

Mendera Temple

Chapter 23 - Ripples

“On the day the crawling chaos was imprisoned, it is rumoured that even the gods wept. For that was the day the multiverse lost its innocence.” – Lurisiana-Goran

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Kittara walked through the crowds, arm in arm with Sventa. They both loved the celebrations for the start of the 16th age of the Temple. The people of Mendera were used to seeing a dark angel and a member of The Damned going everywhere together, they didn't look twice. But the tourists and clerics who'd come for the great celebration were different. They were shocked to see a dark angel living in the holy city and some had even followed them around. Celebrity had its price though and after days with no privacy and little sleep, they'd decided to have a night at home. Estrid had disappeared, gone to find an obscure location to sleep, hoping never to be awakened. Kittara and Sventa now had the house to themselves. They walked along pilgrims walk and through the back door Chlo had added to the house. Of course it was strictly an unapproved change to a cherished building, but being the leader of the Guard Elite had its privileges.

“Do we invite anyone over, or is it just us tonight ?” Asked Sventa.

“Chlo and Hol I think. Sikush I'll see in the morning.”

Kittara hadn't changed. Sventa though now had pure white hair, it seemed no one could escape the wastes of eternity completely unscathed. Not that her appearance seemed to stop her having a steady stream of eager lovers. Chlo accepted the invitation immediately, but then she did have an almost infinite number of selves to choose from.

“I hope she comes as herself, I hate talking to copies.” Said Sventa.

“Don't you dare say that to her, or we'll lose the back door.”

Hol put a rather curt reply on the common channel, moaning about late invites and having to cancel other plans, but she accepted.

“So she still has no idea ?” Asked Sventa.

“No. Chlo has always known of course, but Hol would have spent the last age of the temple looking sad and I didn't want that. A journey to the 7th rift and she can't come, she'll be so angry.”

They both laughed, but they knew that Hol was going to be quite disturbed by what she would learn over dinner. Kittara had arranged for Mo to know she wasn't going to see him again, but as to telling him why.... As with Delmus, if it was something that could be killed or stolen they'd be at her side, but this was something they'd never understand.

“I'm going to change.” Said Sventa.

The dark angel went up to her room, but Kittara just shimmered and she was in a clingy black dress, the sort that will never go out of fashion while women want to show off every perfect curve. She wasn't worried about the evening being perfect, there had been lots of perfect nights in her house, she just wanted to relax with friends. The main thought on her mind was how to tell Hol that she'd never see her again. Going to her death she'd come to terms with long ago, but how was she going to explain it to Hol ?

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The changes brought on by the movement in the balance had generally been positive, but they had been unpredictable. A few long standing dictatorships had fallen, a few desert planets had become lush. On the whole the rifts had benefited from the rebalance and had become far wetter and more

fertile. But there is always a loser and a huge fresh water lake had gradually encroached on Tandalla. In the end the population had admitted defeat and moved the town about three miles to the west. The entire 5th rift had lost its grey and dry reputation and had become a rich and fertile land. The name of Tandalla had shifted over the course of the 15th age and when Silky arrived there, it was called Dix Tandal, derived from the dredger for New Tandalla.

Silky didn't enjoy being used as a messenger, but Kittara had done her a huge number of favours. More importantly in the motivation of a chaos invoker, Kittara also scared her, scared her quite a bit. Silky had several layers of robes, the 5th rift was much cooler than it once was, plus the thick material of the hood hid her features. Silky wasn't scared of any creature she was likely to find in Dix Tandal, but a converted chaos creature walking the streets might cause a panic. Mo had built a plantation style home that reached almost to the great lake. Of course Silky could have simply moved herself to Mo's bedroom and left the note, but Kittara had been precise in her instructions.

"Treat him with respect Silky, go to his door and say you come with an important message."

Oh how she ached to read the sealed note in her pocket. After all Kittara would never know. But Silky had been allowed to watch Kittara extract information from enemies of the empire, she'd seen how long Kittara had kept some of them alive, long after they were pleading for death. No, she wasn't going to read the note. She used the hilt of her dagger to bang on the heavy wooden doors and a pretty servant girl opened them.

