

## Mendera – Empire

### Chapter 14 – The Kivar

**“No wonder Sikush sends you to me,” she said, “all those powers, all those billions of years, yet you still can’t grasp that sometimes there is no right answer.” – Juliette**

Kittara appeared in the dank cell and looked at the misshapen bundle of twisted bones. The clothes were blood stained, the creature's lips were the shade of grey that usually means death isn't far off. But she'd known Mo a long time and using a link with Chlo to scan his body she discovered he'd just had the usual beating the City of the Seven Hills gives to undesirables. Mo opened his eyes and gave her a cheeky grin.

“You took your time.” He said.

Kittara sat on the floor beside him and folded her legs up so that she could rest her head on her knees. The scan of Mo showed just two cracked ribs and bruising, a lot of bruising. Was he getting too old for this sort of thing? She'd lost track of how many times she'd brought him out of stasis for a small job that he was perfect for, that only he could do. Then of course Mo wanted a year or two out of stasis to enjoy the wealth the emporium was bringing in. To Kittara it had been a time span of countless billions of years, but to Mo? She reached for Chlo and even with Mo's rather complex DNA it was possible to say that he was just on the wrong side of middle age.

“I suppose you'd like a bit of healing?” She said to him.

Mo tried to laugh, but coughed up blood. She really did have to either talk Sikush into making him one of The Damned, or let him live out his days as the owner of the best emporium on Mendera.

“He's here!” Said Mo.

If Mo had been one of The Damned and linked to Chlo, they'd have had a tracker on the target, his DNA analysed and there'd be no doubt, but Kittara had picked up a few tricks from the dark creatures that roamed the rift. She got up onto her knees and put her hand at the back of Mo's head. She felt him relax, look at her in a certain way as she leant over him. Perhaps she would finally give him what he obviously craved, and she was curious to find out what those powerful back muscles of his could do.

“Show me.” She said.

They'd been through this routine before and Mo brought up the memory of the man for Chlo to see. Yes it was him, there could be no doubt.

“Where was he?” She asked.

Then the firing started and even deep down in the cells they could hear the steady thump and wine of energy weapons. It was all part of the plan. Alyz and Jen were with another hundred or so of the Guard and they would keep showing themselves to the town guard. The whole point was to keep the eyes of the eleven million or so people of the city looking elsewhere. The City of the Seven Hills was vast and wasn't improved by an overzealous protection of its architectural heritage. The civilisation was old, very old and each generation had decided that many parts of the old city were simply too important to pull down, meant too much to their culture. Eventually about fifty thousand years ago the city reached a point where everything was considered precious and the growing population found themselves in a city that was totally impractical to the needs of a modern high tech civilisation. Today the guard towers that once housed archers, now had staggeringly powerful ion weapons that usually dealt with any threat quite quickly. Kittara smiled as she realised Mendera

had been the same development protected city for billions upon billions of years and that she loved her house in the first circle.

"In the silth trader's area." Answered Mo.

So a drug dealer, she hadn't expected that. She left her hand on Mo's head and started to heal him, pushing enough strength into his frame so that he'd be capable of carrying on with the mission. She carefully straightened his legs, though with his legs it was often difficult to work out what was the correct way for the joints to bend. There were lots of old fractures, lots of strange bumps his bones formed over wounds.

'He even has a bit of Moullay demon in him.' Chlo had once told her.

The thumps and whines increased in volume and number but there was no answering fire. Why did the locals hate The Damned? Kittara had been with the first contact party with the City, which was the only proper civilisation on designated planet #8945.2. At first things had gone very well, until the King of the city had been invited back to Mendera. Religious differences rarely cause problems in the empire, because The Chalne has always insisted on religious tolerance.

'They can believe any daft nonsense as long as they don't kill each other.' He often remarked at dinner parties where only the safe ears of the Guard were likely to hear.

