

Chronicles of Mardoun

Chapter 7 - Sentinel

“Evolution has run amok on Mendera and we have some of the most dangerous fauna in the Multiverse.” – Imperial Cleric, Annotov

It was very early when Kittara returned to her home and Emperor Xeod lay sprawled across her bed and he hardly woke as she gave him a quick stroke. A quick chirrup and he tucked his face into his fur and went back to sleep. Shower or weapons ?

She walked across the hall and straight through the force wall protecting the entrance to her weapon store. It had been a while since she'd had the time to admire and fondle them and it was something she needed. Her blades were in stacks of six hovering in invisible supports, with just enough space to walk between the rows. No one was allowed here. There were no guards, no protection fields and some of these weapons could kill with the slightest scratch. She remembered her first training session in the Guard when Herusher had told her to select a weapon from the rack and like all newbie Guard she'd chosen the biggest and nastiest energy weapon.

“Tech weapons are no use to you,” he'd said. “You will have spells for ranged and area effect attacks and your blade. Projectiles and beams can be blocked, but it's almost impossible to stop an enchanted blade in the hands of someone who knows how to use it”.

She walked down the rows to where her Demon blade lay two down from the top of a stack. She felt the handle and ran her finger along the blade and then flicked it hard with her nail so that it rang. Then on to her Nurigen which had pride of place in its own space against the wall. Sikush had given her the Nurigen the day he'd passed his hand over the back of her left hand to leave the mark of personal loyalty to the Emperor. The blade was truly priceless and was her favourite by a long way. She picked it up and felt the slight increase in clarity it gave and the increase in aggression. The blade itself was covered in intricate etchings of angels and demons and in its centre in the old dead language of the Holy Warriors from the forbidden times.

'Aggrivas Nulonde'

Luri had taught her the old language and she knew the words meant what was now almost the motto of the Guard.

'Beyond Technology'

After putting the Nurigen back in its place she moved on to a blade three from the top in a stack at the back of the room. She picked up the blade and felt it had power, but had never worked out what the power gave to the wielder, if anything ? This was the blade reputed to be a killer of eternal, though it had no name she knew of. She ran her hand along the sharp three foot blade and it felt almost as though it was organic, had been grown in some way. Kittara had used the blade in a few battles and it tore through enemies, leaving ragged wounds that never healed. Almost as though it was trying to eat the victim rather than cut them. There was no doubt in her mind that if she plunged this into his heart while he slept then Sikush would die. There was a damp spot on the blade and she was surprised to realise it was a tear and she was crying. The last time she remembered crying was when she was a child and her mother had died. She put the blade away and headed for the shower.

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Estrid had made morning showers and getting ready for the day a bit of a game, but Kittara wanted at least one morning of unhurried wallowing in hot water. Plus she was a grown woman and she had missed her personal moments in the shower. She reached out to Chlo and asked to

be told if Estrid woke and she then entered the shower with a sponge and a jar of her favourite body cleanser. Not that she ever really dirty, every time she shimmered into clean clothes Chlo would thoroughly clean her skin and remove any mites or parasites that had tried to set up home. Kittara used lots of the cleanser to get herself feeling fresh and noticed she was tingling between her legs with the thought of what was going to happen. After all it had been two months. Over the years she and Chlo had built up a repertoire and preferred body types of playmates, male and female that Chlo could give her in the shower. Not that Chlo was just an appliance in the shower, she enjoyed these encounters just as much as Kittara and had missed it just as much.

“Jay I think this morning, yes Jay.” Said Kittara.

Immediately a girl of about her own size appeared in the shower, with long dark hair and well developed breasts. Kittara felt between the girls leg and found her bush. She’d never liked the trend on some planets for shaving that area, it always looked a bit sad with no hair, a bit deformed. Her fingers went deep in the girl’s fur and on into her cool interior and evoked a gentle moan. No time for much foreplay today though, no telling when Estrid might wake.

“Down.”

