

Mendera Temple

Chapter 6 – Warlords & Old Friends

"The trick to being indestructible, is simply not to actually have an existence in this reality" – Chlo

Alyz was confident she'd made an impression as she moved her reality to beside the Council Club pool area. Most women just wore the briefest of panties to Council Club night, the whole point of going was to be seen and desired, plus of course having consequence free sex with some new and exciting people. Alyz had added a pair of red six inch heels to the mix and she was strutting towards the private imperial area of the pool. Hol often wore heels to club nights, but everyone knew Hol was a bit of a wild one. Quite a few sets of eyes were looking at Alyz with admiration and not a little shock.

"You're in my place!" Alyz said.

She wasn't really angry, but she knew she had to feel it. Alyz thought about the new face on her knees and about to lower her mouth over his dick. Another newbie member of The Guard, probably never been in a real battle.

"What did you say?" Said the girl.

Sikush looked up and seemed bemused by it all, but there was no voice in her head, telling her off, so Alyz grabbed the girl's arms and pulled her to her feet. No member of The Guard had ever gone rogue, something about the conversion made it almost impossible, they couldn't attack each other either. But billions of years of cunning and a bit of help from the dark side of Kittara and Alyz had worked out how to bend the conditioning a little. She gave the girls arm a twist and pushed her left hand against her face, the hand with the imperial guard mark.

"I said you're in my place girl." Said Alyz.

There was a look of surprise as the girl registered the anger and then she'd gone, moved her reality elsewhere. Sikush still hadn't said a word, just looked at her with expectant eyes. The girl had left his briefs on, just pulled them down; she knew he always liked himself and his partners to be fully naked. Alyz used her left hand to pull down her own panties and after kicking off her heels, she stepped out of them, enjoying the appreciative look he gave her. It had been some time since they'd been lovers, she'd had various missions and the rota seemed very confused lately.

"Let's get rid of these." She said.

He was lying on a pool lounge and as Alyz knelt down she couldn't ignore his erection, so she held his dick firmly and gently kissed the tip, the taste bringing back memories of past encounters. Alyz pulled his briefs down over his knees and threw them into the pool with a flourish. This time a little taste wouldn't do, she took as much of his erection into her mouth as she could and licked it until it was nice and wet. She'd intended to spend quite some time over sucking his dick, but her own appetites needed to be fed. Alyz pulled herself onto him and lowered herself over his dick, enjoying the feel of it stretching her out and entering deep into her most intimate area. Sikush would normally only go so far in public, despite the copulation going on around him. As Alyz started the hard rhythmic pounding she was sure he'd soon take them both to a quiet place out on the lake.

"That's perfect." He said to her.

He'd often told her most women were too gentle to get the rhythm right, so she'd learnt to give in to her desires and drive down as hard as she could. Occasionally a lover would get a bit bruised, but most found it a sensational experience. Alyz felt the hormones trying to fog her mind and allowed

them to do their job; all she needed to concentrate on was the steady thrusting of her hips. Her eyes seemed to glaze over at one point and she lost track of time, but eventually she felt him grab her thighs and hold her tightly as he drove in for the climax. The waves of pleasure seemed to carry on moving up her body for some time and when she did open her eyes they were still on the lounge beside the pool. Of course no one would dream of being obvious about watching them, but she knew most of the woman there would give almost anything to do what she'd just done. Alyz lent forward over him and gave him a long soft kiss.

"You never took us to the lake?" She asked.

He put his hand under her bottom and held her tight against him.

"You seemed to be marking your territory and it seemed impolite to spoil that."

Had she been? Certainly any idea of a quick fuck for information was gone from her head, she wanted to be having sex with him until the sun came up.

"Can we talk?" She asked.

"There is a price," he said, "we can talk, but only if you agree to stay for the entire night."

She moved her knees up and gripped him. Some couples were instantly leaping for towels after sex, but Sikush hated that, it took away any romance and spontaneity. Sikush preferred being a bit sticky to spoiling the moment, so Alyz lay on him and simply nodded at him.