The King of the City of the Seven Hills had been invited to see inside the Northern Sentinel and had decided that a living force that almost shook you by the hand was definitely not for his city. Within the year all citizens of the Empire were condemned as heretics and in ten years they were to be shot on sight. Sikush hoped a new King might feel differently, but the people of the city were very consistent with their religious hatred.

"Can you walk now?" Kittara asked Mo.

She watched as the heap of twisted bones and greying hair turned itself into the best slum runner in the Empire.

"Why did they lock you up?" she asked, "did they work out who you worked for?"

I was important. If the people of the city realise who they were looking for they might kill the man before Kittara could get him to Mendera. Mo looked a bit furtive, so she guessed it was one of the usual reasons.

"There was a very expensive lady and I didn't have enough coins." He explained.

There he stood, a beaten blood stained rag bag who had a fortune in Imperial credits in the bank, could have been surrounded by any numbers of nubile working girls, yet here he was, beaten for not paying a local whore.

"Your dick will get you killed one day Mo. Now where do we go?"

"My knife. They took it." Said Mo.

Kittara knew he still had the same thin, wicked blade he'd had when they first met and that he almost worshiped the damn thing.

"Where is it?"

She felt the back of his head and pushed the images back up the connection to Chlo.

'Top floor at the front,' Commented Chlo.

Kittara held onto Mo and moved their reality to the office, which was empty. Mo went to a desk and pulled open a drawer and brought out his much loved blade. It hadn't cost much, but he'd had it since he was a kid. Then they heard the first explosion within the city and Kittara went to the windows.

"They've got an air force," said Mo, "I never realised."

The entire air force of the city had arrived and was attacking the Guard, who'd stayed on a hillside a mile or so from the city. Alyz might have ignored Ion cannon fire from the city watch, but she wasn't going to ignore an air attack. Several large fighter craft were burning cinders outside the city and one had just crashed into a large temple in the south of the city. Kittara thought the conservationists were going to be livid.

"We need to hurry Mo." She said.

Her orders were that the man was needed. Alive was definitely the preferred option, but she was certain that crushed and burned beyond recognition by a crashed fighter was outside the parameters for mission success. Mo was standing there and indicating some clothes that were hanging on the back of a door. Of course he was in rags !

"Just be quick !"

Mo took the clothes and looked at her and made a sign for her to turn around.

"Mo ! I've pulled you naked out of at least three cat houses, your naked body hold no fears for me. Just get the fucking clothes on !"

She still did turn around and a few minutes later Mo appeared in a very badly fitting uniform of the local city guard.

"Very you," said Kittara, "now, where are we going."

"I saw him selling Silth and got a really good look, but a few days earlier I'm sure I saw him coming out a house with a blue door just behind the excise halls."

Silth ! Every world had a drug like it, a drug that slowly ruined the brain, destroyed the will to do anything other than get the next fix. In the City of the Seven Hills it was Silth. Kittara held Mo and moved their realities to the roof of the excise halls in the market district. As they arrived on the roof Chlo told them a contingent of the city guard were in the street below.

'They're keeping against the wall and would far rather be somewhere else.' Said Chlo.

"There, the third house along." Said Mo.

Yes. Kittara could just make out the faded blue door. With luck the man would be at home, as the guard would be telling everyone to remain indoors. From the roof she could see the Ion canons opening up on the hillside, the white heat of their fire almost blinding to the eye. Do they really think technology could beat The Damned ? Then she heard an engine and looked up. So, their aircraft still relied on lift from the surrounding air to fly, actually still used wings ! As she looked one of the wings disintegrated and the craft went into a spin directly above them.

"Hold on Mo." She shouted as she held him close to her, trying to shield him with her own body.

Then there was a darkness, a shadow that seemed to pass over them and the falling craft was pushed far to the south. It hit one of the towers containing an Ion cannon and the resulting explosion was truly dreadful. A low flat wall of white hot gas flattened two city blocks and a fifty foot deep crater was all that was left of the guard tower. The city heritage people were going to be filling in forms for months.

