

## Chronicles of Mardoun

### Chapter 10 - Level 33

**“The Genova have no real home. They flit in and out of various dimensions and realities, but have no permanent solid form in any of them.” – Cleric Ojetin**

Kittara already hated Ixir for its smell, its squalor, its corruption and now she was up against blind bureaucracy.

“Yes little lady, I’ll need you license, your credits, Bio Reg card of course and then if you can fill in the waiver of liability.”

She looked around the personal transport hire establishment and noticed that every other client seemed to be a driver in uniform. All the well off of Norraine obviously booked their transports in advance and sent their man to pick it up. Only the riff raff actually came in off the street and she was sure they’d already been singled out as a target for every scam in the book.

“Oh and I’ll need a deposit of, you see the figure on this form ? Then if you can also fill in this schedule of contact details and any accidents in the last 5 years.”

He was giving her a clipboard full of forms, a damn inch thick bunch of them. No one filled in forms these days, no one ! If the office had been empty Ixir would probably have been minus one transport hire sales person, but the place was full and they were trying for a low profile. Kittara pulled a 1000 Imperial credit note from a pouch in her uniform and held it out to the man. As he greedily grabbed it she held his hand and made eye contact and for just a single second he froze. To anyone watching it was just the passing of a payment, but it gave her just enough time to ease things her way.

“I think you have everything you need now ?”

The man blinked and looked at the clipboard and seemed uncertain why it was there, but he put the Imperial credit into a drawer and reached for a set of keys from the rack behind him.

“Not the usual one for cash clients, something reliable but not flashy.” Kittara prompted him.

He put back the set he had and reached for a set further along the row.

“It’s a three year old Slingshot, with real leather interior, and she’s just been given a full service.”

By the mans attitude Kittara got the impression they were getting a personal favourite of his, so she accepted the keys.

“Through the door over there and it’s in the third row, right in the centre, just beep it.”

The man still looked a bit dazed as they left, but he’d never be able to recall why he was quite so helpful to the strange girl who came in that day.

Kittara led Estrid out to where all the transports were lined up for collection and they walked to the third row. The keys had a large flat plate attached to them with a red button on it and it wasn’t difficult to work out what was needed next. As she pressed the button the lights on a long sleek transport winked on and off and a loud beep was heard.

“Wow, is this ours ?”

Estrid walked around the vehicle touching the metal flake paint. Personal transports throughout the Empire tended to fall into a standard pattern. A hover drive to keep the thing about two feet off the ground, four doors, lights front and rear, fancy paint job and inside enough space for six passengers if everyone is short and skinny, or four normal people. This was different, this was a Slingshot. The Slingshot Company ‘Quality everyone can afford’, had been in financial trouble for years, as they made transports too well. Inside were acres of genuine leather and enough space for a family of six to travel in comfort. Yes, they did come bottom of most safety tables because

all that space meant less crumple zones, but they had a cult following and millions of fanatical owners. Kittara looked it over and it was perfect. Enough comfort, but nothing the police would consider flashy enough to stop out of spite. Chlo sent her the details on how to drive this model and in a fraction of a second Kittara was an expert at handling it.

"Yes it's perfect," said Kittara, "go around the other side and I'll let you in."

Kittara pressed a flat silver key against a black key shape on the door and the vehicle lowered itself slowly down until it was just an inch off the ground and the door opened slowly and gently with a nice reassuring buzz and a clunk. She stepped into the Slingshot and sat down behind the controls and realised how much she missed this. Travelling instantly anywhere in the multiverse was fantastic, but sometimes only a hack in a powerful luxury transport really hit the spot. She was trying to remember the last time she was in a Slingshot when she was interrupted by Estrid banging on the window.

"Sorry."

She placed her finger on the door release and there was the same expensive sounding buzz as the door opened to let Estrid in.

"This is so cool."

As the girl closed the door the transport rose silently to operating height. Kittara could see it had been modified for Ixir. The Slingshot Company build their vehicles on a planet in the Maran Group, where there is little crime and no one has ever been kidnapped for ransom. She noticed that for Ixir blaster proof glass was fitted throughout and there were thin sheets of armour on the insides of the doors and no doubt similar armour in places she couldn't see. Chlo gave her route instructions.

"You can't use any of the main ramp stacks, so it's going to be a long way around. Head for the ramp to level 1 and we'll take it from there."

