

Mendera – Empire

Chapter 12 – Bugs !

“For the multiverse to operate in a sustainable way, we have to conclude that even the Gods must work within limitations – Minraver.”

Jen had taken her team to Tengellen the day the month long celebration had ended.

“Don’t rush, record any marking you can find on the temple ruins.” Sikush had told her.

He’d also made her bring no less than ten battle hardened members of the Guard with her. He’d told her to only bring members of The Damned who’d been there since the start.

“Take the old indestructible who were in the battle of The Well.” He’d said to her.

Why would she need the ancients to fight bugs ? Sikush had been vague about it, but he’d shown her an ancient symbol on a metal tablet.

“If you see this anywhere you are to pull out and return to me.” He’d said.

Pull out ! The Damned run away ! What was he afraid they’d find ? The symbol looked like an old Menderan S, but with an accent. No one, including Luri had any idea why it might be so important. Her party had arrived a few days before and as ordered had recorded any symbols they’d found on the old temple ruins, which was precisely four badly weathered symbols.

“Are there any locals still in the area ?” Chlo had asked her.

An orbital probe had shown aboriginal tribes on the other continents, but no one seemed to want to live within a thousand miles of the complex. That was strange, the land looked fertile. Hot, very hot, everything seemed to grow well. Sikush had actually come to see her at the same entrance to the complex that Delmus had used.

“Go slowly,” he’d said, “record everything, be very careful.”

Just before he’d gone he said to her.

“Don’t be too proud to run away.”

Run from what ? They’d had no problem finding the room where Delmus had found the rift manipulator, then it was a question of following the holes the RM9 had left in the walls. So far they’d seen no bugs, not even bodies. Chlo had given them some really powerful bug killing devices.

“A localised ion beam that could fry a neutron star.” Chlo had told her.

Jen felt the weight of the weapon and felt reassured. Like Delmus she always preferred something heavy and business like when it came to weapons.

“Delmus went up here. You need to go down.” Chlo told her.

She’d wanted Delmus with her as part of the team, after all he had the local knowledge, but Sikush needed him for special assignments. They’d both been there at her briefing on Leviathan, Luri and Delmus.

“Chlo has it all recorded,” Delmus had told her, “I spotted a cave going down but by then all I wanted to do was get out of that place.”

“Were there bugs down there ?” She’d asked.

“The bugs were everywhere !”

Jen ignored the hole Delmus had blasted in the wall and looked down into the cave below. There was the distinct sound of scuttling.

“I hate bugs.” Said Yulin.

Jen was glad to have Yulin along. He was one of the Arcadian guard who'd been converted in the first year of the new Multiverse. Strong and reliable. Ok she'd have to admit he'd never win any prizes for mental ability, but he was good to have on your side in a fight.

"Weapons ready," Jen shouted, "we're still moving slowly and recording everything though."

The cave they dropped into had a crystalline floor that glinted their light drones back at them. On another occasion Jen would have enjoyed the beauty of the place, but thousands of large bugs were swarming out of a hole in the floor about twenty yards away.

"Slow arcs like Chlo said." Said Jen.

The weapons worked well. The hot arcs burned through everything and melted the rock of the floor to leave puddles of boiling silica. The bugs screamed and fell in their thousands. Due to the tightness of the cave only the first three members of the Guard could use their weapons, but it was enough. One bug got through and bit Yulin on the arm, but he ignored it and carried on killing thousands of its kin.

"They've stopped." Said Yulin.

As he pulled the bug off his arm and stamped on it, Jen noticed he was right. A few surviving bugs were hissing at them and disappearing back down the hole they'd come out of. Almost like they'd been recalled ?

"Look in every corner before we go further," said Jen, "make sure Chlo has a record of anything you find."

"Like what ?" Someone asked.

A glare from Jen stopped any further questions and after twenty minutes of fruitless exploration they followed the bugs down the hole.

"I think one is in my ear !" One of the Guard said.

The bugs had come from everywhere and like Delmus they were now covered from head to foot in writhing, hairy, biting bugs. Chlo had foreseen this and given each of them a spray gun full of a special accelerant.

"My own brew," Chlo had said, "I call it bugs well done."

They sprayed each other and the floor and then Jen set off a small fireball. The effect was incredible; the floor was almost instantly covered in the twitching blackened remains of thousands of the bugs.

