

Chronicles of Mardoun

Chapter 6 - Road to Ixir

“All the planets of the Empire have population control except Ixir. 15 billion people mostly crammed into a dozen major cities” – Imperial Census

Kittara came home to find Estrid feeding her Menura Cat. It was now 54 days since she'd invited her into her home and so far nothing too strange had happened. She was fairly good at looking after herself and Luri had arranged for her attend a school for the children of clerics, which she seemed to enjoy.

“You'll get him fat”, she said as she noticed another insect being offered to her Cat.

“I've only given him 6 today and Chlo says that's ok”.

Kittara shimmered and her uniform vanished to be replaced by a lilac robe that hung loosely off her shoulders. She stroked Emperor Xeod the 3rd, or Emp as she usually called him.

“He's 5 million years old, the last thing we need is him getting fat”.

Kittara picked him up and Emp started making happy gurgling sounds and then started a melodic tune almost like bird song. Emp looked much like a domestic Cat, but he had a larger face, sharper claws and he was much smarter. Menura Cats have a volatile DNA structure, so that once they bond with an owner they adjust their own lifespan to match that of their owner. A neat trick that means once you've bought a Menura Cat you've got a pet for life. Not that many can afford the huge sum required to buy one, but Kittara had seen him in the market and fallen in love with him. The Menuran traders only sell males, so that only they have stock of new Cats and they explain the rules to new owners.

“He will live a long time, they are not immortal, but he will live for 7 or 8 thousand years.” The trader had said to her that hot summer's day.

“Once he bonds with you, you must agree to care for him as long as he lives. No one else will be able to feed him, will you agree to care for him as long as he lives?”

She had agreed. Some other members of the Guard had bought Cats like Emp and their volatile DNA had run out of steam at about 8 thousand years. Emp for some reason had kept on going and short of dissection there seemed no way of knowing why. Once Sikush had spent quite a bit of time examining Emp and running tests, and gave up trying to understand why Emp just kept on living. He would also take food from anyone and in huge quantities, so he had a tendency to get fat. She looked at his slightly grey fur around his face and realised she liked having a living creature that seemed destined to travel through the millennia with her. Emp chortled and climbed up on her shoulder and nuzzled her face.

“Any problems with the Genova today”, she asked.

“A few in the garden just glowing. One went through the force wall and got some pilgrims a bit excited, but the mercs moved them on”.

Kittara had a house in the first circle of housing outside the Temple of the Flame. At the bottom of her garden a pathway about 12 feet across went right around the outside of the Temple complex and it has a constant trickle of pilgrims walking round it. Some were religious fanatics, but most were well off citizens of the Empire who believed walking the Temple once in their life would be in some way beneficial for their soul. Numbers were strictly controlled, especially after a few attempts by groups to scale the temple walls, but the people of Mendera were now accustomed to seeing groups of tired pilgrims walking along the path.

The rules on planning regarding housing in the circle is simple. Whatever you do the external look of the building cannot be altered in any way and as Chlo does all the internal and external

refurbishment it's a rule that's impossible to break. From the outside Kittara's house looked a fairly modest 3 storey building about 30 feet wide, and 70 feet long made of the local reddish sand stone. This external look was a complete fiction brought about by the stretching of reality and force walls, a common technique on Mendera to gain internal space and light. Inside the reality of the width of the house had been stretched to double its original size, the length stretched by 3 times and the height by about a third. Then the entire rear wall of the house had been removed and replaced by a force wall. The pilgrims walking past saw what appeared to be a solid wall, but from inside it was invisible allowing light and air to pass from outside. The result was that Kittara had a light and spacious four storey house with a garden at the rear with her own pool. She had often had poolside parties completely hidden from the constantly passing religious pilgrims. The first three floors were open to anyone she allowed into her house, but the top floor was her personal sanctum and Estrid had only just been given access to it.

"I saw an Angel bounce off the Temple wall yesterday", Estrid was saying.