Kittara put her hand on the figure of 8 wheel on the joy stick device in front of her and while sharply turning it to the right she gently squeezed. The Slingshot turned right in its own length. Then in one smooth move she centred the wheel and pushed the stick forward while still squeezing and the transport headed across the parking area and down a ramp to the road. There was always traffic on Ixir regardless of time of day, but Kittara pushed her way into a gap and headed for the ramp to level 1 that Chlo was showing her.

"Is it far?"

"We can't go the quickest way Estrid, so it could take some time. There is entertainment, push the blue dot in front of you."

Estrid pushed the dot and a screen and small keyboard folded out in front of her. Kittara told her the basic buttons to press, but it was pretty intuitive and fairly quickly Estrid was watching the Imperial Newsfeed. There were stories of food riots beginning on the lower levels of Ixir, and there had been a few deaths. As with most 12 years old Estrid ignored these and found the celebrity news feed and caught up with who was dating who.

"You've about 15 miles to the ramp, no police waiting anywhere that I can see, but I'll keep you informed," Chlo informed Kittara.

As a citizen of the Empire, a hero no less, Kittara did have a perfect right to be on Ixir. The problem was that the Guard had no authority to act on member planets and Sikush wouldn't appreciate President Kallin asking him why a unit of the Guard were operating on Ixir. So she couldn't use the main ramp stacks, far too many police. The levels had been built with security in mind and in Norraine there were only four places with ramps that went straight from the surface to level 40. Not that any sane person went below level 15 these days, unless they had a very, very good reason. For most of the residents of the levels the only way to get around was to use the ramp to another level and then travel many miles to the next level up or down. This

made travel between the various levels awkward, but it meant the police had better control of illicit good and criminals. Well that was the theory at least. In reality the poorly paid police used the four main ramp stacks to increase their pay, by putting what were effectively toll booths at each level. If you wanted to travel quickly you had to pay and if what you were carrying was valuable the fee went up. So if you had the money you could get from the surface to Jinxies on level 33 in about two hours and travel in relative safety. If you wanted to avoid the attention of the police as Kittara did the journey could take the best part of a day, if you didn't run into trouble.

"He can't marry her !"

Estrid was hearing about a hero of a vampire, werewolf, fairy entertainment show, who it appears was marrying a channel 77 weather girl. Kittara watched the traffic in front and headed for the down ramp and hoped they didn't run into trouble, but knew they probably would.

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Albas had his 'we're of no interest' projection on full and pulled Princess close to him, in the hope she'd be covered by it too. She smiled up at him and happily snuggled up to him in the dark doorway.

"We need to be the other side of them," she said pointing at the full scale riot in front of them. They'd made it to level 13 quite easily. Princess seemed to know everyone in the levels and a knock on one door had obtained a lift to level 11. Then a quick walk and another whispered conversation, followed by a two hour drive and they were dropped at the bottom of the ramp into level 13.

"There I have a transport ready to take certain items to level 33. The police have been paid so they never check the inside of the transport. We can travel quickly down the main ramp stack." It had sounded so easy, until they came across the food riot in front of them.

"They're shouting death to Kallin ?" Said Albas.

"No one believes him. He's saying the shipment from Mendera is late, but the people know the Empire never delivers late. They think he's selling their food."

The irony that Kallin was for once telling the truth wasn't lost on Albas as he looked for a way through the crowd.

"They were hungry, the people are always hungry," she continued, "so they're going crazy thinking they might starve this time. Look over there."

A protester threw what looked like a bottle at a building, but missed and hit a passer by who burst into a ball of flame. He didn't stand a chance and was soon just a pile of burned clothing on the ground.

"We have to get through, the transport leaves in an hour."

Albas quickly scanned the crowd and counted over a dozen dead bodies, things were looking bad. If he was on his own he could just walk through them all, but he didn't want to risk Princess getting hurt.

"If we run, can you keep right behind me ? Use me as a shield ?" He asked.

"My Prince," she said not for the first time that day and with a wicked twinkle in her eye.

"My name is Albas," he said knowing it was a common enough name on Ixir.

"You're serious aren't you ? You'll get yourself killed."

"Let me worry about that and if you fall stay still and I'll cover you. They're throwing fire bombs at the buildings, so we'll go straight through the middle."

She pulled all her clothing tight and looked at him.

"The crazy thing is no one cares if they burn down level 13. Kallin will be glad to be rid of the place, the Empire couldn't care less, and the Police will celebrate. Come on lets go before I change my mind."

