

Mendera Temple

Chapter 16 – Remember Annill

“Slowly it looked around, seemingly unbothered by the engines of death waiting for it to climb out of the ground.”

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“I’ve looked at the rift Sevril created,” said Juliette, “the Dracc number into the tens of millions and few of my people feel motivated to suffer the wrath of a deity.”

Sikush had met Juliette alone, it was a rare privilege granted to only a few of his most trusted friends. The Angel for once not moving through realities, but remaining corporeal, stood on his veranda while they talked.

“They still have their powers Juliette,” he said, “can you persuade more of them to help?”

Juliette briefly faded and reappeared slightly further away from him, but her eyes still held his. She was the only person he knew whose direct gaze could leave him feeling slightly tarnished, but Genova had that effect on most who could see them.

“They have no world, no hope,” she said, “it’s difficult to motivate people who feel the multiverse has deserted them.”

“What you really mean is that I deserted them.”

Juliette seemed to dissolve and then she was right in front of him and holding his arm.

“The Genova have always been and will always be your loyal servants,” she said, “but surely if you can find a permanent home for the people of Ixir.....”

Sikush knew she was right. He’d already done a deal with the Kivar to cover his back, but he wasn’t sure if was going to keep his word on that one. Juliette though was right, the Genova had been semi corporeal creatures for a very long time.

“I’ve been thinking about after the next switch,” he said, “the Genova would need converting, but those that sought a real existence could have a planet in the Menderan universe.”

He let that sink in while he obtained a drink from Chlo and sat at his favourite table. He could just see the roof of the new pavilion Chlo had built in the palace grounds, the temporary home for the deities while in Mendera City.

“Not conversion to be creatures like Sveta I hope?” Asked Juliette.

“You judge Sveta too harshly. She merely acts according to her nature and it is her nature to hunt and kill for food. Sveta is one of my most loyal friends and I have plans for her. But I didn’t mean conversion to dark angels or conversion to The Damned. I have something else in mind, similar to The Damned, but different.”

Chlo was in his head, she had yet another cleric asking to see him on a matter of extreme urgency. Of course he said no and Chlo would keep the ever growing number of angst ridden clerics well away from him. Kittara was right, they were becoming fucking insufferable.

“With a promise of a real existence and a planet near Mendera,” said Juliette, “I think I could persuade the more energetic of the Genova to fight for Annill.”

“Persuade them quickly, they will need to be ready in the next few days.”

Juliette was fully formed now, he’d given her a reason to anchor herself to his veranda and her own mind had done the rest. A very beautiful immortal angel was now sat opposite him.

“They haven’t been warriors in the last few switches,” she said, “they may be able to destroy a few of the Dracc, but not the millions Sevril has ready to unleash on Annill.”

“You underestimate them Juliette. Sveta had enormous power before her conversion, she just needed the focus to use that power. Push your people, tell them that if they don’t protect Annill, that I may forget the whole idea of a new home for the Genova.”

The beautiful face opposite him now showed annoyance and perhaps a little anger.

“Is that true ?” She asked.

“Perhaps not, but use that threat if you need to. One thing is true though, I will only convert the descendants of those who choose to fight for Annill.”

Juliette rose and gave him a slight bow.

“I will get you an army of the Genova, just remember your side of the bargain.”

She was gone, dissolved away into the grey and on her way to seek out the more energetic of the Genova. Sikush thought of the benefits of sending the Angels to Annill. Not only were they good fighters, but their very presence would do wonders for the morale of the local army.

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Kittara sat in front of the flame and allowed her consciousness to escape to wherever it was it went to at such times. Despite her natural cynicism about such events, she had been enjoying the visit of the deities to the holy city. The people and the clerics were so enthusiastic that it was impossible not to smile and get carried along in the general feeling of euphoria. True half the time the people shouting out ‘Tomma !’ were in fact trying to touch Sevril or even Monazin, but did that matter ? The deities themselves just seemed to appreciate any adoration they could get, even if it was by the wrong name. Sikush had told her they would remember those kinds of things, but only many years later, when countless billions of years had honed the grudges and magnified every perceived insult. “They rarely attack people,” he’d told her, “that would be beneath them. But they’ll remember every time someone called them by the wrong name, or another deity received more attention. They are like children Kittara, very large and dangerous spoiled children.”