"They stink worse dead than they did alive." Said Yulin.

No one fancied digging through the piles of charred remains, but they still had their orders to record everything. Then Chlo saw the symbol on the floor that Sikush had shown her. The bug pile had to be pushed to one side and then some accelerant sprayed on the floor to wash it, but there was no mistaking the symbol.

"Pull your team out." Said Chlo.

Jen nodded at her team and they went back to bay 2 in the Guards barracks, all apart from her and Yulin.

"You up for it ?" She asked.

Yulin just smiled and walked towards the hole leading downwards. Then Sikush was talking to her on private link.

"Go slowly ! Remember what I said about running."

So she'd been given a kind of approval for carrying on, it wasn't totally disobeying orders now.

"Are we going ?" Said Yulin.

"We're going." Jen said as she jumped down to the next cave.

The bugs had gone and there wasn't even the sound of distant scuttling. Jen reached for Chlo to see if she could get a clue to what they might be up against.

"No idea." Said Chlo.

The cave was longer than the others, with the symbol everywhere, almost like someone carving their name on the wall. Or being carved by followers? They walked for almost half a mile before finding another way down.

"Stairs Chlo, proper solid stone stairs." Said Jen.

In front of them wasn't another bug hole, but a wide set of stone steps leading down. How far down was impossible to say, so they sent light drones ahead and started down.

"Did you hear that?"

Yulin stopped and listened intently.

Then Jen heard it too, like rock cracking, but a long way ahead of them. The stairs seemed to go down forever until they eventually came to a set of heavy looking stone doors. To the right of the doors was another bug hole leading straight down. Jen put her ear to the hole and all was silent.

"Let's try the doors." She said

The noise was deafening as the doors screeched over dry dusty floors. They hadn't been hiding, but now anyone for miles must know where they were. Then the rotten egg smell hit them.

"Is it too late to vote for going home?" Asked Yulin.

Chlo told them the atmosphere inside the doors was about 80% methane, laced with enough hydrogen sulphide to kill a battalion.

"Oxygen .01%." Chlo finished with.

They moved on along the corridor and into a large cavern that seemed to have a large cloud of green fog covering a depression in its centre.

"I bet that's poisonous too." Said Yulin.

Chlo duly confirmed it was a highly noxious Chlorine and Sulphide mix. Then they heard the sound of breaking rock again and it seemed to be coming from the area covered by the fog.

"Will our kit survive?" Asked Jen.

Nearly all the time the Guard survived, but their weapons and kit weren't as strong as they were.

Chlo informed them that their weapons would survive the conditions in the cave.

"Good," said Yulin, "no good meeting the big bad with just my dick in my hand."

Jen raised her eyebrows and nodded at him.

The noise was now louder and seemed right on top of them. Jen raised the Ion weapon and felt for a fireball spell in her mind. Then she saw the head rising from the crack in the rocks and realised why Sikush had told her to be careful.

"Fuck! It's a deity." Said Jen.

Then all link with Tengellen was lost as the planet was evaporated, became a just a cloud of super-heated particles.

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Slow Mo had seen the girl before, had followed her to the edge of the slums before losing her where the proper streets were. She moved fast, too fast to be just another resident of the worst part of Ixir. One day there would be houses for them all, reaching up to the sky, or so the president said. Slow Mo spat at a passing growler bug and thought the president was probably a liar. He ran along the roof following the girl, who was using the top walkway along Stone Wall alley.

"Hi Mozim."

He acknowledged the greeting and moved on, trying to keep pace with the girl. His mother had named him Mozim, or rather the woman who told him she was his mother. Perhaps she had given birth to him, but then his father must have been a visitor. He looked at his own legs and his hands with their claws where hands should have been. Yes his father definitely couldn't have been a local. The girl was quite small, almost frail and with the look of a child about her, but the way she moved ! No one was as fast at him, yet he was having to sweat a little to keep up with her.

'Today you won't lose me lady.' He muttered to himself.

Slow Mo headed to his left. Yes ! He'd go over the roof of the 'water side kings' building, then drop down to the walkway just past the Stone Wall tavern. He'd be ahead of her then. Not that the water side kings gang had much water to boast about. Just a grotty stream that doubled as a sewer and smelt like shit in hot weather. He'd been a member of a gang, the 'bottom level devils', but most of them had been wiped out by the militia in a cleansing exercise. Daft really ! With over a million people crammed into the slums another gang took over the territory in a day. Now Slow Mo had no gang, which meant he had no base, no one to watch his back. Not that he had any real trouble, as no one could keep up with him. Plus he delivered good that people wanted delivered on time and with no chance of the militia getting hold of it.

