

Mendera Temple

Chapter 10 – A Private Island

“True she was an ephemeral and always would be, but strangely if immortality had taught him one thing, it was to enjoy life for the moment.”

“None of the islands in this chain have ever suffered a home invasion.” Said Peli Mo loved the place, had even loved it from the pictures and maps. The chain of islands was called the Nerrabar Chain and as the one Mo was on was the island furthest north, it had been unimaginatively named North Nerrabar. They were on the south facing balcony of the main house and Peli was in full sales mode. Not that Mo minded, Peli was happy and he liked her to be happy. “North Nerrabar is the largest island in the chain,” she continued, “with an area of just over ten square miles. There are two main residences on the island and six or seven other buildings, if you include the generator building.”

Chlo had already run through the usual issues with island living when he’d looked at the pictures back in Xeod’s. The Nerrabar Chain was about twenty miles off the equatorial coast of the main continental land mass on Ixir. Too far to run cables for power, even if the local town had the spare capacity, which it didn’t. The answer of course was to have your own very expensive to run generator. Chlo had already told him she could replace it with an imperial power plant with ten times the output and no running costs. Peli was enjoying her sales routine and waving her arms towards the other islands clearly visible to the south.

“There are two other islands to the south. Central Nerrabar is three miles away and South Nerrabar is four miles beyond that. Both are owned by highly respected citizens of Ixir.”

He knew Peli would tell him exactly who owned the islands was confidential, but in truth he realised she didn’t really know herself. Chlo had done a little digging and it appeared his closest neighbour was CEO of one of the largest banks on Ixir and the south island was a love nest for a senior member of the government. Not that Mo really cared who they were; neither sounded the sort of neighbours likely to drop in unannounced.

“The equatorial climate gives a pleasant temperature all year round,” continued Peli, “with a level of rainfall that keep all the vegetation green and lush.”

Of course she could have said ‘it’s hot and wet,’ but Mo quite liked the idea of having an area of wet jungle in the centre of his island. Ten square miles ! That was larger than the whole of the slum he’d grown up in, probably twice the size and over nine million people had been crammed into that space.

“Your own shuttle landing platform and shuttle repair workshop, which is quite rare. You have your own arboretum, two outdoor pools and one indoor. Would you like me to detail all the other buildings for you ?”

“Yes please Peli.”

Mo knew all the details, but Peli was on a roll and he did like to see her happy. Mo knew all about the facilities and Chlo could add anything else he needed. As the to the drawbacks ? As with any island it was water supply and removal of waste, usually at high expense. The previous owners had put in a small plant to convert sea water to drinking water and they had the usual twice yearly visit from a stinking tanker that emptied the septic tanks. There was quite a market for human waste on Ixir, after processing it was used as fertiliser. Again Chlo would put in a constant supply of fresh

water and her own methods of dealing with waste. Where it went Mo had no idea, but as long as it disappeared somewhere he was happy with the arrangement. Peli had paused and was grinning at him.

“You’re going to buy it aren’t you ?”

The price was just about right for the economic climate and Mo was going to buy the island and all its fixtures and fittings. Chlo could have brought them there instantly, but Mo had chosen to come by shuttle, hired at a huge price for the day. They’d followed the coast down, turning out to sea over the town of Barjoul, with its famous swaying palms and plantations. The water had been the bluest blue Mo had ever seen and as North Nerrabar had come into view, the pure white beaches looked perfect. For a boy from the slums it looked like a vision of heaven, the sort of heaven the holy women in the temple had described to him. There had been no alternative for Mo once he’d crossed the blue sea and seen those beaches. He was going to be the new owner of the island.

“Yes I am Peli. Tell them I’ll pay the full asking price, but I want this to be a quick sale.”

