

Chronicles of Mardoun

Chapter 12 - Below 40

“Then well give our lives to protect it until you tell us what you want done with it. We’re soldiers and that’s what we do.” – Salomé

Kittara was having another recurring dream, or was it a vision ? She never had them when she was fully awake, but at times likes these, when she was resting the dreams came. Kittara never needed to sleep in the real sense, but after a long day she entered a world of semi consciousness between the waking world and that of sleep. She knew she was dreaming, yet she seemed to have no control over the content. She was walking along a path through a village and beside her was someone she could never quite see. The villagers were lining the path and jeering at her and her unknown companion, or was it unknown ? On this occasion Kittara could see a wing and then bright red hair and finally the face of the Genova who had saved Estrid.

“Kill them, kill the demons !” The villagers shouted.

Kittara held up her arm to stop the villagers hitting her companion with sticks, and then as always the dream changed and they were alone on the path and the village was a ruin. It was night yet she noticed there were no stars in the sky and it was bitterly cold. She put her arm around the Genova and tried to pull her along the path.

“We have to reach the gates, hurry.” She heard herself say.

No matter how hard they rushed along the path they seemed to get no closer to the large city gates she could see in the distance. Her companion seemed to getting very tired and Kittara found herself almost carrying her.

“We must enter the City.”

Then they were back in the village when it was still being used and there were soldiers among the people. Kittara tried to hurry the Genova along when she saw the troops picking up bows.

“Kill them, kill the demons !”

She tried to block the arrows with her body, but no matter how hard she tried they kept hitting the angel, who was now screaming in pain.

“Stop it you’ll kill her.” She shouted at the mob.

More and more arrows hit the Genova until she fell to the ground and Kittara had to lay over her body to stop the crowd cutting her to pieces.

“Kill them, kill the demons !”

Then they were on the path again and it was once again night. The sky was completely dark and even the ruins of the village looked ancient. This time they were right in front of the city gates and Kittara realised she’d never had this part of the dream before.

“Well ? Shall we enter ? You did promise.” Said the angel.

The city gates still looked solid, yet they were obviously of immense age. Kittara pushed hard at the heavy gates and they swung open. She realised she knew the city, she’d fought in a battle here, then she fully awoke from the dream.

“The City of the Lost God.” She muttered to herself.

“What was that ?”

Kittara felt annoyed at herself for waking Estrid, the girl hadn’t had a proper sleep for a day and a half and needed a few hours.

“Nothing, go back to sleep.”

She went over to the bed and pulled up the blanket covering Estrid and heard Albas and Princess still arguing in the room across the corridor.

"You don't have to go ! No one is forcing you." Shouted Albas.

It had been going on for sometime and it just seemed to be the way they communicated. Of course Princess would come with them, where else would she go ? Jinxies would no longer be there to buy her weapons and the levels would probably be avoided by the people from the surface for a long time. Princess may be a very skilled tart, but there probably wouldn't be much of a market for her talents for some time. So of course she'd come with them, and if she lived the Empire would look after her.

"Quiet, Estrid needs some sleep." She said opening their door an inch.

They both muttered apologies at her and Kittara returned to the old chair in front of Estrid's bed. This was the first abandoned building she'd entered and it had still been fully furnished, there were even family pictures left on the wall. Where had they gone, and who leaves their memories behind ? Kittara stood up and looked at the pictures of an ordinary family and realised that their dreams and hopes had been put into this now derelict house on level 33.

"It's not just about money, where do I go now ?" She heard Princess say.

At least they'd stopped shouting at each other for a while.

They had left the Slingshot and walked the mile or so to the house they were now in. Kittara had put a plasma device in the vehicle and thirty seconds after they left it, it became a heap of ash, along with the body of Jinken Towler the late owner of Jinxies.

"This house is the least likely to collapse on you." Chlo has said.

On that really underwhelming endorsement they had entered the deserted dwelling and made it their temporary base. It would have been nice to bring in a full attack group from Mendera, with perhaps an armoured transport for Estrid, but they were still here unofficially.

"I can bring you weapons, food and armour, but any major disturbance in reality could still be detected." Chlo had told them.

So they gave up on the idea of arriving on level 40 with an army of battle hardened members of The Damned and realised it was going to be just the four of them. Kittara had Chlo send clean blankets and a change of clothing for Estrid along with the rest of the toys Sikush had given her. She left Albas to obtain what he thought Princess would need.

"Probes have found where the vehicles went on 40." She heard from Chlo.

Good she thought. Really they should be on their way, but Estrid and Princess needed rest and Kittara had an idea they would both be needed when they reached level 40. Next door she could hear Princess softly moaning as they had sex. At least they were being quiet about it this time.

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Hol just knew there was something really wrong about President Kallin. He'd been having a long argument with someone and seemed to be losing.

