

Mendera Temple

Chapter 12 – Darken the Sun

“Not that Sveta was cruel, she was just a dark angel and her natural inclination was to kill and feed.”



Sevril-Narge the great bug god was disconcerted. She could feel the construction work being carried out on the 1st rift and she suspected she wasn't going to like what was going on. Sevril was almost completely awake, another fifty million years or so and she'd visit Sikush in Mendera, the time was barely the blink of an eye to a deity. Now though something was happening on the rifts and she sent an aspect of herself to investigate. Her aspect was drawn to the ruined necropolis like a bug to a flame. The destruction of the necropolis was upsetting, she'd been there for its opening and dark consecration, though that had been a long time ago and then the necropolis had been on a different world in a different multiverse.

“So Faarlh is destroyed.” She muttered.

Sevril had hoped Faarlh would at least survive long enough to launch a full siege on Annill, give Sumahn-Nerish a bloody nose and dent his ego a little. Now all her new Dracc would have to be sent against Annill and that displeased her, there were others she would have liked them to have chastised. The aspect moved over Tandalla and then found the hill where the god killer had been used, though the energy there confused her. So much power had been used there, yet the outcome eluded her senses and there was no one she trusted enough to ask. On her aspect moved and eventually on the 1st rift the cause of her consternation was found, the hated Tomma-Goran was building a new great city. There he was. Not even using an aspect, the deity himself was moving through tens of thousands of workers, instructing and directing the construction. The mountain side was already covered in bright white marble towers and on the plain the army of workers were finishing off vast city walls. The area enclosed was huge; it would rival the vast and ancient Leng itself, Leng the dark city beyond gateway. Sevril moved in her slumber and almost decided to attack the city herself, pull it to pieces and throw Tomma into the wastes.

“No ! Sleep and prepare.” She told herself.

There was little chance her aspect could get the better of Tomma and she knew it. Besides she'd managed to cause a state of almost perpetual war in his old city, just by the use of a few subtle pockets of darkness in just the right places. Yes, she'd use her aspect to add a few extra's to the city, or near it, extras that would ensure a hard future for its inhabitants. Over the river the catacombs of the old city were still there, or at least the deeper parts were. The inhabitants of the new city would cross the river, they'd probably build several bridges over it. Then they'd dig in the ruins, their natural curiosity would aid Sevril and be their ultimate undoing. She went deep underground, into the ancient caverns below the catacombs, where the darkness was still strongest.

“Take shape my children, take shape.” She called.

Not bugs these, but wraiths, formed from the darkness and strengthened by her aspect. The people, the human would find the darkness, then the wraiths would find them. Some of the humans would be scared, some would be intrigued, some might even worship the forces of darkness. Whatever the outcome, the new city would become as the old one had been. A playground for all the monsters of the people's ids, brought out and magnified by the few seeds of darkness now being laid. It would take some time, perhaps millions of years, but Sevril was patient.

"I'll win in the end Tomma." She muttered.

~ ~

The paperwork had only just gone through, but Mo was already living on the island, after all who was going to complain ? North Nerrabar was now his and looking out of his bedroom window, he could see the dawn and it was glorious.

"Do you have to be up this early ?" Muttered Peli from the bed.

"Yes, business meeting in Moglas."

It was a lie, today he was going to personally plant the device which would create the largest explosion ever seen on Ixir. Mo looked past the swaying palms and the sea was the bluest blue he'd ever seen. It would have been so easy to slip back into bed with Peli, but others were relying on him.

"You want to plant the device yourself ?" Quinn had asked him.

"I was a top slum runner when Ixir was a planet in the Ambela system. Can you think of anyone better ?"

Albas gave him a smile, but the others around the room just looked confused.

"We didn't think you'd want to do the grunt work," said Miram Dunn, "none of us are actually going there on the day."

Then Axl said what the others were thinking.

"If you get caught, you'll talk," he said, "and then we're all fucked."

Mo looked to Chlo to reassure the other slum runners.

"I will pull Mo out if he is killed or captured," she said, "there will never be a body to identify, or a prisoner to question."

"Would you kill him if necessary ?" Asked Axl.

"Yes."

Mo knew she meant it and he'd been curiously comforted by the thought. No one who knew Ixir wanted to spend a single minute in the custody of the security forces. So he took a last look out to sea and then walked down the stairs and out onto the veranda at the front of the house. Chlo appeared near him and waited for him to collect his thoughts.

"I'm ready Chlo, let's go to Xeod's."

She held him for a few seconds, rubbing his back and then she gently kissed his cheek and they were in the slum runners base at Xeod's. There were a few more rooms now, but after the space on the island it seemed claustrophobic. Mo returned the greeting of one of Miram's warriors and made his way to where the weapons were stored. He picked up one of the explosive devices and turned it around in his hand, so much destruction in such a small piece of technology.

"So you're still taking it yourself ?" Said Quinn.

"The target was my choice, I should be the one."

They'd been through the mission so often, they'd even run through several scenarios in an abandoned chemical plant Chlo had found. Mo couldn't have dropped out now and besides, he didn't want to. Right across Ixir, from the smallest town to the largest city, the slum runners tag had been painted on walls. The media had one burning question, ' who the hell are the slum runners ?' Today Mo was going to show them. Chlo handed him a back pack and he put the device in it, it was light on his back, he was grateful for that.

