

Mendera - Empire

Chapter 3 – Mendera

“He had forgiven and trusted her, and Chlo had repaid that trust many times over.”

Elthriaxer was getting very tired, but the last few main blocks had to be put in place to finish the roof of the ‘Official Flame’ temple. Sikush had asked them not to use the term ‘fake’ to describe the huge temple he was building that could accommodate half a million people. This was just one chamber of the complex they now all called The Temple, which would eventually fill one hundred square miles, most of it beneath the surface of Mendera. Here would be the Official Flame, which would be a magnificent fifty feet high, and be flanked by jewelled thrones for the higher clerics. The real flame was in the small chamber just down a very short and poorly lit corridor.

“We’re not hiding it,” said Sikush, “but there’s hardly room for us in here, and we need somewhere that can handle mass meetings.”

That meeting had been six, no seven months ago, just after the heart of the Temple had been brought down from Leviathan and buried four miles down into the cold crust of the planet. Now seven months had meaning to him, but at the beginning he had wondered why Sikush had chosen this harsh, hot, desert world ? It had a slow rotation, so the days were thirty four of the old Imperial hours, the year was four hundred and fifty five days, so Sikush had decreed there would be thirteen months of thirty five days. They’d only just finished thinking of names for the months, and most seemed to be named after famous Empire warriors, the month they landed being called Mardoun. The place was so hot, why build a capital in the worst desert the miserable rock of a planet had ? If the heat didn’t keep him awake the length of the night did, no one could sleep for the seventeen or so hours of darkness and most of the Arcadians now split their sleep into two manageable chunks, but he was still having trouble finding a routine that worked.

“Cheer up Thrax, the roof will soon be done.” Said Chlo.

Having Chlo as constant companion was one of the best parts of refusing to have the super warrior conversion. Sikush had asked him several times, but he was already immortal and he quite liked the idea of having more children one day, not that he knew where any of his several existing children were. Luri had said the pain was bad, and the Arcadian’s who’d been converted were already using the name of ‘The Damned’, so he’d decided against it. So no conversion meant no mental link to Chlo, so she was with him all day, and often all night too. He even quite liked her calling him Thrax, which had become the usual way people now addressed him.

“We need two blocks of the dull red now Chlo.” He said to her.

He watched the perfectly formed stone blocks appear out of nowhere and seemingly fit themselves into place, perfectly finishing the roof and the pattern that went around the roof. Chlo had gone with him to see the local stone that Sikush was quite keen on, and she’d quickly learned to duplicate it in blocks of any size and shape. He remembered the few instructions he’d had from The Chalné.

“Build to last forever ! Herusher and Lewin know the correct holy ratios and they can advise you, but most of the city will be up to you to design. Make it timeless.”

Herusher had only just been converted and seemed to be having trouble adjusting, so in the end it was he and Lewin who had discussed the required proportions.

“Use Genfor,” Lewin had told him.

After looking at some of the forbidden texts he had worked out that Genfor was the same as the demon Empic, and meant the ratio used by the Multiverse itself, and was about 1.61. Armed with just that and many engravings of long dead cities in the forbidden texts he had started to build. First the great outer wall that would mark the extent of Chlo's control zone and give a clear statement of permanence, then the next step was The Temple. Chlo approached him and gave him a long kiss. He was never sure if another version of her was kissing several other people, or if she slept with him because Sikush wanted her to? Whatever the reason he now just enjoyed her company and was glad the construction of the city was going to take at least two years, even with her ability to duplicate and manipulate matter.

"Sikush wants to talk to us," said Chlo, "is that ok? At the real flame in five minutes."

He nodded at her. Five minutes old time or new? he thought to himself, changing the multiverse was getting very complicated. They walked the short distance to the ancient chamber of The Flame and sat themselves on the floor beside it. Thrax put his hand into the cool blue flame and felt refreshed by it. Chlo had never tried to stop him, so he assumed it was ok and he spent a lot of their break times beside the flame.