"Go fuck a growler." He shouted at the water side kings roof guard.

No harm in letting them know he was the king of the roofs, especially as he was delivering their drugs to them in two days time. He reached the tilted roof that covered the back of the Stone Wall tavern and noticed old Ruben trying to break in the back door again.

'Silly old fool, they'll gut you for sure this time.' He muttered.

Normally he'd stop for a drink, the Stone Wall was one of the few places where the local brew didn't make you blind on a bad day, but he should now be ahead of the girl.

'Fuck ! How did she do that ?'

Below him she went past at speed, but didn't give the impression of hurrying. As he watched she moved in almost a blur to pass a slow moving working girl with her latest patron. He jumped down to the walkway and took after her, cursing under his breath.

"Mozim ! Mizzal wants to see you." Someone called from a doorway.

"Later !" He called back.

Damn this was no good ! His natural advantage was over the roofs. He leapt using his enormous back legs.

"Look like giant lizard legs." A whore had once told him.

Not that it had stopped her fucking him for the right amount of coin.

His claws dug deep into the wall and in seconds he was back on the roofs and sprinting after the girl. He had the advantage of knowing the area better, didn't he ? No playing it cool now, no assumed physical superiority, he breathed deeply and hurtled across the roofs.

'Getcha as we go through Dredger row.'

He had no idea what he was going to do to her, but she had wounded his pride and he did have a long thin blade in his pocket. He'd killed before, but that had been for money.

"Mozim. Over here."

"Fuck off !"

Silly. He was making mistakes. That gang guard should have never seen him coming. Slow Mo was only two roofs from the worst bit of the slums and on Ixir that was quite a statement. A piece of turf that no gang wanted and the militia avoided, called Dredger row by the locals. Rumour had it that a part demon had once eaten a girl there, but like all rumours it was probably crap. What wasn't crap

was the fact that her walkway ended there and the bitch would have to go down two rusty ladders to reach the ground. He had her.

'No ! No !'

He should have been a minute ahead of her, but there she was just below him. He took the wicked looking blade out of his pocket and leapt at her. All his usual caution had gone, there was no plan, he just wanted to cut out her heart for being faster than him on his own turf. Then his legs refused to move, then his arms. This wasn't good ! He spun around and hit the ground hard. The fall would have seriously injured most, would have killed a few, but he just felt bruised.

"Get up, you'll live."

Getting up was never his strong point, he really was designed for crouching or roof tops. The best he could do was a sort of half crouch. Slow Mo knew a paralyse spell when he felt it, but how had she cast it so quickly and so well while running ?

"What the fuck are you ?" Said the girl.

He looked at his lizard legs and his claws and accepted he did look strange. The girl began prodding him, with his own knife too !

"Is there a bit of Ushong in there ?" She laughed.

A few passers-by looked the other way. Slow Mo was on his own now, just another body for the growlers to eat ? He'd always thought of himself as better than most, not the sort to end up as a meal for the growlers when he went. The thought seemed to give him courage.

"What the fuck are you ?" He spat at the girl.

She put her hands on her hips and laughed at him.

"My name is Kittara and I might make you very rich."

He knew the name and it explained the speed. Just his luck to pick on the fucking Damned to mess with. True she didn't look like the girl in the news bulletins, but he knew all about spells to change looks, it might even be a mental thing ?

"Do I have to kill anyone ?" He asked

"No. I just have need of a good thief."

Slow Mo had never had much, but he'd always known a day like today would come. The lady who ran the local Brotherhood of Arthernan temple had once told him he was destined to go far. Well Mendera was pretty far.

"Yes. I'll go."

"What do I call you ?"

"They call me Slow Mo."

He'd always been a bit taciturn, downright fucking rude and moody some had called him, but he said enough to get understood. Kittara held onto him and took them both to the Imperial palace on Mendera.

"I have a solution to your problem." Kittara said to Delmus as they arrived.

Slow Mo made straight for the bowl of fruit in the middle of the table and started eating.

"What did you bring us ?" Asked Luri.