"Not my fault.....lost my whole team.....lock down levels...."

He was mumbling apparently to himself, but she could pick up enough to realise he was making excuses to someone.

"Can you pick anything up Chlo."

"No, could be like the private channels we use ? There is no way of monitoring those."

The long suffering Meg had come in with food and drink on several occasions and though the muttering ceased he showed no interest in her at all. On the last occasion she'd sat on his lap to pour him a drink and he'd still completely ignored her. She left with an indignant snort.

"Yes the current situation is out of control."

The president had picked up a link to the army chief of staff.

"I see no alternative. Send ten thousand of your best men into the levels below 15, kill everything that moves down there."

She could see him getting angry and thumping the desk with his fist.

"Yes that is an order, unless you're offering your resignation ? No ! Good, then I want those troops started on level 16 by morning."

Kallin calmed and drank some of the drink Meg had delivered.

"Oh and stop at level 33, no point in sending the men into the fog where no one can live anyway."

There were the usual pleasantries and then Kallin started on the muttering again.

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Kittara had asked Chlo to bring two of her long blades out of her store. She loved her demon blade, but she was worried it might not like biting a high level one of its own. On the table in front of her was her precious Nurigen which would go on her belt and the supposed killer of eternal. She picked it up and once more felt the throb of power in the weapon and hoped the gamble of taking it would pay off as she tightly strapped it to her back.

"Estrid, come on wake up, we need to leave soon."

She put a boot dagger down each boot and tucked her demon dagger into her belt.

"I can take you where they used to leave the transports," Chlo had said, "it's about fifty yards from the building."

"Can you put us inside the building ?" Kittara had asked.

"There is a reality distortion around the building. I can get you close to it, but you'll need to find an entrance once you get there. I did send a few small items to where I'll send the four of you and when I brought them back they all had nil reality disruption."

Kittara had never know Chlo show the slightest doubt about sending her anywhere before.

"So Chlo, if the creatures you can't see don't get us we might get our reality scrambled. Any more good news ?"

She could have sworn Chlo was hesitant, could Chlo be hesitant ?

"I can't, well there's a strong possibility. Look ! you have to assume you've only got what you take. Using me to get objects out of store looks unlikely when you are there, so take what you need."

Kittara strapped a belt of plasma devices to each leg and she was as ready as she'd ever be. She turned to Estrid's equipment as the door opened and the other two came in. Princess tapped her chest.

"Best blaster proof armour the Empire has to offer, looks like I'm going." She said.

"And a genuine Yakkie I see ?"

Princes held up the weapon and you could see she was genuinely proud of it.

"Pity Chlo can't help with the creatures." Said Albas.

"No. She sent probes all around the building we're interested in and there was no sign of anything alive. She did find a lot of gnawed bones though. Jinx said the creatures don't eat their kills, but something seems to be."

Estrid hadn't quite finished dressing, so she glared at Albas until he faced away from her. Kittara helped her get her cut down Guard uniform on nice and tight.

"You can have a short sword strapped to your back, just in case."

Estrid looked thrilled as Kittara adjusted the straps so she could reach the blade without removing it from its straps.

"Here you are, you might as well put this over your shoulder."

She handed her the sack of toys from the forbidden times that Sikush had given her and hoped Estrid didn't kill herself with them.

"Lastly a mask so you can breathe, don't EVER remove it."

Kittara fitted a small box to the back of the girl's belt and ran the tube up over her back and into the mask which she fitted over Estrid's face. It was the best the Empire had and would provide

clean pure air for her to breathe indefinitely. It even increased the flow if the wearer was engaged in heavy exercise, or of course fighting. Albas was similarly helping Princess to fit her mask.

“Ready ?” Kittara said, and received three nods back.

Kittara fixed a plasma device to a wall and set the timer for two minutes. It was a pity to destroy the building with all its family memories, but they didn’t have time to clean up and too much could be traced to the Empire. Kittara held the Nurigen in front of her.

“Weapons ready, we may have to fight as we arrive.”

As they all readied their weapons for battle the room swayed and vanished as Chlo overlaid their destination on level 40. At first the image of the area refused to gain clarity and Chlo held them back.

“Timer running Chlo.” Said Albas

Then the image of level 40 in front of them was sharp and well defined and Chlo gave them the go ahead to step forward.

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Of course Luri would rather have been on Ixir with the rest of them, but she liked Ojetin and it was vital to get him on board the Old One willingly, if at all possible. His house, or rather rambling mansion was in the cold wastes near the northern polar region of Mendera. Many would, and did build houses there and instantly have the grounds of their dwelling heated and irrigated. Luri often thought it was absurd to build in an area of snow and ice, only to have Chlo create a tropical garden for you.

“Beautiful.” She said to herself as she moved herself to a few yards in front of his gate.