For now though everything in Mendera was wonderful, even if there had been a mysterious inability of the usually efficient shuttle service to bring tourists to the holy city in great numbers. No one at all had been able to visit from the Maran Group, even their president.

“Just one of those things, a technical fault.” Chlo had told the Maran council member.

Kittara was once again aware of her surroundings and for once she wasn’t floating upside down. Her bottom was still firmly on the cold stone floor and by her side was her Nurigen blade. In front of her was a large bunch of flowers and three smiling faces of young clerics. It had been a while since they’d given her flowers, but she did swear at them on a regular basis.

“Thank you.” She said.

The three faces beamed at her and one even waved. At one time the clerics inside the walls had little knowledge of the outside world, but Estrid had made massive changes to their lives, changes that included access to most of the imperial networks.

“Did you see the deities arrive ?” She asked them.

The heads nodded and one, a girl of about fourteen, spoke to her, which was very rare.

“Did you touch them ?”

The hundreds of thousands of clerics who served inside the temple walls lived for a few days like this, when the deities came to Mendera. Yet they weren’t allowed outside of the temple and because of protocols written before the start of eternity, the deities wouldn’t enter the temple to see them.

“Yes, I’ve touched all of them.” She answered.

Their shyness was gone, all three were touching her hands, desperate to feel the hands that had felt all six of the living Gods.

“What did they feel like?”

“Their skin is very dry and hard and cool to touch.”

She allowed her small crowd of admirers to finish touching her before putting her Nurigen in the webbing on her back, tightening it and picking up her flowers.

“Estrid is a deity,” said Kittara, “you must see her quite a lot.”

“Oh yes,” said the girl, “but Estrid is just like us.”

So, younger generation or not, it seemed clerics like their gods to look like gods. Kittara would mention it to Estrid, but she doubted that her house guest would ever take on her ancient form again, even to please the clerics. Kittara moved her reality to the war memorial and placed the flowers on it.

“For Aukar.” She muttered as she let go of the flowers.

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“They all look so friendly here.” Said Sveta.

Estrid was walking beside her and once again they were the most admired pair of women on the planet. On other worlds the talons and reputation of Sveta would have made admirers wary, but on Mendera and among The Damned, it just increased her desirability.

“They love the worship and the adoring crowds,” said Sveta, “especially as they know every picture goes out to the teeming trillion of the empire.”

Chlo had done a good job of erecting the deity pavilion in such a short period of time. The building filled the main open field area of the palace gardens and gave the deities somewhere they could entertain and live. It had ceilings high enough to cope with their height and massive doorways through which they could make many a grand entrance. Tomma chose to live elsewhere and just used the pavilion for meetings. Estrid still lived in the 1st ring with Kittara, but the other four led an uneasy existence together in the great pavilion.

“Two days they’ve been here,” said Estrid, “and they’re already bickering. Give them a few million years of brooding and they’ll be at war, I’ve seen it all so many times before.”

“The dress Sevril gave to Kittara was beautiful,” said Sveta, “I wasn’t expecting that.”

They entered the pavilion, nodding to several people they recognised. In just two days the deities had organised a kind of court politic. If you weren’t known to certain people, you were politely asked to leave.

“I was surprised at that dress,” said Estrid, “the gems alone are priceless. Kittara will wear it to the official farewell for the deities and then I believe it will go on permanent display in one of the public temples.”

Once through the two reception areas they arrived at a room with six enormous thrones. This was where the deities held court every day and dictated wisdom to the clerics. So far over two hundred metal tablets had been filled with the wisdom, though Sikush referred to most of it as self-indulgent gibberish.

“So now we have all six.” Said Tomma.

“If we’re discussing the future,” said Estrid, “we need to clear the room.”

“The clerics must stay, to capture our thoughts.” Replied Sevril-Narge.

Instead of sitting on her ridiculously large throne, Estrid walked into the centre of the room and addressed the other deities from there.

“Rumour and conjecture isn’t worthy of being eternalised,” said Estrid, “clear the room of clerics and other ephemerals.”

There was some resistance from the higher clerics and a few of the wealthy merchants, but eventually the room was cleared.

“And the dark angel,” said Sevril, “she has no business here.”

“Sventa is an immortal and totally loyal to Sikush. I can guarantee her complete discretion about anything she may hear.” Said Estrid.

