

Mendera Temple

Chapter 8 – Battle for the Holy City

“There was decapitation, but that took skill and a certain amount of good fortune, far safer to crush a skull or cleave it in two.”

Hol arrived at the Sentinel of the Well to find it full of undead and the furniture burning. With so many incense burners and traditional oil lamps, it was almost inevitable that many would be spilt by the rampaging creatures and a fire would follow. The sentinel was in her head and she felt confusion from the guardian life force that dwelt below the temple, but she had no way to convince it that the undead were enemies. On the common channel she heard Delmus saying that fire was effective against The Many, so she felt for a fireball spell in her mind and aimed it at the hordes of undead trampling through the temple.

“Fire works very well.” She put up on the common channel.

The almost unstoppable creatures went up in flames like dry straw. They continued to try to run, bumping into others of their kind and spreading the flames. As The Damned were largely unharmed by fire, it was a weapon they could use and use in close quarters fighting.

“Drench them in flames !” She heard Jen telling everyone.

There were now other members of the Guard appearing near her, far more than the five Jen had allowed, but most of them were inexperienced. Hol felt the full blow of a fireball against her chest and looked up to see a female member of the Guard shrugging at her, so she shrugged back. At least they weren’t going to kill each other with poorly aimed fire. Hol created several fireball spells and left them racked up in front of her, the way she’d seen Kittara rack up tears of the damned. Then she calmly walked into the middle of the endless crowd of the undead, pouring through gateways into Mendera. At first just a few pulled at her as they went past, but gradually more and more of them stopped to pull at her and try to rip her apart. Eventually the group around her started to cause a blockage in the flow and the whole temple became a sea of undead, all struggling to get past, so that they could run for the City. As she felt her limbs being stretched and numerous hands trying to pull her skin from her body, she simply allowed all the fireballs in front of her eyes to explode. At first the flash of fire blinded her, but then she realised she was alone in a huge pile of burnt and burning bodies. Not that the feeling of triumph lasted long, the undead seemed to have limitless numbers and very quickly there was another wave of them pouring into the temple.

Hol wasn’t even having it all her own way in hand to hand fighting either, the creatures seemed to be more than just a mindless horde, some of them seemed clever. As she cleaved the head of one, another sneaked behind her and grabbed her by the neck. Hol spun around and cut the creature in two, finishing it off with a fire spell, but the less experienced didn’t do as well. For a start they couldn’t keep up the rate of fire with spells that Hol could and they simply didn’t have the fighting experience. Hol noticed one female member of The Damned go down under a riving mass of the undead and threw a fireball spell into the middle of them. The girl looked so young, so scared. Hol knelt next to her once she’d finished dealing with the undead and the girl’s left arm was only holding on by a few fragments of tissue.

“Move yourself !,” shouted Hol, “back to your barracks. Do it now !”

The girl vanished, leaving just a pool of grey and red streaked blood where she’d been. Moving back to the barracks if you were injured was part of their training from day one, repeated and practised

so often that it should be a reflex. But in the pain and panic of battle so many of them seemed to be forgetting that they could simply move themselves out of trouble. Hol spotted the remains of another member of The Damned, so badly ripped apart that it was impossible to tell if the body had been male or female. All that training over all those millennia, reduce to a small, almost unidentifiable pile of blood and tissue.

“Seemed like you needed a hand.” Said Delmus.

He’d appeared in the ruined main doorway and as he arrived he pulled the RM9 hard against his hip and fired it. As the huge cone of energy displaced cubic feet of air, it made a noise like thunder. Then the white hot energy hit the ranks of the undead and turned them instantly to dust. They were frightened, the first time Hol had seen them display any emotion. They were running away from Delmus, climbing over each other to get away from the killing cone of white hot energy. The RM9 kept killing the undead until it hit the wall of the city, miles away in the distance.

“I heard the RM9 was banned.” Said Hol.

Delmus grinned at her as the huge weapon growled as it recharged.

“They are,” said Delmus, “banned on every world in the empire, mainly for breaking all local radiation limits and Ion energy guidelines. We’ll both be glowing in the dark for weeks !”