"Is this the home of Mozim ?" Asked Silky.

The girl seemed a little concerned by the stranger at the door and two heavily armed guards seemed to appear from nowhere.

"Lord D'Ixir you mean ? The master is at home, but rarely sees anyone." The girl said.

Silky cursed herself for such a simple breach of etiquette; after all, her life in Leng had been spent avoiding the pitfalls of court etiquette.

"Yes of course, Lord D'Ixir. I bring a message from a friend of his in Mendera. The matter is quite urgent."

"I can take the message to him."

"My orders are to deliver it to him in person."

She was shown through the entrance hall and into a comfortable reception room. The usual offers were made of food and drink, Silky accepting the offer of a glass of local wine. It was all very civilised, but the guards had now become four and although keeping a respectful distance, they were watching her intently. Silky had almost finished the excellent wine, when the door crashed open and Mo came charging in.

"I don't care what it is, the answer is no !"

Silky had never understood what Kittara saw in Mo. His legs looked too long for his body and he walked with a constant limp. As for the bloodlines in his ancestry ! Silky could sense several demon lines in there and she wasn't keen on any of them.

"I told Sikush no once," shouted Mo, "and my answer is still no. My days of doing errands for the empire are over."

She let him blow out his anger before replying.

"I have a letter from Kittara, she instructs me to wait for a reply, if there is one."

He looked surprised and looked past her, as if expecting Kittara to appear. He then led her to a small private study and took the note from her. Three pages of tiny writing Silky noticed as he pulled the pages from the sealed pouch. Tiny writing, but neat and not in Menderan, but the old language of Ixir. She sat in a chair, watching Mo pace as he read the first page.

“Do you know the contents of this letter ?” He asked

“No.”

When he got to the end of the letter he collapsed onto the floor and began to weep. Not the quiet weeping she’d seen men do, but the loud and sustained weeping of profound sorrow. Silky didn’t know whether to call a servant, but she did what she imagined Kittara would have done. Silky knelt on the floor next to him and put her arms around his rather bony shoulders. She held him for quite some time, while he wept.

“I can take a reply to her, if you want me to.” She said.

Mo turned towards her and Silky felt afraid. What was Kittara going to do that could cause such pain to her friend ?

“Just tell her,” said Mo, “that I’ll make sure the bastard brings her back again.”

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By halfway through dinner the small and intimate gathering had grown to quite a crowd. An odd mixture of people in military uniforms and party clothes, interspersed with creatures that weren’t easy to pigeonhole.

“Good idea to send Sventa for me.” Said Alyz.

She hadn’t sent Sventa. As far as Kittara knew, her old friend was supervising food deliveries to the 1st rift. She’d hoped to avoid telling a roomful of people about where she was going, that would make it very awkward and uncomfortable.

“Just an impromptu gathering for the celebrations.” Said Kittara.

There were two Kivar in her house and she didn’t recognise either of them, Chlo seemed to be allowing access to her home to anyone. In a way the crowd would make it easier, she’d simply avoid saying anything and enjoy the night.

“I need to visit the flame later Alyz, will you sit vigil with me ?”

Alyz seemed surprised, but she accepted without comment. She’d already asked Hol, who had instantly agreed. Keeping vigil with someone had been a common custom in the early days of The Damned, but it seemed to have fallen out of fashion.

“Who are the Kivar ?” Asked Alyz.

“Friends of Chlo’s I think.”

Sventa seemed to have been busy, Delmus had obviously been brought all the way from Annill and he was giving a pretty Ventellan the full charm offensive. Kittara smiled at him and briefly touched his arm as she walked out into the garden. It was nice to see everyone, but it wasn’t making things any easier. The garden was filling up and Chlo was there, the original, the young version who always looked slightly lost.

“Thank you for filling my house Chlo.”

“I can’t take all the credit, Sventa has been combing the rifts for your old friends.”

For a moment Kittara wondered if Neosto was going to appear, but even Sventa knew where to draw the line, she hoped.

“So now there can be no after dinner announcement.” Said Kittara.

“You can tell your close friends at the vigil. May I join you at the flame ?”

