

Mendera - Empire

Chapter 10 – A Celebration

“Sikush had told her the Empire would give her a huge amount of money at her initiation.”

It was the day before the great celebration to honour Kittara and everyone was back on Mendera. Everyone that is apart from Delmus, who was still on a special mission for Sikush, to the planet Tengellen. Sikush had given the usual speech to the assembled media about the origins of the Holy City and how rare the initiation of a new member of the Guard was.

“The last time was over two million years ago, about the same time Maran last won the Empire games.” He’d told them.

The joke had gone down well; Maran’s were superb economists, bureaucrats, but even their own mothers wouldn’t boast about their athletic skills. Now Herusher was giving them the usual chat about not attempting sex with another type of life form, or drink an unknown beverage, unless Chlo had checked it out. It tended to all fall on deaf ears, like the security announcements on shuttles. By the end of the month you could guarantee at least a hundred dead from drinking something toxic and another thousand dead or mutilated by trying to couple with a being of completely the wrong anatomical type.

“Don’t be the one having your genitals sent home in a bag !” Herusher would end with.

Then Arcadia had suggested moving the Champions Tournament forward by six months, so that it coincided with the initiation celebration. It made sense, but it meant an expected crowd of over a billion, all trying to cram themselves into Mendera City. For a city populated mainly by clerics and who considered a meeting of a hundred people huge, it was a staggering number of visitors.

“How was your training with Juliette ?” He asked Luri.

Officially Jen and Babak were his appointed guards, but Luri had taken in upon herself to watch over him. He’d told her she was to be his sword arm and Luri seemed to interpret that as spending every minute of the day with him. Not that he really had a problem with that, he liked the sheen on her skin, the sound of her voice. Many were intimidated by Luri, in fact he was certain she worked hard at being a complete bitch, but he found her constant companionship very agreeable.

“Well. I survived.” She replied.

“Would you have liked to have had a companion with you ?”

Luri looked at him as though he’d gone crazy.

“No. Never ! Any true warrior should go alone.”

He’d heard all the nonsense before. A few hadn’t survived a trip to see Juliette, but he knew none had died by Juliette’s hands, well perhaps one. He had reports from her on all the trainees and they varied greatly with the bar room versions the old hands told new recruits. In the end the myth and misinformation became the accepted truth.

“How long were you there Luri ?”

“About eight thousand years.”

Eight thousand years, others had been there for twenty thousand, a blink of an eye for an immortal, but a long time to spend on your own. Abijah had been asking him to send her to see Juliette, and she had done well in the last mission, perhaps a reward was in order ? He put a summons up on the common channel and wasn’t surprised that Abijah instantly appeared and stood waiting for his orders. He knew why he hadn’t encouraged her or Babak to advance up the ranks and he knew the

reason was flawed. Even the idea of advancement was alien to his original view of The Damned, but plans adapt, organisations have to evolve. He could hardly deny that Alyz, Luri, Delmus and Jen were at the top of an elite, even if it was an unofficial elite. The truth was that Abijah and Babak had been fresh faced young Arcadians when what he needed was lots of warriors, almost any warrior would have filled the role. Abijah was keen, ruthless, but would she pass the current selection criteria for The Damned ? He walked up to her and held her hand while he pondered, then he took her over to Babak.

“I’d like you both to go to Juliette for training, together.”

Babak looked elated and was grinning from ear to ear, but Abijah ? He could see the disappointment under the smile. She had of course wanted to go alone.

“You will go in six months’ time,” he continued, “tell your friends, tidy up your affairs, you could be gone for many years.”

“I could be ready to go in a few days.” Replied Abijah.

She was so keen, so ambitious, but was it all to make up for something missing ? Sikush hoped he wasn’t making a huge mistake and Abijah was destined never to return. He held his hand up to her and stroked her cheek, she still looked so young.

“Humour me,” he said, “take six months, see your friends, have a huge party before you go. Consider that an order.”

Their mood changed, they both knew that not everyone returned from seeing Juliette.

“Yes sir.” They said, almost together.

Babak looked like a pleased puppy and Abijah gave him a slight bow.

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Delmus was on a dead world, well it had been dead since The Damned had blown the crap out of it about ten years before. Tengellen the place was called and it had been a base for about a dozen raiding groups, until Sikush had decided to eradicate them. No one used the term Imperial cleansing, but Tengellen had been well and truly cleansed.

“Anyone, or thing alive on this shit hole Chlo ?”

Chlo had put the map of the complex Delmus was headed towards and the life form readings on the common channel and with most people she’d have told him so, quite sharply. But she was used to the folksy, boy off the farm attitude that Delmus cultivated and she quite liked it. She knew his reaction times were the highest of any of the Guard, and his weapon skills were second to none.

“No people to worry about,” she told him, “but lots of bugs in the basement.”

