

## Mendera - Empire

### Chapter 9 – The Dracc

**“Of course there had to be guards, even the Gods needed guards on Ixir to protect their belongings.”**

The people of Mizzo were curious about the old man at first, but then the curiosity became awe and then fear. He'd arrived just after a meteorite strike, with just a single bag over his shoulder and a blue grey dagger tucked down his belt. They'd asked him his name ?

“Chelac.” Was his answer, though later visitors called him Nurigen.

At first the young men of the town had talked about who was going to test the strength of the old man, see what he kept in that bag in his room. Then the young men started to avoid him, it was something about the look in his eyes, the old man didn't seem afraid of anything. A few young girls had shared his bed, perhaps in the hopes of a trip off the shit hole of a planet that Mizzo was on. None of them talked about the old man, but few shared his bed more than once.

“So very old, like sleeping with an angel, or a demon.” One girl had said.

Then the old man called Chelac had started telling them a story, a story that started with a supernatural female warrior, who was attacking a prison planet. The story had gone on, night after night, week after week and more of the town crowded into the bar of the cheap hotel where he was staying.

“He has the sight.” Some said.

So much of the story seemed relevant to their lives, how could he know about the eternal, the deities and the angels ? Even the meteorite strike the night he arrived had been strange, no sign of a crater, just a huge area of flattened forest. Parts of their night sky was going dark, there had been huge supernova, visible to the human eye from Mizzo. Could their world be about to end ? Now Chelac was starting a new story about the end of a multiverse, was he telling them of their own demise ? Mizzo had a population of 302 adults, 114 children and about 60 dogs, all of whom seemed to want to cram into the main room of Walt's bar and lodging house, to hear the story continue.

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Abijah had the street plan memorised and anyway Chlo could always prompt her. Babak was watching her, as was Jen, but the trouble with volunteer missions was that everyone seemed very quiet, there was little of the normal flippant chatter. Not that it had to be an assassination, not if things went well, but if he refused to co-operate ? Could she kill his wife and child in front of him ? She felt out her link with Chlo and brought up the picture of the daughter, Delga.

'20 years old, history student, no steady relationship, no criminal activity.....'

The stream of information carried on and Abijah realised it no longer touched her. Where was the young Arcadian girl, thrilled to be given a second chance at life by a merciful dark angel, oh so long ago ? Abijah could find no trace of her and knew that if it came to it, she'd kill Delga and her mother in a split second.

“We can't risk a split with the Maran Group,” Sikush had told her, “if you kill one of them, then you will have to kill them all and make it look like a robbery.”

Chlo had found some DNA in the home of the dead courtesan named Tanil, DNA that had no right to be there.

“She never took clients to her home.” Luri had told them.

The DNA belonged to Tomas Pederman, head of Pederman Bio Research. A coincidence that his company was working on synthetic proteins ? Chlo didn't think so either. It still didn't really make sense though, the Maran Group has a perfect right to develop synthetic DNA if they wanted, so why all the booty trapped bodies and a dead courtesan ? Abijah just wanted a chance to get noticed. She knew that Alyz and Kittara were stronger than her, tougher, she just needed Sikush to notice her. Then she hoped he might give her a bit more strength, send her to Juliette for training. Some didn't return from seeing Juliette, but for those who wanted to get to the top in The Damned, you had to be trained by Juliette.

"No one near their house," Chlo told her, "you can climb into the tree and wait for them to go to bed."

It had all been planned in detail back on Mendera. Abijah moved her reality through their garden wall, climbed an old tree about twenty yards from the house and then prepared to keep completely still and silent for hours. Simple if you've been trained in how to do it for billions of years.

"The daughter still seems to be awake, music coming from her room." Said Chlo.

The Maran Group no longer named their towns or housing projects, Tomas had his house in the nicer part of ExecProj 56, where only board level executives were allowed to live. The property was expensive, but Abijah had seen few militia vehicles on her brief walk there.

"A lot of burglaries and home invasions in the area." Chlo had told her.