"This is Slow Mo," said Kittara, "thief and slum runner of Ixir."

Luri seemed to lose interest, but Delmus walked over to where Slow Mo was already halfway through the fruit.

"Is he any good ?" Asked Delmus

"He almost caught up with me on the walkways."

Luri was now impressed and came over to join the group now watching the Ixir slum runner eat.

"If he's that fast he's perfect for the job." Said Luri.

"What job?" Asked Slow Mo.

"We need something stolen," said Luri, "and you need to be seen, so that we don't get the blame." Slow Mo looked expectantly at Kittara, who he seemed to now view as his patron.

"You'll be ok Mo," she said, "you're fast enough to be gone before they start firing blasters."

"What does the job pay?"

Delmus had been to the market and a Menuran had paid him his change in gold pieces. He counted four of them from out of his pouch and put them on the table in front of the thief.

"This for starters," said Delmus, "and much more later."

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"Best not to tell her how little we found of her," Sikush said to Chlo, "at least for a while."

The hardest thing had been holding the other Guards back, stopping her friends from immediately going to their deaths. He'd blocked anyone going to that system for two hours, to allow Sevril-Narge time to leave the area and the reality disturbances to clear.

"Any traces of Yulin?" He asked Chlo.

Chlo looked at her feet and as usual saw the situation as her failure not his. If he'd ordered them to pull out? But then they'd never have known for sure where Sevril was, or be able to keep track of her.

"Pieces of body tissue," said Chlo, "but no essence, the soul has moved on."

"Then we'll mourn him in the autumn."

Jen was his main concern and she looked very ill. Her skin looked grey and her eyes seemed to have sunk back into her head. All they'd found, all Alyz had found when he let her go was a head hanging onto a neck by a few strands and a right shoulder and arm. The essence was strong though and it had stayed in the body, clung on tenaciously until Chlo had regenerated the physical form. As he looked at Jen lying in her bed he noticed a tear on Chlo's cheek. It was forbidden, the people must never see weakness outside of the time of remembrance, but he forgave her and held her while she sobbed.

"I saved him on Urgat 9." Said Chlo.

Yes she had, and that too had been against the rules, but Chlo saw the Guard almost as her children and you don't abandon your children.

"Get Jen well for me Chlo. I need her, the Empire needs her."

"It may be several years before she's back to full strength. Unless you take her to..."

Chlo stopped and looked up at him, tears streaming from her eyes. Was this the same creature who'd destroyed billions without a qualm? He could take Jen back to Qasit and give her rebirth, but there was always a price to pay for using the oldest powers. He wanted Jen with a touch of darkness, not a slice of her soul so dark that she might regard him as an enemy.

"No more tears Chlo. Get Jen well for me, there is time."

Yes there would be time. The Deities woke up slowly and would take truly huge periods of time to form alliances and make plans, time he would use to his advantage. Chlo could track any of the deities that were awake, but a few were still slumbering, hiding until 'they' summoned them.

"I could kill Sevril-Narge for you." Said Chlo.

A foolish offer given out of love? As he studied her face and wiped the tears from her cheek Sikush wondered if Chlo might give the great bug goddess a run for her money?

"Oh dear Chlo. You are my last line of defence. If all else fails you and I can take the chamber of the flame and wander the temporal wastes."

She smiled and was once again Chlo, the girl who quite liked the idea of just the two of them hiding for eternity.

“Where is Sevril now ?” He asked her.

“Her main aspect is on the 6th rift and seems to be sleeping, but I see a shadow of her near Annill.” So she was watching Annill ! He’d wondered about the Dracc, they were just her sort of plague to inflict on her old enemy. Perhaps it was time to send Alyz into the world of the Dracc ?

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Mo had liked Mendera. On Ixir, in the slums he was tolerated because he was useful, but was always the freak, always the one who had to pay for sex.

‘That’s ok honey. I’d fuck an Ushong for the right price.’ One working girl had told him.

Hell an orgasm is an orgasm and does it matter if it’s paid for ? On Mendera though he fitted in, some of the people in the market made him look downright normal. In a world that welcomed outsiders as long as they caused no trouble, he had slotted right in, had even had sex with a Menderan girl on Council Club night. Sex he hadn’t had to pay for !

“Find a place to wait for a while.” Chlo told him.

