

Mendera - Empire

Chapter 2 – Qasit

“I went to a seer on the 1st rift, she told me some get a spark of god, but I got a spark of the devil.”

– Luri

Sikush had decided to go to his own quarters to shower. Luri had woken as he kissed her shoulder and staying there to shower could well have turned into a very late morning. He thought of the way her skin gave off a blue iridescence as they made love, and realised that even for an eternal, the multiverse still held surprises. As he showered he reached out for Chlo and she was showing him a small fleet of craft, that had joined them during the night. Sikush realised it had been a long time since he'd showered with Chlo, and invited her to join him. After a few seconds a very naked and quite perplexed looking Chlo was stood next to him. He noticed that she was in her normal look for him, blue eyes, blonde hair and a figure that any woman would want. She tentatively approached him and he gave her a long tender kiss. He wasn't hungry for sex, but he'd decided that regular physical intimacy was going to be a vital part of the new Empire.

“I wasn't sure if this was what you wanted.” She said, as he kissed her neck.

He kissed her again and stood back to take look at her, a really good look. He remembered her as the grubby part AI, part human, who had killed five of his people on Enfellan. No one was quite sure what she was ? Rogue AI, some sort of future weapon, or perhaps a doomsday device. The planet she was on had been dead for billions of years, yet she remained in the ruins of the City. The general opinion of his warriors was to destroy her, but Sikush had spared her and now without her he'd be lost.

“Chlo,” he said, “what would I do without you ?”

She gave the throaty chuckle he loved and knelt in front of him and hungry or not, he suddenly found he could manage a good erection after all.

“Not what I meant Chlo, but that was very, very nice.”

They got out of the shower and he started to dry her off.

“You mentioned a fleet arriving last night ?” He asked.

“Yes, about a dozen long range craft. I no longer support any of the old Imperial fleet using reality shift, but they still have faster than light capability. These are an assortment of Imperial cruisers asking to come with us. So far I've ignored them.”

Sikush hadn't expected this so soon. Once before after a few weeks the Empire had ceased internal fighting and come after him. Then they'd actually tried to destroy Leviathan with a nova device.

“As long as they're peaceful, leave them alone Chlo. Once our short range craft are back on board let me know and we can shift to world #448.7.”

He finished drying her off and Chlo turned to him before leaving.

“Once we get to 448.7 I'll keep everyone on board.” She said.

“There might be a change of plan.” He said.

Face to face meetings give the opportunity for just the right incredulous look, that emoticons on the common channel can never achieve. Chlo stood there, and you could see her jaw drop. He knew the plan was tried and tested and that it had been discussed with the clerics, but he now had a better plan. He stood in front of her and kissed the end of her nose.

“You and me against the multiverse. Are you with me ?”

She chuckled and vanished and in his head he heard, ‘of course I am.’

~ ~

As he sat down to a breakfast of Arroya fruit covered in seeds, Sikush felt for a private link with Herusher to discuss the problem of the clerics. Much as he respected many of them, and their current leader, he dreaded the time it always seemed to take to sort out the slightest problem and he was about to throw a huge problem their way.

“What have the clerics done now ?” He asked Herusher.

“They want to talk about some of them going into stasis during the long wait.”

With some two hundred thousand or so clerics on board, they made up by far the biggest group on Leviathan, and although he couldn't ever picture them staging a revolt, he didn't want them sulking for several millennia.

“There might not be a long wait. Can you meet me at their bay in a few minutes ?”

Herusher had confirmed without comment, but he knew his 2nd in command would now be trying to get more information out of Chlo, which she didn't have as he was making the plan up as he went along. He finished his breakfast and transferred his reality to the small rear bay of the Leviathan, which the clerics had turned into a kind of temporary temple.

“They have made quite a few changes.” Said Herusher, as he arrived.

The small bay was a half mile diameter hole that ran the entire four mile width of the craft. Several Imperial battle wings were using one side as a place to park their craft for the long wait, and the clerics had been given the other half. When Sikush had been there two days previously they'd rebuilt one of the control temples and the school, but now they had what looked like a mini version of Garanesh City built in the bay.

“You have to give it to them old friend, in three days they've created order out of a mad situation.”

Even with Chlo providing all the heavy lifting, they had achieved wonders in a very short time, and as they looked for Lewin the head cleric, they were greeted by lots of smiling faces. This was the 8th Lewin to have held the post, and the grandson of the Lewin who 'Lewin Square' had been named after. Sikush always thought of him as less famous than his grandfather, but a far better man. They found Lewin addressing a circle of concerned clerics.