"Thank you Thrax," said Sikush as he appeared, "I wanted to talk about the design of the well."

Thrax noticed Sikush had an armful of the old metal books that Chlo enjoyed digging through.

"I'd like something that looks very old, that is completely unlike the rest of the city."

He was pointing to an engraving on a plate of very dark green metal and Thrax could feel the darkness coming off the page. Sikush wanted this structure in Mendera?

"I can do that for you, with Chlo's help of course."

Sikush gave them both a huge smile and handed the books to Chlo, who received them as though they were the most precious objects in the multiverse.

"Do you want me to build the well structure before the housing?" asked Thrax.

"No. The Temple, then the housing, then the well, then at the very end my palace. There will be other buildings, but they can be built as required."

Then he was gone leaving them feeling like they'd been buffeted by a whirl wind. Thrax rested his back on the chamber wall and noticed that Chlo was busily reading everything she could in the books. She looked over at him.

"Much of this is new to me and some of it I can't read, but I'll store it until I can."

So Chlo didn't have access to all the forbidden texts? He'd always assumed she had. He asked her for some of his favourite stew, none of her vegetarian stuff for him, he liked meat in his meals. The main hall for the 'Official Flame' was now finished, so Sikush could have his first meeting of all the people of Mendera whenever he wanted. Why the name Mendera? Chlo had a rare but lengthy moody spell when he'd pushed her on that and Luri had gone very quiet when he'd asked her. It ran off the tongue well though and the Arcadian's seemed to like it. Mendera City on the planet of Mendera, and he was building the city that would outlast the stars.

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Two hundred and forty three days Sikush had made her wait on Mendera, before he'd let her go off in search of new recruits and it had nearly driven Luri crazy. The damn Genova, or the Angels as the Arcadian's called them were so difficult to deal with, but they were proving very useful.

"He is over there, about half a mile." An angel whispered to her.

Was it the same male who spoke to her before? She had no idea, but had worked out that it didn't really matter. Only Sikush seemed to be able to name individuals of the strange semi corporeal creatures.

“There are hundreds of thousands of them Luri and we are short of resources, so use them. They can go anywhere, can remain unseen and they’re fiercely loyal.” He had said to her.

He’d failed to mention the bit about being almost impossible to tell apart and the annoying habit of vanishing completely at the worst possible moment. Perhaps having seven months to hone her skills and gain the patience to work with them had been time well spent ? Luri was now getting close to the outskirts of the City of the Lost God, with all its demon inhabitants, so she matched her body temperature to the air temperature and moved silently along the drainage ditch. Oh how she loved her new body ! No longer the need to pee, breathe, feel cold, eat or feel weak. Ok forget weak, the last time she felt weak was on her 5th birthday. Yes she did still eat and pee, but only because she wanted to and that was what made it sensational ! She had never felt so in control and as a self-admitted control freak, that was bliss. One of the Genova crouched beside her, a young female and Luri was getting to know this is one, Smilenta ? She seemed to be the one Sikush always chose to accompany him on this kind of thing.

“He is home, but there are guards.” Smilenta told her.

“How many guards ?”

The Angel gave her a curious look.

“This Delmuninager is your friend ?” Asked Smilenta.

No one called him by his full name and he was Delmus to everyone. Yes he was a sort of friend to the old Luri, who had shared a bed with him for a few years, but would he be a friend of the new Empire friendly, Genova accompanied Luri ? Deep down Luri realised this was going to be less a recruitment and more of an abduction.

“It’s complicated,” she told the angel, “can you give me a layout of the house and where the guards are ?”

The angel nodded and vanished. Luri remembered her instructions from Sikush.

“We need more like you. Not pure blood demons, but those with mixed blood, whose natural reaction is to turn to other people in times of trouble. Immortals would be nice, skilled fighters, but it’s important that they are willing to take an oath to the Empire.”