He hadn’t liked the link that Chlo had in some way inserted into his mind, but after a bit of training he could see its use. He liked Chlo, had even picked up the courage to start up a conversation on Club night, but Kittara was the one he thought of as his real friend. She was like him, he felt it. She was damaged badly damaged and that gave them a lot in common. Now he was in the market district of Malakkeva, the capital of Ushong. Why ? To steal a relic from the main temple was the official reason, for money was his given reason, but really he was there to please her, to please Kittara.

“Damn.” He said.

“Problem ?” Asked Chlo.

He pulled the guard he’d just had to kill into a corner and covered him with the usual effluvia a market area creates. Or was the guard a she ? The clothing was so bulky and Ushongs were so damn ugly. There was no censure from Chlo, she knew he might have to silence any guards he couldn’t avoid. The temple was their main holy place, the place where their God had risen to heaven. Every street and alley seemed to be filled with the temple guards. He climbed a sheer wall and wedged himself in a gap between the wall and the overhanging roof. Once when hiding from the Water Side Kings he’d hidden in a smaller gap for seven hours.

“I’m safely hidden.” He told Chlo.

He wondered what the relic would be ? The Empire seemed to be full of temples with a bone of the holy man or a tooth of the grand panjandrum, whoever the local panjandrum was. He knew, or had heard of at least fifty temples on Ixir that claimed to have a tooth of the God in some sort of reliquary. The gods must be a pretty gummy lot after leaving so many teeth behind !

“What is the relic ?” He asked Chlo for the 10th time that day.

“Kittara said you can open the box, when you bring it back.”

There was a prophecy that Ushong would fall if the relic was taken, but there were always prophecies of some kind associated with these things. Below him one of the temple guard was kicking a small child, shouting at him to get off the streets so the archimandrite could pass. Was the child a he ? They were so damn ugly and he was a distance away. To hell with Ushong ! If their head temple guy needed children kicked out of his way, then maybe it was time for the place to fall.

“Dusk in fifteen minutes.” Chlo told him.

Mo edged along the top of the wall in the direction of the temple. Here he was in his element, here he could outrun anyone. Well anyone except Kittara. Below him the archimandrite was being carried home in a sumptuous box with windows that was carried by twelve strong members of the temple guard.

'Fuck them, they've got it coming.' Mo muttered.

Mo picked up his pace and chuckled as he heard the sounds of sexual congress coming from the upper floors of a house. Sex while the great holy man goes past! Maybe some Ushong were worth saving?

"The temple is empty apart from the guards." Chlo told him.

So the clerics and holy men had gone home for the night. He knew there were still fifty or so guards, but it was a large building and he was very good at hiding. Mo had no real idea how Chlo used probes to watch the way he was heading, but he trusted her to tell him when the coast was clear.

"South wall, run now, hurry."

Hurrying down the wall he jumped the last fifteen feet onto the hard cobbles. An animal, maybe a domestic pet of some kind hissed at him and ran away. Mo rushed past several stores, one seemed to specialise in effigies of Estrin-Okanan their God. Damn the Ushong, they'd made her in their own image. Estrin must be pretty pissed off.

"Hurry Mo."

On past the last store and there was an open area to cross. Mo trusted Chlo to tell him if anything was around as he hurtled across the pebbled outer pathway and threw himself up the outer wall.

The surface was shiny, but his claws gained a good grip in the mortar between the stones.

'Amateurs.' He hissed to himself.

At the top of the wall were iron spikes bent outwards at an angle of 45 degrees. A child thief could get by them. Mo swung himself up and over them to land about three feet down the far side of the wall. No shiny surface here, no decorations, this side was just for the holy men to see. The other side of the wall was shaded from the setting sun at that time and everything was dark. Mo liked dusk. He knew some slum runners who did everything in the middle of the night, but not him. At dusk the light made it difficult to see details and colours, but the light there was made lamps useless. People ignored things at dusk, assumed their eyes were playing tricks.

"The building to your left."

Chlo could talk into his mind, but to talk her he just, well spoke and she heard. Here he wanted to be quiet, so he just hoped she kept him informed of anything he needed to know. The building was quite close to the wall, so he jumped and dug his claws in just below an open window.

'Never force an entry if you don't have to.' His old mentor Razor had told him.

Razor had been good, but he liked the drink too much and the militia had caught him when he was sleeping it off with a whore.