"Even the dark one serves you." Said Mo.

Kittara had no idea what had happened, but she noticed Mo was giving her an odd look.

"We have to move now Mo. Keep behind me."

She took them both to the street, right next to the twelve man patrol of the city guard. It wasn't honourable, it wasn't even fun. Kittara felt for the switch in her mind and all twelve became small heaps of ash. They moved across the street and easily found the house.

"Not the front door." Said Kittara.

No one was on the streets, so they had time to look at the side of the house and there was the way in, a set of stairs leading down to another door into a basement area. I was perfect, there was even a pile of old rubbish hiding the door from the side alley above. She went down the stairs and tried the door. Locked, of course it is. A push and the door crashed backwards leaving just the bolt section of the lock still held in the frame. They're inside the house and Chlo is telling them the only life in the house is a warm body on the next floor up. Kittara briefly looks at Mo, who seems happy and able to keep up.

"First floor back." She says.

He merely nods his understanding. Kittara takes the stairs at a run and opens the door. He's asleep. All that and the man is asleep in a chair and is even snoring. There's the sound of another explosion outside and some dust even falls from the ceiling yet the man sleeps like a baby.

"This him ? The one you want ?" Asks Mo.

Chlo was telling her everything matched. His face, fingerprints, DNA, retinas, even his tongue patterns matched completely.

'He's our guy, bring him home.' Said Chlo.

But who was he ? All this for a non-entity who was finally waking up and blinking at her. The site of a poorly dressed city guard and a girl in the uniform of The Damned is likely to give anyone a bit of a jolt and he sat straight up and starred at her.

"What are you doing in my house ?" He shouted.

What was he ? Kittara looked at him, really looked and everything was straight down the line for an ordinary human. People were dying outside, perhaps tens of thousands, so she wanted some answers.

'Just bring him home'. Said Chlo.

Fuck it, she needed to know.

"What are you ?" She said grabbing him by the throat.

Kittara looked ignoring the usual stuff and looked at him the way a demon from the rifts would. She let her Mendera persona drift away and became something else, something very old and dark. Then she looked deep inside the man and found something that had no right being there.

"Fuck it ! Tie him Mo !"

Her legs were buckling without warning and the dark shadow was in the room. A huge weakness had overcome her, but now that she'd ceased looking into the man it was easing away. She watched as the man squared up to Mo, thinking him an easy target, but Mo was far stronger than he looked. Within a minute Mo had the man trussed up in his own clothing and unable to move.

"Are you ok Princess ?"

Kittara smiled. Mo rarely called her Princess and usually only when he was concerned about her. In her head she heard Chlo asking her again to bring the man to Mendera.

"Chlo. Give me ten minutes. The target is safe. Please ??"

Chlo agreed as Kittara knew she would, they'd known each other too long, trusted each in too many terrible wars. This wasn't the first time she'd felt the weakness. Kittara had once gone to dead planet a long way from anywhere and had kept building a tear of the damned up and up until the distortion lines of the multiverse were pulsating so fast they became a blur. Still she built up the power until something else came, something dark. The ground beneath her shook and the tear seemed to explode, but she was unharmed and when she looked the dead planet was still beneath her. The tear she had wound could easily have destroyed everything within 100s of light years including several galaxies, yet it was gone. Something dark and terrible had surrounded her and

taken the force into itself. Sikush had given her a long hard look the next day and she had never taken any spell that far again.

"Watch him Mo." She said.

Kittara went from room to room in the house, trying to find something that would make sense of it all. Nothing ! Each room drew a blank, each cupboard was full of just ordinary clothes, ordinary personal effect.

"What do you want Kittara ?"

This time it was Sikush talking to her, but in her head, not even over their private link.

"Do you want the City of the Seven Hills ? It's yours to destroy. Kill every man woman and child, end their days in torment if you wish ?"

