

## Mendera Temple

### Chapter 14 – The Ixir Solution

**“In front of Mo a strange creature was turning towards him, a weapon held in some kind of tentacles. He lifted the Yakkie and began aiming his weapon.”**

∞

“Approach slowly from the south and take us around in a wide arc over the town before landing.”  
Mo told his pilot.

The pilot was ex-military and was very good at his job. The luxury executive shuttle slowed from half the speed of sound to a relative crawl at eighty miles per hour without causing a ripple in Mo’s drink. True the inertial damping did the hard work, but Mo had known pilots who had turned a simple trip to the coast into an uncomfortable experience.

“Ten minutes to landing.”

The voice over the internal comms sounded reassuring and Mo regretted this was the last journey he’d take with his pilot, or in his ludicrously expensive personal shuttle. The two defence drones turned with his craft, constantly watching for any attackers or missiles from the ground. Ixir was going through very troubled times and everyone with money had state of the art security. Mo had money, lots of money, so much money that the president of Ixir was said to have his comms link on speed dial.

“Xeod looks so beautiful at night.” Said Varna.

Mo liked the blue lighting that illuminated the artificial lake and the starburst of lights that topped the main hotel complex. Twelve casinos, three luxury hotels and a huge number of budget ones, an arena where they’d recently held the only imperial games outside of Mendera, the biggest and best house of sin in the galaxy quietly hidden away to the east of town.... Mo loved it all and he was going to miss his town. The levels had become too violent, too unpredictable as the civil unrest grew. Most corporations had left level 33 when it was obvious Xeod’s needed a new home. There had been the usual bribes and threats, a leading government official died mysteriously, but in the end the government of Ixir approved the building of Xeod town in one of the best tourist areas on the planet. Twenty square miles of family fun, with gambling and every form of adult enjoyment provided for, discreetly of course. The town made so much money that Mo didn’t know what to do with half of it. He had started an art heritage institute that was buying up as much of the classic art of Ixir as it became available. The establishment on Ixir loved it, took Mo to their hearts, without realising it was all being sent to the imperial stores on Mendera.

“Fireworks,” said Mo, “the casino must be celebrating another big winner.”

Varna hugged his arm and he kissed her cheek. She was the leader of Running Sister and his lover, like Sikush he’d seen the advantages of only taking lovers from within his own organisation.

Outsiders always misunderstood why he had to be out of town, they became paranoid about every whispered call to a female member of his team. Mo had gone through several relationships that had ended badly, sometimes very badly.

“Enjoy the view,” Said Mo, “Running Sister ends tonight, make the transmission when we land and lock down the bunker.”

Varna spun towards him; he could see the look of shock on her face. They’d all known the moment was approaching, but they also knew the future would be so very different.

“Big Hal is going ?” She asked.

Halgur Varren was a huge man and known throughout the Ixir media simply as Big Hal. He didn't know it yet of course, but Big Hal was the last president of Ixir.

"Yes," said Mo, "the bastard actually invited me to join him on his personal escape craft."

"What did you say to him?" Asked Varna.

"I accepted of course, I had to. He's expecting me on board with two friends of my choice in three days' time."

Their shuttle landed, the two automatic security drones leaving to go to their own storage area. The ground beneath them began to sink, an elevator to take the craft to an underground hangar. Beneath that public hangar was the base for Running Sister. It had been over forty thousand years since Slum Runners had been formed and gradually the names and tags of the groups had changed. Slum Runners became known as simply 'The Runners' and the Sisters of Ixir had become known as 'The Sisters.' By some strange Ixir logic and graffiti artists on some very serious self-medication the Ixir rebellion had ended up being called 'Running Sister.' The tag, which was on just about every wall on the planet showed a young girl jumping in the air, her hair being blown by the wind, as she threw a grenade. It was stylish, it was trendy, it was so happening that the media took it to their hearts in a big way. Channel 77 had even commissioned a special miniseries called 'The Eternal Heroine,' and had used the running sister tag throughout the show. There had been outrage, there had been demonstrations, there had even been arrests. But the show had been the highest rated network event in the last five hundred years.

"I'll start the transmission from my office." Said Varna.

They kissed and parted, Mo needed to get to his own office and he badly needed to talk to Chlo in private. The secret area they called the bunker was in reality a luxurious no expenses spared secret base that provided better accommodation than most eight rosette hotels. Mo had always considered that leading the revolution shouldn't mean having to live in gritty caves or water logged tunnels. Besides freedom fighters were expected to live like that, it was where security forces looked for them, it was why they were so easily captured. Over forty thousand years and no one had ever suspected Mo was the leader of the rebellion, or that their base was under Xeod. He had thought of putting the base on his private Island, but an earthquake had turned it into a sunken reef about two thousand years after he'd bought it. Mo heard the lock down announcement as he climbed the short flight of steps to his private office.

"Chlo can we talk?"