In the window and Mo found himself looking at a young holy man in bed. No it was woman, he was close enough now to tell the difference and there was the musky smell of female Ushong. A bit early to be asleep, but it helped him. Mo crept across her room and out of the slightly open door.

"Down a floor and the corridor at the back."

The corridor was almost completely dark as Mo found the stairs and went down. As he opened the door to the back corridor he saw a back disappearing into a room. He rushed along the corridor hoping the door into the temple at the other end was open. He had lock picks, but he prayed to the eight great demon gods for the door to be open.

"We needed a bit of luck."

The door was open and he went through it and onto a walkway that went right round the public area of the temple at about thirty feet from the ground. Below him he saw a shape crouched next to the first row of public seating, then it jumped up and rushed off to the far end of the temple.

'They have this strange ritualised method of guarding.' Luri had told him.

He knew they could keep still in a crouch for ten to twenty minutes, then rush off in any direction before repeating the procedure. It sounded crazy, but was a very good way of keeping the guard alert. Like many old rituals, it had a sensible purpose.

"See if you fit over the screen."

He went quietly along the walkway and almost fell over a sleeping guard. Without a sound he broke the guard's neck and pushed the body to one side. Yes it would be found, but by then he'd hopefully be back in Mendera. Would Kittara just take the relic and let him take the fall? It had crossed his mind, but he didn't sense betrayal in her. The screen was really a thick stone lattice work that separated the public part of the temple from the most holy, which was at the back. At the top of the screen was a gap, but Mo knew he'd last have fitted through it when he was ten years old. He shook his head several times to let Chlo know it was a no go.

"Try the door to your right."

Down the screen and there was a guard crouching right in front of the door. No time to mess around, Mo dropped onto the guard and choked him to death. Then he searched the body for keys and pushed it into a corner. It would be found and quite quickly. The second key he tried opened the door and he was through the screen and into the most holy. He locked the door behind him just as the guard stabbed him in the shoulder.

"Sorry, I didn't see him in the shadows."

The wound wasn't deep and Mo cut the guard's throat with his own knife. The man had a very efficient looking blaster, but perhaps blaster fire was banned in here?

"There is a second door Mo, hurry."

There was an altar stone with flowers on it and halfway up the wall behind the altar was a crystal cover screwed into a hole in the wall.

'Hasn't been taken off in centuries, might be a devil of a job to undo.' Luri had said.

He leapt onto the altar, sending flowers flying and then he was up the wall. As he got to the crystal reliquary he looked down and saw three guards aiming blasters at him. There wasn't a sound, from them or the other two guards who were entering the room. Obviously shouting and blasting people from walls were equally frowned upon in here.

"I'm trying the cover." He told Chlo.

It took all his strength, but with a deafening screech the crystal cover started to come undone. Still there was no fire from below. Another full turn and he let the cover fall to the ground below. In the wall cavity was a small wooden box which he picked up and put inside his jacket.

"Bastard!"

The blaster bolt missed him, went several feet wide. Then he saw the group below him seemed to be trying to restrain one of their own number.

"Time to go Mo." Chlo told him.

He went up the wall and there was a shutter held up by a rope.

'Always slightly open for ventilation.' Luri had said.

His knife cut the rope and he just fitted through the hole in the wall, but now the guards outside had seen him and they had no problem at all in firing at him.

"There it is, get it!!"

It !? It indeed ! How dare any ugly smelly Ushong call him an it ? He quickly got on the roof and headed back the way he'd come. More shouting from below, but they now seemed to have no idea where he was.

"You'll have to move quickly and trust to luck."

Wonderful ! That phrase never came up in the planning stage. Mo found the wall nearest to the building he'd come in through and jumped. He hit a window and folded up into a ball as he and the broken glass crashed into the upstairs hallway.

"Hurry."

"I know !"

Along the hallway and up the stairs. A good thief remembers the little things and as he heard pounding feet behind he remembered the girl's room and that the door had been sturdy. Was there a key in the lock ? Yes. Would he bet his life on it ? Yes and he was.

"How many guards do they have Chlo ?"

There seemed to be shouting coming from everywhere.

"About fifty five and most of them seem to be heading this way."

In the girls door and she was still asleep, good he was feeling quite fond of her and her sturdy door and he had no wish to kill her. He locked the door just as a body slammed into it. Out of the window and he was on the outside wall.