“Urrggh I hate bugs.”

The air was hot and sticky, he was picking his way through ruins that might collapse at any minute and Chlo had just told him there were bugs where he was going. Delmus hadn’t been happier in years ! The Empire always tidied up after itself, so there were no skeletal remains, no heaps of discarded weapons. Nature had taken the sharp edge off blasted walls, put green over blackened floors.

“Did we do all this damage Chlo ? Some of it looks really old.”

“The facility was built over an old temple site. Some of the ruins belong to a much older structure.”

Delmus felt his way around a fallen piece of roof, sending dozens of lizard like creatures scampering for cover. It was sweltering, the temperature on the high side of normal for a tropical planet.

“There is one other thing,” said Chlo, “just a local legend really.”

A ruined sentry tower on his left finally gave in to years of tropical corrosion to its metal legs and collapsed, sending dust and debris across his path.

“Ok Chlo. Headless princess, or army of mutants ? What is the local legend ?”

He was finally at a point of access to the old raider base, a broken and blasted set of heavy metal doors, now being steadily covered in vines.

“The raiders used the base because it was abandoned,” Chlo began, “the local records were scant, but it appears the military abandoned the base because of unexplained fatalities in the lower levels.”

One advantage of having Chlo around was not having to carry weapons. No need to carry heavy packs, multiple weapons, heavy ammunition, when Chlo could instantly provide it. Now Delmus decided something was missing, one thing stopping it from being a perfect day.

“Chlo, can I have an RM9 please ?”

Chlo appeared carrying it ! She leaned her head to the side and gave him a quizzical look.

“Trust me, it’s a guy thing.”

The RM9 was heavy, ludicrously heavy and the Empire had long since stopped producing it. Delmus had seen one on a training session on Arcadia and fallen in love with, the way people fall in love with clockwork devices and old methods of transport.

“It will jam on you.” She said as she handed it to him.

Besides the main barrel it had at least five prongs sticking out of the front. He seemed to remember they were part of the recoil protection system. The body of it was made from beautiful polished titanium and the only control to seen was a large switch with ‘live – off’, on it. The stock was wood, real wood from a hardwood tree, not the artificial crap most weapons had these days. Best of all the RM9 weighed more than most of the women he’d recently dated. He adjusted the straps and swung it over his shoulder, now he was ready for anything.

“Any power at all Chlo ?”

Delmus had entered the ground level of the building and found the lift shaft and next to it a set of steps descending into complete darkness. From somewhere down below there came the sound of scurrying insects, a lot of scurrying insects.

“A few hours and I can give you air con and a Jacuzzi, but we are working to a tight timeframe.”

He laughed, yes the party started in less than twelve hours and he didn’t want to be the only absentee. Delmus started down the steps taking them three at a time.

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Kittara had been given no chance to decide on how she’d look after the conversion, no minor adjustments to height or breast size. She stood naked in front of the mirror and envied Alyz, who had admitted getting her breasts ‘slightly augmented’. She turned sideways to get a good look at her bottom and decided that perhaps, just maybe she was happy with herself.

“I look so ridiculously young Chlo.”

There was no response, Chlo had long since given up telling her she had to live with how she looked. She’d been out in public, seen by the great majority of the populace, the time for changing her physical appearance was long past. A councillor from the Maran Group had made unpleasant comments about Sikush taking a child around with him.

“I like the skin.”

It was soft, her skin had been leathery, now it was soft and shiny, like polished leather and as black as night. She was short for a member of the Guard and her breasts looked less full than most, but as she turned and examined herself she realised she liked herself, the new her.

“Alright Chlo, I’ll stop moaning, it feels like me.”

Chlo had told her quite early on about ‘inappropriate behaviour’, how that included inspecting her private areas in public. Now though she was in private and parted her shiny black bush of pubic hair

with her fingers. What a strange but wonderful area of her body it was. Her old body had a similar gash, but there was never any pleasure associated with it. Now it seemed a touch anywhere in that area was pleasurable, and often left her in a state of immobility.

"I think my hair will be blue for the celebration Chlo, all my hair."

Chlo appeared behind her carrying a golden shield covered in precious gems, another gift from the visiting dignitaries. Etiquette demanded that each piece had to be shown to Kittara, before being put on display in the Grand Council building.

"Beautiful." Said Kittara.

It was of course completely impractical as a shield, but it would make a superb ornament for her home, when she eventually bought one. Then there were the monetary gifts from the Empire worlds, her account with the Imperial bank now held more money than she'd ever dreamt of, with more arriving all the time.

"Think of it as payment in advance." Sikush had told her, "the Empire is paying you for risking your immortal life to rescue dumb settlers, punish raiders, see off enemies and generally save its arse on numberless occasions."

Kittara had pondered how bad it was to risk an immortal life and decided she would have done it for a tenth of the money they were giving her.