He grinned at her as he fired the weapon again and this time the undead started to run as soon as they heard the thunderous noise it made. Hol noticed the creatures were now running around the temple and keeping well away from Delmus and his ancient, but effective weapon. Hol used the lull in the fighting to look around and there were only three other members of the Guard behind her. How many had been ripped apart ? Chlo would know, but the grieving would come later, as would the lessons to be learned. For now they’d had a small victory, but an important one. Hurt the undead enough and they would run away.

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Jen was putting experienced veterans in with the groups of inexperienced member of the Guard and far fewer were dying. Along the whole frontline, from city wall to city wall, the fairly thin line of The Damned was holding back the advancing horde of undead. Most it was by the use of fire in various forms, from fireball spells to highly complex conjurations of whole walls of flame that killed hundreds of undead at a time. A few of the more ancient member of The Damned had even obtained their own RM9 from Chlo and Jen could hear them firing and recharging all along the line. If only the constant pouring of undead through the portals would stop. She was pleased about the good news from the sentinel of the Well, but was worried about how many of the creatures had made it past the line and into the city itself.

“Twenty raptors hovering ten miles out and awaiting orders.” Said Herusher.

“Who did Chlo use as pilots ?” She asked.

Jen could have looked at the common channel, but she knew Herusher would already have looked himself and was sure to have his own views on their competence.

“They’re all veterans, eighteen are members of the imperial elite and all are highly experienced raptor pilots.”

She looked at Herusher and gave him a smile.

“So they’re pretty good then ?”

He smiled back at her.

“They’re pretty good.”

Jen felt for Chlo and gave her an announcement, which was quickly repeated on the common channel as high priority.

'No survival zone between the Well and the Southern Sentinel, keep well clear !'

She hoped Hol and Delmus would be alright at the Well, nothing could survive an attack from imperial raptors on a 'no restraints' run and that included the toughest of The Damned.

"Two waves of ten, spaced thirty second apart," Jen told Chlo, "then repeat until I tell them to stop." Normally the raptors would have used various effects to add to the shock and awe. A crackling energy between them, like blue lightning, mixed with a sound like the worst thunder storm that could be imagined. But they all knew the undead weren't likely to be impressed by such tricks, so the raptors came in low and silent.

"There are still a few of our fighters forward of the line." Said Herusher.

Jen gave Chlo permission to pull out any of the Guard still in the no survival zone and Chlo reported that about twenty had been recovered who were likely to survive their injuries and another thirty who wouldn't.

"They're coming in very low." Said Herusher.

The empire hadn't designed their famous raptors. A long dead civilisation had designed and developed the technology and the empire had merely added a self-repair function and an almost limitless energy source. Some called the long dead race the grey men, some called them by other names, in truth no one, including Chlo remembered their real name. The empire ended up with a ludicrously heavy craft that was difficult to fly, had an imperfect inertial damping system, but truly spectacular fire power. The raptors main weapon is a multi-cannon, over a hundred separate energy weapons, all firing together and all able to keep up continuous fire. As the craft came slowly in over the city wall, they started to fire straight down at the ground.

"That will finish them." Said one of her aids.

Jen wasn't so sure, the undead didn't seem quite as mindless as they'd thought and whoever was directing them was no fool. The first ten raptors were spread out, ploughing the ground below them with high energy fire. Even at a distance Jen could see the shapes of the undead trying to clamber over each other to escape the death from above.

"The merchant's area is being overrun," said Chlo, "can I use Babak ?"

Jen almost said no. The merchant's area with its small town of illegally built houses and hard landing for shuttles was their own affair. But they'd been there for millennia, had families, there was even a school.

"Yes, but make sure Alyz has enough of the elite guard to protect the Temple of the Flame."

The first wave of raptors were now passing in front of her and Jen could smell the undead burning. It wasn't like the normal smell of burning flesh that all warriors know well. Once a large monster of a creature had been washed up on the shores of Lake Misogon. A rare storm had hit the lake and the local fishermen had discovered the ninety foot long creature when the storm had passed. Jen had been sent with two other, to incinerate or remove the rotting carcass. That was the smell she remembered, that was how the undead smelt when they burned.