Kittara couldn’t remember Chlo ever visiting the flame room, but there was no reason why she shouldn’t.

“Yes, that would be nice Chlo. I think Delmus is going to be busy with the pretty Ventellan, but I’ll ask Jen to join us.”

“I’m sure Luri would have sat vigil with you, if she hadn’t.....”

Kittara kissed Chlo on the cheek, she always looked so vulnerable in her original form.

"I saw Estrid before she went to sleep," said Kittara, "I met her in Uah Trin, when she came to thank them for their help and give them their final instructions."

"That sounds ominous."

"Don't worry Chlo, nothing to bother the empire, but the Uah are going to have a few very busy millennia. She mentioned that Luri has taken the name Lurisiana-Goran as her deity name."

"Another lost god for the 1st rift to write songs about."

Kittara smiled, remembering what Estrid had said about the new dark goddess.

"I'm not so sure about the lost Chlo. From what Estrid said, I think Deity or not, Delmus hasn't seen the last of Luri."

Her house was going to Sventa, along with her extensive weapon store. There were no long and drawn out legal formalities on Mendera. Chlo knew who was to inherit her possessions and she trusted Chlo to make sure it happened. The crowd in the garden were so varied and bohemian that they hardly flinched when a flaming portal opened in the garden and Silky stepped out.

"I still don't like her." said Chlo.

"She has her uses Chlo."

Silky looked around at the crowd and then spotted Kittara and came over to her.

"Quite a small and intimate dinner." She said.

"Sventa had other ideas. Did you find him?"

Silky handed her a piece of paper, folded in two and sealed with old fashioned wax.

"Yes, he was very upset by your letter. After he calmed down and stopped raving about what a bastard The Chaln  is, he wrote this."

Kittara opened the note and it had just two lines of writing on it. Written in old Ixir slum speak, Kittara thought that she and Mo were probably the last two people who could read it.

'No, I don't understand and never will.

I'll make the bastard bring you back again.'

She laughed and the note pleased her. Not because Mo was so upset, but because he'd keep his promise and that meant moving to the 1st rift to survive the next switch.

"He was so upset Kittara," said Silky, "where are you going?"

"Silky, I am going to fight a battle I can't survive. A battle that was won a very long time ago."

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Sikush was due to attend yet another council meeting that morning, the empire had grown in power and influence, but that meant yet more meetings. The Maran Group had gone. Internal strife had broken the group apart and where there was once the Maran Group, there was now a feuding group of nine independent systems, all member of the empire and all wanting to sit in the core council. The core of the empire was now over a hundred planets, groups, or affiliated system and it was a nightmare to rule. He walked across his favourite veranda and out towards the red gardens, there were some blooms he really wanted to see. Kittara was standing beneath the largest Norron tree outside of the rifts, the bright red leaves hanging over her face.

"Did you tell them?" He asked.

She walked towards him and hugged him, digging her nails into the skin of his neck.

"They sat with me, keeping vigil while I hovered next to the flame. I owed them the truth."

He kissed her and they stood for several minutes, just looking at each other.

"I think Mo will make himself an annoyance," said Kittara, "promise me you'll treat him kindly."

"I will, Sveta seems to think he'll be important one day. But I like Mo anyway and I'll make sure he's safe when the next switch occurs. Of course he may have been murdered by a jilted lover by then."

"I don't expect you to deal with jilted lovers."

They laughed, but she had to go. There was no set time, but the longer she left it, the harder it would be to go.

"Are you still mine?" He asked.

"Always."

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Kittara knew where to go, the dreams had been showing her all her life. She moved her reality to the well and concentrated. It was an ideal time to be there, just after dawn. There were no families with kids to gawp at her odd clothes and break her focus. She's decided to dress as a Lummel priest, it felt appropriate. She watched the sun rise in front of her and remembered the dreams about the abandoned village on the other side of the rift gate. The dream had been pointing at the place, the power within the darkness had given her the time. She looked around, turning herself completely around to take a last long look at Mendera City. The sentinel temple dedicated to Estrid has lost some of its brand new shine, but it was still an impressive looking building. There would never be a temple to Luri on Mendera, but there would be many on other worlds. The thought of Luri being worshipped amused her as she took a last look at the city she thought of as home.