Part of her wanted that so very badly. But not the children, never the children.

"No." She said.

"Then come home. And bring the man with you."

She returned to the room to find Mo pointing his knife straight at the man's right eye.

"His name is Dolen. Not just a Silth dealer, he's the local main supplier."

Kittara knew that this wasn't all over a bit of drug dealing, even if the man was the worst piece of trash in the city.

"Shall I pop his eye ?"

The man looked terrified and Kittara gave it a full minute before answering.

"Leave him alone Mo. Let's go home."

Holding them both, Kittara took everyone to the basement of the Guard barracks on Mendera. She had no idea why Sikush wanted Dolen, but she really hoped it was going to hurt.

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"What do you mean they refuse to go ?" Asked Sikush

It wasn't the clerks fault, he knew that, but to send a shuttle into the new territories virtually empty was unheard of.

"Quite a few clerics want to go sir, er your excellence." Stammered the clerk.

The Chalné may have been many things, but he was seldom a bully. He smiled at the clerk and waved him away while asking Herusher to join him over their private link. A few seconds later and his old friend was stood in front of him, dressed for battle and looking curious.

"They won't need you at the City of the Seven Hills today old friend. Sit with me and have a drink, or perhaps some food." Said Sikush.

He asked Chlo to join them as he felt the need to have her physical presence there rather than just a disembodied voice in his mind. After his two oldest friends had exchanged pleasantries and eaten he began.

"Just how bad is it ?"

They knew what he meant. The Kivar attacks had been persistent and each time Kivar losses had been huge, but so far three of The Damned had also been killed. There were occasional losses, even the best fighters in the multiverse can't always escape unscathed, but the Kivar always seemed to come back. Inflict a hundred thousand casualties on an enemy and they invariably go away or seek peace, but the Kivar just kept coming. It perplexed him.

"Not a single trader wants to go to the new colonies in the Kivar zone." Said Chlo.

"Kivar zone ??" He replied

Chlo blushed, even she was using the term. They'd found a new civilisation in a previously unexplored part of the multiverse and now the news channels were calling it the Kivar zone, or even the nemesis zone.

"They are remarkably resilient to losses." Said Herusher.

Jen appeared at his summons and sat herself on the floor facing Sikush.

"Weaknesses?" He asked her.

Jen had been involved in wiping out two of the Kivar attacks and he was hoping for something that wasn't in her report on the common channel.

"They breed slowly and take a long time to become mature warriors." Said Jen.

"At present casualty levels we could wipe them out with sustainable losses." Said Chlo.

So things were that bad and his own most trusted friends were talking about winning a war of attrition. Soon the Maran Group would begin agitating. What was the point of an empire that couldn't guarantee honest and safe commerce? Before long there'd be two parts to the Empire and eventually six or seven rival factions fighting each other.

"Will shock and awe work? Use the attack wings?" He asked.

Alyz arrived and sat herself next to Jen. Then a tired looking Kittara arrived and she kissed his cheek before sitting herself next to Chlo.

"Not on its own. They don't scare easily." Said Herusher.

"They fight like us." Added Jen.

There was the his dilemma. How did he beat an enemy who were like The Damned? From what he'd heard they had the same code of honour, felt the same about civilian casualties, they should have been allies instead of enemies.

"Is this religion?" asked Sikush, "do they think they go to a big party with their god after they die?"

There was silence, perhaps he should have included one of the senior clerics in his war committee?

"No," Said Kittara, "they're just superb warriors who never retreat and never surrender."

Why now? He really didn't need an enemy like this when he had so many other tasks for his best people. He suspected the multiverse was just making sure the empire didn't have too easy a run. He trusted Kittara's instincts and she'd recently returned from a short visit to Juliette.

'She should be teaching me!' The Genova had told him.

"Go on?" He said to Kittara.

"In one key way they're not like us. They rely on technology."