"The transport is ready." Said Quinn.

Mo used the lift, with Chlo stood next to him. He just needed a bit more normality before he went and a quick walk through Xeod's always grounded him. From the lift they walked through the off limits part of Xeod's and eventually came to the larger of the two warehouses. In the centre was a

twelve seater tourist transport, the sort so beloved by families with lots of small children and elderly relatives. It hovered high enough so that granny didn't need to crouch to get on board, but the seats were easily moved around and the fabric seat covers came off to wash. Mo could feel his testicles shrinking just looking at it, it was horrid, but perfect.

"Come on Uncle Mo, or we'll be late."

One of Miram's girls had shouted, she only looked about seventeen in her short skirt and T shirt that advertised Channel 77.

"Save your old uncle a seat at the back." He replied.

There were eight of them on the transport and he would be the ninth, all looking like they were just a harmless family of tourists. In the back and under sun loungers and camping equipment was enough high tech weaponry to start a war, which was what they were doing. Chlo stood back while he got on board and made himself comfortable, her job was to move the entire vehicle to a secluded spot about five miles out of Tonokae. From there they'd drive the recreational transport into Tonokae and become just another family touring the coast. Gurd, the driver Axl had provided for the team, gave Chlo a thumbs up through the window and the world outside started to melt. Mo remembered to close his eyes, but he still felt nauseous, seeing the world dissolve and then remake itself had that effect on people. As they appeared in the small clearing just off the main road, Gurd turned on the engine and the sound system, a hideous popular music song started to fill the vehicle. "Enjoy yourself kids," said Gurd, "we'll soon be in Tonokae."

"Are we nearly there yet?" Shouted one of the girls.

Mo settled back in his seat and reminded himself he was sat with eight battle hardened freedom fighters, even if they were geeks.

~ ~

Kittara woke up and wondered why her arm had gone dead, then she realised she was holding Sventa's tail. She got out of bed and went to the window, it was getting light, but it was still an hour away from the time the staff of the Annill Rest would bring her bath and hot water. The staff had got used to Sventa, Kittara supposed they must have seen far more exotic creatures turn up in Annill. Sventa was snoring, yet of course when awake she'd deny that a Genova ever snored. Kittara shoved her, none too gently with her foot.

"Wake up you're snoring."

The dark angel opened one eye and glared at her with it. She then obviously realised it was far too early to get out of bed and curled herself further into the sheets.

"Some use you are." Said Kittara.

There was mumbling from under the sheets and Sventa turned away from her, but at least the snoring stopped. There was some stale bread still on the table from the previous night, Kittara picked at it and considered how to get Sventa to betray Sikush. It was only a minor betrayal, but Sventa was becoming more and more attached to Sikush, so the bribe had to be a significant one.

"We could go hunting later." She said.

Sventa pulled her head out of the sheets and looked at her.

"I have to see Nurigen," said Kittara, "but then I have time. We could go hunting out on the rifts."

"No. I won't take you back there." Said Sventa.

Kittara had been left there for a few minutes, while Sventa had taken Sikush back to the Necropolis, but she'd been too stunned by events to have a good look around.

"What harm could there be," she said, "I only want to look for the sword and then we can spend the whole morning hunting."

Sventa was now leaning back, her bright red hair covering the pillows.

“Not undead,” she said. “hunting something I can eat, lots of things I can eat.”

Kittara was fairly certain the dark angel hadn't fed in Annill. There was no way to be certain, but Sventa seemed to consider the population as friends, so she must have been getting fairly hungry. Kittara knew Sikush wouldn't approve, but Sventa needed to eat and she needed the dark angel to take her back to where Abijah had died.

“There are pilgrims on the rifts,” said Kittara, “they travel together in groups for safety.”

Sventa put one very long and shapely leg out of the bed and started to grin.

“We can hunt one of these groups, kill them all, feed on them all ?”

There was a point where something Kittara knew to be a bad idea suddenly took her over. Now she wanted the hunt as much as her friend, wanted to enjoy the kill and give herself up to the darkness inside her, the darkness she usually kept hidden.

“Yes,” said Kittara, “take me where I want to go and we'll hunt the whole group.”

Sventa merely nodded and began finding her clothes. Kittara was tempted to pull Sventa back onto the bed for a while, but they didn't have the time.

“I need to see Nurigen before we go,” said Kittara, “he needs to know I'm leaving Annill.”

~ ~

Sikush was on his favourite veranda in the palace on Mendera and he'd just noticed how well the palms in the garden had grown while he was away.

“I'm pleased the palace wasn't damaged by the undead Chlo. It's been my home for so long now and this veranda has been at the centre of so many good memories.”

He was ignoring the fact that something was troubling Chlo. You couldn't share part of your mind with someone without knowing when they were upset.

“I know we could have rebuilt it,” he continued, “but it would never have been quite the same.”

Soon they would be attending a meeting in the council building to discuss the rebuilding of Mendera. Officially Mendera City was a democracy, but Sikush already knew exactly what the outcome would be. He'd discussed it at length with Chlo and the head of the clerics, currently another member of the Ojetin family.