She appeared in her blonde form and sat in one of the chairs around his conference table.

"So, Big Hal is leaving?" She asked.

"The moment has arrived Chlo. Do we spread the word or keep it secret?"

The information panel on his desk was telling him that all Running Sister personnel were being recalled to Xeod. Some would bring families, some would come alone, but the long rehearsed evacuation was beginning. Chlo looked deep in thought, no doubt projecting casualty rates and likely outcomes, plus of course linking with Sikush.

"An hour from now Sikush will announce that Ixir has been expelled from the empire. The reason given will be the planned departure of the president and the lack of any viable plan by the government to move the population to a place of safety. After the announcement your people should begin their broadcasts."

Mo waved his finger over a comms unit on his desk and then pointed at a picture of Varna.

"Meeting in my office in ten minutes, bring the project Desperation team leaders." He said.

Chlo smiled at him and a long cool and very intoxicating drink appeared in front of him.

“You looked like you needed it.”

“There will be chaos Chlo.”

They both knew that the economic system of Ixir would simply stop working, the food distribution network would fall over, the security forces would stop doing their jobs and join the angry mob. Ixir was famous for having the most fragile social structure in the empire and they were about to throw a large brick at it.

“The selected members of The Damned will be in the levels tonight,” Chlo Said, “the fleet will be here the moment the president leaves. There will still be twelve billion people to pick up and move when it arrives. Without the chaos there would only have been eight billion.”

Mo drank a large mouthful of his long cold drink and felt himself relax. When the multiverse gives you two impossible options, you choose the one that puts less crap in your lap, right ?

“Sikush asked me to mention there is still a decision you could make.”

“What is that ?” Asked Mo.

“You could be the ruler of the 1<sup>st</sup> rift. The new city needs a King and Sikush is still very keen on you taking up the position. Everyone knows you Mo, they trust you.”

Mo drank a little more and began laughing.

“Never in billion switches Chlo, not if the lords of chaos were all chasing me with red hot pokers. Do you know what I’m going to do when this is over Chlo ?”

“No, but I’m sure you’re going to tell me.”

“I bought a house in the 17<sup>th</sup> ring on Mendera. You know it Chlo, you helped ease a few problems and move my name up the waiting list. It isn’t a huge house, but it has a walled garden and from the bedroom I can see the roof of the Temple of the Flame. I will live there and hopefully never hear the name of Ixir ever again.”

~ ~

Kittara hung in the air and waited. Her life was a routine again, but she quite enjoyed having breakfast with her cat and an hour sat in front of the flame every morning. Sikush rarely chose the war memorial as a morning rendezvous point, but Kittara was always right about where he’d arrive, always. A new war memorial hadn’t been on the designs for the rebuild, but the people of the city had needed one, somewhere to visit, somewhere to remember their friends and loved ones. Only seven of the thousands who’d died were buried there, two clerics, two merchants, two of the heroic mercs and one of The Damned. That was rare even for Mendera, the Guard were never buried in a public place, but Sikush had allowed an unnamed member of The Damned to be buried under the simple soil mound. The site was marked by a plain marble monolith, but in just a few hundred years it had become a favourite picnic spot and now there were numerous unofficial stores and stalls to cater for the needs of the visitors.

“The city looks beautiful from here.” Said Alyz.

As usual Alyz had found Kittara, knowing that she had an infallible ability to know where Sikush would choose to start his morning. The city did indeed look very good from their position near the southern city walls. At first the rebuilding had left a new look, everything was a bit too shiny, a bit too sterile. Now though, after a few tens of thousands of years it all looked nicely bedded in again and as though it had all been there since..... well since forever. Alyz gave her a brief kiss on the lips, it was their routine and then her friend began checking her equipment. It annoyed Kittara, it had for billions upon billions of years, the fact that Alyz never checked her uniform or weapons before leaving home. Mo had once told her that friends, really good friends, had a sacred duty to drive you crazy on a regular basis.

“You’ll be coming to Leviathan,” Chlo said in her head, “there’s a huge flap on about Ixir.”

Then she added.

“Keep your head down, he’s in a bad mood.”

Kittara nodded at Alyz, knowing she’d have received the same message. The news about Ixir was on the common channel and all over the news networks, but a flap and on Leviathan? As far as Kittara knew the ancient craft was now an orbiting school for clerics and an unofficial dormitory for illegals. The eight mile long craft hadn’t moved since the days of Thrax and many in the city considered it to be a derelict, orbiting forever like another small moon.

“Good morning,” Said Sikush.