Abijah could hear the sound of a local singer coming from the daughter's room, then a male voice shouting for her to go to bed. Then the lights went out and Chlo indicated that all significant power consumption in the house had ended, or to put it simply, they'd all gone to sleep. She quietly descended the tree and walked towards the house, the dog next door completely unaware of her presence. She didn't bother unlocking the door, just moved her reality through it and into the hallway beyond.

"The sound of three people in deep sleep upstairs." Commented Chlo.

Up the stairs and to the right and she was in Delga's room, the girl was sleeping on top of the bedding, wearing just her panties. Abijah preferred a knife to a blaster any day, but she knew from experience that Tomas would be more intimidated by a blaster, people always were. Ideally she'd have held both, but her left hand was going to be around the throat of his daughter.

"Make a sound and I'll kill you.....slowly."

Abijah was on the bed next to the girl and put her hand around her throat as she woke. She lifted her off the bed and pulled her closer to her, feeling a scream trying to form in Delga's throat.

"Quiet..... quiet and I won't hurt you. Do you understand."

The girl nodded, but her bladder emptied, drenching the girl's legs and leaving a puddle as they walked out of her room. Abijah held onto the daughter as they went down the corridor and into her parent's bedroom. They too were almost naked and sleeping outside of the bedding. It must have been a hot night in ExecProj56, but Abijah hadn't really noticed the temperature of her environment in a long time. She pushed Delga face down on the bed, the blaster aimed at the back of her skull.

"Wake up Tomas." She said in a normal voice.

As they woke up Solga, the girl's mother gasped, while Tomas made a grab for the drawer of the bedside cabinet.

"She'll be dead before you get the blaster out."

He stopped reaching for the drawer and starred at the woman threatening his daughter. Abijah was dressed in a dark grey suit that had a hood, almost the obligatory uniform for those of bad character throughout the Empire. The mother sobbed, but not very loudly, certainly not loud enough to be

heard by the neighbours. The houses here were well spread out, the buildings expensive and well built. Not like Ixir, where the sounds of slapping someone around could be heard by everyone for four blocks.

“What do you want ?” Asked Tomas.

Abijah rubbed the blaster against the girls neck, just enough to get her to squawk a little. She noticed the mother looked in shock, no reaction, just starred at her daughter. Tomas on the other hand winced a little, good, he cared about his daughter.

“I need information, about your work ?” Abijah told him.

Did she see him look relieved ? Industrial espionage was common in the Empire.

“I have a safe downstairs, “said Tomas, “but let my daughter go.”

Abijah decided to pursue the information she needed while she still had him on the back foot and her blaster aimed at Delga’s head.

“You were on Mendera recently ? Visited the merchant’s zone ?”

Yes, she saw the serious look return to his face and he gave another look towards the drawer. She rubbed the blaster against the side of Delga’s neck, quite a nasty wound was forming, but it made the girl cry out.

“Leave her alone,” said Tomas, “I can’t tell you about that, they’ll kill me.”

“If you don’t tell me, you’ll die tonight.”

Abijah quickly looked at the common channel and several sets of eyes were watching her, saying nothing. Chlo had put up a note that she’d jammed the drawer, so Tomas was never going to get his hands on that blaster.

“I mean it,” said Tomas, “I can’t tell you. They’ll kill my wife, my daughter, my entire family. I can tell you nothing.”

“He means it !” Said Kittara.

Abijah looked at the common channel and noticed Kittara had joined the watchers. She agreed with her assessment of the situation. Abijah fired her blaster, showering Solga Pederman with her daughter’s blood. The body twitched a little, before Abijah allowed it to fall off the bed and onto the floor. Quickly she aimed her blaster at the mother.

“Your choice Pederman ? Do you want to lose them both ?”

Tomas made a grab for the drawer and the blaster it obviously contained, but no matter how hard he pulled the drawer refused to budge. He gave up and started to hug his wife, who was sat staring at the dead body of their daughter and making whimpering noises.

“Please,” he said to Abijah, “haven’t you done enough ?”

No, she hadn’t. Abijah knew that before she left they’d all be dead, they now all had to die.

“Tell me ?” Her tone of voice softened, almost soothing.

He looked at his wife and nodded.

“Can my wife stay here ? I have a safe downstairs.”