“I am happy for her to stay.” Added Tomma-Goran.

All the deities apart from Sevril were happy for Sventa to remain in the room, so she quietly sat next to Estrid and wrapped her cloak around herself like a shawl.

“So be it,” said Sevril, “if you want the tainted angel here, she can stay.”

Estrid rose a few feet in the air, where she was more on a level with her fellow deities.

“It has been a very long time since we were last awoken,” she said, “and once again the balance is in jeopardy. Once again we will need to decide on a course of action.”

“Will you agree to implement the decisions this time ?” Asked Monazin-Conosin.

Sevril looked agitated and began to thump the arm of her throne.

“Very little happened last time we agreed what to do !” She shouted.

“The war didn’t help.” Said Sumahn-Nerish.

At the mention of war all the deities looked uncomfortable and Estrid allowed them several minutes to shout and fume at each other. Her role was to steer them and obtain an agreement that they were all happy with, but she knew they needed to let off a little steam. Several entire galaxies had been destroyed during their last war, billions of ephemerals had died.

“There is no use reliving the last war,” said Monazin, “if Estrid won’t agree to implement our decisions, there is no point in our making them.”

More recriminations followed, more picking over the bones of old wars. Eventually Estrid decided to regain some kind of control of the meeting.

“Please, please old friends, stop this pointless bickering.” She shouted.

“We can all see the future,” she continued, “or at least the most likely future. If we do nothing it will end, all of it, no more switches, no more gods. It will mean the end of it all and the release of the one kept prisoner below the temple.”

She had their attention now, they were all looking only at her.

“Yes,” she said, “tomorrow we will make a final decision and I will do my utmost to implement it.”

“Even if the decision is to finally remove the Genova from existence ?” Asked Sevril.

“The Genova are not your concern !” Shouted Tenneth-Sisanath.

There were more arguments as each of the deities either called for the destruction of something, or often an entire race they hated. Other deities would defend what they considered worth saving in the multiverse. Estrid listened to it all, before once again shouting for silence.

“We know there is an imbalance in the multiverse,” she said, “Sikush created The Damned to be far too powerful. If the decision is to remove the Genova, or anyone else from existence, I will carry out that decision.”

There was silence for a few seconds.

“You would really wipe the Genova from the multiverse ?” Asked Tomma.

“If that is the decision tomorrow, yes I will.”

Estrid lowered herself to the ground and seemed to be heading out of the room, but she turned around.

“Of course there can be no acting like spoiled children this time.”

Sevril turned a darker shade of green and gave her that look, the look that had sent whole armies running for cover.

“There can be no more wiping out of entire galaxies when you have your inevitable rows with each other,” Estrid continued, “no more wanton destruction of ephemerals and their planets. No more settling of old grievances under the pretext of rebalancing the multiverse.”

“Have a care,” said Sevril, “your power is great, but you still insult us at your peril.”

“I will stand with Estrid.” Said Tomma.

Sumahn-Nerish said nothing, but silently walked across to Estrid and stood by her side. Tenneth-Sisanath moved next to Sevril and for a moment it looked like Mendera might be destroyed in the first battle in the current war of the Gods. Sevril snarled and was gone, Tenneth following after her.

“I’ll be back tomorrow.” Said Tomma.

Tomma was gone and then Sumahn nodded at Estrid and he too vanished. There was just Estrid stood next to Sventa, who hadn’t moved or spoken during the whole meeting. The only deity remaining was the almost unflappable Monazin. Estrid was pleased he’d stayed, although not really allies, she respected his thoughts.

“I suppose you think you’ve been very clever,” he said, “getting them angry, sending them scurrying away, but they will be back tomorrow, they have to. None of them wants to be tossed into the wastes of eternity when the multiverse ends. And you’ve made them pick sides very early on in your game, that could be dangerous.”

“There is more than a possibility that if we fail, the multiverse won’t end, it will create another method of keeping the balance. Perhaps that method will be less brutal than us, less careless of mortal life.”

Monazin touched his claw to her shoulder.

“You play a very dangerous game.” He said.

He was gone, leaving a strange silence in the huge room. Eventually a cleric would look in the door to see if the meeting was over, but Estrid felt no need to inform anyone.

“Sventa, did you hear all that ?”

