

Mendera Temple

Chapter 9 – Slum Runners

“Sventa was instantly up on her knees, her wings beating slowly and her talons reaching out for Kittara’s breasts.

“Tongue or tail ?” Sventa asked.”

“They’re all here.” Said Quinn.

Mo had seen some of them arrive, some like seasoned slum runners hardly made a wave in the respectable atmosphere of Xeod’s. Others on the other hand had arrived in style, their entourage checking the place out before the boss was allowed anywhere near the place. A new sort of crook to Ixir were the educated corporate types, but Mo had met their kind many times before. Peli was off arranging viewings for him, potential private islands just off the coast. Mo was alone and quite enjoying a brief moment of solitude.

‘Mendera is clearing up after destroying an invading army is less than 24 hours.’

Breeze was on channel 77, showing piles of burnt and destroyed bodies of the undead, heaped in piles all over Mendera city. In daylight and being pushed into hastily dug massed graves, the undead looked more like a traditional army than super undead. It all looked so ordinary, but Chlo wasn’t giving views of their faces, the dead eyes and decaying features.

‘The entire empire is amazed that a well-disciplined army of over a hundred million was defeated so easily.’

Chlo had told Mo the figure was more like sixty million and they’d be scouring the planet for months. Looking for the surviving few undead who’d either run away from the main battle, or simply wandered off. Whatever the true number, The Damned had come out of it looking good and looking dangerous. The Maran Group were no longer critical of Sikush and it would also help Mo in his dealing with the Ixir underworld. They’d all know who he really represented and Mendera had just shown that it didn’t pay to be on the wrong side of the empire.

‘And lastly. The Chalné has decided not to interrupt his trade mission to the outer worlds.’

Mo always chuckled at that line, which all the news feeds were giving out. Some on Ixir knew about the rifts or had an idea about them, but the majority would have considered them an impossibility, a mere legend. Much simpler for Sikush to be away in the outer planets, with no direct access to the news media. Chlo was in his head asking if he was ready for company and then she and Albas were in his suite. Chlo was the blonde version of herself, dressed in a short business suit, while Albas was in his usual very expensive blue lounge suit.

“They’re all waiting for you.” Said Chlo.

Quinn had already briefed him on the eighteen people who’d come to see him. The eleven men and seven women who ran just about every scam and crooked deal on Ixir. Some would be useful in helping them make money and expand their operations, but about five could be very useful in fomenting revolution.

“Would you like more muscle ?” Asked Chlo. “I can bring in a few more of the Guard if you like ?”

Mo looked at Chlo in her grey business suit and Albas in what could only be described as his spiv suit and thought they’d be perfect for the meeting.

“You two will be fine.”

They walked out of his suite and past the mothers and children watching the daily puppet show, Mo preferred the short walk to being instantly zapped from place to place. Then they went through the main bar, which was only selling soft drinks until night. Past the pool and they were into the tunnel that led to Xeod's Classic and Mo suddenly felt alive.

"I love this life !"

Albas slapped him on the back and all three of them emerged into the main bar of the old Xeod's, the version that even at ten in the morning was serving maximum strength drinks and offering a topless dance act on stage. Not that there were many customers, but there were a few hard core drinkers and a few getting breakfast after a night of the kind of carnal delights Xeod's was famous for.

"Mo ! How they hanging ?"

A pretty red head had looked ready to check out exactly how they were hanging, but she noticed Albas and Chlo and just smiled and kept her distance. Another corridor and two state of the art biometric readers later and they were outside of Xeod's boardroom. Mo stood there for a few seconds to collect his thoughts and then he was through the door and heading for the head of the table. Chlo and Albas took up their positions just behind him.

"Welcome," said Mo, "I hope you've all had refreshments ?"

There were a lot of nodding heads and few affirmative responses. Mo continued with his well-rehearsed welcome address.

"For those of you who are spending the night at Xeod's there will of course be no charge for any of our services and I hope you all make full use of the facilities."