Jay was a submissive construct so Kittara grabbed her hair, pulled her head back and pulled her down onto her knees and then pushed her head between her legs. As the tongue entered her Kittara gave her own gentle moan. Then the tongue went up and flicked at that wonderful bundle of gristle and nerves. After a few minutes the girl put her hand up and grabbed Kittara’s buttocks hard and pushed her face hard against her. Then the tongue went in deep, impressively deep, impossibly deep and Kittara arched her back and her shoulders hit the wall of the shower. Still the girl help her hard and the tongue went in deeper still, twisting, turning, teasing until Kittara was screaming with pleasure and her knees were trembling.

“Stop”

Kittara looked down as the Jay construct smiled up at her and withdrew the eight inch long tongue from her and it disappeared into her mouth. Then the girl stood and they exchanged a long passionate kiss before the girl vanished.

“Thank you Chlo, but Estrid might wake and I’ve got a lot to do today.”

In reply there came a long wicked giggle from Chlo and a warm fluffy towel appeared in Kittara’s hand.

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Estrid was still sleeping, so Kittara gently stroked her cheek until she opened her eyes.

“Big day sleepyhead, I’m taking you to the Sentinel of The North”. She said to Estrid who was still sitting on the edge of the bed and waking up.

“Then we’re seeing Sikush to get you ready for Ixir and if you’re good I’ll let you fire a Yakkie.”

Now Estrid was grinning and headed for the shower. Emp deciding it was a waste of a nice warm bed had settled himself into the dent she left. It was still very early in Mendera City and looking at the garden Kittara could just see a few very keen pilgrims walking past in the early morning light.

She remembered her first time at the Sentinel temple and knew Estrid was in for a life changing moment. Kittara sat at the long table in the lounge and had Chlo produce bowls of the food Estrid liked and some fruit for herself and then lay back and let the news channels wash over her. Several minor wars going on in the Empire, but there always were and the Guard only ever got involved in the big stuff, well in theory at least. A planet that had toyed with the notion of democracy had given up on it after realising it just led to corrupt politicians and economic collapse. Several pieces on celebrities of one kind or another who were busy being, well celebrities. She was once again grateful to live in Mendera City which was in many ways a

tranquil backwater. In the various migrant cities on Mendera life could be short and brutish unless you were rich or powerful, or both. Estrid was freshly showered and dressed for the first time in an outfit that was almost a Guard uniform.

"Chlo said this was best for today." She said doing a quick twirl before sitting down and starting on a bowl of mixed fruit and cereal. Estrid looked incredibly cool and poised for someone so young, but Kittara was concerned about her first trip to a Menderan Temple.

"This is going to be different to other temples you may have visited. I'd been to a few, full of kneeling people, dusty dead places that sent me to sleep. This will be different, the Sentinel temples are very much alive." Kittara noticed Estrid look thoughtful.

"Do the Sentinels really scream? We're taught at school that they do".

"Yes they do, but you don't hear it with your ears, you feel it here," and Kittara touched her at the back of head.

"They haven't screamed for a long time, not since the last high level Demon was allowed to pull itself into existence here."

"There are Demons here, in Mendera?" Said Estrid looking alarmed.

"Only when Sikush allows it and not very often, and usually far to the south of the city at the Well of Souls."

"Suppose I make the Sentinel scream?"

Kittara laughed, "I don't think you will. If anyone it should be me they scream at, but they know who I serve and they'll know you are with me."

They finished their breakfast and then fed Emp and played with him for a few minutes before Kittara said.

"It's time to go, this is important, your life will never be quite the same after today." She motioned Estrid to stand next to her and then seemed to change her mind.

"It's time you were used to switching reality with your eyes open, perhaps even trying to step away as we arrive. Try it, I'll catch you if you stumble."

Kittara took her hand and they stood next to each other and she reached out to Chlo for an overlay of their destination near the Sentinel temple. Suddenly the room began to fade and a faint impression of the path to the Sentinel was in front of them which gradually started to look sharper. Estrid almost instinctively held her other arm out like a hire wire walker.

"Now step forward."