"Second wave just starting their run." Said Herusher.

Officially there were no buildings between the Well and the Southern Sentinel. In reality land inside the wall was scarce and several unofficial gardens had been built. There were makeshift eating places for tourists, tournament areas, even a few gift shops selling cheap souvenirs of the holy city. The raptors shredded it all and the second wave came in slightly offset from the first, to ensure the destruction was complete.

"Shall I tell Hol to leave the Well sentinel ?" Asked Chlo.

"I doubt if she'd come. Leave her and Delmus there for now."

Jen looked at the view from above that Chlo was feeding to the common channel. The raptors were destroying the undead in their tens of thousands, but now the creatures pouring through the portals were heading away from the Well, they were heading for the gate in the city wall.

“They’re going for the gate Chlo,” said Jen, “they’re going to follow the wall around to the main east gate.”

“We can’t use raptors that close to the wall.” Said Chlo.

Jen realised she had no choice, it was just stones and history. Only the people and the Temple of the Flame mattered. If it came to it, even the clerics were expendable.

“Yes we can Chlo. Have the first wave turn and attack the undead at the southern gate.”

She saw Herusher turn and look at her, all the orders were going out to everyone with access to Chlo.

“But the wall Jen, it’s the original wall, built by Thrax !”

Chlo then reminded her the burial mound for the fallen was right beside the southern gate.

Jen felt tears in her eyes, why did it have to be her decision.

“I know Chlo, but it’s only stones and soil. Order the raptors to attack.”

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“Why aren’t they telling us more ?” Asked Peli.

“Chlo has a war to fight.” Said Mo.

They were sat on the sofa of the presidential suite, watching several news channels being projected on pop up screens. Mo had obtained a feed from Chlo of channel 77 before she left and now all the local and imperial channels were broadcasting every image they could pull off the feeds from Mendera.

‘Banking, transport and all other imperial services are working as normal.’

The large yellow letters on a nice relaxing blue banner was running along the bottom of all the screens. Only the Maran Group were beginning to suggest the leadership of the empire might have some questions to answer.

“They keep saying the banks are working,” said Peli, “but look at Mendera !”

Her arm was waving about, her fingers pointing at the various views of the undead, ripping the Guard apart and all in full colour and high definition. Mo knew the empire would still function even if Mendera city was completely flattened, Chlo in many ways was the empire. As long as Chlo survived the imperial banks would flourish, trade would carry on, craft could move instantly across the multiverse. What worried Mo was the prisoner below the temple and the slight chance that he might be released.

“Nothing we can do here except watch and wait.” He said.

“Oh not her, I hate her !”

The main face of channel 77 had come on. Breeze Chelano, a tall young woman with impossibly red hair and the best figure that cosmetic surgery on Ixir could provide.

“Still very little hard news from Mendera,” said Breeze, “but as you can see the pictures we’re getting are fairly horrific.”

To underscore how horrific the pictures were, channel 77 went on to show a merchants home being destroyed and his wife being ripped to shreds by the undead. Then Breeze came back on and started to make more inane comments until Peli set the sound to mute.

“Thank you,” said Mo, “she’s far better when you can’t actually hear her.”

Mo had his orders to stay put, so that was exactly what he was going to do. He put his arm around Peli and watched the war on Mendera unfold on the screens in front of him.

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“Not just the main gate,” said Alyz, “spread right around the Temple and remember fire works best.” Most of the faces appearing in front of her she recognised. Old hands, veterans of wars and battles too numerous to mention. It was as though they’d stopped using the common channel and decided individually to protect the place they’d always been taught was the only place that really mattered. “Is Kittara returning ?” One asked.

“No, she’s with Sikush, deep in the rifts.”

Only a few had asked the question, but she knew they’d all rather have seen Kittara standing at the temple doors, Nurigen blade in her hand, than her. Alyz knew she was well respected and they’d all fight under her command, but even she wished Kittara was standing with her. The undead slowed down when they reached the rings, the housing of the rich and famous that went around the great temple in fifteen or so rings. There was no organised defence of the rings, but it gave time for The Damned to get organised and for several thousand veterans to be in place around the entire circumference of the temple. Alyz knew that some areas, like the merchant’s part of town and the imperial palace were completely unprotected, but Chlo had told her many more of the elite members of The Damned were still needed to make sure the temple was protected.

