

## Mendera – Empire

### Chapter 17 – The Nest

**“You !” She shouted, pointing her Nurigen blade at him.**

**“I’m going to cut out your eyes and wear them around my neck !”**

Chlo was her real self, if any version of her could really be said to be the definitive real Chlo. Babak was sat on her couch, while she sat near him and mainly let him brood in silence. Another part of her was using benign probes to search the underground shelters and bunkers on Antuum in the hope of finding any significant reserve forces the Kivar might have.

“If she hadn’t been so ambitious, perhaps she’d have run ?” Said Babak.

The question was said to an area of floor he was staring at and required no answer. Chlo knew that ambition or not, no member of The Guard would have run, it simply wasn’t in their code of acceptable behaviour. Chlo rarely thought of her own existence, she just knew that the version of her receiving oral sex from Juno while they showered was experiencing almost perfect pleasure. The various versions of her running mind numbingly menial and repetitive tasks that kept the empire running, she ignored. True those version could be full version of her if needed, but for the most part no essence of her true consciousness inhabited them. As to a soul of some kind ? Chlo realised that barring an unthinkable huge event that destroyed all of the multiverse, she was eternal. Soul, essence, whatever you chose to call it. If you were going to live for eternity, was there anything to be gained by owning one ? The skinny version of her with the symbols on her neck was the closest thing she had to anything she might acknowledge as being her soul, and it was the only part of her to survive the great switches.

“There was no chance of it being suicide by Kivar, was there Chlo ?” Babak asked.

The big question and one she didn’t want to examine or answer completely honestly, at least for now. All The Damned had a slight death wish, it was almost normal for creatures who faced death on a regular basis. Why not hurry the inevitable ? See whether the darkness is absolute ?

“No Babak, never, not Abijah.” She answered.

“Yes of course. I was being silly.”

Sikush had told her to keep him busy, so she looked for a target in the shelters that would challenge him, but not too much. It had been two days since Abijah had been killed and Sikush thought Babak needed to get some kind of payback. Chlo wandered around the various bunkers by probe and much of it was in darkness, obviously the lighting had been powered from the surface and no sizeable generators still ran on Antuum. Chlo hurtled through the dark, while part of her still made comforting comments to Babak. A portion deep underground with lights ! No the Kivar seemed to be mostly civilians with just a few soldiers amongst them. By the look of their clothing these weren’t high ranking Kivar, who’d managed to get a nice safe spot in the bunker, these looked like servants, those that served the army and government elite.

“Do you think she suffered ?”

It was the fourth or fifth time he’d asked the same question, but Chlo understood his need to ask and carried on searching as she answered, perhaps untruthfully.

“No. It would have been instant.”

A few hundred domestic servants were no use, enough civilians had died already. Chlo started to move on, but decided to look through the living quarters. A young couple were in the shower, the

girl using her finger nails on the man's back to show how much she was enjoying the sex. Normally Chlo would have enjoyed the whole show. Things were boring underground and the couple might well spend all day in the shower, but Chlo had other things to find. She hurtled along another corridor, instantly stopping at any sign of life. Even Chlo could only move that fast by probe and the feeling of freedom it gave was electrifying. She felt Babak relax as he let a little of his drink take effect and why not, he could metabolise the active content in his body instantly if need be.

"Thank you for being a friend Chlo."

She liked Babak and almost whooped for joy as she found at least two hundred reserve Kivar warriors. They were deep, very deep, over a mile underground. How did they get to the surface? Not the elite these, just the ordinary soldiers that did the everyday grunt work that any army needs to do.

"Are you ready to go?" She asked.

It was a standard question and she knew he'd been sat in full uniform and cradling his sword in his arms for hours.

"Yes."

There were no civilians at all, good. They seemed to be waiting for instructions and their weapons store was huge. Their command structure was gone, the instructions would never come, but the Kivar warriors a mile below ground didn't know that. Kittara would moan at her, she did seem to consider the shelters her own personal kill zone, but she was back in the government district with Sikush. She put the details of the Kivar warriors on the common channel and marked Babak as the member of the Guard dealing with the area.

"Any special instructions?"

Chlo felt for Sikush, asked the question and smiled at the reply.

"He said to find how they get to the surface," she said, "and get some payback."