They both took a step and instantly the room vanished and their reality shifted to being on the path. Estrid carried on walking and had a big grin on her face.

"That was fun."

They were about 50 yards from the Sentinel temple and walked slowly up the path towards it.

"There are past head clerics buried either side of the path," explained Kittara. "It's considered a great honour. There are no markers, but everyone in the City knows they are buried here."

Kittara remembered her own first time here and the awful feeling that the invitation had been a mistake and the force wall in front the door would hold her back. Sikush had brought her here and assured her she'd be allowed in.

Although the citizens of Mendera were used to seeing Kittara about and generally left her alone she noticed a few pilgrims pointing at her and headed their way. Very gently she projected the idea that maybe it wasn't a good idea to go to near her. It was a simple trick the Guard used to pass through crowds and it worked perfectly. The pilgrims went off in the other direction. Two clerics either side of the doors nodded to Kittara and they both stepped into the Temple, and Kittara gave Estrid's hand a tight squeeze.

"Oh it's wonderful." Said Estrid as they walked slowly into the temple, her face full of wonder.

The Sentinel of the South Temple was roughly circular with lots of partitioned off areas with comfortable seating in groups. The most striking thing being a dark coloured stone about 10 feet across with a polished surface set into the floor to the right of the door. Kittara remembered her first time here and being astonished at people sitting with food and drink as though they were in a café, and talking to their friends and the clerics.

“Oh, yes, oh,”

Estrid looked a bit unsteady and Kittara led her to a seat, knowing what was happening to her. Like most people in the Multiverse Kittara’s people had a religion based on faith and worship. They believed in a group of unseen Gods who controlled their lives and had to be appeased by regular worship and offerings. Even as a child Kittara had once witnessed that offering being a new born baby. Mendera never tries to spread its religion and has tried hard not to expand it through the colonies, so despite rumours Kittara had no idea what to expect.

“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”, had been her comment to Sikush. So she knew what Estrid was experiencing.

“Please, I don’t”, Estrid had her eyes closed.

Kittara knew Sikush wouldn’t have given Estrid an invite if he thought she wasn’t able to cope with the Sentinel, but you can never be sure. No one leaves their first experience unchanged and a rare few have left with their minds destroyed. Kittara held her hand and gave her a bit of extra strength, nothing too much, just a slight boost.

“Oh Kittara this is wonderful.” Estrid once again looked alert.

“This is the most gentle of the Sentinels. The West Sentinel can hold up your soul in front of you and point at the bad bits. Even I quail at that.”

Estrid laughed and once again closed her eyes and Kittara knew she would survive her first encounter with the Sentinel. For a good hour Kittara watched over Estrid as she drifted in and out of consciousness until she finally woke up.

“Your eyes are darker,” she said to Kittara.

“No, you’re just seeing them clearer. Do you think you can manage to touch the stone ?”

Estrid nodded and Kittara helped her up and still holding her hand took her over to the large dark stone. Several clerics who realised it was Estrid’s first time were gently clearing a few people from the stone so that she could have her first time in privacy.

“Both hands flat on the stone, don’t worry if you faint I’ll catch you.”

“Oh the colours,” said Estrid and Kittara noticed there were bands of red and gold flowing from Estrid’s hand to the ceiling. There were often strange effects in the temple and it was usually a good sign. After a few minutes Estrid turned to smile at Kittara but instead looked horrified.

“I see you !,” then Estrid looked away and took her hands from the stone.

“I never claimed to be good”, said Kittara and led the still unsteady Estrid back to a seat and gave her a drink. After a while the colour returned to her face and Estrid turned to Kittara.

“I’m sorry. I saw many things and I know you’ll serve a far greater role than I.”

“Come on lets see what Sikush has found for you.”

As they walked out of the door and down the path Estrid once again put her hand in Kittara’s and almost without hesitation they switched reality to the Imperial Palace.

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Estrid ran straight up to Sikush and gave him a huge hug, which surprised him greatly.

“Well usually after a first trip to the Sentinel I’m used to getting looks of disapproval, but this is a novelty.”