Delmus was a good fighter, an immortal with mixed blood. As to a willingness to serve the new Empire ? Well, in troubled times you couldn’t expect everything. As Luri reached the first rubble strewn street an eight legged demon walked within a few feet of her and didn’t notice her. Luri hated the eight legged lower level demons, who crawled along the ground like insects.

“Battle fodder.” She spat under her breathe.

This part of the city had been destroyed and rebuilt many times during the constant battle for ownership that went on over the city, between demons and people. In the distance she could see the towers and domes built by Thrax, but here the outskirts of the town were poorly built. No one seemed keen on clearing up the rubble and Luri used it to approach the home of her old friend unseen. She just hoped the Genova would remember to stay invisible in this city, or the whole place would be in uproar. Angels in the demon capital of the first rift. It was unthinkable.

“We gave Chlo the information you seek.” She heard in her ear as the angel invisibly moved through her.

Luri felt for her link with Chlo and was given the layout of the house and the position of the four guards. Four guards ? Delmus had always been a fairly low level body guard who took on the odd assassination to cover his betting debts. So why all the guards ? Luri silently walked up to the outside wall of the house and found the place nearest to the first guard. On Garanesh the building would have been a two story hovel, but here it was one of the best built structures in the area. She un-

sheaved the demon blade Sikush had given her and moved her reality to the inside of the building. She almost collided with a member of the guild of assassins in full armour. She grabbed the man around the throat and thrust the demon blade through his chest. Her opponent was dead, but the other guards must have heard the commotion. Why did Delmus have pure blood people as guards? Members of the guild too?

“Back.” Said Chlo.

Once again the enforced seven months of training paid off and Luri instantly pushed herself flat against the wall as the arrow missed her head by a fraction of an inch. She felt for the link with Chlo and moved herself to the other end of the passageway and hopefully behind the second assassin. It worked and Luri silently appeared behind a woman aiming another arrow at where she'd been. Now she had time, Luri could kill silently and she put her arm around the woman's throat and crushed her windpipe. Sometimes there are uses for demon strength she thought, as she gently lowered the dead body to the ground.

“If this is a friend, how bad are visits to enemies?” Chlo asked her.

“Any idea where the other two guards are Chlo?”

The passage turned right and went up a flight of stairs, but something about the stairs worried Luri. They were just a bit too open, a bit too inviting. She went back and picked up the dead woman's body and put it over her shoulder.

“Three hot bodies upstairs, so they're not demons. I'm guessing one is your friend.” Said Chlo, with a strange emphasis on the word friend.

Luri took the body of the dead assassin off her shoulder and threw it a good distance up the stairs. Instantly there was a series of loud bangs and numerous spears came from above and pierced the dead assassin. Expensive stuff traps, thought Luri and rare for the guild to use them. Luri asked Chlo for the safest spot to avoid detection on the second floor and moved her reality there. She arrived in an upstairs passage and in front of her another male assassin was staring over the banisters at the stairs.

“Why would she use the stairs? She knew about the traps.” Luri heard her old lover Delmus say from one of the rooms.

Luri walked behind the assassin and saw the last one on the opposite side of the stairs, he too was looking at the dead body on the stairs. She wasn't in the mood for a long drawn out battle, so Luri thrust the demon blade through the chest of the assassin in front of her and felt for the switch in her mind for the fireball spell. Sikush had trained her in its use and she'd done well in practise, but real life was different.

“Awesome!” She said out loud.

The last guard was hit by the fireball and completely turned to ash, armour, sword, everything became a small pile of red ash.

“Useful for getting rid of bodies Luri.” Said Delmus.

Luri turned quickly, with another fireball spell ready, but Delmus was leaning against the doorframe of his bedroom and quietly looking at her.

“Why the fucking assassin guards Delmus?”

Delmus hadn't changed she noticed, he'd still pass for pure blood people just about anywhere. True he was taller than most men, but not tall enough to look out of place. Undressed and if you knew where to look and she did, there were bumps on his back where the extra arms had thought about growing, but luckily hadn't. Yes his skin colour was a bit the red side of fashionably tanned, but again not enough to get him hung in a colonial settlement.