“How can some of us enter stasis and leave others behind ? How about those with children ?” He was saying to the crowd.

As Sikush approached the crowd grew and it was obviously the meeting was going to be a public one, which was probably just as well. Lewin greeted Sikush with a hug.

“We're ready Sikush. If you command it, everyone will work hard on board Leviathan for the long wait.”

Now he was here, there was no talk of some going into stasis. The clerics occasionally liked to sound rebellious, but he knew they would all obey his commands. The clerics were all descended from various races and people who had long ago been converted into the Arcadian form. They had no loyalties to any of the planets of the current Empire and their only kind were each other. Sikush stood and waited for complete silence. He had made his mind up, there would be no ifs or maybes.

“There will be no long wait this time. We are going to make a new home where we're going, a permanent home.”

They were too stunned for a huge reaction, but he knew that within the hour everyone on board would know his decision.

“But the teachings Sikush, the prophecies ?”

Lewin was an intelligent man and a good leader, but like all clerics he had absolute faith in the various holy texts. Sikush could have explained that as he'd provided most of the rules, he was

entitled to break them, but he knew better. The clerics would be his anchor in their new home, the people who gave it stability. Shaking their world too much might put that in jeopardy.

"We will talk again once we get to #448.7. We'll have a full meeting then." He told Lewin.

Lewin held onto his hand and obviously wanted to say more, but this wasn't the time, and besides he wanted to take Luri to Qasit. He left them and moved his reality to where the forbidden writings were stored, as Chlo told him that was where he could find Luri.

"So you're going to do it then?" Said Chlo over their private link.

"Yes I am. Are the stragglers back yet?"

He now wanted to shift everyone out of the dying multiverse, but Chlo reported that several of the Arcadian guard were overdue. Once Luri had been converted, he'd go personally to see what had become of them. He found Luri sitting crossed legged on the dusty floor of a storage area, with several open cases around her and a large metal book in her lap. Sikush sat on the edge of a packing case and waited for her to look up.

"I can read this," she said, "some of it is difficult, but most is almost exactly the same language as Dredger, which I learnt as a child."

He wondered what the clerics would think of him giving her full access to all the forbidden volumes, but they probably had other things to worry about.

"How would like to have forever to study all of this?" He said indicating the seemingly endless rows of sealed cases.

He ignored any reply she might have been going to make and walked a few yards to a case Chlo told him contained a particularly ancient demon book. After removing the lid of the case and removing a book made of a dark blue metal he walked over and dropped it at Luri's feet.

"From a multiverse that existed over six hundred switches ago," he said to her, "written on a metal that will never corrode and was thrown into the grey, the area between realities. This ancient tome will give you the ability to use the fabric of the multiverse itself as a weapon. Once of course you learn the language it's written in."

Luri picked up the heavy book and turned the pages, which clanged together as they turned.

"What do you want from me?" She asked him.

He smiled at her and taking hold of her hands, pulled her to her feet.

"Everything," he said, "come on I've somewhere to show you."

He transferred their reality to the group of part worlds, where the laws of the multiverse don't seem to apply, that were known collectively as Qasit. They appeared in a dark cavern, with the sort of complete darkness that you only get underground. He quickly used a spell to create two floating balls of light, which he sent off to hover against the roof of the cavern, some fifty feet above them.

"Sorry no technology here," he said to her, "time doesn't exist here, so any technology brought here vanishes, or at least it isn't here when you come back."

He didn't mention that he'd once left an enemy he was interrogating here, and had found out that living beings aren't there when you come back either. Was the man's skeleton stuck for all eternity in an alternative Qasit? He wasn't sure, but he'd never left anyone here again.

"We could spend days here," he said, "and arrive back at the very second we left Leviathan."

They walked towards the centre of the cavern and he sent two more lights up to the ceiling, but everywhere still seemed dark and full of shadows. Luri looked at the numerous dark passages leading off the cavern.

"Does anything live here?" She asked.

"No. I don't think anything could survive here."

They came to a plane stone stable that seemed to have grown out of the wall.

"You'll need to lie on this." He said to her.

Luri tucked up her skirt and started to climb on the table.

"Naked."

She didn't hesitate as she removed her clothes and climbed naked onto the cold stone table.

"There is a price," he told her, "I can give you immortality, but it will hurt worse than any other pain you've known. You won't be able to have children, and marriage will be forbidden."

He remembered the Holy Warriors and their dynasties of children who had ruled whole star systems, with the almost inevitable wars and insurrections. Never again would his immortals have progeny, or family dynasties.

