

Mendera - Empire

Chapter 8 – Ventella

“Chlo passed the Ventellan’s details to the Mercs who looked after every day policing on Mendera and Luri asked to be informed when he was brought in for a beating.”

“Wake Up ! You won’t believe this.”

Luri punched Delmus hard on the shoulder and carried on reading the notes on the common channel about the pilgrim from Ventella.

“What won’t I believe ?” Asked Delmus.

A punch on the arm was Luri’s normal way of getting his attention and it could mean he was in trouble, she wanted sex, or she simply wanted to show him an item on the news channel.

“Chlo just sent Babak and Abijah to cover our assignment.”

Delmus rolled onto the edge of the bed and sat up, realising as he did so that his body was expecting early morning intercourse, as a fairly impressive erection was lying there with nothing to do.

“What assignment ?” He asked.

“Chlo ! Chlo, you get here right now !” Luri was shouting.

Chlo appeared looking very fresh, as usual and seemed unconcerned at being greeted by an angry Luri and Delmus who seemed to be examining his groin and looking unhappy.

“Yes Luri ? What’s the problem ?”

“The Ventellan in the drains. That was our assignment.”

Chlo gave Luri her steely look and thought it might be time to show Luri how hard life can be without a connection to the Imperial network. Luri had form for being rude to her, and Chlo only ever allowed Sikush to get away with treating her badly, anyone else could find themselves with no access to the common channel for months.

“It wasn’t your assignment,” said Chlo, “it was something I was watching, but then it became upgraded to a full mission. I tried you, tried you both, but you’ve been locked out of the network for the last 11 hours.”

Luri was suddenly aware of how naked she was and starting to wonder if Chlo might refuse to help her with arranging her sexual liaisons again.

“Why was it upgraded ?” Luri asked.

Chlo began tapping her foot on the floor, which was never a good sign. Those who knew her likened it to the way a cat wags its tail before pouncing.

“His sister,” said Chlo, “has made four requests to have the body sent back to her on Ventella for burial.”

Luri was desperately trying to pull a sheet off the bed and wrap it around herself and she didn’t understand why Delmus was staring between his legs.

“So ! Why wouldn’t his sister want the body back ? That’s just normal.” Said Luri.

Chlo was now hovering just off the ground, yet the sound of her foot tapping on the floor was still clearly audible.

“Did you even read the notes before shouting for me ?”

Chlo wasn’t going to do anything awful to Luri, she was enjoying her discomfort far too much.

“No.” Said Luri.

“Grai Harg never had a sister.” Chlo said as she vanished.

Luri collapsed back onto the bed and watched Delmus heading for the shower as she looked at the common channel listing for the Grai Harg death.

“Shit, he never had a sister.” She shouted at Delmus as he closed the shower door.

It had been several weeks since the incident in the sewers and Luri cursed herself for not checking the notes since. The official cause of death given to the Ventellan authorities was a street robbery in the market area. For some reason the mercs had received the first three requests for the body and had, of course, ignored them. Then Chlo had picked up the fourth and Sikush had upgraded the incident to a high priority assignment. There was something missing though, so Luri felt for Chlo.

“How about a body Chlo ? What are you sending the supposed sister ?”

Much to Luri’s relief Chlo sounded her usual self.

“A construct. It’s in stasis until they need it on Ventella.”

Luri looked right through the notes, there had to be something she could get her teeth into. Babak and Abijah were good, very good, but she still felt they were pushing into her assignment. As she looked down a list of people Grai Harg had been to see while on Mendera, one name jumped out at her. He’d spent an entire afternoon with none other than the merchant Hasim. Not that Luri thought Hasim had anything to do with Grai being synthetic, but Hasim was nosy, in fact he was the biggest busy body on Mendera. She really doubted Grai could have spent all afternoon with Hasim and not given something away.

“Can I talk to Hasim Chlo ?”

There was the briefest pause before Chlo replied.

“Yes, but try not to kill Hasim, he has a lot of important connections.”