“If I send the new recruits on their own, they’ll die.” Chlo had told her.

By new recruits she knew Chlo meant anyone initiated into the Guard in the last three ages of the temple. It wasn’t that they weren’t extremely well trained and dedicated fighters, it was just that their physical bodies couldn’t withstand the mauling from millions of the undead.

“I thought they’d run, be in the far north by now.” Said Babak.

The mercs, the mercenary militia who kept the peace in Mendera were going through temple square. Only a few thousand of them, but well-armed, they had a reputation for being lazy but tough throughout the empire.

‘They don’t like being bothered.’ Sikush had once said of them.

Committing a crime or reporting a crime, they all caused work and therefore annoyance to the mercs. Those reporting low level crimes too often could find themselves being given a beating, so the number of reported crimes in Mendera was quite low, which suited everyone. Well everyone that mattered. The Damned had always had an awkward relationship with the mercs, had even killed a few during particularly heated debates over jurisdiction. Alyz though was quite proud of them as they went past the temple door on their shuttles or in well-disciplined ranks on foot. They didn’t really stand a chance and she doubted she’d ever see any of them again, but they were doing what all good warriors should do. They were showing loyalty and being courageous.

“They never even looked our way.” Said a Guard to her right.

“True, but they’re staying to fight.”

Alyz started to stamp her foot and cheer, the traditional way for the Guard to show approval of fellow warriors. Other took up the cheer and quickly all the Guard were stamping and cheering the mercs into battle. A few of the mercs at the rears turned and acknowledged the salute as they disappeared into the streets of the rings. Soon after that Alyz noticed the first flames beginning to rise from the houses to the south, in the outer rings and then the sound of heavy blasters.

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A few groups of the undead had attacked the sentinel, but they’d been easily dealt with and Hol had released the other members of The Damned to help elsewhere. She and Delmus stood alone at the ruined south door of the temple and watched the destruction as the raptors pounded the undead and the city walls.

"I didn't think Jen had the balls to do it." Said Delmus.

All around them the ground was covered in layers of ash and body parts of the undead. Most seemed to have been completely destroyed by fire, but a few were just a head and upper torso, struggling across the miles towards the holy city. They seemed to only have one aim, attack Mendera and the crawling wounded had shown no interest in the ruined sentinel building. There was a stench of badly decaying fish about the burned undead and it seemed to be getting worse. "How many do you think we've killed?" Hol asked.

Delmus looked to the south, the flames lighting up the surrounding flat ground better than any moonlight.

"Maybe half," said Delmus, "but they're still coming through the portals and there seems to be no end to them."

"A great many seem to have made it into the city."

"Alyz will deal with them."

Delmus aimed the RM9 at the nearest portal and fired. The white hot cone of energy met no enemies, but as the Ion blast reached the portal in the distance they heard the definite scream of a great many of the undead. So far the only weapon they'd found that made them scream was the RM9, everything else, including the withering fire of the raptors, was met with silence as they died. Hol sent off a fireball spell in the same direction. It would send a few of the undead up in flames, but it was still just a few out of millions.

"My temple, my sentinel, what have they done to it?"

Estrid had arrived with Sventa and they were both looking at the ruins of what had been the most beautiful of the sentinel temples.

"The undead set it ablaze," said Hol, "there are millions of them. Can you help us fight them?"

Sventa kicked one of the bodies of the undead.

"Not even good to eat." She spat.

Estrid began to glow and lifted her right hand, but then she relaxed and simply sat cross legged on the floor.

"If I show my hand now," she said, "all the other deities will pick a side and most of them aren't awake enough to pick wisely. They'll come here and Mendera will be at the centre of the final battle. Nothing alive or undead will be left in the Multiverse. Do you want that Hol?"

"No."

Estrid stood up and smiled at her, the young woman back in front of her, the one she'd watched grow up.