She could have appeared in his house, they were old friends and he wouldn’t have objected, but she always enjoyed the walk to his door. There was no attempt to tame the climate and snow drifts were allowed to build up against the walls. Large icicles hung from the roof, but of course Chlo would never allow them to fall on anyone. Luri walked up to the front door and as she had done countless times before, she hammered on the door with the hilt of her dagger.

“About time, it’s freezing out there.” She said with a huge grin on her face.

Piaff Ojetin moved forward and gave her a huge hug, which was reciprocated.

“Chlo said you were coming.”

No one used his first name, to everyone who knew him he was just Ojetin the Cleric. As she followed him across the entrance hall to his home Luri paused to look at his Astrolabe of the Menderan system.

“Where did you get this ?” She asked, as she’d often asked before.

“That would be telling.”

Many homes on Mendera had a floating image of the Menderan solar system in their hall or main lounge, it had become a bit of a cliché. Chlo had several static probes at various distances from their sun and it was easy to project the 3d image into a conversation piece. ‘So clear you can see the weather in Mendera City’, was the usual boast, but this was different.

“Is that a star sapphire as Mendera City ?” She asked.

“No that’s Lake Misogon.”

Luri knew quite well what the various gem stones were on the large golden orb that represented Mendera, but she knew Ojetin liked to show it off. His astrolabe was a huge clockwork affair, wrought in gold with precious gems to represent land masses and oceans. Who had made it, and where he had obtained it was a complete mystery. One of their most revered clerics a receiver of stolen artefacts ? Now there was a thought.

“It must be very old, but the continents seem the same ?” She commented.

“Ahh but Luri, very little ever changes on Mendera.”

She followed him along a corridor into his study. Ojetin was a quiet man, who hated public engagements and really wanted to stay at home or in one of the Sentinel temples in contemplation.

"You know the problem Luri." He said as they sat down. "I'm five thousand, four hundred and forty eight years old and that's far older than many clerics live."

Luri looked at him and had to admit he did look his age. He had very little of his own hair left and walked with a stoop. Of course Chlo could have cured most of the external signs of aging, but Ojetin was a bit of an eccentric and liked to look his age.

"This is important, and you'll be on a secure craft with at least twelve of the Guard with you at all times."

"Of course if this is an order from him?"

Ojetin always referred to The Chaln  as him. They'd been friends all his life, yet Ojetin still put on an air of rebellion.

"No one wants to order you, but you've been there, you know the terrain."

Ojetin did look very old and tired and as Luri looked at him, she hated putting him under pressure, but they really did need him.

"Will Kittara be with me?"

Luri didn't take it as an insult. Kittara had a long history with him and had pulled him out of quite a few close calls when he was an eager young cleric, out to see the multiverse. What could she tell him? Chlo said Kittara was now at a place of 'reality singularity', which probably meant Chlo didn't know what was going on, and that was worrying.

"Yes, Kittara has given a pledge to stay on board and protect the craft."

Ojetin looked at his feet.

"You do know what I found there? On NKG0056?"

"I saw your report. The ruins looked old, pre switch, but of course they can't be."

Ojetin stared at her wild eyed.

"But they are and as you say that's impossible. There are ruins from the forbidden times in a new star system. It's not a mistake, something pulled that planet through a switch."

"Only both eternal working together could do that old friend, and they're as surprised as anyone."

Ojetin went back to studying the tiled floor of his study.

"Supposing I'm right, and something has done what it takes both eternal to do?"

"Then you need to come with us."

Ojetin looked up at her, sad but resigned to his fate.

"Yes, I don't want to, but I see I must come with you."

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The first thing Kittara noticed was how dark everything was. Not the slightest glow alleviated the almost suffocating blanket of darkness. She prompted Chlo for some light, it was risky, but they had to be able to see where they were going.

"That's better." Said Estrid as Chlo set up a series of floating lights above them.

"There are tracks here."

They all looked where Albas was stood and many footprints could be seen, and other less distinct tracks that seemed to come from some abandoned buildings a few hundred yards away. Kittara would have liked to explore the source of the tracks, but it was too dangerous with Estrid with her.

"Anything moving Chlo?" She asked.

"No, nothing, nothing on infra red, no movement of mass, nothing."

It should have been reassuring, but Kittara had a bad feeling and her feelings were rarely wrong.

"Everyone together, we'll move around the building and follow the foot prints."

With weapons ready they kept in a tight group and followed Kittara towards the nearest building, and then the lights went out.

"Stay together !"

Almost simultaneously Albas and Kittara felt for the switch to create light and several bobbing balls of light appeared above their heads.

"Chlo are you there ?"

She looked at Albas who shrugged and looked back at her. The constant chatter of traffic had gone from her head and it looked like they were alone.

"The reality disturbance has cut us off from Chlo, so stay alert."

The group formed into a rough semi circle and carried on around the building, where they spotted a door. Then the creatures were on them.

