

Chronicles of Mardoun

Chapter 9 - Ixir

“The Eternals tend to keep apart, as on our own we can do wonderful and terrible deeds, but two of us together ? I worry that two of us could do literally anything !” – Minraver

Kittara arrived back early from Arcadia to be there when Estrid turned on her personal shield. The evening before when they'd turned it off she'd become very upset at the strange feelings over her skin and Kittara had promised to be with her after she showered today.

“I'm ready.”

Kittara had to admit to herself that the shield fascinated her and she was looking forward to seeing how it worked without clothes in the way. Once it was on it was almost invisible, perhaps a slight sheen over the eyes, but even that was almost imperceptible. Kittara stood in front of the very naked and very worried looking girl.

“Ok, turn it on.”

The filaments came out of the metal sliver on her tummy and went everywhere. As they went between her legs Estrid stiffened, but she had the look of someone who knows they have to drink foul tasting medicine for their own good. The filaments went down her legs, over her back and up her neck and over her face. As they went over her eyes she murmured but didn't scream. Then came the miraculous bit as the filaments spread out thinner and thinner until they became so thin they vanished and a slight beep was heard. Kittara reached for her boot knife and handed it to Estrid, it seemed impolite to stab at her with it herself.

“Gently, test it.”

At first Estrid tentatively prodded herself with the knife, but as her confidence grew she started stabbing at her arms and legs with full force and each time the weapon skidded harmlessly off the invisible barrier.

“Your mouth, try your mouth.”

She pushed the blade towards her mouth and it stopped just past her lips and no amount of force would take it any further. Kittara smiled and took her knife back.

“Just remember you're not a tank. If anyone starts shooting at you, run and hide. I'll leave you to dress, full uniform please and I'll see you downstairs. Oh, and no weapons.”

Kittara's hand shimmered as Chlo put her boot knife back into store, and she then headed downstairs. As she picked up Emperor Xeod she noticed Sikush prodding her on their private channel.

“As I mentioned last night you might want to catch the news channel before leaving. Just giving the tree a good kick to see who or what falls out.”

She knew what he meant and being in a playful mood she sent back a mental image of her kicking him hard in the groin. There was a chuckle and he'd vanished. It was alright she thought for him to stir things up, but she was heading into the eye of the storm. She ordered breakfast for them both and sat down with Emp on her lap.

“You have put on weight since Estrid has been here.” She accused him.

Emp rolled over in her lap and began singing to her while Kittara rubbed his tummy. She really could hear her name in the song. Menura Cats weren't known for being mimics, but as she listened there were bits of the song which sounded like 'Kittara'. She reached out to Chlo and Chlo agreed there was a 94% probability he was singing her name.

“I'm going to give you a treat my fat friend. Even if I have to kill a breeder to get one, I'm going to get you a mate. That'll burn the weight off you.”

As Estrid came down and started eating some fruit Kittara had Chlo put a news screen up on the wall. Then she selected the item on Ixir that went out across the Empire an hour before.

"There is some concern on Ixir that the latest food delivery from Mendera has been delayed. Cleric Annotov who is in charge of the Imperial stores has stated the delay is purely an administrative problem and the food will be on its way soon. There are already reports of disturbances in some areas of Ixir, and more are expected later as...."

Kittara cut the screen off, she hated the News Channel and rarely watched it.

"Sikush has decided to give Ixir a bit of a scare." She told Estrid. "Let them know, whoever they are that he disapproves of the games that are being played. It might work, it will certainly stir things up. The problem is as the disturbances grow we're not going to be very popular, so keep alert."

Estrid nodded and carried on with her food.

"I dreamt last night of another Eternal, a woman with gold hair. Are there other Eternals?"

"There are just the two," answered Kittara. "Sikush and Minraver the woman you saw. Minraver rarely comes here, though I did work for her a few times. They tend to keep to their separate paths most of the time."

Kittara was puzzled over the dream and why the people of New Algaria were so scared of the girl.

"Estrid," she asked. "What do you see?"

Estrid turned towards her and then pointed towards the pool.

"I see an Angel."

Kittara looked and one of the Genova had come right up to her pool and was far clearer to see than they usually are. A female with bright red hair and shining blue eyes. Kittara was often tempted to zap the Genova, nothing fatal, just a little something to sting and make them stay out of her garden. As usual when she felt for the switch in her mind she couldn't do it. The angels were harmless and besides the clerics would moan at her for days.