She was dancing about and looking very pleased with herself. Mo wasn’t sure what the girl meant to him, but he had realised her happiness was beginning to mean something to him. He thought about suggesting an afternoon in one of the many bedrooms, but then remembered the previous occupant had removed all their furniture. Mo felt he was getting a bit old for sex on bare floors. Chlo made a suggestion in his head that sounded worth pursuing.

“Have you ever been to the Council Club on Mendera ?” He asked her.

“No I haven’t.”

“By the time you’ve put in the offer on this place we’ll be just in time for lunch at the Council Club and the food is excellent. If you’d like to go ?”

“Yes, that sounds wonderful !”

She’d gone, running down the stairs and off to the shuttle to call the agents dealing with the sale of the island. At a more sedate pace he followed after her and then Chlo would arrive, or perhaps Alyz to take them to Mendera. He suspected he was falling for Peli, but was that a bad thing ? True she was an ephemeral and always would be, but strangely if immortality had taught him one thing, it was to enjoy life for the moment.

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“How many Annill soldiers are you taking ?” Asked Sikush.

Sikush was on the flat grey sand that went on for miles, about a mile behind him was the city of Annill and in front of the city was a vast army. Not all the army, but those that could survive on the 6th rift, or at least survive long enough to be useful.

“About two million, the tally isn’t exact,” said Aukar, “mainly demon and human hybrids, or hybrids of something else. We needed the warriors, so no one has been enquiring too hard about who they are or where they came from.”

Sikush could see a thousand of The Damned in front of the main army, Luri in front of them and carrying a Menderan banner. The Guard may not have known Aukar very well, but Sikush knew they’d follow Luri into hell itself. He’d given Aukar all of The Damned he could spare, but he knew the last of the Terak still felt he was being short changed.

“You really need Kittara and Abijah ?” Asked Aukar.

The two toughest warriors they had, almost indestructible, yet Sikush was keeping them in Annill. They’d argued about it the previous evening and Sikush could understand why Aukar was so upset. “I see things you don’t,” said Sikush, “by the end of the battle you will thank me for keeping them both here.”

Sikush hadn't mentioned Sventa. The dark angel was still at the Annill Rest and although a few of the locals were talking about a strange dark apparition that flew through walls, no one officially knew of Sventa being in Annill.

"Time for you to join the army."

Aukar took to the air and landed just in front of Luri. When everyone seemed settled Sikush reached for the powers he rarely used, the power that Chlo tapped into, the ability to rend and break reality itself. Just a portal wouldn't do, this needed a doorway to the 6th rift and a doorway that would last as long as it was needed. A doorway that would stretch for half a mile in either direction and reach hundreds of feet into the air. Sikush looked over the city wall and on the hill of the Alcázar he could see the huge form of the deity Sumahn-Nerish, watching.

Deep into the rift he felt and he started to pull, pull at the very fabric of the multiverse. There was a shriek, a howl, like that of a wounded animal as he pulled reality to his will. They, the multiverse would be aware of his actions and turn on him, but he suspected they'd been aiding Faarlh and his undead for some time. Slowly a doorway appeared, quite small at first, but as the shrieking continued it grew. At first the edges were rough and the image in the doorway was unclear, but as it grew he poured more power into it, until the doorway was distinct and the destination at the other side of the doorway could be seen. Over a few hundred yards away, across broken ground and rubble was the Necropolis and a large force of the undead were guarding it. Sikush walked through the doorway and was unaffected by it, he just moved to the Annill side of the doorway and waved at Aukar. Sikush was probably the only being able to flout the laws of the multiverse, as he existed outside of all realities.

Sikush walked to the side as the approaching army covered the few hundred yards between them and the doorway. Sumahn-Nerish was still on the hill and watching and Sikush knew Abijah was up there with him. Drums and demon horns playing The Damned walked through the door, closely followed by the rest of the army of Annill. There was no time to relax on the other side of the doorway, the undead were moving to attack the invading army.

"Good luck." Shouted Sikush.