"Or maybe half blue and half purple."

Kittara stood there naked, holding her hair at a strange angle, while Chlo gave her the look every parent knows well. Pride mixed with a huge dollop of total bewilderment.

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Herusher thought his usual piece to the media had gone well, and should be out as part of the mid-day Empire news. Not that anyone ever listened to his warning about sex with aliens or eating things that might kill you. At one celebration a party of twelve clerics had gone on board a craft after a few too many and the craft was from a chlorine breather planet. None of the twelve survived and another story of death by stupidity went into the archives for next time. Herusher realised he was reminiscing to himself about events so rare that they only occurred about once on 3 or 4 thousand generations and Menderan generations at that.

"When you're my age, even the rare happens a large number of times." He muttered to himself. How many of The Damned were there now? It never used to be a secret, but now Sikush had hidden the true total with smoke and mirrors, part of the showmanship he enjoyed. Herusher chuckled, before checking the total with Chlo.

"Thirty two thousand, five hundred and six."

That was a huge number of celebrations and he had been to them all, though most of the early ones had been small private affairs. Now the media demanded access to the new supernatural, immortal member of the Guard.

"Minraver is in the blue garden." Chlo told him.

Herusher pulled himself erect and moved himself to the blue garden in the Imperial palace. Here plants and insects from all over the Empire were kept and nurtured in their own mini bio-spheres, the selection criteria for this garden being a predominant blue colouration.

"Herusher. It has been too long."

She hadn't changed, eternals never do. In his mind he was the new recruit to the Holy Warriors again, the one 'true soul', as Minraver had called him. Why had she taken him to her bed? That worried him less than whether they might not be lovers again during the month long celebration.

"I've missed you." He Said.

She kissed him, passionately, right there in the gardens. True the gardens were private, but to be kissed by an eternal was never a small thing. She had no personal space with him. How long since they'd last made love ? His mind recoiled at the number of years, generations had come and gone, yet she put her arm behind his back and nibbled at his neck as though it had been yesterday.

"I hope you're not going to make me beg for a place to stay ?"

Her voice had an undertone, like the purr of a giant cat. The sentinels liked her being here, he could almost feel them relax, no enemy would risk the certain suicide of attacking two eternal. The multiverse was another matter; it knew the awful possibilities of having both eternal in one city.

"Releasing the crawling chaos is the least of its fear." Sikush had once confided.

Were the legends true ? He'd seen a metal tablet, in the forbidden store, it talked of them being able to bring the multiverse down to a single point, a tiny bead of pure light and then ending it, ending everything.

"Let's go to bed." She whispered in his ear.

Herusher didn't care about rumours. He felt like that young Holy Warrior again and Minraver was just a girl in his arms. He found her mouth and kissed her hard, then he moved them both to his quarters in the barracks. The quarters were plainly furnished, but the bed was comfortable.

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Delmus arrived at the bottom of the steps and Chlo automatically lit the area around him. All the Guard have perfect night vision, they see the actual fabric of the multiverse, but for sheer comfort and peace of mind Delmus still preferred old fashioned lighting.

"Any idea where I go now Chlo ?"

The briefing had been esoteric to say the least, but one thing Sikush had made clear.

"Get as far down in the facility as you can, look for records, tablets, you'll know when you see it."

He started to walk towards the nearest room and numerous insects scuttled into the darkness at his approach.

"When we cleansed this place," began Chlo, "we weren't worried about what they might have down here, not really a search and destroy mission. More of a destroy and then destroy some more mission. You could find anything down here."

Delmus encountered empty room after empty room, with no sign of an elevator down, or a set of steps. Even a ventilation duct going down would have made him happy.

"Can you scan for empty areas behind the walls Chlo ? The floor feels solid."

Chlo gave the 'Mmmm' sound which he knew was her equivalent of the mechanic who doesn't know how to fix something, but doesn't want to tell you.

"There is space below you Delmus. I just have no idea how you get to it."

He took the RM9 from his shoulder and pushed the switch to live. The weapon whined and then gave off a steady deep hum that sent more insects running for cover. He knew that even with all the prongs it had a kick like a mule, so he bent his knees and pulled the stock hard against his hip. There were no sights of course. A rookie once caused huge amusement by asking the instructor how to aim it.

"You don't aim an RM9 boy," he'd said, "you point it in the right direction and hold on tight."

But where to aim ? Delmus decided it probably didn't much matter, so he decided on straight in front and pulled the trigger. The RM9 doesn't have rapid fire, it's strictly a one shot at a time weapon, so the makers made that one shot a bit special. An energy bolt came out of the barrel, white hot with wispy side shoots like solar corona. The initial energy bolt took out walls, partitions, doors etc with ease, until it reached a solid stone wall. There it exploded like a volcanic eruption,

flattening everything for hundreds of yards and destroying just about everything in the basement level.

