

Chronicles of Mardoun

Chapter 16 - The Ruins

“It was like wondering all your life if something was there bringing order, looking after things, giving purpose and then it pops right into your head and says hello” – Kittara

Their progress had been painfully slow with Ojetin limping badly and then the first tremor had occurred in the mine and they'd all had to take cover as best they could. As they dusted themselves off Princess wondered what had caused the tremor, and Estrid had simply said.

“It's expecting us.”

The girl refused to, or could not elaborate and despite her best efforts another of her team was shot and killed by a trooper emerging from a darkened mine entrance. Princess approached Ojetin.

“We need to pick up the pace.”

Ojetin looked at her, but made no comment.

“I have these, they're illegal on Ixir, but I've used them on my people for years.”

The cleric had seen the injectors the mercs used, but the one Princess had in her hand consisted of a metal cylinder connected to nasty looking two inch needle.

“No, I think not.” Said Ojetin, backing away from her.

Princess moved closer to him and brought her voice down to a near whisper.

“We're not going to have time to get there and back, and my team didn't sign up for a suicide mission.”

Estrid held Ojetin's hand and nodded her agreement. Then Princess pulled his robe away from his neck.

“My neck ? Not in my neck !”

“It's either this, or you do the rest of the journey carried over someone's shoulder.”

Princess held him firmly and pushed the needle expertly into his jugular vein.

“Don't worry, it will seal the wound as I pull it out.”

Almost instantly the cleric stood up straighter and looked far more alert than he had for some time.

“What was in that thing ?” He asked.

“Don't ask. You'll feel like you can do anything for the next twelve hours or so, but then you'll sleep for a day. I don't expect you to jog, but we need a good brisk walking pace, ok ?”

Ojetin agreed and they once again set off with Estrid taking up the lead with Princess. To everyone's amazement Ojetin did manage a gentle trot, and they had to pick up their pace to suit his.

“Will he be ok ?” Estrid asked Princess.

“Yes, but he'll ache like hell tomorrow.”

Chlo told them that Salomé had discovered the fate of the team who had set off with Qunan, and that they weren't far in front. As they hurried to catch up with Salomé another tremor hit, making the lights in the tunnel flicker and some in the side tunnels go off completely. In the confusion another New Keo trooper came out of a side tunnel, and he seemed to have been collecting anti personnel mines, which were hanging from his uniform.

“Down ! Get Down !” Shouted Princess.

Estrid stood her ground and used her personal shield to block Ojetin from the blast, and both of them were unhurt. The others didn't fare as well and despite wearing armour, the wounds they suffered were horrific.

"He committed suicide, why would he do that ?" Asked Princess as she checked on her people. Four of the Ixir soldiers were dead, with three more seriously injured and another two who were too badly injured to even be carried out of the mine. As Princess had them taken to one of the darkened mine tunnels, they all heard.

"No, I'll be ok, just leave me here."

Followed by the whine of a Yakkie firing and silence.

"Take your wounded out of here," said Estrid, "you can't go much further anyway or you'll become like the crazy New Keo trooper."

Princess looked at the three injured soldiers and realised no matter how many drugs she injected them with, they'd never be able to carry on with the mission. She selected two of her best people to carry on with her and left the rest to get the wounded back to the Old One as best they could.

"We'll stay with you until we get to Salomé." She told Estrid.

The new smaller group moved quickly and when the next tremor occurred they all managed to come out of it unscathed. After a few more turns in the main tunnel they found Salomé, and the remainder of her team.

"What happened here ?!" Asked Ojetin.

They had come to a fairly well lit chamber and there were dead bodies strewn everywhere.

Salomé left Nauma tending a man lying on the ground and walked over to them.

"They were ambushed. There are two survivors, both in a pretty bad way."

"Where is Qunan ?" Asked Princess.

Salomé looked back at the scene of carnage.

"It appears he just kept walking and by some miracle walked out of this slaughterhouse in one piece. He just left them all to die."

As Princess looked around there seemed to be very few of Salomé's troops who were uninjured.

There were at least a dozen New Keo dead, and perhaps slightly less bodies of their own side.