Kittara was a bit shocked too as Estrid had so far treated the Chalne with a kind of awe at a distance. The girl looked from one of them to the other and finally said with an air of calm grandeur.

"It's ok I forgive you both."

Kittara almost laughed, but she noticed Sikush was holding Estrid's hand and looking at her very seriously. Then he led her to a seat at one side of the Veranda. They were on the private Veranda overlooking the large lake behind the part of the Imperial palace he used most. Two flights of stairs led down in a curve to the lake which doubled as a swimming pool when he felt like relaxing.

Not that any carnal delights were enjoyed here, that was ok for the Council Club, but visitors to the palace were expected to find a private room for any explorations of each others sexual desires. The top of the stairs were covered by an invisible force wall which allowed a slight breeze and scent from the flowers through to the veranda but not the intense heat of the Menderan summer. The garden might swelter, but on the veranda it was always a nice comfortable temperature. With enough room for tables to sit twenty or more, yet an intimate feel it was a favourite place for Sikush to receive visitors.

"You can ask me anything about your experience with the Sentinel, or any of the The Damned, but I'd be wary of asking clerics unless you have a day to spare."

Estrid chuckled and leaned closer to Sikush and Kittara realised she was no longer the shy and hesitant girl they had brought from New Algaria.

"I enjoy the cleric's school, but they do contradict each other and quite a lot of it isn't right. The Sentinel showed me some things the clerics get wrong all the time."

Sikush laughed and turned to Kittara.

"From one so young!" he then turned back to Estrid.

"I formed the clerics you know? Originally to look after the Temple of the Flame and to be the custodians of forbidden knowledge. Like all religious orders they grew in numbers and started to expand their area of influence. Never proselytizing or attacking other religions they started to travel throughout the Empire and beyond."

He leant back and looked thoughtful.

"Most conversations we'll have are only for the ears of yourself and Kittara. Would that make you feel awkward?"

Estrid just shook her head at him. He leant forward and gently touched her forehead and the world looked a bit sharper to her, like the contrast had just been increased.

"The multiverse is all about probabilities. At the moment there is nothing here to give it any concern, but if say Kittara was to form a tear."

He nodded at Kittara and she formed a spinning tear of The Damned in front of her. It spun giving off yellow and green light and it gave off a feeling of power.

"Then if Kittara were to increase the power of the tear."

Kittara felt for the edges of the multiverse that surround us all and started to unravel the fabric and weave it into the spinning tear. Up to a tear capable of destroying Mendera and still on until it was capable of destroying the entire galaxy.

"I see the distortions, it's awful, please stop it." Pleaded Estrid.

Kittara could see the lines pulsing through the veranda as the multiverse prepared for the probably that Kittara just might let the tear fly. She'd never seen the lines as well as the Genova saw them, but she suspected Estrid was seeing something beyond just pulsating blue lines.

Sikush nodded to her and she let the tear disintegrate and blend itself harmlessly back into the fabric of the multiverse.

Kittara had once gone to dead planet a long way from anywhere and had kept building a tear up and up until the lines were pulsating so fast they became a blur. Still she built up the power until something else came, something dark. The ground beneath her shook and the tear seemed to explode, but she was unharmed and when she looked the dead planet was still beneath her. The tear she had wound could easily have destroyed everything within 100s of light years including several galaxies, yet it was gone. Something dark and terrible had surrounded her and taken the force into itself. Sikush had given her a long hard look the next day and she had never taken any spell that far again.

"The Genova see the lines around us all, but they are drawn to people like Kittara who seem to always have a high probability of causing mayhem."

Estrid looked at Kittara and did notice a light blue halo around her that seemed to pulse, but she had to concentrate very hard to see it. She wondered what happened if the distortions kept growing, but felt she didn't want to know the answer.

"I'll leave you with ability to see the lines, but to get back to the clerics. They too developed an ability to see distortions in the multiverse and became obsessed with finding who or what was causing them."

Kittara tensed, he was going to tell her about the mission Qunan was going on.