Luri was smiling at the thought of perhaps, just maybe roughing up Hasim just a little. She got off the bed and headed to join Delmus in the shower.

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Babak had deliberately arrived in Chenalsk the capital of Ventella a fair distance from the home of Grai Harg’s supposed sister. Normally he hated cities, but he found the high tapering towers of the city fascinating. Ventella was one of the founding worlds of the Empire and hadn’t needed any pressure to join; they’d desperately needed a protector. Someone in the Guard had once joked that Ventella was a world of warrior poets, who had evolved into being just poets. They very definitely weren’t great fighters, but for sheer artistic beauty their world had no equal.

“I’m with the local militia, if you need help shout.”

Abijah was delivering the fake body to the local militia while he interviewed the sister and the two of them had been constantly chattering over their private link. If any of the Guard could ever be said to have a long term relationship it was them.

“Any sign of trouble I’ll bring her back to Mendera.” He replied.

As he rounded a corner he once again halted in wonder at the crystalline towers that seemed to reach miles up into the sky. This was just a suburb, the buildings in the business centre were over three miles high, and seemed to almost hang from the clouds. Babak knew he was in the right area, but there were no house numbers, or street name. How did they ever get anything delivered ? He thought.

“The next house on your left.” Said Chlo.

Crime on Ventella was almost unknown, so the door of the dwelling was open and he could hear the sound of a woman laughing coming from inside.

“Hello.” He shouted as he walked into the spacious hallway.

All the walls were made of the same semi-transparent crystal material, much of it infused with a myriad of colours. It made it difficult to tell what was real and what was merely a reflection.

“Here at the back ! Just follow my voice.”

He bumped into one wall and Chlo took pity on him and put a diagram of the house into his mind, so that he quickly found his way to a studio at the back of the house.

“I’m just finishing, talk to me while I tidy up.”

The girl was pretty, but not in the same rather over done way he’d seen out on the streets. No layers of makeup, no scanty clothing, just an artist’s smock and a broad grin on her face. Even the faint green shimmer on her skin that all Ventellan’s had looked good on her.

“What will it be ?” He asked.

The girl had been sculpting a figure out the local hard white stone and so far all that could be seen were two feet and a left arm.

“One of the deities perhaps, I’m not sure yet.”

He was enjoying her company, but he had his orders and Chlo was indicating there were energy weapons in the house, which was unknown on Ventella.

“You are the sister of Grai Harg, or rather you were ?” He asked.

“I am Vita Harg, yes.”

She held his eyes just a bit too long, was just a tiny bit too confident.

“She’s lying.” Abijah told him over their link.

Vita headed out of the studio and into what looked like a kitchen, so Babak followed her.

“My colleague is delivering your brothers body to the city militia,” he told her, “but I wanted to come to offer out apologies over the delay in contacting you.”

“How was he killed ?” She asked.

“A fight in the merchant’s zone, perhaps a robbery that went wrong ?”

Vita opened a cupboard and brought out the paraphernalia to brew the local herbal drink that all Chenalsk citizens seemed to drink in huge amounts.

“Would you like some ?” She asked him.

He nodded at her and sat himself on a comfortable looking chair.

“Was his body badly damaged ?” Vita asked, “an open coffin is usual, but our parents might be upset if he was disfigured.”

Vita turned towards him with tears coming from her eyes and he had to admire how good an actor she was. There was no family for Grai Harg, well no family left alive. His parents were long dead and there never had been a sister. Babak went over to her and held her as she cried, even kissed her when she moved towards him with ‘that look’ in her eyes.

“She’s fucking good !” Abijah commented.

“The damage wasn’t too bad, you can have an open coffin.” He told her.

He felt Vita relax as she moved away from him and began the complex process of making Ventellan Gimork, the local beverage.

“Do you like it strong ?” She asked him.

He’d hadn’t drunk it for years, but remembered the bitter taste that seemed to remain in his mouth for days.

“No, not too strong.”

After a lot of hissing noises the apparatus produced two drinks which she brought to the table.

“Thank you for coming,” she said, “it’s helped, helped a lot.”