"I need to keep going," said Estrid, "you can all go back to the Old One now, but Ojetin and I need to go, and go now."

The man Nauma was treating screamed and they could all see that most of his right side was horribly burned.

"You can't go alone, I'll come with you." Said Princess.

"No," said Salomé, "Qunan is still out there and I can't abandon him. If you hurry there's time to get the wounded back, and I'll go on with them."

Estrid looked at them both.

"It may well be a one way trip, but whoever is coming, we need to go."

They left Princess collecting the survivors together for the return trip while Salomé, Estrid and Ojetin carried on towards the ruins.

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They were so intent on speed that when the next tremor hit they barely even slowed down and when they did get to the start of the ruins, they nearly failed to see Qunan.

"This whole area is pre switch." Said Ojetin, as they came out of a tunnel and onto a flat tiled area.

"See the red swirl on that wall ? Very rare, but I've seen it before."

It was Salomé who looked about twenty yards in front and noticed Qunan sitting on a tumbled pillar. He was so covered in dust, that if he hadn't started to stand up, she may well have missed him.

"Qunan !" She shouted as they all walked towards him.

A miner with a blasting laser strapped to his back came out from behind a wall. It was a large unwieldy weapon, designed for cutting through feet of solid rock, but the man had it aimed straight at Arje before the rest of them could react. Then there was a faint glow and Sveta hurtled out of a side tunnel and pulled the weapon out of his hands. Estrid relaxed, until she saw Qunan start to raise his blaster.

"No," she shouted, "it's Sveta, she just saved your life, she's on our side."

Qunan seemed not to hear and he continued to aim his weapon at the dark angel. As Sveta broke the miner's neck and let him drop to the ground, the blaster shot hit her and spun her around.

"No!" Screamed Estrid.

Sveta was screaming and there was a ragged hole in her wing, as Qunan walked closer and aimed at her again. Then there was a hole in his chest and he spun around and looked at Salomé as she fired again. Arje fell face forward onto the ground as Estrid ran to Sveta.

"Are you alright?"

Sveta's left wing and arm looked destroyed and both were covered in blood that was a strangely coloured mixture of red and green.

"I will heal, I'm tougher than I look, but you need to keep going, it's waiting for you."

Estrid joined Ojetin and they started walking towards a fairly well preserved portion of the ruins. Salomé examined Qunan and walked over to Sveta.

"Thank you." Said Sveta.

"He was a bastard, and he won't be leaving any more good warrior to die. Are you going to be ok?"

"Yes, but I will need to eat again. You can't go much further, but Estrid will know when you will have to wait behind. Don't be too hard on Qunan, this place turns people crazy"

Salomé looked back at the body of the leader who had been like a father to her.

"No, he went crazy years ago, but none of us realised. One day the mission, any mission, meant more to him than the people who followed him."

Salomé rejoined the others, and they walked deeper into the ruins, while they tried to ignore the sounds of Sveta devouring the dead miner.

"This is wonderful." Said Ojetin pointing out carvings on the ruins. "I hope Chlo is getting all this from my helmet camera?"

"Yes I am," replied Chlo, "but keep your head still when you look at things."

They walked across another large red tiled square, with what looked like a strange sculpture in the middle.

"Excellent, I do believe this might be a statue of one of their kings." Said Ojetin.

Salomé looked at the strange abstract looking group of connected blobs and found it hard to believe it was a statue of anyone.

"They looked like that?"

Ojetin laughed.

"This is a statue made of a material that our reality doesn't understand, of a creature that existed over a thousand switches ago. Think of it as trying to play your favourite music on a kitchen appliance and wondering why what you hear doesn't make sense."

Salomé looked unconvinced.

"I see it Salomé," said Estrid, "as a fragile creature with long slender wings and six pairs of jointed legs. There are various tubes I don't understand, but it's still a thing of beauty."

As they examined the statue another miner appeared from the direction they had just come from. Estrid was ready and just one shot from her Yakkie brought him crashing to the ground.

"They seem drawn to the ruins." She said.

As they reached the other side of the square Salomé started to develop a headache, and had to stop for a moment.

