossible not to join in. Or at least Kittara found it impossible. She approached the warrior who had flinched and noticed his eyes never left her.

"You !" She shouted, pointing her Nurigen blade at him.

"I'm going to cut out your eyes and wear them around my neck !"

As she said it she meant it and the soldier broke and when he broke another five or six started to run. She was on him and ignoring all the blows from his colleagues as she hacked into his skulls and pulled the hot, bleeding eyes from their sockets.

"I told you I would and now they're mine !" She screamed.

The soldiers rolled around, his hand going to the bloody sockets. It was the end of any morale in the group and the rout started. The barracks square was covered in body parts, but there was something about the ferocity of Kittara that started them dropping all their kit and running.

"None of you are escaping alive." She shouted.

They trampled each other to get away from her, one even firing on his friends to clear a path, but Kittara was like a wild thing, killing them all. When she finally killed the last one she sat on his chest. Covered in blood and bodily tissue, she turned as one of the few remaining doors opened behind her. It was their General, of course it was, who else was left ? Not that he was twice their size, or wearing special armour, that only happens if comics. If anything he was shorter than his men, but he had that certain manner about him. As Kittara stood to face him Chlo gave her some news.

"It's Abijah."

Kittara walked towards the general, wondering why Chlo was disturbing her at such a critical time, it was so out of character.

"Abijah has been vaporised."

There was no asking for confirmation, no questioning, Chlo never made that kind of mistake. The general drew his sword and waited for her attack, but Kittara had to be somewhere else. In her thoughts she was angry at Abijah for ruining the perfect moment, but Abijah was, or rather had been one of The Damned and that took priority. She couldn't be seen to run, but the kill shouldn't look too easy. If the kill looks far too easy you take away your justification for fighting your enemy. That wasn't empire teaching, it came from Mo and the slums of Ixir.

"I'm sorry. You deserved far better." She said.

The general looked confused and then Kittara was in front of him and his head was bouncing off the paved surface of the barracks parade ground. She gave the body a quick bow and moved her reality to the stadium, to the exact spot where Abijah had been standing.

There was nothing there apart from a much pitted sword, which Kittara picked up and examined.

There had been a bit of a breeze, so any dust that was the remains of Abijah would have long since blown away.

"Are they still here Chlo ?"

"No. They went out through the back and they may already be dead. A group of the Guard reported killing an elite squad of Kivar only a few yards from the rear entrance. If they weren't all killed then, it's unlikely they'll survive until morning."

Juno appeared and stood staring at the ground beneath Kittara.

"They didn't even leave us anything to bury." She said.

"Enough ! We'll grieve for her at remembrance, but not now."

"Yes you're right, I'm sorry."

Kittara liked Juno, but they were at war and there was no time for grief or doubt.

"Here," she said, "take her sword to Jen."

Jen would know what to do, she'd tell Babak about her death. Then Kittara realised he'd have seen the news on the common channel by now, so she sent a quick and highly forbidden note of

sympathy. They'd been lovers for longer than most bubble universes exist, rules or no rules he'd need a few kind words. Kittara walked slowly up towards the top row of the terraces, to where the Kivar elite would have stood. Not that she hoped to find anything, she just had a need to do something, anything. Out of the corner of her eye she saw movement, a few civilians running away. She realised she really wanted to kill them and make it slow and painful.

"Can you take me to the underground shelters Chlo?"

"If you're ready to go? He needs you now."

Of course she was ready. Kittara looked at the sky and realised night was approaching on day one of the war. The shelters and whatever they held would have to wait for now. Kittara moved her reality to just the right spot, about twenty feet to his right and a couple of feet back. Yes, Alyz was in a similar position to his left, this was going to be an enjoyable fight.

"We saved some for you." Said Sikush

It was a charnel house of dead Kivar and mixed in with their body parts were the gears and motors of some kind of war machines. To the left and right the carnage and destruction had cut a narrow corridor through the government district, but within that corridor not one brick still stood on another.

"They have powered armour." Said Sikush.

In front of her appeared at least a dozen Kivar, dressed, if dressed was the correct word in some kind of fantastical body armour. The armour was four or five times their size and seemed to be driven by a small engine of some kind. The armour also seemed to house several rocket launchers and other means of hurling projectiles. Kittara readied a few tears of The Damned and for the first time that day she was truly happy.

"Leave these few for me," she said, "this is just what I need."

~ ~

There was no true night on the 1<sup>st</sup> rift, but for most ephemerals there was a time of day when darkness seemed to fall and they craved a secure spot to rest and get a night's sleep. Delmus had been a member of The Damned for a very long time, but he still had demon skills and his vision showed the rift bathed in light. Very few creatures could see in the upper ultra violet, but he could and he knew other creatures could too.

"Sleep well." He said to Dolen.

Delmus applied a small spell to the man to ensure he had a good night's sleep. Plus it meant he didn't have to worry about him doing anything silly for a few hours. They were in a fairly deep dry gully and well screened from anything that might walk or crawl by, but Delmus knew that to certain chaos creatures their bodies would shine like hot beacons, tasty hot beacons. His own body temperature he matched to the air temperature, but Dolen slept on and looked like a huge bright 'eat me' sign. Not that there should be any chaos creatures on the 1<sup>st</sup> rift, but it was his duty to get Dolen to the Nest in one piece, so he kept awake and alert and watched over the drug dealer from the City of the Seven Hills. In the distance he could see the temple that marked the gateway to the 2<sup>nd</sup> rift and around it he could just make out a few traces of movement. They were going to have a fight and like it or not, Dolen was going to have to help.