How fast could she run ? Albas hoped very fast as he set off into the crowd with her behind him. There were several burning vehicles directly in front of them and avoiding them sent him straight at two protesters. A quick shove sent them flying, but the activity became noticed and the effect of his hiding thought control started to weaken. He was pleased the girl was following his every swerve, but then he saw her blaster fire at a nearby group. He wished he'd told her to leave her weapon alone as it was bringing them more and more attention. He rounded a group of men who seemed to be fighting, when he heard.

"Fucking cops."

A huge hulk of a man swung an iron bar at him which he avoided, but it hit Princess hard on the shoulder and sent her spinning against the wall of a burning building. Albas quickly ran to her, but three of the protesters joined the hulk and ran at them armed with bricks and sticks. There was no time to explain they weren't undercover cop, even if they'd listen. There was a slight shimmer and Albas had a short sharp blade in his hand and he launched himself at the hulk. Nothing fancy, he took the mans throat out and turned away to leave him drowning in his own blood. The next person was a woman about to throw a brick at Princess. She lasted a fraction of a second before his blade severed her right arms and she collapsed to the floor. Even for adrenalin fuelled protesters this was more than they were prepared to deal with and the remaining two ran off to join the main group. Albas crouched next to Princess while Chlo scanned her.

"You'll live he said," pulling her to her feet. "A cut that will wait and a dislocated shoulder, but you can run. Now on your feet and follow me, and no more firing at the crowd."

She was obviously in pain, but she nodded and again followed him as he ran, now keeping close to the wall of the building. Had she seen him use the blade ? That too could wait for a better time. He could see the safety of a dark and quiet street less than fifty yards in front of them, but it was blocked by an angry mob of armed protesters and at their front were the two who had run away.

"Kill the fucking cops, kill the fucking cops." The mob started chanting.

Chlo was watching and he was almost at the point of asking for help or grabbing Princess and moving their reality far away, when there was a huge ball of flame behind the protesters.

"Cops, behind us, cops, run."

Albas could see several bodies at the back of the protesters, who were now heading their way in panic, so he pushed Princess against the wall and folded his body over her.

"Keep still we'll be ok," he said trying to reassure her.

The mob hurtled past, and they were at least a hundred of them armed with anything they could pick up. As they went by a few crashed into Albas as they hurtled wildly by, but none of the blows reached the girl. He felt for Chlo who told him there were no police within miles of them. As the last of the mob went by Albas pulled her away from the wall.

"Come on we've got to carry on."

Again she nodded and followed, but he could see from her look that he'd be facing a few awkward questions when they reached her safe house. They covered the remaining distance to the relative safety of the dark street without incident and he lowered the pace and walked next to her.

"How far to your people ?"

"Half a mile or so, I'll lead now."

They walked swiftly along the streets which were gradually looking better kept and the houses were showing signs of occupation. There were chinks of light behind the shutters and the occasional outside camera that turned their way. As they walked Albas asked Chlo about the blast that had occurred so conveniently.

“Two small charges of local manufacture that I activated and placed at the back of the mob, you looked like you needed a bit of a hand. Nothing that can be traced to the Guard.”

Albas smiled and gave Chlo a few ideas of how he was going to thank her the next time he went to the Council Club. The houses started to look tidier and the shutters less crude, when Princess stopped.

“Over there, the building with the walled courtyard. They know me, keep behind me.”

The street lighting on all of the levels is bad and generally consists of a few faint lights at street corners, often put up by the local people. Here there were a few extra lights and Albas noticed a camera on the house turn their way. They walked to the door of the house and Princess knocked on the door with her good arm.

“Come in,” said a man armed with a blaster, who nodded at Albas as they entered.

“The trouble has been on the news, that bastard Kallin.”

The man went into a side room and Princess led him to a comfortable lounge at the back of the house with a shuttered window that must have overlooked the courtyard. She sat on a sofa, while Albas carefully helped her off with her jacket.

“Careful.....” Said Princess before passing out.

The cut was worse than he thought and a sharp edge of the pipe had almost cut to the bone. He was grateful she was unconscious as it meant he could reach into his mind for well remembered switches to heal her wounds. The shoulder needed a good old fashioned pull to get it back in its socket, but Princess remained limp. His hand glowed faintly green as he applied a general healing spell and she was as good as new, well would be after a day or so to rest up. There was an entertainment system in the room which he turned on and turned the volume to low to watch the local news channel.

‘Rioting continues on levels 13 and 14 as the current food crisis continues. President Kallin has again denied he is withholding food from the stores, but panic buying as meant there are large areas of Ixir with no food in the shops. Mendera has made no comment on this matter since the original statement saying there would be an administrative delay.’