"Farewell." She said.

She felt for the well and used it to move to the village, then the darkness within her pulled at the heart of reality and shifted her back through time, to a moment that should have been impossible to reach because it was many switches ago. Chlo had no memory of past switches, they were wiped from existence completely, yet Kittara found herself stood on the 1st rift before it became the 1st rift. Then it was just another world among other dark worlds, nothing made it special, apart from the shrine she needed to reach.

There was no village then, just a path worn by creatures moving from the hills to the banks of the great river. There was nothing in her head now, not the slightest transmission from anywhere to anyone. The path became more defined, one day it would be the main road to the City of the Lost God, but now it was just a road for wild creatures. A pair of eyes looked out from behind a bush, but nothing came to attack her. A slight hill and she was where the city gates would stand one day and she could almost follow the road from memory, except that the shrine of the dark angel wouldn't be built for a very long time.

"It has to be here." She muttered.

Modern temples were built over old religious sites. They built over and claimed the site as theirs, often even taking over sacred dates. It has gone on since the first shaman killed his rival and stole his collection of bones and perhaps even longer. The shrine of the dark angel had been built over a chapel to one of the great demon gods. That chapel in turn had been where a sacred grove had once stood. So it went on, back through time until all that had been at the point was a small amount of real power. Kittara sensed the residue and it was still there, waiting to be taped for good or ill. Once she used the power there was no going back, it meant her death. Others might have cursed fate, but Kittara had known much pleasure in her life and she knew that one day he'd bring her back, he had to.

Kittara felt for the right words in her mind and spoke a language that was dead before the rifts were born. She felt herself falling and then the heat hit her, as she found herself stood on the red hot sands of what was to become the 7th rift. At first everything looked strange, the images in front of

her kept breaking up. She knew she was watching other versions of herself, other timelines. Then she realised that not some, but all the timelines were trying to get into her head at once.

“The dream child, the dream.”

The creature from old Leng was in her head and she remembered the awful recurring dream of the rifts that had blighted her childhood. That was her timeline, she just needed to focus on it, or she'd be fractured and split across eternity. Had all version of herself gone through this for eternity ? She knew it was true, but she admired the persistence of her other selves. The dunes in front of her became the all too familiar hot glowing rocks of her dream, but this was no dream. The heat was real the holy warriors massed for an attack were real and Sikush was real.

“Now you know it was no dream.”

She had to focus hard to hear his words in her head, but there was no mistaking it was him. He was riding a strange six legged beast with horns, but it was Sikush. The holy warriors looked different to the ones in the pictures in the temple, but she instinctively knew they were relying on her to win the day. Supposing she failed, would the crawling chaos rule for eternity ? Surely not every version of her in every switch could win. Maybe each just had to add their stone to the pool and move the ripple on as best they could ? Sikush was in her head again.

“You have more power than even Mardoun managed to acquire. You are the one who locks him away for eternity.”

At last nothing was shifting around in her vision; she was firmly focused on the battle that was meant for her. Countless versions of herself had fought and would fight the crawling chaos, but she shut her mind to that thought.

“It's just another fight I have to win.” She thought.

In a fair multiverse she'd have been given time to think about tactics, feel out the strengths and weaknesses of the holy warriors, but the multiverse has never been fair. She'd barely become used to the searing heat, when the chaos creatures began to pour out of their holes in the ground. The dream had been bad enough but it lacked clarity. Now she could see millions of distorted abominations of life, coming towards her and the holy warriors. Some looked like giant molluscs, moving at a surprising speed on some kind of giant gelatinous foot. Others resembled spiders, often with hundreds of legs. All of them were bright red and seemed unbothered by the burning heat that hit Kittara like opening a furnace door.

Kittara created a dozen tears of the damned, lined them up in front of her face, let them build until each became capable of almost unimaginable destruction. Then she let them fly, each hitting an area thick with the creatures and turning tens of thousands to nothing but red dust. The holy warriors began to attack too and the usual chaos of battle ensued. One powerful spell missed its target and she felt freezing cold down her left side, she saw a dozen of the warriors on her side die from the spells of their own sorcerers. It was how battle always was and always would be.

