

## Chronicles of Mardoun

### Chapter 17 - Always

**“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.”**

It was Estrid’s eighteenth birthday and Kittara should have been taking care of last minute organisation at the Council Club, but she needed a little time in her favourite place in front of The Flame. Decisions had been made and Sikush had made up his mind and Estrid was going to die.

“May we ?”

More smiling clerics, nearly all with flowers. She nodded at them and promised herself to start being taciturn with them again. There was quite a room full of smiling faces, all of them just happy to watch her hover above the stone while she brooded.

“I’ll make her a cleric of the Sentinel of The Well on her eighteenth birthday.” Sikush had said.

It was only fair Kittara thought and at least there was no chance of her being selected for permanent exile in the Temple of the Flame.

“I’ll changer her into a Menderan, so she should get five thousand years to study and perhaps start a family.” Sikush had explained.

Kittara could remember lying next to him and looking into his eyes.

“But she’ll die.”

Sikush had stroked her hair and held her for some time.

“Not everyone can be an immortal Kittara.”

“But with the spark inside her ? I thought ?”

“That spark will move on after she dies, but Estrid is just a normal girl. A very nice and intelligent girl, but just a normal girl.”

Kittara hadn’t cried, she wasn’t sure she could, but she could shed the odd tear and one had run down her cheek. So Estrid would die. Not tomorrow or the next day, and hopefully after a long and happy life, but she was going to die.

“Stop moping and stop driving the clerics crazy in that dress.” She heard in her head.

She was about to send Sikush a rude reply, but instead told him she would be there soon. Over fifteen hundred people were attending Estrid’s birthday party and it would be the talk of Mendera for months. She looked down and her skimpy little dress had fallen to one side and she was effectively floating above the shrine in just her panties. No wonder there seemed to be lots of extra flowers today. She could have shimmered into her dress just before the party, but the visit to The Flame had been a last minute decision.

“But why ? You could have had it all.” The creature in the ruins had asked her.

The creature had offered her change and an Empire eager to rule the entire multiverse, with her leading it. Sikush had gone into one of his deep and silent modes when she’d asked about the creature, but she doubted if it had been an immortal for very long. Estrid was going to die in five thousand years or so, and that was the blink of an eye to her. Everyone seemed in so much hurry, like ants furiously busy, but on a road to nowhere.

The last thing a truly ancient immortal wanted was more change, more progress, more pointless technology. Sikush had understood this and nothing changed on Mendera, it was the one constant point in the entire multiverse. They had buried Ojetin against the wall of the Western Sentinel and in countless billions of years she knew that on his birthday Luri would be found

there with a bunch of flowers. That permanence is what true immortals needed and Sikush knew that.

'And ?' She thought to herself.

Kittara had always been completely honest with herself and self delusion wasn't one of her many character flaws.

'I love him.'

Sikush had given the eternal killer to the best person to keep it, the one person guaranteed never to use it, the person who loved him completely. She stood up and smoothed her little black dress and moved her reality to the Council Club.

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She arrived at the back of the pool area and watched Estrid talking to Sventa. They seemed to be inseparable these days and Kittara turned a deaf ear to stories of their wild antics. Estrid was now a grown woman and once Sikush transformed her into a Menderan she'd have even longer legs. No wonder she and Sventa had so many male admirers.

"Hello Kittara."

"Hi, Nauma isn't with you ?"

"Yes, I think she went to get a drink."

Kittara hadn't seen Salomé in quite some time, but she still had the jagged scar on her cheek. She seemed to notice Kittara looking at it.

"I could heal that in seconds ?"

Salomé moved back and Kittara saw the wary look in her eyes that she'd seen before, even well before the death of Qunan. Kittara often wondered what had happened to Salomé to make her so wary, so granite eyed.

"No. It still reminds me to duck quicker."

There was the usual smile, but deep inside Salomé had her personal demons. Only Oddr and Nauma had wanted to carry on with Salomé, so Sikush had given her a top of the range Needle ship, enough money to hire a good crew and one simple instruction, or perhaps threat.

"Stay out of Imperial space for your raids and I won't have to send the Guard after you."

Salomé showed her a long thin box she was carrying.

"I brought Estrid a gift, I'd better give it to her."

As she walked away Kittara was glad she'd come to the party, but hoped she wouldn't stay too long. Then she felt a familiar pair of hands on her shoulders and stepped back against Sikush.

"Pity about that scar, she could be a real beauty." He said.

They watched as Estrid removed a very expensive looking necklace from the box and judging from her body language, started enthusing over it. Then she tried it up against Sventa's neck, and there was more laughter. Sventa now had bright red hair halfway down her back and looked more like her old Genova self than a dark angel. Despite all their worries she hadn't eaten any pilgrims, although there had been a near miss at the opening of Xeodz. The man was drunk and he survived and the injuries had been blamed on growlers.

"Have you seen Princess ?" Kittara asked Sikush.

"Yes. She's with her new guy, the police chief. Do you want to go to her ?"

"Not now, but definitely later on."

The opening of Xeodz had been a huge success and despite a drunken Sventa and several fights, no one had actually died. Albas and Princess had lasted another year before having a spectacular row and vowing never to talk to each other again. Now Princess was dating the police chief who looked after security for the levels and they'd been together for the last two years. Albas kept being inscrutable about his current lover, which usually meant she was

married. Was it love or convenience for Princess ? Well thought Kittara, she was a pretty shrewd lady.

“Bring Estrid to the palace, I have a gift for her.” Said Sikush.

“Now ?”

“Yes, it’s quieter there and she won’t be away long.”

Kittara had no idea what the gift was, but she walked over to Estrid and heard her talking to Sventa.

“Luri says she found something really interesting in that old astrolabe that Ojetin made such a fuss over.”

“Sikush has a present for you, I’m to take you to the palace.”

“What is it ?” Asked Estrid.

“I honestly have no idea.”

Kittara held onto Estrid and moved them both to Sikush’s favourite veranda in the palace. Sikush was sat on a long sofa and next to him was a large box, with holes in the side. As he got up he kissed Estrid on the cheek.

“I thought we might be going to Qasit early ?” Said Estrid.

Sikush held put his arm around her and pointed at the box.

“No, your conversion is still tomorrow. I got you a present, go on open the box.”

The girl walked to the sofa and started to pull at the lid, and a scratching noise came from inside.

“It’s something alive.” Said Estrid pulling her hands back.

“Open it, it won’t hurt you.”

Estrid cautiously pulled back the lid and her eyes lit up.

“Oh it’s wonderful.”

“She’s wonderful,” said Sikush, “I had to pull a lot of strings to get her and she’s a present to Emperor Xeod too.”

Estrid lifted the tan coloured female Menura cat from the box and it started to chunter at her and as Estrid stroked her, it began to sing to her.

“There are heaps of instructions that come with her, but you’ve helped look after Emp for years, so I’ll just say, pick a name quickly and carry her around a lot so she imprints on you.”

Estrid was petting the cat and examining her.

“Can I call her Ojetin ?”

Kittara and Sikush exchanged looks.

“Yes, if you want,” said Sikush, “I think he’d have liked that.”

“Will she live forever, like Emp ?”

“No, she’ll imprint on you and live as long as you do.” Said Sikush

As Estrid played with the cat Sikush leaned towards Kittara and whispered in her ear. She turned towards him and simply said.

“Always.”

----- The End -----

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