Vita took off her work smock and was wearing the usual local skimpy dress underneath, and Babak was treated to a good view of her thighs as she sat down. His orders had been to play it by ear, get whatever information he could and if in doubt Chlo would put a probe on the body.

"We'll see where they take it and what they do with it." Chlo had told him.

The problem was that despite the wise words from Abijah and countless years of experience, Babak was softening towards the girl. He decided to sound her out.

"You can be honest with me." He said.

Chlo gave a gasp in his head, as Abijah told him to be cautious.

"If anyone is forcing you to pretend to be Grai's sister," he continued, "we can protect you."

One second Vita was sat there with a smile on face, the next her body exploded with a rush of blood and a ball of white hot gas. As Babak was thrown up and through the walls by the blast he realised he'd got it completely wrong. He was very tough, but not completely immune to damage and every wall he went through left a few cuts in his back and a few more dents in his pride. He went across the street and hit the outside wall of the house opposite with enough force to crack it, before he fell down the wall and landed in a crumpled heap on the ground.

"Babak ! Are you alright ?"

Abijah was crouched beside him and helping him to his feet. Across the street there was little left of the beautiful house he'd been in. Then he looked around and saw at least three dead bodies in the street, there was no way this event could be hidden. As startled locals started to appear from their homes, Abijah took hold of the wounded Babak and brought him back to Mendera.

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Sikush had never known Herusher argue with him before, but he'd threatened to leave Mendera if nothing was done about Kittara. Yes, the girl was difficult, but he knew there was something within her that he needed, the Empire needed.

"What do you feel ?" He asked her.

They were stood in the chamber of the true flame and Kittara was looking at the ground as though it might bite her.

"I feel death is here, but much more than that. Strength and power is also here."

Two clerics entered the chamber, but left hurriedly after seeing Kittara there. The Genova seemed to almost worship her, yet the clerics were building up an instinctive fear. Sikush sat Kittara in front of the flame and looked deeply into her; it was like looking into a raging hurricane. Even Alyz was worried about Kittara.

"I know you've never had a rogue member of The Damned," she'd said, "but I'm worried Kittara might be the first." She said to him, and she was her closest friend, perhaps her only friend.

Kittara put her hand into the flame and seemed calmed by it; he hoped that the flame might give her the focus she needed. He knew that no matter what, he'd never let her be destroyed, even if that meant hiding her away somewhere.

"The celebration for your initiation into the Guard is soon," He told her.

Kittara looked up at him and smiled, a full smile that held nothing back, hid nothing. Why couldn't she be like that with others ? Once the celebration was over perhaps a few years in the temple with the clerics and the flame would be good for her.

"She is the best fighter I've ever taught." Herusher had told him.

Sikush held her hand.

"Are you mine ?" He asked her.

"Always." She answered.

He felt he could trust her completely, but there were so many unanswered questions. Chlo had taught her a few basic mental switches, how to call for a move through reality, how to keep her bladder empty, but nothing like the spells she was learning.

"I never taught her any of this." Chlo had told him, as they watched her destroy the fountain with a precisely aimed fire ball.

They'd both smiled at her and applauded, but they had no idea where the knowledge was coming from, or why it seemed to darken her. It was almost as if she was relearning old skills from herself.

"Would you like to do more of your training with me?" He asked.

She didn't need to answer, the look on her face said it all.

"Yes," she said, "teach me so that I can kill for you."

Herusher would have said she didn't really understand the true nature of the Guard, but Sikush thought Kittara understood his requirements very well. Yes, he'd decided. Once the celebration was over, if there was any more concern over her behaviour, he'd bring her to the temple for a few thousand years.

"Do I please you?" She asked him.

He kissed her cheek and gave her an honest answer.

"Yes you do, you please me very much."

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Luri had booked the appointment with Hasim without telling him it wasn't a visit to buy his wares.

Once he'd gotten over the surprise of seeing Delmus with her, she'd enjoyed seeing him squirm once she told him her visit was on official business.

"With me? I've done nothing against the Empire."