"There, to your right Princess, watch out." Said Estrid.

Kittara was the first to attack the creature by sending off a wall of flame towards them. It hit the advancing creatures, rendering many of them to ash before hitting the wall of an abandoned building. Kittara noticed how the flames died almost immediately, as there was no oxygen here to keep any kind of fire going.

"What are they ?" Shouted Princess as she fired a long burst from her Yakkie.

Kittara could now see the creatures clearly in the Yakkie fire, and she had never seen anything like them. Dark green in colour, they were like giant bats that had grown too heavy to fly. Stubs of wings frantically beat in some sort of hopeless memory of the days when they could fly, while whip like tails angrily thrashed in their direction.

"I have no idea what they are, keep moving towards the door."

Estrid was liberally running her Yakkie over the approaching horde of creatures, but their numbers seemed endless. They had savage looking teeth in heads on top of long necks and would have looked quite comical if they didn't have such murderous intentions.

"Cover me, I'll open the door." Said Kittara.

The remaining three grouped behind her, firing everything into the seemingly endless swarm of creatures, while Kittara examined the door. Right in front of her was a large red handle.

"Too easy, too obvious," she told herself.

One of the creatures bit Estrid on the arm and if it wasn't for her shield it would have caused serious injury. Albas hooked it with his claw and sent the beast hurtling into its fellow monsters.

"We're ok, do what you need to." Said Albas.

Kittara used her precognition powers and looked forward just a few moments in time, while picturing herself opening the door with the handle. There was a huge explosion, which killed the two ephemerals instantly and flattened the building.

"Oh, fucking thing."

One particularly large beast had pecked straight at Princess, knocking her off her feet. Estrid had quickly killed the creature with a shot to the head, while Albas pulled Princess to her feet.

"We're ok, but don't make it too long." Said Albas.

She once again went into precog mode, but went deeper almost putting herself into a trance.

Then she pictured herself opening the door and slowed the images right down. The door opened, then inside to the right is a huge box, connected to the door handle by a wire. A simple single fucking wire. Kittara almost cheered as she punched her fist through the wall of the building where she remembered the wire was.

"Soon, please soon !" Pleaded Estrid.

Kittara turned in time to see yet another wave of the creatures appearing out of the dark. She turned her firewall spell up to max and sent it off at the beasts. As they listened to the screams of the burning creatures, she put her dagger through the hole in the wall and cut the wire.

"Inside, quick!" She shouted as she opened the door and entered the building.

The other entered the building, closing the door behind them, while Kittara sent several balls of light up towards the roof. To their surprise there was no hammering on the door they had just entered.

"Imperial Alloy," said Kittara, "the whole building is made of it by the look of it. They never used these buildings on the 40th, but Chlo thought this was intended as a fusion power plant. This building will still look just as good in another thousand years."

Albas checked over the explosives next to the door for any further surprises, while Princess and Estrid started to look around.

"It's huge." Said Princess.

Estrid removed an eight sided box from the sack over her shoulder and started to sprinkle the contents in a wide semi circle around the door they had entered.

"Good idea." Commented Kittara.

There was nothing in the empty building, so they all moved towards the goods lift and stairs in one corner. The controls for the lift indicated there were eight floors, all below ground level.

"Eight floors down and no power for the lift."

Commented Albas as they started down the stairs.

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Hol was now really concerned about what was happening with Kallin. Chlo had told her all contact had been lost with Kittara and almost immediately the President had started to rant really loudly to himself.

"That bitch..... should never have got inside.....kill them all."

She couldn't make out all that he said, but what she could hear convinced her that he was in contact with someone on Ixir who was trying to kill Kittara.

"Meg, get in here Meg."

Meg had entered still pouting from her earlier rejection, but by the way she walked into the room Hol thought she was actually looking forward to sex with the President. No accounting for taste thought Hol. Kallin held up his hand to stop her as she approached his desk.

"Your clothing, there's something wrong with it."

Meg looked at herself and started smoothing her skirt, while looking inquiringly at him.

"You're still wearing it."

She smiled at the joke and slowly removed all her clothes. Hol had to admit Meg was pretty good looking for a girl from Ixir, and under different circumstances she'd have enjoyed some intimate time with Meg herself.

"Round here."

Now they were obviously on a part of their regular sexual repertoire. Meg came around and stood between Kallin and his desk, then she shoved all the loose papers to one side and laid herself face down over the desk. There was no preamble. Kallin dropped his trousers, moved forward and rammed his erection into her.

"Urrgghh." Grunted Meg.

Well so much for romance thought Hol, but Meg really did seem to be enjoying the experience. Kallin thrust away for quite some time and Hol had to admit that for a middle aged politician he seemed to have quite a motor on him.

"Thank you Meg, that was superb."