He doubted anyone heard him, but Aukar gave him a quick wave before ordering his army to attack. Across the surface of the 6th rift the army ran, crashing head on into the remnants of the undead. Not the tens of millions there had been, but enough to be a real danger. Now the reserves were running towards him, the five hundred or so members of the elite imperial guard who'd come with him to Annill. They would be the thin line that kept anything nasty from coming back through the doorway. Veterans all of them and he had total faith in them, and if they did falter he had Kittara and Abijah with him. He doubted if anyone would have the nerve to attack Annill while he was there, but if they did he'd show no mercy. Through the doorway Sikush could see warriors falling, but they seemed to be getting the better of the undead. It was Aukar's war now though, so Sikush walked towards the city and a meeting with Kittara in the Annill Rest.

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"I was with Pineus special forces for ten years."

After the destruction of the previous merc militia the adverts had gone out all over the empire and beyond. Come and serve the empire, the adverts had said, good pay and prospect. In the tiny details was the clincher for most who applied, 'place of operations Mendera City.' Everyone wanted to work in the holy city, even though most of the mercs were never offered citizenship.

"What rank did you hold when you left?" Asked Jen.

"Senior Enforcer."

He was just what they were looking for and they needed a good sized force fairly quickly. The Damned could look after the big stuff, but the city needed a militia to look after the day to day enforcement of law and order. Being a merc on Mendera was a good job, the chances of ending up dead were rare, despite the recent destruction of almost the entire force. Alyz was on another table, vetting applicants and Delmus was on another with Hol. Jen had decided that as it was a nice day in Mendera, they'd put up tables outside the barracks to interview applicants. Jen had noticed that Delmus seemed to need to tell a lot of anecdotes as part of his interview process, but she had to admit he was good at spotting good fighters. Jen liked the applicant standing in front of her, so she nodded at the chair. Only those who survived the first few questions were offered a seat.

"Any problems you want to tell me about before I ask Pineus for your records." She asked.

She already knew of course. The merc hopefuls had been arriving on the shuttles for a while and Chlo was checking them out as they were allocated temporary lodgings. This one had a record that made him very suitable for life as a merc. He stared down at the table and looked awkward, not realising that his particular weakness was considered a plus by Jen.

"I was demoted after my first two years," he began, "but I regained my rank."

"What was your offence?"

"I was found guilty of two charges of using excessive force."

According to the records on the common channel, Jen could see he'd narrowly avoided another four cases of excessive force, but his record also said he showed a high level of subservience towards senior officers. He was perfect merc material.

"There is a mandatory seven days training at full pay," said Jen, "if you can start training tomorrow I can offer you a bonus of an extra ten days pay. Would you be able to start tomorrow?"

Most said yes. Life in the outer planets was tough and doubly so for ex-military personnel. They weren't suited to civilian life and many ended up on drugs and got involved in serious crime. Chlo had added a note that Malvek Harrin, the hopeful Jen was looking at, had traces of three types of drugs in his system, but all were perfectly legal on most empire planets.

"Yes, I can start in the morning. I brought all my things with me."

His face had quite a few scars, the records showed he had a plate in his skull, yet all he owned had arrived with him in one bag on the shuttle. Jen could understand why a career in the mercs was so sought after.

"How are the lodgings they've given you, comfortable?"

"They're fine. I'm in a part of the palace. There are three other guys in the room with me, but they're no trouble."

So he'd been lucky, or Chlo had liked his record and he'd been put in the palace. Jen had once lived there for a while and still missed it on occasions.

"We don't do signatures here," she said, "you tell me you're in and you're in. If you don't show up for training we'll come looking for you. Once you complete training you will be expected to give a verbal oath to serve the empire. Is this acceptable to you?"

"Yes. I'm in."

Jen opened a box on the table and brought out a coin, a ten imperial credits gold coin. It was the usual induction fee to the mercs and most kept it as a prized possession, often putting it in a cabinet on the wall. She handed him the coin.

