

Mendera Temple

Chapter 1 – Awakening

“No one is unworthy, there will be no burning. Do you understand ?”

“I did say I’d bring you here.” Said Kittara

“Yes, but that was over two hundred years ago.” Replied Estrid.

They’d arrived on the shores of Lake Misogon a week or so before, to have a short holiday before the Awakening event itself. Not that Kittara really expected anything to happen, the Uah had a prophecy about the Awakening of their God that had started over a billion years before and like many such prophecies, it was generally taken with a huge pinch of salt. Their name had a huge open vowel in the middle, which had given them the popular name as the ‘startled fishers’, but there was something about the gentle dignity of the tribe that commanded respect.

The Uah were the distant descendants of the Ushong and unlike most of their kind who had moved to various planets of the empire after the destruction of Ushong, the Uah had arrived on Mendera to ask The Chaln  for help regarding their prophecy. He’d offered them stasis for the billion or so years, but they had simply asked for somewhere to wait out the time. They’d been fishermen, so Sikush had given them the shores of Lake Misogon to use as they pleased.

Not that the Uah had ever done much to worry the varied and numerous types of creatures that inhabited the great freshwater lake. From the start they’d preferred to farm the land and keep livestock and the aesthetically pleasing fishing boats seemed purely for show and the occasional trip onto the lake. The present day Uah with their slender bodies and intelligent eyes were completely different to the almost brutish peoples of Ushong they’d evolved from, but it had often been said that Mendera had a strange effect on evolution. The same creatures that would happily frolic with swimmers in the fresh water of Lake Misogon were terrifying, merciless predators in the salt water of the oceans.

“Coming for a swim ?”

Kittara shook her head and watched a naked Estrid leap into the crystal clear waters of the lake. Normally they’d both wear at least something small to cover their intimate areas, but they were over a mile away from Uah Trin, or Place of the Uah in the Menderan translation of the name for their small fishing village. There was no beach, but the day before they’d found a quiet spot screened by tall trees with smooth grass that went right to the edge of the water.

“Beautiful and the sun doesn’t burn here.”

Chlo had appeared, dressed in the formal attire felt appropriate for the occasion.

Kittara waved Estrid in from the water and shimmered into her best uniform of The Damned, with its gold trim and then she started to tighten the various laces and straps, more out of habit than any need to do battle with anyone.

“Is it time ?” Asked Estrid.

“Almost and you can’t go naked.”

Kittara saw the grin on the girls face and the two hundred years had hardly changed her, the look behind the eyes was a little more knowing perhaps, but otherwise she hadn’t changed since being converted into a Menderan. The eyes though, they seemed to know far more than Estrid was letting on and Kittara could understand why the Uah were so fond of her. They’d even offered her a spot of

her choice to build a house and they were famous for lodging objections to anything built within miles of Uah Trin.

“What shall I wear ?”

It never felt strange to Kittara that an intelligent woman over two hundred years old still asked her those kinds of questions. Estrid still lived with her and showed no signs of wanting to move out, but with two Menura cats to look after she was glad of the help.

“Not a clerics robes, anything but a clerics robes.”

Estrid was now officially a cleric of the Sentinel of the Well, although she was still in training, she had already been on several visits to temples of various religions around the empire. The problem was that Kittara still had a few issues with the clerics and more than once had blustered about those; ‘fucking clerics’ with a grinning Estrid sat in the room.

“Will this do ?”

She was dressed in a tiny skirt and tight top that was bound to get a few strange looks from the Uah, but at least it wasn’t a clerics robe.

“Perfect.” Said Kittara and Chlo together.

Kittara held Estrid and moved them to the lakeside in Uah Trin where the ceremony was due to take place, though none of them knew the exact nature of the event. The various news channels had been totally underwhelmed by the event and none of them had asked permission to broadcast the Awakening. Chlo appeared some distance from Kittara, with Alyz and Jen near her. It may have been a sleepy fishing village and a prophecy with a shaky provenance, but The Chaln  was going to be there, so the Guard were attending in significant numbers. Kittara felt strangely protective of the Uah and walked towards Chenad the rather elderly mixture of head man and high priest of the village.

“Is everything ready ?” She asked.

“It’s been ready for over a billion years.” He replied.

It was the sort of reply she’d come to expect from him and he held her hand and then gave Estrid a hug.

“This means so much to us !”

He’d spoken to Estrid and he didn’t seem to want to let go of her hand. All the tribe had been treating the girl like visiting royalty, but people were always strange around Estrid. Sikush arrived with Luri by his side.

“What time is the apocalypse ?” Asked Luri.

It was a typical Luri remark, yet the group of Uah in their ceremonial robes just gave her a pleasant smile and carried on with their preparations. There was no seating, just a few wooden tables full of pre-cooked food for the small number of invited guests.