The report went on and there were pictures of the mob on level 13. Albas noticed it all looked like it was taken from public camera feeds. Even the news teams didn’t give a damn what went on in the lower levels.

“You need anything ?”

Albas shook his head at the man and arranged Princess more comfortably on the sofa and put her jacket over her. Albas settled himself in a chair, but a few moments later the man came back into the room.

“We need to go now, is Princess ok to travel ?”

“She’ll be fine.”

Albas gave her a little shake and put her jacket around her shoulders as she woke and sat up.

“Your man says we need to go.”

She leant on him as they both followed the man out of the room and through a door into the walled courtyard. The courtyard was almost filled by a large goods transport that looked fairly new and well kept. The man opened the rear doors and helped Albas get her on board. Although Princess winced every time her arm was moved, he was pleased to see she used it to pull herself into the back of the vehicle. They edged between rows of crates until they came to a gap in the boxes were someone had thoughtfully put a few blankets for them to sit on.

“The police have been well paid,” she said, “even if they look in here we’ll be ok, they sometimes get nosey, but they only care about the money.”

Albas could feel the transport rise up from the ground and turn towards the courtyard gates.

“How long until we get to level 33 ?”

"About 2 hours, but you've got some explaining to do before then." She said giving him a wry smile.

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Luri wasn't happy. She would have preferred to have been on Ixir helping Kittara, but she was stuck in the cells below the Guard barracks on Mendera questioning Councillor Adrill. He'd tried to get on a transport to Arcadia for about the third time and had actually attacked a merchant in the market area, when he refused to take him.

"You can't hurt me, I'm a Councillor of the Empire," he said for about the eighth time.

The thing that annoyed her was that no one cared about him any longer, but he was needed to just sit in the chamber so that meetings could go ahead, Protocol was that all the councillors from the founding worlds had to be there before The Chalne could enter the chamber and commence a meeting of the Grand Council. Everyone knew he'd been bribed by Ixir, probably by the President of Ixir himself. It was old news. Even if he talked and told them everything he knew, it didn't matter now.

"I demand to be released."

"You attacked Tolbeth, who has been a merchant on Mendera for eighty years."

"I am a Councillor of the Empire, I have immunity from any prosecution."

Then Luri was contacted by Chlo and heard some wonderful news she couldn't wait to pass on. She asked Chlo to join her.

"Adrill you piece of filth," Luri began. "You're no longer an Imperial Councillor, the Arcadian government has appointed a replacement."

Chlo and Luri smiled broadly at the now quite worried looking ex councillor.

"Who did they appoint?" He asked.

"Lavella, and she was brought straight here to attend in the chamber tomorrow."

The women noticed Adrill was now far less truculent.

"Look I'm sorry about Tolbeth, perhaps if I made some kind of offer for compensation to him?" Courts rarely got involved with assaults and most were dealt with by the guilty party paying the injured person a sum in compensation. It saved time and the courts were very harsh, so few risked incurring their wrath.

"And the information we wanted?" Asked Chlo.

Chlo produced a table and chairs and a jug of cold drink and she and Luri sat down and gave the impression they weren't in a hurry. Adrill hadn't had any food or drink in several hours and just wanted to go home.

"Ok, I was given land, a few prime acres of Ixir that will be developed next year. I was also promised citizenship of Ixir and protection."

"Ahh let me guess?" Said Luri. "You were promised all this by Juvan Swire, on behalf of President Kallin?"

She knew she'd scored a direct hit by the way his face collapsed.

"No one cares Adrill, Carl Laundry has told Kittara far more than you ever could. Though I don't suppose I should have told you that, if you're going to leave here alive?"

Adrill had the look of a man who knows he's deep in it, but honestly doesn't quite grasp why.

"I don't know anything else. What do you want from me?"

"Nothing, that's the point. Tell him the best news Chlo."

"No one wants you. The Arcadian government had rescinded your citizenship and say if you go back you'll be executed on arrival. We don't want you here and I doubt Ixir will want you now you've failed them."

Adrill thought for a moment.

"Where can I go?"

Luri walked over and stood right in front of him.

"How much were you going to offer Tolbeth?"

"I could give him 1000 credits?" Said Adrill obviously keen to please.

"You broke his arm, and he's an old man, you can do better!"

"Ok, 2, no 3000 credit."

Luri turned to Chlo.

"Chlo please transfer 3000 credits from my account to the account of merchant Tolbeth, with a note that it's as compensation for his recent injury."