“They weren’t guards,” he said, “they were hiding out here. You ok, you look thinner than I remember ?”

Thinner ! She just smiled at him. The conversion to The Damned had left her a good four inches taller and with a longer torso, yet all he noticed was her weight.

“Yeah I went on a diet. Why are the guild hiding out in your hovel ?”

Delmus looked hurt and looked around his home. It was probably the best house in the area, but as the area was the slums of The City of the Lost God, that wasn’t saying much.

“Things are different here Luri, look out of the window.”

She pulled the internal shutters back a bit and looked out of the window.

“There ! You can just see the horizon,” said Delmus, “the purple sheen, that isn’t normal and people say the rift is shrinking.”

She knew the rift was shrinking, but that the 1st rift was almost certain to survive, but she wasn’t sharing that information with him, well not yet anyway.

“I heard the rifts are shrinking, but why does that mean you need guards ?”

“I keep telling you Luri, they’re not guards. The rifts are shrinking, which has really annoyed some high level demons. All of a sudden they don’t want people in the rifts and even mixed bloods like us aren’t welcome. They’re all going crazy and more and more demons are arriving in the city every day.”

Luri could understand that and Chlo was confirming to her that the 1st rift now had about a thousand times the population it normally had, but it’s normal population was pretty low. The situation suited Luri well as she guessed Delmus would be looking for a way out of town, but Chlo was pestering her to ask him about something.

“Why not just get out of the city Delmus ? You have contacts everywhere.”

Delmus walked past her and closed the window shutters.

“To go where ? There are rumours that everywhere is shrinking, whole worlds collapsing.” As he spoke to her he sniffed at her.

“You are different Luri, what happened to you ?”

Should she tell him everything she knew ? Once she had him on Mendera it would be easier to get him to believe. Would the name have meaning to him ? Chlo was quite curious to hear if word of their new home had reached the 1st rift.

“I found a new home, somewhere they don’t mind if you’re part demon. You’d fit right in Delmus, will you come with me ?”

He walked into the bedroom and started putting on his boots.

“Where is this new home Luri ? Not that hell hole Garanesh I hope ?” He asked.

“No, these people helped me escape Garanesh. The new planet is called Mendera.”

Either Delmus was a very good actor, or he’d never heard of Mendera. He just carried on putting on his outdoor clothes and reaching under the bed for a blaster and a dagger. She was glad the name meant nothing to him, as she knew enough of the old demon languages to understand why Sikush had called his world Mendera. ‘Men’ meant our, or ours. ‘Dera’ meant chastise, whip or scourge. The Chalné was provoking the entire demon world by calling his planet ‘Our Scourge’. There was not the slightest doubt about who the scourge was meant for ! The Chalné was equipping himself for war from day 1 of the new multiverse and he was stating his intent to all the demon worlds.

“How would we get there Luri ? Everything is closed up tight here, even going out in the street could get me killed.”

Luri had him on her side now, after all there was nowhere else he could go. Then a Genova appeared next to her and whispered that a dozen or more low level demons were heading in their direction. Delmus sat on his bed and simply stared open mouthed at the angel.

“Looks like I arrived just in time. Someone has sent a group of low level dredgers to throw you out of town and they’re not far off.”

Delmus opened a cupboard and pulled out an empty bag, and then started to throw everything else in the cupboard onto the bed.

“No time to pack Delmus,” she said, “just grab anything you can’t live without.”

He went to argue with her, but obviously changed his mind and felt on top of the cupboard for a money belt and a small box which he shoved into his shirt. The blaster he rammed down his trousers belt and then he turned to her.

“Ready. Now how the hell do we get out of here ?”

Luri picked up the dagger off the bed, which he’d forgotten and pushed it down the side of his boot. Then she held him tightly and said the phrase that always made her smile when she heard Sikush say it.

“Hold on tight and close your eyes.”

He looked a bit surprised, but duly closed his eyes and Luri moved them both to her quarters on the Leviathan, just as the low level dredger demons began pounding on the front door.