Sikush moved their reality to one of the larger islands out in the lake, thoughtfully Chlo had placed several large towels there before they arrived. Alyz quite enjoyed open air sex, but even an immortal doesn't enjoy sex on a sandy beach. She moved to his side and listened to the sounds of other couples nearby, a squeal of delight, someone being spanked, but no one was close enough to hear their conversation. He turned towards her and stroked her hair.

"This is as private as the Club gets," he said, "what do you want to talk about?"

Alyz obtained a drink from Chlo for them both and handed one to him, after countless millennia she knew his preference in post-coital drinks.

"I believe there is a large contingent of The Damned on Mendera," she said, "most of them from the outer empire and housed where the citizens won't notice them."

"There are about fifty thousand of them now Alyz." He said.

The number was crazy, they could have taken entire galaxies with a fraction of that number and had done so. Besides The Damned didn't need to be garrisoned, they could be anywhere instantly. She felt a tiny knot of fear begin in her stomach.

"Why are they here, what is going to happen?"

"Nothing if you believe the time lines," he said, "Chlo can find nothing strange, Mendera City is a happy and successful centre of the empire as far as she can see."

"But?" She said. "I've known you long enough to know there's a but?"

He looked his usual carefree self, but Alyz was beginning to get a really bad feeling.

"I have had a few dreams. Normally I'd believe the time lines, but this is Mendera. There are the sentinels, our prisoner below the temple and the whole planet is almost as old as I am."

"Strange place." She said.

They both started to laugh and Alyz allowed the drink to work on her.

"It is a strange place," he said, "so I'm being cautious, that's all, just being cautious. I'll be going to Annill in a few days and taking a lot of the strongest warriors with me. If someone was waiting to attack Mendera..... Jen will be here, but keep close to the Temple Alyz and protect the people if anything happens."

"What did you dream?"

He seemed to be trying to recollect the details.

“The Sentinel of the Well ruined and on fire, buildings in the circles destroyed, dead clerics everywhere.....”

“Fuck !” She said.

His hand went to her breast and he started to kiss her with an urgency that she understood. Alyz parted her legs, not completely, she liked the feel of him pushing them, spreading them with his thighs.

“Don’t worry,” he whispered in her ear, “I’m just being cautious, probably nothing to it. I also dreamt of an ally being sent from the rifts, a powerful warrior. I sent Luri and Delmus to investigate, but that appears to have been false.”

He’d started to penetrate her, so any reply seemed superfluous. Alyz wrapped her legs up around his back and forgot about everything except the rock hard dick being thrust deep inside her.

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“I own how many stores ?” Asked Mo.

“Over a hundred sir, then there are the warehouses and the supply craft.”

There were just the three of them, himself, Chlo and his loyal and extremely effective general manager of twenty years, whose name he was having trouble remembering. Mo had bought a small store towards the back of the merchant’s area, something quite humble. Somewhere to put a bit of the money he’d made from the Astrolabe deal. Now it appeared he was the largest owner of emporiums, stores and other retail outlets on Mendera.

“And you negotiated to buy these stores Na.....”

“Naabid sir, yes sir I did.”

He’d never met the man before and Chlo had that twinkle in her eyes that told him she was enjoying his discomfort. Chlo had told him how much Naabid was paid on the way and he’d chocked, but now he wondered if he was paying him enough. Mo had sold the original Hasim’s Emporium a long time before, but he was pleased to note that his retail empire was called Hasim and Associates.

“These stores are all successful ?” He asked.

“Yes sir. There have been a few bad periods, that’s why we obtained some of them at very advantageous prices, but they’re all doing very well now.”

Naabid was rotund and Ventellans were never rotund, or overweight at all. Mo quite liked Naabid and the fact that he seemed to have trouble fitting into his suit.

“And Chlo approved of all these acquisitions ?” Mo asked.

“Yes,” said Cho, “Naabid went through the details with me and they all met the parameters we agreed.”

There were no written contracts, that wasn’t how Mendera did business. He’d sat down with Chlo and talked through the details of how she’d run his affairs. He’d just had the pleasure of being badly beaten at the City of the Seven Hills and getting his affairs in order had seemed important. Other planets had legal systems with lawyers, on Mendera everything was agreed with Chlo. There had been an understanding that if in doubt, Chlo would ask his opinion, but could he really complain that she’d never asked him about any decision, he was after all immensely rich now.