“How long ?” Asked Estrid.

As if to answer her Chenad stood on the raised stage area that the Uah had made from the local wood and banged his ceremonial staff three times for attention. It was so wildly out of character that he instantly had everyone’s attention.

“Please be silent the moment approaches.”

Most of the Uah were there and a few of them munched at the assorted snacks provided, but most of the gathering instinctively watched both the lake and the sky for any sign of the big event, the billion year old predicted awakening.

“Estrin-Okanan awake !” Shouted Chenad.

Despite the heat of the sun many felt a cool breeze start to come from the direction of the lake and even Kittara felt something strange was about to happen.

“God of the Ushong, show yourself to the faithful !” Screeched Chenad.

Chlo started to detect definite disturbances in reality building above the lake and put the details up on the common channel and then the first minor ground tremor occurred. Kittara held onto Estrid and prepared to move them away from area if the tremors looked dangerous. A lady from one of the Ixir news agencies pulled out a recording device from under her jacket that she’d hidden just in case anything worth looking at happened. None of the Uah seemed to care and she was left to record everything for later transmission.

“Wave forming.” Said Chlo. “I’ll block it.”

In the centre of the lake they could all see a wall of water rising from the surface and heading towards them, as if the lake was trying to empty itself in their direction. Hundreds of feet high the wave hurtled soundlessly towards them, as the second tremor hit and sent the Uah crashing to their knees. Chenad pulled himself back onto his feet.

“Yes great God, Yes, we are waiting for you !”

The air was now definitely much cooler and Kittara looked anxiously at Sikush and asked him if he wanted to leave over their private link.

‘Just when it’s getting to be fun.’ He replied.

A third and much larger tremor hit the village and a large crack opened up in the ground that swallowed most of the dwellings on the east side and great many of the Uah fell to their doom in the process. Not that they seemed to care, the Uah were seeing the prophecy fulfilled and most of them appeared to be in a trance like state.

“The moment is now HERE !” Shouted Chenad.

The great wave lifted all the fishing boats of the Uah high into the air, along with the strange creatures that inhabited the lake and the various piers and jetties and crashed the whole mass of flotsam against the force wall Chlo had put in its way. The noise was tremendous and nearly everyone apart from The Damned fell to the ground and covered their ears. As that wave fell back, another even higher crashed into the force wall and then another, and another. It was as though every God there had ever been was intent on wiping Uah Trin from the face of Mendera.

As if the waves weren’t enough the earth once again shook and two enormous cracks appeared that swallowed most of the remaining houses of Uah Trin and the majority of its people. The cracks expanded and crept towards the party by the lakeside, but stopped a few feet from Sikush.

“Thank you Chlo.” He Said.

Then it seemed to be over and the surviving Uah started to look for survivors in the ruins of their village, while Sikush himself pulled Chenad from under a fallen palm. Kittara noticed that all the surviving Uah seemed happy, were grinning from ear to ear. But surely their God had failed to awaken ? Even Sikush smiled at Chenad as he dusted him off and talked to him. Only Estrid seemed unhappy at the events and Kittara realised the girl had said very little and shown almost no emotion during the entire disaster.

“Are you alright ?” Kittara asked her.

“Yes.”

Satisfied that Estrid was just shocked rather than hurt in anyway Kittara went to help Sikush as he moved around the few Uah to survive. Everyone from young to old seemed immensely pleased, despite losing nearly everything they had.

“We’ll help you rebuild.” Sikush said to Chenad.

The head man seemed to notice the destruction for the first time.

“Thank you. Though our needs are small a few new fishing boats would be nice.”

Sikush nodded to Chlo who simply said.

“They’re in the air and on the way.”

“I think we can do better than that,” said Sikush, “imperial shuttles are on their way so you’ll have shelter and food tonight and The Damned will help you rebuild.”

Chenad was about to reply when he saw Estrid walking towards him and he instantly fell to his knees and started looking at her with adoration. Kittara noticed all the other Uah were similarly kneeling and holding their hands, palm upwards towards the girl. Sikush merely turned towards her and smiled.

“So Estrid, or should it be Estrin ? Do you still hate me ?”

The girl still seemed a little unsure of herself, as if upset at the destruction. She gave Sikush a hug, which surprised everyone, then she held her hand out palms down and the ground started to shake again and the waters of the lake looked agitated. From the waters walked the Uah who had died in the disaster. Young and old, the infirm being helped by others, the entire population of the Uah who had just died walked out of the lake and seemed none the worse for their experience. Then they all fell to their knees and faced Estrid.

“I told you a long time ago eternal.” She said to Sikush. “I forgive you.”

The woman from Ixir news had long since dropped her recording device, which was a pity as she missed the biggest news exclusive in several million millennia.