"You're now a member of the Mendera Militia Harrin. Come to the barracks in the morning and you'll get your uniform and an induction briefing."

He gave her a huge smile and went away with a spring in his step. Jen knew he'd probably find a link and be telling his family on Pineus within the hour. Most of The Damned thought of Jen as a hard case, probably thought she was a total bitch. But if they saw her smile as Harrin walked away they might have thought differently about her.

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"You don't forget the face of someone who's saved your life. I'm telling you it was Abijah." Said Juno. Meeting Juno had been a strange coincidence. Babak had been assigned to lead one of several groups giving the sewers a thorough search. Chlo had been getting some rather odd and inconclusive scan results from the sewers. There were quite a few strange creatures living in the sewers and Menderan's tended to live and let live, but there was a chance that the scans were picking up a few of the undead. Not that Mendera had sewers. Thrax had quite clearly marked the entire network of tunnels as being storm drains, but just one whiff of the atmosphere and Babak knew what the storm drains were full of. Juno was supposed to have been vetting new recruits for the mercs, but Chlo had needed another seasoned hand in the storm drains.

"It's been a long time Juno," said Babak, "and we all saw her essence move on."

The newer members of The Damned were in the lead, eager to be heroes. Babak slowed them down with a barked order before giving his attention to Juno once again.

"That's what I thought," said Juno, "there wasn't much seen of her on the news broadcasts when Sikush left for Annill, I checked. But I was there, among the crowd and I saw her face. Right next to Sikush, it was her."

They were approaching a large intersection where several tunnels met. The members of his group furthest in front were getting excited about a movement in the middle of the intersection. Babak told them to hold fire and moved to the front of his team. They'd been armed with fairly effective flame throwers, considered easier to use and more reliable than their spell casting. The problem was that a great many fairly harmless creatures had already been fried.

"What did you see?" He asked.

"Something with six legs sir. Big and it doesn't show up on body heat scanners."

They weren't on a clandestine mission, they were in the sewers on Mendera. Babak created a ball of bright white light and sent the light floating up to the ceiling. He heard several flame throwers being activated behind him.

"Leave it!" He shouted.

The creature was huge, probably bigger than him, but it didn't seem aggressive. A large grey body on six muscular grey legs, he'd never seen anything like it, but Chlo had warned him there were strange creatures in the drains.

"The big ones keep the tunnels clear, don't kill them all. Unless you're volunteering for the job of tunnel clearer?" Chlo had said to him.

Babak saw a powerful set of jaws open and close, but the creature was heading away from them at speed. Whatever its business was, it seemed to want to get somewhere it would be left in peace to get on with it.

"What was that sir?"

"I've no idea, but it doesn't seem hostile."

Babak considered asking Chlo about Abijah, but it was more than likely Juno had got it wrong. Kittara had been there when Abijah was vaporised, they'd all seen her essence move on to be reborn in another body. There was more movements showing ahead, but Chlo had them marked as growlers. There had never been growlers on Mendera, but some had been introduced into the sewers from

Ixir. Perhaps by accident from a market area shuttle or maybe deliberately, but now there was a large and growing growler population in the drains. They didn't get to the surface and they kept other vermin down, so their presence was tolerated.

"Are you going to ask Chlo about Abijah?" Asked Juno.

"They'll be back from Annill soon. I'll probably wait and talk to Sikush."

They approached the next tunnel and there was a huge blockage of what looked like a small tree that had fallen into the drains and the usual unpleasant material found in a sewer. Right in the middle of the blockage was a hole where the water was pouring out, obviously made by a large creature of some kind.

"Keep well back, I'll blow it through." Said Juno.

They all moved well clear. Though The Damned were immune from any diseases the sewers might contain, like most people they didn't enjoy being covered in decaying faeces. Juno created a very mild disruption spell and used it on the blockage. Like popping a cork from a bottle, a small torrent of water flowed into the intersection and the stench was almost unbearable.