Adrill still looked confused as Luri punched him hard in the face. Her blow collapsed his nose and eyes into his face and carried on going. His face joined his brain as the whole bloody mass was compressed against the back of his skull, until that too gave way and bloody lumps fell out of the back of his head onto the cell floor. Luri kept her hand there for a few seconds before withdrawing it and letting out a long sigh.

"Pity we can't bring him back to life and kill the fucker again."

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Hol heard about the explosion and fire while she was on a fast monorail service to the small coastal town of Phlot.

"Anyone sitting here?"

She eyed the man smiling at her and shook her head at him. She'd deliberately only bought a cheap ticket so that she would blend in with the crowd, but she didn't want this guy hitting on her for the next four hours.

"Are you from Norraine?" He asked.

She was going to shake her head again, but decided on a glare. When he looked away she settled herself into the uncomfortable plastic seat and reached out to Chlo for the details of the deaths. Chlo had put the local news report on the common channel.

'Gas explosion suspected as the cause of multiple deaths in Norraine – A woman and two children were killed in an explosion and fire in the quiet residential suburb of.....'

"Are you sure it's them Chlo?"

"Yes, Marra and her two children have just come up as admitted dead on arrival at the medical receiving station, DNA match confirmed."

"The girl friend of Imber, is she alright?"

"A woman of the same age and description is reported as being killed in a street robbery at about the same time as the explosion."

"And this was all in the early hours, about two hours after I left them?"

"Yes Hol. Kittara thought she scared Laundry enough to stop him taking revenge, but perhaps she scared him too much?"

The man leant towards her to talk to her again and Hol just wasn't in the mood. She smiled and leaned into him and put him to sleep. Catching his body she propped him up in his seat. He'd wake just as they reached Phlot with nothing worse than mild amnesia and a bit of a headache.

"Any change in my orders Chlo?"

"No," she said after a slight pause.

President Kallin had done what he always did when there was the smallest public disturbance, he ran away to his home on the coast near Phlot. As he added more and more wings to the already large house the people called it Phlot Palace, but these days most of Ixir knew it as Castle Kallin. It covered several acres and had a standing army of several hundred well armed personal guards. Hol had visited the place many times when Sikush attended private meetings with the President and she'd always admired the strength of the security systems. Now her orders were to penetrate that security unseen, get herself as close to Kallin as she could and

wait for orders. Had the death of Marra and her children changed anything ? Hol wasn't sentimental, you couldn't be a member of the Guard and stay sane if you got emotionally involved in every death. If Sikush had ordered her to, she would have killed Marra in a heat beat, but if the order came to kill Kallin she'd make him suffer a little longer for Marra.

"Hot drinks, snacks, souvenirs !"

A seller had stopped in the aisle next to her seat. Not the usual robotic device, but a real warm blooded person. Hol leant over the sleeping man and gave the seller, who looked very young, enough credits for a carton of fizzy water and a packet of bright orange junk food.

"And your friend ?"

"No, he said he needs a good sleep."

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Alyz watched Salomé drill her troops and she had to admit she was impressed. A short time after looking like a bedraggled group of rejects, they now looked like a fairly formidable fighting force. Chlo had healed wounds, replaced limbs and added muscle tissue, but there was a real sense of fighting spirit about them.

"You know what they have now ?" Salomé had asked her the night before.

Alyz looked at her enquiringly.

"They're all dead, officially dead and gone. They can start a new life anywhere they want and The Chalné has promised them enough money to start a comfortable life and Imperial identification in any name they want. Some have even asked for their memories to be wiped so that they can really start afresh. They know they won't all come back from the mission, but for the first time in a very long time they have something real to fight for."

"How is Qunan ?" Asked Alyz.

"Qunan is Qunan," chuckled Salomé, "I never really understood the relationship he has with The Chalné, it almost seems like worship."

"As a leader though, will he be ok ?"

Alyz realised that more and more it was his second in command, Salomé who she'd been relying on to get things organised, and not just her. Chlo had reported that in all day to day things all the troops were now reporting to the second in command.

"He needs a cause, almost any cause will do. Give him a battle where he can make a heroic stand against insurmountable odds and he's happy. The problem is that although his troops love him they realise he's often tempted by futile heroics that get them killed."

"You will lead them though, if you have to ?"

Alyz studied the young woman, who none of them had thought of as anything other than one of the troops, and hoped she'd be up to the job.

"Qunan is upset, only five of his people have offered to stay with him after the mission. For a man like Qunan that is a huge blow."