"She's beautiful." Said Estrid.

Kittara had to admit this angel was quite a beauty, but as she moved Emperor Xeod from her lap to walk over to her the angel faded and vanished.

"Now I'm on my feet we may as well go. Hold my hand."

Kittara chose somewhere busy, not too far from the Foundation office. The street in Norraine started to fill the room and Kittara noticed a gap in the crowd. As she put the idea into the crowd that they weren't worth looking at she gently pulled at Estrid's hand and they stepped onto Ixir at just coming up to midday local time.

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Much earlier Hol had headed towards the better parts of Ixir. Luri had put the Cole brothers at the top of her list of likely counter surveillance guys who could have set up temporal disturbance in the offices of the Foundation. Then on the police computer they're listed as overdue by an anxious wife and girlfriend, coincidence?

It was very easy for Chlo to find an address for the wife, the problem was finding anywhere with a crowd nearby in the early hours. In the end Chlo came up with a station on the commuter monorail system just a mile from the home of Arran and Marra Cole. Luckily it was a chilly morning, so she could put on a coat with a hood to aid her projected 'I'm of no interest' thought control. She stepped onto the station platform just as it was filling with cleaners and office maintenance staff queuing for the early train. She left the station without anyone looking her way and headed out onto the streets to walk across Norraine to speak with Marra Cole. She'd had to talk to a lot of worried wives over several millennia and of one thing she was certain, Marra would be up and sitting by the phone. Even after 800 millennia Hol was still considered

the newbie of the Guard, so she knew many were watching her in case there were problems, but she didn't want to disturb Luri or Albas who had their own missions on Ixir.

"Bit of a dump isn't it?" came over her private link from Sikush.

"The air smells, like sulphur, or bad eggs?"

"Too many people crammed together," he replied. "I'm in the Council all day, but I will be watching, keep safe."

Hol jogged past street after street of small box houses that were packed in one row against another. These were the middle class streets of Ixir, full of civil servants and accountants, she dreaded to think what the bad areas were like. The area for the well off where Marra lived was a gated community, though walled enclave would have been a better description. As she approached she saw the 20 foot high wall, topped with razor wire and cameras about every 100 or so feet apart.

She reached out to Chlo and asked her to freeze the cameras away from her for a few seconds, before putting herself tight against the fence and moving herself the few inches to the other side. No motion tracker on Ixir would notice that small jump, and so far she'd seen no one else up and about yet in this area. The houses in this area were far nicer, separated from each other by small gardens and with decent street lighting. To a Menderan they still looked a bit squalid, but they were mansions compared to the boxes for people she had jogged past earlier. Some of these houses even had sectioned off areas to leave personal transports and the house she was now stood in front of had enough space for two.

Unit 3347 Mallork Row, this was the residence of the Cole's and Hol had to admit it looked very nice. There was no time to hang around, the whole area would be covered by cameras and a young woman loitering was sure to be investigated. She walked up to the door and pressed the pad with a finger symbol on it. As she guessed the door was opened very quickly by a tired looking woman who had obviously not slept all night. It would have been easy to put an idea into her mind to let Hol in, but Hol wanted her trust.

"I'm here from the Guard," she said pulling her hood down. "I'd like to help you find your husband."

Marra smiled and stood aside for her to enter, giving Hol a chance to get a good look at her. Marra Cole was short and pear shaped like most women of Ixir. Just what centuries of bad nutrition and bad air will do you thought Hol. Marra had dark shoulder length hair and dark eyes, but she had a huge smile on her face as she led Hol to the lounge. Of course, Hol realised, she like all the Guard was a bit of a celebrity here. How many times had her blood spattered face appeared on Ixir TV rescuing colonists or despatching justice to raiders?

"Please sit down, can I get you a drink?"

Hol agreed to a glass of water mainly to relax Marra and get a longer look at the lounge. There were pictures of Arran everywhere which she recognised from his records Chlo had delved into Ixir central records for. There were also photos of two kids, a girl and a boy, both dark and swarthy like their parents. Given luck and continued affluence the next generation of Coles might gain a bit of height and muscle tone. Marra returned with the glass of water and sat opposite Hol again with the same adoring grin on her face.

"The police called, or rather one of the police called," she began. "He said he'd found my husbands transport on patrol, but hadn't reported it. He wanted a reward, a hefty reward to tell me where it was."

"Did you pay him?"