"I'm not feeling too good. Not too bad yet, but soon I may need to stop."

She crouched on the floor and began rocking back a forth. Eventually she stood up, but kept looking back over her shoulder and muttering.

"I can go on now, I'll be alright."

"No," said Estrid, "wait here, or you'll be killed by it. We haven't got much further to go."

Salomé looked relieved and almost fell in a heap on the ground.

Now it was just her and Ojetin and they walked down a path between two rows of pillars towards a set of doors that were ajar.

"Are you going to be ok Ojetin ?" Asked Estrid.

"Yes, I can feel it in my head, but I'll be alright."

As they walked through the doorway the scene in front of them brought them to a halt.

"No wonder they got jumpy." Said Ojetin.

A huge underground chamber lay in front of them, and at its centre was a stone circle, with some of the stones toppled over. Then there were the bodies.

"Some of them have been dead a while." Said Ojetin.

The faces of the dead miners and soldiers had a look of horror on them, and all of them appeared to have died in pain. As they got closer to the stone circle they could see bodies that were starting to decompose and abandoned digging equipment.

"None of this was here when I last visited," said Ojetin, "just the stone circle, but no one had started excavating it. Are you getting all this Chlo ?"

"Yes, but my probes are saying nothing there exists, so I'm relying on your head cameras.

Everything there, walls, floors, stones, are all causing massive reality disturbances."

As they approached the circle of stones, many of the bodies were very badly decomposed.

"Urrghhh." Said Ojetin, trying to cover his nose.

"There." Said Estrid.

In the centre of the circle were the remains of three dead bodies around a shallow hole in the ground, and in the hole was a shiny black rock, no bigger than a mans fist.

"So," said Chlo, "there was no spy in our midst. They unearthed this and people started dying. No wonder they all started going around armed to the teeth."

"This upright stones have carvings," said Estrid, "I should get them all on camera."

Estrid stood in front of the stone and felt the carvings, as though touching might help her to understand it.

"Very old, I've seen similar, but I can't read it." Said Ojetin.

As Estrid reached the third standing stone, there was a warm glowing light next to her, and then Sventa appeared. Her wing was now intact, but she still held it, and her left arm at an odd angle. Her mouth and the front of her robe were covered in congealed blood, which obviously wasn't hers.

"Can't you heal yourself completely ?" Asked Estrid.

"It doesn't work like that, it never did. I can heal others, but not myself."

Ojetin sat himself on one of the fallen stones and looked at the small black rock in the centre of the circle.

"It's not very big," he said, "Perhaps Sventa could take it back ? Then we can hide in the mines and hope we get picked up another day."

He knew it wasn't much of a plan, as they had no supplies and it was likely the New Keo forces would search the mine very thoroughly.

"Let's have a look at what caused all this." Said Estrid.

She began walking towards the hollow in the centre of the circle when another tremor sent her crashing to the ground. She heard Sventa curse as she clung to the floor of the cavern, and Ojetin had sunk to his knees.

"Something is breaking through." Said Sventa, pointing to the far end of the chamber.

Estrid looked and it was as though the rough wall of the cavern was melting, opening up to allow a bright red light to come through. She turned and saw that Ojetin was still on his knees, and seemed to be staring at the ground.

"Can you keep your camera pointed ahead?" She asked him.

There was no answer from him, and he didn't even move. Estrid took her sack off her shoulder and searched it for a particular star shaped device. She would only have once chance to use it, but with just her and Sventa up against who knew what, they needed anything advantage they could get.

"Chlo, what is that?!"

Estrid was trying to sound calm as a large grey arm came through the gap in the far wall. It was followed by a feline looking head, and then a long grey body with eight legs.

"Chlo?"

There was no response and Estrid could only assume that the reality disturbance meant they were now completely on their own.

"It feels like a Demon," said Sventa, "but I've never seen one like this."

The creature seemed to have clothing on or armour. There were straps and pieces of metal, but none of it seemed to cover it properly, or look complete. As the thirty foot long creature finally emerged from the portal it was followed by at least twenty feet of lashing tail.

"I've never heard of a grey demon." Said Sventa.