Quinn was at the far end of the table and smiling at him. All the girls had been well paid to look after whatever requirements the visitors might have and Mo had promised extra bonuses if things went well. Mo had always been good at the timing of his speeches and he'd given quite a few, mostly when he was running an assassins guild. Once he'd been quiet for long enough to gain their complete attention he started on the speech he thought of as pitch 1.

"Firstly can I say that I consider us all to be friend around this table, friends who can trust each other. You all know who I work for and the importance of confidentiality. Anyone divulging any details of our meeting would no longer be considered a friend."

There were a lot of heads nodding at him.

"Needed saying, needed saying." Came from the end of the table.

"Everyone here has dealt with Xeod's in one way or another and although peaceful times can be profitable, we all know that wars and unrest are far more lucrative."

There was quite a bit of table thumping and Belso Drahl the weapon dealer was particularly keen to make himself heard.

"No use trying to sell guns if everyone's loving their fellow man."

There was general laughter, but Belso stood up and obviously had a serious point to make.

"Mo, we've all heard of you and there's no disrespect meant, but there's rumours of you bringing in top of the line Maran weapons. None of us can compete with that, so I'm hoping you're going to share some of your supply ?"

A few worried face, but most of the group seemed to concur with the weapons dealer.

"There will be no moving in on your territory," said Mo, "all the Maran tech will be sold through the people around this table and we've other ideas for expanding your trade."

He had them now, he'd appealed to their true nature, greed.

“I’m going to give you a short presentation,” said Mo, “about the profits to be made from conflict. I’m not talking about major wars or large scale destruction. I’m just going to try and show you the profit there is to be made from a long and drawn out revolution.”

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“He certainly has a way of handling an army.” Said Sikush.

“An army needs to keep busy, they’ve been inactive too long.” Said Luri.

They were halfway down the hill from the alcázar and watching Aukar drill the troops on the flat plain below them. Annill was a huge city and because of the years of war it had needed to be self-contained. Below them was an area large enough to assemble an army of thousands and Aukar was working them like a master. As one vast phalanx of men wheeled one way, Aukar would lead a group of defenders in a mock defence in the other direction, wheeling above them and inspiring them to heroism. Nurigen was down there, offering advice on tactics and the use of hand to hand weapons. The famous and rather irritable Weaponsmith had formed a friendship with the last of the Terak that had surprised everyone.

“He reminds me of Herusher,” said Kittara, “but Herusher on a really good day.”

Kittara was with them, she’d been invited to join the imperial party as they reviewed the progress of the troops from a good and well trained army to being a superb force and second to none. Abijah was there, but she was still saying little and keeping close to Sikush. She still seemed to have little memory of her own past and although she still had her legendary fighting skills, most of her history she was learning from Sikush.

“When will they be ready?” Asked Abijah.

“That is Aukar’s decision,” said Sikush, “he knows the urgency.”

There was the sound of drums from below as the third giant phalanx moved to join in the mock battle. To train The Damned Chlo used whole planets as simulators, but in Annill they played against real adversaries and mock battle or not there would be injuries, perhaps even deaths. Sometimes Aukar used the new soldiers as reinforcements for one side or another, but on this occasion they seemed to be attacking everyone they came into contact with.

“If they don’t attack the Necropolis soon,” said Kittara, “Faarlh will split his undead up, move them around the rifts, make them hard to root out. They could pop up anywhere and cause trouble.”

“Spread them wide enough and we might never find them all.” Added Abijah.

Luri was keeping silent, they all knew that she felt a deep shame for the actions of her brother and that she wanted the war with The Many to be over as quickly as possible. Aukar was flying above the troops below and urging them on, while the sound of drums continued.

“Aukar will decide when they’re ready,” Said Sikush, “but he’s training them hard, because he knows the army needs to attack the Necropolis soon, very soon.”