"I'd forgotten how good that felt." Said Delmus.

He could now see that the basement was one huge room that had been made into about thirty or so rooms by fitting partitions. All the partitions, furniture and a good part of the flooring was now gone, turned into kindling and pushed into a drift against the wall behind him. The wall in front of him looked badly scorched, but solid.

"Try the wall next to the stairs." Said Chlo.

Hunch or had she noticed something ? Delmus decided just to give it a try. Once again he crouched, pulled the RM9 in nice and snug and pulled the trigger. This time there was a sound like metal girders collapsing after the initial explosion.

"You found your way down." Said Chlo.

The wall was gone and with it the first fifty feet or so of the stairs out. Anyone without an alternative means of leaving the basement wasn't going very far. What Delmus was looking at though was a way to go even further down. Directly behind where the stairs had been and recently hidden behind a foot of wall, was a way down.

"The stairs even look intact." Said Delmus.

Looking down all he could see was a circular staircase leading down and there was the definite sound of slithering coming from below. Down he went, with Chlo sending lights that kept slightly ahead of him. After a few feet he found some of the creatures who'd been so busy scuttling and slithering.

"Basically a large weevil type creature, almost certainly omnivorous." Said Chlo.

As the first one was trying to take a bite out of his leg just where his trousers met his socks, Delmus was inclined to back up the omnivorous theory. They had large front jaws, about a dozen legs and two fluffy antenna. He was tempted to fireball them, but didn't want to risk destroying what he'd come so far to find. He did what people have done to bugs, since there have been people to do it. Delmus stomped on them, hard, until the dozen or so on the stairs were just an unpleasant smelling brown mush. He then went a few more turns around and down the staircase before Chlo said.

"How good a stomper are you ?"

Below him was the end of the stairs and a small storage room lined with cabinets, about twenty or so of them, the sort of cabinets with heavy doors that people put important things into. In the centre of the room though was a large wooden chest, painted bright blue. It almost shouted, I am the one you want.

"The chest will be empty, I guarantee it," said Delmus, "what we're looking for will be in the dented cabinet in the far corner."

Then he noticed the floor of the room was moving, seething, with waves like an ocean that's just been disturbed by a sudden wind. The super weevils looked to be a good foot deep in places, there had to be tens of thousands of them, all probably partial to wandering warriors.

"I wonder what they feed on ?" Said Chlo.

Delmus began going down the stairs and they spotted him, or smelt him, or whatever scuttling over grown weevils do to spot their next meal. They swarmed up the stairs and were all over him in seconds. After the initial feelings of shock and revulsion he realised they weren't able to actually hurt him.

"Strange sensation, and one seems to want to mate with my ear, but they're not doing me any harm."

He put his hands to his head and swept the bugs off his eyes. They were back on him in seconds, in huge numbers that seemed intent on biting at any piece of exposed skin they could find. There were far too many to stomp, so using Chlo's hands he started across the floor of the room. It was like wearing a wet suit, a heavy moving wetsuit that was intent on eating him.

"Try the big fuck off chest first." Said Chlo.

He waded through the bugs to the chest, just knowing it was going to be empty, or worse, a booby trap. He put his hands on the chest and found a good inch of bugs between hands and chest. It took nearly a minute of squishing and rubbing to get all the bug bits out of the way, so that his hands could touch the wood of the chest. Chlo scanned the chest.

"No electrical devices, no explosive." She said.

"It'll be empty." He replied.

More squishing so that he could grip the edges, then he lifted and looked down. It was a shock to see his torso through Chlo's probe, his body covered in hungry writhing insects. As to the chest ?

"You were right, it's empty." Said Chlo.

Twenty or so cabinets to go, a lot of wading a lot of stomping. Delmus started towards the bent cabinet in the far corner, hoping his sixth sense was correct. Chlo could have tried various types of bug killer, perhaps even drenched him in burning accelerant, but any of that might destroy whatever was hidden down there.

"Where are they all coming from Chlo ?"

He made his way to the cabinet, certain in his mind that the bugs were getting deeper, the mass of them covering him heavier.

"There's a small hole in the wall," said Chlo, "leads to chamber beyond the wall, a fireball there might thin them out a bit."

She didn't sound confident, but Delmus could feel a few of the bugs had now discovered his balls and the sensations from that area of his body were getting very weird.

"Do what you think best Chlo."

More squishing and his hands were on the metal of the cabinet. A tough lock this one, but after a few seconds it was open and inside, all on its own was an Imperial archive canister. Delmus just knew deep in his soul that this was what he'd come for. He'd seen them before, designed to survive natural disasters, terrorist attacks, fire up to truly ridiculous temperature. On the front of it was the clincher, it had written on it in an ancient demon tongue, 'for Tomma-Goran'. Only a few people left alive knew that tongue, this had to be what he was sent for. He heard the soft crump as Chlo set off the fireball in the nearby chamber, then the deafening crash as the whole wall of the room fell inwards.