"Well it's not getting that." Said Sventa as she walked towards the rock.

Then the creature lurched towards her and started to scream. A long high pitched scream, which hurt their ears and seemed to get right into their heads.

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Kittara had been helping Alyz to heal the trickle of wounded as they came back on board, while watching events in the ruins.

"Chlo, can you get a probe in there?" She asked.

"No, all I have is the helmet cameras and Ojetin is just looking at the ground."

She'd been pestering Sikush to allow her to go and help them, and when the creature appeared she started to shriek at him.

"Alright Kittara, but just you, go now." He said.

She felt for the usual help from Chlo and found nothing.

"You can't go Kittara, there is so much reality disturbance that you'd be scrambled." Chlo told her.

Then over the barely working camera link she heard the creature scream and Kittara did something she rarely did. Blocking out Chlo completely she drew on her reserves of dark power and moved her own reality to just behind outside the stone circle. As she arrived, she stumbled slightly as something reached into her mind.

"Kittara!" Shouted Estrid.

"Don't worry about me, shoot that fucking thing."

It felt like sharp nails were being pulled through her brain and Kittara instinctively drew her sword, and looked around for an enemy to fight. It felt as though one of the sentinels was looking into her, but far more raw and powerful. Then whatever was looking into her must have liked what it found, because the pain stopped. No wonder the miners went crazy and died she thought.

"It's doing no damage." Said Estrid, as she fired her Yakkie again and again at the creature. Kittara looked to her right and noticed Sventa's arm was glowing brightly and pointed at the rear legs of the creature. Now she knew why it screamed. Its four hind most legs were buckled over and it was trying to move forward by shuffling its body. The most worrying thing was that the monster wasn't even looking at Sventa. It was giving a look of intense hatred at Estrid and was doing everything it could to get near her.

"Can you hit it harder Sventa?" She asked.

"I'll try."

Sventa's whole body lit up with an orange glow and the creature screamed again. At the same time Estrid threw the dark metal star into the air. The object seemed to hang in the air a few feet above Estrid, and then it hurtled at the creature and hit it full in what seemed to be its chest.

"Have you got any more those?"

"No, just the one."

The creature screamed and a grey ooze started to flow from a wound in its upper body, but still it crept towards Estrid. Without saying anything Estrid started walking towards the centre of the circle, and Kittara started to follow her. Then the voice entered Kittara's mind.

"Kill her, it would be so easy. Then you can come to us, where you really belong."

The voice was so persuasive and the creature now looked so benevolent. Kittara held the eternal killer in front of her and the point was aimed at Estrid's back.

"You can have it all. We can rebuild Mendera as a modern city and it can be yours."

In her mind were pictures of cheering people greeting their new queen, who was going to take them into a new age of prosperity. Yes, she thought and her sword moved closer to the girl in front.

"We will never release that thing in the temple, we just want to use the power for change. To take the Empire forward. To stop the stagnation."

It all made so much sense to Kittara and as Estrid reached out to pick up the rock she raised her sword.

"But you made a mistake. You missed something very important!" Kittara shouted at the creature.

She could see the look of confusion on the creature face and in her mind she saw vast armies with her at their head. She was the new Empress of the multiverse and Kittara knew, without doubt that the creature was showing her a genuine part of her future, if she chose it.

"You just don't get it."

As Estrid touched the rock the whole cavern seemed to lurch, and Kittara hurled herself at the thing that Sventa still held trapped.

"But why? You could have had it all."

She aimed her weapon straight between its eyes and drove it in deep. Then blackness overcame her and she seemed to be falling a very long way.

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Princess had made good time and had only seen one more New Keo trooper on the return journey and he seemed intent on heading towards the ruins. As they left the mine and headed towards the Old One, she suddenly remembered Boomers.

"Nauma, can you look after them? I want to check the settlement."

"They'll all be dead by now."

She looked at the straggling line of wounded, some being carried and it would have been very easy to forget the team who had gone to the settlement.

"No one went to help them Nauma, I have to go."

Nauma grabbed a passing soldier and made him help carry the wounded she was supporting. No one tended to argue with the large female augment.