It wasn't that Hasim had ever done her any harm, she just enjoyed seeing him discomfited, it made up for all the little remarks he'd made to her over the years.

"You recently spent quite a bit of time with a known terrorist." She informed him.

True no one had known Harg was anything other than a harmless pilgrim at the time, but Hasim didn't need to know that. His assistant arrived with refreshments, which Delmus dived into.

"I love the drinks here," he said, "no one does nunga juice like this."

Hasim was controlling his emotions well, but there was a vein in his neck that was twitching and a line of sweat forming on his cheek.

"Who? I don't know any terrorists."

Luri pretended to think about the answer, while she rubbed her palm over the handle of her boot dagger.

"A pilgrim by the name of Grai Harg," said Delmus, "he was here all one afternoon."

Hasim spun around to stare at Delmus.

"I see lots of people, everyone knows Hasim's Emporium."

He called for his assistant, then another arrived with a book full of loose pieces of paper. After a lot of digging it appeared that Harg had bought two suits of Menderan clothes, some shoes and a few other pieces of local clothing. Luri didn't care about the purchases, she knew Hasim would still remember every piece of gossip the Ventellan had told him.

"What did you talk to him about?" She asked.

Hasim knew that gossip wasn't evidence and that he'd lose a lot of custom if he became known for repeating much of what he heard.

"It was weeks ago," he said, "I'm an old man, my memory isn't that good."

"You'd better start packing then." Said Delmus.

Before Hasim could react, Luri carried on with the pressure.

“Associating with a known terrorist, non-cooperation with the Guard, you’ll be back on Ixir with all your goods and chattels within the week.”

It was a low blow and Luri thought Hasim might collapse in front of them. She knew he’d never been to Ixir, was about the 5th generation of his family to live on Mendera, but the rules of the Empire were simple ; unless you were descended from the original colonist, you were always going to be a migrant. That meant no rights to residency or to own land or property. Luri knew Hasim would survive for about a day in the cramped stinking slums of Ixir.

“He arrived just after lunch,” said Hasim, “seemed very interested in the coming celebrations for the initiation of a new member of the Guard.”

“We’re not in a hurry, tell us everything ?” Said Delmus.

“I must admit he seemed fairly streetwise for a Ventellan, they’re usually just interested in the more aesthetic of my good, but this one wanted to know lots of details about the celebrations. Did you know I’ve been invited to build a temporary emporium right next to Grand Council building ?”

Delmus shook his head, but Hasim was now enjoying telling his story and needed no prompting to continue.

“I told him about all the extra temporary structures that are allowed within the city walls, he didn’t seem interested in any of it really. He just wanted to know about the order of events and where everything was going to happen. There was one strange thing though, some of the clothing he bought was for a woman.”

“Nothing else ?” Asked Luri.

Luri almost felt sorry for the merchant now, but she needed any information he might have.

“I wouldn’t do it for most clients you understand, but he was looking for company, female company.”

“So you set him up with a courtesan ?” Said Delmus.

“As I say, normally I’d have nothing to do with that kind of thing, but I heard there was a girl in the market, who catered for unusual tastes, so I simply sent him in her direction.”

Luri hadn’t seem Tanil in a while and had assumed that after earning a considerable sum off her, the girl had decided to spread her wings and move on, now she had a feeling of dread.

“What was the girls name ?” She asked.

“She’s always in the same spot, Tanil they call her.”

Luri thanked him for his help and assured him he had nothing further to fear from the Guard, then they left his emporium.

“Do you know where she lives ?” Asked Delmus as they came out of the shop.

Luri remembered her having a small two room dwelling in the merchants zone.

“Nothing fancy and never for use by clients, just my own private place, my sanctuary.” She told Luri.

Luri had felt rather proud of spending a night there with her on the small bed, not as a paying client, but as a friend.

“She has a place behind bay 22 in the merchant zone.” She told Delmus.

As they arrived there Luri knew what they’d find. The door was easy to force open and inside was the badly decomposed body of the young courtesan. Her wrists were tied to the bed frame, a long thin blade protruded from what was left of the chest.

