

Mendera - Empire

Chapter 6 – The End

“Yes, almost every living thing was going to die, but that was just part of the regular cycle of the multiverse and life would soon return, in all its wondrous variety.”

The multiverse was due to end in eight hours and there were no events to mark it, the general idea was for everyone to spend the time how they wished as Sikush had made the day an official holiday. Then Luri had received the summons to meet Sikush in his office in the Guard barracks, and to dress for war. Luri felt for her private link with Delmus to cancel their lunch, only to find out that he'd had a similar summons.

“Is it just us ?” She asked him.

“I think so, Chlo said best battle dress, but there wouldn't be a fight.”

The uniform of The Damned was a bit of a moving feast and everyone had their own slight variation, and although Herusher often moaned about the lack of a uniform, uniform, Sikush had hinted at quite liking the variations. Luri shimmered into hers and for the first time in years asked Chlo to put up a screen showing her reflection.

“Very nice Chlo, just the right amount of gold trim.”

Luri was wearing the usual black tunic and skirt, but the cut suited her curves and there was gold trim around the collar and hem of the skirt. Luri pulled the thigh length leather boots further up her thighs and tightened the laces, as Chlo never got them tight enough. Then her hand shimmered, and Luri put the boot dagger she was holding carefully into the top of her right boot. As to weapons, it had to be her broad demon blade. She asked Chlo for it almost unconsciously and Chlo brought it from her weapon store and placed it in her hand. Luri put the sword belt around her waist and looked again at her reflection, there was something missing ?

“Bracer and gauntlet ?” Suggested Chlo.

“Yes.”

A silver metal bracer appeared on her left forearm arm on her left hand a studded leather gauntlet. It was her favourite fighting combination of weapons and she always enjoyed using the back of the gauntlet on an opponent who'd dodged her sword. There had been a surprising amount of activity over the last few million years, far more than she'd been expecting. As the 1st rift filled with demon refugees there were more potential recruits, more artefacts to liberate. Now there were over five thousand of The Damned, which is why Chlo had built them a barracks. Not that any of them lived there full time, but a barracks was useful for training and as somewhere to detain prisoners.

“Perfect Chlo,” she said, “is Sikush ready for me ?”

“Delmus is waiting in his office, you may join him there.”

Luri moved herself to the barracks and found Delmus pacing the room. He turned towards her as she appeared.

“Do you think it's anything serious ?” He asked.

He was wearing a similar uniform to Luri's, but his had loose fitting trousers instead of a skirt and his boots stopped at his knees. Luri noticed he had a studded left arm gauntlet that went right to his shoulder. It looked really good and Luri wondered about changing her bracer for one ? No, they'd look like twins and besides, she liked the feel of the bracer on her arm.

“Something ceremonial is my guess. A ritual at the temple, or something similar.”

Delmus walked over to her and kissed her, and in a fraction of a second Chlo had retouched her blue foundation and lip liner. Sikush appeared and Luri was quite surprised at his appearance.

“Thank you for volunteering.” He said to them.

Luri exchanged a smile with Delmus, as both had been seriously invited to volunteer for a mission on what was the only official planet wide holiday in several million years.

“There will be no need for fighting today, but I needed two veterans I trust.”

Luri pulled her back a bit more erect and forgave Sikush for wearing what looked like full ceremonial Imperial robes. He’d always said he hated pompous formality and usually wore a uniform similar to their, but today he looked scary and powerful, which she guessed was the idea. As she watched Sikush moved his right hand in a circle and a bright red flame appeared in the centre of the room which started to grow. Then Luri realised it was a demon portal, just like the ones the invading army had used all those years back.

“Chlo can’t take us where we’re going,” said Sikush, “this is the only way.”

The portal grew until it was big enough for them to walk through, then Sikush walked through and Luri put her hand on her sword hilt and she and Delmus stepped through the portal. They emerged into a dusty chamber with a dim light coming in from a window high on the wall. The portal closed as they approached the door on the far side of the chamber.

“Ready ?” Sikush asked.

Luri wanted to ask, ready for what ? Delmus gave her one of his half smiles and they both nodded at Sikush as he opened the door and took them out onto a long winding set of stone steps leading up.

“We’ve a long way to go.” He said.

They started up the stairs and passed a window which showed a city of domes and towers very much like Mendera and easily recognisable as the work of Thrax. So they were in The City of the Lost God, and likely to be in the very heart of the city. They continued to climb and another window showed the Minaret of the Dark Angel, and Luri was certain they were in the heart of what was left of the demon empire.