Abijah had seen grieving mothers come out of shock. She might jump through a window, come downstairs with a blaster, or come out of the kitchen with a cleaver. Once she’d seen a middle aged woman head but her way through a reinforced door, so she was taking no chances.

“Bring her with us.”

They went down the stairs, the mother making keening sounds as Tomas had to pull her fingers away from the door frame, so intent was she on not leaving her dead daughter.

“Solga ! Solga ! Leave her.” Shouted Tomas.

They went into a room at the back of the house that looked to be his study. Bookshelves full of medical journals, several certificates on the wall saying he was a surgeon, doctor, qualified hospital administrator. Tomas gently pushed his wife into a chair and told her to be still.

“Over here, behind the seating.” He said to Abijah.

He pulled at a section of seating built into the wall, swinging it smoothly away to reveal a small safe. It almost seemed redundant, what else was he going to do ? But she said it anyway.

“Ok, open it.”

He had to enter three sets of numbers into the key pad, but eventually the safe opened to reveal just one thin file, which he handed to Abijah. Inside were just twelve sheets of paper and as she scanned it she knew it was huge.

“Sit down with your wife and keep quiet.” She told him.

As she read the documents she realised that Chlo was instantly seeing and recording all of it, so she only gave the more technical pages a brief speed read. Even so she realised the implications of it, the enormity.

“Obvious once you see it.” Said Chlo.

Then the orders appeared on her link with Chlo.

‘Leave the file with the bodies.’

There was no talking with the Pederman’s, no last minute requests, no last words to haunt her for the next few millennia, not that Abijah had ever known sleepless nights. She fired her blaster at the centre of Solga’s chest, then a second later did the same to Tomas and then she dropped the file on the floor. It was normal procedure not to aim for the head, it could make identification difficult and cause the authorities to spend too long on what looked like a simple house invasion or robbery.

Abijah then moved herself back to Mendera.

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Kittara had been given the tidy up operation. Not that Abijah couldn’t have done it herself, the mission so far had been text book, the objectives met, major liabilities dealt with. Sikush had obviously wanted to give Kittara a run out, see how she handled herself. A bit like taking a personal transport out for a test spin around the block.

“No one heard a thing.” Chlo told her.

Well that would change fairly quickly. What self-respecting home invader leaves no readily obvious point of entry ? Kittara spun on her left foot, hitting the door hard in the centre with the sole of her right boot.

“That will wake them up.” She muttered.

The door crashed into the hall, taking most of the frame and some of the fabric of the wall with it. Did it look like a group of desperate marauders had invaded the house ? Yes, Kittara was satisfied it did. As she went up the stairs to the bedrooms Chlo kept her up to date.

“Lots of lights coming on in the area, the first call going out to the militia.”

There wasn’t much that needed doing in the bedrooms. The plan had been to use incendiary device, but Kittara walked into Delga’s room and set the bed alight with a fireball spell. Then back along the corridor and into the main bedroom, another fireball to get the bed well alight. As she returned to the stairs she heard the first shouts from neighbours. Normally they’d continue shouting and waiting for the militia turn up and Kittara would be long gone by then.

“Militia on the way, just one vehicle.” Chlo told her.

One vehicle ! For an expensive area like this. Kittara thought the locals weren’t getting much back for the famously high Maran Group taxes. Down stairs and Kittara could definitely hear the sound of a

high pitched siren, but it was still quite a way off. Now for the safe and the file. She picked up the file, tidied the document and put them back in the safe. Locking the door was simple, once slammed shut it locked itself. Then Kittara had a thought.

“Any other large metal objects in the house Chlo ?”

The fire upstairs was taking hold, but Chlo understood her point and began scanning for a second safe, the sort house robbers would go straight to.

“In the kitchen, in the yellow cupboard,” She told Kittara.

Kittara pushed the seats back in front of the safe and set off a fireball in the room. Then it was down the corridor to the back of the house and into the family kitchen. Now she could clearly hear the sound of a police siren and one of the braver neighbours shouting.

“Get your Dog, the Pederman’s might be in trouble.”