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Nurigen was happy as he slammed the heavy hammer into the white hot metal that was beginning to look like a sword blade. It had taken a long time for him to replace the equipment he’d lost during the last switch. Chlo had offered to duplicate some items, but it wasn’t as simple as that, he’d never have sold his soul to Sikush if it was that simple. Yes he hadn’t actually sold his soul, but offering perpetual service in exchange for immortality was pretty much the same things.

He grunted in appreciation as he pushed the blade into a device on his right and it showed there were no flaws in the metal, this one might, just might make a perfect Nurigen sword. Very few went on to the stage of being given a minor enchantment and the famous etched words along the blade.

‘Aggrivas Nulonde’

(Beyond Technology)

Many of the devices he used would have looked familiar to any village blacksmith, but what had taken the time to perfect was the hybridisation, the mixing of weapon technology with magical enchantment. Chlo couldn’t simply copy the devices, he had no real idea how he’d made some of them work, it was often millions of years of trial and error. There were no bellows heating coals, his was an Ion furnace that could melt titanium at a touch.

“Perfect.” He muttered.

Very few of the blades he made ended up being used as weapons. Most had flaws in the metal, some didn’t accept the enchantment and quite a few simply didn’t feel right in his hand. Often he couldn’t explain why the blade was wrong, he just knew it was and the metal was recycled. Only two or three a year were put in the rack against the wall, but those were perfect. His daughter, Alyz, had once had the impudence to ask if Chlo could duplicate a finished Nurigen blade. He’d invited her to ask Chlo, who told her;

“No. The material of the blade contains nothing I recognise as belonging to this reality.”

Not that Alyz interrupted his work these days, she knew he was trying to increase the destructive power of the already legendary weapons.

“Kivar body armour please Chlo.”

A sheet of the material the Kivar used as body armour appeared in the test area, neatly held between two clamps. Not that the empire ever intended to attack the Kivar, but their armour was the best known in the multiverse, so it was a good test for the new blade. He swung it gently at the sheet of armour and it cut through it easily, like a razor through a sheet of paper.

“Yes !” He shouted to himself.

This was going to be a perfect blade, he might even present this one to Sikush himself. He looked around and noticed Alyz sitting patiently, waiting while he worked.

“You look happy father.” She said.

“Yes. This blade will be perfect, I just know it. I think I’ll present it to Sikush, it’s far better than the old one he has.”

He noticed her fiddle with the completed blades in the rack on the wall, why did the girl have to fiddle with things ?

“But he’s had that blade, well, forever,” she said, “he probably won’t want to change it.”

She was right, of course she was right, people get used to things, they gain sentimental value. But for some reason knowing she was right annoyed him. Most of the time he was immensely proud of his daughter, but sometimes, as now, he just wanted her to leave him to his work.

“Unless you’ve anything in particular you need ?” He said.

He could see his daughter had no intention of being dismissed and was looking intently at his finished work.

“There are over twenty blades here.” She said.

“Twenty two, no more, no less.”

“Well as there are quite a few. I was thinking of presenting one to...”

“NO ! Remember the trouble last time ?”

He hated shouting at her, but she’d given a blade to Delmus, who admittedly had saved their lives, but then she’d given one to Babak. There had been numerous accusations of favouritism, so now Herusher took the blades when he thought someone was worthy. True he hadn’t thought anyone worthy in a while, but he’d even heard Luri moan about the quality of new intake into The Damned.

“I was just going to say.” Said Alyz.

She was giving him the upset look her mother had often used on him, he knew he was beaten and was just hoping for a way out.

“That Estrid might need a good blade,” she continued. “even deities must need a good sword, don’t you think ?”

Yes the strange Estrid girl who it turns out was some sort of deity, yes she’d be perfect and of course even deities need a good sword. He raised the blade in his gloved hand, noticing that the tip was still glowing white hot.

“You’re right my dear and when I’ve completed this blade, you can present it to her.”

He enjoyed a smile from his daughter before he once again put the blade into the furnace.

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Luri came out of the shower to find Delmus juggling what looked like a bar of gold about a foot and a half in length. They’d been spending most nights together recently and although that was nice, it had its potential problems. The minor one was finding Delmus juggling a priceless artefact; the other was what The Damned referred to in private as the ‘Babak problem.’

“Put that down, even Chlo has no idea what it might do.” She told him.

She watched him give the cylinder one last twirl before putting it back on her dresser. Yes, the problem was that no one wanted to end up like Babak. He’d never fully recovered from losing Abijah, but could anyone recover from losing a lover they’d shared a bed with for billions of years? So all of the Guard who had partnered up, and there were quite a few, knew the problem and did their best to have other interests and partners outside of the main relationship.

“What do you think it does?” Asked Delmus.