As Kallin withdrew Meg kept quite still on the desk, obviously basking in the afterglow. The president put his hand in a desk drawer and pulled out a short silver cylinder. Hol recognised it and had a good idea what was coming next, but she was here under orders and had no intentions of interfering.

“HmMMMM.”

Meg continued to lie on the desk with her eyes closed while Kallin rubbed her back with one hand while gently putting the cylinder against her spine. He pressed the button on the device and Meg twitched twice and was dead.

“Sorry Meg.” Said Kallin, as he pushed her body onto the floor.

Hol had seen the device used before, and it was a favourite with the Ixir secret police. Quite simply it neutralised any electrical charge in the body, heart, brain, all simply turned off.

Virtually instant and completely pain free. One second Meg was enjoying her post coital after glow the next dead, as if someone had pressed an off switch. All this was going on the common channel and no one had given her any change of orders, so Hol remained where she was as Kallin restarted his muttering.

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Juvan Swire was waiting for them as they came down the stair to the eighth floor down. He’d been waiting behind a partition and fired at Princess hitting her in the chest with his blaster.

“No. Leave him, he’s just a messenger boy.” Kittara Said.

Estrid had fired her Yakkie at him as he ran up the stairs and had singed his back a bit, but he it hadn’t slowed him down much. As Swire ran up the stairs they examined Princess.

“I’m ok, the armour took most of it.”

Albas winced as he removed the armour, which had taken most of the energy from the blaster, but Princess still had some nasty burns.

“Here we go again,” joked Princess, “you always seem to be healing me.”

Kittara walked around the quite small room, lighting every inch of it and there was nothing. No door, no stairs going down, no sign saying ‘this way to the Demon’. There had to be something, otherwise why was Swire down here ?

“Nothing here, there has to be a door, or something.” She said to the others.

“It’s there.” Said Estrid, pointing to the left wall.

Kittara went to where Estrid was pointing and thumped the wall and it was solid. She used all her senses and only found a very dusty solid wall.

“Do you really not see it ?”

She knelt down next to Estrid and put her hand on the back of the girls head.

“Show me ?” She said.

As Estrid looked at the wall Kittara could see the top of some stairs glowing faintly orange in a light coming up from below. No door, no hidden room, a set of stairs in full view. Kittara went over to the wall and once again it was solid, and no matter how hard she hit, Kittara couldn’t get through.

“Let me.”

Estrid walked up to the wall and touched it, and it disappeared to reveal a flight of steps leading down to another room below.

“I think you just earned as much junk food as you can eat.” Said Kittara.

Princess was now on her feet, but after the beating from the creatures outside and now this, she was barely standing. Kittara pulled some partition across the room, so that they gave cover from both sets of steps.

“Albas and myself are going down there. Both of you on the floor behind the partitions, and if anyone who’s not us turns up. Let them have it with the Yakkies at full power.”

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The Grand Council had finished for the day, but sadly for The Chalné it was due to sit again the next day.

“Councillor.”

Sikush shook hands with Councillor Leonide of Ixir and although he didn't like the man, he was in a position, or likely to be in a position where he could be useful.

“Please join me for a meal at the palace later, there will be a few people there, but we will still get a chance to talk.”

Of course the wretched creature had said yes, in fact he couldn't have been more syrupy and sycophantic.

“Emperor you honour me, of course I'd be delighted to attend.”

“I'm only Emperor to strangers, call me Sikush.”

He felt slightly queasy at being so nice to Leonide, but Ixir needed a period of stability and the awful little man bobbing up and down in front of him might just provide it.

“Bring a partner if you wish, Chlo will know the time.”

Sikush had turned and walked away. Councillor Leonide was also the vice president of Ixir and if Kallin met with an unfortunate accident ? Leonide would make a very good replacement.

Actually the man would be a useless cretin in the role, but easy to manipulate. Sikush smiled and thought that president Leonide would suit the Empire very well.

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As they reached the bottom of the stairs Kittara realised the orange glow was coming from a room a fair way down a wide corridor.

“This corridor has been reality stretched, I can feel it.”

Albas nodded to her, he could feel there was something strange too.

They silently walked the length of the hall and looked into what appeared to be a single large room. The walls glowed red and seemed to pulse and about seven lower ranked demons were busy with various bits of machinery. Behind them sat on a throne was Xeod himself. Kittara had met a high level demon, but he had been almost friendly and out of his own realm. This Demon seemed to ooze confidence and raw power. Kittara felt for a private link with Albas.

“I feel drained. They seem to have brought a bubble from their own reality here.”

Albas agreed with her. In this room they were in the reality normally only found beyond the 7th rift and both of them were constantly having to use up their power to survive.

“Albas !!”