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Delmus hit Dolen, hit him hard right in the centre of his face. As he felt immense pleasure he also felt the man's nose break and realised he'd just given him another reason to gripe and moan. Delmus stood over the unconscious man and cursed himself for losing control.

"Come on get up, you're not that badly hurt." He said.

He knelt next to the man and realised he wasn't faking it, he was out cold. Damn! Delmus wasn't that good with healing spells and that meant using up some of the ointments Luri had given him 'only for emergencies'. After two days on the rifts Delmus had started to trust him, had even given him a short blade. Then as Delmus was fighting a couple of low level demons Dolen had tried to plant the blade between his shoulder blades.

"Damn you! Why are trying so hard to cause trouble?"

Dolen opened his eyes and blinked up at him, the ointment seemed to have knitted the bones, but his face was still swollen.

"Fucking asshole!" spat Dolen.

One of the demons was still moving so Delmus used the remainder of his anger on finishing it off. Of course he knew what the problem was, Dolen had asked him about it at least twenty times.

"What happens to me when we get to the Nest?"

He honestly didn't know, but the Nest was a place of some infamy, so in all likelihood it wasn't going to be something good.

"I don't know," Delmus had told him several times, "I deliver you to someone there and they give me something in return, that's all I know."

Not strictly true as Delmus had overheard a few things. For a start whoever was currently residing in the Nest had cleared out the previous occupants, an infestation of feral Jangar, not an easy thing to do. He'd also heard Luri mention a name to Sikush, "Charadask", then they'd both given him a funny look. As to the return trip ? That was when the rift manipulator was mentioned. No Delmus wasn't going to mention any of this to Dolen, but he strongly suspected the man wasn't coming out of the Nest with him.

"You'll need this."

Delmus picked up the short blade and threw it at Dolen's feet, after all they both knew it couldn't hurt him. Delmus had felt the blade hit, the nerve endings signalled that something sharp was trying to pierce his skin, but countless billions of years of toughening had stopped it doing him any damage. Delmus wasn't sure what could hurt him, but he was certain it wasn't going to be an Ixir blade in the hand of an Ephemeral.

"Come on we need to keep moving."

Dolen stood up and pushed the blade into his belt, a bit dangerous, but Delmus wasn't in the mood to give the man a lecture on weapon safety. Out of the corner of his eye Delmus noticed a third low level demon was circling Dolen, probably fresh meat was hard to come by this far into the rifts.

Dolen noticed the creature and looked at Delmus.

"There's another. I hope you're quick on your feet." Said Delmus

The two demons circled and watched and seemed to ignore Delmus, there was after all easier prey to satisfy their appetites.

"Stop giving me crap. You need me alive !" Shouted Dolen.

Delmus had no intention of letting the man become demon food, but he was enjoying watching him squirm a little and he wasn't about to join in until Dolen had started fighting. Dolen moved towards the nearest demon and stabbed with the blade like a pro. Delmus had fought back to back with him earlier, so he knew the drug dealer could handle himself.

"Get his eye stalk, then he can't see you." He shouted.

"Fuck you !"

His encouragement obviously wasn't appreciated, so Delmus found a rock to sit on while he enjoyed the fight.

"You going to do it ? Sit there and watch ?" Asked Dolen.

Delmus was surprised at how quickly Dolen cut the front two legs off the demon, but he took a nasty scratch across the shoulders while he did it. More of the precious ointment used up later ! Low level demons rarely fight in groups, in fact they were known to eat each other, but this pair started circling around Dolen and chirruping at each other.

"You need to finish that one off and quickly."

No profanity, Dolen just glared at him and limped towards the wounded demon, Delmus hadn't seen him take a wound to his leg, but there was blood on the man's trousers just below the knee. Delmus decided to help, mainly because he didn't want to use all the healing ointment after this fight.

"I'll get the other." He said.

For the first time Delmus realised how hot the air was, as he caught the heat shimmer distorting his view of the second creature. No wonder Dolen was breathing hard, his physiognomy worked best at lower temperature and higher humidity. Delmus easily cut the head off his target and turned to go back and help Dolen. As he did so he saw the man neatly sever the creature's eye stalk and then drive the short blade into what passed for its chest.

"Well done. Let's get you healed up before we move off."