Yes it was the edge he was looking for and like all good ideas, when someone points it out, it seems obvious. Even Herusher was nodding at Kittara. He didn't like the solution, but it would emphasise the strength of the empire and quieten Maran opposition. Sikush looked around the room and hoped he didn't lose too many friends by his decision.

"The empire will wage total war on the Kivar military. We will attack their home planet and all their military bases in five days time. We'll destroy all their technology. This is an imperial order."

Everyone was smiling at him, this was what they existed for and it had been a long time since they'd had a worthy adversary.

"Chlo will provide any resources required. Bring all the attack wings into play." Sikush added.

There was a background murmur, his friends were happy. The deity search would have to be put on hold for a while, the empire was going to war. Kittara had pulled her legs up onto the chair and was watching him with her head resting on her knees. It was something she'd picked up from Mo and it suited her personality.

"Can I ask for a reward?" She said over their private link.

He listened and it didn't seem too much to ask, so he gave her permission.

"Five days might be a bit tight." Said Herusher.

Everyone smiled, even Herusher. He was their war commander and he'd been through more battles than he liked to remember. It was almost his job to be the curmudgeon of the group. Sikush stood up and looked around the room. Yes they needed this war !

"In five days I want The Damned on every Kivar planet." He said.

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"But what would I do with immortality ?" Said Mo.

Sikush had asked Mo to join him for the evening meal. On Mendera almost every meeting involved food and drink, it was almost an unwritten rule. Sikush hadn't spoken to Mo in private for some years and the answer impressed him. How many of The Damned had asked him that very question ? He could only think of Luri and one other. So many had begged for immortality over the years that it was refreshing to have someone who realised it wasn't always a blessing. Sikush remembered Nurigen offering anything for immortality, even perpetual service to the empire. There would be no demands on Mo, if he accepted immortality it would come without strings.

"You wouldn't have to work for Kittara if you didn't want to. You could be an immortal emporium owner, or anything else you might want to be."

Sikush liked Mo, the slum runner from Ixir had grown on him over the years. He saw Mo expressions and movements in Kittara and now Mo was looking at him with an intensity that was pure Kittara.

"Is it reversible ?" Asked Mo.

Again a good question, a sensible question, yet so few had ever asked it. He gave the answer he'd given Luri all those billions of years ago.

"I'll make you immortal not invulnerable, you'll will always be able to end your own life. If you have religious views against suicide ?"

Mo vigorously shook his head and seemed to be giving the matter a lot of thought. Sikush had told him he wasn't really suited to be one of The Damned, but he could be an immortal like Nurigen.

"If I quit at any time," began Mo, "even tomorrow I can just walk away ? No one is going to come after me for the information I have in my head, or to keep me quiet ?"

Sikush hadn't wanted to have Mo as a distraction while Kittara had Estrid to look after, but there had been no desire to see him put out of the way.

"No Mo, no one will come after you. You'll be safe, even from Kittara."

"Will it hurt ?" Asked Mo.

This was more familiar ground, everyone asked if it was going to be painful.

"It will feel like a very large demon is pushing a red hot poker up your backside Mo, it will be bad."

Mo started to laugh and reached into a bag and brought out a bottle of very rare and expensive Menuran strong ale.

"The advantages of owning the emporium, will you join me in a glass ?"

Sikush pulled his chair closer and agreed to a glass of the ale, which was truly excellent. After they'd both had time to savour the drink Mo asked.

"Did you ever find out what demon fathered me ?"

"Yes. Chlo worked it out some time ago. It appears you're about 55% human, 30% Dredger and the rest is Moullay."

Mo looked shocked.

"Moullay ? I thought they were a myth ?"

“No they exist and drift in from the 7<sup>th</sup> rift occasionally. Your father must have been a rare hybrid. It accounts for the healing of your bones, as long as your heart beats you’ll survive just about anything.”

They sat on in silence for a while, enjoying the view as two of Mendera’s moons lit up the palace gardens.