Kittara had felt the spell a fraction of a second before it hit, but Albas hadn't. The powerful repulsion spell sent him crashing into the walls of the corridor and then into the stairs that had just come down. There was no sign of life from him and for all she knew he might be dead. Wonderful, she thought. We're up against a top level demon for all of five seconds and one of us may well be dead. She drew her Nurigen blade and walked closer to Xeod. Only one of the lower level demons had survived the repulsion spell and none of the equipment, they were all obviously considered expendable by Xeod.

“Is that the best Sikush has ?”

He pointed down the hall at the still static body of Albas. He was a good twenty feet tall, with rippling muscles and the usual four arms. In one hand was a large demon blade, but he seemed to be relying on spells. Once again he unleashed a huge repulsion spell that shattered the already broken equipment in the room and killed the last remaining lower level demon. Kittara easily nullified the effect of the spell on herself, but her power was draining away.

“I remember your brother. Now he's dead I named my cat after him.”

He launched himself at her, but seemed useless with the sword he held. As she went past him Kittara put a good deep gash in him with the Nurigen. He turned and flicked her with his lower left arm, sending her crashing into the wall. So fast she thought, how could anything so huge be so damn fast ? He turned towards her and she noticed the wound in his side was healing up as she watched.

"Nice sword you have," she said, "I'll put it to good use after you're dead."

She leapt at him with all the strength and speed she could and her Nurigen bit deep into his side, a good ten inches into his flesh. Again Xeod spun incredibly quickly and punched her, sending her hurtling into the wall.

"Aargh."

It had hurt, in fact it had hurt her a lot. She had no idea why he wasn't using his sword, maybe it was just for show ? He was certainly quick with his fists. As Kittara watched him she could see green blood dripping from the demon's orange torso. Then as before the ragged wound started to heal and in a few seconds was completely gone. Kittara on the other hand was draining fast and knew that soon Xeod would be able to kick her inert form to pieces at his leisure. She looked at Albas and his body still hadn't moved from where it had fallen. She dropped her Nurigen on the ground and reached for the eternal killer. Desperation maybe, but she had nothing to lose.

"Another toy Kittara ?"

The demon's voice sounded quite ordinary, like an educated citizen of Mendera. She summoned the remnants of her strength and went for him. She punched into his chest with the sword and gave it a twist, but in doing so she left herself open. Xeod grabbed her around the neck and threw her as hard as he could against the floor, then he kicked her so that she crashed into the wall. She stood up, but she was hurt more than she thought she could be hurt. It felt like something inside her had broken and without Chlo she had no idea what it was. Then she looked at Xeod and realised that he too had his problems. His orange skin had lost its glow and the gapping wound in his chest was bleeding huge amounts of green blood over the floor. Best of all the wound showed no signs of healing. What next though ? A battle of attrition until they both lay dead on the floor ? Kittara knew she couldn't survive another pummelling from Xeod.

"Is that all you've got bitch ?"

Kittara found herself drifting off into the world between waking and sleeping and that probably saved her life. She was Mardoun. She had been as at home in the dark realms past the 7th rift, as she'd been in Mendera city. Xeod was barely five billion years old and she had lived so many billions of years that the number no longer had meaning. Then she started to draw dark power from the fabric of the room and use it.

"What are you doing ?"

For some reason she felt a question come into her head that surprised them both.

"Your brother, Xeod 3rd. Tell me, did he have a wife or favourite female ?"

The demon looked as though he was thinking for a second. Kittara noted how feline his face really did look.

"Yes, there was Tulenga, and he seemed obsessed with her. But why?"

He coughed and seemed to be trying to close the open wound with his fingers.

Xeod now looked slightly grey and had dropped the demon blade. Kittara kept pulling dark energy from the pulsating room and pulling it inside herself. Then she held the eternal killer above her head and flew at the demon like a living javelin. She hit him in the centre of his chest and carried on, going right through him and out of the other side. She was going so fast that she crashed into the opposite wall and had to spin around to meet any counter attack. She needn't have worried, Xeod was dying.

“How did you.....”

As he turned towards her his internal organs fell out of his chest and he came down heavily on his knees and then onto his face. Kittara who was now covered in yellow blood and goo just watched, almost unable to believe she had killed the creature.

“Albas are you alive ?”

She knew it was a strange question as she straightened his body and examined him. He wasn't dead, she still felt the inner spark of life in him, his soul, but he was badly damaged. She lifted him in her arms and carried him up the stairs.

~ ~

Hol watched as Kallin suddenly stopped muttering and looked lost. As though whatever comms channel he'd been using had gone dead. He'd sat there looking at the dead body of Meg for a while and then reached into his drawer for a packet of white powder. Drugs ? Hol watched him pour it into a glass of water and drink it, then she was given an order by Sikush.

“If you're from him, you can't harm me any more.”

As she moved through the office wall Kallin saw her, but he didn't seem to recognise her.

“It's too late, much too late.”

Hol drew a sharp dark blade and moved towards him, when she noticed a look of recognition on his face. He smiled at her.