“Yes Luri,” Sikush said, “Thrax built to last, though I expect the use of magic too, as these buildings must be two billion years old by now.”

Had she spoken ? Luri didn’t think she had, but perhaps Sikush had guessed her thoughts ? She gave Delmus a smile and carried on up the stairs. They came to a landing with several doors leading off, and in front of one were two medium level demon guards, in full armour and regalia. Luri instinctively tightened her grip on her sword, but the guards bowed low to Sikush as he passed. Luri had a brief look through the door and saw creatures she’d only heard about in rumours and legends, creatures that were created by chaos at the dawn of time. Then she realised that this was the demon version of Mendera. Any demon or creature from beyond Gateway had to come here if they wanted to survive. She shuddered as she imagined the abominations that must be waiting in the other rooms for the multiverse to begin again. Sikush carried on as though he knew the route well and opened another door and carried on up another staircase. Luri felt for Chlo and wasn’t surprised to receive no response.

“All rifts, gates and portals will close as the multiverse ends.” Chlo had told them.

So they were alone and Luri hoped they’d be back home in Mendera city before the multiverse ended. They kept climbing and passed another window and Luri could look down on the slums where she’d found Delmus, though the houses had been rebuilt many times she could still see the stream that went past his house. They arrived at another landing and there were guards in front of open doors, who again bowed low as Sikush walked past. From one door a beautiful naked girl

appeared, smiled at Sikush and then went through another door, her ten foot long tail following on behind her, while she held her wings tight against her back. Was that a dark angel ? Luri thought they were just a myth. Through another door and yet more stairs to climb until they came to a hallway with just one heavy metal door, guarded by six medium level demons and two dark angels. One of the guards opened the door and the rest bowed to Sikush, but Luri was certain one of the dark angels winked at him as they went through the door.

“The art of Thrax lives on here.” Said Sikush.

They had gone through the door and onto a wide bridge about two hundred feet long that ended at a dome on the mountain. Only Thrax could have built such a slender, but strong structure and they dawdled to enjoy the view.

“The horizon has stopped twinkling.” Said Luri.

“It’s shrunk as far as it’s going to.” Said Sikush.

They crossed the bridge and came to the entrance of a huge dome built onto the very summit of the mountain. Once again the small group of guards on the door opened it for them and bowed low as they passed. Down a set of steps, along another hallway and they went down into a low room full of demons resting on couches while eating. There was a scent of demon about the room which unsettled Luri, but she held her sword tight and followed him across the room. One demon girl looked almost human, with the same blue skin as Luri. She’d never seen the demon who had bedded her mother and given her life, but she was curious to know about the girl.

“We have time, ask your question.” Said Sikush.

Was he in her head, or just really observant ? Luri approached the blue skinned creature who was giving her a bemused smile.

“Hello sister.” Said the demon.

There was something about the nakedness of the girl and the expression on her face that changed Luri’s mind. Perhaps, she thought there are some pieces of knowledge that are best left unknown ? She ignored the girl and moved towards Sikush who smiled at her and carried on across the room. They arrived at another set of stairs down and Luri knew they were at their destination without being told. Sikush had slowed down and there was the sound of music coming from the room, good music.

“Ahhh my friends come in, come in.”

A large demon sat on a long sofa was beckoning them into the room and Luri was hesitant about sitting next to Sikush as Delmus seemed ready to stand.

“Sit with me, we’ll be here some time.” Said Sikush.

Luri sat beside him and hoped the ‘some time’ wasn’t longer than the seven hours they now had until the end of everything, or almost everything. The demons seemed hospitable, but she didn’t really want to be trapped here forever. The demon needed no introductions to Luri, or Delmus, it was the great demon lord, highest ranking of all the demons, the immortal Neosto. Though why they were sat in his chamber and being offered food and drink was still a mystery.

“Try some of these Luri, they’re excellent.”

It was strange to have a dark mystic offer her food on trays while Neosto gave her a breakdown of where the food had come from and how excellent it was. So the great Neosto knew her name ? She had been a thorn in his flesh for a long time now, so it was hardly surprising. The demon who looked to her like a very affable cat with four arms now turned to Delmus.

“Delmus. You once lived here I believe ? Some of my people were a bit over zealous and that cost me the services of some really good warriors.”