None of it affected Kittara; she pushed the darkness out in front of her, as she'd done at the battle for Annill. This time though there were no allies in front of her, just millions of the abominations. The dark mist flowed from her and every creature it touched withered and died, its essence adding to her strength. Out the mist went, covering miles of dusty red dunes, seeping into the ground and destroying the monsters of chaos before they reached the surface. Kittara knew it wasn't going to be that easy though, destroying the first wave would mean that he would come for her. The ground beneath her erupted and something large tried to grab hold of her. Not him yet, just more chaos creatures, but these were much larger and appeared to be immune to the darkness she projected. Instead of avoiding the creatures, Kittara walked between them, touching them and using the curse

of chaos against them. Everywhere she touched a malign spot was formed, like a malignant tumour spreading across their bodies. Kittara had learned much during her very long life and she had a few surprises for the creatures of chaos, she could wield their weapons. They were running from her now. Huge creatures the size of temples, running on their malformed legs, trying to get away from the terrifying creature of darkness who'd invaded their realm. The holy warriors were dying; they lacked her immunity to the hideous transformation wrought by the touch of chaos. Some had to survive; they were needed to close the prison once he was weakened enough. She felt for Sikush in her head and asked him how many holy warriors were needed.

"I have reserves," he said, "don't worry about them, just weaken him enough."

She ignored the death and destruction around her and walked towards where she felt him, felt him deep beneath the ground. So far he'd ignored her, there had been no voice in her head, but she knew that would come. The holy warriors were leading a team of the huge six legged creatures, of the type Sikush was riding. There were at least eight of them, pulling a vast device on a wooden platform. It was clean and white now; the charring and dents had yet to happen. It was the prison that was buried deep below the temple on Mendera, or would be buried.

"I won't fail you." She said.

"I know." Sikush replied.

He was coming; she could feel him rising up through the ground. Strange how she thought of him as a he, the eternal chaos that had ruled the multiverse for so long. It wasn't his turn now though, he needed to be locked in his prison and kept there for eternity. She was alone now, the holy warriors had pulled back and the large chaos creatures had descended back their lairs. He was coming and even his own creatures feared his gaze. Sikush sat on his beast watching her. She knew it wasn't permitted for the emperor to engage in this battle, but she still felt resentment. She had to die, yet he would live for eternity. She briefly wondered why her body was so short and thin and she was thinking as Mardoun. It took an enormous amount of strength and focus to pull her back to being herself again, the presence of the crawling chaos couldn't be allowed to take away her focus. She was quite short, she was quite thin. Many people meeting her for the first time, thought of her as little more than a puny child, but today she had to win.

The ground cracked open and a dark green ooze spilled out. The first long probing arm followed the ooze, then came another dozen long green arms. No hands on the arms, just flattened ends, with several suckers on each. In her dreams he was huge, but nothing could have prepared her for the massive form that pulled itself from the ground. There were no features at all, just a mass of green with dozens of writhing arms, but still there was no challenge in her head. It was so close, towering over her, it seemed to fill the world around her. Kittara used a powerful tear of the damned, exploding it right up against his skin. The explosion sent tons of red dust into the air and a deep crater was created, but he was unharmed. Kittara knew no weapons would harm him, not even the tears. It had to be pure power, the power she'd spent so long acquiring. One of his arms curled back and then hit her, so hard that she was thrown backwards for about twenty yards, cracking a solid block of stone that she slammed into.

"Is this the best The Chaln  has?"

At first she thought her sense of wellbeing was just a state of mind, but she really was unharmed, not even a bruise. The time in the darkness had nearly taken her sanity, the things that had crawled over her..... but she was now almost impervious to normal damage. Kittara stood up and then hovered a few feet above the sweltering rocks, confident that the only person who could kill her was herself.

"I have power," she said, "given freely by those who want rid of you."

Power she needed, raw and lots of it. Kittara raised her arms and let the darkness roll out of her fingers. It hit him and hurt him, she could feel him recoil. More and more she poured forth, until her fingers began to tingle and burn. He was hurt and the offers began.