"At least they can't get through those defences", Kittara replied.

Kittara put Emp on the floor and walked out to the table by the pool. Emp scurried after her and climbed onto one of the chairs. Instantly bowls of hot food appeared in front of Kittara. Estrid joined her, but had to ask Chlo for her food out loud, and ended with asking for a bowl of Ticka worms for Emp. She looked up at Kittara with a guilty look on her face.

"Ok, but you can play with him before bed to burn it off".

They both settled down to their meal and a quiet evening in Mendera, but Estrid knew they would soon be going to Ixir and didn't want to spoil the moment by mentioning it.

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"Ixir?"

The Chalne looked surprised when Chlo announced the findings of her temporal probes. Both of them were stood in his office in the Guard barracks and as usual two of the Guard were close by, on this occasion Jen and Albas.

"No doubt about it", and Chlo put up a screen on the wall and showed the leader of the raiders entering an office block on Ixir. Chlo froze the screen and he recognised the building very well. Once it had been a tavern with what amounted to the Thieves Guild of Ixir in the basement. Then they started a little assassination on the side.

"Who was the leader then?" He asked Chlo. Where his mind stopped and her memory started was unclear and they could exchange thoughts as though in one mind.

"Clem was it? No Chem, Chem Laundry." He remembered the man's son had started insulting the Guard on the streets and has assassinated a Menderan banker. In his mind he saw a young man of about 25 with six of his personal guard standing in front of the Crossways Tavern in Norraine the largest city on Ixir.

"Arlan", said Chlo, "I remember him, real firebrand, seemed intent on an early death".

He remembered sending Kittara to Norraine with orders to start a fight with Arlan and kill him in fair combat. She hadn't needed to taunt him, he was with his guards and they'd all been drinking. As soon as he saw Kittara standing outside the Crossways he'd attacked her.

"Put it up on the screen Chlo."

They all watched the fight slowed down to one twentieth speed. Arlan was a good fighter and came at her, hitting her raised blade with a strong hard and precise blow. He was no match for her and she side stepped and punched the Demon blade hard into the body of one of his guards. So hard that it severed his spine as it came out the other side. Still she wouldn't engage Arlan and after avoiding his next attack she took the head off another of his guards. Another three of the guards went the same way and no matter how much Arlan tried to engage her in single combat she just danced around him. The final guard took an energy weapon out of his belt,

which was not only bad sportsmanship, but was an action certain to be punished. Kittara stepped round him and briefly ran her finger over his arm. The man screamed and fell to the floor with his good arm clawing at the clothing where she had touched him. Then flames, green flames started to cover his entire arm and the screaming got louder. If Arlan was worried about the agony his guard was going through he didn't show it. He kept coming at Kittara and she kept blocking his blows and making strikes at his head which never quite landed.

"She's showing him respect, letting it go on for his family". Said Jen.

The two fighters spent another minute trying each others defences until Kittara moved under his guard and punched her blade into his chest. As he fell there were still the rules of combat to be obeyed. She held up her sword and bowed to his corpse and then wiped and sheaved her own blade. As she moved away the guard was still screaming and burning and would take another ten minutes to die. All this was captured by Chlo in high definition 3d and leaked to sources in the media who in turn leaked it to the right news channels.

"It cost a pretty penny to keep the peace," said Jen.

"A warehouse full of Empire gold seemed to make Chem forget a much loved son pretty quickly and he knew his son was a problem. Carry on with the recording Chlo".

The leader of the raiders walked into the Laundry foundation building, the most opulent building in Norraine and walked up to the holographic receptionist.

"I'm here to see Carl Laundry, I am expected".

A beam briefly examined his retina and checked his DNA and he was allowed to move through to the personal carrier area. On the floor were a row of round platforms with a rail around them and a gate. One the platforms was lit with a faint glow and the hologram led the man to it. He walked onto the platform and it lifted smoothly into the air to be replaced by another which came up from below. They watched as the platform rose up the hollow centre of the building, right to the personal floor of the company chairman.