Delmus nodded at him, but he kept that steely stare that Luri knew, he wasn't buying any of it. Once the pleasantries were over Sikush and Neosto got down to business and Luri understood little of the language they used.

"Pull back to the 7th rift."

Then there was a whole hour before she understood.

"The prophecy will begin on the 3rd age."

Luri wished she'd learned more languages on the rifts, but she suspected there were few left alive who understood the language they were speaking. Neosto wasn't an eternal, but he was a staggeringly old immortal.

"So we are agreed then." Said Sikush.

Four hours had gone by and Sikush was standing up and giving the demon lord a friendly embrace. Luri didn't understand what had just occurred, but she guessed it was fairly momentous. One of the dark mystics brought in a metal tablet for Sikush to sign and Luri realised the similarity between this court and Mendera. The clerics become dark mystics, the Guard become medium level demons, it was all so similar in look, but so very different in how it felt. Sikush and Neosto engraved a line or two onto the tablets and Sikush put one in his pocket, before standing again.

"It is done. I will see you for her initiation." Sikush said to the demon.

What initiation? What prophecy? It was driving Luri crazy. Sikush moved towards them.

"Let's go home to Mendera." He said.

They stood, but before they could go the naked blue skinned girl walked into the room. Now she was at the right angle so that Luri could see the stub horns growing from the side of the girl's head.

"She's a Fjoral," said Neosto, "would you like to talk to her?"

So a Fjoral? Now she had a type of demon and one day she'd do her own research, but she had no wish to ask favours of Neosto.

"No," said Luri, "No thank you."

She followed Sikush from the room and began the long journey home.

~ ~

Abijah sat on the hillside and looked at the old abandoned village on the 1st rift. Chlo had only allowed her through the gateway because she'd promised to be back well before the end came, she just needed somewhere to be alone for a while. It had been her day to be a companion to Sikush and he'd then taken Luri on a secret trip somewhere. She had no right to be jealous, for weeks they'd known today was a holiday for everyone, but why had he chosen Luri instead of her?

"Be back well before the end, or you'll be stuck on the 1st rift." Chlo had told her.

The 1st rift had shrunk, but she knew there was still more space than on a hundred planets, so being stuck here didn't overly concern her, as long as she got back home eventually.

"I can't talk about it." Luri had told her when she asked where they'd been.

Abijah had been one of the first converts and had always been completely loyal, so why was she being locked out? She checked the time and found there was no link with Chlo, so she pulled the old electronic device out of her pocket and realised she had only forty minutes to get back through the rift entrance.

"Why not stay here for a while?" She asked herself.

She lifted herself off the ground and gently hovered at about fifteen feet and headed in the direction of the village. It had been long abandoned and as she came to land in what looked to have been the town square she realised she wasn't alone. Just coming out of a ruined house was a grey skinned woman, completely naked, and she had wings. As she watched she noticed the creature had a long

barbed tail and talons in place of hands. Then Abijah remembered a statue of a dark angel she'd seen on Arcadia and she had a name for the beautiful creature that was looking around, apparently unaware of her.

"Run, run now." Her mind was telling her.

She had no idea if she was outmatched, the tales of dark angels were all about mythical creatures and she'd never met anyone who'd seen the real thing. The creature seemed to be looking for something and suddenly seized a plant from the ground and examined it. The dark angel cleaned the soil from the plant, crushed it in her talons and put it in her shoulder bag. Then the creature looked at her and started to make a clucking sound.

"There's more over there." Said Abijah pointing at a wall some distance off.

She started to walk to where she'd noticed more of the plant and the dark angel leapt in her direction. Abijah had never seen anything move so fast, even Herusher couldn't move that quickly. The creature was on top of her and had her pinned to the ground.

"Interesting." Said the dark angel in a deep female voice.

It used its talons to feel Abijah's breasts and then her arms, while it sniffed at her, as it continued with the clucking sound. The creature kissed her cheek and ran its long tongue up her neck.

"I haven't eaten this well in a very long time." It said.

It used a talon to cut open her tunic and prodded at her stomach, saliva from its mouth dripped onto the front of Abijah's uniform.

"Lots of nice things in there, tasty things."

Abijah should have been scared, but instead she was fascinated by the creature and pointed at where she had seen more of the plant.

"There is lots over there, what do you use it for?"