“Maybe one of her clients went too far ?” Said Delmus.

“She never brought clients here, this has to be connected to the pilgrim from Ventella.”

Luri examined the meagre possessions in the room, not much to show for a hard life of sucking cock and opening her legs. Delmus was crouching over the body and going through the forensics with Chlo, so Luri went through the objects on the dresser. A few decent pieces of jewellery and a cheap bracelet that Luri had seen her wear quite a bit. She quickly slid it onto her own wrist, perhaps Hasim was right about her getting softer as she got older. It was weeks since she'd been here and then a very live Tanil had been moaning under her while she licked between her legs. Chlo called the mercs and Luri waited for them to arrive, giving the commander a large bribe to make sure Tanil had a decent funeral.

"If she goes into the storm drains I will hear of it!" She told him as he left.

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Herusher had asked for an active mission, but he'd never imagined Sikush would send him into the rifts with a dozen of The Damned.

"He can be a bit jumpy, but he's been guarding our backs for billions of years. He'll like you, he's not keen on most people, but I'm sure he'll like you." Sikush had told him.

It had taken them three whole days to get here, wherever here was, Chlo was no longer responding, and he was beginning to wonder if they should have come at all.

"It doesn't look very welcoming." Said Jen.

Herusher was glad Jen had chosen to join him, as one of the small group of elite guards for The Chalne she could have easily avoided the mission. They'd used the Well of Souls to get to the 1st rift, which was strangely empty and tranquil these days. Then they'd had to fly across thousands of miles of hostile rifts to finally get to the city of Annill at the furthest point east on the 3rd rift. Not that Herusher had ever heard of the city they now stood in front of, no one seemed to have heard of it, apart from Sikush and Chlo.

"How do we get in?" One of the Guard asked.

"No moving through reality here," shouted Herusher, "that's important."

Sikush had told him Sumahn-Nerish would be displeased if they manipulate reality while in his city, and no one with any sense wants to displease one of the Ancient Deities.

"I guess we knock on the door then." Said Jen.

The walls of the city in front of them were immense, rising at least two hundred feet about the flat grey sand that covered this part of the rift. Huge buttresses reinforced the walls and everything looked immensely old, but well maintained. In front of them a long ramp made of yellow stone rose at a very shallow angle, until it led to a set of huge metal doors in the city walls.

"We'll walk from here." Said Herusher.

They set off to walk the hundred yards or so, up the ramp and towards the gate and as they marched through the fine grey sand, heads appeared, looking over the top of the city walls at them.

"Sumahn has been protecting our backs for years," Sikush had told him, "he wouldn't ask for help unless he really needed it."

So here Herusher was, with only one other member of the Guard he knew would be good under pressure and orders to leave some of them behind as permanent garrison if required. As he snarled at one of the Guard to knock on the door, Herusher really wasn't in the best of moods.

"Who wishes access to the City of Annill?" A voice asked.

Herusher looked and a small metal panel had been pulled back in the door, about three feet higher than their heads.

"The Damned. We are expected." Boomed out Herusher's reply.

They heard the heavy clangs as various locks and bolts were being opened. Herusher's orders from Sikush were clear, if a little unusual.

"He has a right hand man who really runs the place. He's called Lanssor, you can trust him, try to get him on your side. Don't expect to be greeted with open arms, the city has suffered a lot and we have been a bit slow in helping them."

'A bit slow in helping', Herusher had only heard of the place a few days ago.

As the doors were wound slowly back by unseen hands a lone figure walked through them. He looked very old, his right leg showing a pronounced limp, but his expensive looking robes and the golden staff he carried marked him as a person of importance.

"My name is Lanssor, first minister to the holy one. Please follow me." He said.

Lanssor was a very slow walker, which gave Herusher time to look over the city as they walked through it. There seemed to be people from every part of the multiverse here, including some he'd never come across before. They all had that look of having seen too much fighting, one too many battle where they'd lost friends. It wasn't just they all seemed heavily armed and ready to do battle, but their clothes were blood stained, their shields damaged by enemy weapons. Not that all of them were armed for hand to hand fighting, some of the people they walked past were carrying high powered military blasters.