"That didn't go as expected." Said Chlo.

Delmus grabbed the canister and held it against him as the wall of bugs hit him. These weren't like the super weevils, they were bigger, hungrier. As they swarmed over him and carried on filing the room he realised they could bite a lot harder than the little ones.

"No wonder they had unexplained fatalities Chlo."

The pinching of claws was now starting to be an annoyance, not really hurting, but even a minor pin prick can be unpleasant when it's multiplied a thousand times. The bugs continued pouring through the wall, filling the chamber for at least twenty feet above his head. Delmus held the canister tight in his left hand and used his right to press the 'live' button on the RM9.

"Chlo," he said, "I've just had an idea."

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Abijah stroked Babak's neck before climbing over him to get out of the bed, he always grabbed the side nearest the door, just another of his quirks. She had wanted to go to see Juliette alone, but as she watched Babak sleep she could see that going as a couple had its advantages. He stirred and half opened his eyes.

"Go back to sleep, I won't be long." She said.

She loved him, had loved him since first seeing him in the Arcadian junior reserve all those years ago, and yet she'd have happily left him for thousands of years to be noticed. She had to become one of the inner sanctum, it was like a drug to her, almost a physical need. One last kiss on his cheek and she had Chlo dress her in the usual light robe of a Menderan, a light cloak, then a small spell to slightly change her features. Now she was ready to leave and go to meet Kittara.

"Over here."

They'd agreed to meet near the market place, and Mendera was almost unrecognisable. Above them the sky was full of huge spacecraft from all over the Empire, all locked in place by Chlo. Everywhere people had put up tents, wooden huts, anything that would give them a bit of shelter so that they could see the great celebration. Yet the people around them, sleeping in the storage hold of dirty bulk carriers, these were the elite of the Empire, the top tier who had to be there, had to be able to tell their grandchildren that they'd seen the celebrations for the birth of an immortal. As to the rest of the Empire, the washers, scrubbers, artisans and strong backs ? They got to watch on the news channels.

"Crime is rife," said Abijah, "someone tried get over the wall of The Temple yesterday."

Suddenly in the distance there was an explosion followed by a ball of flame, perhaps a shuttle crashing or just an accident with some fuel ? Kittara smiled at Abijah.

"Don't you love it though ?"

Without waiting for an answer Kittara was off leading Abijah between the makeshift housing. Mendera had become a shanty town, a temporary home to a billion citizens of the Empire, who all needed feeding and watering. Abijah had been briefed by Sikush earlier.

"We've discovered a plot to disrupt the celebrations. A plot by the Maran group, involving the use of explosives concealed in peoples bodies. The loss of life could be considerable if this plot isn't stopped. Kittara knows the details, but you have skills that will make her job easier."

Abijah knew what those skills were, she'd made it obvious on many occasions that if the Empire needed an assassin, then she was more than happy to take up the role.

"Try not to involve the mercs, make it look like a robbery." Sikush had told her.

Strangely enough she wasn't upset at a newbie like Kittara running the mission, Abijah could recognise that Kittara had skills she could learn. They went down the alley next to the famous Hasim's Emporium and towards a set of tents pitched in a small park.

"There should be seven here, unless they changed the plan." Said Kittara.

They both giggled as they pushed through the tent flap, just two local girls looking for a bit of illicit fun. The men inside smiled back, one even helping the tent flaps to fold back.

"Are you lost ?" Asked one of the men.

"I think we've found what we were looking for." Said Kittara.

Abijah watched Kittara turn on the charm, smiling at the men while she looked around their tent.

"Just the seven of you ?" Asked Kittara. "Looks like you need someone to show you the city."

Three or four of the men clustered around Kittara, while rest asked Abijah the usual small talk questions.

"Are you from Mendera City ? What do you do ? Are you seeing anyone ?"

When Abijah pushed her knife in the first throat, she couldn't decide if she was carrying out the mission, or just bored stupid. One of the men screamed, but everyone was shouting and screaming in the nearby tents too, some from sex, others from too many excited people all trying to be heard. "Oh no you don't."

Abijah saw one of the men trying to open the tent flap, so she pushed her knife deep into the top of his back, then she ripped it right down his body until it reached his pelvis.

"More frenzied !" Said Kittara.

They both hacked and slashed until there wasn't much left to slash at, then Kittara started going through pockets. Abijah joined her in relieving the bodies of every money belt, purse or hidden pouch they could find. As one final touch to make it look like a savage attack for money, Kittara cut open a purse and scattered the enclosed coins across the tent. Then Chlo arrived and started to examine the bodies and run her hands over them.