"Yes, he insisted on the credit transfer before he'd tell me." She handed a piece of paper over to Hol.

Hol put the address into the common channel and onto the private channel for Luri. As she guessed Chlo asked her to get a sample of Arran's DNA.

"We have resources your police don't have, but I need something your husband used on his body regularly, a hair brush perhaps?"

Marra thought for a moment and then left the room to return with a towel with a few spots of blood on it.

"He cut himself opening a food canister, this was still in the laundry, will it do?"

"Perfect."

Chlo extracted the DNA and told Hol that a probe had found Arran's car exactly where the police office had said it was and it was in a bad area. The people of Ixir had built their cities as high as possible, in fact until a few buildings fell down. Then they had dug deep, up to 40 levels of housing, stores, hospitals etc below ground level. At first these lower levels seemed the answer to the housing shortage, but little fresh air and sunlight reached 'the levels' and eventually most levels below 15 were abandoned. Left to the growlers and the gangs. Even level 12 where the transport had been found was bad and what was a well to do Arran Cole doing there? Chlo then put up that the vehicle next to it was registered to Imber Cole.

"Did your husband say who he and his brother were meeting that day?"

"No, but he did look concerned that day. Imber was always nervous and jumpy, but this was the first time Arran had worried. I don't even know if they were together that day."

Hol's hand shimmered and it in was a probe picture of the two transports side by side on a road in level 12. She handed the picture to Marra.

"Our people just found their transports together on level 12, a part of level 12 that has been almost completely abandoned. Have you any idea what they were doing there?"

"Arran stopped keeping any notes about his meetings, he's dead isn't he? Or he'd be home by now"

Marra started to cry and Hol sat beside her and held her while she sobbed. Hol might be the newbie to most of the Guard, but she had a good idea when people were lying to her and she knew Marra was holding something back. Then on the common channel Chlo said a probe had found a trace of Arran's DNA in an abandoned area of civic buildings a couple of miles from the transports and that Luri was going to investigate.

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Luri was certain no one was going to be scanning level 12 for people moving about. There were only a few small areas with power and the DNA seemed to be in what was left of an old hospital building. Chlo confirmed there was no evidence of surveillance of any kind in the area. Chlo brought up a faint outline of the hospital corridor and when she was happy with where she wanted to go Luri stepped into the corridor outside the room where the bodies lay.

"Growlers, why did it have to be fucking growlers?" She said to no one in particular, but heard Chlo chuckling in response.

In front of her the room was alive with wriggling growlers, all anxious to make the most of the feast they'd been given. Luri couldn't fry them without destroying the bodies, so she put out a thought that they should ignore her and started to wade through them towards the biggest concentration of the bugs, where no doubt the bodies were. As she started to pull the creatures off the bodies some started to try to bite her despite the thought control, so she crushed their heads with her hands and threw them into a corner. In the end the room was awash with the green ichor that came from the crushed bugs and she could finally see the bodies. What she saw was pretty appalling. The faces had been eaten away down to the bone and huge gashes had been created in their clothing where the bugs went after meat from the chest and legs.

"Some one has been careless Chlo, very careless. They left them dressed and didn't clear their pockets." Said Luri as she pulled more bugs out of the way to rummage through the pockets of the bodies.

"I've got a set of keys here Chlo and a wallet. There's no one for miles can you give me some more light?"

As the room became brighter and she could see where the bodies were, Luri started reaching for the trigger in her mind to burn the bugs out of the room.

"Real sloppy work Chlo, over here by the door someone has dropped their Bio Reg cards. Can you match them to our new friends here?"

"Yes, you've found Arran and Imber Cole. Hol is with Arran's wife and wants the bodies bagged up and taken to Mendera, can you do that?"

"Oh crap. You tell her she owes me. Ok give me the bags."

Luri went through the tasks she'd done many times of removing all personal items from the bodies and putting them in sleeve on the outside of the body bag and then carefully putting each body inside the bag.

"Hol needs the Bio Reg cards."

Luri held them in her hand and there was a slight shimmer and they were gone. She had a last look around the room and placed a small circular disc on the lopsided table. Then she bent down and took a good firm hold of both body bags and moved herself and them to deep inside the Guard barracks on Mendera. Half a minute after she left the small disc filled the room with plasma at 15,000 degrees and any trace of Arran and Imber Cole was destroyed.