"The Sentinel showed me places, where the stones come from." Said Estrid.

"Yes, though the clerics cannot go there. The clerics travelled and found whatever was causing the distortions. Sometimes what looked like nothing other than old rocks, sometimes ruins, and very rarely indeed an object. The problem was that the Empire needed to take control of these places and so the clerics became seen as an advanced guard for the Empire."

Kittara remembered the deaths of clerics who simply wanted to expand their knowledge. She'd seen Sikush in great distress as yet another cleric he'd nurtured was buried along the paths to the Sentinel temples.

Sikush picked up her thoughts and they exchanged a private nod at each other.

"At first I ordered all clerics to travel with at least one of the Guard as an escort, but they're used to having the right to travel anywhere and the deaths continued. So an Imperial edict was published stating anyone who killed or tortured one of my clerics would be destroyed. After a few examples were made it's worked pretty well at keeping them unmolested."

"I saw the EK 4867 raid on several news channels." Said Estrid.

Kittara could see where this was leading and although she looked calm she was privately insisting to Sikush that Estrid was no warrior.

"Sometimes even now an example must be made. The clerics now travel everywhere, generally alone and unmolested. One called Ojetin investigated a strange distortion in the multiverse in the New Keo Group and it sounds like something we need to take control of. He went to a mining complex run by the group on NKG0056 and found an ancient temple, perhaps dating to before the last switch."

Estrid looked a bit confused and Kittara realised that despite her new found poise she was still only a 12 year old girl from the colonies. Sikush took time to explain the idea of switches to Estrid and they both noticed a glint in her eye as she understood.

"Do you know everything from the forbidden time?" She asked Sikush.

It's another widely held belief by the people of the Empire that The Chaln  knows all and really knows everything that has ever happened and keeps it all secret, in reality his memory is effectively wiped with Chlo's at every switch. It is impossible to remember everything that ever happened in an eternal series of multiverses and even using the fabric of the multiverse as a memory store as Chlo does, she would still never be able to store more than a fraction of all learned knowledge and events. There comes a point when you have to clear everything out and

start afresh and this is the switch. Even so Sikush realised that some high tech devices need to be carried over and there is some knowledge essential to the new multiverse, so the books were allowed to be kept in the Temple of the Flame and Chlo was allowed to keep records of 'useful' devices and weapons from the forbidden times. It was still only an almost non-existent percentage of past knowledge though and there were objects and devices that Chlo held in stasis in the Imperial forbidden store that she had no knowledge of. Sikush himself often felt like an old person who has gone into the cellar for something, but on getting there has no idea what he wanted. He often looked at objects that seemed familiar and yet he had no idea of their use. To Estrid he gave the standard answer to the question.

"That in itself is a forbidden piece of information. Some knowledge is held in the Temple of the Flame, but how much and of what it is forbidden to say."

Estrid was left with the impression he was hiding his true knowledge from her, which of course was the intent.

"NKG0056 is a planet formed in the last 5 billion years, so Ojetin realised he was onto something big. Unfortunately the New Keo Group while happy to allow the cleric access aren't about to allow a full scale excavation by the empire. So I've devised a plan to gain access to the site without risking an incident."

Sikush brought his other hand round and held Estrid's hand between his.

"You're no warrior and you will never be one of The Damned, but I know one day you'll become a very good cleric, perhaps one of the best."

Kittara felt a sense of relief, but she could see from his behaviour there was more to come.

"You need to go to Ixir with Kittara, but I also think you should go with her on the mission to the site Ojetin found."

Kittara was an old hand at dealing with Sikush and she knew arguing with him would get her nowhere, so she maintained her calm exterior and bided her time.

"Kittara will merely be staying on board the craft used in the operation, so there should be no risk, so yes you will be going with her. You will of course need a weapon of some kind for the trip to Ixir. Plus some protection and a few other tricks. I have a Council meeting soon, so let's have a look in the Imperial store."

Sikush stood and still holding both of Estrid's hands he disappeared taking Estrid with him and Kittara instantly followed.