‘So we're agreed,’ he's said, ‘A square in front of the Temple of the Flame called Merc Square to honour the fallen and the rings to be extended to twenty two rings of housing.’

‘Plus the new cleric's school.’ Chlo had added.

The head cleric was pleased, all the construction would be in the same style and materials as the original city built by Thrax. There'd be more housing and a better school and of course a memorial square. But really Mendera City would look and feel exactly as it has always looked and felt and that would please almost everyone. Some councillors wanted a new high tech city, something to rival the glittering towers of Ventella. Mendera wasn't a place for glitter though and the holy city definitely wasn't the place for high rise buildings and fast food.

“Babak knows Abijah returned and died again.” Said Chlo.

It wasn't the sort of news he been dreading. No undead horde killing off ambassadors, no destruction of a friendly planet, no imminent danger of a nearby descending star. He liked Babak, he always had done, but the news could have been far worse.

“He knows she was with you as you left the city,”

Damn, he'd tried to be so careful, even getting Chlo to disrupt media coverage of the event.

“It was always a possibility,” he said, “how is he taking it ?”

Silly question he knew. Babak had probably just started to recover from the loss of his soul mate, then she's taken from him yet again.

"He asked about methods of self-destruction."

Sikush always told new members of The Damned that they had a way out, that if they really wanted to end their immortal life, they could do so by their own hand. He always told anyone who asked that no member of the Guard had ever done so, but in fact there had been three. Three immortals had decided that immortality was, for one reason or another more intolerable than death. Sikush was determined Babak wasn't going to be number four.

"He has the right to end his own life," said Sikush, "but ask him to see me about it, ask him to have dinner in the palace this evening. It's not an order, ask him to come as my friend."

Sikush had an idea of somewhere Babak could be useful. Suicide was a rage, a deep dark rage aimed inwards. Now if Sikush could refocus that rage ? Yes Babak could be very useful.

~ ~

There was no need to park the transport in the visitors area of the fusion plant, there was a beach nearby. Some famously high waves came over four thousand miles across the ocean to pound the beaches of Tonokae and the foolhardy came to ride them on long wooden boards. Gurd eased the transport into a gap between two other family recreational vehicles and turned off the engine.

"Volunteers to get wet ?" Asked Mo.

He wasn't officially the leader of the group, but as one of the main slum runners and the founder of the movement, he thought he outranked them all. Miram's team instantly grabbed beach towels and swimming wear and headed for the sea. Three of the men began extending the fabric rear of the transport, turning it into a camping vehicle capable of sleeping up to twenty people. Inside the large tent, they began assembling and checking their weapons and equipment. They were going to have fun, set up a camp fire and in the early evening they'd attack the fusion plant. A wet towel hit Mo across the back of his neck.

"Come on, with those legs you must be a good swimmer."

Relda, the youngest of the girls was grinning at Mo.

'Well why the hell not ?' He thought.

Mo grabbed the girl and threw her over his shoulder. With her screeching in delight, Mo ran for the ocean.

~ ~

"Why here Sventa ?" Asked Kittara.

The dark angel still had most of her Genova powers, some of them were even amplified since her conversion. Kittara thought there had to be a reason Faarlh had come to that deserted hillside and perhaps Sventa could sense why.

"It's just a hill," said Sventa, "the sorcerer who sent him probably chose the place at random."

Kittara felt around on the ground and there was a dark residue from Abijah, like fine soot. But of Faarlh and her sword there was nothing.

"Have you felt deep below the ground ?"

Sventa gave her one of her long suffering looks.

"I've looked everywhere, it's just a hill, like hundreds of others nearby."

Getting the blessing of Nurigen to leave Annill had been easier than she'd thought. Sumahn-Nerish had been treating him very well and since the death of Aukar he'd drifted into training the army, as well as providing them with fine weapons.

"I'm quite safe here." Nurigen had said, "and if Sikush needs you to visit the Nest, then obviously you need to do that."

The mildly paranoid and insecure Nurigen was gone and the man in front of her had shown new found courage and focus. Kittara had seen it before. Warriors kept out of battles for too long went soft, started seeing an assassin in every shadow, hear danger in every creak of the stairs. Put them back in a position of real peril and they became lions again. She'd left Nurigen with a promise to send Alyz to see him as soon as she could.

"Can we go hunting now?" Asked Sventa.

Kittara scanned the horizon herself; there was nothing but scrub and hills for thousands of miles.

"Is there anything near here?" She asked.

Sventa went quiet and closed her eyes, then came the strange sniffing as she felt the fabric of reality.

"There is an old shrine, but it's about five miles away."

"Take us to it."

She hung onto Sventa for yet another trip through the grey, but she was getting used to it now and it was far more pleasant than the sort of holes Sikush tore in reality. They appeared quite close to the few stones that were all that was left of the old shrine. There seemed to be about six of the undead, all simply crouching near the stones and hardly moving. Kittara drew her sword, but it was fairly obvious that the undead weren't interested in her, or anything else.

"They seem harmless now Faarlh is gone." She said.

Sventa just gave a snarl at the creatures that were useless to her as food.

"Like the Genova they seem drawn to shrines and old temples." Said Sventa.

Kittara searched around the ruins, not quite certain what she was looking for. Eventually she realised there was no clue to the missing sword, or any connection with where Faarlh had died. The time had come for her to fulfil her promise and take Sventa hunting.