“There have been period where some stores have made losses,” said Naabid, “but the fact that the owner, you sir, never drew any money from the business helped us to get through the bad times.”

Mo knew Sikush had been generous to him, very generous in fact, but he had no idea how much money Chlo was holding for him.

“How much money is there Chlo ?” He asked.

“Just this business, or everything ?”

“Everything.”

A piece of paper appeared in Chlo’s hand which she handed to him. The number didn’t mean anything to Mo, it was just too huge. He put his thumb along the bottom edge of it, as if that would give him an idea of scale, but it was too large, just insane. Chlo put her hand on his arm and moved closer to him.

“There have been several large sums from the empire and the sale of the previous emporium. You’re a very wealthy man Mo.”

The largest sum of money Mo had ever seem was a million in Maran, heaped up on a table, with three men’s blood spattered over it. He looked at the piece of paper and realised he’d need a warehouse full of tables to hold his money. An idea began to form in his head, an idea to help the plan on Ixir and to hopefully add to his retail empire.

“How about expanding on Ixir ?” He asked Naabid.

Mo was sure the Ventellans skin went slightly darker green and there was no mistaking his expression of concern.

“Ixir has shown very poor returns in the past sir and very few people have much in the way of disposable income.”

“I was thinking of the Xeod’s area, part of the new development.” Said Mo.

He saw Chlo give him a concerned look and it pleased him. They’d promised him whatever he needed and he was going to assume that included the best area for footfall on Level 33. Besides he quite liked the idea of a Hasim Emporium next door to the most famous house of ill repute in the empire.

“That’s different sir,” said Naabid, “but I heard decent positions near Xeod’s are hard to come by.”

Mo smiled at Chlo.

“Oh, I think some of my connections might be able to find a decent site for an emporium.” He said.

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“There are living organisms on the 6th planet.” Said the Old One.

Jen knew the organisms were the kind of primitive anaerobes to be found almost everywhere in the multiverse, but the Old One was getting very excited about it. The planet the Old One was on was a rock, a lifeless cold piece of rock with almost the right gravity to keep most of the workers comfortable and on their feet.

“Chlo can give you more probes if you need them.” Jen Said.

She didn’t have the same rapport with the craft that Alyz had, or the patience to handle the frustrating pauses in his speech. Jen wasn’t even sure of the purpose of the refit, Sikush was letting little of the information out on the common channel.

“I have enough probes,” said the Old One, “and several small robot devices that Chlo has loaned me.”

Jen looked at the main screen and wondered why the Old One seemed so pleased with what was to be his new home, for the duration of the rebuild. It was a giant heap of fused silicates that had never really got started. All its atmosphere and water had been swept away by the solar winds and now it was an ugly, airless dump, with all the appeal of a fungal infection.

“This is the first planet I’ve seen,” said the Old One, “I must analyse everything about it.”

His first planet! Of course he’d been in the void for so long and all memory of his home world had crumbled with his aging circuitry. Alyz could understand why a few brown stains of life around a volcanic vent were so exciting to him. Perhaps they should have taken him to an inhabited planet ?

But it was too late now, his engines had been taken offline and the engineers brought from across the multiverse.

"If you need any other devices to examine this system, you only have to ask." She said.

All the indicators were in the normal zone and Jen was sure she could hear the ancient craft humming.

"Yes, of course. I've asked Chlo for a DNA analyser." He said.

Jen had the defences of Mendera to manage when Sikush went to Annill, so she was happy the Old One was keeping himself occupied. She moved herself to the outside of the ship and into the fifteen mile wide force dome that Chlo had put over the craft. Normally Chlo would have done all the work, but Sikush had called in other creatures, with other skills and most of them required an oxygen atmosphere. Not all though and Jen noticed one or two methane breathers walking around in atmosphere suits.

"Ideally I'd bring them here in shifts," said Chlo, "and give them all a perfect atmosphere, but the Aumashy won't be here long"

A blueish skinned version of Chlo she'd rarely seen appeared next to Jen.