"How much did we pay Laundry last year Chlo ?" Asked Sikush.

"5 million Imperial credits, that's about a billion in Ixir currency".

The platform came to rest next to another hologram point and once again the man was checked over, this time more thoroughly.

"Why is the recording breaking up Chlo ?"

"They seem to realise he might be traced by probe and are using local temporal disturbances to try and prevent it. It nearly worked, took me days to keep to the right time thread. Very difficult to do and only a few people outside the Guard can do it. They will leave a signature and Luri is helping me track them down."

"Tell her to keep them alive, at least until they've been interrogated".

The Laundry Foundation had come a long way since Kittara had killed Arlan at Crossways and over the millennia had taken control of all organised drugs, prostitution and gambling on Ixir. Although now much of the money came from legitimate business, the foundation was still heavily involved in drugs and illegal gambling. The Chaln  knew this of course as he used the foundation quite a lot. He had his own very efficient assassins, but the foundation had proven very useful in moving good of a sensitive nature and people not exactly on the Empire's approved list.

The man had walked down a corridor and a door opened to reveal expensive carpet and two bodyguards who very thoroughly search him and for a third time ran scanners over him.

Then Carl Laundry was there and was shaking hands with him and drawing him into the office.

The recording went on for some time as the man was given money, the papers to pick up a small assault craft and the Yakkies for his crew. As the man left the recording ceased and the room was silent.

“Well whatever we paid him Chlo, it obviously wasn’t enough.” Said Sikush.

“I think we need to organise a trip Ixir, meanwhile let’s wake up Qunan”

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Beneath the palace are three levels of storage. Huge areas with distorted reality to allow enough space to fit in the contents of most planets and all of it kept in stasis. On a planet, in fact in an entire bubble of the multiverse where everything was kept in forced stability it just seemed easier to Chlo to put the entire contents of the Imperial store into stasis. That is with their reality locked to the moment they were put into store. They now existed as matter with no space time events. The store contained precious metals, foods the Guard were fond of, furnishings and gifts given to The Chalne over the course of billions of years, weapons, armour, high technology, even a little over 16 million people who had asked to be kept in store. About 200 hundred thousand had belonged to an Emperor Cult that grew up on Mendera about fifty thousand years before. These cults always embarrassed The Chalne and he was quite relieved when they asked to be put in stasis until the day the next age of the Temple started. Not that he expected them to be greeted with a huge celebration when they were taken out of stasis.

“I bet they at least get some sensational sex”, Kittara had pointed out.

Then there were the 16 million or so people of Gulfar. The Empire, or rather Chlo had worked out that their planet would be destroyed by debris from a nearby super nova. Nearby meant 40 lights years and the rubble took countless millennia to arrive, but the fate of Gulfar was known to the millisecond. Meeting the people of a new planet was always difficult, add the fact that they’d never met aliens before and it became a nightmare. The Chalne’s first words, after the usual pleasantries to the assembled leaders of Gulfar had been.

“In about 500 of your years space debris will destroy this solar system completely”.

The billion or so inhabitants of Gulfar were having none of it and neither were their leaders. Yes their astronomers had noticed patches of the night sky had become clouded over, but their own scientists had concluded this was just interstellar gas. An apocalypse ? No, nothing of that magnitude was at all likely. The Empire took their scientists to see the approaching cloud of super nova debris and pointed out that much of it was anything but gaseous. The leaders of Gulfar thanked the Empire for taking the trouble to visit them, but they had obviously got it wrong and there was nothing to worry about. A religious sect on Gulfar though had other ideas. It turned out the date of the predicted destruction matched one of there own prophecies and the prophecy talked of a long wait for a new planet to become just right for them. The Chalne had asked Chlo to look forward down the time lines to the point 4 billion years in the future foretold by the cultists and much to her surprise there was a better than 99% probability of such a planet being there. Having some 16 million of your people saying they want to go into storage for 4 billion years isn’t an easy thing to take. There had been social unrest on Gulfar that had eventually become a civil war, but eventually 16 million people from Gulfar had been brought to the Imperial store, to wait in stasis for their new planet to be just right. Of course 500 years later the planet of Gulfar had been completely destroyed in less than 5 minutes by super nova debris.