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Kittara and Estrid had arrived outside the best looking office building in Norraine and perhaps in Ixir and over the common channel Hol was filling Kittara in on what had been found on level 12. "The offices of the Foundation," she said to Estrid. "Perhaps the most advanced building in the Empire and certainly one of the best defended. Stay close to me and if you see anything in that way you see things, tell me, nice and loud."

They went through two sets of automatic doors into the large open plan reception area and Kittara turned off her thought control and showed no signs of being in a hurry. To the right of the door was an old fashioned water fountain with tinkling fresh water coming out of six spouts and dropping into a trough around the bottom. Probably meant as an ornament, but Kittara could tell the water was pure and let Estrid drink from the spouts.

"This is wonderful, we need one of these on Mendera," she said as she moved from spout to spout, enjoying a cool fresh drink.

On the top floor Carl Laundry had been alerted and was watching them on his screen. In fact every screen in the building was quietly alerting everyone to the fact that a VIP was on the premises. It wasn't everyday that an immortal hero of the Empire was in the building and a general state of excitement was spreading around the building.

"They have some of the best art in Ixir on display here and even some pieces on loan from the Imperial collection," said Kittara as she took Estrid around the sculptures and paintings in the lobby. She noticed the hologram receptionist had been turned off and two women were now on duty and beaming in their direction. That's it thought Kittara, come and see the famous hero, you can all relax and let your guard down.

Laundry was beginning to sweat and he hated sweating in an expensive suit. He had an idea why that bitch was here, but why bring a child? He couldn't see any weapons, but he knew enough about the Guard to know that meant nothing. Run? There was no where to hide from the Guard and there was a chance she was here to talk about another shipment. Laundry did the only sensible thing he could, he waited for Kittara to stop messing around and come up to see him.

"This is beautiful." Said Estrid looking at a sculpture of a young woman.

Kittara noticed a third woman had arrived at the reception desk and all three were now looking her way. She felt she'd given them enough time to go into relaxed mode.

"We'd better go and see Carl Laundry."

Holding Estrid by the hand Kittara went over to the reception and said while giving her biggest smile.

"I'm here to see Carl Laundry on a matter of some importance."

The woman didn't even ask her if she was expected, she simply pressed the button on the screen that informed Laundry that someone was here to see him.

"He'll see you now," said one of the women, "here let me show you to the rising platform, keep inside the rail."

With the three women now almost bowing to them, Kittara and Estrid walked onto the rising platform and ascended to the top floor. There was no one to meet them on the top floor, but Laundry had come out of his office and was waving to them. As they approached he appeared genuinely pleased to see them.

"Kittara, always a pleasure, but I don't think I know this young lady?" He said while leading them into his office. There were no guards of any kind in the office and when Laundry shut the door she reached out to Chlo.

"Completely sound proof, with no surveillance on you, Laundry intends this meeting to be private."

"Please, not at my desk, lets sit over by the window on the sofas, we can talk in comfort."

Laundry took them over to two very comfortable looking sofas separated by a low and expensive looking table.

"I'll get us some refreshments, then we can get down to business in privacy. You never did tell me the young ladies name?"

Kittara had a few quiet bombshells she intended to use to soften Laundry up a bit, so she decided to use the first.

"Oh I'm sorry. Let me introduce Estrid, who is from New Algaria. Estrid, this is Carl Laundry who runs the Foundation"

Kittara had to admit if Laundry was a poker player he'd do very well. No outward sign of shock or concern, but she felt him shudder inside and she could almost smell him perspire.

A woman came in with various bottles of drinks and snacks on a trolley, and left once they'd made their choice. Kittara chose just water, but Estrid almost filled the table with brightly coloured bags of junk food.

"We never had these back home," she said while opening various packets and taking quick bites out of the contents.

Kittara notice Laundry was fondling the back of the sofa, it was obviously something he took great pride in.

"Beautiful sofas," she said, "very comfortable."

"They're hand finished Jegara hide, designed by Puna himself, who normally only takes on commissions for Sikush."

Kittara nodded at him and ran her hand over the silky smooth leather of the sofa she and Estrid were sat on. Kittara noticed the refreshment lady was just closing the office door.

"So," said Laundry once they were alone. "I'm always pleased to see you, but I'm sure there is a purpose to your visit?"

Kittara lay back and made it look as though she was thinking, but really she had already worked out this was the point to drop the big bombshell, her nuke.

"I rarely tell anyone my orders, but I think you need to know my exact orders from Sikush."

She leaned slightly towards him as though to impart some personal secret.