"So he really has brought in experts from the forbidden worlds Chlo?"

"Their technology is beyond even mine and the Old One needs to be able to operate independently of any contact with the empire, or me."

Jen almost asked why, she'd been within a split second of asking, but she knew Sikush would have his reasons for bringing so many of their old enemies into the same bubble universe as Mendera. Jen walked with Chlo towards the imperial needle craft, there were now six of them. Creatures usually unseen in the empire, six armed and dressed in a striking brown military uniform had inspection hatches open on the craft and were attaching large pointless extra sections to the outside of the craft.

"Strange I know," said Chlo, "but they'll still operate at full potential and they'll all look unique and definitely not like imperial craft."

"So the Old One and his flotilla of needle craft looks like a group of totally alien war craft."

Commented Jen.

Chlo just nodded at her and Jen noticed one of the methane breathing Aumashy was working on the control centre of the craft, probably to give the Old One sole control.

"So Sikush trusts him that much?" Asked Jen.

"Apparently so."

There were several imperial raptors being given the alien makeover, it appeared the Old One was going to have about ten of those in his fleet too. They were in the same galaxy as Mendera and as Jen looked up and to her left she could just see the Menderan sun, a small insignificant looking, faint yellow dot at the limit of what her naked eye could see.

"Will you be monitoring this fleet?" Asked Jen.

"Sikush said that won't be necessary."

Jen looked at the old enemies crawling over the best weapons the empire had and hoped that they were never turned on Mendera. Why had he brought them here? To the very heart of the empire.

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Sikush enjoyed being on Leviathan as it orbited Mendera, it reminded him of the times when the huge craft had been home for billions of years.

"They look comfortable here." He said to Herusher.

There was barely an hour left before he left the city, perhaps for some time. Sikush had felt a need to join Herusher on a routine inspection of the temporary barracks in the main hold of the huge vessel.

"I've not heard a single complaint." Said Herusher.

Every face they passed was smiling and Sikush knew they all secretly hoped there would be action on Mendera. The Damned were warriors after all and no warrior ever really enjoys a time of peace. He recognised a few faces from the Council Club night and acknowledged their greetings.

"The clerics seem to have added their touches." He said.

Thousands of The Damned were billeted on Leviathan and although Chlo had put in partitions, beds, rec rooms and a certain amount of entertainment, it had still looked rather austere. Estrid had offered to help and she's brought several thousand clerics on board to give the main hold a few homely touches. Even to Sikush it looked a bit overly ostentatious in places.

'Looks like an Ushong brothel.' He'd heard Kittara say with delight.

He had no idea if Kittara really did know what an Ushong brothel had looked like. Ushong had been destroyed a long time ago and they weren't exactly famed for being hedonistic, but he did wince a bit at the number of scatter cushions and velvet drapes.

"A bit overdone," said Herusher, "but the Guard seem to like it."

He was sure they did. Life out in the furthest reaches of the empire, where most of them had come from, didn't run to the kind of luxury he was looking at. Herusher moved a little closer to Sikush.

"You realise they're all hoping there will be an attack?"

"Then you'd better keep them alert while I'm gone."

As they entered one of the many rec rooms Chlo appeared, looking a little flustered, which surprised him.

"You're needed back at the palace, it's a matter of some urgency." She said.

In his head she was telling him not to bring Herusher, that something had occurred that she was sure he'd want kept quiet, at least for now.

"More empire bureaucracy I expect. Can you finish the inspection for me?"

Herusher nodded and gave him a slight bow as he and Chlo moved their realities to his favourite part of the palace. He arrived there expecting to find a drama unfolding and was surprised that he and Chlo were alone on the veranda.

"What's the problem Chlo?"

He put his hands on her shoulders and felt her anxiety as though it was contagious.

"Your dream about the ancient temples appears to have been correct." She said.

Sikush moved to the seat that overlooked the pool and sat down, sitting Chlo next to him.

"What did they find?"

"They're keeping her at Luri's house. No else knows about her."

He didn't want to simply delve into the part of her mind he shared, she was obviously already quite upset.

"Who Chlo, who did they find?"