Through the kitchen window the largest of the Maran 1 moons was rising, did it have a name ? She delved into her link with Chlo and came up with Jasar. Quite a pretty name for a people who called their home world Maran 1 and gave numbers to towns, it must have been a carry-over from an earlier age. Jasar for some reason reflected a blood red light, something to do with the high magnetite content. The red illumination seemed to suit the occasion.

“Found it.” She told Chlo.

Inside a large yellow cupboard half filled with what was obviously the families best dinner ware was a safe, a big fuck me safe, that yelled to be opened and no self-respecting robber could have missed. Kittara put her palm on the safe and let Chlo work her magic, she heard the click as the first ward opened.

“Come out, we can see you in there !”

The police were lying, Kittara was almost inside the yellow cupboard and the growing fire in the upstairs rooms would have been getting everyone’s attention. The second ward clicked open just as the militia fired three blaster shots blindly down the hall. Kittara set off a fireball near the front door and heard a howl as one of the militia was slightly singed by it.

“It’s open.” Said Chlo.

Kittara pulled the plates onto the floor, probably the ones the family had used for holidays and pulled open the safe.

“Fuck ! That is a lot of money.” She commented.

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

“Enough to buy several planets, the Empire looks after its own.” He’d told her.

Her old raider mentality was still there and the safe was full of Imperial credits, the big ones, each worth ten thousand credits. There was enough money in the safe to buy half of Maran 1, shit you could have bought all of Ixir, maybe twice over.

“I need a fire proof sack.” She told Chlo.

There was no argument, Kittara was a member of the Guard on a mission and as her hand shimmered, Chlo filled it with a large fire proof sack. Kittara had half of the money in the sack when Chlo reported the militia were about to reinforced by the Maran army, by two flyers full of their elite anti-terrorist troops. It was about to get very heavy for such an expensive and quiet area.

“You need to be gone in five minutes.” Chlo told her.

The rest of the money went into the sack and she swung it over her shoulder, even just by weight it was a lot of money. She looked around the room and sent a fireball to the fire end of the kitchen and felt the heat from it prickle her skin. She knew how much her body could take, so the next fireball she sent to just in front of her, it exploded destroying most of the yellow cupboard and her uniform.

As she heard the first of the elite troops enter the house she set off a huge white hot fireball, almost in her own arms. As the heavily armed Maran trooper came into the kitchen he saw a young naked girl, bathed in flames, apparently relishing it. He backed away and leapt through the window as Kittara approached him. With her mission accomplished Kittara returned to her quarters in the Imperial palace, still carrying her sack of money.

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Herusher had seen a lot of battles, he'd heard of massed armies fighting from static positions, both sides seemingly stuck in a deadlock for year after year, but he'd never seen it until now. This end of the cavern system was huge, perhaps over a mile wide, the roof only held up by a few solid pillars of rock.

"I know what you're thinking." Said a man in uniform.

"Why not blow up the cavern, or block up the portal ? It's all been tried and it never works. The bastards just dig their way up somewhere else and the problem moves to a new part of the city." They all turned to look at the middle aged soldier, as he surveyed them with a knowing grin on his face.

"Sorry. I know you've come to help. I'm Milligan and I'm the leader of the Annil army, or what's left of it."

Herusher looked at the portal that was almost half a mile away and he could see a constant boiling mass of creatures pouring out of it, the Dracc ? On the Annil side there had to be at least a quarter of a million troops, armed with everything from hand axes to high powered energy weapons, some hiding behind the natural rock protection of the cavern, but most dug into water logged trenches cut into the floor of the cavern.

"How did the war end up like this ?" Herusher asked.

There was lighting in the cavern, but the constant flares from weapons made it unnecessary. How did the Dracc look ? Like the denizens of hell sent to devour men, all dark green carapaces, with lots of teeth and claws to tear and bite. Herusher had seen the chaos creatures that inhabited the land beyond gateway, but these looked like weaker imitations.

"They aren't that tough," said Milligan, "they just don't stop coming. As long as the men kept under cover the losses on our side were sustainable, but then the big one came through."