"I can help you with the sentinels though," Estrid said, "but I need one that's still animated."

"Alive?" Asked Delmus.

"No, they're all dead, have been dead for a very long time. I need one that's intact, still moving, still a threat."

Delmus smiled and rested the RM9 against the wall before vanishing. A minute or so later he was back, with a very intact and animated undead in his hands.

"They're almost as strong as us, give me a hand."

Hol grabbed one arm, while Delmus put his knee in the creature back and together they pinned it to the floor and looked at Estrid expectantly. She knelt next to them and put her hand on the head of the undead creature, running her fingers over its eyelids.

"This creature, once had a mind, was a sorcerer beyond gateway."

"What made them this way?" Asked Delmus.

“The demons had deities, minor ones, most now banished to the wastes. I sense the hand of Nigon in this and he was exposed to the outer wastes a very long time ago. Now the City of the Lost God has gone there will be no more new undead.”

Estrid seemed to concentrate on the creature, her hand actually sinking into its flesh, until it stopped thrashing about. Almost instantly the portals outside slammed shut and the sky beyond the well once again just showed the stars over Mendera.

“The sentinels can’t hurt them, they have no essence,” said Estrid, “but they won’t open any more portals for them. You’ll need to clean up the remaining undead yourself. Sveta and I will protect Kittara’s house, our home, but I can do no more, not yet.”

Estrid was gone, vanished, but Sveta pointed in the direction of the now closed portals and a fire came from her finger, a bright fire that hurt the eyes and almost seemed to melt the ground it passed over. A huge scream went up from the undead and Sveta had gone, moved herself through the grey to follow Estrid.

“Well at least Kittara’s house will be undamaged.” Said Delmus.

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“You’ve been to such meetings before Luri, the sort of meetings that don’t officially happen.”

Luri had been summoned and at first she thought it was for more pleasant activities, but the message had mentioned full battledress.

“Just the two of us,” she asked, “you’re not bringing Kittara ?”

She noticed Sikush wasn’t putting on robes, he was pulling up uniform trousers, the sort worn by almost all The Damned.

“Kittara isn’t officially here and besides she’s being watched.” He said.

“Watched ?”

“Estrid thinks of her as a mother and will have an aspect nearby and there will be others. Our Kittara is the key to it all and they will be watching her constantly.”

“They ?”

He looked at her as if seeing her properly for the first time and kissed her very gently on the lips.

“The multiverse Luri, watching to see which way she jumps. Besides, it’s likely she, the person I’m meeting, will be coming through on her own.”

Luri nearly asked who, but reasoned that she’d know soon enough and so she checked the strap of disruption grenades under her skirt and said she was ready. She’d thought they’d be entering a portal created by Sikush, as on other occasions she’d attended meetings that ‘hadn’t happened,’ but Sikush led her on foot out of the Alcázar and towards the two hundred foot high city wall.

“Sumahn-Nerish may not appreciate me meeting her,” said Sikush, “I want to get well outside the city walls.”

The houses on either side looked opulent and well kept; they were obviously in the wealthy part of Annill. They quickly came to a small door in the city wall, guarded by half a dozen well-armed members of the Annill army. The soldiers greeted them warmly; their presence in the city was obviously appreciated.

“Will you be coming back after dark sir ?”

“Perhaps.”

“We normally seal the outer door at dark, but I’ll leave a few men outside until you return.”

They were through the door and into the interior of the great wall, which must have been well over forty feet thick. The passageway went sharply to the right and above them Luri could see a grill and faces peering through it. She dreaded to think what might be pouring through the grill if they

weren't allies of the city. The passage went to the left and then sharp left with another grating above them and more warriors examining them from above.

"They seem well prepared." She said.

"They've had centuries of constant war," said Sikush, "nothing better to keep warriors sharp."

There was an outer door and among the Annill warriors was one of The Damned who greeted them and asked for news of Mendera. Luri told him that all had been well when they left and she and Sikush headed across the grey sand and towards the nearest hills.

"Not far," he said, "there's a gap between two dunes."