The dark angel rose to her feet, sweeping back her robe and then yawning. Sventa ran her fingers through her hair and finally kissed Estrid on the cheek.

“Yes, they’re all quite mad.” She said.

Estrid gave a genuine laugh, which echoed off the walls and seemed to lift the gloom.

“Are you really playing a game with them ?” Asked Sventa.

“Yes, but not my game. I am just trusting Sikush and obeying orders.”

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The Genova liked tranquillity and Juliette had brought them all together on an ancient rock of a planet that had long since ceased to have a name. There were a few old stones that formed a circle, but apart from that the planet was a barren lifeless rock. The circle still held a connection to power though and the Genova liked tranquillity and the hint of mystic power, it almost hypnotised them.

“They spook at the sight of technology,” said Juliette, “they’re hardly ready for war.”

“There is something for them to fight for now and they’ll do better than you think.” Said Estrid.

Only a portion of the Genova had answered the call, the more energetic, the more eager of them.

But even that portion numbered several million and they covered a vast area of the planet. Juliette was trying to remain corporeal, but the constant movement through reality of the other angels wasn’t helping her.

“They know it isn’t for them,” said Juliette, “they’re here to gain a home and a real existence for their distant descendants, but they’ll fight for that. Just so long as they don’t fade away into the grey once the fighting starts.”

“The moment approaches,” said Estrid, “be ready to lead them.”

Unlike Juliette the Genova weren’t immortal. Juliette had bought immortality at a price; a price even she often thought was too high. Maybe it was easier for an ephemeral army to go to war? Their natural lives seemed to last barely the blink of an eye. How much worse for an immortal to risk their lives, how much more of a price to pay. The moment had arrived and Estrid rose into the air above the ancient stone circle.

“You were once the warriors who kept the crawling chaos imprisoned.” She said.

She spoke softly, yet every one of the Genova heard Estrid perfectly and they began to appear more solid. They looked beautiful to Juliette, so beautiful that she dreaded taking them to fight the Dracc.

“You have great strength,” continued Estrid, “more strength than most of you realise and I will add to that strength.”

Estrid simply waved her left arm and the millions of angels were now in their real form. Juliette looked around, from horizon to horizon and every angel was now fully corporeal and ready to fight.

“The time is now !” Shouted Estrid.

Juliette moved through them, the millions of Genova. Some had golden hair, but most were now born with red hair, hair the colour of ripe Arroya fruit. Their robes were all white or cream and to Juliette they looked like the famed warrior angels of legend. Juliette pulled a few after her, ripping reality apart and leading them through the grey between worlds. The rest of the army followed and they arrived on Sevril’s private rift in their millions.

“Be quick !” Juliette shouted.

Some heard her, but they all knew there was little time to spare. The Dracc would be enough of an enemy, none of them could face an aspect of Sevril-Narge and one was likely to arrive fairly quickly. The angels started using fire to destroy the Dracc as soon as they arrived, simply pointing a finger in the direction of the Dracc and releasing fires as hot as hell upon them. There were so many Dracc though, instead of millions, Juliette began to think there were hundreds of millions. After five minutes there seemed to be very few burnt Dracc, but the army needed to move on, so Juliette pulled herself into the grey and the entire army followed her. Only a few seconds later Juliette arrived on the vast parade ground of Annill, with over a million Genova trying to fit around her.

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Even though he was expecting it, Sikush was surprised at the panic when Sevril decided to leave Mendera. There could be no plan to save the multiverse, no more tiny writing on metal pages. As he arrived at the pavilion with Alyz and Kittara, most of the resident clerics were huddled in one corner and making a forlorn moaning sound. The sentinels were screaming and there were scorch marks on the floor and walls.

“What happened here ?” He asked.

The only deities still in the pavilion were Estrid and Tomma and Estrid was busy healing an injured cleric.

“We were starting our final session,” said Tomma, “when Sevril said her rift was under attack and she went crazy. I don’t think she killed anyone, but she left in one of her rages.”

Sikush looked at the doors of the room, which were broken outward and beyond them part of the inner reception area was still on fire. Chlo was relaying pictures to him of the gardens outside and there seemed to be a lot of injured clerics.

"I don't think she intended to attack Mendera," said Tomma, "but you know what her temper can be like."

"Oh yes Tomma, I know her temper."

Chlo was telling him no one had died, but a few would need limbs rebuilding and some would need skin replacing where they'd been badly burned.