He seemed his usual self and as Kittara kissed him she smelt Hol on him, so she knew who’d shared his bed the night before. It wasn’t being nosy; they just all knew each other so well. A visiting ambassador had likened the Menderan court to the den of a pack of feral cats. The comment had been intended as an insult, but Kittara had chosen to take it as a compliment. He kissed Alyz and in her head Alyz was saying ‘Hol’ and grinning at her. Sikush linked with them on a level they’d all ceased to deal with on a conscious level. Like raising her arm, or taking a step. As Sikush linked with them they moved as a group to the bridge on Leviathan. Jen was on the bridge with Herusher and the original form of the Chlo, the version that could always be relied on to give sarcastic comments in exactly the right place.

“Good morning Jen,” said Sikush, “get Leviathan and the fleet ready, you need to be orbiting Ixir in less than three days.”

“The clerics want to see you about their school, they were rather upset when I told them Leviathan was moving.” Said Herusher.

Kittara was enjoying this. She could see the nerve on Sikush’s neck twitching, the one she knew far too well, but for once it wasn’t her in his sights. Plus anything that caused annoyance to the fucking clerics made it a perfect day.

“There is no time to argue Herusher, I won’t be seeing endless committees of clerics.”

Sikush sat in the vacant pilots chair and looked in the direction of Chlo.

“I take it Leviathan is in perfect repair and capable of leaving orbit?”

“Better than the day she was built,” said Chlo, “but the clerics have their school in bay 4.”

Sikush was going a little red and moving his head around, looking around the room like a cornered beast. Kittara knew the explosion wasn’t far off.

“Didn’t they get a new school during the rebuild and another since,” said Sikush to no one in particular, “why do they keep needing more schools and why in my craft?”

“There are a lot more clerics now.” Said Alyz.

It was a mistake and Kittara felt sympathy for her friend as Sikush turned towards her.

“I’m not someone who needs to know every decision taken in the empire, but who gave them permission to use Leviathan as a school and how are they getting there?”

“I think there has always been a school there.....”

Alyz was in need of rescue and Chlo helped her out.

“The very first cleric school was on Leviathan and they’ve had a small school there ever since. It has grown lately. As to getting there, I provide them with a shuttle four times a day.”

“We give them a shuttle service.....”

Kittara loosened her belt and settled down on a desk in the corner. Moving might bring her to his attention, so she was going to keep still and quiet. Today was going to be one of those days she watched hundreds of times over on Chlo’s archives.

“They go !” Shouted Sikush, “I don’t care if they have an imperial decree, they can do without school for a few days. I take it Leviathan can purge the fleet from the bays without opening them to the vacuum of space ?”

“Yes,” said Jen, “but purging will take longer.”

“I don’t care, this isn’t a war mission, we’re going there to rescue twelve billion people.”

Sikush was calming but Chlo hadn’t quite finished giving him unwanted news.

“What are we going to do with the twelve hundred who live on Leviathan ?”

“The clerics ? We’ve dealt with those.” Said Sikush.

“There are the illegals Chaln ,” Said Herusher, “the merchant’s area is very small and they can’t buy property on Mendera, so many from the outer worlds live on Leviathan.”

Sikush jumped to his feet and then sat backwards onto a table and started laughing.

“And of course they get there on the shuttles we run for the school ?”

Everyone was nodding at him as he chuckled, everyone apart from Kittara who was still trying to be invisible.

“Ok, ok, it’s what we do,” said Sikush, “providing shuttles so that illegals can live on our largest star ship, having lots of rules that are often ignored, but no one gets in a flap about it. I do understand this and long may it continue, but we need to solve the problem.”

Sikush looked genuinely calm as he talked to Jen.

“We won’t purge to vacuum,” he told her, “so the school and any illegals on board will be safe. We will need all the fleet, every single shuttle, so tell the empire that routine cargo deliveries may have to wait.”

Her turned to Herusher.

“The Damned will need to cover emergencies, delivery of medicines, equipment for disasters.”

Herusher nodded at him and he moved onto Chlo.

“I want hourly broadcasts throughout Leviathan saying that the craft will leave orbit in a days’ time. Provide extra shuttles, but tell them anyone still on board will be going with us, no exceptions.”

Sikush was calm now, so Kittara risked a smile and was rewarded by him smiling back.

“Kittara you have a vital mission,” he said, “for the next two days, make sure I’m not pestered by hundreds of fucking clerics.”

~ ~

Hol requested three hover lights from Chlo and sent them to hover about fifty feet above the ruined buildings in front of them.

“This place is a mess.” Said Albas.

He hadn’t seen the old Xeod’s on level 33 in thousands of years and the intervening years hadn’t been kind to the abandoned buildings. The river was back to being a stinking sewer of thick green liquid and the air had the smell of sulphur and something nasty, something decomposing.

“It’s a miracle the levels haven’t completely collapsed.” Said Hol.

“Chlo built them to last Hol.”

The sign was still there, someone who knew what it said could still have made out the name, but the wall below it had a huge ragged hole in it. A paranoid person might have thought the wall looked to have been blown in by an explosive device and given the history of Xeod’s they might have been right. There was still the rustle of growlers amongst the ruins, though Albas wondered what they fed on now the bins full of waste food had gone.