There was another shout from the men in the forward trench as one of their colleagues was pulled from relative safety and partly devoured by the horde. The answering fire killed dozens of the Dracc, but more kept pouring through the portal. No one was collecting bodies from either side and Herusher could now understand why the entire cavern stank of death.

"The lesser ones seem to be trying to reach it, maybe it's one of their chiefs ?" Said Milligan.

Behind the portal were a series of caves leading off the main cavern and from one came the sound of an animal in pain, a large animal.

"We've tried to kill it, but it's a tough brute. If we attack it the others go crazy, none of our troops ever get back alive."

"What is their world like ? On the other side of the portal ?" Asked Alyz.

Milligan looked at her with a strange intensity that all of them had seen before, on the faces of troops asked to achieve far too much with scant resources.

"We don't know," said Milligan, "several squads have gone through, but no one has lived long enough to tell us about the other side."

Alyz placed her hand on his shoulder.

“There was Yosep,” he continued, “tough bastard from Ixir, he came back. His face was burned black, his clothing in cinders. He died in agony from the burns a few days later, still screaming ‘They come from hell’ at everyone.”

Herusher could see it was time to get on with the job they’d come to do.

“So we tackle the portal another day,” he said, “for now I want you all to keep the flow from the portal down while Alyz and I have a good look at this big one.”

Herusher positioned the Guard amongst the defenders and had them start to pour withering fire at the Dracc. Strangely for creature ‘from hell’ they seemed to be destroyed quite easily by the fireballs sent by The Damned.

“Ready?” Herusher asked Alyz.

She nodded at him and they both headed over the top of the trenches and towards the portal. As the fireballs took their toll, the flow of green insect like Dracc began to diminish, until the creatures started to make a screeching sound as Herusher headed towards the cave where, the big one was said to be. Then the seemingly endless swarm made renewed efforts to come through the portal and follow them to the cave.

“I’ll try disruption.” Said Alyz.

In her mind she found a favourite switch and it seemed that a twist in reality shot out of her body, bending even light as it headed towards the portal, where it seemed to suck everything around it into itself. Thousands of the creatures were pulled into a disruption vortex, where the very fabric of their molecules were crushed and pushed into compounds that no chemist would recognise. When the spell ended very few of the creatures were left alive and those that were appeared hideously mutilated.

“Now’s our chance.” Shouted Alyz.

There was little light at the back of the cave, but they only had to follow the trail of decaying body parts and dropped weapons to find the creature they sought. It was big, a good fifty feet long, with at least a dozen pair of legs and at least a hundred arms that ended in nasty nipping, razor sharp claws. It only had one head, which almost disappointed Herusher. From the damage the creature had done, the sheer number of dead soldiers they’d stepped over, he had thought it must have at least four sets of jaws.

“It has armour.” Said Herusher.

This was no mindless beast, around its middle there was a complex set of metal plates and straps. Now most of it hung useless from cut straps and buckled metal, but it was clear the creature had once possessed a full set of body armour. As it noticed them it started a loud screeching, which was answered by the fresh horde of creatures that started to pour through the portal. Without saying a word Alyz walked back down the cave and started hurling fireball spells at the approaching avalanche of angry Dracc.

“So my beauty,” said Herusher, “let’s see what your insides look like.”

He had two swords on his back, he chose his oldest weapon, a Nurigen that had been through the last switch.

“The multiverse won’t know what to make of it,” Nurigen had told him, “as the multiverse doesn’t know how to age it, or corrode it, it should be indestructible.”

Now was the time to test that. Herusher held the blade firmly and swung hard at the creature’s side. It was almost too easy, the flesh parted like butter, the grey ichor from inside pouring out and soaking his feet, almost boiling them in the creature’s hot bodily fluid. So the Dracc were warm blooded, he thought Chlo would be interested in that. Another blow from the Nurigen and the

creature was dead, the screeching ended. With the creature dead the flow of Dracc from the portal eased and Alyz was able to come back to Herusher.

“That was so easy,” he told her, “a good force here could keep them under control.”

Alyz cut some of the metal armour pieces from the creature, but none of them had any inscriptions on them, the metal work looked very crude.

“Now the hard bit,” said Alyz, “and I only brought one clean uniform.”