"Delmus went alone to Ingar Gols, he went there last and after five days she appeared. Delmus believes it's Abijah."

Abijah! He'd deliberately left her soul alone. There had been a long life as a daughter of a ruler on a primitive planet and then he'd stopped tracking her. For all he knew her soul might have been scattered across the multiverse in fragments. Whatever her fate, Sikush had decided that the empire had received service enough from her.

“Do you think it’s her ?”

“Delmus is certain it’s Abijah, but Luri isn’t sure and we can’t ask the one person who would really know, Babak, in case it isn’t really her.”

“But surely you can tell Chlo, what do you see ?”

Chlo looked unhappy and he knew he wasn’t going to like the answer before it came.

“With my eyes I see her, but otherwise she doesn’t seem to exist. I can touch her, talk to her, but in any real sense she doesn’t exist.”

Chlo seemed to think for a while before carrying on.

“If you were to ask me to guess. Then I’d say it is Abijah, but in a physical form that has no existence in our reality.”

Chlo vanished, leaving him to watch the wind moving the leaves in the garden and listen to the gentle buzz of insects in the trees.

“This is easier than trying to explain.” Said Chlo.

She was back, holding onto a woman in cleric’s robes. Delmus and Luri appeared near him, both armed and staring in the direction of the mystery woman. They’d broken all protocols in bringing her to him, but he could understand why they’d done it. If he couldn’t tell if she was the genuine Abijah, no one could.

“You must be the one they call Sikush ?” She said.

She looked like Abijah and the voice was the same, but the cleric’s robes hid all of her body. He stood up and walked over to her.

“May I take your hand ?” He asked.

She nodded and held out her hand to him. Her smile was exactly like Abijah, but when he touched her hand he felt nothing. He held her hand with his left hand and used his right to push the arm of her robe right back to her elbow.

“This may hurt a little.” He said.

Again there was a nod and smile. He put just two finger tips on her arm and attempted to meld his body with hers and failed. He tried harder and slowly his fingertips appeared to melt into her flesh. The woman in front of him gasped and tried to pull free.

“Stay still !” He shouted.

He felt her, really felt her whole being and none of it was right. Nothing about her conformed to any kind of reality he was familiar with, but then almost hiding he found a soul. Deep inside her and looking lost, the soul opened up to him and gave up its secrets. Sikush removed his fingers and noticed two livid red scars where he’d probed her arm.

“I’m sorry Abijah, I doubt if those scars will ever heal, but it was necessary.”

“So it’s her ?” Asked Chlo.

He kissed Abijah’s hand and rolled her cloak down to cover the scars.

“Yes, it’s her.” He said.

He felt them all relax and yet the woman still just looked at him with the same smile.

“And to answer your question,” he said, “I am the one they call Sikush.”

“Everyone keeps calling me Abijah,” she said, “is that who I am ?”

He knew that by the Well they were getting ready to leave. The last of the Terak, Nurigen, over a thousand of The Damned and of course that devious creature Kittara, who much to his secret delight had managed to get an invite for the trip to Annull. The seconds were ticking by and he couldn’t be late, yet how could he leave Abijah like this for weeks, maybe months ?

“You are Abijah,” he said, “you were a warrior here long ago and called this planet home for billions of years.”

“I remember nothing about that.”

Chlo was telling him, on their private link, that there were just a few minutes until they had to leave.

“What do you remember ?” He asked.

“I knew it was important to meet someone at that ruin. I had the knowledge that there was an important role for me, but I have no idea who gave me that knowledge.”

He made his mind up, Abijah was going to Annill with him.

“We can talk about your history on the way to Annill, you’re coming with me. I know you have hundreds of questions but I need to leave right now.”

He turned to Chlo.

“Get her a decent weapon and a uniform for the journey and nothing about this goes on the common channel, Babak is not to be told yet.”

“Who is Babak ?” Abijah asked.

Sikush ignored her and turned to Luri.

“Collect what you need for the trip and get to the Well, tell them I might be a little late.”

As Luri vanished he looked at Delmus.

“I was going to take you to Annill, but I think you may have use for you RM9 here in Mendera and don’t be afraid to use it, everything can be rebuilt. I need to take Abijah with me and her structure will give her an advantage if the undead attack in force.”