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Alyz was back in the imperial stores, deep beneath the palace on Mendera. She never had setup the permanent link to the Old One; the invasion of the undead had interrupted her. Understandable the ancient craft was concerned about the attack on Mendera and the fate of his precious DNA bank. “There,” she said, “still stored in stasis and untouched. No one can enter these stores unless Chlo gives them access.”

It wasn’t quite true, there were two entrances from the palace garden, but they were rarely used and as no one entered the palace precincts without permission from Chlo, Alyz decided not to complicate matters by mentioning them. Alyz could almost feel the Old One relax as she

permanently locked a benign probe in place. It would send the Old One a constant live image of his DNA bank. After the usual long pause Alyz heard him reply.

“Thank you Alyz.”

Like most of The Damned Alyz enjoyed being in the imperial store and she rarely left without a good look around. At one time Chlo had kept non-perishable items out of stasis, but in the end it became easier to keep everything inside the light green glow of a stasis field.

“Everything is perishable.” Chlo had once told her, “Gold, platinum, even the finest Kivar steel. Leave it long enough and entropy will turn it to dross.”

Alyz knew that Chlo was fighting an unseen, but constant battle to keep entropy from turning the fabric of Mendera itself to dross. She moved between the shelves and even after all the billions of years she’d been one of the Guard, it still gave her a thrill. Alyz noticed a box she’d never looked at and found it contained seeds from Ushong, seeds of an edible bulb of some kind. Why were those seeds in stasis ? According to the index Mo had put them into store and mentioned the particularly good flavour of the bulb. Long forgotten of course, as was so much else in the huge city sized store. Alyz ignored the first rule of the store and removed someone else’s box from stasis.

“Are they viable Chlo ?”

“Of course. But I will need to inform Mo of your actions.”

Alyz looked at the original storage date and it was so long ago that the numbers weren’t used in current Mendera math. Mo would have forgotten all about them and there were a lot of destroyed gardens in the city. A few edible bulb seeds wouldn’t go far, but it was a start and Alyz had always fancied having a garden near the Well. She put a message for Mo on the common channel.

‘Sorry Mo, I felt the need to start a garden.’

After putting the packet of seeds in her pocket, Alyz moved her reality to the roof of the Council building, one of the few undamaged structures in Mendera. Jen had been leading the clean-up operation and part of the royal palace was being used to house those who had once lived in the rings. Right by the palace walls Alyz could see tents, the temporary homes of merchants and near their tents was a makeshift marketplace. Alyz knew that temporary had a habit of becoming permanent on Mendera and that second market area was likely to be there in a thousand years, maybe a million years. The local clerics would moan, there’d be noisy scenes in the council chamber, but on Mendera, business is business. Alyz looked towards the rings and the destruction looked far worse now that all the loose debris had been moved in the search for bodies. There would be no single burial mound this time, families were holding the usual low key Mendera type of funeral as bodies were found. Deep graves that were unmarked, but well out of the way of any likely building work. Alyz knew there would be a memorial built and a time of official grieving for the dead, but that would come later, when Sikush returned.

Miles to the south large transport craft were landing, bringing in stores and then some remained on the ground, providing more temporary housing. Days on Mendera were hot, often very hot, but the nights could be cold enough to cause a layer of thin ice on pools and ponds. Not everyone was suited to living in tents in such temperatures, so Jen had called some of the large transports out of orbit, putting them on the ground near the Well. In many ways life was beginning to return to normal in Mendera, but they needed The Chalné to return, the eternal guardian. Then the rebuilding could begin and the city would be unchanging once again.

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Delmus was still working with Hol, they just seemed to end up needed at the same place. Chlo could always give the number and location of bodies, but getting them from under the rubble needed a bit of brute force and that usual meant a couple of The Damned.

“Can you hold the beam out of the way ?” Asked Hol.

Delmus easily pushed the heavy beam up and away from where Hol was reaching into the dust and rubble. As he watched Hol was pulling out a woman, a cleric and then Hol pulled her two children from the ruined house. They’d been pulling bodies out of rubble for far longer than the entire war had lasted and for Delmus this was when the war felt real.