"Can you see that mountain, the one with the triple peaks?" She asked.

"Yes."

"That is Mount Erran, there is an ancient trail that runs around its base," she continued, "every pilgrim or trader heading for Tandalla has to use that trail to cross the mountains."

Sventa became animated, making her clucking sound that showed she was happy. The mountain was only about thirty miles away and Sventa was keen to be off.

"Take us high on the mountain," said Kittara, "then we can watch for a caravan entering the trail."

Kittara flapped her wings in excitement before holding onto Sventa and dragging them both into the grey.

~ ~

As the sun started to get lower on the horizon the families packed up their things and went home. A few transports were still in the parking area, but they spread themselves out, most full of young couples seeking a different pastime after a day's sunbathing on the beach. By the time Mo's group lit a small camp fire, there was no one within a hundred yards of their transport. Mo had the device on his back and a top of the range Maran blaster on his hip, nothing but the best for the slum runners.

"Keep to the trees." Mo said as led his seven warriors away from the beach.

Gurd was staying by the camp fire, as was one of the girls. Not just to add a little authenticity to their camp site, but they also had heavy weapons, just in case the evening ended in a fire fight. There was giggling coming from inside one of the transports they passed; the beach was very popular with

student couples. Then the seven were in the trees next to the fusion plant and Mo was getting a last minute all clear from Chlo.

“Nothing,” she told him, “no extra patrols, no new motion detectors. I’d say they’re definitely not expecting you.”

Betrayal was always a risk, especially as this was the first mission for a fairly disparate group of freedom fighters. Mo walked out of the trees and towards the razor wire fence, knowing the rest of them would follow him. There were none of the body heat detectors or motion detectors that were found protecting the military bases on Ixir; after all it was just a power plant. The authorities had put in three rows of razor wire fencing, the final one was twenty feet high. It was just to keep out angry locals and Mo’s team would be through it all in a few minutes. Relda was an expert with the cutters and she worked with another girl who everyone simply called Mouse. The cutters used a tiny, almost invisible lance of super-heated particles to melt the fence and create door way size holes in it.

“Wait a moment.” Whispered Mouse.

The girl was tiny but strong. As the cut wires cooled, she put them back behind them, sticking them in place well enough to fool a bored and sleepy guard. Soon they were on the other side of the fence, the side where the armed guards should have been swarming all over them. But it was quiet and Mo could hear an animal of some kind barking in the trees behind them.

“I still can’t believe how light the security is.” Said Relda.

Two of Quinn’s men glared at her, they didn’t approve of idle chit chat. Besides they all knew from the briefing that the only serious guards were inside the building that housed the fusion vessel itself. Mo ignored the door nearest to them and took his team across the almost empty employee parking area and towards the large doors at the back of the goods unloading bay. It all looked so low tech for a modern nuclear energy plant, there were bits of broken packing cases against the huge roll up doors and someone had spray painted ‘Todd is a wanker’ on a wall. Mo knew Todd was the maintenance supervisor.

“Everyone hates the boss man.” Muttered Erru.

Erru was one of Quinn’s men, an ex-special forces type who carried out the odd assassination if the price was right. He looked and sounded professional, but Mo knew the type, Erru was so keen on there being a fight that he might well start one.

“Easy peasy.” Said Mouse as the roller door moved silently up.

They pulled the door down once they were in and put a metal wedge under it, to stop it dropping into the locks. They were in, into the holy of hollies, the Tonokae fusion plant and it was a huge disappointment. The loading bay had parts scattered all over, some shiny and new, others were covered in corrosion. The floor was greasy and there was another reference to Todd and his sexual preferences sprayed on the wall.

“What a shit hole.” Someone muttered.

At the back of the building there were work benches, a little cleaner and someone was in the process of assembling a newly delivered pump. On the wall over the bench was a girlie calendar and the now almost obligatory insult to Todd and his lack of parentage.

“They really hate Todd.” Said Slash.

Slash looked about seven feet tall and broad to match, but he managed to move like a shadow. One of Axl’s men, Slash looked like a typical street hood, but he’d managed to stay out of prison, so Mo knew the mountain of a guy was no fool. A door led them to a main corridor; again there were no detectors, not even low level anti burglary protection. The plant was privately owned and security was expensive. Besides no one was going to attack a power plant, were they ?

“Listen.” Whispered Mouse.

There was the sound of a door being closed and locked somewhere in the distance and then there was silence once more. They carried on for about fifty yards down the corridor and then another set of door took them into the turbine halls. In some parts of the empire they used a technology to directly convert the fusion energy into electricity, but it was expensive and inefficient. On Ixir they still used steam created by the heat of the hydrogen fusion vessel and good old fashioned turbine generators, dozens of them.

“It looks like hell.” Said Erru.

Below them, row after row of turbines roared, the noise was appalling. The rows of turbines went off into the distance, enough to cover a two acre field and then there were another three such huge rooms, cathedrals to the great need for cheap power. There was no talking once they went down the stairs into the turbine halls and the plant staff always wore ear defenders. There were staff though, not many, but even at night someone needed to monitor the huge turbines. Mo pointed to where they needed to go, the direction all the super-heated steam pipes came from, the fusion building itself. They moved between the pipework, lagged but still hot enough to burn, still keeping a watch for any maintenance or monitoring staff.