Chlo had just given Abijah her old Nurigen blade, which she was admiring as she took practise swipes with it.

“My structure ?” Asked Abijah.

Both she and Delmus were looking at him expectantly.

“I think you’ve mastered the trick all warriors would love, that of being indestructible.”

“How did I do that ?”

They all turned towards Chlo as she dropped a uniform for Abijah on the floor and added.

"The trick to being indestructible, is simply not to actually have an existence in this reality"

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“You can take care of them one at a time if you like ?” Said Tomma-Goran.

Alyz stood in Bay 2 beneath the barracks on Mendera and realised she’d been fortunate that a deity had been willing to help her. She was also aware that having the great God of the City of the Lost God right there, helping her against the Dracc, was an honour. But she was still feeling angry that she seemed to be the one taking all the fucking risks.

“There seem to be a lot of Dracc between me and them.” She said.

The rift where the chaos creatures were creating the new improved Dracc swung in front of her.

Tomma used a different system than Chlo, the picture was far less clear and often broke up completely near the edge. The point where the deity proposed to insert her onto the rift was a long way from the first converted chaos creature and the door she’d appear through would flare bright red, there’d be no sneaking in.

“I’ll need to keep Sevril busy,” said Tomma, “you wouldn’t last five seconds against one aspect of her and there are two guarding the Dracc.”

It took a lot to unsettle Alyz, she’d seen just about everything while serving the empire, but the converted chaos creatures unsettled her. One had once been female, but Sevril-Narge had added an extra arm where the left breast had been and made her back curved and muscular, with a hard shiny

carapace. She was probably a much more efficient creature for her given purpose of creating Dracc, but Alyz shivered as she watched her use all three arms to pull a new born Dracc from its incubation chamber.

"It will be a mercy to kill them." She said.

Tomma put a surprisingly gentle claw on her shoulder.

"They won't see it like that. Be very careful Alyz and show no mercy."

The deity vanished and she could see him running across the rift and issuing a challenge as he ran.

"Run with me Sevril, accept the challenge and run with me back through eternity." He shouted.

He ran straight through row after row of the new tougher Dracc, sending them scattering and crushing many. Then Alyz saw a hint of movement, almost like a heat haze, but this haze was in the form of a very angry female deity.

"Are you scared of me Sevril?" Shouted Tomma.

Another shape solidified some distance away and hurled itself in the direction of Tomma-Goran.

Both aspects of Sevril-Narge were so intent on attacking the deity that they crushed thousands of the Dracc under foot. Tomma seemed to be able to easily outrun them as he shouted further insults and soon he was just a dot on the horizon. Alyz hadn't been sure of his plan to distract the bug goddess, but she had to admit that shouting threats and running away had worked very well.

Alyz pushed her way through the window into the rift, feeling it ooze around her like invisible syrup. As she'd expected, her entrance onto the rift was accompanied by a bright red flare of light and the female chaos creature turned to look in her direction.

"Come and die bitch!" It shouted at her.

The rows of Dracc between Alyz and the invoker seemed almost dazed and without proper control.

A few tried to bite Alyz as she passed through them, but most ignored her and she found it quicker to run around them, only hacking at the odd arm or leg that got in her way. The female chaos invoker seemed to be ignoring her, but Alyz noticed a wicked looking sword in its right hand. Alyz jumped to the left of the last Dracc in her way and used her Nurigen sword to hack off the arm that held the blade.

"Fuck!"

It had been far too easy, the female had been hiding a thin tube in another hand and had plunged it into Alyz's abdomen. There was fire, hot burning fire belching from a hole in her middle. Herusher had spent hours teaching her what to do if the unthinkable ever happened.

'Keep it simple,' he'd told her, "if you think you're being beaten, use the quickest and simplest way to take out your opponent.'

Alyz ignored her sword and reached inside herself for a disruption spell. Then she put her left hand on the face of the female invoker and released the darkness Kittara had taught her. There was no scream, no sound at all. Pieces of the creature's face seemed to melt, joined the other pieces of its skull and brain, hurtled away and up like a fountain of sticky green fluid. The creature was dead, there was nothing at all left above its chest, just a stump of bone and the body fell over backwards.