"I'll come with you."

As Princess and Nauma jogged in the direction of the settlement, two others from the Ixir team joined them without being asked and the four of them headed towards Boomers.

"We'll need to be quick." Said Nauma.

They were all aware that they only had about fifteen minutes until two New Keo Enforcer craft arrived and the Old One would have to leave. As they approached the settlement they could see three figures emerge from a ruined building and walk slowly towards them.

"Oddr, you're alive." Shouted Princess.

The male augment had lost an arm just above the elbow and his right eye, but seemed quite unfazed by it and was half carrying a wounded colleague. As Nauma went to his aid Princess asked.

"The others?"

"Dead."

"And the New Keo troopers?"

"All dead, everyone is dead."

Oddr was a man of few words on a good day, and today wasn't a particularly good day. There was no time to tend the wounded, so they took it in turns to carry the badly wounded soldier and made the best speed they could towards the Old One.

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As Kittara came to the first thing she noticed was being covered in grey ooze. She stood and looked at the creature in front of her and it was obviously very dead. She could only remember hitting it once, but must have hit it many times, as its head was cut apart in several places. She sheathed her sword and turned to look at Estrid. The girl was holding the stone and placing it in carefully in her sack. Sveta was on her knees beside Ojetin and shaking her head.

"Can he travel?" Asked Kittara as she walked over to them.

"He's gone."

"Gone?"

The dark angel looked genuinely upset, as she kissed Ojetin's cheek.

"He's dead Kittara."

Sveta pulled the helmet off the cleric and gently laid him down on his back and folded his cloak over him.

"Was it that creature?" Asked Estrid.

"No, I don't think so. He was very old and it was just his time."

Another tremor hit the cavern and large stalactites of rock started to fall from the ceiling high above them. Luckily most of them fell in the area of the cavern where the creature had weakened the wall.

"I'm not leaving him," said Kittara, "I'll carry him over my shoulder."

There was still none of the familiar chatter from Chlo, but Kittara was confident she could get them out of the cavern. Then she remembered Salomé.

"Sveta, Salomé is still in here, just outside the doors."

"I know, I saw her sitting there."

Kittara looked at Sveta's broken wing and really didn't like asking her, but she had to get Estrid to safety.

"Can you try to get her out of here?"

Sveta looked drained and keeping the monster tied down must have weakened her, but she smiled at Kittara.

"I'll try."

Then she ran off towards the doors out of the cavern, her damaged wing flapping awkwardly.

"We need to leave Estrid, are you ready?"

The girl nodded and Kittara was reaching down for the body of Ojetin, when she remembered something from when she stabbed the creature. It was important and nagging at the corner of her mind.

"Wait here, crouch down. Your shield will protect you. I won't be long."

Kittara picked up Ojetin's helmet from the floor and hoped Chlo was still picking it up, otherwise she was taking a huge risk for nothing. She went back to the dead body of the monster and pulled a few loose rocks from its body. Yes, there were writings on its armour. She looked back towards Estrid and saw a large piece of the ceiling falling towards her. She quickly felt for a repulsion spell and sent the rocks crashing to the ground at a safe distance. She aimed the helmet camera at the writing and counted to five. There had been more though. She frantically grabbed a large boulder and threw it to one side and underneath was a belt with an inscription on it.

'I bet that's your name.' thought Kittara as she aimed the camera and gave it a few seconds.

As she headed back to Estrid she felt for the link with Sikush and got only a strange background crackling. She lifted Ojetin over her shoulder and took firm hold of Estrid.

"You bastard, where are you?" She yelled at Sikush.

She picked up a faint response and hoped he'd hear the reply as she shouted.

"I'm going to your tomb."

As the ceiling gave way and buried the stone circle, Kittara moved their realities to the planet Sessana.

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The two Enforcer craft had arrived just as Princess came back on board, but they were being very cautious. The Old One had fired his blasters at them and they moved to higher orbits.

"They don't know how the other craft was destroyed." Said Alyz.

The Old One noticed them launch a shuttle to bring down fresh troops and used his weapons to destroy it. After that they didn't launch any more shuttles.