"I need exact details of your part in the attack on New Algaria. I have orders not to kill you or leave you in a condition where you can no longer run the Foundation, so you can talk quite honestly?"

Laudry leant back in the sofa and looked very distressed and his breathing seemed uneven. Kittara sensed he was considering making a run for the door and was ready to freeze him. In the end he looked at her, relaxed and seemed to shrug his shoulders.

"Why not? Business is business, and I'm sure the Empire will need my services fairly soon. What do you want to know?"

"Who did the original orders come from?"

"I can't tell you much," said Laudry. "One of my usual contacts who gets works from reliable sources approached me with a price and instructions for a raid on New Algaria and he wanted the Foundation to organise it."

"Who is that contact?" Kittara could see Laudry was hesitant to answer.

"If it helps Carl we just found Arran and Imber Cole where your guys left them. Sloppy job by the way, all their personal items left on the bodies and Bio Reg cards left nearby. We have the bodies on Mendera, and they could of course turn up in your foyer at 4am one morning."

"Ok, though it won't help you much. The contact is Jinken Towler, though everyone in Norraine knows him as plain Jinx. He runs a fairly clean bar and cathouse, that also sells weapons, which is down on level 33. Difficult place to get to, but he gets a lot of rich clients as some of his girls cater for, well particular tastes. The place is known to everyone as Jinxies."

"Did you know what was in the orders you gave the raiders?"

"No. I bought a craft and arranged for money and that was it. I gave a set of sealed orders to the raiders and that was the end of any involvement between the raiders and the foundation."

"He's lying," shouted Estrid.

Kittara smiled at Carl Laudry and her eyes went black, and suddenly as if from nowhere she had a wicked looking dagger in her hand. Laudry seemed almost hypnotised by the dagger.

"Yes, yes, ok. I had my people scan the package. I knew the orders were to wipe out all life on New Algaria, particularly a young girl matching the description of Estrid. I take it that's why you brought her here? Business is business though and they paid me a ridiculous price for such a straightforward task. I should have known there would be a catch."

"Do you have any idea who gave Jinx his orders?"

"No, he's just one of my usual contacts."

Kittara had no idea what Estrid knew, but she looked at her and Estrid nodded in agreement. Chlo was filling her head with information about the place on level 33, and confirming it as a brothel of some fame.

"I need more Carl," said Kittara. "I can't go back to Mendera with nothing. You must have an idea who is the top guy behind this? I need something, anything?"

Estrid started fidgeting, which seemed to make Laudry very nervous.

"I'd love to help you, but it was just a contract. I was paid in Imperial gold pieces, which is rare, but anyone can get them. I was paid far too much, but who would complain at that. I simply bought a space craft and passed on some orders."

"How about the Yakkies?"

Laudry seemed to think about lying, but then shrugged again.

"We opened the crates, so I knew what was in them. I don't know how they got Imperial Yakkies, I wish I did, the Foundation could make a fortune selling them. The crates were delivered by Jinxies guys and then picked up by the raiders. I honestly I have no idea who is behind all this."

This time Estrid almost screamed, "HE'S LYING !"

Kittara hurled herself across the table so fast that all Estrid saw was dozens of junk food bags and cups knocked in all directions. Kittara was now kneeling on the table in front of Laundry with the dagger expertly pinning his shoulder to his prized sofa. She'd gone in just behind the joint of his shoulder, so at the moment he'd suffered no serious damage. She projected her old true self to Laundry, so that in front of him he saw reptilian claws and hard reptile eyes staring into his. She twisted the knife just a little.

"Oh dear, your sofa looks damaged." She then brushed her cheek against his and said very softly.

"You could run the Foundation without a left arm and they fit some very good artificial limbs these days. Of course to stop the blood flow I'd have to cauterise the wound. Very painful and it makes fitting an artificial shoulder very difficult."

She put out a finger and wiped some of his blood from his suit and put it slowly on her tongue and made sure he saw her taste it. Then she smelt him urinate and knew he was terrified, but she wasn't finished yet. In her head Chlo was trying everything to get her to ease up, but Kittara was not in the mood to show mercy. She'd obey her orders, but Carl Laundry might never be the same man again.

"Oh Carl, that won't improve your suit, or the sofa."

She edged ever closer to him, until they were almost like lovers embracing.

"Then Carl there are your legs. You could run the Foundation with just one and they do artificial legs which you can barely tell from the real thing. I'd even you up of course, left arm, so it would have to be right leg."