As they were almost at the main pipe duct the figure walked straight into them. He managed a faint scream as Mouse buried a dagger in his chest, but the noise was lost in the roar of the turbines. The man was dead and on his chest was a badge ‘Todd R – Maintenance Manager,’ they all smiled at each other. Mo carried on and came to the tunnel leading to the fusion building, a tunnel full of huge pipes carrying steam at impossible temperatures. The pipes were covered in inches of insulation, but the temperature in the tunnel was still very high and Mo knew the plant staff were only allowed a few minutes in there at a time. As they entered the tunnel the noise stopped, which was a relief to them all.

“Keep moving.” Said Mo.

Mo knew the plant had a bad safety record, good safety was like good security, it was expensive. There were stories of staff in the tunnel being cut in half by a steam leak, the steam so hot that it was invisible to the eye. Mo led them on and eventually they emerged from the tunnel and into a router room, where several huge pipes coming from the fusion vessel were split into smaller pipes for the turbines. Beneath the huge thirty foot diameter pipes was a door and on it was a sign saying ‘Fusion building staff only – High risk of death.’

No one needed telling to check their kit, past the door a group of elite special forces guards worked in shifts to prevent exactly what they were going to do, destroy the plant. The guards were good, the best and they outnumbered them. But Mo and his group had surprise on their side and the natural apathy that all guards develop if there has never been a genuine threat. You can throw realistic simulation at people, take them right down to the wire, but after a while everyone could tell it was just another drill.

“Quietly Mouse.” Said Mo.

As if mouse could ever be anything but quiet, quiet was her nature, it was why they called her Mouse. There were two locks on the door, both top of the range and a biometric device. Mouse was through them all in two minutes and she had the door slightly opened to see beyond.

“Looks clear.”

Mo waited for Chlo to confirm that no guards were waiting inside the door. Once through the door was closed, once again Mouse made sure none of the locks could engage. This was where they were

to split up and Mo was going up while the others planted timed explosives on the panels and machinery.

“Good luck.” Whispered Mouse.

She kissed him on his cheek and Mo looked for the place to start climbing. It was what he was good at and he felt safe heading up high. He’d been through the route several times, looking at the pipes and ducts on benign probes, but real life is always different. Ducts can be slippery, pipes can be white hot, you can never allow for every eventuality. In front of him was a pressure regulator with cable trunking leading up to a girder, which in turn would take him to a pipe. Mo leapt onto the regulator and started to climb the trunking. He was happy, he now felt like a true slum runner again.

~ ~

The sixty or so hybrids coming along the pilgrim’s trail were a mixture of merchants and pilgrims, travelling together for protection. Kittara unconsciously marked two serious looking guards as the first to die, but even they were no real threat to her or Sventa. Killing always felt better if the opponent was a worthy one, the thrill could be almost sexual. But today there would be no almost orgasmic encounter, not with the mixed bag passing below them.

“Now ?” Asked Sventa.

“When I tell you and only then.”

Kittara looked them over, not a single one of them had noticed they were being watched by two strangers barely a hundred yards away. They had livestock, a few beasts of burden and cages of edible birds in crates on a cart. Eventually a call went up and the two guards started to head towards them, each carrying a large weapon shaped like a scythe.

“The guards are mine,” said Kittara, “then you can have who you want.”

Sventa removed her gown and began screeching, the guards came to a halt and gave the impression of people wanting to be somewhere else. Kittara ran at them with her Nurigen blade raised and they ran, it was a disappointment to her.

“Cowards !” She shouted.

She could hear Sventa flapping her wings and flying towards the main group, while she ran after the fleeing guards. One of them finally turned and faced her, but only to drop his weapon and fall to his knees. Kittara wasn’t in the mood for chivalry though and removed his head from his shoulders without breaking her stride. There was screaming now, with Sventa there was always a lot of screaming. The dark angel like her food fresh, so she’d kill a few, but just maim others, leave them alive enough to keep them fresh.

“No, please !” Shouted the guard.

He looked huge and well protected in good quality armour, yet like the other he’d thrown down his weapon and was facing her and pleading for his life.

“Fuck you,” she said, “you can feed my friend.”

She used her blade to expertly cut the tendons at the back of his knees, leaving him alive and screaming, but incapable of escape. Kittara looked around and there seemed to be only a few of the hybrids still standing and none of them were attacking the dark angel. While Sventa had her fun and enough liver to eat to make herself ill, Kittara decided to look at the goods the merchants had been carrying. She couldn’t see Charadask appreciating edible birds, but perhaps a half ton sweaty Farrag beast might be an appreciated addition to his diet ?

“No, No Please, No.”

Kittara could hear the screams had become the usual pleadings as Sventa began to feed. The rending and ripping sounds would come next and then the whimpering of those that had watched her eat

and were now aware of their fate. Not that Sveta was cruel, she was just a dark angel and her natural inclination was to kill and feed. Out of the two Kittara was capable of real cruelty; there was just no one worthy of such attention today. She picked through the boxes that had fallen off the carts and there were the usual herbs, spices, jewellery and clothing. One box though had books, she'd never expected Tandalla to be a place of learning, but one box was full of books, all nonfiction and on high quality paper. There had been no intention to take a gift to the Nest, but now they were surrounded by so many goods, with no living owners, it just seemed mean to arrive empty handed. "This will do." She muttered.

