

## Mendera - Empire

### Chapter 4 – The Well of Souls

**“Religions of faith and worship have always puzzled me. Surely a responsible deity would let you know they exist ?” – Elthriaxer**

The 4<sup>th</sup> rift had never been a hospitable place to visit, but now it seemed to be trying to set new records for unpleasantness. Luri and Delmus tried to get cover from the wind behind one of the few surviving bushes they'd come across. Lower down there was water, even streams and quite a bit of vegetation, but up here in the hills the hot dusty wind destroyed nearly all life. Even for part demons like them it wasn't easy country to travel in and to Luri it felt like the wind was constantly biting at her flesh. As the wind eased slightly she moved out of cover and looked up the valley.

“The fort should be at the top of the valley.” She told Delmus.

He nodded and they covered their faces and headed out against the hot wind. Communications here with Chlo were often impossible and the only way out was to get back to the rift entrance, which was now thousands of miles away. Chlo was very good at inserting skills and knowledge into their minds though, languages, maps, even the sound of voices. So Luri had a complete map in her mind of where she was going, and would even recognise his voice when they found him.

“Nurigen is a bit of an eccentric,” Sikush had told them, “he lives in an old circular fort high up in the hills of the 4<sup>th</sup> rift. He will honour his oath to serve the Empire, you just need to find him and give him this.”

Sikush had handed Delmus his Nurigen blade, with orders not to lose it. Luri had heard the famous weapon smith was dead, but she was beginning to realise half the rumours about the Empire were deliberate misinformation, and the rest were just plain wrong. They had seen a few low level demons just after entering the 4<sup>th</sup> rift, but they all seemed intent on escape, rather than fighting them.

“The rifts are shrinking very slowly,” Chlo had told them, “just a few feet every thousand years or so.”

Even so the local demons seemed in a panic and were all trying to get to the 1<sup>st</sup> rift as quickly as they could. Luri had always hated the 4<sup>th</sup> rift, with its orange horizon, but now the horizon was livid purple and seemed to be closing in on them. Knowing that feeling was an illusion, and the rifts would still survive for millions of years didn't help. She pulled the scarf from her eyes and could just make out the walls of the stone fort about fifty yards in front of them.

“There !” She shouted and pointed.

The fort had been part of a long line of defences built for a war that was so long ago, no one remembered who had fought in it, but as they approached the walls still looked solid and imposing.

“The door should be quite close.” Said Delmus.

As they walked around a curve in the wall they arrived at the doors. Two huge and well maintained doors that looked immensely strong and gave off an aura of magic to both of them. Luri simply nodded at Delmus and they both walked past the doors and approached the next section of wall. Nurigen wasn't an enemy and they had every reason to expect a friendly reception, but just knocking on the magically reinforced door seemed a bit foolhardy. Luri tried to contact Chlo and got nothing, so shifting reality through the wall was out, then Delmus pointed up at a window some eighty feet or so above them. They might need Chlo for the fancy stuff, but they both had the ability for a short levitation spell.

"I'll go first." Said Delmus.

Luri nodded at him, as it was his turn. She'd gone first when entering the yurt of a dredger demon on the 1<sup>st</sup> rift and she was still nursing the scars, so she quite happily watched as Delmus rose into the air and used the hilt of his boot dagger to break the window. As there were no obvious alarms, or sounds of fighting, she levitated herself up the wall and climbed through the window.

"Quite fancy for an old recluse." Said Delmus.

The room was obviously designed for a female, with the bed and furnishings covered in a soft pink fabric. Several long gowns had been laid on the bed, as though someone had been deciding on what to wear. Luri smiled when she noticed Delmus examining the underwear.

"I doubt she was dressing to receive us." Said Luri.

Sikush hadn't mentioned anyone female living with Nurigen and in her mind Luri had expected a kind of hermit living in a bit of a ruin, but as no one had seen him for billions of years, no one was sure what they'd find. Delmus tried the door and it was unlocked, so they quietly walked into the hallway. They'd had quite a lot of training from Herusher during the fifty million or so years since they'd been made members of The Damned, so without saying a word they moved to opposite sides of the hallway and walked soundlessly to the top of the stairs. From below came the sound of music and the odd chuckle, but not a human chuckle. Then they both picked up a warning to be careful, nothing in words, but just a feeling that they were being warned. They both came down the stairs very slowly and using a strong 'we're not a problem' though control, until they reached the bottom of the stairs.

They were now in the main hall of the fort and it was full of low and middle level demons. There was a huge fireplace at one end, which wasn't alight and in front of it was sat Nurigen. There was no mistaking him from the information Chlo had put in their minds, it was almost like seeing an old friend. He was flanked by two heavily armed medium level demons, who were taking it in turns to prod him with swords.

"Do that again and I'll kill you."

The words were spoken by a young blonde girl, who looked Arcadian to them. She was being prodded to play a device which looked like a lute and one of the low level demons was putting a claw up her dress. The demons have no interest in sexual acts with people, but Luri had often witnessed them use sex acts to humiliate and degrade. There must have been fifty demons in the hall and perhaps more in other rooms, but Delmus and Luri were finally happy. This was just the sort of battle they'd trained for, lived for. There might be little left of the hall after it, but the 4<sup>th</sup> rift was collapsing after all. No challenge was given, Delmus ran across the room as fast as he could, which was so fast it took him a fraction of a second to reach Nurigen. He would have liked to save the girl first, but their orders were to bring back the weapon smith alive, everyone else was expendable.

"Who are you?" Spluttered Nurigen.

Delmus had just Shattered the skulls of two mid-level demons with a sword Nurigen could have sworn was one of his and was now dragging him unceremoniously across the floor under one arm. The demons holding the girl were too shocked to react and both of them fell to easy blows from the Nurigen blade Delmus was using. Then Delmus pulled the girl to the ground and held her and Nurigen underneath him.

"Ready." Shouted Delmus, as he wrapped himself and them in a shield spell.

Luri had intended to wipe out the bulk of the demons with fireball spells, but instead she stamped on the legs of the nearest low level demon, crushing them into a green sludgy mess. How she hated the damn creatures! She then sent a fireball spell into the mass of startled creatures at the far end

of the hall, which hit the ashes and half burnt logs in the fireplace, sending sparks and flames amongst the already panicky demons.

"You next !" Shouted Luri at the nearest of the three medium level demons.

The demon with the crushed legs was still screaming and trying to crawl from the room as Luri cut an arm off the demon in front of her. As she moved in for the kill she sent off another fireball into the group of already burnt and dying creatures. Then out of the corner of her eye she noticed a medium level demon leading a group up the stairs and towards the window she and Delmus had broken.

"No you don't." She screamed.

She knew Delmus would keep Nurigen safe under the shield spell, so she ran up the stairs, just in time to see the demons jumping from the window. Quickly Luri sent a large fireball after them, which exploded a few feet outside of the broken window. Either one of the demons or a piece of debris must have touched the protection spell on the huge front doors. Luri found herself blown off her feet and flung right back to halfway down the stairs. There were now vast holes in the stonework at the front of the house and numerous small fires had started in the piles of debris blown into the main hall. Behind her Luri heard the sound of breaking glass, as the few surviving demons tried to escape through upstairs windows. As she went to pursue them Luri suddenly remembered Delmus and ran down the stairs and into the main hall.

"Delmus. Are you ok ?"

She pulled a burning cupboard off them and a few small pieces of shattered stonework and knelt beside the still crouched form of Delmus.

"Delmus !" She shouted.

Delmus released the spell and all three of them rose wearily to their feet and looked at what little remained of the fort.

"You made a bit of a mess of my home." Said Nurigen.

Where a small hallway led to the front doors there was now a gaping hole in the stonework of the building, through which the hot acrid wind was pouring in. There was still the sound of demons screeching coming from the back of the building, but Luri doubted any of them posed much of a threat. Delmus had found a surviving chair and was helping the girl to sit down, as her leg seemed badly bruised.

"Alyz let me look at that." Said Nurigen.

Alyz ? Delmus and Luri had been briefed thoroughly on the man they were sent to get and there had never been a mention of an Alyz. Daughter ? Mistress ? Luri finished off a few wounded demons as Nurigen expertly healed the girls leg.

"We were sent to find you, there was no mention of anyone else." Said Delmus.

"This is my daughter Alyz, and if she doesn't go, I don't go."

Their orders were to get Nurigen to safety, but the girl didn't look too heavy, so Luri exchanged a brief nod with Delmus.

"Ok we'll take both of you," she said, "that was some door trap you had there."

Nurigen looked a bit embarrassed.

"Er yes, it did seem a bit excessive, but I never thought anyone would be silly enough to set it off."

They all chuckled as they followed Nurigen down a passageway to the back of the fort.

"They got in here." Said Alyz.

There was a store room at rear of the building and it was full of debris where the back door had been broken in.

“They did this two nights ago,” said Nurigen, “they didn’t seem to want anything in particular, just food and shelter. They never did find this though.”

Nurigen pressed a brick on the wall and then another and a section of the wall folded back with a dry grinding sound, to reveal a set of stairs. Nurigen sent two light ball spells in front of them and took them down the stairs to his workshop.

“Most of the tools can be replaced, but these can’t.” Said Nurigen pointing at a sack.

Nurigen had obviously been planning to leave the fort, as various items had been covered in dust sheets and others put in packing crates. Delmus opened the sack to find three of the famous and priceless Nurigen swords inside.

“The sack can go with us now, then you can come back for the rest,” said Nurigen, “a few trips and all but the heaviest items can be taken to the Imperial store.”

Delmus looked at Luri and they both realised that Nurigen was expecting them to simply transfer him, his daughter and most of his worldly goods by instantly shifting their reality to Mendera.

“There could be a problem.” Said Delmus.

Alyz and Nurigen looked at their would be rescuers.

“We don’t have contact with Chlo,” said Luri, “we will need to get back to the 1<sup>st</sup> rift without her help.”

“But my equipment ?” Asked Nurigen.

“We could carry a couple of sacks each.” Said Delmus looking at Luri.

“Yes,” agreed Luri, “we can carry two sacks and the two of you, one each.”

Nurigen and his daughter exchanged puzzled looks.

“One each ?” asked Alyz, “how do you intend getting us out of here ?”

“We’ll carry you and fly to the rift entrance.” Said Delmus.

“It won’t be very comfortable and it will be cold,” said Luri, “do you have any warm clothing.”

Nurigen slumped himself into an old chair, while Alyz looked bewildered.

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Babak still didn’t enjoy cities. He and Abijah had been converted at the same time and usually worked together as a recovery team, but today she had been assigned to guard The Chalné. He knew Abijah would love the bustle and noise of the city he was walking through, but he had to check with Chlo to remember the name, Ouflan city on the planet Missen. Chlo had taken a lot of trouble to install the local language in his mind, and the mission parameters, so he felt guilty at not giving the mission 100%.

“The hospital is another four streets ahead of you, about three hundred yards.” Said Chlo.

Babak pulled himself erect and studied the streets ahead. None of the buildings were higher than four floors, and Chlo wasn’t picking up any radio broadcasts. Missen had electricity, primitive computers and he could see streets lights, but it was still a very entry level civilisation. This was just another routine mission and he knew the risks of not concentrating, they’d already had a death in The Damned. Sikush had warned them all about the effect of having their life targets extended indefinitely. Goals and wish lists set for attainment in a brief five thousand years seemed irrelevant when confronted with immortality. Had young Arran died of a mistake, or had he decided not to fight back ? Suicide by local militia had been hinted at and they all noticed that Sikush had slowed down the rate of new intakes from Arcadia.

“Are you looking for company ?”

The young woman in front of him was quite attractive and he wasn’t insulted by the offer. As he smiled back she put her arm on his.

"I have a place, it's not far." She said.

Babak was a bit taller than the locals and a bit more muscled, but it was winter in Oufan and in his thick coat he looked like just another local.

"I have somewhere to be, perhaps another time?"

He smiled at her and gave her hand a squeeze as he removed it from his arms.

"I'll watch out for you." Said the girl.

Good he thought, I'm back on form again, the proposition refused without gaining any unwanted attention from the locals or a row in the street. Not that the local militia here were anything to worry about, they only had very inefficient projectile weapons. Oufan wasn't an ex Empire city, it hadn't even existed fifty million years ago when Sikush had quit Garanesh. This whole civilisation had started since then and had no idea there was life on other planets. Had Sikush jumped too soon? Should the old Empire still be ruling the Multiverse? Babak often thought that yes, Sikush had cut and run too early, but he was one of the few dissenting voices.

"The big white building just over the next intersection." Said Chlo.

Babak stood and waited while a powered vehicle went past before crossing the street, the acrid smoke from a chimney on the vehicle making him cough. What could Sikush want from this primitive planet? They'd picked up converts from the rifts and high tech devices from the old Empire that Sikush was busy putting into the Imperial store, but this place? He entered the main doors of the asylum and walked confidently to the front desk.

"Long term high security please, I am expected." He said.

Chlo had already put his visit in their computer and provided him with a pass for the hospital. The receptionist prepared a plastic card for him and inserted it in a clear badge, which she handed to him.

"You are entering a maximum security area," she said, "you must wear the badge at all times. The guards will open the doors for you."

She pointed at a bored looking man who was stood in front of a very serious looking metal door.

Babak put on the badge and walked to the door.

"Wear your badge at all times." Said the guard.

Once the door clanged shut behind him Babak had time to look around. No cameras here, they hadn't advanced enough to think that 24/7 surveillance was a cool idea. Not that it mattered, as he doubted anyone would ever be back here again. In front of him in worn paint, on a grubby wall was painted 'high security' with an arrow pointing to his left.

"There are four high security cells, he could be in any of them, their records aren't that good." Said Chlo.

Babak knew the target, or rather person to be rescued was called Divad, Divad Ward. He had a picture of him that Chlo had obtained, but it was likely to be old and inaccurate, so he'd have to check all four inmates. He came to another door and another guard, this one armed with a large crude looking projectile weapon.

"Wear the badge at all times." Said the guard as he opened the door.

As that door closed Babak found himself another reception area with a unformed nurse sat behind a desk. As he approached he saw her look at him with a puzzled frown.

"I saw your name on the appointments for today," she said, "didn't we have a training course together at the central hospital two years ago?"

He could see the confused look on her face and her hand moving in the direction of the panic button, so he grabbed her and put her into a long sleep.

“Sorry nurse.” He said.

Of all the luck he thought as he put her gently back in her chair, to get the one damn nurse who knew the fucking guy I’m supposed to be.

“She will have routine check in times,” said Chlo, “you need to hurry.”

There was a hallway to his right and as he ran down it he came to the first cell. A child, a young girl who had been biting her own arm and left in filthy clothing. He moved onto the next cell, this one held a middle aged man who was sat on his bed and staring at the wall.

“Divad, is that you ?” Shouted Babak.

As the man turned towards him, Babak could see there was no resemblance at all between this poor wretch and the picture he had of Ward.

“Get me out of here.” The man pleaded.

Babak ignored him and turned to go back to the reception desk to try the hallway on the other side, as he did so he heard the metal entrance door open and a guard shouting.

“Esme ? Are you ok Esme ?”

Babak arrived back at the desk to find the nurse had fallen off the chair and was lying on the floor, and the armed guard was looking down at her.

“I can explain.” Said Babak.

It was an old line and he wasn’t surprised it didn’t work, but he was surprised when the guard lifted his weapon and started firing at him. Babak moved his reality next to the guard and put him to sleep for a few hours, but the shots were heard by someone and he started to hear an ever growing number of alarms.

“At least ten armed guards heading your way.” Said Chlo.

Babak could have killed them all, but then there’d be the local militia, perhaps even the military and he needed time and a bit of peace and quiet to find Ward. Besides he had nothing against the locals and didn’t want to kill anyone unless he really had to. Babak ran to the heavy metal entrance door and slammed it closed, his hand shimmered and he was holding a hefty looking long sword. Nothing special and nothing to identify it as ‘other worldly’, but it would serve his purpose. He jammed the point of the sword into the ground and put the hilt against the door handle and then he put all his strength into pushing the blade hard home. It wouldn’t take the guards long to break in, but with luck he now had the few minutes he needed.

“I bet he’s in the last cell.” He said to Chlo as he ran down the other hallway.

He was wrong. Divad Ward was in the first cell he came to and he was talking to two of the Genova.

“They said you’d come.” Said Ward looking at him.

The man looked quite lucid, but Babak wasn’t about to open the cell door until he was sure Ward wasn’t going to run up the hall screaming. Babak moved his reality into the cell and Divad didn’t even flinch. He was older than the picture showed, with long grey hair and a bit of a bulge around the waist.

“They said I was mad, seeing angels,” said Divad, “but you see them too, don’t you ?”

Seeing angels might have got him into the asylum, but not in the maximum security area, so Babak was still cautious.

“Yes I see them too. I need to take you out of here, someone wants to see you.”

As Babak took hold of his arm Divad jerked away. The old man had incredible strength, and Babak could see why they’d locked him up.

“There is something at my home, it’s important. We have to get that first.”

In his head Chlo was telling him to grab the old man and get out fast, but something was telling Babak this was important and the Genova were nodding at him and pointing at Divad.

“Are you sure Chlo, this sounds important?”

Then he sensed Chlo pause and perhaps there was a bit of confusion.

“Sikush says to go to Divad’s home and get whatever he needs.” Said Chlo.

The old man was now sat on the floor and rocking backwards and forwards, while down the corridor there was the sound of battering on the door. Babak did what the Guard are good at, he kept his cool and sat beside Divad Ward.

“We’ll go to your house I promise.”

There were now three very nebulous Genova floating around the cell and taking it in turns to whisper to Ward.

“I know, they told me. He has to listen to me, the Multiverse will protect the balance.”

He had no idea what the old man was talking about, but he got him to his feet and asked Chlo if she had any idea where his home was.

“I have it from the hospital records. I can put you just inside the front door.” She said.

Babak held onto Divad and moved their realities to his home on the outskirts of town. The guards were amazed to find no intruders in the maximum security area and the missing patient was the talk of the city for months.

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Abijah enjoyed being with Sikush. Herusher had been a good trainer and without the skills he’d taught her, she doubted if she’d have survived some of the recovery mission, but he had no understanding of people’s feelings. After a lot of tantrums and a few quiet words with Sikush, a small elite within the Guard were now allowed to set their own rota for being with The Chaln . Abijah was very proud to be one of that group.

“Chlo, be sure to say this piece is Rejjacy, or I’ll forget.” Sikush said to Chlo.

It all looked a bit primitive to Abijah, as Sikush and Chlo pondered over the wording on metal tablets, which were then taken away by one of the clerics in attendance. She’d never seen the forbidden section of the Imperial store busy before, yet today there were at least a hundred clerics and many version of Chlo to take them to the Temple of the Flame.

“When the multiverse goes, Chlo’s memory will go.” Sikush had told her.

So she understood why so much of the science and technology of the old Empire was being brought here and recorded, though according to Sikush it was only the smallest percentage of the acquired knowledge in the multiverse.

“Be careful, that’s dangerous.” Chlo was shouting at a young cleric.

Abijah had worked out that as long as she kept one eye on Sikush, he was quite happy for her to look at anything in the store and she enjoyed wandering around the shelves. It wasn’t as easy today, as Herusher kept popping in and out, often bringing Thrax with him. There was something about to happen, something big and the good thing about being close to The Chaln  was that she’d be one of the first to know when it happened. In one corner there was a small row of figure in the store, not statues, but real creatures held in stasis fields. Many of them she recognised as demons, Arcadian’s or people of the old Empire, but one always held her attention. He was huge and the top of his head almost touched the ceiling above. She always thought of the creature as ‘he’, but there were no obvious signs of gender. He was like a snake that had grown four sturdy legs to stand on and two arms to hold vicious looking weapons. His jaws were open and he seemed to be screaming defiance at whoever he was about to strike with a large axe.

“Impressive isn’t he ?” Said Sikush.

She hadn’t heard him approach, but she didn’t hear any reproach in his voice.

“Yes his is,” she said, “can I ask who he is ?”

“Before you stands Tomma-Goran, who created the City of the Lost God, and who is prophesied to restore the city to greatness one day.”

Abijah had seen statues of Tomma-Goran on Arcadia, but none of them had been as impressive as the real thing, now stood in front of her.

“On Arcadia we’re taught he’s one of the great Deities.” She said.

Sikush looked up at the colossal figure and seemed to shrug.

“Never judge by appearances Abijah. My old friend is here by choice and one day I may introduce you to him. As to being a Deity ? I often wonder if that word really means anything ?”

Sikush took hold of her hand and led her back to where Chlo was stacking artefacts.

“Stay close Abijah, I’ll have needs of your skills quite soon.” He said.

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“We’ll never get past all those.” Said Alyz.

They had trouble getting past the rift entrance from the 4<sup>th</sup> to the 3<sup>rd</sup> rift, but now the entrance to the 2<sup>nd</sup> rift was completely blocked by what looked like an entire demon army. Alyz had handled being carried while they flew at high altitude quite well, but Nurigen hated being frozen one minute and baked the next and he looked just about beat.

“No chance of contacting Chlo ?” He asked for the 4<sup>th</sup> time in the last two hours.

Luri shook her head at him.

“When we get to the 1<sup>st</sup> rift. Then we’ll be ok.” She said.

They’d landed halfway up a mountain that overlooked the plain where the rift entrance lay and it was cooler up there than on the baking plane. Below them past the foot of the mountain a long snake of demons marched to the rift entrance, not as part of rout, but they looked like a well-disciplined army. From the opposite direction another column of demons met them at the entrance and they were all slowly moving up to the 2<sup>nd</sup> rift.

“I don’t like this,” said Delmus, “they’re not running, they’re heading somewhere.”

Luri knew demon battle formations and that there were too many medium level demons down there for this to be an ordinary raiding mission. One of the demons spotted them on the mountainside, but Luri doubted if they’d send anyone up the near vertical face of the mountain to attack them.

“My father needs rest, can’t we wait here for a while ?” Asked Alyz.

“An hour perhaps,” said Luri, “then we’ll need to move on.”

She knew that the army below meant bad news to someone, and she had a bad feeling about where they might be going. Luri pulled at Delmus and took him a short distance from the others.

“That army is going to take a day to pass here, and then there will be others.” She said.

“Agreed. I’m assuming you have an idea ?”

Luri had been working on an old dark spell that Sikush had first shown her before she was converted. Dark Tears it had been called, though Luri thought Tears of the Damned was a more appropriate name for it. She’d become very good at casting very powerful tears, but she wasn’t sure about getting the proximity to friends right.

“How good are your shield spells ?” She asked Delmus.

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Babak transferred his reality to the front of Divad’s home and a few seconds later two of the Genova arrived.

"I'll need a few things." Said Divad.

Babak looked around the small house and was surprised that he recognised everything. A kitchen he could use, a bathroom, bookshelves, a large and comfy bed. He realised that although this civilisation had grown up with no contact at all with other planets, he could quite comfortably live in Divad's house. Was it the DNA seeding that the Empire always carried out after a switch and he'd heard Sikush discussing with Herusher ? That might explain the fact that many of the civilisations seemed to be made up of intelligent creatures with legs, arms, a head and eyes in basically the same number and position, but surely not the similarity in cultures ? Babak made a note to discuss it with Chlo once he was back on Mendera.

"Can you carry a case for me ? You look strong." Asked Divad.

The idea had been for them to make a quick trip for whatever it was that was so important, but Babak nodded at him and watched as the old man emptied the contents of a wardrobe into a couple of cases.

"Where is the object ?" Asked Babak.

Divad pointed to a bookshelf in the corner of the room and as Babak approached it, he felt the power coming from an old wooden box.

"Best not to open it," said Divad, "it hurt, deep in my head."

The old man was rubbing his temple, so Babak put the small box inside his shirt as Divad finished his packing.

"It's just a calling card," said Divad, "so he knows I'm from them, or so they said."

"Who said ? The Genova."

The old man shook his head and handed one of his cases to Babak, while he picked up the other.

"We need to go, company is expected." Said Divad.

Babak held onto him and moved their reality to within a few feet of Sikush in the forbidden section of the Imperial store.

"Divad, I'm so glad you got here ok." Said Sikush.

As Sikush held the old man's hand, Babak removed the box from his shirt and handed it to Chlo.

"Thank you for bringing the gift," said Sikush, "it may well help one of the Guard called Luri to perfect a spell she was working on. Now Chlo will take you to your quarters to get unpacked and settled in."

"But, but they're coming !" Said Divad who looked very distressed.

Sikush held the old man and instantly Divad Ward looked more lucid and alert.

"I'm sorry you took so much hurt from the gift," said Sikush, "they are on their way, but not today, so get some sleep and we'll talk later."

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Luri had let Nurigen have two hours sleep, but she didn't want to attempt the rift entrance after dark and the longer they left it, the more attention they were getting from the demons at the base of the mountain.

"They're getting very agitated down there," said Delmus, "we really should be moving."

They'd put the plan together while Nurigen and his daughter had slept, and even to them it sounded crazy.

"We have to go now." Said Luri prodding Alyz awake.

It took her several tries to wake Nurigen and he still looked very tired.

"He may be immortal, but he's not tough like you." Said Alyz.

Luri had always pictured the great Nurigen as a hero, slaying all the enemies of The Chaln  with one of his enchanted swords, and the truth was a very tired old man who sat and blinked at her.

“No more high altitude. You’ll kill me.” Said the old man.

The rift entrance looked very close, but Luri knew it was a good twenty miles from them. There was no curvature on the rifts and the strange shimmering lights on the horizon were tens of thousands of miles away. Luri sat herself on the ground and began to pull at the fabric of the multiverse, but gently so that she could weave the power into a spinning tear drop that hovered in front of her face. Luri carried on pulling power in until the tear had the potential to burn and destroy a considerable area, then she started creating a second tear. The creatures at the base of the mountain seemed to sense what was going on and a hush settled over them. Luri was tempted to weave a third tear and send it into their midst, but then the element of surprise would be lost.

“I need longer to rest.” Moaned Nurigen.

With the green sparkling tears in front of her face Luri took a firm hold of Nurigen and whispered in his ear.

“Take a good firm hold of me and keep quiet.”

Then Luri built up a strong shield spell around them and waited for Delmus to do the same around him and Alyz. They all lifted into the air and accelerated hard towards the rift entrance. The creatures below saw their intent and it looked like every demon left on the rifts was trying to reach the entrance and stop them escaping.

“Close your eyes.” Luri hissed at Nurigen.

They were now moving very fast and would be at the gate in less than two minutes. Luri released the first tear and sent it to the rift entrance. There was an old ruin there that had historical significance to both sides, and it was completely vaporised by the explosion of the tear. Luri knew Sikush would be unhappy about the rift sanctum being destroyed, but her first priority was to get Nurigen back in one piece. Below them the heat and force of the exploding tear had vaporised everything for several hundred yards around the entrance and killed most of the other demons in a two mile diameter. The next tear was more difficult and Luri had only a few seconds to send it off.

“Keep still.” She shouted at Nurigen who was fidgeting in her grip.

The next tear had to go through the rift entrance and explode on the other side, so that the similar massed ranks of demons were cleared out of their way. The problem was that to ensure the right path for the tear, it had to be sent off when close to the entrance, very close. Luri released the tear and remembered the sanctum on the other side wasn’t a ruin, it was a full blown temple, with several rooms and a courtyard with cloisters. Oh hell she thought, Sikush and the clerics were really going to be annoyed and there would a lot of masonry blown into the air. They skimmed the ground still traveling very fast and arrived at the other side of the entrance barely a second after the tear exploded. Luri and Delmus frantically tried to climb up and away, but the air around them was full of debris and demon body parts.

“Fuck !” Shouted Luri.

Something had hit Nurigen and he was gone out of her arms. She shot downwards trying to beat gravity. How high had they been ? A few thousand feet at most. Luri saw the limp form of Nurigen falling towards the ground and caught up with it barely a hundred feet from the ground. She grabbed him and turned on her back and accelerated up and away, sending fire balls through the lines of the demon army, vaporising many and sending most in their ranks running off in panic. Eventually she reached a safe height and saw Delmus circling around above her. They travelled

together at high speed for several miles until Luri saw a plateau rising from the rift that she recognised and she started to spiral slowly down towards it.

“Are you ok ?” She asked Nurigen.

There was no answer but she could feel his heart beat and the warmth of his body. She landed softly and gently lowered the old man to the ground, just as Delmus and Alyz ran over to see if he was alive.

“Some fucking body guard you are.” Said Nurigen as he propped himself up on his elbows and grinned up at her.

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Sikush walked past the entrance to the Western Sentinel and stood in front of the huge statue of Mardoun, which had been travelling with him for more switches than he could remember. Now you have a permanent home he thought. There were problems about building a permanent home here, in the one permanent bubble universe, huge problems, which was why he'd never considered it before, but those were problems for the next switch.

“Let's sit here.” He said to Divad Ward.

They sat on the stone seating that went right round the open air training ground for the Guard and watched as several pairs sparred with each other under the watchful eye of Herusher. Sikush noticed that Babak watched the trainee fighters, but Abijah sat on another seat quite close and only gave part of her attention to the fighting.

“Did you look at the gift ?” Asked Divad.

“Yes. It will help Luri immeasurably. Who gave it to you ?”

Sikush watched as Divad rubbed his head for an answer that just wasn't there. He knew who had given the ancient metal tablet to Divad and it was an object guaranteed to prove the credentials of the person carrying it, but Divad Ward was only a messenger, no more.

“I'm not sure.” Said Ward.

Luri would be able to use the knowledge on the tablet to perfect the Tears of the Damned, well once she'd settled in after returning from the rifts. They'd brought back Nurigen and his daughter safely, but destroying the sanctums ! The audacity, the impudence ! Sikush gave a smile and thought it was wonderful, just the attitude he wanted from members of The Damned. The clerics would mutter for years about the destruction of the sanctums, but in a hundred million years or so the rifts would be gone anyway. As to Nurigen having a daughter ! It was nice to know the multiverse still had the capacity to surprise him.

“So tell me the complete message.” He asked Divad.

“They just said to remember balance is essential. If you make your new Empire too strong then the balance will strengthen your enemies. Ultimately this could mean the deities themselves joining the conflict.”

So the multiverse would preserve the balance ! Sikush had never intended to wipe the 1<sup>st</sup> rift clear of demons, but perhaps protecting the entire planet of Arcadia from the switch was a mistake ? It had been their price for giving him the help he needed and nearly all the current two thousand, four hundred and seven members of The Damned were converted Arcadians. He was breaking a few rules keeping them out of the cosmic recycler, but he'd given his word.

“It didn't feel like orders,” continued Divad, “more like giving you information.”

No, the multiverse never gave orders, just a nudge in the right direction. Then there was the question of what to do with the messenger ? Divad knew no more than he was saying, but the clerics would drive him crazy if they go their hands on him.

“You have my thanks Divad, and a home here. What do you want to do now ?” He asked.

Sikush looked at the old man and thought how difficult his life was likely to be. Just an ordinary person, he now knew the multiverse was in its death throes, had conversed with angels and had been given a message from the multiverse itself. There really was no going home and pretending it never happened for him.

“A house like my old one, visits from the angels and a bit of garden. Is that possible here ?” Asked Divad.

If only all requests were that easy to deal with thought Sikush. He would give Divad a copy of his old house just outside the North Gate of Mendera, with a huge garden and he’d personally make sure the Genova made regular visits.

“Yes. That can easily be arranged.” He told Ward.

“The first trial will be soon.” Said Divad.

Sikush knew that the demon army on the rifts was heading towards Mendera, where else would they be going ? Soon the defences of the city would be tested. The four Sentinel temples were built, the Guard were few but more than capable of defending the city. There was Minraver if the need arose, but after the warning delivered by Divad, he decided the idea for the first trial had to be ‘less is more.’

“They’ll break through at the Well of Souls.” Said Divad

Yes thought Sikush, and the trick will be to make them think twice before ever trying to use that doorway again.