Where the creature's head started was unclear, it seemed to grow straight out of the front of its body with no neck in between. Alyz used a demon blade to hack just behind the bulge of the Dracc's skull and even more of the hot grey fluid drenched the floor.

“Fuck ! They bleed a lot.” She commented.

A few more hacks and the giant head, at least four feet across, began to droop forward. Another five hacks and it fell to the ground. Alyz looked at her wet, messy prize and realised cutting it off the creature wasn't the end of her problems.

“Do you think Sumahn-Nerish will come here to look at it ?” She asked Herusher.

They both sat on the rocks and laughed at the sheer difficulty of getting the huge head, that must have weighed half a ton, back to through the cavern. Without Chlo to move heavy objects they were left with strong backs to move everything. Alyz was capable of dragging it, but it wouldn't resemble a Dracc much by the time it had been bumped over a mile of cavern floor. Just then about five of the Guard came to see what had become of them.

“Good,” said Herusher, “more strong backs. I'm sure that between us we can get this back to Sumahn. And don't forget to collect all the pieces of armour.”

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Luri felt awkward, which was such a rare feeling for her, that she was taking time to analyse it.

“No ! She has to have free will.” Sikush was saying to Tomma-Goran.

They had been selected for this guard duty, more of the ‘volunteering’ they were getting used to. It was known to both of them that these jaunts with Sikush were off the record, even Chlo said very little about them when they saw her.

“Let's go to see the God of the Lost City.” Sikush had said.

Seeing a two hundred foot deity, a dusty deity at that, in a stasis field in a rarely used part of the Imperial store was one thing. A living deity crouched down in conversation with The Chaln  was quite another.

“Delmus !”, she said over their private link, “get closer. Listen to what they're saying.”

Why should she feel awkward ? They'd been brought by Sikush. Yet she was right in front of the pair of them and didn't feel like moving closer. Delmus was behind them, he could move closer without being conspicuous. Besides Sikush and the deity seemed to be completely ignoring their presence.

“Of course I will help.” Said Tomma-Goran.

Good Delmus was now close enough to hear everything and relay it to her. Of course Chlo would know what they were doing, but was that a problem ?

“Thank you,” said Sikush, “if she dies it would..... complicate matters.”

Then Tomma-Goran lifted his great horned head and looked straight at Delmus.

“And what of these two ?” He asked Sikush.

Was Sikush laughing ? Yes, as he turned to her, he had a smirk on his face.

“Their lives will never be the same again.” He said.

Then Sikush turned back to the Great Deity and the conversation continued, luckily none of it was in any language she didn't know.

“So, you intend to bring Estrid into this ?” Asked the deity.

“I don’t see how it can be done without her.”

Luri was surprised at the deference the deity was showing to Sikush and not for the first time she wondered at the true nature of the eternal, who was also her friend and frequent lover. True the creature had to crouch to converse with a being less than a tenth of its size, but there was something about its attitude. Fear ? No, she’d have felt that, been drawn to it, almost by reflex. This was a deep respect and affection.

“They won’t forgive you,” said Tomma-Goran, “they will try to punish you.”

“Protect Mardoun for me. I can handle them.”

“It won’t be just them. All your other enemies will go after Estrid.” Said the Deity.

“Let them, it will draw them out into the open. Perhaps they will even try to turn my people, but The Damned will prove a hard task for them to corrupt.”

There was no mistaking it now, Tomma-Goran the most ancient deity was concerned about Sikush, she could feel it.

“Estrid may not even help you ?” Said the deity.

“She will probably look upon me with disgust, but many of her emotions will be childlike. Let her build bonds with a mother figure, then her loyalties will be with us.”

The deity chuckled and the whole room shook, several packing cases fell off dusty shelves.

“Us ! I was never here, we never had this conversation.”

The deity straightened itself out and performed a soundless cat stretch between the rows of stored boxes.

“I will protect Mardoun for you,” it said, “I just hope you know what you’re doing.”

Then there was a vortex in the air, like a tornado with no sensation of movement and the great deity was gone. Sikush turned towards Luri.

“Now you’re both going to be busy.”