“Alright, I’ll do it, I’ll become immortal.” Said Mo.

“Good.”

“You were joking about the huge demon and the poker though ?”

Sikush gave Mo a wink.

“A bit. Think more of a small demon with a red hot poker.”

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Kittara was alone on the roof of the excise hall. Abijah had wanted to come, but Kittara wanted to savour the moment alone. How long was it since a kill had been for the pure pleasure of it ? A very long time indeed and Sikush had realised this was something she needed. On Mendera it was still the middle of the night, but here in the City of the Seven Hills it was just after dawn. She moved along the roof, invisible to any that might have looked up, but then of course no one ever looks up. “More damage than I thought Chlo.” She said.

The religious leaders of the city had always said the empire was out to get them, had fed the paranoia for centuries. Now it almost seemed as though they’d been right, but all the damage had been done by their own aircraft as they were brought down over the city. The exploding Ion cannon had flattened dozens of homes and smoke was still rising from fires all over the city. They’d rebuild, everyone did, probably in exactly the same impractical style. Kittara watched the fires and a tingle began to build in her tummy, a physical manifestation of the excitement building in her.

She moved her reality to in front of the headquarters of the city guard and allowed herself to be seen. The huge double doors of the building looked incredibly strong. A good strong local wood with a metal banding of some kind, they must weigh several tons.

“There’s one, kill her !”

She ignored the growing crowd and let the tingle of anticipation grow. She felt the weight of the demon blade against her back and it felt good, especially where the metal caressed her bare skin.

“Get her !”

She turned to face the crowd and it went quiet. A snarl would have suited the occasion, but Kittara thought that was a bit beneath her. She could have just reached in her mind for the spell, but a little theatricality seemed in order. She flipped her wrist in the direction of the heavy doors and the crowd broke and ran as the doors became a cloud of splinters and metal shards.

“Rabble !” She shouted after them.

Not that she intended to go through the gap in the building where the doors had been. Seeming to disappear into the dust Kittara took herself up to 2<sup>nd</sup> floor and the office of the commander of the city guard. As she arrived in his office he was just opening the door to see what the commotion in the street was all about.

“What is your name ?” She asked him.

Was it just being polite to know the name of your kill, or did it serve a deeper purpose ? Kittara saw him move towards the gap in the door and was on him before he even saw her move.

“I’m an important man. Harm me and you’ll suffer.”

She closed the door and slapped him hard, perhaps harder than she intended. Where her knuckle met a tooth part of the tooth, perhaps all of it broke off and bounced off the wooden floor. She had him by the throat now and flung him across his own desk.

“Wrong answer.” She told him.

She reached for the demon blade and gently eased it out of the straps on her back, loved the kiss it gave the skin on her shoulder as she drew it out. She loved the blade more than some women love their partners.

“Jolppe, I’m Commander Jolppe of the city guard.”

“Jolppe ? What kind of name is Jolppe ?”

Kittara pulled open his jacket and then his shirt, all the time sniffing his skin. Not enough sweat and fear yet, he obviously still expected to be rescued. There had been some noise, but as she’d planned, most of his men would now be out in the street investigating the destroyed doors.

“You hurt my friend.” She told him.

He looked blank so she let the sword bite the back of his hand. Not a large cut, but he screamed as though a demon had just bitten his backside. She liked screamers and she liked the fear she could now smell on him.

“You had him beaten and put his knife in your drawer.”

She saw him suddenly understand who she meant.

“The freak, you mean the freak ?” He shouted.

Kittara picked him off the desk and holding him with his back to her she rested the demon blade on his bare chest. Even the feel of the metal made him scream and she ached to pull the edge of the weapon through his skin. Not here though, not here. She had a few places where they wouldn’t be disturbed and she could enjoy the screams for hours. Already she could feel her concentration going as the hunger within became almost a drug.

“What are you going to do with me ?” Asked Jolppe.

“Everything you’ve ever had a nightmare about.”