"Salomé is out there," said Chlo, "her camera is damaged and she's moving in a strange way, but we need to give her a few minutes."

The Old One continued to fire at the Enforcer craft, but knew that if they started to use concentrated fire on him, then it would be suicide for anyone to try to enter the main bay.

"I'll give her time," he said, "how about Kittara and the girl?"

"They're going home another way."

Inside the bay Hol was watching and could just see a shape flapping about that looked like Sventa, but why did she seem to be moving in little jumps rather than flying. Princess approached the bay door and was preparing to go out to help her, but then Sventa came crashing into the bay holding an unconscious Salomé.

"What happened to her?" Asked Hol.

"I found her under a pile of fallen rocks, but she should be ok."

Sventa put her right hand on the woman's head and it started to glow and Salomé blinked and sat up.

"Did everyone get back?" She asked.

"Yes," said Princess, "now let Sventa finish healing you."

She nodded at Sventa and let her continue, but held her back as the dark angel tried to heal a deep gash on her cheek.

"Leave it. The scar will remind me to move quicker next time."

Salomé got slowly to her feet and went to look at the wounded members of her team in the hold.

"They'll be fine," said Hol, "If they get here alive, Chlo can make them good as new once we're back on Mendera."

Salomé gave her a harsh look and walked away as Hol knelt beside Sventa.

"What's her problem?" She asked.

"She lost a lot of her people out there."

"We saw what happened to Qunan on her camera, but no one will blame her."

Just then Salomé spun around and faced her.

"I know warriors aren't supposed to ask, but was it worth it?"

Hol walked towards her and hugged her as she sobbed.

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Once Sventa was on board the Old One lifted the billions of tons of his craft gently into the air and climbed towards the upper atmosphere.

"Did we leave anyone behind?" He asked Chlo.

"No one alive."

The Old One wasn't familiar with warfare, but asked out of curiosity.

"Did we win?"

"Yes, this time I think we did."

One of the Enforcer craft started to hit him with heavy fire, but none of it could penetrate his force walls. Hol brought Salomé onto the bridge and they sat in a corner talking quietly. They couldn't move their reality too soon, or the New Keo Group would know instantly who had attacked them, so the Old One ignored the fire from the enemy craft and headed away from NKG0056 and along a fast elliptical path around its sun.

"How long until I can go home?" He asked Chlo.

"They're quite slow and we should be out of their scanner range in six hours."

The Old One increased speed and began wondering if Alyz and Kittara might have other little jobs he could help out with? He wasn't completely happy at leaving so many dead troops behind, but it was more interesting than his old existence.

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Kittara arrived on Sessana in front of a very ancient building and looked down at Estrid. The girl looked so tired, had been through so much.

"It's so hot."

Kittara never really felt the heat, but they were in a desert region and the air had almost no humidity.

"Yes it is hot, but once we get inside I can get us some drinks."

Kittara was happy now that the constant chatter of the common channel was back in her head, but she did wonder how Luri was taking the news of Ojetin's death?

"Where are we?" Asked Estrid.

Kittara headed up the steps to the building still carrying the dead cleric over her shoulder.

"This is the planet Sessana, and no one ever comes here, so no one can be harmed by that rock you have."

The door was about twenty feet wide and half open as they approached it.

"Could there be wild animals in there?" Asked Estrid lifting her Yakkie.

"There might be, but after what we've just been through, I can't see a few unfriendly animals worrying us."

Kittara walked into the structure and sent a few lights up towards the ceiling. Estrid followed her and started looking at some of the carvings on the walls.

"What is this place?"

"This is a tomb, or rather the antechamber to a tomb."

Kittara laid the body of Ojetin down on a stone table and reached for Chlo to put him in a stasis field.

"Now he can rest here until he's taken to be buried."

Kittara looked at Estrid and waved her hand around the room.

"A very long time ago an enemy of Sikush build this tomb for him, not as a gift, but as a very expensive and elaborate threat. There is a cloister we can rest in and it will be shaded at this time of day."

Estrid looked at the statues and pictures along the walls as they walked.

"Where are the people who built this place?"