“Sad to see it like this,” said Hol, “I have some great memories of this place.”

“In theory at least, I still own this pile of rubble.” Replied Albas.

Sikush had sent The Damned out into the levels, in twos; the levels were now somewhere even immortal warriors went in twos. Ixir army personnel who'd deserted, Militia just looking for someone to rob, the usual malcontents and crazies who lived in the levels, they were all there. The levels below 11 had always been dangerous, but now the number of potential threats had risen tenfold.

"Are we early or are they late?" Asked Hol.

Albas used Chlo to scan the area and found half a dozen warm human bodies about a hundred yards from them and approaching quite slowly. One advantage of the anarchy on Ixir was that The Damned no longer had to hide meeting with the various resistance groups, not that there was much of a security force left to do anything about it.

"I think they're finding the terrain a bit hard going." Said Albas.

Eventually the heavily armed group of rebel fighters clambered over or around the ruined buildings and approached them. Tough and silent, they looked different to the population of the levels Albas remembered. Just a few thousand years had made them shorter and stockier, more suited to the harsh environment. Albas couldn't help thinking that they were perfect for the rifts. There was no need for introductions, the faces of The Damned were famous throughout the empire and no one else apart from the rebels would come down to a meeting on level 33. One man moved towards them, he looked to be slightly better dressed, his uniform a little cleaner than the others.

"We received the call," he said, "though this is a strange place to meet, too many growlers."

As if to emphasise the point, two large growlers got a little too close to one of the female warriors in the group and she expertly used her energy weapon to fry them both.

"They get bolder all the time," she said, "they know the whole planet will be theirs soon."

"What do they find to eat?" Asked Albas.

"The unwary." Answered the girl.

There wasn't anywhere comfortable to sit, but Albas and Hol removed their back packs and sat on a part of the old Xeod's parking area wall.

"The packs are for you," said Hol, "not much I'm afraid, but normal distribution of food has stopped. Do you have clean water?"

"Yes, there is a clean spring near our base."

"You need to spread the word," said Albas, "evacuation is in two days' time. Get everyone onto the surface ready to be taken onto shuttles. Other members of The Damned are telling groups similar to yours, right through the levels."

"There will be shuttles at all the major exit points from the levels." Added Hol.

The girl picked up one of the packs and put it on.

"What is this new world we're going to like?" she asked, "we've been hearing some strange rumours."

"You'll love it," said Hol, "plenty of space, no more ice ages and I just know you'll thrive there."

The leader turned towards Hol.

"I hope there are some enemies," he said, "people get soft if they don't have enemies."

"You'll have enemies, but at least they won't be your own government." Said Albas.

The girl spat on the ground.

"Big Hal!" she said, "he may take all his cronies to a new planet and take his army too. But who is going to grow his crops and make his tools?"

She had a good point and Chlo wasn't forecasting a long future for Varren Paradise as the new planet was being called by the Ixir media.

“Don’t be late,” said Albas, “the Guard will come down with the shuttles to give protection, but there will be no second pickup. Anyone here when the fleet leaves is staying on Ixir.”

~ ~

“All exterior defences are armed and ready.” Said Chlo.

Mo leant back in his chair and looked at the screens. One, the long range scan fed from a satellite above Xeod showed ground troops approaching. They were slow because of the armoured launch platforms slowing them down, but they were the main worry. The second screen was switching between views from the roof of the main hotel complex and it showed a fleet of Ixir army assault craft coming in low. There always had been the possibility that the security forces would trace the final evacuation transmissions. There had been a lot of un-coded transmissions to a huge number of people, almost inevitably they pointed straight at Xeod and Mo. Not that the disparate group of fighters he commanded were worried, he could hear them all whooping and cheering as they prepared for the attack. Varna was in her office and had already given herself manual control of two ground to air Ion blasters near the western shuttle landing zone.

“We’ll show the bastards.” He heard her shout over his comms link.

“Did you get the paying guests into the shelters?” He asked her.

Ixir had a certain reputation, so the public simply didn’t visit a resort that didn’t have shelters and panic rooms. The order to evacuate to the shelters had gone out as soon as the first dots had appeared on the long range satellite scan.

“Most,” said Varna, “but there will be a few who simply refuse to go.”

“What did you tell them?”

“This is Ixir Mo, I just told them bad people are coming.”

Chlo was in his head telling him the Ixir security forces had a few scores to settle with Running Sister, but she was sure that they’d lose interest once their casualty numbers mounted. But their assault craft were based on the imperial raptors and even their pilots were trained on imperial simulators.

“Help is on the way Mo.” Said Chlo.

“What sort of help?”

He knew Sikush wasn’t ready to send The Damned against Ixir in open warfare yet, so Mo was genuinely intrigued about what form the help would take.

“You’ll see.” Said Chlo.