"Quite a variety of fighters you have here." Remarked Herusher.

"Many people arrive in Annill, usually by accident. Once here they either fight, or they die."

The first minister had a deep and almost despondent voice, a voice that sounded resigned to a life of constant war. He took them through a city that seemed under siege, yet they'd seen no enemy at the walls. They went past an armourer repairing a Bardiche on an anvil, then a merchant selling high tech power armour. Eventually they came upon a building of a type they all recognised.

"The Annill Rest," said Lanssor, "they offer food, lodging and other services."

"A good honest tavern," said Jen, "things are looking up."

Lanssor stopped and looked at Jen, with almost a look of sorrow on his eyes.

"You'll find little that is honest in this city, but I've heard their ale is drinkable."

The first minister led them towards what was obviously the more affluent part of the city, the armed troops became scarcer, curious well-dressed civilians more numerous.

"We are heading there, to the alcázar, where the holy one awaits your arrival."

The old man was pointing at a structure on top of a hill that was still some way off. Herusher looked and saw a palace, or some sort of keep, with a great many towers around it, its position dominated the city below. They'd now entered an area with large expensive looking property and Herusher thought some of the people looked very like the population of the Maran Group.

"Where do you get your population from Lanssor?"

"The demons withdrew to beyond gateway and almost at the same time all the lesser gates and portals started leading here. We get a steady flow, often a thousand a day. Once they're here there is no way out. Very few can fly as you did."

The first minister seemed to remember something from the past.

"Nurigen managed to leave, I believe he's now on the 4th rift, or was it the 5th? He was quite a character while he was here. He made my staff."

This was quite a shock to them all.

"Nurigen was here?" Asked Jen.

"Oh yes, for several years. A perpetual war is the ideal place for a master weapon smith after all. He also made the main gates to the city."

They had now reached the start of the huge number of steps up to the alcázar and Herusher hoped the holy one would at least let them fly while they were there, otherwise they were going to spend a lot of time running up and down stairs.

“There is one thing,” said Lanssor, “I think Nurigen might still be under a death sentence from the holy one, it was one of the reason he left, best not to mention him.”

They carried on climbing in silence until Jen asked.

“Who is the enemy you’re fighting ?”

It was an obvious question, but the first minister seemed shocked by it and had to grab a firm hold of his staff.

“Our enemy you say ? I suppose we’ve been fighting them for so long that I’d assumed you knew. We fight the Dracc. Everyone here fights, well except the wealthy of course. You don’t fight, you don’t get food or lodgings. The losses have never been more than thirty thousand a year, but recently a big one came through and we’re losing a lot of good fighters.”

Herusher had never heard of the Dracc, but he had a good idea he’d be seeing plenty of them fairly soon.

“What are your losses now ?” He asked.

“In the last half year we’ve lost two hundred thousand, all trained fighters.”

Herusher now understood the weary look of the fighter, everyone must have lost a friend or even family member in the battle. They weren’t even paid mercs, just fairly unwilling conscripts by the sound of things. After some time they arrived at the entrance to the alcázar and the doors opened as they approached. Despite all his years on Mendera, Herusher was still very impressed by the opulence of the entrance hall. He imagined then heading up the main stairs, but instead Lanssor took them around the side of the stairs and down. The old man stopped at the top of the stairs.

“We have some way to go, but don’t say another word until you’re introduced to the holy one. Not one word !”

Herusher nodded and they all followed him down flight after flight of stairs, until they must have travelled right through the hill and a great depth into the ground. The first minister clung onto the staff Nurigen had made for him and seemed unfazed by the exercise. Then they came to a hall with six well-armed guards. Not the weary conscripts they’d seen so far, but alert crack troops in clean uniforms, carrying deadly looking scimitars. Lanssor put his finger to his lips to remind them, while the guards opened two metal doors for them to pass inside. The room they entered was high, very high, perhaps the ceiling might have been three hundred feet above them and supported by several rows of columns.