"Couldn't the mercs do this sir?"

"No, they'd get infected, which is why we got the job."

As the water started to slow down the two undead tried to rush them. Babak didn't even need to get his weapon out of store, the flame throwers finished the undead off in a matter of seconds. He stood over the smouldering remains and talked to Chlo on the common channel.

"Two undead at intersection 18f Chlo, we will need to check the entire drain system."

"I'll assign four extra teams, anything else?"

Babak hadn't intended to mention Abijah, but he switched to his private link.

"Juno mentioned seeing Abijah with Sikush, is there anything you want to tell me?"

There was the slightest of pauses before Chlo replied.

"Will you come to my quarters for dinner tonight?"

"Yes that would be nice."

"Good, we can talk then."

At that moment Babak was certain that Abijah really was, by some miracle, alive.

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It was a good job that Kittara had insisted on two rooms at the Annill Rest, as it was the two rooms were feeling fairly crowded. She'd never seen Sventa in the company of other Genova before and the dark angel didn't seem to be enjoying the experience.

"You're sure you can take Kittara to the right place?" Asked Sikush.

Sventa was normally completely confident with Sikush, but Kittara noticed the dark angels talons kept fading out, as though she was a Genova again. Her dark eyes stared at the Genova in the room as she answered The Chalné.

"Yes, there will be no mistake, I promise."

Abijah had arrived amidst a lot of fuss from the tavern staff. Having one immortal warrior under their roof had caused excitement, but two would have them talking for months. Abijah just sat in the other room and looked out of the window, adding the occasional yes or no to comments from Sikush.

"You understand what you must do?"

Kittara took a second to realise the question was aimed at her, she'd been watching the Genova as they watched her.

"Yes, I do and I'm ready."

She stood up and started to fix her swords across her back, the Nurigen blade and the famous God killer. The Genova watched her every move, they seemed obsessed by her, but then again they always had been. As she started to tighten the webbing on the swords another Genova appeared in the room and simply watched her. Sventa seemed very distressed and whispered to Sikush, Kittara heard him reply.

“Don’t worry, they’ll all be gone soon.”

Kittara had no idea why the Genova worried Sventa so much, perhaps they reminded her of a past she’d rather forget, or perhaps they reminded her of something of herself that was lost ? Sventa calmed, but kept very close to Sikush.

“Abijah, we are ready to go now.”

Kittara watched as Abijah walked slowly across her rooms and held on tightly to Sikush, almost in a lovers embrace. Then Sikush nodded at one of the Genova and they were gone, taken off through the grey to a point in time and space where there was a likelihood something important would happen. It was all too vague for Kittara and she knew her role was if anything even more vague.

“Just us now Sventa.”

The dark angel was more settled now, no bits of her were showing signs of becoming non corporeal. But it needed Kittara to put a hand on her arm to raise a smile.

“They are no longer my people.” Said Sventa.

“Who are your people now ?”

Sventa looked at her, her tail waving gently, which was a sign of contentment.

“You are and of course Estrid.”

Kittara finished collecting her kit together and waited for Sventa to tell her the time was right for them to move. She just hoped they’d end up where they needed to be and at the right time.

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Luri had seen some ferocious fighters over the years, but nothing compared to the army of Annill and that included the Kivar. Perhaps hundreds of years fighting the Dracc had given them their edge, but they fought like a well-oiled machine and with no thought about their own safety. It was almost as though the undead had met a more professional and intelligent version of themselves. She’d gone through the doorway onto the 6th rift with Aukar, but now she was letting him get a few yards in front of her. It was no good arriving where she needed to be without the support of the army and it was giving her time to collect her thought, especially about her brother. When it came to it, could she sink her blade into his heart ?