"Who went with her?" Asked Sikush.

"No one," said Tomma, "they all left after Sevril had her rage, probably to prepare for war. Sumahn said he was returning to Annill."

So at least Sevril had left alone, Sikush was pleased that the deities weren't forming groups, not yet. Estrid helped the cleric to her feet and then approached Sikush.

"It could have been far worse." She said.

"Do you know where she is?" Asked Sikush.

Estrid seemed to stare at the blackened ceiling for a few seconds.

"She's on her rift, surveying the damage and creating leaders for her Dracc. I doubt if she'll go to Annill with them though, she won't want a direct fight with Sumahn-Nerish."

"As the remaining deities are you both happy if we close the meetings without any real decisions being made?"

"We don't seem to have any other option." Said Tomma.

Estrid merely smiled and nodded at him. Sikush reached for Chlo and started to concoct a story that would keep the empire happy, but which was also plausible. A terrorist attack perhaps, something that could be blamed on Maran Group extremists.

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"We had a warning that you might be arriving and it's nice that you brought a large army, it will lift the hearts of our forces." Said Luri.

They were stood at the top of a large tower behind the main gates, Luri had commissioned the construction of many such towers behind the city walls. Around the tower walls and covered by thick metal armour were several clockwork devices, each capable of inflicting withering fire on any enemy. Some of the devices were aiming back into the city, just in case the walls were breached.

"So you've seen Estrid?" Asked Juliette.

"No," said Luri, "we have a strange messenger from beyond gateway that Sikush uses."

"Silky? I've seen her. A strange one, but she seems useful."

"Yes," said Luri, "without her we'd have been blind to what was going on away from the rifts."

From along the vast city walls came the rattle of devices being wound, ammunition being loaded.

"How tough are these new Dracc Juliette?"

"Big, bigger than a man, with six legs and sharp teeth, but the claws are their real weapons. At the front they have two huge and very powerful claws and they seem hardened, almost as though they're made of weapons grade metal."

"Any weakness?"

"Fire," said Juliette, "they don't like Genova fire."

Juliette patted one of the clockwork driven war machines.

"I don't think they'll like these," said Juliette, "the bolts from these will cut them to pieces."

What passed for night was coming to the rifts and in the distance Luri could see a purple glow and then another, as many portals were being opened. There wasn't a sound, the distance was too great, but quickly the sky in the distance was lit up by the purple glow of thousands of portals. Genova had

been sent to the distant watchtowers and they began to report back to Juliette, whispering to her before leaving to join the defending army.

“Well ?” Asked Luri.

“They’re pouring out of portals about ten miles from the city, millions of them. All heading for Annill.”

Luri simply nodded at one of her runners, within seconds the office of the watch would be informed and the message put out along the ancient cable comms system. It was very old, but the coded cable transmission system was rift rot proof and the army of Annill had become very good at using it. Luri knew that her army would be ready and waiting for the attack.

“I know they haven’t tunnelled into the city for millions of years, but they might try that route again.” Said Juliette.

There was a flash of red in the sky as the Dracc hit one of the trip wires set in the hills. A few would have died, but the main purpose of the traps that far out was to act as distance markers for an invading force.

“They’re moving fast,” said one of her men at the walls.

“I assumed Sevril would try her old tricks,” said Luri, “we have reserves ready at the most likely places they might burrow in and a few of the less likely.”

Several flashes of blue lit up the sky.

“They’ll be here soon.”

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Delmus had heard the clicking of the decoder, but by the time his runner told him the enemy were on the way, he already knew. The purple portals and then the flash of red, he knew the Dracc were rushing towards Annill. Juno was helping the men load the devices on their tower, which was two miles from where Luri was waiting for the attack.

“We’re as ready as we’ll ever be.” Said Juno.

Delmus liked Juno, there was no nonsense with her, she just got on with things. Some of The Damned had developed an attitude over the years; carrying ammunition was beneath them, but Juno too off her jacket and threw boxes around like a mechanical loader. Delmus looked at her grubby face and was rewarded by a huge grin. Juno had been sent with the last rotation of the Guard, and her replacement was supposed to arrive in three days.

“Just think,” said Delmus, “another three days and you’d have been at the council club on Mendera about now.”

“And miss all this fun Delmuninager !”