“Three this time,” called Delmus, “a woman and two children.”

It all went like a well-oiled machine. Delmus and Hol brought out the bodies, which Chlo identified and then a group of clerics cleaned the dead and prepared them for instant burial. Mendera was hot, it was always hot, so the dead would be in their unmarked graves within the hour. There were relatives of course, in this case a father and surviving son came forward and helped wrap the bodies in white shrouds. There’d be crying, but Delmus was always impressed by the quiet dignity of the surviving family. No wailing, no screeching at the recovery team, they quietly tended to the bodies of their dead and buried them with respect.

“Wing 5 need some help,” Chlo was saying in his head, “a group of undead have gone into caves to the North West. Are you able to assist ?”

Hol was getting the same request and looking at him and nodding, he knew she’d had enough of digging in rubble for dead bodies. Chlo had been using attack wings to destroy the remaining undead. It was hardly sporting to use that much firepower, but no one wanted any of the undead raiding towns a cities for years to come. The problem came when a particularly clever group of undead went to ground and this group had gone into the Haxall caverns, a major beauty spot and not one Sikush would be keen on seeing blown up.

“Happy to Chlo,” Delmus replied, “but they will need assistance here for some time.”

“No problem a relief team is on the way.”

Delmus lowered the beam back into the ruined building and before he could look for the next building to investigate, Jen herself was next to him, with one of the Guard from the outer empire.

“Come to get your hands dirty ?” Asked Delmus.

“I wanted to see just how bad things are.”

“It’s bad. Some houses have no survivors at all; the families are being buried by neighbours.”

Jen talked to the party of clerics and they moved off to investigate the next building on ring eight.

Delmus and Hol both shimmered into clean uniforms and moved their realities to just outside the Haxall caverns.

“Any clues as to number and position Chlo ?”

“Ten of them went in, but the geology and depth blocks scanning.”

There was a slight pause before Chlo added.

“The caverns are the home of a rare cave crab and a major tourist attraction for the pilgrims. Please try not to damage it too much.”

So no RM9 this time. Delmus sighed and looked at Hol, who gave him a wry smile.

“I’m just glad to be away from search and recovery.” She said.

Delmus knew what she meant, seven hours of digging dead civilians out of ruined building could rattle the toughest warriors. He looked at the entrance to the caverns, complete with lights to guide pilgrims along the approved route. Somehow Delmus just knew the undead weren’t going to stick to the approved route.

“Wasn’t Haxall a heretic who Sikush had executed a few ages of the temple ago ?” Asked Hol.
“He was and Sikush had his church burnt to the ground and dispersed his followers across the empire. But history is fickle and now the cavern where Haxall hid is a major destination for pilgrims.”
“Why, it doesn’t make sense ?”

Delmus started to walk past the tourist information desk and into the caverns.

“It’s religion Hol,” he said, “it doesn’t have to make sense.”

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The meeting had gone very well and all eighteen of those invited had agreed to help the highly profitable revolution Mo had discussed. Some just wanted to sell more military kit, but others had their own reasons for wanting to destabilise Ixir. Mo desperately wanted Chlo to give him an idea, a warning if he was planning something too over the top, but even talk of destroying a fusion generation plant had received just a smile from her.

“So how many Maran 47s can you obtain ?” Asked Belso Drahl.

The eighteen had been reduced to twelve, then five and now just three remained, the three Mo thought would be most useful to the revolution, three he’d be proud to have as fellow slum runners. Belso was of course interested in obtaining state of the art energy weapons, but he could provide explosive that were completely untraceable.

“In theory,” said Chlo, “supply could be unlimited, but you wouldn’t want to flood the market and bring the prices down.”

They’d developed a rhythm, with Mo taking a proactive role, Quinn providing operations expertise and Chlo providing accurate information as required. Albas had taken the rest of the party to classic Xeod’s, to make sure they enjoyed their stay and were looked after by the staff.

“My people can set their signatures ?”

