

Chronicles of Mardoun

Chapter 1 - EK 4867

“The question is councillors. Are the Imperial Guard here to protect the Empire or is the Empire here to finance the Guard ?” – Councillor Samara

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Kittara held herself high up in the atmosphere of EK 4867 and watched her fellow members of the imperial guard get in position. The minions of Gheren Hel had no idea they were there, and they moved invisibly among them. Their first command was to ensure the safety of the prisoners. Not that Kittara cared about the prisoners, but she obeyed Sikush “The Chalné” without question and so she would give her life if called on to defend the prisoners on EK 4867.

Once again she felt for that private contact with him in her mind and once again Sikush pushed her away and told her to have fun. He was friendly and this was a fairly routine operation, but she’d known him too many billions of years and something was being held back. Below her three thousand of the Imperial Guard or the damned as they were generally known moved to encircle any areas of Gheren’s bunkers that held prisoners. She started to drop and noticed Alyz drop with her. They were a mile or so apart and briefly touched minds and agreed a spot to attack. They had no specific orders, just to do what they were incredibly good at, bringing death and destruction to EK 4867.

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When she was at about a thousand feet above the bunker Kittara held her position, with Alyz a mile or to the west and Jen to the east. All the sensors of the bunker looked up on maximum alerts and saw nothing. Looking down Kittara saw the net was closing and all the prisoners were now shielded by the invisible silently moving Imperial Guard. Then on the link they all shared The Chalné issued the command to begin and she powered herself down towards the bunker below.

The roof of the bunker shattered as she hit it and at the same time five tiny shining revolving beads formed in front of her, the tears of the damned they were called. Then in a micro second they were gone and the sound of heavy explosions were felt throughout the bunker. Still Kittara dropped through three more floors leaving destruction in her wake and eventually stood in the lowest level of the bunker.

Alyz and Jen were wreaking similar havoc and she could see their tears causing fatal damage to the structure. This was a punitive exercise that had to tell the multiverse that if you killed an Imperial Cleric then you could expect no mercy. By the time they left not one of the fifty thousand or so minions of Gheren Hel would be left alive. Or perhaps maybe just one or two left to tell the tale. To her left a small group of soldiers had recovered some discipline and were firing just about everything they had at her. None of it had any effect as The Damned were impervious to any weapons they were likely to come up against today. Kittara felt for a trigger in her mind and a wall of fire enveloped the men and left just a few bits of grey ash where they had been. She was enjoying herself now and she sent another dozen or so tears off to crack the walls of the bunker.

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Then she got the call that The Chalné was ready for her. She almost went instantly, but looked down at her charred clothing and decided to change. There was a slight shimmer and Kittara was dressed in a new uniform of The Damned. Her hair was long and shiny black and the right side was longer than the left, which was old world Menderan style, but she liked it like that. Her uniform dress was black with short sleeves and no back on the left side so that her Imperial Guard mark showed clearly for all to see. No tattoo this mark, but an enchanted

emblem representing the Imperial lightning flash inside a circle that was given as part of the initiation ritual. Her left hand and lower arm were marked with the encircling vines which meant she had given a personal vow of allegiance to The Chaln  on joining his personal guard. On the back of her right hand was the mark of Mardoun whose soul she now housed, though the memories of those days were forbidden to her. On her neck and across her body and right down to her ankles she had the crossed vine marks of Holy Armour which made her almost indestructible. Coupled with countless billions of years of weapons training and her own natural affinity for magic meant that she could destroy the defences of most planets on her own if she needed to.

In her belt was tucked a small sword which had been given to her by The Chaln , incredibly sharp it had taken off countless heads, which was her favourite method of neutralising enemies. She could pull other weapons out of her personal store, but she was a weapon herself and a weapon beyond technology. On her feet she wore knee high boots that were again black. Someone from Earth looking at her would recognise her as human, but with perhaps slightly too long lower arms and fingers and perhaps a bit too slender about the waist. She looked a bit like an 18 or 20 years old girl, but inside was a billions of years old veteran of so many campaigns she couldn't remember. She felt for a switch in her mind to call for a reality switch and instantly she was standing in the damaged but still standing quarters of Gheren Hel in the heart of the bunker complex.

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A few emergency lights were working in Gheren quarters, but what had been the control centre of his empire a few minutes before was now a chaos of broken technology and charred walls. The Damned kept arriving with key officers in Gheren's army and already about a dozen sullen and dejected looking men huddled in a corner.

The Chaln  was talking to one of them in what appeared to be an almost friendly way. "Gheren", he said "I came to see you two years ago and explained that taking one of my clerics as a slave was something I wouldn't tolerate, yet now Nelus has been killed in your dungeons. She was barely 17 years old".

The Chaln  looked around the room and smiled at Kittara and she felt comfortable again, but something was still being held back. The Chaln  looked like any 6 foot tall man in a loose fitting brown robe, but he had a certain aura about him. No one ever argued with him and people always felt he was ancient, really ancient even though physically he looked like a man in the prime of life.

"The problem is Gheren", he continued, "No one has seen The Damned in full action for at least five thousand years, so they start to doubt the stories. They start to think we're a myth, a legend invented to get children to go to bed when they're told. So we're going to use you as a message that we're not just a legend".

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The Chaln  looked at Albas who was holding the jailer of EK4867 and Albas released him and let him fall to the floor.

"You killed Nelus."

The Chaln  said with no sign of it being a question, but a statement of fact. The man who had once been one of the most feared people on the planet now looked a pitiful broken wreck. The Chaln  looked at Kittara and simply nodded. She examined the man with her mind and gave him the strength to stand and the energy to feel almost back to his normal self. Then she engulfed him in flame and he started screaming. She could protect the key areas of his body needed to keep him alive and feeling pain, brain, heart, lungs. She could repair nerve endings and keep him in agony indefinitely. As the screaming went on the other members of Gheren's team started to look scared and some looked around for somewhere to run to, but there was nowhere.