“You freed him !,” said Luri, “won’t he try to rebuild his city ?”

Sikush sat himself on one of the fallen packing cases, while Chlo appeared and began to bring order back to the forbidden section of the Imperial store.

“No. He won’t do that,” said Sikush, “that’s a complete myth, he has no interest in rebuilding that awful place.”

He stood as Chlo produced chairs for them to sit on and moved the packing case back to the shelf, where it had lain for countless billions of years.

“Sit.” He said to them both.

She sat, still feeling awkward, while Delmus threw himself into the chair. They’d both seen a lot since being converted into The Damned, but a living deity was something new.

“You will both be my sword arm,” said Sikush, “I will send you both to parts of the multiverse you never knew existed, usually off the record and with no support. I’m sure you’ll both enjoy that.”

Luri stopped feeling awkward, the prospect of a few dangerous missions put her back in her comfort zone. Delmus just sat in the chair grinning, before asking.

“Who is Mardoun ?”

Sikush looked slowly at them both, before answering.

“Yes. There is a lot you will need to know to make a success of your missions. So, I have a lot to tell you both.”

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The girl didn't look out of place in the slums of Ixir, short, slight of build, dressed in plain clothing that had seen better days. The black skin was rare, but few got a look under the hood to notice it. She had a rough memory of where she needed to go, but it had been a long time ago.

"We don't have any more food, try tomorrow."

In her memory she saw the face of the woman as she turned the families away, knowing many might not make it until they found a place that did have food, might have children who wouldn't see tomorrow. At the time it hadn't worried her, none of it. The look of anguish on the woman's face, the cries of the starving children, none of it. How long ago had it been ?

"Where are you hurrying to pretty ?"

She looked like she belonged in the slums, but that was no guarantee she was free to go where she pleased. This was the worst part of the slums, which for Ixir was saying something. Already she'd been propositioned twice, tired looking faces wanting a quick fuck in a grubby alley. On those occasions a "fuck off" and a fast pace had sufficed, but this character had blocked her path.

"Leave me alone." She hissed.

"Just a bit of fun pretty, just a suck, then you can go on your way."

She could smell stale urine on his clothes and something else ? The smell that all drug addicts seem to get, like mould, the musty smell of mildew. To her left was a solid wall with no exits, to her right was a drop to a street below. When had she climbed up to this walkway ? In her head she was trying to find the place she remembered, but now she had no idea where she was.

"Fuck off asshole." She said.

The man moved towards her, the meeting of bodies unavoidable. She moved closer to him and saw the look of victory on his face, then her knife entered his body. She felt it nick his lower rib, then turn up towards his heart. There was blood, lots of hot free flowing blood. Later the stickiness would come, but now it was hot and trying to cover her hands. She hadn't wanted to arrive there with blood on her hands.

"You....." The man tried to speak.

Deeper with the knife into the heart, now twist it around, make the kill quick. She kissed the man gently on his cheek and as she felt him die she whispered in his ear.

"I told you to fuck off."

Not much noise, but no one in Ixir would have been concerned at the death of a resident of the slums. I just meant one less person to compete with for a meal, one less person looking for a fuck or a fumble. As the body fell to the walkway she saw her hands were covered in blood. The girl cut the man's jacket off him and used large pieces of it to clean her hands. Now they stank of sweat and piss, but most of the blood was gone. Out of old habit she went through his pockets, even fumbled through the sweaty groin area for any hidden money. Success ! A small pouch inside what was left of his underwear and inside a few local coins, enough to keep existence going for two more days.

"You won't be needing these." She said.

The knife cleaned, it went back to the leather sheaf inside her blouse, then she was off again, looking for landmarks she might recognise. Then down the ladder at the end of the walkway and a small child leaning against a bin, in full sight. Children of that age were a commodity here, or a trap, so she melted away down another alley.

"Lost dear ?"

A face with too much makeup, the smell of cheap scent trying to cover the smell of stale cum. She went to go by the prostitute, but then brought out the few coins she'd just acquired.

"The place where they feed people ? Can you take me."