She always used his full name when he teased her, she was probably one of the few people who remembered his old demon name. Many hated the rifts, but to Delmus it almost felt like coming home. The blue flashes went off, more traps that indicated the Dracc were moving very fast. Delmus picked up his RM9, while counting off the seconds in his head. Not too soon or there was no point, but not too late either. He turned on the hefty weapon and enjoyed the buzz and hum as it came to life. He rested the muzzle on the tower wall and set it to full power, as far as he was concerned that was the only setting for a serious battle. No energy weapon he’d ever used had a serious recoil, apart from the RM9. As he pushed the fire switch it dug itself into his shoulder and gave him a reminder that it expected to be treated with respect. His eyes were dazzled by the cone of white light as it left the weapon, but he quickly recovered and watched as the Dracc in the distance were burned to death by the seemingly unstoppable fire of the RM9. There were a lot of a Dracc, a huge

wall of them and moving at speed, the hole he'd made in their ranks being quickly filled and then everything was in darkness again.

"Fuck ! There are a lot of them." Said Juno.

Delmus lifted the weapon and moved his aim closer to the city and a bit over to the left. As he aimed he noticed a flash to his left as Luri fired her own RM9 into the advancing enemy. Delmus fired his weapon and once again watched the carnage as it tore a flaming hole in the wall of running Dracc. Once again the hole filled with other Dracc and the whole scene was lost in the darkness.

"Plenty to go around." He said to Juno.

Delmus had never really considered not surviving any battle, he even had a rift manipulator in his pocket. He'd never use the device to escape himself, but he was considering ripping an escape portal in reality for Juno if things got desperate. He aimed the RM9 into the darkness just as the devices on the main wall started to fire, their clockwork clattering filling the night. There were just so many of the Dracc, Delmus wondered if Annill could survive.

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Nurigen was out with his group of mobile tunnel locators. All the known locations the Dracc had used in the past were covered, but Luri had foreseen the need for a quick response team, a group who could quickly find and defend against an intruder from below.

"I sense something over there." Said Smilenta.

The Genova were new, as were the half dozen bodyguards from the contingent of The Damned. Luri obviously thought he was worth keeping alive, which pleased Nurigen.

"Yes, over there." Said Lilenta.

There seemed to be a cloud of Genova, all with very similar sounding names. They were delightful creatures and they seemed to understand his orders, but they were beginning to irritate him.

"We're moving," he shouted, "follow Lilenta."

The budgers began getting the huge device towers rolling, getting right in between the wheels as they began to steer the towers in the direction Lilenta was headed. Nurigen always thought the budgers were in danger of being crushed, but they were experts at moving the towers. The known locations of previous Dracc tunnels had static guard positions, armoured turrets, all backed up by reserve forces. For tunnels emerging in other locations the city had the towers and the budgers, the highly trained crews who moved them around.

"Still deep, but heading up." Said Smilenta.

Nurigen had a portable listening device. It was quite big and needed three soldiers to carry it, but they quickly had it over the spot where the Genova were indicating.

"Quiet !" Shouted Nurigen.

There was something coming up, there was no mistaking the sounds. Nurigen looked up just as the first of the towers arrived and put down its lockable feet. Each tower was the height of a building and had several floors of clockwork devices on it, each capable of withering fire. Each tower moved on six enormous wheel and was powered by vast clockwork engines. Over the years the team of budgers had become very good at moving the towers at speed, even at night. Almost as soon as the first tower was locked and ready, the others arrived, all seven of them.

"They will be at the surface very soon." Said Lilenta.

The crews were busy aiming every clockwork device at where the Dracc were likely to break the surface and they were keen for a fight. Nurigen had seen a single tower rip solid rock apart, he almost felt sorry for the first few Dracc who put their heads above ground.

"We're ready for them," he said, "aren't we budgers ?"

“We’re ready !” They all shouted.

The RM9 was getting very hot, so Luri put it on the wall mount and quickly told one of her men how to use it.

“Aim, fire, count to five and then fire again.”

Several of her command tried to stop her leaving the tower, but she wanted to be on the walls, that was where the real fighting would take place. Down the tower steps she ran, leaping from a window on the first floor and heading towards the stairs that would take her to the defences above the main gate. As she ran the ground seemed to be shaking under her and Luri realised it was the advancing Dracc causing the ground to tremble. The stairs were full of soldiers, most carrying boxes of ammunition for the devices and the bowmen, they all made way for her as she took the stairs two at a time.