"The biggest price will be having to risk that immortal life to protect the Empire. Do you wish to continue?"

Luri settled herself on the cold stone and closed her eyes.

"Yes."

"Try not to move."

He started at her feet and gently passed his hand over her toes and slowly headed up her ankles.

Luri tensed and let out a long anguished moan. He knew she was experiencing deep pain, the kind that usually comes from being flayed alive. He moved his hand up to her thighs and lingered there.

"Fucking bastard!" She shouted.

"Keep still, it's important." He said as she tried to raise her arm.

He knew the power here was a very old power and it didn't care about her pain. In fact like many of the key moments in life, like childbirth and death, the pain seemed to be essential to define the moment as something huge. His hand moved over her stomach and up her torso and he had to hold her right arm down as he ran his hand over her breasts.

"I'll kill you once this is over!" She shouted.

"Good, that's the spirit."

He was monitoring her heart. After all it was no good creating a dead immortal, but her demon side was tough and she was handling the pain well. As he got to her neck he whispered to her.

"A few more seconds, but the worse. Then there will be pleasure."

He used both hands on her face and for a fraction of a second she passed out, but she quickly came around once the pleasure started.

"Oh, that is so good."

As he ran his hands over her body he remembered a female Holy Warrior saying it felt better than sex. For them though the pain had been less, much less, but he had made Luri very different from the Holy Warrior. Luri was not only immortal, she was an open system that would learn and develop from each battle and every wound. As he ran his hands over her neck the healing was finished and the pleasure stopped.

"More." She said through dreamy eyes.

"Sit up."

He helped her sit on the edge of the stone table and saw her amazed look at her extra-long Arcadian style legs. He then realised that perhaps he should have offered her a choice on how she looked? He would remember that for the next one. Luri held up her arms and seemed pleased that the burnished metal sheen was still there.

“Your body will learn Luri,” he told her, “every fight will make you stronger, every burn, every wound and your body will change to prevent it happening again. In time you will be almost indestructible. For now though you’re just very tough, so be careful.”

She stepped away from the table and tried to look over her shoulder at her own back. Then he caught her as she almost fainted.

“You’ve been through a lot,” he said, “talk to Chlo about your new body and rest up for a few days.” He helped her into her clothes and noticed that Luri wasn’t really into underwear. He held her and moved their realities to her bedroom on Leviathan.

“Have a long sleep and I’ll see you tomorrow.” He said as he pulled back the covers and helped her into bed.

He felt for Chlo and asked her to look after Luri if she woke and then he asked her about the stragglers.

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Sikush moved himself to the main control room and looked at the outside view screens. They were now at the centre of a small but growing flotilla of craft. Chlo had left the Empire with the ability for instantaneous communications over any distance, but that meant the whole Empire knew where they were and a lot of them seemed to be heading their way.

“If they get even slightly hostile, shift yourself out of here.” He told her.

Then he thought about the problem of a missing Needle craft, a Raptor and four of the Arcadians. He didn’t want to just leave them, but he didn’t want to risk his scant resources to find them. He had about fifty thousand Arcadian’s on board and they had to form the core of his new Empire. Babak and Abijah were ready for conversion, but he didn’t have time to let them rest up afterwards. He then realised he’d have to go after the stragglers on his own.

“Any luck with the probes to find them Chlo ?”

Chlo could use benign probes to look anywhere in the multiverse, once she had a clue where to look, but they weren’t helping her much.

“I’ve found both the craft. They were answering a distress call, but no sign of any of the crew.”

Sikush looked at the common channel and saw the distress call had come from mineral detection group 6 on designated planet #1,176. No even a name for the planet, so it was certain to be a lifeless rock.

“Breathable atmosphere and a few primitive plants.” Said Chlo.

He pulled her probe picture off the common channel and saw the two Imperial craft standing beside a makeshift building, both looked undamaged. He was just about to transfer himself there when Luri appeared next to him.

“Chlo told me you were going alone.” She said.

Chlo had outfitted her with an Arcadian uniform, a neck guard, arm bracers and one of his priceless demon blades. She certainly looked a formidable warrior and he suspected she could fight as good as she looked.

“Are you sure,” he asked, “you really need a day or two to recover ?”

“It’s what you made me for. I’ll be ok.”

There was a light in her eyes and she looked alert and ready for action. Sikush put his hand on her arm and gave her a little extra strength.

“We’ll start at where the Raptor landed.” He said.