Luri had no idea how he knew about the local area, but she trudged next to him, her hand ready on her sword hilt. They suddenly came up to a dip in the ground and sure enough it was as though someone had dug a trench between two sand dunes. He stopped and seemed to listen and Luri too heard the small sounds that even a well-trained soldier makes over sand, they were being followed.

"Just one Luri, take care of it." He whispered.

Sikush continued down between the dunes, but Luri retraced their steps. The lone soldier following them was so intent on following their tracks, that Luri had her sword to his throat before he was aware of her presence.

"Who sent you?" She asked.

She drew a little of his blood to show that she was serious.

"No one, I was just curious to see where you were going."

Luri knew he was telling the truth, she was probably a slightly better empath than Kittara and she knew with all certainty that the young soldier's only crimes were poor discipline and being nosey. But she didn't have time to make sure he didn't run off and tell half the city about The Chaln  from Mendera going off into the dunes for secret meetings.

"Will anyone miss you," she asked, "not just a girl you've seen a few times, but really miss you?"

She saw confusion turn to realisation in his eyes.

"My sister." He said.

Luri pulled her sword across his throat and was glad someone would miss him, she thought there was nothing sadder than having no one to mourn your passing. She left his body lying on the sand and rushed to catch up with Sikush. When she entered the gap in the dunes, he wasn't alone.

"Luri, this is Silky." He said.

A chaos creature, he'd come out of the city to meet a chaos creature ! Luri felt something inside her wanting to kill the creature he'd introduced as Silky, but she kept it under control and just nodded at the creature. Sikush certainly seemed to know Silky well, as he allowed her to kiss him on the lips and let the kiss linger. The creature was well dressed in an expensive dress and had the musky sensual smell Luri had noticed on other chaos invokers.

"No one knows you're here?" Sikush asked.

"No, not even Neosto has any idea where I am."

They sat down crossed legged on the sand, so Luri lowered her behind onto the sand and did the same.

"So, what is happening on Mendera?" He asked.

"As you suspected the undead attacked the city after you left, Faarlh committed nearly all his forces to the attack on Mendera."

It was the first Luri had heard of an attack on Mendera, but she kept her face firmly on the sand in front of her and listened.

"Were there many casualties?" He asked.

“The battle still rages, but the portals are now closed and there can only be one outcome. All of The Many on Mendera will be destroyed. I saw many dead clerics and the mercs were almost wiped out, but The Damned quickly discovered fire was the most effective weapon.”

“And the temple is safe ?”

Silky gave Sikush a strange smile before answering.

“Was there any doubt the temple would be safe ? The battle still goes on in the circle, but The Damned will win. Your commander has been braver in allowing the destruction of the ancient city than I thought, but you’ve won Sikush. You tempted Faarlh with bait he couldn’t resist and you’ve destroyed his invincible army at the cost of a few mercs and city walls.”

Luri had never heard anyone talk to Sikush in such a direct manner, she herself would never have dared to do so.

“Estrid did as I asked ?”

“I can’t be certain, but I think she closed the portals. I picked up no trace of her in the battle, so yes, she did as you asked.”

Sikush leant close to the chaos invoker and there was a private conversation that Luri couldn’t hear, but as they stood Sikush actually initiated a kiss with her.

“Thank you Silky,” he said, “stay safe and withdraw your eye from Mendera now.”

Silky did a slight bow to Sikush and then a dark red portal opened behind her and she was gone.

Sikush looked at Luri and smiled at her.

“Mendera will survive, but it sounds like we’ve a lot of rebuilding to do when we get back.”

Luri found herself wondering about Delmus, but decided that if there was just one building left in Mendera; Delmus would be stood on it with his beloved RM9.

“Is Silky your spy beyond gateway ?” She asked.

“Silky is my official link with Neosto, but she wants a new home and in return for a few favours I’ll bring her to Mendera once we’ve won the war.”

“So she’ll be coming soon ?”

They’d walked back to where the body of the young soldier lay and while Sikush waited she dragged it behind some low scrub and hid it from view.

“Not this war,” said Sikush, “but the big war that is to come.”

Luri couldn’t help being angry. The chaos invoker had woken up feelings from her childhood and she wasn’t sure if she ever wanted her to be part of the imperial court. As they approached the door back into the city she talked very quietly to Sikush.