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The Chalne stood at the entrance to the great bay on Leviathan and looked out at Mendera. No view through a screen, sometimes it was nice to stand behind the force wall of the bay and look straight out into space. Mendera with its four moons and blue ring lay before him. The general consensus was that the ring was the remains of a fifth moon, but as it was entirely made up of millions of ice particles, he thought a shattered comet was its likely origin. A hazard to navigation, but as it was rare and now almost a symbol of the planet to many of them, it would stay and visitors would have to navigate carefully.

“One hour to the ceremony.” Abijah almost whispered to him.

He noticed the young female Arcadian convert to The Damned briefly held his hand before moving closer to the force wall to get a better view. Were the new Guard genuinely gaining an appreciation of physical intimacy, or did they still feel very alone in a multiverse that was about to die ? He guessed the answer was a little of both. Chlo had been sharing his bed all the time lately, and even she seemed to have bad dreams. Or at least a version of Chlo shared his bed.

So the wall was finished and today the main chamber of the Temple of the Flame would be finished, then Thrax could start building homes so that they could all get off Leviathan and onto the surface.

“Why not seal up the Well ?” Herusher had asked him.

Sikush noticed how no one ever shortened Herusher’s name. His oldest friend seemed to have no real friends. Sexual partners ? Sikush found himself cringing at the thought. So why had he told Herusher the well was to remain ? After all he knew the risks of leaving a weak point in the defences, an entrance to the rifts actually inside their walls. Was it provocation to the demons and whoever else might arrive with the next multiverse ? Yes he had to admit it was.

“Still a few of the clerics who are ‘too busy to attend’.” Said Chlo over their private channel.

“Tell them I want 100% attendance or I’ll come and get them.”

Why was it always the clerics ? He knew he’d be saying that probably every day for, well forever.

Abijah was pointing something on the surface out to Babak the young male Arcadian convert. Lately the two of them seemed to accompany him everywhere and he guessed Herusher had ordered that

two of the Guard had to be with The Chaln  at all times. Not that he disliked the idea, as it gave him a chance to see the new plan through their eyes and reactions. He liked their new uniform of almost totally black fabric that Chlo had designed, it looked distinctive and professional. The left shoulder blade was left uncovered to show the single lightning bolt in a circle, which he'd started marking all the new converts with. He'd seen the marking appearing on the Imperial Raptor craft and the walls of their quarters on Leviathan, so they did see it as their badge. Luri had even asked him to put the mark on her, even though she knew it would sting like hell to have it done. Sikush felt for Chlo and moved his reality to the Well of Souls and noticed his two guards arrived only a fraction of a second after him. No stumbles, hands on daggers, alert, they were getting very good at this. Perhaps he would have a few of The Damned as his personal guard, as Herusher suggested. The problem was there were still so few converts and he was determined not to convert those who didn't have that certain spark of darkness about them. He'd had holy men and women, good men and women, now he needed warriors, he needed killers.

"Thrax seems to have started building here." Said Abijah.

Thrax did seem to have sent an advanced team to the Well and several large stones were laying on rollers nearby. As Sikush approached the Well he noticed his guards looked nervous. Here you could hear whispers from the rifts and if you could survive the journey, which most couldn't, you could travel from here to Gateway on the 7th rift and hurl a challenge at the demon gates. The journey was long and difficult, but the Well would take you to the 1st rift.

"Yes, Thrax is being thorough and efficient, as always." He said.

Sikush reached for Chlo and was told there would be no absentees from the ceremony. Sikush turned his back to the Well and looked back to the Temple in the distance, it looked so small. Should he have built the Sentinels first ? No, get everyone housed, get his palace built over the Imperial store that had been on the planet for many switches, then he'd get Thrax to build Sentinel Temples that would be the talk of the multiverse. Chlo was nudging him about the time, so he moved his reality into the main chamber of the Temple. Luri spotted him and was pulling at Delmus to bring him over for an official introduction.