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In an out of the way corner of the store were the remaining 52 people in stasis, the rebel leader Qunan Arje and the remnants of his army. Even under the light green glow of the protection field you could still see his army had been through quite a battle. Ragged clothing, field dressings still on wounds, some even had poorly fitting prophetic limbs.

“I healed all potentially fatal wounds before putting them into stasis, but they will need more work,” said Chlo to the unasked question she knew was coming.

“More work ?” Said Sikush. “How long to get them all combat ready ?”

Sikush noticed Kittara add herself to the watching members of the Guard and show she was ready to join him, but he decided to let her enjoy her night at home.

"I can give them new limbs, repair bones," Chlo carried on, "but they'll need time to get used to those limbs, muscle tone will need to be built up...."

"How long?" He interrupted her and then smiled at her, "Sorry Chlo, how long?"

"3 months to be fully fit and up to Merc level."

He walked up to the form of Qunan hovering in stasis and nodded to Chlo. Instantly the green protection field went off and Arje moved forward and down until his feet touched the floor and as the stasis field was turned off he turned towards The Chaln .

"You bastard," he said with a huge grin.

They approached each other and exchanged a momentary hug and around the multiverse over 2000 watching Guard relaxed a little, but carried on watching.

"Let's get your people out of stasis, then we can talk."

Chlo began turning off protection fields and some of the rebels walked without assistance, but some needed to be given urgent medical help. All of them had the look of soldiers who've seen too much combat.

"Salom , are you ok", Arje asked a young dark haired woman who was sat on the floor. She looked unhurt but had the same dazed look of the others.

"Yes, I think so. I was being held by Gheren and now I'm here. Where is here?"

By now many versions of Chlo were there going from soldier to soldier reassuring them and making sure they had food and drink. One of them took Salom  away to sit on some newly erected seats and have a few minor cuts looked at.

"Been with me since she was a kid, family killed by raiders," said Arje.

"Estrid says we're going to Ixir." Kittara said over their private channel.

"She's probably right", he replied.

"She means us, her as well."

"Then she'll need toughening up, bring her with you in the morning."

By now all the rebel soldiers had been brought out of stasis and most now seemed aware of their surroundings and were being taken care of.

"You're all officially dead," began Sikush. "Many of you are listed as dead at the hands of Gheren Hel, others when attacking troops of the Empire or raiding colonies. As far as everyone is concerned you're all dead and buried".

Qunan Arje started clapping and slowly cheering started until they were all cheering loudly.

When it died down Sikush explained to Arje.

"I'll send you and your people to a full equipped Imperial battle cruiser currently in the middle of nowhere. You can have any facilities you need, but you have to be ready to go in three months."

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Kittara had waited until Estrid was asleep and then she'd tried to reach Sikush. Chlo told her he was with Jen and out of reach until the morning.

"Unless it's an emergency?" No it wasn't an emergency, she just needed to talk. Estrid was important to her. A piece of her life outside the daily risks of the Guard and yet now her home life and the Guard looked set to collide.

"We're going to Ixir," Estrid had said. "You need me with you."