Rubbing in ointment on an unconscious man was one thing, but Delmus wasn't going to do it to a fully awake one who was glaring at him. He handed him the small jar of ointment.

"Careful with it ! It has to last until we get there."

Dolen rolled up his ragged trousers and rubbed a tiny amount of the cream into the wound. The bleeding stopped and in a few seconds there was just a slightly livid scar where the wound had been. Dolen then started to apply a small amount of the cream to his shoulder.

"Will I need healing on the way back ?" He asked.

Delmus looked at the man and for the first time wished he could have turned around and taken him somewhere else, anywhere else, but definitely not to the Nest.

"I've told you my orders and that is all I know."

"But you must have an idea about what happens to me once we get there ?"

Delmus was checking both the demons were completely dead and that no more of their kind were hiding in the vicinity.

"I have an idea, yes."

"And my future doesn't look good in that idea ?"

Delmus looked Dolen over and helped him get some cream into a nasty scratch over one shoulder blade.

"No it doesn't. Now come on we've still got a long way to go."

Dolen put his jacket back on and followed Delmus across the parched arid land of the 3<sup>rd</sup> rift.

"Do you have a first name ?" Asked Delmus

Dolen gave him a grin as he struggled to keep up the pace in the dry heat.

"Fuck you !" He replied.

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"She's got herself turned around and doesn't know where she is. None of her comrades are close, so she has to fight her way out of this near impossible situation..."

What crap ! Kittara stopped listening to the news feeds, she'd only peeked at them to make sure she had their full attention. The idea of any member of The Damned getting turned around and confused was preposterous. On the common channel she had her position showing up and that of every other living creature within miles. Not that she used the information very often, it was far easier to ask Chlo if there was anything nearby to worry about. As to the impossible situation ? Sikush had told her to arrange something a bit special for the news, so here she was. The problem was that any Kivar worth fighting were getting scarce and she just hopped the two hundred or so of the elite guard in the nearby government building might be up for a fight.

"What are they doing Chlo ?"

Kittara continued looking around and trying to appear lost, this had to look genuine.

"Guarding someone. It looks like the local district governor, or commander."

Damn ! Kittara felt for Jen and asked her for a very big favour.

"The flag ship is still under attack !" Jen told her.

"You'll only be gone a few seconds. I'd ask Alyz, but she's with him."

There was a gap of a second, maybe two. In any other place at any other time it would be nothing, but in the war and between the Damned it was a huge time. She's asking him ! Kittara felt the seconds as though they were hours.

"Ok."

That was it and then as the billions across the empire watched Kittara pretend to be little girl lost, she watch Jen appear next to the local governor and rip his heart from his body. Good girl, it had to be messy, had to be nasty, had to make the warriors really want revenge.

"I'll be outside." Jen screamed at the Kivar soldiers.

The news feeds got none of this of course. No doubt one night after a few drinks Chlo would retrieve the footage, perhaps when they were all around the pool at Kittara's house, but for now it passed invisibly through the empires systems. To the watching billions, soon to be trillions it looked like the two hundred or so elite warriors were charging out to attack the lone girl. Kittara let her hair fall across one eye and even started to limp slightly as she walked towards the soldiers.

"Perfect."

He was in her head now and as she lifted the Nurigen blade and pointed it at the approaching Kivar, she decided to ask the question he often asked her.

"Are you mine?"

No hesitation, no concern over her impudence, the answer was instant and the warmth carried with the answer washed over her life a reassuring wave.

"Always."

Then he was gone, leaving her to concentrate on the kill. To the empire it looked like she was in a trap and could she have seen the online comments they'd started to follow a single theme.

'wasn't someone going to help her?' 'Surely someone, anyone must help her.'

Like a confident spider Kittara lured them into her trap and kept the blade of her sword resting on her arm and aimed straight at the Kivar warriors.

'she's alone, someone must help her' 'it'll be murder if no one helps her.'

They circled around her apart from one lone warrior who ran at her and lay dead at her feet after a single stab from the Nurigen. The weapons, the special weapons that had left nothing of Abijah started to fire at her and she did nothing. Kittara knew the exact place and moment of her death and a ruined street on Antuum wasn't the place.