Kittara was good with pain and had once kept a victim alive for months, but she doubted The Chaln  would let her fun go on for long. The jailer was now just a screaming heap of gristle and bone held erect and kept alive by Kittara. Then after about three minutes The Chaln  looked at her and she felt him say enough. The jailer became just a small heap of ashes that fell into a small pile on the floor. The smell of incinerated flesh and bone filled the room and the prisoners started to look very scared.

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There was no preamble, no chance for pleading. The Chaln  looked at Gheren Hell and simply said "Ten minutes, I think". Kittara knew a lesson had to be given, so she put most of her skill into keeping him intact and screaming while the white hot flames engulfed him. At the end of ten minutes all that was left was another heap of ash on the floor and the stench of burnt flesh.

"The rest of you I'm going to release", said The Chaln .

No more than that. Kittara felt disappointed that her fun was over, but her loyalty and love for The Chaln  always overcame her dark side and she relaxed and when the order came to go to the detention centre she obeyed immediately.

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Kittara could see the general chatter of the Imperial Guard going through the common channel. Shuttles were landing to take the released prisoners, nearly a million of them in total to their home worlds. A shuttle was called to take the few released Gheren troops to wherever they wanted to go. The interesting thing was that no one was talking about the eight prisoners left in the detention centre who she was now looking at.

Three women and five men in filthy clothes, they didn't look or feel valuable to her. Yet The Chaln  had told her to protect them while he dealt with a few other matters and as always she obeyed without question, but as always not without curiosity.

She touched the mind of one of the male prisoners and found a mercenary, a veteran of various minor skirmishes, but nothing major. Another male was a huge powerful man from an outer colony whose DNA had been changed artificially to create a super warrior of sorts. He was no match for the Imperial Guard, but he was out of place in a dump like EK4867.

A female was from the same outer colony and both had served in guerrilla actions against the empire. She felt for Chlo the link to the Imperial computer system, but Chlo wasn't playing and simply told her The Chaln  would tell her what she needed to know.

Chlo was the organic side of the great Imperial computer database. Chlo had originally been part of a name in a long, long dead language of a long, long dead race, and now she was simply known as Chlo. Despite being the Empire's central computer the organic side was as alive as any other member of The Damned and seemed to enjoy the variety of carnal delights as much as anyone on Council Club nights.

Kittara was annoyed now. Being locked out of information was annoying and rarely happened. As she thought many times a day The Chaln  really was incredibly annoying and if she wasn't sworn to protect his life she'd quite enjoy plunging her short sword into his heart. As often happened when she was brooding Kittara started to hover about a foot or so off the ground and a dark mist began to form around her. Sikush always said it was because she was happy, like a Cat purring, and usually he was right, but today she felt angry and unappreciated.

The prisoners saw the change in her and began to back away and she picked a name, or part of a name from the female mutant. "Arje" was the name and probing deeper she got "Qunan Arje." But he was dead, had died ten years before during a futile rebel attack on the Imperial fleet. Chlo just responded to her enquiry with the official account of how Arje had died. An almost suicidal attack on Leviathan the eight mile long flag ship of the Imperial Fleet. No attack had ever scratched it and yet a few scruffy mercenaries thought they could destroy it, it was madness. Then Kittara wondered why mercs who had no cause, no ideals

except money would throw their lives away in such a futile act ? She prompted Chlo for details on Arje's crew, his key people and about twenty brief bios came up and a few old pictures. She asked Chlo to compare the pictures and details with the prisoners in front of her and waited. Instead of a reply Chlo appeared next to her.

If you asked a citizen of the The Empire about the Imperial Guard they would tell you about the immortal warriors who kept the empire safe from any outside threat that had arisen for countless billions of years. Immortal and incredibly tough, but not invulnerable. Over the years many of The Damned had fallen to protect the empire and they were treated almost like royalty wherever they went. To risk an immortal life to protect the citizens of the empire was considered a great act of courage. Asked about the main strength of The Damned you'd be told the mantra every child learnt at school.

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"Where there is one of The Damned, there can be a thousand"

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They watched each other. No matter how far apart and even in different bubbles of the multiverse they could use benign invisible probes to watch each other. If an incident required the guard to attend they were watched by twenty and if those twenty shifted reality to instantly be at the scene another hundred would watch them, and so on. This had been going on since the last great switch in the multiverse and was so finely tuned that any of The Damned in trouble could have a thousand comrades to support then in seconds. The second line of the mantra should have been where there is one of The Damned, there also goes Chlo.

Chlo was the medium they used to watch each other, so once The Damned visited a planet, Chlo was there and the terrain was mapped and the population recorded and assessed, and the great Empire carried on expanding.

Not that the Empire was ruled with an iron fist. Yes the occasional difficult politician might vanish, or an uprising put down, but on the whole the Empire was well thought of by most of its citizens. Through unrestricted trade it made them wealthy and created jobs, and few will argue against an Empire that fills their bellies.

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Chlo looked unassuming. If you saw her in her bright coloured dress and her constant smile you'd think she was a 19 year old student told to make sure the visitors were looked after. On this occasion she was a pretty blonde, which was her default look, but if needed she could take on an almost infinite number of forms at the same time, all looking unique and all able to perform her full set of functions. She moved closer to Kittara and held her hand. "You're getting ahead of the game he plans, be patient", was all she said and she was gone. As Kittara watched eight of The Damned appeared touched one of the prisoners and instantly both were gone until Kittara was alone in an empty room. She shifted herself to the Imperial Guard barracks on Mendera. This time she would be patient, but she was still annoyed and curious in about equal parts.