"Kittara, I am not your enemy. Join with me and rule by my side."

As she heard the words one of his arms pointed at her and the hot air seemed to ripple as something headed towards her. The force was invisible, yet the rocks it passed over crumbled and became dust, a few changing in structure and shape, but all of them fell apart. There was no effect on her, the chaos ripple passed through her and she remained unchanged. Kittara used more power, lifting her arms and pouring it in to him. Long tendrils of black that sparkled, she poured enough darkness into him to kill an entire planet, but he was only slightly hurt. The promises and enticements became more desperate.

"If you win today, you die ! There is no need to end your life here. I will leave you the worlds of people, they will be yours. Join with me, join with me."

"I didn't ask for this power, but I am glad of it. I can use it to put you in your jail."

For a moment she thought her focus had left her again, Estrid seemed to be stood next to her. But no, the goddess really was stood on the baking ground and reaching out to her.

"Take the power, take it all and use it all." Said Estrid.

The power hurt her, there was too much of it and there was too much of the light about it. Kittara hoarded the power, took it into her body, but there was just too much. She put out yellow tendrils and gave some to the holy warriors, healed and rejuvenated them. Nothing for Sikush though, sat on his strange creature. He wasn't fighting today, so she wasn't giving him any of the power. Estrid began to fade, reaching out and giving her another farewell.

"Dream of me Kittara, dream and hold the memory. If a future you is in need, the dream will bring you to me."

The goddess was gone, but her power remained within her. Kittara lifted her left hand and a blinding burst of power leapt from her and hit the crawling chaos. He wasn't just hurt, he began to shrink in size and two of his armed withered and died.

"Kittara ! I know the future, I've helped you, whispered to you while to spent countless nights by the flame. Much of the darkness in you came from me. There can be a different future. Join me, join me !"

She was beyond replying. Her body wasn't designed to hold the powers she was using and it was dying. Her left hand was burnt beyond recognition, so she brought up her right and sent more unimaginable power against him. He shrank even more, screaming her name and begging. Just as she thought she'd done enough, the power Estrid had given her ran out and she crashed face first into the baking soil.

"You're dying Kittara and I still live. You can't kill me, I am forever. Let me heal you and you can still rule with me. I can be merciful Kittara."

Something got her up on her feet, some remnant of her own personality that refused to die until the task was finished. Every cell in her body was dying, but she had enough time if she took a risk. Kittara felt for the place that even he was afraid to look. She looked into the darkness, felt for those who had never wanted her to leave. They responded, trying to draw her back there, but all she wanted was their power. Kittara ripped the power from the darkness, pulling as much into herself as her body could hold and she could hold a lot of darkness. None was shared, the slightest touch of it

would kill the holy warriors. If evil ever really had a meaning, then Kittara had filled herself with the essence of the original evil.

“Now you will learn to fear me !” She screamed.

She used it all on him, watching him shrink, his arms becoming withered and eventually dying. Still more of the darkness she poured into him, until his screams faded and he became just a large shivering mound of darkness. No features now, no trace of his original shape, the darkness covered him and held him tight.

“Nothing wants you,” she said, “light, dark, even those you thought served you. None want the multiverse to revert to chaos.”

Kittara fell onto her knees, but she knew she’d won. The holy warriors were moving forward with his prison and he’d soon be inside it for eternity. Her hands had no fingers, but she used a stump to hold herself up as she watched him being shoved into his prison and the door sealed. Sikush was still watching her and she felt him in her head.

“Are you still mine ?” Kittara asked.

“Always !”

Her body started to break up, but she used pure force of will to survive long enough to see Sikush lead the holy warriors away, taking the prisoner with them. Her last emotion was happiness at not failing him.

“I will bring you back.” Said Sikush.

Kittara died, the dust of her body joining the dust of what was to become the 7th rift. There wasn’t much power left in her body, but what there was drifted out into the hot dust. Many, many millennia later a passing caravan of outcasts would be feel that residue of power and be inspired to build a great city on the very edge of the abyss. They would name that city Leng.

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