Kittara wasn't the sort of person who demands answers to everything. Working for The Chaln  who was Emperor and head of the Temple accustomed her to having to put up with half answers. She took Estrid's statement at face value and then he'd as good as confirmed it. She stroked Emp who was now asleep on the chair next to her bed and shimmered into the uniform

of The Damned complete with short sword. She never entered the Temple in civilian clothes, it just didn't feel right. Finding the switch in her mind that only the Guard posses Kittara transferred her reality just behind the main doors of the most heavily defended place in the Multiverse. The Temple of the Flame. She knew at least 500 pairs of eyes were watching her as she arrived, the Temple was not the place for anyone wanting to hide. No one knew the last time the entrance doors had been opened, anyone arriving had to be brought by the Guard and only the Guard ever left again. She took herself to just outside the main chamber of the Temple where the clerics held gatherings for special occasions, including marriages. Since the first age of the Temple clerics are invited to enter the Temple, with the knowledge that once they enter none may leave.

Over the years relationships form, and children are born who are destined to live out their lives in the Temple. Not that it is a cramped world by any means. The internal dimensions have had their reality stretched until some 200 thousand clerics now inhabit a city within a city of some 100 square miles. Even what seemed to the outside to be a small inner courtyard had been stretched to be a park a mile across. Very few of the children born into service of the Temple ever tried to escape, there really was no way out. There had been a few suicides, but on the whole they enjoyed their world and of course every year saw the arrival of new people who had not only volunteered to join their world, but had considered it to be the highest point of their lives.

Today Kittara avoided the main hall and walked down a small and insignificant looking side passage, She always enjoyed walking down this passage and she hoped no one else was in the chamber ahead. She passed through the gap in the doors which were ever ajar into the presence of The Flame, the genuine eternal Flame.

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This chamber felt different from the rest of the Temple to her. It was the original Temple that had been brought here by The Chaln  after its previous location had become unsafe. It had been pushed deep into the rocks of the planet and then the modern temple constructed above and round it. The stones that made up this chamber had come from a multiverse that had died a very long time ago. The physical laws that created them no longer existed, yet here they were, permanent and never changing. No forced stability by Chlo was needed here, there was no half life for these stones, no constant threat of entropy. There was no reality for them here, no rules that told them how to age, so they would stay as they were forever. There were no seats here, but sometimes clerics came and sat on the floor. Today she was pleased to see she had the place to herself. In front of her was a stone about 20 feet across that protruded a few inches from a hole in the ground.

It looked what it was, a huge plug of stone rammed into the hole in the floor and held in place by almost unimaginable forces. In the middle of the stone a flame started about an inch above the surface and rose in a teardrop shape to about 3 feet high. No one apart from The Chaln  knew what powered the flame or how long it had been burning, all that knowledge was well back into the forbidden times. Kittara walked onto the stone and sat crossed legged in front of the flame. There was real power here, power beyond Chlo using every trick she knew to keep the stone well pushed home. Real live power, the same power as she felt in the sentinel temples, but much more raw. Here though it didn't effect those who came in the chamber, everything was focused on keeping chaos locked away.

She concentrated on looking deep into the flame and meditating on her surroundings. This place was real. It wasn't a blind faith used to get people to behave, it wasn't superstition. Beneath her in a chamber under the stone was the crawling chaos. It waited never sleeping, never resting for a chance to escape and return the multiverse to the chaos it was formed from. No planets, no

stars, no life, just a swirling vortex with no purpose or structure. Evil ? She had often wondered if the term actually meant anything. There was a feeling of darkness about the chamber where she sat, but that could be the residue from countless billions of years of scared clerics. She felt The Chalné reach out to see if she was awake, obviously Jen had finished fucking his brains out. "Not so much finished as paused for a break."

Normally she'd have moaned at him for invading her mind, but tonight she was grateful for the closeness.

"He's in there forever, even if the door is lifted there are other barriers." She was often puzzled by the way Sikush called chaos he. To her it was an unfathomable force from before time, but never a he or a she.

"I have some ideas to keep Estrid safe, and take her to the Sentinel of the North before you bring her to me." He didn't need to tell her where he'd be, she always knew. He was gone, no doubt Jen was refreshed and ready for more fun. Once again Kittara looked deep into the flame and stilled her mind. In the early days after her initiation into the Guard she'd found it hard to cope with the idea of having billions of years in front of her, everything had to be done now, today. Sikush had warned her.