“My friends, Sikush told me you were arriving today.”

The voice was loud, but not loud enough to hurt the ears. Herusher was one of the few to have seen Tomma-Goran in action and he’d been amazed at the agility of the deity. On one occasion he’d seen him crouch down to talk to Sikush without making a sound, a difficult feat for a massive being nearly two hundred feet tall. Should he mention the deity of the City of the Lost God ? Deities could be very jealous of each other, so he decided not to mention that part of his past.

“Holy one. We are sent to aid you against your enemies.” Herusher said.

A two hundred foot snake with four legs and two muscular arms stood in the centre of the room and examined them and he seemed pleased with them.

“Fourteen of you. Good, you’ll have the big one dead and skinned in no time.”

Herusher could feel the same repressed power he’d felt from Tomma-Goran. He knew this deity could have destroyed his enemies in a heartbeat, but of course it wasn’t proper to have to fight his

own enemies. Have the Dracc say it needed a God to defeat them ? Never, The Damned would have to find the Dracc 'big one' and skin him for Sumahn-Nerish.

"Sikush asked me to apologise that it has taken so long to send aid."

Herusher saw the deity approach and hoped he'd said the right thing. Sikush had warned him.

"If he kills you all I will have stern words with him, but you'll still be dead, so it will be treading on egg shells all the time you're there."

Were deities ever quite sane ? Herusher wondered. He'd met three now and they'd all seemed somewhat less than rational.

"Thank you Herusher, you may call me Sumahn."

The first minister was busy whispering to various servants and tables had appeared, then food and finally some chairs for them to sit on. To Herusher's amazement Sumahn-Nerish managed to get his head right down to their level while they ate. The closer he got, the more he resembled a giant horned serpent.

"When you've eaten, my first minister will show you the cavern where the Dracc enter our world.

Today you are to kill the big one and bring me its head. You are late arriving, so don't let me down in this matter."

Then the deity walked to the other end of the hall and left through another huge set of doors.

Lanssor held his finger to his lips again and Herusher assumed his new friend Sumahn could hear all conversations inside his alcázar.

"Finish your food, then I'll take you to the cavern, it isn't far below us." Said Lanssor.

The talk around the table was of the upcoming celebrations for Kittara's initiation and a few unkind words about the insane new member of the Guard. Herusher quickly changed the subject to the question of who might form a semi-permanent garrison in Annill. When they'd all finished eating Herusher had them all check each other's kit, he and Jen checking each other's. It was a piece of routine that could save lives and gave them a few moments to prepare for the fight.

"Nearon has a non-standard knife in his tunic." Someone called out.

There was a general chuckle, everyone knew Nearon carried a demon blade he'd borrowed from Luri a few months ago and had 'forgotten' to return. Herusher smiled a rare smile. If they could make jokes in this place after seeing a living god, they might well survive the rest of the day.

"We're ready." He told Lanssor.

The first minister took them through a small low door and down a single flight of stairs, in front of them was a small, but very tough looking metal door, guarded by four soldiers armed with heavy blasters. The door sparkled with magic defences, most likely the work of Nurigen, Herusher thought. He remembered Nurigen had a reputation for over doing door defences and hoped the first minister knew the pass signs very well.

"I won't be going any further," said Lanssor, "I wish you luck."

Once through the door they were at the entrance to a large cavern, with a larger main entrance to their right. In front of them rows of troops checked their weapons before trudging off through the damp cavern towards the sound of fighting in the distance. Herusher noticed the smell, mustiness from damp clothing mixed with something else ? A smell all soldiers know, the smell of dead bodies left to decompose on the battlefield. In the distance, between two upright columns of stone they saw a flash, then a fraction of a second later the dull thud of a detonation.

"This cavern must be immense." Said Jen.

A few of the assembled troops looked to be from Ixir and recognised The Damned, then the word spread until a general cheer started to go up.

“We know why we’re here. Let’s get it done.” Said Herusher.
At a fast sprint he led his team in the direction of the action.

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