The first wave of military craft came in over the boundary road and the automatic defences brought down three of them before they were over the town. Varna took an engine off one, but her aim wasn’t as good as the AI system and the craft limped on before hitting the roof of the Golden Apple casino. Mo saw the explosion on screen a split second before the room shook and his paperclip dispenser fell off the desk. They were under a lot of concrete and few extra layers of armour Chlo had fitted, but the floor vibrating emphasised they were at war. At least a dozen automatic alarms started up and various AI systems started calling the emergency services. Mo shut them all down, the security forces were already there.

“Second wave.” Shouted Varna.

Mo just wished she wouldn’t sound so happy about it, he knew it was useless asking her to let the automatic systems take control of the Ion blasters. The second wave fared slightly better and two of them made it over the perimeter and began to indiscriminately pound the buildings beneath them. Mo felt the explosions through the floor and noticed dust falling from ducting on the ceiling. There were different defences inside the town itself, sacrificial drones that could bring down the best armoured enemy, but they were there as a last resort. Mo watched the AI as it sought permission

from him to use them and he pressed the confirm button. Two drones were launched, each as big as a civilian shuttle. Designed to bring down high flying enemies, their destructive power at low altitude would destroy vast areas of the town. But the security forces assault craft would do a lot more damage if left unchecked.

"Drones launched," Mo told everyone on the comms link, "I repeat drones launched."

The drones exploded, turning the assault craft into clouds of debris and blowing craters into the ground, craters fifty yards across. Mo's chair bounced an inch off the ground and his screens flickered, but otherwise they were still secure in the bunker.

"They've given up," shouted Varna, "they're landing well out of range of our blasters."

"They're just getting out of the way of their own medium range launchers." Said Mo.

How close did the dots on his screen need to get, another hundred yards perhaps? He'd seen the huge missiles on caterpillar tracks in action, but he'd never been on the receiving end before. Some would have energy weapon warheads, other traditional high explosive. If the security forces hated them enough there might be chemical warheads and biological weapons. Mo pressed the button on his comms link.

"Prepare for the worst, full bio hazard armour is to be worn."

It was imperial kit and if any bodies were found it would clearly link Mendera to the Ixir revolution, but there was no point in having the suits if no one wore them. Light, easy to put on, clean air and protection up to Bio Hazard Level 12. Mo put his suit on and repeated the order that all personnel were to wear theirs. At first there was anxiety looking at the world through a visor, but most people felt safer in the suits fairly quickly.

"They're digging in at maximum range." Said Chlo.

Yes the dots on his screen had stopped and now the satellite could zoom in and show him several rows of medium range launchers, being half buried by teams of engineers. There seemed to be some heavier flying transports behind the launchers and a lot of activity going on.

"Can you see anything out there Shard?" Asked Mo.

Shard had been with him a long time, his ancestors had fought in the first year of the rebellion and he was very proud of that. Shard had dug himself in a few miles outside the perimeter road, the most logical place they'd decided for an attacker to set up their heavy weapons. He didn't quite have a front row seat for the action, but the veteran would be seeing a lot more than Mo.

"There are a lot of their elite forces here, two thousand, maybe more," said Shard, "looks like they're getting ready to move in once the launchers have done their job."

Mo gave the automatic system permission to use anything. Drones, lasers, Ion blasters, even the disruption devices Chlo had told him were an absolute last resort.

"Launch detected."

Chlo told him at the same time as his screen was showing several hot yellow bursts of flame as the first missiles headed their way. Old chemical missiles with a limited payload, but used against the buildings in Xeod they would be devastating. The first missile hit the main hotel complex and Mo lost half of his high resolution optical devices. He frantically spun the satellite around and zoomed it in on the town and very little was left of the main luxury hotel. Fires were out of control and he could see several bodies, obviously not everyone had obeyed the orders to evacuate to the deep level shelters.

"Are you sure these guys are going to lose interest Chlo?"

"Sorry Mo, help is close. Do you want me to pull you out if things get..... Bad?"

Mo chuckled to himself, almost annoyed with Chlo for asking but understanding why she had.



“After all we’ve been through Chlo. We all leave here or none of us do.”

Another missile hit the hotel complex and there was only a small explosion, that was worrying, the warhead obviously wasn’t conventional explosives. Then two more missiles arrived, one hitting the sports arena and the second buried itself deep into the centre of the lake before exploding. It was a bunker buster, they were looking for the leaders, they were looking for him !

“Fuckers !” He heard Varna shout.

The floor cracked under his chair and Mo lost the rest of his visual feeds, all he had now was the satellite, which was showing him a town that was almost a total ruin. Varna was checking with everyone and although most of his team seemed to be alive, Mo was worried about the lack of response from the south of town.

“I think we lost the bunker under the Theme Park.” Said Varna.