Of course the multiverse can play tricks on those foolish enough to take such things for granted, but not today, she wasn't dying today. Kittara had been having dreams again, but not about the 7<sup>th</sup> rift. Now the recurring dream was about helping an angel with red hair as they tried to enter the City of the Lost God. Now part of that dream was playing in her head and the words the Genova spoke to her.

"There is always more time than you think."

Of course there is, it was a phrase every warrior knew well. More warriors died from hurried action than from hesitancy. There was always more time than you thought, time to check your target, gauge the response, pick your moment. Then another voice, but not the one she associated with Mardoun, the voice that had introduced her to so many wicked delights. This voice was different, much nicer, it almost caressed her mind. Then she realised it was her own voice. Madness? Perhaps, but she was pleased that finally her own voice was silencing the others.

"Be still, there is always more time than you think." It said.

The Kivar were still firing, it seemed to have been going on for hours, but was probably only a few minutes. Looking down she saw the concrete at her feet was melting, bubbling like hot stew. Would it be reinforced? For some reason that seemed important to her. She lifted herself slightly above the bubbling concrete and hovered in the air. Still the Ion energy battered her small frame and had no effect. Her uniform was gone, so were her knickers. Her bush looked healthy, seemed to glisten in the energy storm. Surely it was dead hair and should have ignited? So many silly questions seemed

to fill her head, but at least the persona asking them was now her. She'd learned a lot from Mardoun and the other forces that had swept through her, but now she was herself.

"Wait and make it perfect."

Sikush was in her head, but very gentle while he was there, the words almost like her own thoughts. She heard about the trillion watching and expelled him from her head. This was going to be her moment, hers and hers alone. They stopped firing at her. They weren't out of energy for the weapons they just seemed confused about what to do next. Kittara smiled at them and shimmered into her training clothes. Not a uniform of The Damned, but what she wore to fight him on Ring. A short skirt with several slits to her waist, small shoes that were almost like dancing shoes. On her arms were bracers and across her throat was a jewelled guard. All of it was definitely not part of the approved uniform, but she just knew the empire watching would love it. Still there was time, so she let the Nurigen shimmer back into her store and removed the demon blade from her back. It looked brutish and dangerous and she could sense the fear among the surrounding Kivar.

"Who's first?" She shouted.

Most people get their idea of sword fights from actors and big budget entertainment. Big whirling movement looks cool there, the swords weigh next to nothing and the stunt men get a lot of rest time between shots. In real life most people would have trouble lifting a long sword off a table, much less whirling it about or hacking with it. Well trained fighters realise you quickly get fatigue from using a sword, so they keep large movements to a minimum. Many warrior empires have perfected the use of the sword as a punching weapon, almost like an extension of the fighters arm. Usually the fighter uses a shield and then punches with sword, stabbing at the enemy's throat, stomach or chest, with devastating effect.

Kittara knew how to use the demon blade and she moved so quickly that they didn't have a chance to react. A punch through a throat, then a chest and finally she sliced a man from ankle to groin before moving to their rear. He screamed, the demon blade had bitten deep and anyone would scream, but the others didn't panic, they still moved in a disciplined group. A few started to fire at her together, but she no longer wanted to play that game. In a few second their bodies lay on the ground and Kittara was letting the demon blade taste the flesh of their friends.

It would have been easy to kill them all with a few fireball spells, but that wasn't what the news channels wanted. She allowed herself the luxury of looking at the common channel and discovered 1.3 trillion were watching her, a record. Children in classrooms, office workers, even prison inmates, they all wanted to see the girl from the empire triumph. After all she was one of them and the Kivar were so, well alien !

"Surrender and I'll let you live." She said.

They were all dead apart from one lone warrior and he looked very young. Kittara had intended to kill the last one in a spectacular fashion, but there now seemed no honour in that. She was surrounded by body parts and blood and the screaming of the few she'd only wounded. The young Kivar warrior just shook his head at her and walked at her with a short sword in his hand.

"So be it."

Kittara slowed herself down and walked around him. It was a pity that such a brave warrior had to die for no good reason, she'd already proved any point that needed proving. He'd die and his name would be forgotten and the only immortality would go to her and she already had it in copious amounts. So life was a mean bitch ?! Kittara didn't feel the need to make it any fairer for the young warrior, he was going to die. He lunged at her and he knew his stuff, he might have won against an Arcadian, but she was at least twenty times faster and infinitely tougher.