Sikush held onto her and moved them to just under the right wing of the Imperial raptor. It was just approaching dusk on the unnamed planet, but they could see a small settlement a few hundred

yards away. Had she worked out how to use the channels in her head ? Sikush reached for the private channel with her and was pleased to find her there.

“I’ll go right, you go left and we’ll meet in the centre of the settlement.” He told her.

He moved silently towards the settlement and it was the same basic layout as most of them. A single street of made up road with about eight or nine buildings on either side. Top or bottom ? He decided on top and moved himself to the second floor of the building. It was clean and the two beds had been freshly made, so the small town was still inhabited. He used the stairs to go to the ground floor and there were still no signs of life, but someone had turned on the Imperial comms network in the corner of the room, and music from Garanesh was playing softly. So some bits of Garanesh carried on with business as usual, he thought. He noticed stairs leading down and went down to the basement and found the first Arcadian warrior. A bed frame had been put up against one wall and he’d been tied to it.

“Are you getting his DNA ?” He asked Chlo

“Yes. I’ll notify his family.”

He felt the body and it was still slightly warm, so he hadn’t been dead for that long. Why had they tortured him ? There were signs of whipping and then something heavier had been used. Eventually when he obviously hadn’t been telling them what they wanted to hear, someone had used a sharp knife on him. There were stories of the cleric’s hording a great treasure. Perhaps these people had taken the legend seriously ? Another version of Chlo with dark hair appeared next to him and started preparing the body for transport home. Sikush moved his reality to the top floor of the building across the street. Nothing, just an empty storage area, with a few dusty bits of crate in one corner. He took the stairs down and he was in what looked like a small assay office. Along a shelf were bags labelled as some of the rarest elements in the Multiverse. Whoever was here now, it certainly wasn’t raiders, or the bags would have been long gone.

He went to the front door and looked into the street, just as blaster fire started from the direction Luri had taken. He heard her chuckle over their private channel, so he left her to her fun and moved himself to the top floor of the next building. There were four recently made beds, but no occupants, so he used the stairs to go down to the ground floor. This seemed like a small bar, as there was a counter at one end and several casks against one wall of a famous Empire brew that he quite liked himself. He heard movement in the basement below and moved himself down there, just in time to see Luri stab the demon blade she carried into the chest of one of the locals.

“Over there !” she shouted to him, “in the corner near the stairs.”

He looked and noticed three tied up bodies in the recess under the stairs and one of them was moving. He moved himself in front of them and cut the throat of the man left to guard them. To his amazement two of what he thought were dead bodies started to struggle frantically at their bonds. Sikush cut them both free and Chlo identified them as two of the Arcadians, one male, one female, who he’d been looking for. Sadly the third body was the final male Arcadian who seemed to have suffocated to death on the gag that had been jammed into his mouth.

“Thank you, we thought they were going to kill us.” Said the Arcadian female.

“What did they want from you.” Sikush asked.

He looked at the dead male and realised it was Obrin, who had been marked for great things in the Arcadian guard.

“They went mad,” said the girl, “wanted to know where you were going, what you were taking with you.”

So all this had been out of simple greed, Sikush thought as he checked the two living Arcadians for wounds. Luri came back to him and stood like an eager runner waiting for the signal to begin. Sikush noticed she enjoyed cutting the three locals in the room to shreds and she now wanted permission to finish off the rest of the settlement. There was no language used on their private channel, just a strong wordless need that he understood very well. He had nothing against the people here, after all until a few days ago they'd been model subjects of the Empire. Still he was pleased Luri had come to him to ask, so he sent her off to finish the job. Around him several versions of Chlo busied themselves with healing the two living Arcadians and preparing the dead one for transport. He was talking to the female Arcadian when Luri returned and he'd never seen anyone, friend or foe, look at his Holy Warriors with such awe.

"They're all dead." Said Luri.

She was covered in blood from head to foot and the demon blade she carried was dripping blood onto a puddle on the floor.

"Just be glad she's on our side." Sikush said to the girl.

Yes he'd made a good choice and the plan was going to work. The new Empire wasn't going to be as easy to live with as the last one, but it was going to be far stronger. He watched as Luri shimmered herself into a clean set of clothes and wiped the demon blade clean.

"I'll leave you to tidy up." He told Chlo.

Then Sikush held onto Luri and transferred them both to her quarters on the Leviathan.

"Thank you," he said to her, "have a good sleep now, you must need it."

As he turned to leave Luri held out the demon blade to him.

"Keep it, you've more than earned it."