Even in a day dream Luri was far more alert than most and the undead heading for her hadn’t escaped her attention. He was huge, a good seven feet tall and stocky, which was unusual. Most of the undead were converted chaos creatures who had been sorcerers and seers to some of the most wealthy and important dynasties on the rifts. This was the first brute of a creature she’d seen in their ranks and it was heading straight at her and at some speed.

“Now you die my sister !”

None of the undead had ever spoken before and the eyes were different, they were alert. Luri barely had time to think that her brother had sent her something special, when the creature punched her in the chest and she was flying backwards through the air. Over and over she spun, eventually landing in the middle of several dead members of the Annill army.

“I will finish you !”

Luri had been bruised by the undead out on the rifts before, but nothing like this. As she tried to stand her whole body ached, but some of the stiffness was an act. As the undead colossus lifted its

arm to hit her again she drew her sword and in one lightning swift motion she'd buried it in the creature's chest. Just the usual dry as dust tissue in its chest, no blood, no bodily fluids. Yet the eyes looked different, they looked alive.

"Are you in there brother, are you animating this dead thing?" She asked.

The creature knocked her over, but as she was thrown off, Luri managed to swing her blade and sever its head from its shoulders. Cursing her own stupidity and rubbing yet another set of bruises, Luri avoided the still thrashing arms and looked into the still sentient eyes of the creature.

"I'm coming for you brother. Soon you'll know the kiss of my blade."

The eyes went dead and the arms stopped moving, Luri was certain her message had been received. She brushed herself off and looked at the remains around her, all of it from hybrids, they alone could survive on the 6th rift and of course creatures like the last of the Terak. A few human warriors had been brave and pretended to be of mixed blood, purely to be part of the attack on the necropolis. Few of them had survived more than a few seconds on the 6th rift, a few had run back through the doorway, but they'd have hideous burn scars for the rest of their lives.

"Well done, he was some beast." Said Aukar.

"I think it was a special message from Faarlh. I've never seen an undead like this one before."

She looked at Aukar and there was a tear in one of his wings and he had several nasty looking burn wounds. He seemed to notice her concern.

"I'm not as immune to fire as you are. There's still fighting on the surface, but I'm taking the main army down into the heart of the necropolis. I thought you'd want to come with me."

She simply nodded and followed him across the battlefield and towards the nearest set of stairs leading down.

"Stop a moment." Said Luri.

She brought out a small pot of unguent from her jacket, a pot that had cost her a few favours and quite a few credits. She rubbed tiny amounts over the burns on Aukar and was pleased to see that although they didn't heal completely, they did look much less raw and bloody.

"Thank you."

He was off again over the broken ground and heading for a group of Annill warriors clustered at the top of the stairs. Luri could see some with axes and others with bleeding edge energy weapons. A strange mixture was the army of Annill. As she approached one of the soldiers was bouncing a large Ion grenade on the palm of his clawed hand.

"Just to clear the route a bit." He said winking at her.

He twisted a ring on the weapon and threw it down the stairs. A few second later there was the familiar crackle and sparkling blue light of intense Ion radiation. Short lived, but deadly, it would destroy anything that crawled, shuffled or walked, regardless of their DNA or lack of it.

"Forward!" Shouted Aukar.

Luri added her own war shout to his and weapons drawn they all ran down the stairs.

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"Pretty good, but I still prefer women." Said Dhali.

The way she'd been clawing his back, Albas wondered how wild the pretty brunette might get with the right female? He was assimilating into his life at Xeod's so well that he rarely used Chlo for clothing or bodily functions now. Albas picked his underwear up off the floor and began to get dressed.

"I think your trousers might be out in the hall."

How drunk had he been ? He checked that everything was more or less covered before he opened the room door and sure enough his trousers had been left against the door by a helpful member of staff, together with his socks. He promised himself that in future he'd behave better at Xeod's, the same promise he'd made thousands of times before. As if reading his thought Dhali made her own comments as she searched for her own clothing and found her panties under the bed.

"If it helps, the staff think you're pretty cool."