"You didn't answer me, you will lead them if needed ?"

Salomé looked intently at the floor for a while.

"We're here for another ten days, then we go on board the craft you call the Old One to finish our training there. I will make sure my people are ready and if it comes to it I will take them into battle. Unlike Qunan I will try to bring as many back alive as I can."

"It is worth it," said Alyz.

"Worth it ! Talk to Qunan about whether things are worth it. We'll go out onto this rock you call NKG0056 and we'll find whatever it is you think is there. 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. One thing though."

Alyz put her hand on her shoulder as Salomé looked up at her.



"The Empire had better keep its promises, or I'm coming looking for you all afterwards."

Alyz felt more confident than she had in while that this strange assortment of soldiers might be able to pull it off.

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They had come all the way down to level 30 with no serious incident, but now they were on the ramp down to level 31 and the bottom of the ramp was blocked.

"It's so dark." Said Estrid.

Kittara looked out and away from the lights of the transport there was total blackness. No one lived here, well no one who wanted to draw attention to themselves, so for mile after mile there was the kind of darkness you only ever get underground. Kittara had Chlo run a scan and there were no people anywhere for miles. That didn't mean there was nothing out there, but Estrid had her shield and they both needed to get out of the transport for a while. She lowered the vehicle and opened both their doors. The first thing they realised was how well the vehicles air con had been coping with the bad air. The smell as they opened the door was almost unbearable and Estrid started coughing. The pollutant levels here were more unpleasant than dangerous, but below level 35 they formed a constant green fog and could kill in minutes.

"Stay close and if you need to pee, do it in the road, I won't watch."

They had stopped in what looked like a quiet part of level 12 for Estrid to go behind a bush, but some rioters had appeared from nowhere. Kittara had got her back in the vehicle safely, but it had been close and they'd heard missiles bouncing off the roof. It was at times like this that Kittara was grateful that her own bodily functions could be turned off.

"Oh, look at the poor Slingshot?"

Kittara turned and realised she wasn't going to get her deposit back. The roof looked like someone has tried to run a can opener along it, but luckily whatever it was hadn't broken through the armour. There were numerous other gouges and dents, but luckily none of the lights had been damaged. Estrid walked around the front and just pointed and looked shocked.

"The mob on level 17." Said Kittara.

Several times during the journey groups of people had appeared on the road in front of them brandishing various home made weapons and they usually got out of the way when it was obvious Kittara wasn't going to stop. A group of four people on level 17 hadn't and there had been a crunching sound as the transport ploughed through them.

"It's a knee I think," Kittara said as she pulled the bleeding object from the air con grill.

"Urgh."

Kittara held up the knee and after examining it threw it over the side of the ramp. She walked down the ramp trying hard not to look in the direction of Estrid who was attempting to hide to the side of the vehicle to have a pee. The last thing she wanted was the girl to start wandering off into the dark for privacy. The vehicles lights showed crumbling, but still solid buildings and an empty plot of land just in front of the bottom of the ramp. Even in the days when the government of Ixir was extolling the virtues of the levels, the people weren't convinced. There were many empty building sites below level 20 and many of the finished homes were never used. Kittara could have taken them instantly to level 33, but anywhere as frequented by the rich and powerful as Jinxies was certain to have scanners. They'd come this far without drawing official attention to themselves and Kittara was determined to use the Slingshot all the way.

"You'll never shift those."

Estrid had joined her and they were both looking at the problem. Someone had put two rows of large round concrete blocks across the road. One row of five and then behind another row of five to cover the gaps in the front row. The result was a barrier that you could walk through, but no vehicle was going any further.

"About two tons each," said Kittara, "Not the work of locals. Looks like the police want to make sure any contraband goes via the main ramp stacks and they get their cut."

"So what do we do now?"

"Stand back."

Once the girl was a good way back Kittara confirmed they weren't being watched and walked to the block in the front row that was directly in their path. She placed her hands low down on it and reached for the place in her mind that all the Guard are taught and pushed up and away. The block hurtled into the air and spun end over end before landing with a deafening crash on the far side of the vacant site. It then carried on tumbling into the abandoned building in front, bringing much of it crashing to the ground. After the silence the noise was almost too much to take.

"Wow, that was awesome."

Kittara turned to her and did a slight bow while Estrid applauded. Then she moved to the next block in the front row and repeated the trick.

"The two behind those and we can get through."