As he now had his dagger aimed at the seamless gold casing, Luri deftly removed the object from her dresser and examined it herself. Quite heavy and apparently made of gold, it had no markings, no real features to it, it just looked to be a solid cylinder of gold. She’d found it in a secret compartment in Ojetin’s old astrolabe and after showing it to a few people as a curiosity, it had ended up under the effluvia on her dressing table. Once the assorted powders and creams had been cleaned off, it really did look like pure gold.

“I have no idea,” replied Luri, “but Sikush said to bring it to the palace, so hurry up and get ready.”

As Delmus went into the shower she gave the object one last rub with her fingers and satisfied herself that there were no signs of face powder or body lotion. The smell of the lotion brought back memories of encounters with the courtesans who plied their trade in the market and she decided to take a stroll there in the evening. No one wanted to become another Babak.

Luri shimmered into a uniform of The Damned and checked herself over in the mirror, which she always did for a summons to the palace. Not that Sikush ever commented on the state of her uniform, but she still craved his approval.

“Day dreaming?” Asked Delmus.

“Maybe a little.” She said giving him a smile.

“I just hope there aren’t bugs involved in this mission.” Said Delmus.

She had been day dreaming, and the boot knife in her hand had been waiting to be put down her boot for a minute or so. Luri pushed it neatly into the top of her right boot and tightened the laces on her boots. Everyone seemed to have caught the tightening behaviour from Kittara.

“Ready?” She asked him.

Of course he wasn’t, he never was. After quite a bit of fussing and general confusion Delmus was finally in his uniform and ready to go. Luri picked up the golden cylinder and when Chlo told her it was just the right moment she moved her reality to Sikush’s favourite veranda at the palace, with Delmus arriving a second or so after her.

“Get some breakfast. I’ll be over there soon.” Said Sikush.

He was talking to the Ventellan ambassador, putting on the legendary charm no doubt. Luri sat at the table that overlooked the garden and Chlo instantly put her usual food and drink in front of her. Was she that predictable? She probably was, but was pleased that Delmus was just as predictable as a plate of hot food was placed in front of him as he sat down.

“I hope they’re a while,” said Delmus, “I’m starving.”

As she watched him eat she sipped her herbal drink that Delmus called disgusting and her gaze went to the garden below the veranda. The various palms were at their best in the early morning sun and there was a ripple on the surface of the lake caused by one of the creatures it contained. It felt so peaceful.

“I see you brought this with you.”

Sikush had sat down and was examining the cylinder. Luri looked at him and exchanged a smile.

“Your garden is beautiful,” she said, “I can see why this is your favourite spot.”

"I am lucky at being able to have most of my meetings here."

Delmus looked at her and sent 'I bet it's bugs' on their private link.

"Luri has been with me most days for quite some time," he continued, "and Delmus has been running a few errands that needed doing."

Luri smiled, remembering a three inch wound in Delmus' back that she'd healed after he'd returned from one of the 'errands'.

"How would you like to work together again, do a delivery for me and spend some time gathering information?"

Delmus was suddenly alert and Luri could almost hear him asking Chlo for an RM9. They both nodded at Sikush, who started to turn the cylinder in his hand.

"Is it dangerous?" Asked Delmus.

"Oh yes, probably the most dangerous thing you'll ever see."

Luri remembered using it to squash a wortle bug that had got into her bedroom and decided to look after unknown artefacts a little better in future.

"It needs to be given to its maker, and I think now is the time." Said Sikush.

Luri sipped her drink and hoped Delmus was wrong about the bugs.

"Delmus has been there and knows him. An ally of ours by the name of Charadask."

Luri knew all about the trip to the nest and the fate of the drug dealer he'd taken there. Luri wanted to say he was a strange ally, but then Sikush would remind her that he'd pulled her out of the deepest dungeon on Garanesh.

"There are strange stories coming out of the rifts," Sikush continued, "of rivers drying up and strange plagues affecting the demons. Take your time, take a year to get there and a year to get back. Blend in with the locals, find out what's going on for me, become travellers of the rifts for a while."

Delmus looked really pleased, but Luri had become used to being part of the Menderan imperial court, so she had her reservations about the trip.

"When do you want us to leave?" She asked.

"A few days' time. Get your arrangements made and I'll get Chlo to give you the rift manipulator, but only use it as a last resort."

Delmus winked at her and the thought of two years in a tent with him wasn't going to be exactly a chore, but she made up her mind to find a courtesan from the market area before she left, just for a little variety.

"Oh and I have a few places I'd like you to visit while you're on the rifts," said Sikush, "none of them are on any maps, so I'll give you directions before you go."

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Estrid wasn't sure why she'd come to Uah Trin at night, but something had brought her. Besides since finding she had the ability to move anywhere, instantly, she wanted an excuse to go somewhere other than her bedroom. There had been a tense time with Kittara, but once it was clear Estrid was going to stick to her old routine, