

## Mendera - Empire

### Chapter 5 – Panajarum

**“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.”**

Sikush was stood looking at the finished temple Thrax had constructed over the Well and it was a superb version of a Dark Age temple. Like all later reproductions it was too good, the originals were never as well finished, or as lovingly put together.

“You really want that over the Well ?” Thrax had asked him.

Yes he did, it was exactly the right thing to finish off what did look like a city from beyond the 7<sup>th</sup> rift. He turned and looked back the four miles or so towards the centre of the city and it wouldn't have looked out of place beyond gateway, Thrax had done a very good job.

“It's beautiful.” Said Luri.

He was stood behind her and leant forward to gently kiss her neck. With four moons you could always guarantee plenty of moonlight and three of them were shining brightly over Mendera City. The four sentinel temples were Thrax's greatest work, though the clerics were still murmuring disapproval. Yes they did look like the temples of the City of the Lost God, but they were stronger and built to last forever. Thrax himself had spent too much time in the western sentinel after the protection artefact had been installed and was now currently resting at Luri's mansion in the mountains. All the sentinels could be rough on the unworthy and entry would always be by invitation only. Thrax had spent a lot of time in the western sentinel finishing off internal details and he'd had his soul dangled in front of him for inspection one too many times.

“How is Thrax ?” He muttered in her ear.

“Better, he's still not his old self, but he's already designing a house for Delmus.”

Good he thought, at least he knew Thrax would be well out of the action when the attack came. He took her right up to the Well temple and sat on a low stone wall. He knew Abijah was close and four others, plus another hundred of the Guard watching while he was that close to a place of potential danger. Here he could hear the whispers coming up from the rifts, the mutterings of unknown creatures from beyond Gateway.

“Look !” Luri said pointing at the well itself.

The well was simply a deep fissure that ran at least five miles down into the crust of Mendera and acted as weak spot in their reality, a place where you could literally step onto the 1<sup>st</sup> rift and find yourself on a windswept hill overlooking a long dead village. He knew that if he'd taken that step now he'd find a vast demon army encamped there, awaiting the time when their leaders said the omens were just right for them to invade Mendera. Now as he looked where Luri was pointing he could see blue and red sparks jumping around the top of the well.

“They won't attack tonight, but perhaps tomorrow.” He told her.

No, the demons were cold blooded and would far prefer the hottest part of the day when Mendera city was baked by the desert heat. He leaned into her and kissed her neck, she responded and he asked her if she'd share his bed that night.

“Every night if you wish.” She answered.

Chlo and Abijah had long ago offered to set up a rota for him on who was to sleep with him, but that always seemed a bit clinical. They'd realised other guys weren't his thing, or threesomes, after a few tries to get him in bed with the twin Arcadian blondes.

"It can be very discreet and you'll get variety." Chlo had said to him.

He'd just spent over two weeks with Chlo as his constant sleeping partner and now he might spend the next two weeks with Luri. Was it unfair to the others? For all he knew they had partners and wouldn't want to be on a rota.

"Let's walk for a while." He said.

They started to walk towards the centre of the city and he wondered how much of the demon army could be fitted in the twenty square miles or so between the well and the Temple of the Flame? A million would be easy, even two, perhaps four or five million might come through? He'd specifically told Thrax to build nothing in that part of the area within the wall.

"A market would be nice there and a place for traders to land," he'd told Thrax, "but that can come later, for now leave the south of the city empty."

There was no real peril to the city of course and the demon army would be destroyed, the problem was the best way to do it for the optimum outcome with the fewest negative consequences. Chlo was designed for just this kind of thing, allow her to duplicate herself millions of times and with her innate savagery the job would be done in minutes. He'd seen what Chlo could do on Panajaram and he'd promised himself it would never happen again. The trick was to make it look easy, make the demon leaders decide that attacking Mendera would always be unthinkable. He was a showman after all, it should be easy. Everyone was convinced he knew all knowledge of every switch and that he understood all the forbidden texts, which was nonsense. All done by looking wise and the use of smoke and mirrors, being a showman.

"So Thrax has finished your castle in the Nikar?" He asked her.

"Yes," she laughed, "and it does look very like a castle. I wanted a few spare rooms and I've ended up with two wings, four turrets and a moat."

They both laughed, knowing that Thrax could get carried away and Sikush suspected the old architect wanted an excuse to spend time away from the sentinels and Mendera city. He stopped and looked at the city in the moonlight and gave Luri a long lingering kiss, even though he knew at least a hundred pairs of eyes were watching.

"Let's go to bed." Said Luri.

He transferred their reality to his bedroom in the huge royal palace. It was large for a bedroom with large windows so there was plenty of air, the usual shower room and facilities, seating and of course a large bed with plenty of cushions and pillows. The strange thing was the lack of a door. This wasn't for security, it was simply his way of stating it was a very private place and the only way in was by invitation. Luri shimmered and was naked, but she hesitated about showering, as she knew he didn't like her over sanitised. Sikush reached between her legs and noticed the blue sheen on the skin of her neck ripple with pleasure.

"I'm glad you were free tonight," He told her.

The newer female members of the Guard always tried to impress him in bed and he'd found that telling them to relax usually had the exact opposite effect. Luri knew what he liked and just as importantly he knew her particular desires. He shimmered out of his clothes and eased his fingers further into her and was rewarded by just the right perfume, the perfect tang of roused woman. They both tried to kneel down together and became a huddle chuckling on the floor. A less familiar partner would have been mortified, but Luri pushed him onto his back and looked down at him.

"Really nice dick." She said.

He watched as Luri began to expertly get his dick really wet and then his attention went completely as she gave him the best blow job he'd had in a very long while.

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They'd made love so many times that it was difficult to tell where one session ended and the next one started.

"You're always um, energetic," Said Sikush, "but tonight you seem really hungry."

Luri wiped the sweat off her brow and laid her head on his chest.

"Just in case it's the last time." She said.

Sikush knew there might be deaths in the forthcoming battle, but he doubted if Luri would be one of the fatalities, she was much too experienced and battle hardened.

"You'll be fine, it's the young Arcadians I'm concerned about."

Luri moved her head along his chest until her face was right in front of his, their noses almost touching and he could feel the sweat dripping from her hair onto his neck.

"You could use Chlo, she's very keen to defend Mendera."

How much should he tell Luri ? He'd locked them out of the common channel when they first entered the bedroom and the constant chatter had long since stopped. Chlo wouldn't hear anything he told Luri, but it would still be a betrayal.

"I can never use Chlo Luri, she's much too good at destruction. You'll just have to trust me on that, I can't go into details."

Luri looked about to speak, but then she kissed him once and fell to sleep where she was. He pulled a sheet over them and remembered Panajarum and its consequences. It had all happened many switched before, but it was so ingrained in his memory that it would never be forgotten and there were records in the forbidden store. Panajarum was one of those awkward non Empire worlds that kept needling at the edges of the Empire, a raid here, a kidnapping there. There was nothing inherently evil about them or anything to mark them as a pariah planet, they were just very high maintenance.

"I could teach them a lesson." Chlo had told him.

He'd seen the damage Chlo had caused on her own world and knew she was probably intended to be some sort of super weapon, yet since joining him in a kind of symbiosis she had never shown the aggressive side of her nature. He'd assumed the old Chlo was a blank page waiting to be written on and that the Empire had given her a set of basic moral parameters. That assumption proved to be wrong ! Not that the Empire was perfect, it did glory in war, but there were definite ideas about proportional response and the protection of civilians.

"Give them a rap over the knuckles." He'd told her.

Chlo had gone to Panajarum with a few warriors and warned them that any further incursions into Empire territory would be severely punished. Within a few days they'd sent a significant space fleet to cause disruption to a key trade route. Chlo reacted by destroying nearly their entire fleet and she thought the job was done, Panajarum given a beating, no more problem. She failed to understand their mentality and their internal politics. Their planet had its first ever global government and President Montello was trying to keep together the old hundred or so nations with thirty languages, any sign of weakness and the great experiment of global government would be over. He had sent a highly skilled and well trained invasion force to take over the nearest Empire mining planet.

"Chlo, this needs sorting out." He'd told her.

Sikush had still thought that it was just a skirmish over a piece of territory no one really needed and after a bit of sabre rattling the problem would go away and again he was wrong. Chlo used the warriors of the Empire to retake the mining colony, so President Montello sent a larger force to a

heavily populated planet of the Empire to appease his internal critics. The escalation continued until the Panajarum forces used nuclear weapons to take over a major planet of the Empire.

“Now you need to use large numbers of warriors Chlo, we need a quick solution.” He’d told her.

“It will all be over in no more than three days.” She’d replied.

Sikush had assumed Chlo would use the whole might of the Empire to crush the Panajarum armed forces once and for all. Three days later he realised his error. There had been complete silence from Panajarum and there were whispers on the rifts about huge ripples of reality disturbance being felt across the multiverse. Without saying a word to anyone Sikush had gone to Panajarum only accompanied by Chlo in her original form.

“What have you done ?”

The local sun was far darker than when he’d last visited the planet a few years before, but that didn’t really matter as the entire planet was now lifeless. There was no atmosphere, the vast oceans had gone, not a single living bacteria existed in the vacuum of space which now went right down to the surface of Panajarum. Sikush could see a few blackened ruins of buildings, but they looked like they’d been there for billions of years, and yet three days before three billion had called the planet home. Even the two moons had gone from the sky and the planet had shifted several degrees on its axis.

“They are no longer a problem.” Chlo had told him.

He looked deep into her mind and still found Chlo, but she was now in a very dark place. He’d given her the gift of being able to manipulate reality and she’d done terrible things with that gift, things he didn’t want details of. The Empire rarely talked about reality manipulation, but it was the key to their success. Why use huge amounts of energy to move a craft through space when you can simply move its reality to where you want to go ? Why generate electricity when you can manipulate reality to create a power block with a perpetual electrical potential ? Everything they did used reality manipulation, it was such a part of everyday life that they used it almost unconsciously, but never for destruction, until now.

“It’s my fault Chlo, I should have taught you better.” He’d said to her.

He held her as she looked into his eyes for a clue as to her error, and he realised that Chlo was the ‘perfect weapon’. She was a permanent blank page that would adapt to any situation and use any and all means to achieve the set goal. It took him many billions of years and a lot of patience to bring Chlo back out of that dark place, back to being the smiling girl who often shared his bed. He was determined that no matter what might be on the way, there would never be another Panajarum.

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Sikush was back in the Imperial store when the sentinels started to mutter and grumble for attention. He had been expecting it, the weather forecast when he’d showered with Luri that morning had been very hot and a sand storm coming from the east. Perfect weather for demons. He looked at the common channel and was pleased to see everyone was going through the well-rehearsed procedures with no sign of panic.

“Clerics and children to stay indoors.”

“Herusher to the roof of the western sentinel.”

“Wall shields to maximum.”

“Imperial guard to your assigned positions.”

The instructions were coming up at speed and being acknowledged and dealt with by whoever had been assigned to deal with them. Abijah appeared next to him with a determined glint in her eye and her hand on her sword hilt.

“Sir.” She said to him.

She looked ready and keen for the battle ahead and if the others in the Guard were as keen, he thought they might all survive the day.

“Stay close Abijah, I will be moving fast today.”

He moved his reality to the roof of the western sentinel and Herusher was already there. Thrax had constructed all the temple slightly differently and high up on the roof of the western sentinel he had built a walled platform where Sikush could watch the entire length of the training grounds in comfort, today it made a perfect place to watch the invading army.

“They’re trying to create portals for over a mile either side of the well.” Said Herusher.

“Then we should let our guests in.”

Sikush couldn’t order the sentinels to do anything, but he was very good at suggesting and nurturing ideas about action with them. He felt for his link with the sentinels and quickly quietened them down and had them lower their defences around the well. Abijah stood next to him and gasped as what looked like huge red holes being pulled out of the air around the well.

“Any change in orders Sir ?” Asked Herusher.

“No. I’ll let them in while there is room for them, then we attack.”

“It goes for miles.” Said Abijah.

For at least two miles on either side of the well the demons were ripping holes through from the 1<sup>st</sup> rift. Without the weakness point of the well it would have been impossible, but now they had enough portals to bring a large army inside the walls of Mendera. Chlo appeared next to him and held his hand.

“Keep the wall shield at maximum Chlo. Our guests don’t realise it yet, but they are the ones inside the trap.”

Then they heard the drums and saw the banners as the demon army stepped through onto the soil of Mendera. This wasn’t their natural environment and the low level demons looked awkward and uncomfortable. They weren’t used to the humidity and the reality they were in was constantly trying to rip them apart and only the constant work of high level dark mystics was keeping them alive.

“They look on fire.” Said Abijah.

“They can’t survive for very long here,” said Sikush, “but they didn’t come to occupy Mendera, they’re here to destroy the city and go home.”

Out of their reality or not the numbers of demons coming through increased, line after line of eight legged low level demons armed with long scythes, battalions of medium level demons in full battle armour and carrying demon blades. Between them the dark mystics ran back and forth renewing the protection spells, while numerous other creatures from beyond gateway slithered their way slowly towards the Temple of the Flame. Sikush knew they’d never release the power imprisoned there, but they’d take all the forbidden knowledge back beyond gateway and the multiverse would know an eternity of rule by the demons.

“See. The demons are trying to walk like men.” Said Abijah.

Sikush looked and some of the medium level demons seemed to having trouble staying up on their hind legs. The numbers kept growing and slowly the front row of demons got closer to the city.

“There are now over three million of them.” Said Chlo.

“Room for more yet.” Said Sikush.

The noise of their drums was now almost deafening and the thin drawn out line of the Guard who were there to stop them looked like ants trying to stand in the way of stampeding cattle. One of the demons sent of a fireball spell, which was easily stopped by the Guard. The demons were now close

enough to think about using bows and spells, but still Sikush waited. He turned Chlo towards him and looked at her.

“Almost.” She said.

The two thousand, four hundred members of the Guard were now under attack by spells and bows and soon the demon army would be on them. Sikush noticed a fireball spell hit Babak, who simply shimmered into a new uniform and stood his ground.

“That’s it,” said Chlo, “the entire demon army are inside the wall, all four and a half million of them.” Sikush felt for the sentinels and quickly made them think that closing the demon portals and keeping them closed was vitally important. Most of the demon drums continued as the portals slammed shut behind them, but Sikush noticed the dark mystics started to move back towards the well. Sikush leant towards Chlo and whispered something to her.

“Only if you are in danger, I know.” She replied.

Sikush turned to Herusher and Abijah.

“Time for us to join the battle.”

They vanished and Chlo issued the order to attack.

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Luri had stood and watched the approaching demons and quietly spun tears in front of her until eight were hanging in front of her face. Sikush had given her a box that contained the secret of how to spin them quicker, but there was a catch, there always was a catch. She’d need to learn the language of the long dead race who wrote it. She was excited and the long line of the Guard spread out to either side of her seemed excited by the thought of action too. Delmus was way off to her right, where he was protecting the cleric’s school. Herusher had put her dead centre of the line, right in front of the southern sentinel and she was in her element. Even the arrows and fireball spells didn’t give her any real concern.

“That the best you can do?” She shouted.

They wouldn’t hear her over the drums, but they did see the particularly insulting gestures that she did to them. Babak was about ten yards to her right and she’d just seen him shrug off a hefty fireball spell. Then the portals had closed and the order came she’d been looking forward to.

“Attack at will.” Said Chlo.

Luri sent her first tear off to near the well and realised she’d got the power of it too high as pieces of masonry flew into the air and crashed down among the creatures. Thrax will kill me she thought as she sent another tear off to her left and another to her right. Despite seeing the fire balls and bits of demon fly into the air she noticed that the drums kept playing. This army had good discipline she realised. The demons in front were getting close, so she used a firewall spell to drive them back, how she enjoyed the smell of burning demon that the breeze was bringing back to her. On her right Babak had used a firewall spell and was now advancing into the creatures and using his sword. The good thing was that the demons were so scared of him that they were leaving her alone too. Sikush appeared next to her and leant in towards her.

“The drums Luri, can you do something about the drums?”

Then he was gone with poor Abijah frantically trying to keep up with him. Luri could see a lot of demon banners waiving about nearly three miles to her left and she sent her forth tear at them. There was a pleasing plume of fire and the volume of the drums greatly diminished. It wasn’t very scientific, but she sent her fifth tear off towards a similar jolly looking group of demon banners in front of her and the drums ceased, to be replaced by the sound of demon screams and the crackling of their burning bodies. Noticing that there did seem to be a crush of creatures heading back to the

Well, Luri sent her next tear high and had it explode fifty feet above the well. It completed the job of destroying the temple lovingly built by Thrax, and at the same time fried thousands of demons trying to escape back to the 1<sup>st</sup> rift.

“They won’t get out that way, I’ve sealed it.”

Chlo was stood next to Luri and bringing up a screen to show her where the elite of the demon army were massing. The dark mystics and the strange part mollusc chaos spawn, all of them were trying to get as close to the southern city wall as they could.

“Here, and here.” Said Chlo.

Luri sent off her remaining two tears and effectively cut the head off the demon army by destroying those in command. Luri drew her demon blade and ran to join Babak in the slaughter.

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Delmus was just about as far west as you could get and still be inside the city walls. Here Thrax had built the school for the children of the clerics and it was rumoured many had wanted it built even further out, perhaps even beyond the wall. They were thinkers or warriors and neither type had a reputation for enjoying the noise of children.

“The children will be in the basement guarded by Arcadians, you shouldn’t have any problems.” Chlo had told him at the briefing.

To his left the Guard were strung out all the way to the eastern wall, but on his right they’d run out of The Damned, so about fifty or so of the Arcadians were grouped there like a kind of military book end to stop any demon desperate enough to stray that far. Then he’s seen a large group of low level demons heading his way, who seemed to be accompanied by a good dozen medium level demons. Delmus had checked the common channel and everyone seemed busy, so he flagged up that the ‘quiet babysitting’ assignment was about to hot up.

“I’ve got a lot of company on the way Chlo, if you’ve got any backup ?”

Later on the consensus was that the demons saw an out of the way building with a huge number of warriors guarding it and assumed it must hold something worth having. They hadn’t differentiated between everyday Arcadian warriors and The Damned and just assumed there must be one hell of a treasure in the school house.

“Got my hands full, will try to get to you soon.” Herusher put on the common channel.

Delmus watched as around three thousand heavily armed demons, complete with drums and bright jolly banners headed his way. Then he got a good look at the banners and realised these were the ‘Mark of Purity’, the damned shit heads who’d tried to run all the mixed bloods off the 1<sup>st</sup> rift. He had a score to settle with these guys and he had a bright new Nurigen sword given to him by Alyz. As the demons reached about twenty yards from him Delmus reached for a switch in his mind and built up a firewall spell. He could generate larger walls than Luri, but it took him longer, so he stood his ground as the arrows started to fall around and on him.

“Burn you bastards.” He shouted.

The firewall was impressive, about eight feet tall and as hot as furnace. It killed the first four ranks of low level demons and badly injured two dark mystics, but most of the medium level demons were very good at countering its effects. As the sound of drums died Delmus lifted the Nurigen blade and hurled himself into the centre of the demons. He cut the head off a medium level demon and then hacked its body into pieces in a frenzy of rage. After being chased and persecuted for months on the 1st rift, he now had a chance for pay back. Delmus faced up to another nine feet high brute of a medium level demon in full armour and the Nurigen cut through the creatures armour as though it was butter. The eight legged crawlers were constantly jabbing at him with lances, but none of it was

doing him any serious damage. Yes he could see spots of his blood on the ground, but fifty million years of scrapes and raids had taught his body how to deal with damage from conventional weapons, so he laughed at the insignificant wounds on his skin and attacked a group of three dark mystics. As he took the head off one he felt something pulling at his arm.

“Delmus, Delmus.”

He ignored the words in his head and cut the talons from the creature of hell that was trying to get its hands around his neck.

“Delmus, the school Delmus.”

This time there was pain in his arm, really bad pain. He swung around, sword at the ready.

“Delmus, you need to help the children.”

The red mist eased from his mind and in front of him was Chlo, looking as calm and fresh as though there was no battle going on. He looked past her and saw a line of demons heading for the school doors.

“Yes. I’m sorry Chlo, I’ll go now.”

He ran towards the school scattering any demons who dared to get in his way, but he arrived too late to help the Arcadians who had stood with him. All fifty of them were dead and many had been brutally dismembered. The school doors were now broken open and the end of the line of demons was vanishing inside. Delmus moved himself to the basement of the school and hoped he’d be in time. When he arrived the bulk of the demons were finishing off the Arcadians who’d been left to guard the children, but one truly huge brute of a demon had just bitten through the neck of a young boy. As the nine foot high demon dropped the dead child to the ground it picked up another. Delmus could have stabbed it in the back, but he had a code of chivalry.

“You should have stayed on the rifts.” He shouted.

The demon turned, but hung onto the child, a girl of about 5 and brought her body up to its jaws.

“The rifts will soon be gone, but all these.....these children will die.” The creature replied.

Delmus had a code, a code taught to him by Herusher, but on this occasion Herusher chose to ignore the code. He appeared behind the demon and with one blow he severed the creatures head from its shoulders. The little girl fell to floor and passed out, but looked unharmed.

“Wake up Delmus, we have work to do.”

Herusher rushed past him and started hacking at the demons who were still trying to get down the stairs. Delmus joined him and side by side they cut at demons until the stairs were green and slippery with demon blood and they emerged from the school doors and into the sunlight of a Menderan afternoon.

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Sikush had been running poor Abijah ragged as she’d tried to keep up with him as he went around the battle encouraging here and giving a helping hand there. The news of the school invasion had reached him when he was busy elsewhere, but he was aware that Delmus and Herusher had dealt with the invasion and were still guarding the school. He’d been dealing with an attack on a house in the 8<sup>th</sup> circle. When Thrax built the city he’d started with the Temple of The Flame and then built sixteen circles of housing around it and for some reason a few stray demons had picked the house of a harmless civil servant in the 8<sup>th</sup> circle to break into. By the time Chlo picked up the alarm and he’d arrived the family had all been killed and with Abijah he’d been left with the job of killing all the demons in the house.

“Why would they do this ?” Abijah asked.

The father, mother and two children had been literally pulled apart and there seemed to be parts missing, probably eaten.

“Their commanders are dead, so they’re just behaving like raiders.” Said Sikush.

He’d returned to the sentinel of the south and watched Luri hacking her way through the mass of demons.

“Time we got our uniforms dirty.” He said to Abijah.

They moved themselves between Babak and Luri and joined in the battle, which was fast becoming a rout. Looking to his right he could see a group of semi organised demons, but he ignored them and just kept alongside Luri as she fought her way to the well.

“There are a lot of chaos spawn.” Shouted Luri.

There were more and more of the part mollusc creatures as they got deeper into the demon ranks and it meant to Sikush that they must have been very certain of victory to bring the dwellers of the lower rifts with them. The ground beneath their feet started to crunch with demon shell and they were having to climb over demon bodies to get at new enemies, when suddenly it began to end. A few demons lay prostrate and threw away their weapons, then another. It was like a contagion moving from one group of the creatures to another, until the whole battle field was full of demons hugging the ground in a submissive position. Sikush was at a loss as to how to handle it as there was no demon chain of command, no leader to agree terms with.

“Thrax, they killed Thrax.” Chlo was telling him in his mind.

He knew Luri would have picked up the news and wasn’t surprised when she appeared next to him as he moved to another part of the battlefield. This was deep into the battle, almost up against the city wall, what was Thrax doing here ? Lying on the ground was a body in Arcadian full armour, a dented and bent sword still in its hand.

“I took the helmet off to identify the body.” Said Chlo.

Looking up at him was the face of Thrax and by the condition of his sword and armour he’d put up a very good fight.

“He told me he was staying at my house.” Said Luri.