By now Chlo was getting frantic, but no sign of Sikush. She knew from years and years of experience that Chlo might be in a panic, but if Sikush wanted to stop her he'd tell her himself, meeting or no council meeting.

"Then Carl there are eyes, your eyes."

To emphasise her point she held his eyelid up and pressed the tip of her tongue against his eye.

"They still can't do much with eyes on Ixir, but for a price in the Outworlds you can get an artificial eye that will do the job, and you can run the Foundation with one anyway."

She snapped her teeth closed right against the surface of his eye and his bowels gave up and emptied where he was sat, but Kittara still wasn't finished.

"Then there are balls Carl, I think you could run the Foundation with none at all. Tell me everything?" She kept her teeth against his face and gave the dagger a wicked twist.

"My driver," he whispered. "He uses Jinxies, his wife doesn't like to do the things he likes, so he goes there a lot. He saw someone talking to Jinx, ask my driver."

Kittara bit a piece of skin from his cheek a good inch across and put her hand in his groin and took a not very gentle hold of his balls.

"You tell me Carl?"

Laundry was crying now. All he'd wanted to do was earn a living and now this monster was tearing him apart.

"He used to be a driver for the government before I offered him more money. He can drive or fly anything, he used to fly the special craft the top guys in the government use. He told me he saw a regular face on level 33 give jinx a packet that sounded like the orders he gave me."

"The name Carl?"

"This goes right to the top, they'd snuff me out, no one is immune. This goes all the way to the fucking President. You can never tell them I told you."

"Ok Carl, but if you lie to me I'll come back and orders or no orders you'll have an unhappy accident with a very sharp knife."

"He saw one of the top guys who looks after security for the President. A guy who's known to be someone who takes care of little problems. He saw Juvan Swire, and he heard them talking about a project below level 40. I have no idea what he meant by below level 40 and I don't want to know. On Ixir if you mess with President Kallin you turn up dead very quickly. That's it, that is all I know."

Kittara turned to Estrid to get a nod, but was alarmed to see Estrid had collapsed onto the floor. "Ok Carl, I'm going to put you to sleep for a while and when you wake up change your suit and forget all about today. If you try to get revenge you know I'll be back and anyway you know the Empire will continue being a good customer of the Foundation. Are we agreed Carl?"

Carl nodded and Kittara sent him into a deep sleep and removed the dagger from his shoulder. Healing the wound was a simple click of the right switch in her mind and physically he was as good as new. She propped him up against the back of the sofa and turned her attention to Estrid.

"Estrid"

She patted the girl's cheek and she regained consciousness, but still looked pale and shocked.

"Below level 40." She started. "It's important, we need to find this fixer for the President."

Chlo had already put details of the route to Jinxies on level 33 on the common channel and it looked a long and unpleasant journey through some bad parts of town. The girls there must really be something if guys go there every weekend thought Kittara.

"They probably have passes to get past the police, you'll have to use less well used routes," said Sikush over their private channel. She smiled knowing he'd left her to her fun with Laundry, and hadn't interfered. She turned back to Estrid.

"First we'll go to Jinxies and have a quiet word with Jinx."

There was one last task for Kittara to perform. Her hand shimmered and in it was a small silver probe which floated up to the ceiling and then vanished. Now Chlo had a permanent and untraceable link to this room and any deals and schemes hatched by the Foundation would be instantly on the common channel. They returned to the reception area where one woman had even found a Kittara doll that she wanted autographed. Then saying goodbye to their small group of admirers they went out onto the street and Kittara steered their course towards the nearest place to hire a reliable personal transport.

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Even with the Bio Reg cards in front of her Marra Cole found it hard to accept that her husband was dead. Then Hol put up a screen and showed Luri removing keys and personal items from the bodies to be put in the body bags. It was a cruel thing to do, but Hol needed Marra to accept the fact that her husband was dead.

"I know you have more information than you're telling me Marra, and it's not helping. I need to know everything if I'm going to help you find who killed your husband."

Hol knew it was a lie, she was watching the common channel and knew quite well Carl Laundry had her husband killed, but she needed her cooperation. Then she brought up a picture of the two body bags in stasis on Mendera.

"We have their bodies and when you're ready I can get them brought back here for the funerals."

"Can I see him?"

"Probably not a good idea, the bodies had been there a while and the Growlers...."