"Freeze for a count of ten."

He froze as he heard voices coming to look behind the building.

"It must be heading for the wall." "What was it ?" "I hear it's killed dozens."

As he reached a count of ten he swung himself over the spikes on the wall and looked down, just in time to see about twelve of the local militia disappear around a corner.

"Go !" Shouted Chlo.

Off the wall and a drop of twenty feet, he felt something twist in his foot, but there was no time to worry about it. Across the pebbles just as blaster fire hit the ground behind him. Past the effigy shop.

"Right here."

An alley next to the shop with an exit into a muddy courtyard.

"Stairs to your left."

Up and only one door which a female hand opens and locks after he's entered.

"Well done Slow Mo." Says Kittara.

There is the sound of thumping on the door, but Kittara calmly picks up the bed and throws it through the window.

"The back, the back ! It's escaping through the back !"

It again ! Fucking Ushong. Then Kittara is looking at his leg and he realises there's a blaster burn he never even felt.

"We'll get that healed once we get back." She says.

As the guard start to break down the door Kittara holds onto him and takes them both back to Mendera City.

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Nurigen had known the moment would come. So many people wanted him dead, even a deity. As he heard the craft land and the heavy blaster fire start he almost felt relieved, no he was relieved ! No more obeying Sikush because of the silly vow made when he was a kid.

"What's happening ?" Asked Walt junior.

Most of the people in the bar were trying to look out of the window, some were checking their own weapons were ready for combat.

"If we're lucky someone has come to wipe us all out." He said.

Walt junior looked at him curiously, just as the first blaster bolts blew out the front windows of Walt's place.

"Might be your daughter come for you." Said one of the girls.

That might do thought Nurigen, she was pretty angry at him when they'd parted. With any luck she'd kill him. He'd tried suicide by deity, but even Sumahn-Nerish couldn't be relied upon to kill someone who called him an asshole. What had become of the Gods when good old fashioned blasphemy didn't get you fried ?

"They have flags on their helmets." Someone shouted.

Nurigen thought back. There had been a warlord on Tartaren who'd sworn to kill him, but that had been a very long time ago. More blaster fire could be heard and then the glow of a burning building started to light up a corner of the room.

"We want Nurigen. Give us the old man and we'll go."

So it was him they were after. Good, he hated to think that all this might be for some unpaid bills that Walt might have run up to build his extension. Some of the locals would have handed him over, but they were all too busy worrying about themselves to react to the shouts from outside.

The door of the bar was kicked open and a young man in full body armour walked in, a bright orange banner was on his helmet.

"Are you Nurigen." He asked.

Orange ?? Nurigen went back in his memory, but he had no recollection of any orange banners.

"Yes I'm Chelac Nurigen, former general of the Imperial army. Who the fuck are you ?"

Through the door walked the man who was obviously the leader. He was followed by his honour guard and he had the most expensive looking armour Chelac had ever seen.

"Stand worm and face my wrath !" The man said.

Nurigen sat where he was. The stranger might kill him, with luck, but he saw no need to stand up for the experience. The face though, it reminded him of the warlord on Tartaren, but that must make this man his grand child of about twelve hundred generations. They must really know how to hold a fucking grudge.

"He was your ancestor, the warlord on Tartaren. Right ?" Asked Nurigen.

The man looked confused. Fear he had expected, but he didn't know how to handle confused curiosity.

"Die dog ! I claim my vengeance."

As he raised his weapon a female form appeared and cut his arm off, then she severed his head from his neck before killing the honour guard.

"Time to go home father." Alyz said to him.

Several other members of the Guard appeared in the bar and Nurigen could hear the blaster fire and screams from outside. He knew all the raiders would soon be dead and many of the locals.

"I'm not going anywhere with you," he said, "and stop saving my life."

Sikush appeared and Nurigen knew things must be getting very serious.

"I'd offer you drink, but I think they killed Walt." He said.

Sikush sat himself at the bar and looked at his old friend.

"He's not dead, he's just hiding."

After some persuasion Walt Junior was coaxed out from under the bar to serve them drinks.

“And those vegetable stick you do,” said Sikush, “Chlo tells me they’re superb.”

Walt brought some food from the kitchen and there would have been a sense of normality if it hadn’t been for the dead bodies on the floor.

“Who was that guy ?” Asked Sikush.