Something for his mind and something for his belly. The Farrag had panniers on its sides, full of bottles of a decent wine from Quron. She threw the bottles on the ground and filled the panniers with books. It would mean using her dark side to carve a hole in reality and Sveta always moaned that such portals caused her pain, but that way Kittara could get her gifts to Charadask. By the time she had the books securely packed on the beast, Sveta looked like a creature formed from blood and entrails. The dark angel had put her head inside so many bodies to get at the best bits that she was drenched in blood. Kittara waved and Sveta waved back.

"No hurry, take your time." Said Kittara.

The screaming started again as Sveta found another pilgrim to feed on. First she opened the chest with her talons, ripping the bones of the chest to one side. Then the screaming would stop as she ripped out the heart and pushed her head inside. Kittara had watched the routine many times and knew Sveta would drink the hot blood, before consuming the liver. Kittara found an unbroken bottle of the best Quron wine and a bundle of bedding to sit on. As her friend ate more than enough to keep her contented for many week, Kittara drank the wine and relaxed. When Sveta was finished they would get cleaned up and go to the Nest.

~ ~

Mo was across the building without mishap and about to climb the fusion vessel itself when the firing started somewhere below. They never had thought it was possible to get in and out without detection, even the best scenario had them fighting their way out, the worst had them all dead. But every scenario that Chlo had worked on, did show the plant being destroyed, as long as Mo worked alone in the fusion building. Mo heard a scream from below, a woman's scream and then yet more blaster fire. He climbed high up onto the fusion vessel and crawled through the gap between it and the reinforced concrete roof of the building.

"Most of their charges are in place." Chlo told him.

Chlo had been quiet, leaving him in peace to get where he needed to be. It would have been nice to know if the rest of the team were still alive, but he knew that knowledge wasn't needed to complete his mission. The charges the team placed fused themselves to the surface they were placed on and were effectively impossible to remove, or at least by Ixir security forces. They would explode at a pre-designated time and then a minute or so later his device would crack open the vessel and release the miniature sun at the heart of the fusion vessel itself. Not that they expected anyone to relieve the guards very soon. The nearest military base didn't have fast transports, or the battle ready fast response troops to deal with such an attack. After arguing with the onsite security, seeking permission from the government in Moglas and then getting equipped... the army would probably arrive just in time to be vaporised.

"I see it." Whispered Mo.

Right at the very top of the vessel, about three hundred feet up, there was a small plate where fibre optic cables penetrated the casing. They were an afterthought, extra sensors that the designers hadn't planned for. They were a weakness !

"Get the device up tight against the cables." Said Chlo.

Mo removed the device from his backpack and put it against the cables, using some sticky tape to hold it in place. The vessel itself would protect it from the explosions below, the staff in the plant might even think the attack had failed.... then Mo's device would detonate. Chlo set the timer running and Mo realised he now had a very small and finite amount of time to get clear of the plant and a good distance away from Tonokae. There was more blaster fire and then Chlo informed him that all the explosives below had been planted, some of his team must be alive.

Descending fast but carefully Mo retraced his steps across the fusion vessel and across the girders that braced the structure against the concrete walls. He had no fear of heights, but he was aware of being an easy target if anyone looked up, but then of course people rarely do look up. Once back on the pipes, he carefully climbed down to the ducting and noticed a body below him, it was Relda. Two of the elite guard were stood over her body, one was feeling in the pockets of her jacket. It was still too high for him to jump down on them, but Mo brought out his very expensive and very accurate blaster.

"Bastards !" He shouted.

As the guards looked up he shot them both, just small holes in their heads indicating how they died. Mo almost ran down the ducting, leaping the last twenty feet to land near Relda, feeling his foot turn under him, yet ignoring the pain. Relda was dead, the huge hole in her neck simply didn't allow for her to be anything other than dead. Mo sensed movement and ducked, just in time to save himself from being fried by a blaster. Again he used a precision shot to kill the guard who'd fired at him. Just as he was about to run for the door he noticed a foot on the ground near the guard, a small foot, a female foot.

Damn he was running further into the building not out of it, the building with a miniature sun in a vessel that was about to explode. The foot belonged to Mouse and she was out cold on the floor. Mo knew when someone was alive, he'd always been able to tell and he knew the fact that half her left arm had been blown off hadn't killed her. The guards were using old style blasters that cauterised the wounds they made, that had saved her life. Newer blasters didn't do that to wounds, she'd been lucky. Who after all would want to stop someone they'd shot from bleeding to death ? Mo picked her up, she weighed almost nothing and threw her over his shoulder. Fuck, she might be light, but she was going to slow him down. Chlo wasn't telling him how the timer clock was decreasing, so he wasn't about to ask her. Mouse groaned as he ran towards the door.

"Don't worry," he told her, "we're on our way home."

~

~

There were quite a few there to join Sikush for dinner, some invited and a few knew they could simply turn up. Jen was enjoying the attentions of the new commander of the mercs, while Chlo had managed to get Babak to actually laugh. Strangely the large dinner group made it easier to talk to Babak, Sikush simply steered him just far enough away from the other guests to talk privately.