“I don’t like the look of her, are you sure you can trust her ?”

Sikush stopped and put his hands on her shoulders and looked at her.

“Really ? Actually she rather reminds me of you when I first found you. Anyway we must get back and start to organise moving the army of Annill to war.”

“Who with ?”

“The undead of course. With so many casualties in Mendera they’ll be weak and now is the perfect time to attack the Necropolis.”

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Chlo sat on the roof of the barrack in Mendera and watched the raptors turn in for another sweep between the Well and the city itself. There were forty raptors now and little of the southern section of the famous city walls were standing. On the roof next to her she’d pinned a particular active one of the undead, who was still struggling to be free of the chains Chlo had used to hold him. She patted his head and talked to him soothingly.

“Quiet, don’t stress yourself, you’ll all soon be destroyed.”

She’d examined his body and found no DNA, that had long since degenerated and vanished, but there was a distinct pheromone signature. The strange dead fish smell they put out was unique and could be used to track them and to destroy them. Already the creatures were showing up on the common channel as tiny red dots, a lot less now than had been only a short time before. They appeared to have been given the Temple of the Flame as their objective and almost none had moved further north. The imperial palace and the Council building were completely unscathed. All the news organisations were constantly asking her for updates and she was telling them all that the situation was under control. It wasn’t a lie, now the portals were closed, the mopping up of the undead was just a matter of time.

“Maran Group fleet here, we can be there in seven hours if required ?”

“That won’t be necessary, the situation is under control.”

That was the last of the empire fleets to volunteer, the first had been the Kivar and they weren’t even full members of the empire. Not that any of them could just turn up if they felt like it, without Chlo to give them access to the Mendera Universe, they weren’t getting in. Normally Chlo would allow most craft entry to Mendera, but they didn’t want a flotilla of gawping media to arrive, so she was going to effectively lock the doors of Mendera for a few days. Chlo saw a dark shape hurtle past, Sveta hunting strays that had become lost beyond the walls. There was no need to tell her to be careful, Sveta had an uncanny knack of avoiding friendly fire. Sveta rarely hunted anything she couldn’t eat, so Chlo suspected Estrid had asked her to use her skills to protect the city.

“Louise from Ixir Chlo, will our food shipment arrive on time ?”

“Yes the shuttles will arrive at the usual time.”

“Thank you, hope you’re all safe ?”

“The situation is under control.”

Chlo was answering the same kind of messages every couple of minutes, but she could understand why. The empire, or rather Mendera was the centre of a very fragile network of supply and economics. If anything happened to Mendera, the ripples would stretch out a very long way and a huge number would suffer and die.

“Do you need more old hands at the temple Jen ?” She asked.

Old hands was perhaps a bit rude, but Jen would know what she meant.

“No, they’ll just get in each other’s way. Alyz has a lot of work to do, but we can start mopping up in a couple of hours.”

Alyz had done well and few now were looking at her as a poor alternative to Kittara. How many of the undead had they killed that night ? Chlo assumed most of the fifty or sixty million had come through the portals and yet barely five million were now showing up by their stink, the pheromone signature. Alyz still had a lot to clear from the temple walls, but The Many were completely beaten.

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“Chlo has reserves. If you’re feeling tired, ask to be replaced !”

Alyz was walking around the outside of the temple and reviewing the Guard. The initial attack had been tough, especially when it was obvious the true goal of the undead was to attack the temple. Then Babak had been sent to help in the protection of the merchant’s area. For a while Alyz had seen the new members of The Damned die, torn apart in front of her, by the incredibly strong and single minded undead. That had been some time ago though and now the Guard weren’t suffering any loses. The occasional warrior needed to rest up, or was simply exhausted of any ability to use fire spells, but Chlo had reserves and the bulk of The Many were now dead.

“Best with weapons at the front, best with fire spells at the back.” She shouted.