“I can provide you with an admin console,” said Chlo, “same as they use in the Maran army. You can set up the 47s for anyone you want.”

Belso looked impressed, so impressed he wanted to make an order for the high tech Ion blasters known as the Maran 47.

“I’d like a thousand delivered over the next quarter. Can you give me an idea on price ?”

They’d reached the point of no return earlier than Mo had expected, he’d anticipated another couple of meetings would be required, but he went ahead with his rehearsed plan.

“Prices can be negotiated and could even be below normal trade prices, for partners who are committed to the plan.”

He had their attention, so Mo continued.

“There has to be an act to show good faith, something that means there is no going back for any of us.”

“You’re after a sign of commitment, I understand.” Said Axl Devon.

Axl ran a gang called the ‘Crazies,’ their tags were on just about every wall in the levels. Axl’s gang ran everything from selling stolen microchips to the odd assassination. His gang were famed for never talking to the authorities and their brutality. They were perfect for what Mo had in mind.

“Indeed Axl, that’s exactly what I mean,” said Mo, “a group enterprise that bonds us all together. You will of course be well paid for your expertise.”

“What kind of group enterprise do you mean ?” Asked Miram Dunn. “My people aren’t into suicide missions.”

Miram was a last minute addition to the group and Quinn had almost left her out of the invites.

“She’s a head case,” Quinn had said, “she has several feminist anarchy groups and leads the Sisters of Ixir. She’s trouble !”

The Sisters of Ixir had blown up a few militia buildings and had burned down a few public buildings. There had never been a great loss of life, but the group had registered in Mo’s memory and he had insisted on Miram being invited.

“No suicide missions Miram,” said Quinn, “we want everyone to come back alive. A few of my men will be going on the mission, and I want them all to come back.”

“So, you’re calling it a mission now.” Commented Axl.

Mo had tried to avoid using the word mission, but he guessed that for the right monetary incentives Axl would come in on the plan. The difficulty was Miram, who seemed to have goals beyond just wealth and power.

“Ok then it’s a mission,” said Mo, “does it matter what we call it ? Axl and Miram will be well paid for their help and the families of any casualties will be looked after. As for Belso ? You’ll get your thousand Ion blasters and at rock bottom rates.”

“Who or where are you looking to blow up ?” Asked Miram.

Quinn had given Mo a few good ideas, but Mo wanted the first outing of his slum runners to be memorable, to be something no one could ignore. Plus the target he had in mind was deliberately isolated and on the coast.

“We’re going to destroy the fusion reactor at Tonokae.” He said.

He’d expected a stunned silence, but all three of his chosen group were nodding at him and seemed happy about the choice.

“That’ll get you noticed.” Said Axl.

Miram looked particularly happy.

“There’s only a small village and nothing else for miles,” she said, “so when do you want this to happen ?”

Chlo was doing what none of them could really comprehend and that included Mo. She was plugging the protagonists, the target and various dates into the time lines and looking at the results. No computer on its own could have treated live timelines as though they were a simulator, but Chlo was a hybrid of computer and organic life. In his head Mo heard her decision and passed it to the group.

“Twenty days from today,” he said, “to have the optimum effect.”

Again no dropped jaws, no one shouting it was impossible.

“I take it you have plans of the plant and a route in and out ?” Asked Miram.

Chlo appeared to pull printed paper out of thin air, as she placed several maps and detailed reports on the table.

“We have two main scenarios,” she said, “and a backup. I have a copy of everything for all of you, but it is mission that can be accomplished with minimal risk.”

For the next hour Mo and Chlo went through the plan, with Quinn giving extra local information as required. Eventually Mo realised the speculative plan was now fixed irrevocably in the minds of the team around him, it was going to happen. Eventually Axl broke the meeting up by saying he needed to leave. Before they could go Mo handed them each a simple artwork drawing of a tag, a tag that simply said ‘slum runners’ in the sort of script beloved by the graffiti artists of Ixir.