Another missile went into the ground quite close and the ceiling a few feet away cracked, concrete dust formed a heap on the floor and the screen showing the image from the satellite went dead. Mo gave the AI permission to send their few remaining drones against the missile launchers. It was an act of desperation, but Mo was feeling desperate.

“They’re here. The help is here !” Said Chlo.

Mo felt blind, nothing was showing him the outside world, but Varna still had visual feeds from outside and he could hear her reaction.

“Who the hell are these guys Mo ? They’re kicking some serious arse out there.”

“They’re the rescue team, I think.” He replied.

There was silence, and Mo realised that no more missiles were landing and the huge concrete door to his bunker was opening.

“I’ve taken over from your AI,” said Chlo, “everyone is to evacuate immediately. Go to the large craft just landing west of the lake.”

Then rather ominously Chlo added.

“There is a biohazard level 12 risk, check your suits before leaving the bunker.”

Mo pressed the diagnostics on the wrist and his suit was sealed and working perfectly. Before he left Mo put his palm on a keypad on the wall, but it just sparked and buzzed at him.

“Can you open this Chlo ?”

“Mo you need to hurry.”

“I want it Chlo, open the cabinet... please.”

The heavy door opened and Mo took out the Yakkie Kittara had given him when they’d moved into the new town of Xeod.

‘For emergencies.’ She’d said.

Well today seemed like an emergency, so he spun the dial on the weapon up to maximum and turned on the proximity protection. Carrying the weapon he left the bunker and hoped he’d see an enemy on the way out. Any enemy would do, Mo just needed a little pay back. He could still hear Varna muttering into her comms.

“Everyone out and that includes you Varna.” He shouted.

He didn’t recognise the destruction outside of the bunker as the town he’d arrived at only a day or or so before. The pathway was covered in rubble and Mo had to tread carefully to avoid falling into cracks and fissures in the ground, everywhere there seemed to be fires burning out of control. He found a man with terrible burns, dead but his body was still bleeding and the pool of blood around him was still growing. Another corpse, this time a woman, her skin covered in weeping sores, a green discharge coming from her mouth. Mo stopped looking, he jogged past the bodies and the

destruction and headed for the lake. The Ixir elite forces were landing, or at least trying to land. Strange craft, craft that looked totally alien were attacking them and driving them back. In the direction of the missile launchers explosions sent bright red flames into the air and vibrated the ground beneath him. In front of Mo a strange creature was turning towards him, a weapon held in some kind of tentacles. He lifted the Yakkie and began aiming his weapon.

“No Mo,” said Chlo, “that’s an AI device and on our side.”

Mo had seen every empire world and many outside the empire, but he’d never seen anything like the creature or device in front of him.

“What the hell is that Chlo ?”

“Just move Mo, keep moving.”

The creature ignored him and ran in the direction of the Ixir elite forces. There didn’t seem to be many of the Ixir forces still fighting and Mo wasn’t surprised they were finally losing interest in the fight. He jogged towards the lake and found Varna simply staring at the craft that had landed a hundred or so yards in front of them. More of the alien creatures were guarding the open hatchway and firing in the direction of the few Ixir forces who hadn’t run away.

“You have some strange friends Mo.” Said Varna.

Some of the paying guests had obviously decided the security forces weren’t strictly on their side anymore and they were running towards the craft with his own people. The craft was huge. Mo had seen Leviathan from the outside many times, but this craft looked bigger and it had managed to land on the ground. Completely alien in appearance, Mo realised it was the complete lack of symmetry that he found so unsettling and there were strange appendages on the craft that just screamed ‘alien.’ Mo knew his own makeup wasn’t exactly pure human, but the craft in front of him would have looked bizarre on any world he’d ever visited. Varna had a bleeding wound in her thigh, so Mo helped her across the hundred yards or so of rubble, heading for the large open section of the alien craft.

“What the hell is it Chlo ?” He asked.

“Mo, that craft is known as the Old One.”

The Old One had landed on top of the Theme Park rides, but Mo assumed that was probably the place to land a craft several miles long with the least damage. He half carried Varna into the large central hold and found a relatively quiet corner for them to sit in. For the first time he heard the voice of the Old One.

“Washing facilities are at the rear of the hold and there are numerous food and water points. We will be leaving shortly.”

Mo applied a healing spell to Varna, being with Luri for so long had given him the opportunity to learn a few of her skills. He found some water and brought it back, to find Varna being looked at by his own medical officer from Xeod.

“You did a good job of healing her, she’ll be fine.”

He moved off to treat others, there seemed to be hundreds of people sitting wherever they could find a patch of floor space. His own fighters mingling with holiday makers, who seemed almost dazed by the recent events. Someone was screaming quite near them, so Mo decided to see if he could help. As he got to his feet the bay doors closed and he felt the floor vibrate at the Old One lifted into the air.

“Where are they taking us ?” Someone asked.

“Anywhere is better than here.” Came the reply.