"Did you know she was going to die again ?"

Babak barked the question at him, so loud that several concerned heads looked in their direction.

Sikush once again wondered why everyone assumed he was in some way omniscient, when most of the time he was as confused by events as they were.

"I knew it was her destiny to destroy Faarlh, but as to her death.....there was a possibility we'd lose her again."

Babak was no longer looking at him, he seemed to have drifted off into his own thoughts.

"At least you had some time with her," said Babak, "I never even had a chance to speak to her."

Sikush had never intended that Babak would know Abijah was back, until he was certain she was back for some time. But telling Babak that would only complicate matters and wasn't likely to improve the warriors mood.

"Chlo told me you were asking about ending your life."

Again there was the hunted look in Babak's eyes and he looked ready to run off.

"That is my right, you've often said The Damned may end their immortal existence."

Sikush hoped Babak wasn't going to be the fourth to commit suicide. It would be hushed up of course, it would be unwise to let the idea grow in other minds. The problem would be with the newer recruits. Once their family line had died out and sometimes their entire race, they became restless, not yet part of the family of The Damned. No, there most definitely couldn't be publicised suicides.

"It is your right and I won't offer any objection, but I need a favour. Will you help me Babak ?"

It was unfair and Sikush knew it, after years of conditioning to obey orders and protect the empire, Babak could hardly refuse.

"Of course Chaln , what would you have me do ?"

"Kittara will be leaving Mendera after the celebrations at the beginning of the next new age of the temple. She may be away for many millennia and I will need people I can trust around me."

Babak seemed to suspect a ruse to stop him seeking termination.

"But you must have thousands of good warriors. Your personal guard is now over twelve hundred strong."

"Oh yes I have a lot of good sword arms, but I need something more, I need a mind behind that arm, I need a thinker."

Sikush pulled him further away from the dinner party before continuing.

"There are those who will assume the empire will be defensive without Kittara, that I'll stay inside the walls of Mendera City and be very cautious."

Babak was now joining in with the conspiratorial nature of the conversation, leaning in towards Sikush and almost whispering.

"And you won't be cautious ?"

"It seems to me that if I'm expected to be cautious, it might be the perfect opportunity to settle a few old scores. I'll need you by my side and once Kittara has returned you can seek termination, I will give you permission."

"Yes of course Chaln , I am honoured by your trust."

He had him, it would be a very long time until Kittara went beyond gateway and even longer until she returned. By then Babak might be in love again, or he may simply have died in battle. It was putting off a problem for another day, but Sikush was pleased with the outcome. Babak turned to leave, but asked one final question.

"If I may ask, where is Kittara going ?"

Sikush realised that Babak wanted a confirmation that he was trusted, that it wasn't all an elaborate ploy to keep him from self-terminating. He had no alternative other than to tell him the truth, the complete truth.

“No one must know ! Kittara is going to the city beyond gateway to be trained in the ways of our enemy. There are skills she will need in the coming war, skills even I cannot teach her.”

Babak went visibly pale.

“You mean you’re sending her to.....”

“Yes Babak, Kittara is going to Leng, to become an adept of their dark arts.”

~ ~

Mo arrived at the door to the pipe tunnel room with Mouse over his shoulder and a blaster in his hand. There were bodies and a great deal of blood and the door was now a pile of splinters and bent metal. Something huge had happened, but luckily the war seemed to have moved onto somewhere else. The bodies were all from the elite guard, so at least his team seemed to be winning. Mo looked to his right and another door had been blasted to pieces and there was another dead guard. That was the official way out, the one they’d been taught in endless discussions with Chlo. It wasn’t the way Mo had ever intended to leave, he felt comfortable up high.

“Hold on to me Mouse.”

He felt her one good arm grip his jacket, so she was at least aware of what was going on. Mo went through the door and instead of entering the tunnel he put the blaster away and started climbing up a vent pipe. The pipe was hot but he moved fast, even only using one arm he was at the top of the pipe far faster than any of his team could have made the climb, even with no injured woman to carry. There was a locked window, but the blaster melted the lock and they were out on the roof of the turbine hall.

“Where the hell are we Mo ?” Asked Mouse.

“Trust me, I know where I’m going.”

There was blaster fire below them, some of his people were obviously going out via the turbine halls. There were explosions to his right, the direction of the goods bay and the way they’d come in. Mo held onto Mouse and started across the roof at a run. He’d managed half the length of the roof when an explosion below made a jagged hole in the roof to his left and he came to a halt. Mo felt Mouse struggling and pulled her off his back and laid her on the roof. Mo could hear and feel intense vibration coming up from below and he had a good idea what was about to happen.

“Keep still !” He shouted.

Mo covered Mouse with his body and waited. The vibrations were getting worse, far worse, the individual sections of the roof were rattling and moving apart. Mo had heard stories about turbines that had seized or been damaged, how the huge momentum built up by the tons of rotating metal could do bizarre things. One turbine weighing forty tons was said to have thrown itself five miles, right across a major city.

“Mo I can’t breathe.”

“Keep still.”