The prostitute looked hungrily at the coins and nodded, leading the girl through a warren of stinking lanes and alleys. Past a group of men kicking another on the ground, who looked to have been dead for some time, past a woman negotiating the sale of her daughter.

“Twelve years old and still a virgin.”

Then they were in a street, a proper street, that looked cleaner than most, with the prostitute pointing at a building and holding out her hand, palm upward. Yes this was the place, the girl recognised the sign on the building. There were many religions on Ixir, many temples. Much of the trouble was the temples telling the people to multiply. Soon there wouldn't be room to lie down, let alone fuck !

“Here.”

The girl gave her the coins and watched her melt silently back into the surrounding alleys. Could she find her way out of here ? Perhaps not, but she still had something to do. She entered the building, ignoring the group of beggars waiting just inside the door.

“Where are you going ?”

Of course there had to be guards, even the Gods needed guards on Ixir to protect their belongings. The girl gave a detailed description of the woman she'd come to see, right down to the small crescent scar just below her left eye.

“That was my mother.”

She hadn't heard the woman approach, which gave her a shock, she had to keep her focus. Looking at the woman she could see a younger version of the woman in her memory. The girl had no love of any religion, but the servants of the various religions had a reputation for honesty.

“Are you hurt.”

She looked down and saw there was still blood on her hands and down the front of her skirt.

“It's not mine.”

The woman simply nodded, life on Ixir was tough and even clerics weren't unused to the sight of blood.

“Follow me.”

The girl followed her along clean corridors, until they came to a simple room with a bed, a few pieces of furniture and a sink in one corner. The woman's room ?

“You can wash while we talk.”

The girl removed the heavy back pack she was wearing and placed it on the floor, before filling the sink and using a lump of hard soap to wash her hands.

“My mother died some years ago, did you know her well ?”

“No. I only saw her once. She had to turn away several hungry families, some with young children.”

The woman looked straight at her, almost looking into her.

“And that moved you ?”

“No. Not then.”

“But now it moves you ?”

What the hell did this cleric want from her ? Why the questions about feelings ?

Kittara looked at the woman in the religious garb in front of her and saw her, really saw her. It wasn't a young girl, but an elderly woman. Her mother must have worked here a long time ago, might have died years before.

“When I was first here I wasn't like this.”

Kittara ran her hands over her body as though pointing out the obvious.

"I was here hunting a man who had to die. I still have no idea why he had to die, but I was paid a lot of money to make sure he didn't see another morning. At the time I didn't give a fuck about the starving people here, would have probably stolen their last few coins, but now it does worry me. I don't know why."

Kittara opened the backpack and dropped it at the woman's feet, some of the money from Tomas Pederman falling out at her feet.

"It's for you." Said Kittara.

All of this was supposed to be off the record, she was trusting Chlo that anything happening after being taken out of the common channel was private. Kittara was hoping Chlo could be trusted on such things, even if it did mean an unpleasant journey back out of the slums.

"Is it clean?" The woman asked.

Kittara blinked and pondered the question. There was no blood on it, but Pederman had hardly earned it by honest toil. She'd seen the contents of the file and he definitely came down well inside 'bad guy' territory. Why were religious types bothered by these things.

"I don't think the man it came from earned it honestly, but he'd dead now."

"Was that his blood on your hands."

Kittara shook her head.

"Did he deserve to die."

Again with the strange questions, did anyone? Kittara thought about it and decided to be honest.

"No more than you or I really. If you're asking if the multiverse was improved by his death? I'd have to say yes, but by a very tiny amount. You can at least put the money to good use."

The elderly woman picked up one pack of Imperial credit notes, her hand shaking.

"It would have to be spent slowly," she said, "we can't be seen to be rich. We'll turn less people away, buy better food. I can give some to our other temples on Ixir. Is that alright?"

Kittara was happy, the woman was going to accept the money.

"Imperial credits are valid forever," Kittara said, "Take as long as you like spending them."

She helped the woman stack the money in a plain cupboard by her bed. Then as she turned to leave the woman asked her a question.

"Can I know your name?"

Kittara was shocked herself by reply, as it seemed to come from deep inside her, a part of her locked away.

"My name is Mardoun." She said.