“Fire the flares !”

The section commander issued the command and it spread along the miles of wall defences. Huge fire tipped arrows were fired from massive bows that took three men to draw them back, the arrows bursting into a blinding white light as they soared above the plain outside the city walls.

“May the eight great demon gods protect me.”

A demon hybrid to her right made the comment and Luri could understand why. Gone were the trees and shrubs of the plain, gone were the few huts and cultivated areas. Everything was a sea of black bugs, some even climbing over each other to reach Annill quicker. Huge, looking almost like they were covered in the black velvet, the Dracc made no noise, but the noise of their running was like thunder. Turrets rose from the ground in front of the walls and other appeared out of pits in the main ramp that led to the city gates.

“Time to see how well the turrets work against them.” Said Tejan.

Tejan was one of the few new arrivals of The Damned that Luri recognised. Without Chlo she’d given up trying to recognise everyone, but Tejan had become a bit of a favourite with Nurigen and had helped construct some of the turrets. She was an Arcadian and a member of the Guard since the 2nd age of the temple and Luri was pleased to have her as part of the main gate guard.

“There are the trenches first.” Said Luri.

The Dracc ran over the cover and it collapsed, sending them crashing into the deep trench and igniting the oils in jars at the bottom. Part mineral and part magical the oils burned white hot and soon the flames lit the scene outside the city walls like daylight.

“They have no fear.” Said Tejan.

The bugs died in their tens of thousands, their shells popping in the heat, their organs cooking and filling the air with a foul stench. But still they ran forward, climbing over their burning comrades and into the second trench. More fire accelerants, more magic and another trench was filling with burning Dracc. The heat from the flames was becoming so intense that guards were backing away from their positions at the walls. Then the turrets began to rattle and clank as they poured thousands of metal bolts into the advancing creature, some of them incendiary devices.

“Nothing should be able to survive this,” said Luri, “but still they run for the walls.”

It was as though hell had come to the flat plain in front of the city gates. The bolts were cutting huge gaps in the ranks of the Dracc, the incendiaries creating burning mounds of them up to a mile away. Still they came, filling the trenches with their dead and climbing over them. On they came, mindless creatures with no fear, no basic instinct for self-survival. The defenders knew their job well; they had trained for this moment over countless generations. The invasion of the Dracc had been prophesied

millions of years before and they were ready. They threw jars of fire oil at the foot of the walls, adding another seemingly impenetrable barrier between the bugs and the city.

“Nothing stops them !” Shouted a soldier.

“They die easily enough,” said Tejan, “we must have killed a million of them, but more just take their places.”

The massed Dracc hit the wall so hard that Luri felt it shudder under her feet, but the great gates didn't even tremble. Nurigen had once spent a thousand years getting the metal for the gates just right and he boasted they were stronger than the city walls.

“Prepare for battle,” shouted Luri, “here they come !”

Some still on fire, others missing legs, the Dracc climbed over each other until the ones at the top were on the battlements. There was no sign of any intelligence involved, the creatures just seemed to be driven by a desire to get into Annill and kill the population. Luri drew her Nurigen blade and stood with her soldiers as the Dracc poured onto the top of the wall. No more fire spells, they'd kill friendly forces, now it was all down to weapons expertise and strong arms. Luri hacked at any Dracc who came near her and none managed to get a good grip on her with their claws. She did as all good fighters do, she got into a routine of hacking and slashing, until there was a lull in the tide coming over the wall. Luri looked around and realised she was only living person on the battlements. The wall was covered in body parts and broken Dracc shell, covering the ground like a grotesque carpet. Not far from her and leaning against the carapace of a dead Dracc was a head, Tejan's head.

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Delmus watched the fires as the Dracc hit the trenches and he was still firing his beloved RM9 into their ranks. Then as the weapon stopped its recharge whine he heard the clockwork devices rattling behind the walls.

“Sounds like they're coming up through one of their old tunnels.” Said one of his men.

Delmus slung his still hot weapon over his shoulder.

“You know your orders,” he said, “I'll check on the attack inside the walls.”

His men looked grave and nodded at him. They knew their orders, fight to the last man to hold the device tower, or until they'd run out of bolts to fire. Delmus knew it could well be the last time he'd ever see any of them alive.