"Demon Gods stop this fucking pain!" Alyz shouted.

She fell to her knees and pulled out the tube, but still the white hot flames poured out of her.

Anyone other than a member of The Damned would have been dead, but Alyz looked up and saw the other chaos invoker, the male, running. Running not towards her, but away and in the direction Tomma had led the aspects of the bug goddess.

"No, you're not escaping." Alyz shouted.

She was up on her feet, forcing herself to ignore the pain and her legs to run. He had a head start on her, but his grotesque body wasn't designed for running. Sevril had obviously adjusted his body for efficiency at creating Dracc, but the extra appendages didn't help when running away. Alyz used the same trick of running around the Dracc and a swerve to the right saved her from being hit by some sort of force bolt the creature had fired from a tube. Alyz was developing a healthy respect for the tubes these chaos creatures used and was now keeping a careful eye on her enemy as she closed the gap.

'Don't wander too far from the entry point.' Tomma had told her.

Easy to say, but all Alyz was concentrating on was catching and killing the male chaos invoker. There must be a trail of dead Dracc behind her and the dead female. Yes, the dead female would give her the exact position where she could return to Mendera. The terrain changed and the flat brown grit of the rift gave way to what looked like volcanic vents and a yellow sand underfoot. Alyz lost sight of the creature behind a vent and pure reflexes made her duck as she saw it come up out of cover and fire a tube at her. The bolt hit one of the Dracc and it screamed, it screamed long and loud, for the few seconds it took its body to disintegrate into a wet mass of body parts.

"Bastard." Muttered Alyz.

She was almost on him and as she ran around a steaming vent he was there, tube aimed straight at her. Alyz leapt forward onto her face and the bolt went over the top of her and she heard another Dracc scream. Up came her left hand and almost without thinking she gave him a high level disruption blast. Again there was silence as his body was turned to a green sticky mess. Alyz had hit him in the middle of his body and after he'd died only the ends of his arms and legs were recognisable as parts of what was once a living creature.

Alyz finally had time to look at her wound and the flames had stopped. There was still a great deal of pain, but Alyz knew what her body could take and she was almost sure the wound wasn't going to kill her. She looked back the way she'd come and gave a long sigh. The surviving Dracc, which seemed to be most of them, had shuffled back into tight ranks and there was no sign of any body parts. It almost seemed as though the dry grit of the rift had digested the remains, leaving nothing at all behind. Alyz knew the rough direction and had a good idea of the time the run had taken her, so she started off at a slow trot in that direction.

"Oh shit!" She muttered.

The Dracc were moving to attack her, slow and easy to avoid, but with every sidestep she became more and more unsure of the way back. Then she heard Tomma shouting abuse and realised he was leading the aspects of the bug goddess straight to her.

"We've won Sevril," he shouted, "I can feel they're dead!"

She started to run, hoping some kind of inner compass would take her the right way and she did see something in the distance that might just be the dead female invoker. All the time though Tomma seemed to be getting closer, the two huge semi visible aspects of Sevril-Narge only a few hundred yards behind him.

"You're scared Sevril," he shouted, "too scared to accept the challenge. Run with me Sevril, run with me if you dare."

Then there was a hard sound, an extremely loud hard sound, like two mountains colliding and to her left Alyz saw Tomma tumbling through the air. Looking behind her she noticed one aspect was still going after Tomma, but one was now hurtling after her. Alyz almost stood her ground, but Tomma had told her none of The Guard could survive a fight with a deity and she remembered how long it taken Jen to recover from meeting Sevril-Narge. She ran, ran fast!

“Accept the challenge.”

At least Tomma must be on his feet again, she thought as she ran in the direction of the body parts on the ground. She was almost there when she felt something grip her around the middle and there was complete darkness.

~ ~

Sikush was in front of The Guard as they approached the Well. He'd once imported some four legged beasts he'd seem other leaders ride on, but the creatures were far too skittish. One had leapt sideways at the sound of drums and killed several bystanders. In the end Sikush had given them to a collector of rare and unusual livestock and gone back to leading his troops on foot.