Luri knelt beside his body and looked at the prostate demon only a few feet away. It didn’t matter to Luri that the demon who had killed Thrax had already been killed, Sikush could see she wanted vengeance. If terms had been agreed he would have stopped her, but she needed this and if the situation has been reversed the demons would have killed all prisoners.

“Only this one Luri.” He said to her.

Luri nodded at him and gently removed the sword from Thrax’s hand and walked over to the demon. It screamed as she started to cut off its legs and only stopped screaming when she cut through its heart several minutes later. Luri threw down the sword and gave one long piercing scream. He watched as Chlo took the body of Thrax for storage in stasis with the other dead, they could be buried later, but he had half a million prostate demons to deal with. Sikush moved himself back to where Babak was patiently waiting and started a dialogue with the sentinels. It was a strange request, but they could see the benefits of clearing the demons from Mendera and they reopened the portals to the 1<sup>st</sup> rift.

“Go home.” Sikush shouted at the demons.

As they saw a means of escape open up the demons didn’t need much encouragement to go home. A few snapped at the Guard and were killed, but the majority of the half million or so survivors were pushed back onto the 1<sup>st</sup> rift. As the portals slammed shut Sikush looked at the millions of dead demons around the well, some of them still twitching. He called Chlo to him.

“Once our dead are taken care of, sweep these creatures into the well and burn the remains.” Sikush looked at the details on the common channel and realised they’d had very few casualties. The demons had lost about four and a half million, yet they’d only had about four hundred Arcadians killed and forty of The Damned. The civilian casualties had been very small, but the loss of three children was the hardest to come to terms with. Chlo slept with him that night and voiced a question no commander ever wants to hear.

“Was it worth it?”

They almost shared a single mind, so she knew the answer even though she fell asleep before he could give it. Yes it was worth it. The demons would never dare try that route again and they’d been thoroughly humiliated. Had it been too easy though? Perhaps it had and that meant the balance was likely to give his enemies a few new players in the game, but for now he was content.

They didn’t hold the burial of the dead for several months. Sikush wanted the city cleaned and a site for the burial agreed on by everyone, yes even the clerics. They’d rebuilt the Well and Thrax would have been proud of it, the blast marks on the stones gave it a look of authenticity it had lacked before. Why had Thrax decided to put on armour and join the battle after a long life as a self-admitted coward? Sikush knew the western sentinel well and he’d had his short comings dangled in front of him many times, but Sikush had a very thick skin. Thrax was obviously less thick skinned and that day had been his time to prove himself. As Sikush looked back at the city from the well it was hard to believe there ever had been a demon army there.

“It’s a good choice Sikush.” Herusher said to him.

In the end the clerics wanted the burial in the garden of the Temple of the Flame and the Arcadians had wanted it right in front of the southern sentinel and neither side was budging. Sikush had issued an Imperial edict.

“All the fallen will be buried under a single mound between the well and the south wall.”

Burials had never been a huge occasion in the old Empire, or so far in the new. High office clerics were buried against temple walls, or by the side of the path with no markers or huge ritual, but this was their first mass burial and Sikush had decided it needed a marker.

“The children are next.” Said Chlo.

She folded herself against him and started to cry and he noticed Delmus was comforting Luri. Sikush didn’t really know how Delmus was coping, but he hoped he wasn’t blaming himself, war is always chaotic and he had arrived in time to save the other children.

“It’s a good memorial Chlo, you did well.” He told her.

Chlo had created a huge mound with a stone circle on the top with a list of the fallen carved into the upright stones. Then there were individual burial shafts for each of the fallen, and they’d been there most of the day carrying out each burial individually so that friends and family had a chance to grieve. Now night was approaching and they were all getting very emotional. Was he expected to say a few words at the end? He noticed everyone was looking at him as the last body was brought out of stasis and lowered into the ground in its simple shroud. He walked slightly up the mound and turned to face the group of a few hundred.

“Menderans.” He began.

He knew they’d had a long day and didn’t want a rousing piece of political nonsense.

“One day someone will ask, why do we need the guard?”

He looked at the faces around the mound and noticed a few had brought their children, which was good, the children will remember, he thought.

“Times will be good and they’ll question the need for a Guard. You will always remember today and the friends we buried and you will know why we need the Guard.”

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