"Gone. Long dead, except for one and we don't talk about him."

As they approached an open door at the rear of the building Estrid stopped in front of a statue.

"It's you!"

Kittara laughed.

"Indeed it is. I'd almost forgotten about that. The inhabitants of this awful planet weren't that keen on me either."

Outside the door was a large dusty square surrounded by a cloister and as Kittara had hoped, their side of it was in the shade. Kittara had Chlo provide them with a table and three chairs and a table full of refreshments.

"Three chairs?" Commented Estrid as they sat down.

"Sikush will be here soon. He needs to decide what to do with the rock."

Estrid sank into the chair and poured herself a long drink of the fizzy sugary stuff Chlo knew she liked.

"Don't fall asleep," Kittara told her, "you'll have terrible dreams, this is a dreadful place."

Estrid took the rock from her sack and placed it in the centre of the table.

"So many lives and so much trouble for that." She said.

Kittara ate a few of the berries that Chlo knew she liked and looked across the square.

"The tomb is down those stairs in the centre, but Sikush has never has felt like using it."

"Doesn't anyone live here?" Asked Estrid.

"No. This system was shunned when it was inhabited and still has a bad reputation now."

A hot breeze stirred up some dust in the square and in the distance they heard an animal cry out.

"He's coming." Said Kittara.

Sikush arrived and walked behind Kittara and kissed the top of her head before sitting down. He looked them both over and settled back in the chair.

"The New Keo Group aren't saying a word about the attack, so they obviously want to keep it quiet. When they identify the body of Qunan they'll be certain it was just a raid that went wrong."

He poured himself a glass of cold water and grabbed a handful of fruit.

"Did Ojetin suffer at all?"

Estrid was surprised to see he was looking straight at her for a reply.

"No," she said, "There was a ground tremor, so he went down on his knees and just seemed to have fallen asleep."

"That will please Luri. Once we've taken care of this artefact you brought back, she can come and collect his body."

Sikush picked up the stone and turned it around in his hand while examining it. The stone was completely black, and shone in the light as Sikush spun it around.

"Very rare, a few have been found and one of them is the source of power of each Sentinel temple. None of them are as powerful as this one though."

"It likes you." Said Estrid.

Kittara had long ago learnt that how a thing looked in one dimension was often a bad guide to its real self. She moved closer to Estrid.

"Can you show me what you see?"

Estrid nodded and Kittara moved her hand to the back of the girl's head. After the previous experience of doing this she was a little apprehensive.

"It's alive." She said.

Through Estrid's eyes Kittara saw not a rock, but an object of pure white light, that turned and changed its brilliance as it turned. It did indeed seem to enjoy being held by Sikush and rubbed itself against his hand. Kittara removed her hand and thanked Estrid.

"You found this Estrid," said Sikush, "so you should have a say in what is done with it."

He places the object back on the table and took a sip of his drink.

"Four of these are buried deep in the base of a Sentinel temple and they give them the power to protect Mendera."

"They don't just scream?" Asked Estrid.

"No, and I think Kittara needs to tell you about quite a few things you thought were just legends. The Well has always been a weak spot and I've often thought of building another Sentinel there. What do you think about using this as its source of power?"

Estrid looked at the object for some time and seemed to be in deep thought.

"Yes it would like that."

"Good. What do you think of my tomb? Get Kittara to tell you about the people who built it."

Kittara could tell he was about to go, and reached for him on their private link.

"Before you go," said Kittara, "the inscription on the creature's clothing, was it useful?"

He looked at her very seriously as he picked up the stone.

"Yes, and you were lucky to get out of there alive. It seems as though a high level demon was taken over by something much older, much nastier. We'll talk about it later."

Sikush held Estrid's hand for a moment and then vanished.

Kittara stood up and took hold of Estrid's hand.

"Let's go home. I think we could both do with some sleep."

"Did we stop it, has the trouble gone away?" Asked the girl.

"Yes it's gone."

Kittara held Estrid and took them home, and regretted lying. The trouble was never gone, just beaten for a while. Eventually the older evil would find a new point of entry, all they had done was to delay it for a while, with luck for a few million years.