“Sorry.”

She whispered as she side stepped the blow and brushed her lips over his cheek. She was playing with him, but she could easily have emptied his entrails over the floor and hadn't. The demon blade slid over his thigh, just kissing the skin and leaving a ragged scar. He didn't scream ! Men twenty, or thirty years older, veteran of countless conflicts had screamed, yet he turned and glared at her. Sikush was in her ear, the time had come to finish him off. Yes. The networks had enjoyed the fight, but carry it on much longer and the outnumbered girl from Mendera would begin to look like a cruel bitch and they couldn't have that. Kittara noticed her fairly flimsy top had been damaged in the fight, one firm breast showed through the fabric. To hell with it. No network executive in his right mind would pull this finale off the air for showing a nipple.

“You fight well.” She said.

He just squared up to her and started to pull a battered Ion weapon out of his jacket. Kittara was in front of him the end of her blade entering his groin. For an instant she saw pain in his eyes, then they went quickly blank as the sword cut him through his abdomen, then his chest and finally came out of the top of his head. His halved body fell to either side and as it did so Kittara gave a leap into the air, blood, Kivar blood dripping onto her face.

“For the Empire !” She screamed.

Her top had fallen away from her breast and a section of her bush was clearly visible, yet the networks all showed the uncut footage for several days and on every broadcast. The picture was of course on most teenage boys bedroom walls within a month. More surprisingly a lot of teen girls had the same picture on their walls. Everyone it seemed wanted to either be Kittara or have her.

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Delmus decided every warrior he'd killed must have picked this very day to curse him. He put his head above the rock to look at the open ground between them and the Nest and there were four high level demons there. True one of them was dead, but that just seemed to be getting the surviving three very agitated.

“What...” Began Dolen.

Delmus had his hand over his mouth and whispered to him.

“Everything at a whisper, their hearing is far better than yours. It's a miracle they never heard us approaching, but they seem to have other things to worry about.”

They did indeed have other worries and Delmus could hear one of them shouting at his friends and pointing at the Nest. They were a good two hundred yards away, but Delmus still picked up the words 'coward' and 'vengeance.' He'd have bet good money that whatever was in the Nest had killed one of them and chased the other three out.

“Shall we wait until night ?” Asked Dolen.

Delmus just shook his head, they'd been through all this many times. Dolen wasn't stupid, but for his whole life darkness had meant somewhere to hide, somewhere safe. The idea that demons could see him very clearly in what to him was complete darkness, was beyond him. Different parts of the spectrum ! Delmus might as well have tried to explain Monotran maths to him. The demons looked set for a long argument, they might even fight it out and that could take another day.

“Look,” he whispered, “we have no idea what will happen to you in the Nest, but as soon as I stand up and walk towards them the demons will attack. You either help, or you die here.”

Delmus didn't even know the man's first name, he'd been calling him 'fuck you' for a day and a half. To ask him to help fight his way into a grotesque prison where he was likely to be killed ! Delmus doubted he'd have gone willingly.

“On one condition.” Said Dolen.

“I’m listening ?”

“Whatever’s in there. Don’t let it kill me.”

It was an impossible request. Delmus had his orders and if Charadask wanted to kill him after the exchange, then that was no business of his.

“I can’t make that promise, but I will try as hard as I can to bring you out alive.”

Dolen looked resigned to his fate and didn’t even try to argue any more.

“Just try your best. Now what do we do now ?”

Delmus had given the matter some thought, but every time he came up with an idea it relied on a lot of luck.

“Are you a religious man ?” He asked Dolen.

“No.”

“Well now is the day to change. Follow close behind me and start praying.”

Delmus could ignore the dead demon and one of the others was favouring his left leg. Either he’d been wounded or it was a slow healing wound from an older battle. The other two may have been high level demons but their armour and weapons were definitely out of the cheap end of the market. There had been rumours about hard times on the rifts, strange weather, even for the rifts. Luri had told Delmus the awakening of the old Gods was causing imbalances and Luri usually talked sense.

“Stay behind me !”