“Can you all get a few of your people to start putting these all over Ixir,” he said, “and then step up the numbers appearing after Tonokae ?”

“So that’s us ?” Asked Axl. “We’re going to be the slum runners.”

“I like it,” said Miram, “I’ll get some of my girls straight to it.”

Belso just nodded, they all knew that someone needed to claim responsibility for destroying the fusion reactor and one name was much the same as any other. They arranged the date of the next meeting, but as he left Axl couldn't resist adding.

"See you soon fellow slum runners."

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Delmus hadn't gone far into the caverns before finding the body.

"There are no staff here, must have been a tourist." Said Hol.

He rolled the body over and there was the hole in her neck, the sign that one of the undead had bitten right through her spinal cord. When Chlo told him she had enough information to obtain an identity on the body, Delmus carefully pulled the body to one side of the path and wrapped it in an imperial body bag.

"We'll find more," he said, "tourists always travel in groups."

The caverns were famous for their crystal ceilings, which were the colour of amethyst. Add the effect of lighting, perfectly positioned to show the colour to the best possible effect and many tourists were left staring and speechless. It was all constantly being kept in a perfect condition by Chlo of course, like the rest of the fabric of Mendera, but that didn't stop the caverns being beautiful. The life on Mendera however had been allowed to evolve, mutate and then evolve again as it went through millennia upon millennia, with no interference from Chlo. The result was that Mendera had some of the strangest creatures and plants in the multiverse and the giant blind crabs of the caverns were one such creature.

"Do the crabs bite?" Asked Hol, who'd never been to the caverns since childhood.

"No. They're six feet across and might get in your way, but they're harmless."

Delmus was so busy enjoying the caves that he almost didn't notice two of the undead running at him. He drove his sword into the head of one, while Hol used brute strength to crush the skull of hers. The creatures that had caused so much panic in the city were quite easy to kill once you knew how and if you were an extremely ancient killing machine like The Damned.

"Pull them into the centre of the path and I'll burn them." Said Hol.

Chlo hadn't told them not to use fire in the caverns, but neither of them wanted to damage the famous crystal caverns. After the bodies were well away from the edges of the path, Hol ignited them with a simple incineration spell. Ten minutes hard running brought them to the end of the tourist section of the Haxall caverns and away from any major lighting or floor markings. They'd seen no other signs of the undead, but just a few yards into the off limits section of the caverns brought them to another dead tourist.

"Why?" Said Hol. "They don't eat them, they pose no threat to them."

The body was that of a young Ventellan male, barely out of his school years. Again the neck had been bitten through and the body left where it fell. Delmus carefully bagged the body and marked it for extraction.

"They don't think like us Hol, they just kill because that's what they do, it's all they do."

There were a few scratches on a column, but apart from that the caverns didn't show any signs of the undead having been there. A little further and a pool meant another possible route, through it and a swim along a flooded channel and there was another cave system.

"Do they swim Chlo?" Delmus asked.

"Unlikely, they're incredibly dense and would sink."

They ignored the pool and the going became harder, less paths of any kind and more stalagmites of crystal rising from the ground. The lighting was now only from the odd inspection light and they

started to see more signs of collisions between the undead and the landscape. Lots of scrapes against the walls, more signs of scuff marks in the gravel floor. They came across another two bodies, probably of tourists attempting to hide in the dark.

“Two more Ventellans,” said Hol, “I think we’ve found the rest of the family.”

Delmus could imagine what it had been like for the middle aged couple, waiting in the dark, waiting and hoping the undead would pass them by. He hoped their deaths had been quick, but knew that they probably weren’t. One more straight stretch of crystal cavern and they were into the part of the caverns that ecologists and biologists from all over the empire almost worshipped. The freshwater river section where the giant crabs lived. Here the riverbanks were made of fine sand and silt that showed very clearly the prints of many passing feet.

“They seem to know where they’re going Chlo, any other exits further on ?” Asked Delmus.

“None at all. The caverns are well mapped and the river enters a deeper flooded system about a mile further in from where you are.”