~

~

Jen gave the order and the fleet began the purging, the operation designed to get every shuttle and attack wing out of Leviathan and into orbit around Ixir. Normally they'd have turned off the shield walls and opened the bays to the vacuum of space, but for some reason over two hundred illegals had decided to remain on board. It was slightly slower to purge with the shield walls up, but the huge mile wide shuttles were still leaving Leviathan at an impressive rate. Kittara was pacing about on the bridge like a wounded creature, she'd heard Mo was under attack but Sikush had refused to let her help.

"Impressive," said Alyz, "what comes out of the bays next?"

"Next will come some attack wings," said Jen, "just in case the Ixir military are stupid enough to attack the fleet. Then the shuttles stacked on the outside of Leviathan will peel off. It is like un-building a huge child's puzzle toy."

There was a moment of noise behind them as Sikush entered the bridge and Kittara once again asked to help Mo escape from the surface of Ixir. Jen noticed the body language and assumed she had been refused again.

"Will there be enough to hold everyone on Ixir?" Asked Alyz.

"We could get fifteen billion onto Leviathan, packed in tight and held in stasis, but the fleet will pick up about twelve billion. Some will follow Big Hal to his new planet, he's only invited the wealthy of course and most of the military. Some will have decided to stay and live through the coming ice age and if there are only a few their descendants might survive."

The screen showed hundreds of shuttles of assorted sizes, peeling away from where they'd been stacked against Leviathan, to have their reality pulled through from Mendera to Ixir. There were imperial vessels filling space around Leviathan, with yet more appearing out of the various bays.

"It looks so precise," said Alyz, "has the fleet done this often?"

"Never," said Jen, "but Chlo worked out the procedure in case it was ever needed."

Sikush was now walking towards them and Kittara seemed more relaxed.

"How long until full purge Jen?" He asked.

They weren't automatic craft out there, each one had a member of The Damned aboard. It was the biggest force ever sent to a friendly planet, or at least friendly in theory. Jen almost felt sorry for any Ixir forces daft enough to attack the evacuation fleet.

"Another fifteen minutes." She answered.

They were all there, the elite that didn't officially exist, all watching and waiting as Sikush walked into the middle of them and the room became silent.

"President Halgur Varren has left Ixir," he said, "Ixir is no longer part of the Empire. I have news that Mo and his team have been picked up by the Old One, so there will be no change to your planned missions. You all know where you need to be, so good luck and do your best for the people of Ixir."

There was a cheer and some looked happy, while some seemed deep in thought. Jen watched the thousands of craft begin descending towards Ixir and hoped they'd all be returning.

"The real problem," she told Alyz, "will be getting everyone off again at the other end."

~

~

Estrid could have felt insulted at being sent off to the 1<sup>st</sup> rift to do a chore for Sikush, but in reality she was quite looking forward to it. The chance to use a little of her true power, even if it was in a very small and controlled way. She noticed the darkness Sevril had sewn into the ground near the new city, but decided to leave it and let matters run their natural course. Perhaps the darkness would strengthen the people coming from Ixir? Estrid had seen a lot of wars and she had noticed that enemies seemed essential for a people to achieve their full potential. There would be internal

strife, but despite the darkness the original City of the Lost God had outlasted over two hundred thousand rulers and a great many switches of the multiverse.

"The new city is magnificent," she said to Tomma-Goran, "will you stay and greet them?"

The air was sweet, the water in the river was clean. Estrid thought Tomma had perhaps put a bit too much red into the light spectrum, but perhaps the people of Ixir needed it like that. The vast city in front of them looked superb behind its walls of shining marble.

"There will be no more talk of lost Gods," said Tomma, "besides I have other tasks to do. I'll be gone when they arrive and they will never see me."

Estrid wondered how the new inhabitants of the rift would react to the new city. Personally she would have stayed to instruct them in the ways of the rifts, but no doubt the people of Ixir weren't fools. They would do as we all do, learn by experience. Some would die of course, from eating the wrong type of fruit, or trying to out stubborn a dredger demon, but then that knowledge would be passed down.

"Do you need my help with the gateway?" Asked Tomma.

Estrid saw no malice in Tomma, the question had been genuinely intended to be helpful. She knew of his important task, but she also knew Tomma would come to Mendera to see Sikush when the others did. The deities were like children, none would want to miss out on what was said and by whom.

"No," she said, "but thank you. I will see you when you come to Mendera."

Tomma did a half turn and vanished into another reality. There were no carvings in the city, no great announcement revealing who had built it and when. Rather than stopping talk of lost Gods, Estrid suspected Tomma had created even more of a legend by his absence. But that wasn't her concern and she set about creating a gateway for Leviathan to enter the rift.

"There I think." She muttered.