They were working in the same groups of five or six that proved so effective in front of the southern sentinel. The Guard at the front breaking skulls with swords, while those at the back fired off a barrage of assorted fire spells. Then they’d slowly rotate to keep fresh sword arms at the front and fresh minds at the rear. They’d learned a lot about facing a massive army using brute force, the Guard learned from every battle and they improved. Alyz slipped and looking down she saw the arm of one of her own, the hand had the markings of the imperial elite. It had to be someone she’d known and trained with, perhaps even known as a lover. They’d learnt a few lessons from the battle, but the cost had been high. The destruction wasn’t as bad as it could have been, Alyz reflected that it rarely was. Kittara’s house looked intact, but it wasn’t the only one and a good third of the housing in the rings looked either undamaged, or easy to repair. She checked on the common channel and was pleased that Jen was already bringing in shuttles to remove all civilians from the city. Even the merchant’s area was now quiet and it appeared that apart from a few stragglers, the remaining few million of The Many were now attacking the temple.

“Let’s step it up ! They’re not paying us by the hour !” She shouted.

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Babak had a deep claw mark on his upper arm, but it was his left arm, so he could still crush skulls very efficiently with his right. He’d assembled an odd mixture of mercs and Guard, who’d volunteered to protect the merchants area, or just drifted into fighting in that part of the city. He noticed that the original Hasim Emporium was burnt to the ground, but then remembered that Mo had sold it quite some ago.

“They’re all moving towards the temple sir.”

He had to check that the Merc was talking to him, he wasn’t used to being called sir. Without him the mercs would have been wiped out, but he’d formed them into a classic fighting square and by some miracle a few of them still lived.

“Alyz will deal with them,” he said, “we’ll carry on cleaning out the market area.”

The destruction seemed almost complete, with merchants shuttles ripped apart, shops and stores ablaze. But they’d seen faces at windows, adults and children who’d survived and were waiting to be rescued. It was still too soon to risk bringing them out into the open, but when Jen thought it was safe she’d send in the shuttles to evacuate the civilians. At least they now knew where the undead were and there wasn’t the usual and often fatal surprise that came with meeting a group of the undead.

“Three of them behind the wrecked container.” He said.

On the common channel the three dots looked static and he wasn’t surprised when, as he approached the container, one of them ran straight at him. Babak easily cleaved the creatures head, they’d all become either very good at it, or dead. There was decapitation, but that took skill and a certain amount of good fortune, far safer to crush a skull or cleave it in two.

“All dead sir.”

He almost corrected the Merc, but decided to let it go. He knew the creatures had been dead for a very long time, they just hadn’t fallen over. Jen was in his head, talking about evacuation, so he signalled his group to keep still.

“Shuttles coming in Babak, can you offer protection ?”

“Ready and happy to.”

Chlo was using small long shuttles, the type that fitted in between houses and wreckage. Babak and his team started to call out the survivors and bang on doors even before the shuttles had fully landed. Herusher was on the first shuttle, with six very tired looking elite members of the Guard.

“How bad is it here ?” Asked Herusher.

“Fairly bad, the few mercs you see here are all that survived and most of the body parts you can see are what’s left of many of the merchants.”

Despite of what he’d said a lot of merchants families were appearing out of the wreckage and heading for the shuttles. They all looked stunned, they’d had no warning about any threat from the undead and one particularly angry old lady said to Herusher.

“How could you let this happen to us. This is Mendera ?!”

Babak could have mentioned that it was almost certain that Faarlh had been getting information from the merchants and that all of them were, in theory at least, breaking Menderan law by living in the merchant’s zone. But he knew the laws had been ignored for millennia and no one expects to be attacked in the middle of the night by a mindless horde.

“Get on the shuttles as quickly as you can.” He said.

A few of the undead tried to rush the shuttles, but they were easily dealt with, even by the newer recruits. They now knew what to do, but the knowledge had been hard won.

“Where are you taking them ?”

“To Leviathan,” said Herusher, “then they can either go home or rebuild on Mendera.”

“This is home to most of them.”

The families walked past him, most of them looking shocked and confused. One little girl was still carrying a Kittara doll. Not the expensive one with gems and made of precious metals, but a cheap cloth doll that barely resembled Kittara at all. The child stopped crying and smiled at Babak and he smiled back.

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