They’d managed to approach surprisingly close to the demons before they turned towards them and even then they didn’t seem keen on attacking. On his own Delmus might have got past them without trouble, but to three hungry demons the two hundred pounds of hot smelly man flesh called Dolen was too good to miss. Or rather two demons, the wounded member of the gang sat himself on the dusty ground and seemed content to watch how things turned out. Delmus had a few toys Luri had given him, though he suspected they originated in the lower levels of the imperial store. It hardly seemed fair or sporting, but he did need to get Dolen into the Nest and preferably before he died of old age.

“Close your eyes !” He shouted at Dolen.

The small globe was out of his hand and climbing high over the two demons and of course they watched it. The burst of ultra-high frequency UV light fried their eyes and left them defenceless, or as defenceless as any twelve foot tall highly armoured demon can ever be. Delmus finished them both off and thought the fight was over until he heard the sound of clashing metal behind him.

“Help !” Shouted Dolen.

For a wounded creature dripping large amounts of blood the demon had moved fast, probably driven by hunger. He was striking at Dolen but most of his blows were going wide. Even so Dolen was already bleeding heavily from a gash to his side.

“Bastard.”

Delmus hit the demon like a landslide and sent it sprawling to the ground. Quickly he jammed his blade deep into its chest again and again until all signs of life had gone.

“Is it worth healing me ?” Asked Dolen.

Delmus wasn’t sure, but he used the last of the ointment to bring the man back to being relatively fit and healthy.

“A few days off work and you’ll be as good as new.”

They both chuckled as Dolen got to his feet and brushed the dust off his clothes.

Even Luri was unsure of what had built the Nest, or she didn't want to say. Obviously the nest of some kind of huge insect like creatures it was still solid and erect after countless billions of years. "Still harder than concrete." Luri had told him.

There were several entrances, or more correctly holes they could have used to gain entry, but Delmus chose the one with demon blood around it. He wanted to find the creature who'd ejected the demons from its home, so it seemed sensible to follow their trail. Dolen didn't ask for a rest, or make any last minute plea; he just followed quietly behind Delmus.

"We're going the right way." Said Delmus.

Demon armour and clothing seemed to be everywhere and they realised there had been more than four of them when they came across the partly eaten body.

"What could do that to a demon?" Asked Dolen.

The flesh was ripped from the bones and even some of the bones themselves seemed to have been chewed. Alarmingly from the struggle marks in the dust, the demon seemed to have been alive while it was being eaten.

"Let's keep moving."

Down, always down. They followed the blood and abandoned clothing and weapons until they came to another dead demon body, this one still had a creature feeding on it. Like a giant spider it stood over the body on eight enormous legs and pulled at the demon's flesh with several rows of sharp metallic looking teeth.

"So you brought my tribute?" The creature said.

Delmus had no idea what it meant by tribute, but he was certain they'd now found Charadask. If that was an individual? For all he knew it might be the name of the type of creature and here was the last of the Charadask. The voice was broken, but for an insect it was still quite clear and the language was perfect Menderan.

"You have something in return?" Asked Delmus.

"Yes, Yes, you'll get the information the eternal requires."

The creature moved with a strange motion, almost as though it was operating by clockwork. It knelt over Dolen and sniffed at him, then it prodded at him with a single pointed leg.

"Enough," said Delmus, "give me the information I came for."

Dolen had his hand on his short blade, but seemed almost hypnotised by the creature. Charadask made a clucking sound and ran off up a side tunnel at some speed. Delmus assumed he'd gone for the information and was pleased that the insect like monster was carrying a small box when he returned.

"Take!" It said.

It thrust the box at Delmus, who examined it but couldn't see any way to open it.

"He will be able to open it. Would I dare to send an empty box to the one you serve?"

Delmus had to admit he had a point and with some reluctance he told the strange creature he could have Dolen.

"What are you going to do with him?"

The creature gave a strange snort as though it had been asked a ridiculous question.

"Eat him of course, it's the only way to absorb the power within. First the skin comes off and then I can eat the flesh."

Dolen suddenly seemed to wake up and looked pleadingly at Delmus.

"There must be another way?"

Delmus had his sword half out of his belt and was ready to fight the Charadask.

“Don’t be silly,” it said, “you can’t harm me and I know your orders. Now obey them and take the box back to Mendera and leave me to my task.”