"Sikush this is my old friend Delmus."

She was holding onto her friends arm and almost willing Sikush to approve of him. Sikush did like Delmus. The stubs of arms that he prided himself no one could see would be removed at conversion, but the demon strength and the darkness in his soul that he was trying to hide could stay, they would be very useful.

"Welcome Delmus to Mendera, and you've arrived on day zero of the New Empire."

Sikush could tell Luri was pleased. Delmus wasn't just her first foundling from the rifts, she obviously had feelings for him.

"Can I show him the true flame Sikush ?"

He was glad she had asked and in a few weeks the Temple would be sealed to all but the clerics who would live out their lives here and The Damned. By then Delmus would either be a convert to the Guard, or back on the 1st rift.

"Yes of course." He replied.

Luri took Delmus off to see the true flame and Sikush hoped he'd accept the conversion and give an oath to the Empire, but that would be a free choice for Delmus to make. There would be no conscripts in The Damned, just volunteers and those who accepted an invitation. Sikush made his way to the large golden throne in front of the giant flame that was intended for him. Lewin would do most of the talking, but declaring the first age of The Temple was his job.

“This is far better than the long wait.” Said Lewin.

Yes thought Sikush, it was. None of the clerics were immortals and countless generations living out their lives on Leviathan while the multiverse went through its slow and inevitable death throws can't have been a happy prospect for them. They'd have proper lives here, have families and Lewin would be the first head cleric of the new Temple on Mendera.

“Yes,” he replied, “and Thrax has made very good progress on the build.”

He looked at the rows of people standing in front of him, and the Genova who seemed to be constantly shifting in and out of reality and they seemed quite a large group. The small line of The Damned looked very impressive, he just needed many more of them.

“May I begin ?” Lewin asked him.

He nodded and the room came to a hush as Lewin rose to his feet and went through his speech. Sikush knew most of it by heart, as it had all been sent to him for Imperial approval. He'd made no changes to it and most of it was just thanking people like Thrax who had worked so hard to get the Temple built so fast.

“Don't let me nod off.” He told Chlo over their private channel.

It was strange to look at the crowd in front of him and the Genova flitting between them and he hoped Chlo was recording it all for posterity. Lewin was coming to the bit about the Temple being sealed after it was completed and asking those who wanted the honour of being the first clerics of The Flame to contact him. He didn't like the idea of generations being locked away inside the walls of the temple, but he wanted what the temple guarded to drift into legend and be forgotten, until no one was really sure if it was just a myth. Then it was his turn and Sikush rose to his feet and looked around the room. He was a past master at timing and knew just the right number of times to smile at individuals in the audience and acknowledge the applause.

“Welcome to the Temple of the Flame.” More applause.

Sikush's hand shimmered and he was holding a sheet of metal with Arcadian lettering etched into it.

“My first Imperial notice is to name this planet Mendera, and this city Mendera City.” More applause.

Several clerics came to him and took the metal sheet to the library, where it would become part of the forbidden knowledge and passed on forever. There must never be any confusion or lack of clarity about the naming of their home world.

“My next official duty is to declare today the start of the first age of The Temple.” Huge applause.

Sikush looked around at thousands of cheering faces and waited for them to quieten down. Then he continued in a less portentous style.

“The old Empire on Optilion wasn't tolerant of strangers and those who were different. The New Empire will be open to all and we should take delight in the knowledge that others will bring with them.” More Applause.

Sikush had intended to end there. It was traditional for the Emperor to say as little as possible in public, but he decided to continue.

“This Empire will be different, it will be an Empire of warriors and clerics working together. If the worlds we encounter are friendly they will have nothing to fear, but if they are hostile The Damned will show no mercy. As to whoever takes up residence beyond Gateway, let them tremble at the mention of Mendera.” More applause.

It was the right speech at the right time and as Sikush looked at the rows of smiling face he knew the plan would work. He also knew that before the end of this multiverse came, the demons would try out the Menderan defences.

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