She pushed the next block and it hit the abandoned building and by now there was little of it standing, so for the final block she gave it a really good shove. It went up at about 45 degrees and hit an abandoned building quite a distance away. There must have been a long lost gas tank there because there was a loud explosion and a mushroom of flame fanned out and rose to the roof of the level a good two hundred feet above them. One day thought Kittara the roofs will give way and Norraine will tumble into the abyss. The flames quickly died and they started to walk slowly back to the vehicle.

"Let's eat here, sitting on the wall?" Asked Estrid.

Kittara was no keener than her to get back in the Slingshot, so she agreed and they sat on the wall of the ramp to have a meal. Her hand shimmered and she produced a bowl of mixed fruit for Estrid and one of the revolting sugary drinks she loved. Then seeing the girls face she produced two bags of her favourite primary coloured junk food. Then she relaxed and started on her own food.

"Over there a glow."

Kittara looked where Estrid was pointing and just made out a slight glow, but her scans showed nothing.

"I've never heard of a Genova on Ixir, they hate crowds and pollution."

Still she did wonder, the angels had followed her to some strange places.

"Estrid we never did talk about what you saw that frightened the people of Tranquillity? You can tell me, there's no one for miles and I'll even unplug the link with Chlo."

The chatter went off in Kittara's head and there was just her and the girl, with the occasional rumble of falling masonry from the building she demolished.

"I saw whether people were sick, and if they were telling the truth, but I had terrible dreams."

Kittara really wanted them to be on their way, but this was important and she was going to let the girl tell it in her own way. Chlo was nagging her to turn on the link, but she ignored her.

"I told the people I lived with about the creatures in my dreams and they got very upset and took me to see the head man, you met him Hvorchak. He looked scared too and told me not to tell anyone else."

"But you did tell someone else?"

"Yes, we always had a few traders in Tranquillity, the Empire provided the basics, but most people wanted a few extra things, for their house. One was very interested in my dreams and even wrote some it down."

"Did you get his name?"

"No, he was just another outworlder, but he listened to me."

"And you parents?"

"They were scared all the time.... Once my father beat me and threatened to sell me to the raiders. I think he meant it."

Kittara noticed the glow had approached very close and she could definitely make out the shape of a Genova. An angel on Ixir, whatever next?

"So, what was this creature you saw in your dreams?"

Estrid then described in perfect detail a top level demon. Not the sort of demon the masses of the Empire frighten their children with, but the genuine article, right down to the weapons carried and the markings on its armour. This wasn't one of the high rankers who occasionally come slumming past the 7<sup>th</sup> rift to rally the troops and gain some kudos. She described a top level immortal Demon, one of only six that existed in the multiverse. There were only a handful of people in the Empire who had ever seen a top level Demon and very few had survived the experience and one of them most definitely wasn't a 12 year old girl from the colonies. Sikush could have probably named the Demon from the description if she hadn't cut off the link to Chlo.

"Do you know where this creature is?"

"Oh yes, I'm now certain where it is."

Kittara's head was full of the impossibility of it all. She was practically indestructible, yet she questioned her own ability to destroy a Demon that powerful. The Empire always told the planets not to worry about Demons as they were only in the parts of the Multiverse the Guard and a few select others could get to. She remembered telling a class of young clerics that the Demons were not something to worry about.

"So where is it?"

"It's below us, below level 40."

She didn't doubt the girl and realised all this had been off the record, so none of it had been recorded and put on the common channel.

"Xeod, Xeod is his name, you named your Cat after his brother."

Kittara had never been so grateful to hear the voice of Sikush in her head. She'd seen a picture in a very forbidden book in the Temple of the Flame of a legendary top level Demon called Xeod 3<sup>rd</sup> and his face did have distinct similarities to her cat.

"That Demon was killed in an attack on the City of the Lost God, but his brother is now Emperor Xeod 4<sup>th</sup> and he rules much of the lands beyond Gateway."

"But can he be here, on Ixir?"

"Perhaps, there is a way. Go and find out."

Then he was gone and she noticed Estrid was staring past her. She turned and saw a Genova in almost complete form stood by the Transport, watching them and listening. Then it vanished.

"The same red head," said Kittara, "come on we've got a long way to go."

"How long will it take us?"

"The remaining ramps aren't too far apart. We should be on level 33 in less than two hours."

They got back in the transport and after it had lifted up to operating height, Kittara went down the ramp and headed towards Jinxies.

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As she drove she remembered her first experience of a top tier Demon. She'd only just got over her initiation and was still a bit tired and unsure of her new body. The Damned had thrown yet another party in her honour and she felt surrounded by friends. Then she felt the Sentinels scream in her head.