“There's a good crowd.” Said Luri.

“A full opening of the Well is rare.” Said Nurigen.

Sikush hoped that some of the crowd had come to see him lead the troops to war, or a potential war, but sadly he knew Nurigen was probably right. Kittara was at his far left, keeping well out of his way, but she'd know the hooded female walking behind him was Abijah, yes Kittara would have sensed it. But Kittara would never tell and the return of Abijah would remain a secret for at least a while longer. He stopped and heard the marching behind stop as he turned to look at them. They'd brought the demon horns and the drums; some even carried brightly coloured banners. The idea was to make as much noise as they could on the rifts, give any enemy plenty of time to run. Sikush knew his troops would enjoy the odd skirmish, but he wanted to get to Annill as quickly as possible. He raised his hand and the horns started up, the eerie wailing sound seeming to fill the air.

“Forward!” He shouted.

Sikush turned and walked slowly towards the Well. First he felt for the sentinels and convinced them to release control for a time and then he felt for the most fundamental structure of reality and pulled at it until it screamed. The noise was incredible as a huge red window over a mile wide opened up in the reality of Mendera. Through the window could clearly be seen the hill leading down to the abandoned village on the 1st rift. Several flying creatures came through the window and into Mendera, not realising they'd never fly home again once the window closed.

“Impressive.” Said Abijah.

She was beside him as he stepped through the gap in reality and onto the grass of the 1st rift.

“The citizens expect a show every so often,” he said, “and it's good for the news networks.”

Nothing mechanical brought onto the rift worked for long, even he wasn't entirely sure why. But the rift even ruined living beings given time, so it was hardly surprising that technology lasted no time at all. Once through the window there'd be no craft to carry them, they'd have to take to the air themselves. Aukar had his wings and even Nurigen had mastered the art of flight, although he constantly moaned about his eyes watering. Abijah? He assumed she'd take to the air with him, but he could carry her if need be.

“Halt!” He called.

The horns and drums continued as the last few of the thousand or so members of The Damned marched onto the 1st rift. Sikush closed the huge window in reality and gave himself a minute or so to look out over the landscape. It had been a long while since he'd set foot on the rifts and he quite enjoyed being able to see thousands of miles into the distance.

“Up!” He shouted.

As one they rose into the air and Sikush was pleased to see that Abijah smoothly followed him as he rose to a thousand feet above the ruined village.

~ ~

Alyz realised it had been Tomma who had grabbed her at about the same time she realised he'd made a slight mistake in the entry point for Bay 2. She saw the concrete floor about eight feet below and hit it with her face before the darkness fully lifted.

"For fuck sake Tomma, you could have warned me."

It was hardly the way to talk to a deity, but Alyz hurt. Not just the hole in her middle, but everywhere. She had the need to gulp large lungfuls of air, even though she was aware of being able to survive without breathing at all. Alyz moved up onto all fours and gasped and retched as her body recovered from being dragged through whatever void gate Tomma had pulled her through.

"Sorry. Sevril was almost on you. You'll be fine soon." Tomma said.

She turned her head to look at him and was shocked to see Tomma looked as though he'd been through a battle. It had never occurred to her that a deity could be injured, yet he had several large claw marks across his face and a deep dark gash right across his chest. Even his skin looked greyer and older.

"Are you alright?" She asked him.

There was a sting in her abdomen and she noticed a version of Chlo was examining her and fixing some kind of device to her wound. Alyz hadn't even noticed her arrive.

"I'll heal," said Tomma, "but it was worth it."

Chlo was tutting and pushing Alyz onto her back on the hard concrete, while she fixed another device on her arm. Alyz felt mildly sleepy, but the pain in her middle had now almost gone.

"I killed them both Tomma," she said, "that'll set her back millions of years."

"Indeed it will, but there was something else, something worth being beaten for."

Alyz looked at him and heard Chlo mutter as the sleepy feeling increased. Tomma-Goran was beaming at her. His face looked like a hatchet had been used on it and he could hardly stand, but as she drifted off to sleep, Alyz heard him say.

"Sevril is so angry that next time I challenge her..... I think she'll accept."

~ ~