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The forbidden section of the Imperial store is just behind the room where Qunan was stored and looks like any other part of the store. Kittara had walked past the shelves many times and was always fascinated by the chatter from Chlo going quiet. Chlo always gave her a run down on the objects she was passing but then all would go completely quiet. Kittara had often questioned Chlo on this but was always told she was forbidden to talk about items in that section. In reality Chlo could not have told her much anyway. The forbidden section covered about a square mile and almost everything in it was impossible to examine by her scanners and probes.

"Over here." Said Sikush and still holding Estrid's hand he took her to a block of strange looking objects held behind green protection fields.

"This is the one, 3rd one in and we'll need Chlo."

Chlo appeared and then a table and extra lights appeared hovering over that section of the store. The green light went out and a long case moved slowly out of its resting place for countless millennia and onto the table. The Chalne put his hands on the case and hesitated. In his mind he was pulling in memory fragments from places that even surprised him. Glimpses of ferocious warrior women armed with unique weapons, who went out to kill on his orders.

Another snippet of a hand adjusting what was in the box and a memory of a voice in panic. He opened the two catches on the case and brought out what looked like a cut down Yakkie.

"The YK 2 is a modern weapon made by the Empire, but this is quite different."

Sikush lifted the weapon up onto his hip and ran his hand almost lovingly over its surface.

"Yamish Karugin only ever made 5 of these and they were the best weapon he ever made."

The weapon in his hand looked like a standard Yakkie, but was about 2 feet long. Two flattish plates with three holes in the business end, joined by a slender neck and all made of a mat finish silver metal. There were no obvious controls on the device. He placed his hand on the rear plate and seemed pleased with the gentle whine that resulted.

"This is the special Karugin and it has less power than the modern Yakkie, but it's far better at delivering a targeted charge at a distance."

"An assassin's weapon", said Estrid touching the neck of the Karugin.

"Here it's yours now, put it over your shoulder, it won't fire yet."

Estrid put the strap of the weapon over her shoulder and was surprised how light it felt.

"I'll show you how to use it after the Council meeting. Chlo will not be able to repair it, but it should be almost indestructible. It will recharge itself from almost any power source, but try not to use long bursts. Come on there are other things to collect."

Chlo put the empty case back in the store and they spent some time collecting other items which Kittara and Chlo carried.

"Here."

Once again a table appeared and this time a small thin sliver of silver floated from the store onto the table.

"You don't need to undress for this, but I need to put it on your tummy."

Estrid pulled up her top and Sikush knelt in front of her.

"Activate this every morning after you shower, it will feel easier before you dress. It will always feel very strange though, especially when it gets to your eyes, but don't panic."

Kittara had no idea what to expect and Sikush was ignoring her prods on their private channel, so she moved behind Estrid and waited. Sikush placed the 2 inch sliver of metal on Estrid's stomach and then put her finger on it.

"Feel it throbbing? It gets its power from you. Now put your finger at the bottom and keep it there until it beeps."

Kittara moved next to Sikush and looked at the device now laying flat just above Estrid's navel. Then there was a small but very clear beep.

"You can't stop it once it starts and it will feel awful. Get ready and then run your finger up the device then move your finger away. It won't fall off."

Estrid ran her finger up the sliver and then moved her hand away and Kittara saw small filaments start to move out from the device and over the girl's skin. Estrid obviously felt the filaments and her breathing changed and she started to sweat.

"Don't worry you'll get used to it. This will probably save your life many times."

Then to Estrid's surprise Sikush kissed her on the forehead. Estrid could feel something moving all over her body, up her shoulders, down her legs, like hundreds of ants crawling over her skin. It took over three minutes for the crawling sensation to reach her face and then she saw something move over her eye and screamed.

"No, trust me it will be fine."

Sikush held her hand and gave her just a little bit of strength to get through it. The filaments over Estrid's eyes widened and then vanished and all the crawling feelings stopped. Her vision was clear and Estrid relaxed.