They ran where they could and walked where they had to and just when Delmus thought they must have dived into the deeper system, they found the remaining undead. They were huddled in the dark, lurking about the hole where the crystal clear water fell a hundred feet into the caverns below. They’d been clawing at the walls and in their frustration they’d pulled several of the harmless giant crabs to pieces. Whether Delmus had started to underestimate the creatures, or these were a particularly fast group, he was never sure. Two of them hit him before he had time to react and he found himself thrown against a rock wall thirty feet away.

“You alright ?” He heard Hol in his head.

“Yes, just my pride dented.”

Hol had her hands full, but seemed to be dealing with the undead that were attacking her. Delmus gave up on his sword, there was no room to move it around. Pulling a long thin blade from his store he leapt at his attackers and rammed his dagger into the eye slits of the first one. As the undead hit the ground he stamped on the skull, leaving grey ooze and brain tissue all over the ecologically sensitive area. He felt a pain in his shoulder as the second attacker tried to bite him, but Delmus had been through far too many dreadful wars, built up far too tough a hide. He broke the neck of the undead who was attacking him and used brute force to pull the skull from the body, its eyes still blinking at him as he threw the skull into the cascading water.

“You could have left me one.” He said.

Hol had expertly decapitated the rest of The Many who’d chosen to hide in the caverns. Her skill wasn’t in question, but Delmus thought his methods of destroying them were more fun. They walked back a few yards down the caves and Hol used a few fire spells to destroy the bodies of the undead and the dead crabs.

“It looks a bit lived in.” Said Hol.

“The public never see this bit.” Replied Delmus.

The fire had charred the walls and Delmus had flattened a few features in his battle, but it could have been far worse. Then Chlo was in their heads.

“I’ve a worried council member a few miles north of you. He’s safely behind the walls of his house, but he says something keeps trying to breach the force wall. Might be just the usual fauna of Mendera, or it might be an undead. Do you fancy checking it out ?”

Hol was busy wiping grey tissue off her sword and simply nodded at him.

“We’re up for it Chlo, we’ll be there right away.”

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Kittara had become a bit of a fixture at the Annill Rest. Some of the locals had tried to get information out of her, but once she'd made it quite clear that she didn't appreciate company they'd left her alone. The food had turned out to be quite good and Kittara had her usual table by the north window of the main bar and a plate full of an excellent local delicacy in front of her.

"So I hear the army is moving out. You going with them?" Asked Meldun.

The owner of the best tavern in Annill, and that is his description, sat opposite her. Meldun was one of the few people in Annill that she had time for. She suspected he was a retired warrior, perhaps he'd even fought against the empire. But he was even more taciturn than her normally and Kittara had little curiosity about these things.

"Perhaps," she said, "but I'd like to keep the room for a while."

No one was listening to them, she'd dumped the last eavesdropper outside the tavern door and hadn't been too gentle about how she dropped him. Meldun waved one of his girls over and told her to bring a bottle of his favourite brew. It was obvious he intended to talk to her for a while.

"No problem," he said, "I thought you'd be bad for business, but people are coming here to see what you do next. You can have that room for as long as you like."

He was teasing her, but she didn't mind. She picked up his bottle and poured herself a good measure of the strong local concoction and smiled at him.

"You must have family on Ventella?" She asked.

Meldun chuckled and pulled his chair a bit closer to hers.

"Yes a grandfather who arrived here by accident and like so many, he never found a way to leave."

"I knew it."

"I had a mother who was..... well let's just say that my father must have loved her for her personality."

They drank more from the bottle and eventually Kittara finished her meal and headed for her room.

The streets outside were still full of people, even though it was the middle of the night. Provisions were being taken to the troops, lovers were sharing a last night, perhaps forever? The entire city was alive in a way that only war and conflict can bring a city to life.

"Do you need anything?"

"No. I'm going straight to bed."