"Most avoidable deaths happen in the first million years after conversion. New Imperial Guard feel they've got something to prove, that they need to learn it all very quickly. Then boredom sets in when they start to see eternity stretching out in front of them. You need to find a way to deal with it, a focus."

First million years ! She'd been in the Guards less than 200 and was going crazy. She started to experiment with the proximity of fireball spells to add excitement to her life and nearly burnt her feet off. She cut corners on missions to deal with raiders, she started having hours and hours of sex with some very strange creatures. Her life had been an exciting whirl that she was trying to cram into 30 or 40 years if she was lucky, before she ended up being killed by a town full of pissed off colonists. Then she was given forever !

Then she'd cut a few corners on a routine mission to escort an outlander trader to a dung hole of a mining colony in the middle of nowhere. No one attacked the Guard and why the hell was she being given baby sitting duty anyway ? She didn't stay alerts and the trader was killed in an attack by a few raiders with poor equipment. The Guard looked bad, the Empire looked bad and she was in trouble.

"I warned you about this, she's never going to settle down." She was in the office of The Chalné in the barracks of the Guard on Mendera and Herusher was doing his big 'I told you so' speech. "The outlander traders are essential to the Empire, it's cost us a lot to appease them."

There were just the three of them there, Sikush, her and Herusher. She wasn't officially under arrest, but she knew she was in bad trouble. No member of the Guard had ever been executed, but Alyz had tormented her with various stories, all probably untrue of punishments for the Guard. One had involved 200 thousand years of sewer cleaning.

"This can't continue, this er..... creature is out of control."

He seemed to have a lot to say and she decided the best policy was to look at the tile on the floor between her feet and say nothing. Herusher was the oldest of The Damned and in theory at least their leader, though they took care of their own duty rotas. He'd come to Mendera with Sikush and was rumoured to be the last surviving Holy Warrior.

"We built this great city as symbol of stability, of an unchanging presence in the Multiverse and this girl threatens it all."

She'd heard rumours Herusher had designed much of Mendera and it was nice to hear it confirmed. What puzzled her about Herusher was that he chose to look old. Given a choice at initiation all the Guard, almost without exception choose to look young, fit and attractive.

Herusher looked old, wizened and ugly. Children fled at his approach and she couldn't recall him having any real friends. Not that his appearance slowed him down. He'd taken her for sword practise and had disarmed her in seconds.

"I see no alternative. I can't recall it happening before, but she has to be destroyed".

There it had been said. She could have run, moved her reality to another dimension and hope it took them years to find her. Instead she looked at the floor and felt miserable. Her initiation had been painful, they all warned her it would be. Sikush had taken her to a cavern in a part of Qasit, a strange mixture of part worlds where the normal rules of the multiverse seem to have been forgotten.

He'd told her to undress and lay on a bare cold stone slab in the centre of the cavern. He told her it was important not to move and she hadn't. He moved his hands over her flesh and it felt like he was cutting her flesh to the bones, and she did not move or scream. It had gone on for some time until it felt like her whole body had been stripped of flesh and she must surely die and she still didn't move, though she did remember screaming at one stage. Then had come the pleasure. He ran his hands over her skin and everywhere he'd touched had tingled with pleasure. That too went on for some time and then he had gently put his arm under her and lifted her so she could sit on the edge of the slab. She had spent ages with Chlo going through how she wanted to look, but it was still a shock to look down at the dainty feet and shapely legs that must be hers because they moved when she wanted them to.