“Tell Sikush I'm sorry. I was weak.”

Then he fell forward on to the desk and was dead.

Hol picked up the glass and Chlo analysed a quick and painless poison. They'd wanted him dead and now Kallin had done them the favour of making it a suicide. Hol pushed him back in the chair and pulled Meg up from the floor and put her back face down on the desk.

“We need him found quickly, arrange an alarm.” Sikush had said to her.

Hol looked at the computer screen as she moved Meg's hand close to the panic alarm button and noticed the army chief was requesting an approval for the operation to clear the levels before proceeding. It wasn't one of her orders, but Hol was quite pleased that operation would now never be confirmed. Hol put Kallin over Meg in the classic coital position and surveyed her handiwork. Meg on the desk enjoying the sex, Kallin suddenly attacks her, she hits panic button. They'd have fun trying to work out how the fast acting poison and neural neutraliser fitted in, but luckily that wasn't her problem. Hol dropped Meg's hand onto the alarm button and moved back into the wall cavity as all hell broke loose.

~ ~

She heard Princess scream as she carried Albas back up the stairs and she had to admit they made a grim tableaux. Albas was still in a crooked unnatural pose as she lowered him to the floor and her uniform was now more demon guts than uniform.

“I'm trying to give him strength Princess, but it isn't working.”

Kittara really didn't know what else they could do, and how could she carry him through those creatures so that Chlo could heal him ? Then she noticed a glow on the stairs from above and reached for her sword.

“It's the angel.” Said Estrid.

Sventa moved towards them fading in and out of clarity as she came. Then she took a firm grip on Kittara's arm and pulled herself, at least for a while into their reality.

“I need to be quick, he's dying.” Said the Genova.

Sventa knelt next to Albas and as she ran her hands over him she straightened his limbs out.

Kittara was amazed how strong she was, but of course she was now fully corporeal.

“I am Sventa.” Said the angel looking straight at Kittara.

There seemed no reason to return the introduction as the angel seemed to know who they all were, so they watched as she appeared to put her glowing hands right into the chest of Albas.

"He will still be very weak, but he will live."

There was a lot more of Sventa running her hands over Albas before he coughed and tried to sit up.

"I'll be ok," he said, "did you get him?"

"Yes I got him."

Kittara noticed Sventa was starting to fade, so she grabbed her arm.

"No. Twice you've saved people who meant something to me. We need to talk, but there is something I have to do."

Estrid understood the situation and took a firm hold of Sventa's other arm, firmly anchoring her, at least for a while in their reality. Sventa gently brushed the girl's hair from her eyes.

"Thank you."

"There is something I must do, wait here." Said Kittara.

She went back down the stairs and along the corridor to recover her Nurigen sword and then she went to examine the dead demon. Kittara cut his sword belt from his waist and tied it to her back with the demon blade firmly in the scabbard. There was nothing else on him though. She turned him over, cut off his clothing, but there were no hidden pockets, no purses. It didn't make sense, the creature had destroyed his minions and the machinery as though they were nothing, so there had to be something else down here. The throne he'd been sitting on revealed no hidden switches and Kittara broke it down into splinters before she accepted it had no hidden compartments.

"No real time for this, but I must." She said to herself.

Kittara let herself float at about two feet off the ground and allowed her dark side to gain control of her body. The room no longer looked pale red, now the walls looked a pulsating, almost living blood red. She revolved slowly around and noticed a different portion of the wall behind the throne. Not the same red, but slightly pinker and it seemed to have markings on it, like a claw.

"Yes of course, and I'll need this Xeod."

She cut off the enormous right, top hand of the dead demon and carried it over to the wall and hit it hard against the marking.

"I knew it."

A part of the wall seemed to melt away to reveal a small room. To the demon it would have been a small cupboard, but Kittara could walk into it without crouching. In one corner was a quite ordinary looking sack, which she picked up.

"Hmmm."

The contents looked harmless to her, so she swung the sack over her back and returned up the stairs to the others.

"I'm glad you're still here." She said to Sventa.

"I'm fixed here now, for a while, but quite soon I will have to move on again."

Kittara and Princess got each side of Albas, while Estrid held firmly onto the arm of Sventa and all of them headed slowly up the eight flights of stairs to the surface.

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Councillor Leonide was thoroughly enjoying himself. He never thought he was particularly popular among the Guard, yet here he was being wined and dined like an old friend.

"My dear Maxl, you must try some of this it's superb."

The Emperor, The Chalne himself had just called him by his first name. Then there was the annoyance of a high priority call from Ixir, which he was sure was going to ruin the evening.

"Yes, this is Councillor Leonide."

Even though Sikush knew what the call was about, he showed concern and signalled the room to be quiet.

"When was this ? Yes I'll return to Ixir straight away. You are sure about this, there can't be a mistake ?"