Luckily the turbine was in the next building over from them and it destroyed most of that roof when it went straight up into the air in a mass of broken pipes and cables. Up it went, all fifty or sixty tons, spinning in the air as it reached the wood north of the plant and crashed into the trees, cutting a path through the timbers a good fifty yards long.

“We have to go now Mouse.”

He had her on his shoulder and running, there were more worrying sounds from below them and he knew the device he’d planted was ticking down. Chlo might pull them out if they could get a few miles from the plant, but not where they were, it could be detected. The empire wasn’t about to have its secret war exposed and Mo knew that they’d be allowed to die if he didn’t get back to the

transport and a few miles down the road before the fusion vessel exploded. Mo jumped the few feet down onto the roof of the goods bay and ran along it as fast as he could. There was the sound of blaster fire from below, but he had no idea if any of it was aimed at them. At the end of roof, above the roller doors, he put Mouse down and allowed himself a few seconds to look for a way down from the roof. Damn, the only way was drain pipes and Mo knew how many burglars died trying to climb down drain pipes. They either broke, came away from the wall, or your hand found a patch of slippery moss. There was the sound of a blaster from below him and he saw Slash in the woods, waving at him and then firing towards whoever was below him. Mouse was unconscious but Mo knew the girl was alive, he just had to get her off the roof without killing her.

From the woods came the sound of a heavy military blaster, perhaps Gurd was giving covering fire ? The sounds below stopped and Slash was beckoning him to follow him. Mo held onto Mouse and started down the pipe, it started to come away from the wall, he knew it would. Mo frantically half climbed and half ran down the pipe finally jumping the last ten feet. As he hit the ground the corroded pipe landed a few feet away, but he was alive and running.

"I thought we'd seen the last of you." Said Slash.

"How many others made it ?"

"Most I think, I saw several others running towards the beach. Did you plant the device ?"

"Yes."

Slash looked pleased and scared at the same time. There was another explosion and a dark cloud of steam and pipework came out of the turbine halls roof.

"We need to hurry." Said Mo.

They were off at a run, Mo easily keeping up with Slash as they pounded towards the beach. They passed another dead guard, this one looked to have been burned to death, but that was a story for when they were back at their base.

"Run you bastards !"

Gurd had the heavy blaster held under his arm like it was a toy and he was strafing the woods behind them as quickly as the weapon would allow. Mo could see the transport now and Erru, Quinn's man had made it and he was firing into the woods. Keen hands pulled Mouse into the transport and then helped Mo. He was keen to know who'd died and who'd lived, but it was dark in the transport and everyone seemed busy.

"We're going." Shouted Gurd.

The doors were closed and the huge driver was putting down the blaster and climbing into his seat. Chlo was in Mo's head telling him there was another member of the group running towards them.

"Stop Gurd, there's someone else coming." Mo said.

It was no use, the driver was under stress and not listening, he was starting the engine, the transport was rising to operational height. Mo grabbed a tight hold of Gurd's arm and pulled it from the controls.

"I said there's someone else coming !"

For a second it was tense, Gurd straining to break free, while Mo held onto his arm like a limpet.

There was a bang on the doors and several people were pulling someone inside. Who they were, Man, Woman ? Mo had no idea and it didn't really matter, they were going home. Gurd drove onto the road and ignored all caution, driving at top speed away from the plant. Chlo then told Mo how long they had until the device exploded and it seemed a ludicrously small amount of time to get to a safe distance.

"Faster Gurd." He said.

The driver merely glared at him before concentrating on the road, they were already going at the vehicles top speed. A few minutes later Chlo was telling him they should pull over, get the vehicle behind some sort of cover, if there was any. There wasn't, but Gurd took the vehicle off the road and allowed it to settle onto the ground.

"Don't look back, cover your eyes." Said Mo.

They'd all had the drill, been given instructions, but Mo had seen a few looking back out of curiosity. They all bent forward in their chairs and covered their eyes with their hands and Mo did the same. As the counter reached zero there was a bright light, so bright that Mo could see his fingers through his eyelids, not just the fingers, but the bones in his fingers.

"Fuck me !" He heard a female voice shout.

There was no warning of the shock wave, no rumbling sound, no rising wind. One moment everything was quiet and then the transport was on its side and being pushed across the ground like a toy. A tree branch hit the window near Mo, but the window held and as quickly as it started the shock wave was gone. Gurd kicked out the windscreen and Mo climbed out after him. Most of the team were clambering out of the main doors, Slash was helping Mouse. In front of him Gurd was looking back towards Tonokae, he seemed almost hypnotised. Mo looked back the way they'd come and even after billions of years with The Damned he was still shocked. Most of the team were now looking back towards Tonokae, none of them saying a word.

The mushroom cloud seemed to fill the horizon, they could see debris still falling from it, glass fragments glittering reflected light from the fire ball. Parts of it were purple, parts a sickly yellow, but the main colour was red, bright red like the fires of hell. The mushroom went up, meeting the clouds and pushing them aside, still rising, still burning. It was silent now, nothing was making a sound, as though all of nature was watching the mushroom rise. Mo felt a hand on his arm and it was Mouse.

"Thank you for getting me out of that."

No one was cheering, no one was even smiling. They were all watching the unimaginable forces they'd just unleashed on Tonokae.

~ ~