Then he asked her to give a simple vow to protect the Empire and its people, and his hand moved over her shoulder blade to give her the sacred mark of The Damned. After that things were clouded in her memory. There had been several days in her bed recovering and then getting used to her new body. She no longer had to pee if she didn't want to, but for some reason she constantly felt the need to. Then food, again there was no need to eat, but she seemed to be constantly eating. There was the constant chatter in her head now and the worry about triggering a shift in reality to somewhere deadly, like the centre of a star. Once the thought was in her head it seemed to cry out to her, shift yourself to the centre of a star. Chlo and Alyz visited her often and assured her everyone went through this and Chlo would never let her transfer somewhere that would kill her. Even at the great celebration to mark the initiation of a new immortal being (her), she still felt awkward and kept feeling the need to pee every 30 minutes. She was certain she wasn't going through all that to be discarded like a broken toy. "No, that won't happen".

She looked up at him and realised for the first time that he'd been in her head, listening to everything.

"I think you need focus. A few years duty as a watcher of The Flame will do nicely."

From the huge grin on Herusher's face she didn't think she was going to enjoy her punishment, but as it turned out the years she spent in The Temple were some of the best of her life. He'd brought her here, to The Flame.

"This is why we exist, why we fight." He'd said to her.

She'd spent her days reading the old forbidden texts and her nights sitting in front of the flame meditating on it. Whether this awoke part of Mardoun within her she was never sure, but she gained focus. Now she shifted herself slightly and gazed into the flame and she knew this was her point of focus, her special place, after all in many ways it was the only place in the Multiverse that really did matter.

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In his home in the best part of Norraine on Ixir, Carl Laundry looked at the note and gift just delivered by special messenger from the Emperor.

“My friend, thank you for helping with that little matter recently. The enclosed will help you enjoy some pleasurable nights, Sikush.”

Laudry held in his hand a large jar of ointment that when rubbed on the skin in very small quantities greatly enhanced the sexual experience. Used covertly it could also guarantee the submission of a lady who was playing hard to get. A gift worth a small fortune, even the jar it came in was made of a precious stone worth a king’s ransom.

The Foundation had recently transported some sealed containers to planet in the New Keo Group. The containers he knew were from Sikush and of course he didn’t want the local officials looking at what they contained. Weapons, drugs ? To be honest Laudry had no curiosity about it. It had been a tricky delivery for which he’d been well paid and the ointment was a nice bonus, and hard to come by. There was a particularly attractive girl on the 15th floor, the longest legs he’d ever seen. She’d obstinately refused his advances for some time, but the ointment would cure that. Laudry relaxed, he had been worried about the raiders on New Algaria. He’d been paid a lot, a really huge amount of money and business is business. The raiders were all dead, the leader sliced to pieces by the women of the planet, or so the rumours went. There was very little chance of them being traced back to him. All their minds had been wiped, he’d even had some very expensive tech guys in to create temporal disturbance in the office. If they really did anything ? They arrived late one night with lots of equipment and claimed it was done, but they did come highly recommended.

“No one will follow time lines in your office, guaranteed.”

They had told him, but this wasn’t anyone, this was Chlo. He felt nervous again and fondled the jar of ointment. He called his office and left a message for his HR lady.

“This is Laudry. I need some help catching up with paperwork. There’s a girl on the 15th floor, Georgie, I hear she’s very efficient, works in contracts. Have her seconded to me for the next week.”

He remembered being in the lobby and watching her go up on a platform to the 15th floor in a very short skirt.

“Actually make that two weeks and have her in my office in the morning.”

He turned over the jar in his hand and was certain if his connection with the raiders was even guessed at, then Kittara would be here now. He knew of her reputation and had seen her make enemies of the Empire scream for minutes on the News Channel. He wondered about getting logistics to dispose of the techies, he hadn’t liked them anyway. Yes first thing he’d arrange for the techies to disappear and then he’d enjoy the rest of the day with a much more obliging Georgie. As for the people who employed him ? One of the usual intermediaries had approached him and he had no doubt there would be another 5 or 6 contacts between them and the original people setting it up. He had no curiosity about who they were, it was just business.