Sikush watched as Maxl Leonide slowly realised the opportunity that had just come his way. Leonide closed the communication and turned to his host.

"That was terrible news, it appears Kallin, I mean our president, has killed himself."

Luri sat herself next to Maxl on the sofa and held his arm, while using just the right amount of thought control on him. Too much and he might feel it, just enough to give a tiny amount of empathy to the ideals of the Empire.

"Maxl that is indeed awful news," said Sikush, "you have the use of the Guard of course to take you and your people back home immediately. The council meeting for tomorrow was only for the closing ceremony, which I'll cancel under the circumstances."

Maxl Leonide felt like crying for some reason. He had never realised how understanding the Emperor was, how decent a man.

"I couldn't possibly expect the council to cancel....."

"Nonsense," said Sikush interrupting him, "you shall have fifty of my best people as your guard, as I hear things are getting a bit, er difficult on Ixir."

"Thank you that is very kind of you."

By now Maxl was crying and Luri held tight on to his arm and made the usual comforting sounds.

"I'll order the food transports to land on Ixir straight away, no silly admin error matters at a time like this. Oh and you can keep the fifty of the Guard for as long as you need them, they might prove more reliable than the secret police president Kallin had."

"Yes, of course you're quite right," said Maxl, "and if I can ever do anything to repay your kindness ?"

Sikush waved him away as he went off with Luri to pack his belongings. Oh yes Maxl there would be quite a few things the Empire would like from you.

"Look after him," he said to Luri on their private link, "I think President Maxl will make a very good friend of the Empire."

~ ~

They had reached the last landing before the top of the stairs and it had been hard work getting the injured Albas that far.

"He is up there," said Sventa, "the man who ran up the stairs. He has something on him you need. I will help you."

"The rest of you stay here, Sventa and I will deal with Swire."

Kittara started up the stairs while Sventa faded and drifted off through the ceiling. Kittara guessed that Swire had a way of getting past the creatures and with Albas in his weakened state they really did need it.

"Stop ! Stop there, I have a blaster aimed at you."

Kittara was a bit surprised that he would expect a blaster to stop her, but looking down at her filthy ragged uniform she accepted she no longer looked like a famed immortal warrior. She kept slowly walking towards Swire.

"So. Juvan Swire, why shouldn't I turn you to a heap of ash ?"

"I have here," he pulled his sleeve up to reveal a bracelet, "a device that scares the creatures away. I don't know how you got in, but you won't get out in one piece without my help."

"So why are you still here ?"

Swire indicated the numerous gadgets on the floor around the door.

"I'm guessing they're not there to improve my health."

"They were to stop the creatures getting in, but I take your point. So we have a stand off of sorts Juvan. How do you propose we get round it?"

"Take me with you. I can get you past the beasts outside if you give me your word to take me safely to where I want to go."

"Where would that be Juvan?"

Before he could answer Estrid came up the stairs. Curiosity and worry about Kittara had gotten the better of her and she walked towards Kittara.

"Stop, is this some kind of trick?"

Swire looked scared and he lifted his blaster and got ready to fire at Estrid.

"Not a good idea." Whispered Sventa in his right ear.

As Swire spun in the direction of the voice his shot went wild and hit the wall. Kittara had the chance she needed and was instantly next to him. She swiftly used her boot knife to sever his arm above the bracelet and pushed him back into the mines. Even Sikush had no idea who had made the mini mines, but he had given an impressive description of their action, and Kittara was curious to see them in action. Swire trod on the first one and froze as it fired a blue beam at him. Then another of the mines fired at him, then another until all of them had him at the centre of needle thin beams of blue light. Then for the merest fraction of a second Juvan Swire knew what it was like to be at the centre of a super nova.

"Wow that was impressive." Said Kittara.

The beams had gone off and nothing was left of Swire, not the slightest trace. Kittara noticed Sventa was fading again and grabbed her arm.

"You didn't need to kill him."

"No, I didn't."

Kittara pulled the bracelet off the wrist and threw the rest of the arm away.

"Estrid. Please collect up your toys so we can leave."

As Estrid collected the mini mines and put them back in their box Kittara led Sventa back to the stairs to call up the others. As they got there she pulled the angel round to face her.

"Ok, three times now you've done your best to keep my friends alive, yet you don't really know any of us. My guess is you want something in return?"

Kittara's look softened and she leant towards the angel and kissed her gently on the lips.

"You've earned my help. Ask for what you want and I'll do my best to help you?"

Sventa leaned towards Kittara and they talked for some time. Estrid tried to listen in, but each time she moved close Kittara waved her away.

Princess gave up on Kittara returning for them and slowly came up the stairs with Albas in one arm and her Yakkie in the other. They found to their amazement the sight of Kittara hugging the Genova and saying.

"You have my word. I can do this for you, and I will do it soon."