"I know how to deactivate them now." She said.

Of course ! Abijah had seen the information about the synthetics on Maran 1, but has assumed Luri and Delmus would be dealing with it on Mendera.

"They didn't even know they were synthetic," said Chlo, "just implanted with a few memories and a command to be at a certain place tomorrow. Then boom !"

How many would have died ? The Empire would have looked ridiculous, The Chaln  would have been badly embarrassed. Abijah kicked one of the dead corpses. They shimmered into clean gowns and left Chlo to finish her work.

"Now we have the organisers to get." Said Kittara.

Kittara led them across the city; in no apparent hurry she took them past the temporary building that held the Parisi Brothers famous brothel that was fast becoming the talk of Mendera.

"They have a girl, part Dark Angel, called Jenna." Said Kittara.

Kittara knew the story of Abijah and her near miss with death and she was sure that Jenna would intrigue her.

"Have you ever," began Abijah, "paid for sex ?"

Kittara looked at the gaudily lit entrance to the brothel and her eyes had an almost childlike glint of excitement.

"No, but I intend to spend some time here over the next month. Anything I want is free, or so Delmus told me."

Kittara took hold of Abijah's hand and moved them far to the north of the city, to the area just in front of the Imperial palace. Here the structures were still temporary and rickety, but the constant roar of sound had gone. This was the area for the ambassadors of the Empire worlds and other notables. Kittara knew the building she was after and that it had to look like robbery.

"Crime in these celebrations is so bad," Kittara said to Abijah, "the mercs should do something about it."

They both chuckled as they removed a wooden panel from the prefabricated structure that was the home of the Maran Ambassador for the month, or would have been, but tonight was going to be his last. Of course killing an ambassador was unthinkable, a complete travesty of all the rules of diplomacy, but then so was plotting to kill thousands of innocent Menderan's. They were lucky and as they turned down the first corridor a man almost stumbled into them.

"He's one." Whispered Kittara.

She held the man firmly and cut his throat, widely and deeply, the blood quickly soaking the expensive purple carpet that had only been put down a week before. Abijah watched as Kittara laid

the man soundlessly on the floor. As they moved off he was still just alive, still making a quiet choking sound, but he wasn't going to cause them any trouble. From a door further along there came the sound of two men talking quite loudly. It had to be the ambassador and his aid, as the servants were sent to their own tents shortly after dark.

'What do you mean you've lost contact with Argour?'

'I'm sorry sir, shall I send a scout to look?'

There was the sound of someone being struck as they approached to just outside the door.

'Fool! No one must know but us, go yourself, go now!'

A man holding a very red eye opened the door and Abijah cut deep into his belly, deep enough to feel the blade scrape his back bone. Then throwing his body in front of her she entered the room with Kittara. The room was lavish considering that in a month they'd be pulling it down, expensive wall coverings, the best carpeting and furniture that Maran had to offer.

"I am an ambassador of the Maran Group. Anyone harming me will be hunted down and killed."

Good he was feisty, Abijah liked them feisty. So often when it came to it, they hid in corners and whimpered, or even worse they started pleading. What was this one's name?

'Ambassador Driscoll,' she found on her link with Chlo.

Kittara went to finish off the aid, who was still moaning and bleeding over the carpet and she nodded at Abijah, giving her the kill.

"No matter how long it took, Maran intelligence would carry on until they found you."

Abijah grabbed the man's head and forced him down onto his knees, ignoring his clumsy attempts to hit her. As he felt her strength she could see realisation dawn in his eyes.

"May I know the name of my killer?"

There was to be no talk in here, the room might be full of recording equipment, in fact it probably was. Abijah had used a technique before, it was very effective and caused surprisingly little bleeding. Holding his head back she plunged a thin seven inch blade through his tear duct, through the eye socket and into his brain. By the time her hand touched his face he was twitching and dying.

"Nice," said Kittara, "but we need the heads."

So no nice clean kill! Abijah quickly cut through muscle and bone to remove Driscoll's head, covering herself in his blood as she did so. Then she went into the corridor, quickly returning with the dripping head of the aid. She looked enquiringly at Kittara, who produced a sack. With all their super technology, Abijah reflected on how often a mission seemed to end with someone needing a plain cloth sack.

"I'll leave you to take their valuables," said Kittara, "I have to deliver these."

With that Kittara took the sack of bloody heads and vanished. Abijah wondered what was considered 'valuables' to the everyday robber? She went through their clothing, remembering to look around the groin area as Kittara had shown her. They had a surprisingly large amount of money about them, several thousand Maran credits and a few precious gems.

~ ~

Sikush was wondering if the president of the Maran Group would return home after finding the heads on his bed in the royal palace? It was a very strong signal of disapproval, perhaps too strong? Luri was still with him, though he knew Kittara would eventually return to share his bed, Chlo had adjusted the rota to ensure that.