“I’m not sure. I think I annoyed his ancestor about half a billion years ago.”

“Nice armour.” Noted Sikush

They ate their food while Alyz had the bodies cleared away and arranged for transports to take the locals to another system.

“Do you want to go Walt ?” He asked.

“Of course. Everyone wants off this shit hole.”

After ignoring Sikush for as long as he could Nurigen had to ask.

“So the deities are waking up ?”

“Yes.”

“How many ?”

“All of them.”

“How long have we got ?”

“About ten ages of the temple.”

So there was time to prepare. Nurigen still wondered if Sikush would hold him to his vow.

“Are some on your side ?”

“A few.”

“How about Estrin ?”

He saw Sikush pause before answering him.

“A moon child will be born, called Estrid.”

Nurigen jumped from his chair, his hands shaking.

“You’re going to trap Estrin-Okanan, the most powerful of all the deities ? We’re fucked ! She hates you anyway.”

“I think hate is a bit strong.”

“I’m not going with you. Leave me here and I’ll take my chances.”

Sikush looked weary and Nurigen remembered giving him a vow when he was very young. He’d been a young man who realised he’d never create the perfect weapon in a single lifetime. Sikush had offered him immortality, but there was a price tag.

“You will regret giving it, but you must give an oath to obey me if I am in need of your services.”

Regret it he’d thought, why should he ? Oh the stupidity of youth.

“Will you at least kill me after this is over ?” He asked

“No.”

They collected his few possessions from his room. A bag full of trinkets and toys that were worth a small fortune, but seemed so little for such a very long lifetime. As Alyz took hold of his hand to move him to Mendera he asked Sikush.

“Will you release me from your service if we survive this ?”

“No.”

“Will you at least tell Estrin it wasn’t my idea ?”

“No.”

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Sikush was pleased that Nurigen was back in Mendera. The Moon Child plan was dangerous, but it appealed to him. It was after all the ultimate pieces of theatre to bring up a deity as a human child in

the hopes of bringing her over to your cause. Had she hated him ? There had been threats, but he still thought hate was a bit strong. He'd asked them to wait for him before opening the box, but Kittara had made a point of getting to him before he reached Delmus and Luri.

"It may seem it," he'd told her, "but I don't scan the multiverse looking for waifs and misfits to turn into immortals."

Kittara had looked upset and it was obvious Slow Mo meant a lot to her.

"But he's done so much for us."

"I'm sure he has. So offer him a home here and give him enough money to live a long and comfortable life."

Kittara looked at him with her best stern look.

"There is always stasis." She said.

Sikush looked at her and kissed her cheek.

"Have him follow you through the ages like a stray, being pulled out of stasis to do your bidding ? You'll get him killed Kittara. Give him his money and leave him alone to enjoy it."

She nodded at him, but he knew he hadn't yet won the argument. He moved them both to where a freshly healed Mo proudly held onto to the box.

"They said I could open it." Said Mo.

"And so you can, and you can remove the contents."

With all four of them watching him Mo opened the small metal catch and pulled up the lid of the box.

"Urgghh." He said.

The inside seemed to be full of spider's web, so he put in his finger and scooped everything out onto the table. They all looked at a dusty lock of hair in a silver clasp and a large dead black spider.

"It's fake," said Delmus, "the silver metal is even corroding."

Mo looked mortified at taking such a risk for a fake relic that he could have bought for a few credits in the market. Sikush chuckled and looked at Kittara.

"If I must." She said.

Kittara picked up the dead spider and put it in the palm of her hand. The dead body quivered and sank its jaws into her hand.

"I can see her blood going into its jaws." Said Luri.

As they watched the spider took on a velvety lustre and grew another inch in length. Then it removed its jaws a sat in Kittara's palm, almost as though it was looking at her.

"Mine now." Said Chlo as she arrived and picked up the spider.

"You can trace Estrin now ?" Asked Kittara.

"Yes. I will soon know her exact location."

Slow Mo looked completely confused.

"So what is the spider." He asked.

"Think of it as a sign post to a slumbering God." Said Sikush.

Everyone seemed happy and Chlo took the spider away to work on the location. As Luri started passing around the food and drink Mo asked a question.

"So, Ushong will be ok ? It is just a legend about the fall of Ushong ?"

Sikush watched them all as they turned in his direction.

"It's no myth," he said, "without the spider Ushong is fucked."