Marra stood up and beckoned Hol to follow her through a door and down into the lower floor of the house.

"The agent we bought the house from said it was ideal for a private pool, but we decided on a safe play area for the children."

As the lights came on Hol saw a room with a very soft floor covering and full of toys. Soft toys of all shapes and sizes and various ball games fixed to the walls. There was enough down here to keep an army of children amused.

"There is a private room at the back."

Hol watched as Marra pulled open what looked like an ordinary light switch and pressed a button inside. A section of the wall swung out pushing several soft toys out of the way. Inside was a long table with three screens on it and several data storage boxes on the walls.

"Arran always realised there was a danger of them arriving to a meeting and never coming home. Imber seemed the paranoid one to people that knew them, but Arran planned. He decided a year ago to wipe all notes from the home and work computers about meetings and put everything onto these. There is nothing about the last meeting though, I looked."

Within seconds Chlo had copied the entire contents of the computer system and was putting anything of use onto the common channel. There was no record of the last meeting and although Arran assumed several recent jobs were for the Foundation, but he wasn't sure, there was always a third party contact as a cut off. Then Hol realised the implication of a few of the older entries.

"Marra, you said they got the Foundation work because they came well recommended, so who gave them the recommendation?"

"That's easy," said Marra. "There was an unpleasant man who used to come here sometimes. I hated clients coming to our home, but he'd just turn up unannounced, sometimes quite late at night. Arran seemed quite impressed with his connections, as to his name? They just knew him as Jinx."

They closed up the door of the computer room and tidied the children's toys while Chlo continued to analyse the information.

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Albas lay on the bed naked watching the girl he knew simply as Princess walk naked across the room before bending to pick up her panties. As she reached down he enjoyed seeing her small firm bottom tense. The girl looked around and saw him watching, so she reached right down to her toes while shaking her naked rear in his direction. Then she laughed and put her panties on, but only her panties. She then went over to the small kitchen area and picked up a cup and looked questioningly at him.

"Ok, nothing herbal though."

Officially he'd been on watch and he'd been on Mendera waiting for the inevitable call to help on Ixir. Kittara had chosen him as part of the team and it was just a question of waiting, but he'd become bored. After all if he was already in Norraine he could respond quicker? It was lame excuse and he knew it, but finding a crowded bar on level 9, he'd transferred himself to Ixir. The first thing to hit him was the smell. He'd grown up on Ixir and remembered how crowded and dirty it was, but the smell seemed worse than when he was a child, but that was a very long time ago. He'd been pleased his projection of himself as a typical short and dark local had worked so well. No one gave him a second glance and he'd bought a few drinks in the bar with no problems at all.

The problem though is that strangers with money, Imperial credits no less, were rare in that bar and two men in threadbare clothes followed him onto the street. They followed him for a quarter of a mile and didn't even bother to ask him for his money. They came straight at him, one with a knife the other with a length of pipe. Obviously they thought it was easier to take the money off his dead body than ask for it. He didn't kill them, just left them both unconscious in a side alley. Chlo never said a word, but he knew leaving two unconscious locals within half an

hour of arriving on Ixir was hardly the stealthy mission they were hoping for. He'd found the nearest down ramp to level 10 and hoped no one else was on his trail.

"Looking for someone to spend some time with?"

The girl seemed to appear out of nowhere and he tensed in case a well aimed blade followed, but she smiled and was wearing very little to hide a very nice body. She looked a bit too good for street trade, but on Ixir everyone has learned to make a living as best they can. Why not? He thought, he needed somewhere to lay low for a while.

"Do you have a place?"

"Yes, not far away. Nothing too fancy, but it's clean and safe."

That had been a few hours ago and most of the time had been spent screwing each others brains out. Princess was athletic and skilled at her chosen profession, and she seemed in no hurry to get him out of the door, so she could find the next client. He was pleased his projection had remained solid even during sex, and the girl still accepted him as a lonely local looking for some fun.

"What do I call you?" He'd asked as she showed him into her home.

"Everyone just calls me Princess," she said while removing her top.

Her home looked like a large metal box and had probably been made from old delivery containers. At one end were the bed and a few rails for her clothes and at the other was a small kitchen area with an electric stove. In one corner a tidy plastic curtain hid a shower and a toilet. There was the inevitable screen to watch the entertainment channels and a few books on a small table, but otherwise it was fairly bare. For level 10 on Ixir though it was a clean palace and she probably had to pay a hefty rent for it. She brought over a cup of what looked like muddy water for him, which actually tasted pretty good. So far she'd made no mention of the cost of her services, but he had plenty of Imperial credits on him. He finished the drink and kissed her.