There was glitter in his underpants, why did all the girls insist on wearing so much glitter ? He seemed to find it in every wrinkle for days and he was still finding some from his last encounter with Dhali. It had been a very long time since any of the genes in Albas had anything remotely to do with Ixir, but he felt at home on the planet in a way he'd never felt at home anywhere else.

"Where are you from Dhali ?"

"Housing complex 17 in Moglas City."

She knew what he meant but she was teasing him. She was giving him a wide grin from a mouth much too full for a family long on Ixir, her skin too healthy and dusky for the levels.

"Dad was running contraband in from New Keo 7. He was caught and put into the state prison out near Meeran, no one comes back from there. Me and my mum ended up in the levels, there was nowhere else to go."

His jacket had some very odd stains on the front and he remembered a particularly bad meal at a place on the 3rd level, one of the few places that wouldn't call the militia if things turned rowdy. He put the jacket on, but knew it would never be completely clean again.

"Is your mother still in the levels ?"

"She caught the Ixir Cough real bad and died when I was still a child."

Dhali was paid by Xeod's and paid quite well for looking after the management and their guests, but Albas always gave her something extra. He pulled a few imperial credit notes out of his pocket and slipped them into her hand while he kissed her.

"I think we've unfinished business," he said, "shall we continue tonight ?"

"I'm game, but can we go to somewhere better for dinner this time ?"

He knew what she meant, he could still taste the overpriced and over spiced concoction they'd eaten the night before.

"Ok, you can choose where we go."

He left the room and walked towards the link point to the imperial stores on the next level down. There wasn't much there yet, but he wanted to check on the explosives Belso Drahl's men had delivered. He didn't need the link, but like Mo, he was beginning to enjoy walking around the Xeod's neighbourhood.

"Quinn was looking for you ?"

He nodded at the guy, another new face, there were a lot of new faces in Xeod's now the plan was progressing. Albas opened the door of what looked like an old and grubby freight elevator for the rooms above. As the door closed he ignored the singly button with an up arrow on it.

"Down." He said.

His voice was on the very small list of people who were allowed access to what was becoming the base for the Slum Runners, hidden away on level 34. The lift stopped and he entered a corridor that led to a few storage rooms and a small barracks area. Quite soon Chlo would enlarge the base, but for now there were few places to go and Albas entered the weapons storage area.

"Come to see our latest toys ?"

Quinn had the top off the box and was looking at the latest weaponry Ixir could offer. A small but incredibly powerful explosive device that could level a small town, but with no radiation of other bio hazards being generated. The Slum Runners were now the proud owners of six such devices. So new they hadn't picked up a nickname yet and were known only by their research code of ITR874. Albas picked the bomb up and it was light and small enough to carry in an ordinary shopping bag.

"They should be good," he said, "they cost enough."

"I'm surprised Mo hasn't been to look at them."

"He's on Mendera, but he'll be back soon."

Albas put the weapon back in its box and checked with Chlo that she was happy with the devices.

"A bit overcomplicate for my liking, but they'll work. Not really Ixir tech, but research stolen from the Maran Group."

They now had the means to cause a lot of death and destruction on Ixir, Albas just hoped the ends would justify the means. He walked to the small barracks section and found three members of the Sisters of Ixir, on duty as guards and very alert. They were there just in case another group on the levels might want to steal the weapons for their own particular ventures. Albas thought it unlikely, but the other members of the Slum Runners had insisted on a permanent guard rota.

"Nice jacket."

His jacket looked far worse in the harsh lights of the barracks and he simply shrugged at the young girl.

"If ever I offer to take you for a meal.... Insist on going somewhere you know."

They laughed easily, not the rabid anti male types he'd been expecting. He wasn't sure how interested in men they might be, but he was definitely going to find out one day. Satisfied that everything was progressing according to plan, Albas moved his reality to his own quarters, where he intended to take a long shower and then a few hours' sleep.

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