There was a weakness in the fabric of reality at the Well on Mendera, Estrid had already stretched it out and up into a gateway that Leviathan would fit through at that end. No one, as far as she was aware had ever brought an entire star craft into the rifts, so Estrid was excited as she pulled the ten mile wide hole out of reality. Leviathan would actually land Sikush had told her. It had been a long time since the huge craft had landed on solid ground and few were alive who had seen it, but Leviathan would land of the 1<sup>st</sup> rift with its precious cargo.

"Perfect." Said Estrid.

The gateway wasn't the awful purple and black vortex that even Sikush called a portal. Estrid had created a portal that was pure white, with a slight yellow glow at the edges. It would be stable and safe to use for as long as it was required. There were risks of course, once a gateway was opened other could use it, even come through the grey to use it. But Sikush had asked her for a reliable gateway and she had provided him with one.

~

~

The shuttle had trouble landing at the exit from the levels, there were simply too many people crowding together, waiting to be evacuated. As the ramp extended Sikush watched the inhabitants walk quickly, but without hurry into the huge shuttle craft. There had been panic reported at other pick up points, there had been some trampling. But the people of the levels were a different type to most, they had seen so much, had been through such hard times that little caused them to panic. Dressed almost uniformly in black or brown they entered the shuttle, most nodding to Sikush as they passed. There were a very small number being carried on stretchers, or helped along on crutches, but life expectancy wasn't high in the levels for those who weren't able bodied. Elsewhere, in the

more prosperous areas, there would be relatives making decisions on who to take and who to leave. There would be arguments about whether loved ones would survive the trip, or whether euthanasia was the best option. Sikush had said he had no intention of playing god and that the empire would evacuate any who were carried or helped onto the shuttles.

"They brought something down over there." Said Alyz.

Waking beside the crowds Sikush made his way towards the blackened wreckage, with Kittara behind him and Alyz slightly in front. Hol was there, with a tiny man they all knew simply as Dolgun. He was smiling at them and patting the still warm metal.

"We got it before you arrived," he said, "and another about a mile away. The militia won't be sending any more craft over here in a hurry."

The craft looked quite small, but there was a serious looking twin blaster array at the front, the fighters from the levels had done well shooting down two of them.

"Dolgun organised the evacuation of the levels," said Hol, "I think we got almost everyone to the surface."

Dolgun was in front of Sikush and hugging him, leaving Kittara and Alyz wondering what to do. No one was ever allowed to touch the emperor when he was on official business, but Dolgun was a hero, they could hardly drag him away.

"Thank you," said Dolgun, "I always knew we could trust you."

Sikush stood back and looked at the quiet man who'd kept the people of the levels alive through such difficult times.

"The levels have helped from the start, when Princess built Xeod's, right through to standing by Mendera during the last forty thousand years of struggle. I will never forget that." Said Sikush.

Dolgun bowed and collected his family together before heading towards the shuttle. Sikush carried on walking beside the queues of people, some of them firing weapons into the air and cheering as he passed. They were approaching the ramp into the ground, the main entry to point to Level 1. Kittara recognised where they were, the temple across the street, the other side of the torrent of people was one she'd often visited with offerings of money. Kittara had once thought her need to give donations was based on a need to atone for her life of violence. Soon though she'd realised she was a good killer and she enjoyed it and didn't have a troubled conscience about it. The donations made her feel better about losing her sisters, gave her some sense of making amends. It was strange that in spite of understanding the mechanism working in her head, giving to the poor still helped. Like a fake magicians trick, knowing how it worked hadn't taken away its power to affect her.

"There are a few hold outs at the ramp." Said Alyz.

Things were getting heated and one man in particular was holding his blaster up and shouting at the passing evacuees.

"You can't force us to go. We have a right to stay here !" He shouted.

"No one is forcing you to go anywhere," said Alyz, "but lower your weapon or I'll take it off you."

Alyz put her hand on her sword and the man lowered his weapon. Kittara noticed a young woman standing apart, with a child just old enough to stand, a boy perhaps. The woman had the darkest eyes Kittara had ever seen and she didn't look happy.

"Take her if you like," shouted the man, "she's a bit touched anyway, you're welcome to her."

Kittara ignored the usual Ixir speak Chlo fed into her head and used the local dialect she'd picked up on her visits, the street speak Mo used.

"Would you like to go with us ?" She asked.

The eyes showed nothing, but her head nodded.

Kittara took her arm and strode into the mass of moving people, touching a large woman on the arm. The woman stopped, causing a blockage in the flow that others started to walk around.

“Will you get this woman and her child safely onto the shuttle for me ?” Asked Kittara.

“Why of course I will miss.”

They were gone, the torrent pulling them irresistibly on, towards the shuttle to the rifts. Kittara returned to Sikush who seemed ready to leave.

“We have a lot more pickup points to inspect and people to greet.” He said.

Kittara felt Sikush link with her and move their realities to another shuttle and another ramp. A ramp with another group of tired but hopeful evacuees walking up it.

~

~

© Ed Cowling – Aug 2014