"If you don't have to be anywhere, shall we go again?"

"Only if I get a turn on top," she answered.

They were past the need for foreplay. She'd sucked his cock and pushed her pussy into his face hours before, now it was straight to the hard screwing. She deftly removed her panties and mounted him, fitting herself over his now rock hard dick. He seemed far more experienced than most men from Ixir and there was a style to his sexual repertoire that intrigued her. She put her hands on his shoulders and thrust up and down. None of the flailing about so beloved of porn films, this was serious fucking and as she came down hard the bed clanged against the metal container.

'Bang, bang, bang, bang.....'

The sound seemed to stir her up to go faster and harder, on and on, until Albas roared as he clutched tight on her thighs and pulled himself hard into her. She moved off him and lay down by his side and did what she'd never done before, she fell asleep before being paid. Albas lay awake watching the common channel and feeling very pleased with himself at finding such a pleasant place to wait for his orders. He noticed Kittara had left the offices of the Foundation and was heading for level 33, and he saw his name requested to go to level 33 to offer support. He was looking at the route to Jinxies and wondering how he'd get around the police checks when Princess woke up.

"You're still here, that's a good sign," she said standing up and heading for the toilet.

He felt Chlo and asked her about the correct amount to give Princess for her services and then while he was pretending to listen to Chlo telling him off for using her as a guide to whoring his way around Ixir, he had an idea.

"Have you heard of a place called Jinxies on level 33?"

She pulled back the curtain and came out of the toilet and went to a small set of drawers for a clean pair of panties.

"Yes I know it, even worked there once, but the clients started to expect all the girls to do some pretty weird stuff. Spanking I don't mind, but some of the girls I knew started getting broken arms. Then one went missing, so I left."

She started spinning the panties around her finger and looking at him.

"Are we finished ? If we are I'm going to get a shower, and don't you ever need to pee ? You've been here for hours."

Albas wondered if Kittara had the right idea about keeping to all her normal bodily functions ? It certainly would have helped him keep his cover better. He was now certain that he needed Princess with him for her local knowledge.

"I'll go when you've showered. Do you want to go to Jinxies with me ? I have to meet someone there and you know the route better than I do. I'll pay for your time."

She pushed her head through the curtain.

"On the rail, the towel, pass it to me."

As she dried herself he went to the toilet and passed water for the first time in several billion years. Princess chose a comfortable looking set of clothes from the rail that definitely weren't work ware and then sat cross legged on the floor while Albas showered and dressed.

"I'll go with you to Jinxies, but I have to be back for a regular in two days. What credits are you carrying ?"

Albas not only needed her to trust him, but he also needed her to think he was more than just an average guy off the street. He reached into his pocket and pulled out a clip with fifty, one thousand Imperial credit notes in it. He saw her shock at the sight of the money.

"Imperial credits. How much do you want ?"

Princess looked hard at the truly immense wealth in the clip.

"A hundred Imperial a day, plus whatever you think today was worth and most importantly I want it now. Just in case you get killed on the way, as I noticed you're unarmed."

Albas coolly pulled a single 1000 credit note from the pile and handed it to her.

"Most of that is for today, and there'll be another 1000 when we get back."

He shifted around a little uncomfortable and sat next to her.

"I should mention this might get a bit dangerous, there could be people following the friends I need to meet, bad people."

She laughed and pulled him to his feet and opened the door to her home. They went outside and he noticed a similar metal dwelling a few feet away which she opened while beckoning him inside. As the light came on he noticed it was still being used as originally intended as it was full on one side of wooden crates. Princess lifted the lid on one and pulled out an energy weapon, the same used by the police. Then from another crate she pulled out an assortment of knives. "Help yourself to what you need," she said. "It's all covered by the 1000. As you can see, dangerous I can handle."

She equipped herself with a wicked looking dagger and an energy blaster while Albas looked through the other boxes. Now he knew why she seemed to live so well for Ixir, Princess was obviously the local arms dealer. He could pull any number of weapons out his store in needed, but for show she pushed a hefty energy weapon into his waistband and tucked a stiletto down his boot. As she locked up her weapon store she turned to him.

"By the way, what do I call you ?"

"If you're Princes then I guess you can call me Prince."