“Good luck sir.” Someone shouted.

Unlike Luri he didn't bother with the stairs at all, he jumped from the tower, rolled over as he hit the ground and began running in the direction of the noise. He ran through the deserted streets, ignoring the people waving out of windows at him. As he reached a small temple in the poor area of the city he couldn't miss the freshly made hole in the ground and the Dracc pouring out of it.

Temples had been built over all the old exit points from the Dracc tunnels, as if the people of Annill were trying to ward off evil spirits. Delmus doubted if the temples did much good, but they did provide good landmarks for areas that need static defence turrets. The turrets were firing rapidly and a large vessel with a clockwork pump was pouring burning oil into the hole. But even out of that hell some of the Dracc were still trying to get out onto the surface. Delmus doubted if one of The Damned would attempt to run the gauntlet of the fire and the turrets, yet he could hear the bugs screaming as they died in their thousands and yet they still struggled to get into the city. The local commander beckoned Delmus into an armoured observation point.

“We have them under control,” he said, “there are less coming up all the time.”

“Are you alright for ammunition ?”

“Yes, we all thought Nurigen had given us far too much, but we're grateful for it now.”

Delmus went back to the hole and didn't even use his RM9, there was nothing he could do that was worse than the turrets and the fire oil was doing. Eventually the turrets stopped firing and the crews began to reload and another large container of fire oil was being carefully brought out of storage. Delmus looked into the hole and the heat had fused the soil into a glassed wall that reflected the light from Dracc that still burned inside the tunnel.

"Don't worry sir, we'll be ready for them if they try here again."

A young soldier was looking into the hole with him and Delmus might have missed seeing the creature if the young boy hadn't spoken.

"What's that thing?"

Delmus looked and deep in the tunnel, just where the light from the fires was almost gone, stood a Dracc in some kind of armour. It seemed to have hands instead of claws and it was holding something, maybe a weapon. Then Delmus realised it was some kind of communications device.

"What was it sir?"

"I have no idea."

The creature had gone, back into the tunnel and the fires were starting to go out. Delmus started off down the tunnel at a slow jog, wanting to catch up with the unusual Dracc, but not wanting to run into a bunch of them at full speed.

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Nurigen kept well out of the way as the budgers became excited, the Dracc were about to break the surface. Smilenta was staying close to him, obviously she'd been instructed to look after him. The other Genova got between the wheels of the turret towers and aimed their hands at the ground. To Nurigen the Genova all looked such fragile creatures, even the males.

"Look, look," said Smilenta, "a claw!"

From the ground came a long sharp set of claws. Then another set and then the black insect head of a Dracc. Slowly it looked around, seemingly unbothered by the engines of death waiting for it to climb out of the ground. More claws pulled at the ground, until the soil fell into the tunnel and Nurigen was looking at a hole about thirty feet in diameter. The turrets began firing and the angels began to send fireballs into the hole and Nurigen still hadn't seen an intact Dracc make it to the surface.

"They work," he said, "the mobile towers work."

His bodyguard of The Damned added a few disruption spells and for a while it seemed that the incursion of the Dracc would be easily stopped. But the mobile towers weren't designed to carry much ammunition and in their hurry the ammo carts had been left behind.

"Could your people bring more bolts?" He asked Smilenta.

"Perhaps a box or two," she answered, "but not enough to make any real difference."

The Dracc showed no sign of giving up and after a few minutes one of the towers fell silent.

"Send your men back for an ammo cart," shouted Nurigen, "and hurry."

The entire team of budgers began running towards their base, as the rest of the towers carried on pouring thousands of heavy metal bolts into the hordes of Dracc.

"Another tower has stopped," said Smilenta, "we should leave now."

Nurigen resisted the angel pulling on his arm and watched as tower after tower fell silent and just the Genova and few of the Guard were left to fight off the Dracc.

"We go now!" Said Smilenta.

She was much stronger than he thought and she had him off his feet and was pulling him into the grey. As he looked back Nurigen saw the Genova vanishing and The Damned running away. He'd

never seen them run from anything, but they were running from the Dracc. The last thing he saw as Smilenta pulled him fully into the grey was the Genova Lilenta being ripped to pieces by the bugs, as they poured into Annill in their thousands.

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