“Please ! For pity’s sake.” Cried Dolen.

“Can’t you at least kill him first ?” Asked Delmus.

“No. Now be gone before my patience runs out with you !”

Delmus had no option but to leave. He had his orders and he knew the Charadask, for all its horrors was an ally of Sikush. He started to walk away and did his best to ignore the constant pleading from Dolen. Delmus made it to the end of the first tunnel before he heard the first sound of skin being ripped from flesh and the scream that followed it. He turned to go back, but realised there was nothing he could do. Delmus was blessed, or in this case cursed with demon hearing and he heard every piece of skin ripped from flesh, every bone cracked, every scream for mercy.

“I never even knew his first name.” He muttered to himself.

The sounds stopped just before Delmus came out of the Nest and onto the rift. He wanted to sit down in the dust and cry, or at the very least curse the luck that had given him the assignment. Delmus though was one of The Damned and he reached for that inner certainty, the self-assurance that all that mattered was the security of the empire. He pulled out the rift manipulator and tore a door home out of reality.

“Fuck you Dolen.” He said as he stepped into the portal.

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Sikush looked at the partially ruined palace of Abalexis and realised that in all the mental pictures he’d had of this situation, the palace was always completely intact. He’d wanted to win the battle and be pictured in front of the pristine building, but real life often refuses to play the game and a good part of the palace was now destroyed, long trails of smoke rising from the wreckage. No one had targeted it, but with so much ordnance missing its target, the inevitable had happened.

“Damn thing !”

A broken set of power armour lay on the ground in front of him, its owner now long past worrying about how the battle went. Every few minutes the armour tried to rise on its own and started making an annoying buzzing sound. Sikush hit the power packs with his sword and the noise stopped. Luri was next to him, any closer and she’d be inside his cloak, but he had told her to stay close. Kittara still wasn’t here, where was that girl ? Probably helping Babak work out how the Kivar had arrived at the surface so fast, as if it mattered now ?

“Thank you Delmus.”

He watched Delmus walk away after handing him the box, he seemed his old self. He knew the price the old sorcerer would need for the contents of the box and how he intended to extract the power of the Chinnura from Dolen. It can’t have been pleasant for Delmus, but he took up a position a few feet away and seemed relaxed. As to the box ? Sikush knew it contained just a single sheet of paper with a few words only he and the ancient creature could read. Charadask had given his allegiance to the empire for the entirety of the coming war between the deities and he would make a formidable ally. Worth a hundred of Dolen ! Would he have given him Luri for his loyalty ? No, that would have been too much of a cost.

A lone Kivar fighter plane appeared in the distance, perhaps it was the last in the city that was still flying ? He hadn’t seen any Kivar aircraft in nearly two days. He nodded at Delmus as he thought he probably needed a good clean kill. Delmus simply looked at the aircraft and it became a cloud of super-heated gas. Effective, but disappointing, he’d been hoping the RM9 might have played a part in the proceedings.

“Where are you ?” He asked Kittara over their link.

A feeling of warmth over the link, a hint of affection, but no words. He’d just have to be patient. There had been several scenarios when they’d worked out this stage back on Mendera. If resistance was still strong they were going to destroy the palace and use large numbers of The Damned to find the president, who was no doubt hidden away in a bunker miles beneath their feet. If no one came out to oppose them, as was now the case, there were no less than five options, but he was now planning on a 6<sup>th</sup> that no one but him had heard of.

“Sorry.”

Kittara kissed him on the cheek and took up position a few feet to his right. Kissed him indeed ! Sometimes it felt like having a wayward daughter, but he now had a smile on his face. Babak appeared way to the rear and Chlo told him that all the ‘elite’ were now with him. Not that there was an elite of course, but if there was one it was now stood watching him and waiting for the next move in the game. Sikush turned and looked at them, giving Nurigen a small wave as he saw the old Weaponsmith leaning on his daughter. Very brave for a non-member of The Damned to be right in the heart of an enemy city. He’d have to think of a way of rewarding such valour. Babak stood alone, still brooding over his loss. He needed action, a good war, and as luck would have it one was about to arrive.

“Friends,” he began, “we have nothing left to prove here. I’m ordering all forces to return home.”

They all looked at him with questions in their eyes.

“Go, go home.” He said to them.