The dark angel looked up and flew off to where Abijah had been pointing and Abijah walked slowly after her. If this was some strange kind of cat and mouse game, she wasn't going to run and play the role of the mouse. The creature pulled the plants from the ground and carefully removed all soil and stones from the roots.

"Jangar plant," it said, "the roots help invocations, the leaves heal wounds."

Once it had pushed all the plants into its bag the dark angel moved towards Abijah and gently kissed her on the lips. Then it sniffed her again and smiled at her.

"No one dies today." It said.

The creature unfurled its long dark grey, leathery wings and took to the air.

"Go home girl," it screeched at her, "go home!"

~ ~

Sikush walked onto the training grounds next to the western sentinel carrying various blankets and cushions. It was now only a few minutes until the end of the multiverse and Chlo wasn't able to do much now. He felt drawn to the statue of Mardoun and put the cushions on the seat there and took the basket from Chlo as she sat down.

"It's going to be a chilly night." He said.

Everyone had been warned that for at least an hour Chlo wasn't going to be running things. There had never been a live, working world to be looked after at any previous switch and Chlo had done her best to ensure automatic devices would run most things. He pulled a blanket over her knees and brought a bottle of her favourite drink out of the basket.

"Wonderful." She said.

They clinked glasses and noticed Abijah was sitting not too far away as was Alyz. What was he going to do about Alyz ? Nurigen would no doubt return to the rift once he armed them with a few swords and produced metal for their armour, yet Alyz showed no sign of wanting to leave Mendera. She was adamant about not being converted, but after Thrax being killed he didn't want another fragile immortal to worry about. Chlo wasn't providing any dramatic count down, but on the common channel was a counter running down, which was currently on ten minutes.

"We've done this so many times." She said to him.

Yes they had been through more switches than he cared to remember but all had been on board Leviathan, which ran itself. A few miles away he'd allowed the Arcadians to build a city. Close enough for trade, but far enough not to be an annoyance had been the plan. The problem was that they took Chlo for granted, as did everyone and some things were going to stop working.

"I'll look after you." He said as he kissed her forehead.

Her core systems, the organic being he was now holding would survive, but once the multiverse went, much of Chlo would go with it. Using the fabric of the multiverse itself as your memory was wonderful, it gave almost unlimited computing power, but it had one huge drawback when the multiverse ended. Sikush noticed more and more familiar faces congregating around them. There had been nothing planned, no great public event, yet the training grounds were filling with clerics and the Guard.

"I feel it," said Chlo, "this time feels different, the change more profound."

Then she was gone, the body limp in his arms. The heart still beat, the body still warm, but the entity that was Chlo had gone. Last time it had taken a minute for the multiverse to start again, but for now only Mendera, Arcadia and the remnants of the 1st rift remained. He looked into her eyes and the pupils were fully dilated and lifeless. The time went past three minutes and he saw a meteorite cross the sky, and the crowd watched it rush past. More than likely it was a communications drone dropping out of powered orbit, but it could be replaced.

"Pretty."

Chlo was back and the life was back in her eyes.

"Five bubble universes have opened, now six." She said.

As the multiverse exploded back into life, so did Chlo and he looked deep into her and found Chlo was there, but different, there was always a difference, this Chlo would be a bit more mischievous perhaps. The common channel started to operate and Chlo was updating the current state of the multiverse which currently consisted of eight bubble universes, five rifts and the worlds beyond gateway were starting to form. A billion years and they could start to seed their DNA as they'd done before and the demons could spread their spawn.

"You'll miss having demons to fight." Said Chlo.

"There will be plenty of new enemies, there always are."

He could almost hear the multiverse throb as it started up again on its almost unimaginably long cycle. He'd gone to see Neosto at the demon kings insistence, he'd almost begged for the meeting. His old adversary had seen The Damned in action and was worried that they might wipe the rifts clean of demons. Perhaps it was brinkmanship to leave it until the day everything ended, or perhaps he too had been concerned about the balance ? Anyway it had been agreed that he'd keep beyond gateway and Sikush had agreed there would be no major attacks on the demon worlds. It gave them both an opportunity to rebuild and hopefully stop the deities from rising. As to the 'prophecy girl' who was due in the 3rd age of the temple ? He had ideas, but they could wait, there was a lot of work to do before then.

“Let’s sleep here,” said Chlo, “under the stars.”

He pulled a blanket over them both and held her while she slept and the crowd gradually faded away.

© Ed Cowling – March 2013