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As Sikush went to his quarters he noticed the Leviathan was now at the centre of a fairly large flotilla.

"They're still arriving," said Chlo, "and lots more on the way."

There had been no reported aggression, they just seemed to be following them to wherever they were going. Surely they knew their reality drives no longer worked? He shimmered out of his clothes and showered the dust of the now dead settlement off his body.

"Move us when you're ready." He told Chlo.

He lay naked under a single sheet on his bed and linked with Chlo for an update on the Arcadians and found that the two they'd brought back alive were fit and well. He'd have the other two buried where they were going to, perhaps hold a public ceremony with everyone present. As he was almost asleep the sheet moved and Chlo pushed her naked body against his and joined him. She kissed him once and turned away from him. This wasn't the blonde, blue eyes Chlo. This was the dark haired girl he'd found in the ruins all those billions of years ago, with the strange thirteen digits on the back of her neck that no one understood. The first two looked like a crooked C and an H, the 8th and 9th looked something like an L and an O, so he'd called her Chlo. Even now looking at her neck, he still had no idea what the markings really meant. Chlo pushed herself closer to him and seemed to go to sleep. If she ever really slept? There were probably several versions of her dealing with important matters all over the craft, but this one, the original didn't want to sleep alone.

"Sleep well Chlo." He said to her as he held her to him.

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The mission should have been routine for the young Rejjacy students. They'd been running two craft exploration teams for years and there had been very few fatalities, on thousands of surveyed

worlds. The Empire jokingly called them X teams, because it was said the students couldn't spell survey. They gained a year of experience to put on their job applications and a decent pay day when they came home, the Empire gained some bright and keen kids to explore places where machines usually failed to deliver. AI no matter how good was never as effective as twenty pairs of young excited eyes. This particular X team had been given a very ancient ruin on a long dead planet to explore and it should have been routine, until the landing team vanished. No screaming for help, no final set of jaws on the helmet camera, they'd just vanished. Those left on the craft had called in the second craft, as the X teams always travelled as a two craft expedition. The standing orders stated that they should now call in the Empire to send the Imperial Warriors, but for some reason this group didn't. Another fifteen students landed close to the ruins and their last message was simply. "Movement seen in ruins, we are investigating."

With thirty dead or missing students the Rejjacy government contacted The Chaln  and demanded action, so he sent two of the Imperial Warriors to the ruins and they died in seconds. They were immortals and well trained and very, very tough, yet after a quick gasp over their comms channel they'd died. Three more had gone after them and after a few images showing what appeared to be a girl moving at high speed, they too had died. Then Sikush had blocked any more attempts at rescue and had gone himself.

The planet was long dead and almost airless, nothing could have survived there. Finding the creature hadn't been difficult, he'd just followed the dead and mutilated bodies to the young girl sat in the centre of the ruins. She had grey skin and dark hair, but looked sexually mature, which was easy to make out, as she was completely naked. The strange thing was that she made no move to attack him and just watched as he walked around her. Sikush had noticed the lettering on her neck and approached to read it.

"Chlo." He'd said.

She had simply looked at him and he felt her trying to look into his mind. He knew she was part organic, but there was something else there. By looking into his mind, she was giving him the opportunity to look into hers.

"No !" She screamed and grabbed him by the arms and pushed him to the ground.

He ignored her attack and delved deeper, further into her systems and found a long dead people, who had created the ultimate device to conquer their enemies, and they'd never had a chance to use it. How had she survived so long without food, shelter or any link to her creators ? It must have been tens, perhaps hundreds of billions of years, yet she still functioned. Sometimes the Multiverse itself seemed to take a hand, and perhaps Chlo had been preserved to play a part for good or ill, in the ultimate contest between light and dark ? Her creator had been beaten to the final punch by their enemies, yet Chlo lived on. She had muttered gibberish in his ear, until he clearly recognised. "Sorry."

He'd spent days with her, keeping her on that dead world, prepared to turn it into a cloud of hot debris if she'd turned hostile, but she hadn't. She knew little of those who had created her, but Sikush saw her potential. Would anyone left for dead, alone for countless billions of years reacted any different to her when strangers arrived ? He had forgiven and trusted her, and Chlo had repaid that trust many times over since. Sikush held her tight as the AI version of Chlo moved the reality of the Leviathan and all those on board out of the bubble universe that would vanish, and into a powered geo stationary orbit around a planet in a solar system kept constant by forced stability. The planet had no name and was simply known as planet #448.7, but he would think of a name for their new home tomorrow.

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