The young girl always ran to her as she mounted the stairs, for a back water tavern the Annill Rest was becoming like home to her. Kittara started to remove her clothes as the door closed and then she opened the window and lay naked on her bed. There was no moon on the rifts, but the glow of millions of lights across the city meant there was no real darkness. Kittara knew there was someone watching her, she'd felt it for a very long time, but now the feeling was much stronger.

"I've got no one with me tonight. Come out if you want to."

Nothing, no movement, perhaps she was going mad. But Kittara knew there was someone or something taking an interest in her and they were close by. She heard a slight scratching noise and then a talon appeared through the wall. The wall was only a thin affair made of slats and clay, but the talon and then an arm appeared as though they were appearing out of a doorway. By the time the long red hair appeared Kittara knew exactly who'd come to visit her.

"Your house is safe." Said Sventa.

The dark angel glided into the room, her long prehensile tail was the last of her to appear through the wall. She sat herself on the edge of Kittara's bed and just looked at her, as if waiting for some kind of permission.

"Sikush was expecting trouble in Mendera, but I'm glad my home is undamaged."

Sventa still never took her eyes off Kittara, as she stood up and started to undo her gown. It was one of the new style gowns that Chlo had designed for her and it fitted her well-proportioned body without covering her wings. As the gown hit the floor, Kittara picked up the musky perfume that turned most people into Sventa's sex toys. Kittara had either learned how to overcome it, or her body had become used to it after years of sharing a home with Sventa. Tonight however Kittara wanted the pleasure of a lover with wings and a famously wild libido. She allowed the perfume to do its work and as Sventa removed her panties she reached out for her.

"Is Estrid safe at home?" Kittara asked.

"Yes. She is."

Kittara pulled Sventa onto the bed next to her and kissed her on the lips. Like many predators Sventa had a second eyelid to protect her eyes and Kittara noticed the second eyelid always fluttered when the dark angel was aroused. Not that it took much to arouse her, a single finger used correctly between her legs could driver her crazy, as Kittara knew from experience. It sometimes felt strange to have sex with a creature she's created, was in many ways its mother, but Kittara grabbed a handful of Sventa's breast and just concentrated on enjoying the night.

"Have you been bad?" She asked.

Sventa nodded at her, her eyes just staring.

"Then you must be punished."

The second eyelids were fluttering and the perfume of roused female filled the air. As Kittara pulled Sventa over the edge of the bed the dark angel's tail went flat against her back and started quivering. They both knew what was coming and in their own way they were both desperate for it to happen. Kittara slapped Sventa's right buttock with enough force to seriously damage most, but Sventa just clamped her jaws together and tensed her whole body for the next spank. Kittara hit the left buttock this time, with enough force to make the bed bounce off the boards. Sventa dug her head into the bedding and gave a long pitiful whimper. Kittara was so wet herself that she could feel it starting to run down her thigh.

"You deserve more!"

Sventa wriggled, but Kittara held her firmly against the bed, ignoring the tail thrashing about and the fluttering of the dark angel's wings. Two more huge slaps and Sventa was soaking the bedding with her sweat and was giving out a constant whimper. Kittara roughly shoved her across the bed and lay down on her back.

"Pleasure me!" She commanded.

Sventa was instantly up on her knees, her wings beating slowly and her talons reaching out for Kittara's breasts.

"Tongue or tail?" Sventa asked.

"We've got all night, why not a little of both."

Sventa scratched her talons over Kittara's breast and then began to lick and suck at her right nipple. At the same time she inserted her tail between Kittara's legs and then gently into the already very wet and sensitive pussy. Her tail was slightly barbed, so at just the right moment Sventa tensed her tail and rammed it in hard, far deeper than any male organ could reach. Kittara grabbed the wooden frame of the bed and let out a whimper of her own.

"More?" Asked Sventa.

"Lots more."

Sventa wrapped her wings around them both and started a regular rhythmic thrusting of her tail. At the same time she rubbed her rough tongue over Kittara's nipples. Kittara just hung onto the bed frame and emptied her mind of everything except pure pleasure.

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