"You are now the proud owner of the only remaining Rejjacy body armour. It will stop all projectile and most energy weapons, but you're not a tank. My advice is to behave as though you're not wearing it. It will stop anything penetrating the armour which now covers your body, but if you get blown across the room the concussion will still kill you."

It took a lot to impress Kittara, but the Rejjacy armour certainly had.

"What happened to the Rejjacy?" She asked.

Sikush seemed to be a long way off and finally he shrugged and gave her a truthful answer.

"I have no idea. This trinket has been in my possession for over a million switches."

The room went quiet as they all took in the enormous age of the armour. Chlo looked at the sliver and the filaments and it was all impossible. None of it matched any of the rules of the multiverse and it shouldn't exist, yet it did. The one thing which was obvious to her was that with all the resources of the Empire she couldn't construct such a device. Sikush was still giving Estrid all his attention.

"Like most objects from the forbidden times it has no rules here to tell it how to age, so it will last forever. It's porous so sweat will evaporate through it and of course you can breathe and hear. There is a very small loss in visual acuity, but the boost I gave you earlier will more than compensate. Ok hold out your left wrist."

Estrid noticed a silver band going around her wrist that hadn't been there before, with two yellow circles on it, each having a strange symbol in a language unknown to her.

"Your right wrist has the same band on it. Press the left button and your mouth protection will be turned off so you can eat. Press the button again to turn on the protection again. The right button will turn off the protection to your personal areas, so you can use the toilet. Don't try to go for a pee without turning off that bit of the armour or I've heard it can be a very unpleasant experience. Ok let's run through them again."

Estrid ran through the options until she had them perfectly remembered and then asked.

"How do I turn it completely off?"

"Yes of course. I'd turn it off every night if you can so your skin can breathe properly but when you're in Ixir you can leave it on all the time. To turn it off keep your finger on the top of the sliver until you hear the beep and then rub your finger down the device. You'll get another beep once all the filaments have withdrawn. You can't remove the sliver."

Estrid looked a bit shocked.

"I can remove it, but it's now harmlessly joined itself to your skin. You'll soon forget it's there and it is now yours forever." Estrid still didn't look happy and Sikush took her by the hand again.

"One last thing."

Sikush took Estrid off through the store while Chlo followed on producing floating lights so they could see the stored objects. Kittara followed on pleased that Estrid was likely to arrive on Ixir very well protected.

"In here, yes in here."

Letting go of her hand Sikush walked between the green glowing protection towards a small cylinder several feet from the path. As he put his hand out for it Chlo cut its stasis field and it dropped into his hand. He walked back towards them and drew what was a small dagger from its sheaf. The blade glinted blue and silver in the dark.

"A demon blade." Said Kittara.

As Kittara watched the 7 inch blade glint in his hand she looked around and wondered, not for the first time at what other wonders were still held in the forbidden store.

"Yes a Demon blade taken during a battle from..... Well it was a long time ago. It's yours Estrid but be careful, unlike Empire weapons which don't harm friends a Demon blade will

happily bite into any flesh, even yours. Use it as a last resort, not to wound or threaten but to kill. Kittara will show you how.”

He sheaved the blade and handed it to Estrid who tried to coolly push it into her belt, but her clothing had been moved around so much she felt like a rag bag. Everything else they’d collected was now on the table and Estrid recognised nothing except a boot dagger very like the one she watched Kittara put in her boot every morning. Ignoring questioning looks she took the knife and removed it from its flat scabbard and stabbed the back of her own hand. The blade glanced harmlessly off the Rejjacy armour. Estrid nodded to no one in particular, put the knife back in its scabbard and then expertly slid it into her boot, exactly as Kittara did every morning. She turned to see all three of them give her jaw dropping looks and she felt her cool had been restored.

“Right, everything else in a bag for Kittara to take, I have about a minute to get to Council.”

Chlo produced a bag and about another five strange objects went into it and Kittara threw the bag over her shoulder.

“On second thoughts Kittara come with me, watch from my dressing room and bring Estrid. She can see what I have to put up with.”

All four of them vanished, the table vanished and all the lights returned to their usual dull default setting.