"I love the City like this," he said, "but it's nice to return to the quiet of the palace."

They were on his favourite veranda in his personal quarters, the constant noise of the crowd far away beyond the walls of the palace.

“Who will be returning to Annill ?” Luri asked.

He knew she wanted to go, was almost desperate to go through the portal with Alyz, see the world beyond, but he needed her with him.

“Alyz will lead,” he said, “but the rest of the group will be decided on closer to the time.”

There was no huge hurry, Sumahn-Nerish was happy the big one had been so efficiently dealt with. Alyz had even gone back and skinned the beast, used over two hundred of the local troops to carry it's hide back to the Alcázar, what a warrior, her father would be so proud, if he knew. Now he'd reinforce the permanent garrison of The Damned to twenty and send Alyz through the portal next year, when Sumahn needed impressing again.

‘Delmus is requesting entry.’ Chlo told him.

About time he thought, as he gave Chlo permission to bring the warrior into his private quarters.

Delmus appeared looking like he'd been up to neck in bugs for hours, which of course he had been.

There was just enough left of his uniform to cover his groin, he was covered in the grey/green blood of countless bugs and over his shoulder was the RM9, still glowing hot and steaming from over use.

In his arms Delmus was holding a scorch marked Imperial archive canister. The first thing Sikush noticed though was the huge grin on his face. Delmus really seemed to have been enjoying his work.

“So Delmus, what have you got for me ?” He asked.

The filthy warrior handed him the canister as if it was the most precious object in the world.

“When I saw the writing, I knew it was what you wanted.”

There was no writing on the top of the canister, that Delmus had been clutching hard against him for some many hours, as he blasted his way through cave after cave of the bugs. He looked disappointed at first, then bewildered.

“The deities have strange ways Delmus,” Sikush said, “I'm certain you saw what they wanted you to see. Come on let's see what it holds.”

Chlo produced a table while she took five time locks of the room, then the palace and then two time locks of the entire Menderan system. She also alerted the sentinels and was once again exasperated by their underwhelming response. Finally she flagged up what was about to happen to Minraver. All of this was done quietly, almost automatically, you couldn't take chances with strange objects found in very odd places.

“You're wounded.” Said Luri.

Delmus seemed to notice the wounds in his back for the first time, deep wounds that would have killed anyone other than a member of the Guard.

“I'll get them seen to later.”

Sikush could see Delmus just wanted to see what was in the canister, but anything that could damage the Guard needed investigating and he exchanged a private word with Chlo about getting a full team to investigate Tengellen properly.

“Open it Delmus, you've earned the right.” Said Sikush.

Delmus fumbled with the catches, the bug's blood hindering his wounded fingers, so Luri helped him open all the catches and unscrew the top. As the lid came off there was the hiss of air entering the canister, probably for the first time in billions of years.

“I hope it's not a book !” Said Delmus.

He turned the canister upside down over the table and gave it a shake. Onto the table fell a small golden device, that would just about fit in the palm of a large hand.

“A rift manipulator.” Said Luri.

Sikush picked it up and felt the slight tingle that told him the device was working.

“Yes Luri,” he said, “a rift manipulator and it’s still live. A very rare and important find.”

“Is it valuable ?” Asked Delmus.

“Oh yes, priceless. You can spend the entire month enjoying the delights of the Parisi Bothers establishment and I will pay your bill.”

Delmus finally shimmered into a clean uniform and allowed Luri to apply healing spells to his wounds, but the grin on his face kept getting broader.

“What does it do ?” He asked.

Sikush held the manipulator closer to his face, there were two small marks, maybe scratches, but no signature, no clue as to who made it.

“People think of demons as just warriors,” he began, “just as heavies who occasionally use magic, but in the past they have developed advanced technology. This device is from the height of their most advanced of times. It can create a doorway to just about anywhere.”

~ ~

Abijah didn’t even know why she’d come, this time in her full best uniform, wasn’t even sure she’d be welcomed here.

“Come in, no queues for the Guard,” the man at the door had said, “please step through into the reception.”

So she’d gone into the sumptuous reception area of the Parisi Brothers famous brothel and had been truly impressed by the wonderful decadence of the place. It seemed that just about any drink she wanted was available, any food could be acquired. All this was done in a room of floor to ceiling pink opulence. Did the guys get a less pink room ? She wondered.

“Welcome.”

The man looked human, looked like an Arcadian.

“We have something for all tastes. Would you like anything specific, or can I show you some of our most popular companions ?”

Abijah relaxed, it was just another shop after all and she rather enjoyed shopping.

“I’d like to see Jenna.” She said.

The man went into his routine, probably designed to get the price up.

“Jenna is very popular, she usually only sees a few regulars, but for one such as you..... I’m sure something can be arranged.”