'Get it out, get it out, get it out.....'

They seemed to scream over and over again.

"Come with me." Sikush had said and she'd hung on to him and closed her eyes.

They were in the south of the city near the Well of Souls and there were a lot of anxious looking VIPs and journalists who looked uncertain whether to be terrified or pleased to be part of a once in several millennia event.

"A Demon is asking to come through, a big one." She heard someone shout.

The initiation of a new immortal to the ranks of the Guard is a huge event in the Empire and the City of Mendera suddenly finds itself having to cope with up to a billion visitors. All the heads of planets, their wives, friends, heads of major corporations, they all want to be able to tell their grand children they were there. The sky was full of craft large and small, all firmly locked in place by Chlo. There was even a temporary building inside the walls of the City to house the famous Parisi Brothers brothel, which offered some very rare delights. For miles around every piece of space seemed to be filled with a shuttle craft or even a tent as the extra billion tried to fit themselves into the city. One place had been declared out of bounds though. No one had been allowed to go within a hundred yards of the Well.

"Are we ready?"

The woman who asked the question Kittara later learned was Minraver the other eternal. Two eternal to watch over this demon? If she'd realised the implications of that she may have been worried, but as it was she was just very curious. Sikush nodded at Minraver and although their private channel was still developing she heard in her head.

"Don't be scared, like everyone else here Neosto comes to honour you."

So Neosto! Now the visitor had a name, though then she didn't know the extent of his powers, or his realm, not then.

"Keep everyone back." Said an excited voice.

There was a crackling sound and it was as if a hole was appearing in reality right in front of them. A small red hole that seemed to ooze flame had appeared and was expanding until it was at least fifty feet across.

"Get it out, get it out, get it out....."

The Sentinels were filling her head and she could see a lot of scared people around her. The strange thing was the Guard looked happy, in fact pleased that such a mortal enemy was ripping reality apart to gain access to Mendera.

"You can trust him," she heard Sikush say in her mind. "He may offer you gifts, and you can accept them if you wish, the choice is yours."

A huge creature started to walk through the tear it had created. Kittara's first impression was that a strange six legged beast had reared up on two legs and decided to stay there. He was twenty or maybe twenty five feet tall, and very broad across the shoulders. He had four arms and huge legs that rippled with muscle. The creature seemed to be wearing armour, but his outline was obscured by what looked like a coating of fire. She later learned this was the fabric of reality trying to tear him apart and it was only his own immense powers that prevented it.

"There are no force walls around it." She heard a news lady from channel 77 say.

Kittara had only been a member of the Damned for a few days and she realised this being could stomp her into oblivion and no one could stop him. Strangely enough like the rest of the Guard she felt pleased to see him. Perhaps it's being immortal warriors in a multiverse full of ephemerals, but there was a real respect felt by the Guard for this fellow immortal, even if he was on the opposing team.

"Come with me."

Sikush held her hand and walked her towards the creature who was quietly standing there looking as though he was engulfed in fire. As they got closer she could see he was wearing a full set of battle armour and had a long dark blade hanging from a belt at his waist.

“Welcome friend.”

Sikush stepped forward and gripped the creature's arm. Kittara couldn't help feeling he looked slightly ludicrous against the colossal bulk of the demon. He turned and beckoned her forward and Kittara walked to within a foot of Neosto.

“So, this is the one all the fuss is about?”

The voice was surprisingly quiet and reminded her in many ways of Sikush.

“I have a present, which you can read when the celebrations are over.”

The creature's lower right arm was carrying a sack which was offered to Kittara. The sack too appeared covered in flame, but Kittara accepted it and found it was quite cool.

“Thank you.”

“Ahh always polite the Guard. I have another gift, an offer. When you're ready I'll give you safe passage past the 7<sup>th</sup> rift. Come to see me and I'll teach you all I know. Do you accept?”

It was an absurd offer to someone who had no idea of the importance of the offer, but without even looking at Sikush she had accepted.

“I do realise it may be some time until you're ready.”

The creature had then turned and walked back through the tear, which healed up behind him. A long time to be ready indeed! That had been so many billions of years ago that whole star systems had come and gone, mighty civilisations on countless planets had formed then flourished and died. Yet now it was just a mere 500 million years until she stepped past gateway and the 7<sup>th</sup> rift, not as an enemy but as a guest. She was still unsure if she was ready and now a top tier Demon might be here on Ixir and she wasn't sure if she was ready for that, but she found the idea of battle against a worthy adversary exciting.