He left her with two girls who kept filling her glass and giving her views of very nice and scantily clad bodies. They’d obviously decided she was into girls. Was she ? Not really, though she did enjoy a night with either sex, but on the whole she preferred dick to pussy.

“You are in luck. Jenna has put off a very important client to see you.”

The maître de had returned and was beckoning her to follow him. No mention had been made of price, but Abijah had put a thick bundle of Imperial credits into her pocket before coming.

“In here.”

The boudoir had a large round bed, and a long sofa covered in comfy looking cushions, most importantly it smelt clean. On Ixir she’d followed a target into a brothel and the cheap scent barely covered the sickly smell of sweat and stale sex. She sat on the sofa and almost instantly a beautiful girl entered and by her tail, Abijah assumed this was Jenna.

“Thank you for asking to see me Abijah.”

The voice was nice, very melodic, it reminded her of the last dark angel she’d met, but Jenna was obviously a mixture of types. No barb on the tail, the face very human and very beautiful, the hands instead of talons.

"I hope you like what you see?" Jenna said removing her blouse.

Abijah had been staring, her face was perfect, the proportions just right, the skin tone just the right shade, and everything looked genuine.

"You're beautiful, you're not like the last dark angel I saw."

Jenna's breasts were firm, again just the right proportions and Abijah fondled one as the dark angel sat in front of her.

"You've seen a full blood? And you live. That is quite rare. My grandmother was a full blood dark angel, my grandfather was..... He was something else."

Abijah had to have this girl, no matter what the cost. She'd allowed the drink to affect her, just a little and she wanted Jenna, wanted everything from her.

"The way this works," began Jenna, "is that I never spend less than two hours with a client. For five hundred credits I will give you the best two hours of your life. For a thousand credits we have a light meal together, then three hours to enjoy ourselves. Finally for two thousand you may share my bed for the entire night, and we won't be getting much sleep."

Jenna then got up to refresh their drinks, leaving Abijah to consider the tariff. This was a well-known routine for Jenna, who removed her panties as she returned with the drinks. Abijah felt in her pocket for a five thousand note, then pulled out two. Ten thousand was an absurd sum for a night of sex, but she wanted Jenna, wanted her body and soul.

"And for this?" Asked Abijah giving the dark angel the money.

Abijah shimmered out of her clothes, leaving her in just her panties, which she was quite looking forward to Jenna removing for her. Jenna gave her a slight bow and put the money into a pot on the table.

"For that Mistress Abijah can have whatever she wishes."

~ ~

Sikush was on his own, which was very rare. He'd noticed Luri giving Delmus certain looks as she tended his wounds, so he'd sent them off to enjoy themselves. Various members of the Guard had tried to join him, but he'd told them all that Kittara was joining him soon. That hadn't stopped the fussing on the common channel, he really should have at least one guard, even in his own palace. He looked again at the news coming in of deaths in the Menderan shanty towns that had sprung up for the celebration. So far one hundred and fifteen deaths had been reported, most of those nothing to do with Kittara or Abijah. Put a billion people together in a confined area, add drink and drugs and people will die. The Maran president showed no signs of leaving, so the plan seemed to have worked, give the Maran Group a quick sharp shock, but nothing to permanently damage diplomatic relations.

"I'm not leaving!"

Jen had appeared, unbidden and she was stood glaring at him, defying him. He smiled at her and beckoned her to sit with him. He'd always known the Holy Warriors would never really work, but The Damned were turning out far better than he'd hoped.

"Would you like to take a team to Tengellen? Find out about these super bugs?" He asked her.

"Yes I would."

They were friends again, she was telling him all her gossip. As to Kittara? She was sat on the stone in front of true flame, regaining her focus. He felt for her mind and found her calm and strong, another few minutes and she'd join him.

"Another marking would be nice." Said Jen.

She now had his full attention.

“Like the mark on our shoulders, but for your own guard to mark us out,” she continued, “perhaps on the backs of hands to make it visible. Or am I just being vain?”

She laughed, but he thought it sounded a very good idea. A marking for all his elite personal guard, by his invitation only, with perhaps a second oath of loyalty to him.

“No. You’re not vain, that sounds a good idea. See me after you clear out Tengellen and we’ll work out the final format.”

Jen smiled and then vanished as Kittara appeared. Kittara was wearing very little, so he told Chlo to lock them out of the common channel until morning.

“Did you miss me?” She said as she sat next to him.

“I should beat you for making me wait.”

He kissed her as his hand felt for her left breast. Kittara had done well in her mission, and yes he had missed her.

“Urrghh too many clothes.” She said looking at him.

He shimmered and was naked.

“Better.” She said.

As she pulled back his foreskin and started to lick the end of his dick, he realised he’d been looking forward to this all day. Nothing more was said by either of them, until Sikush gave a long contented sigh some time later.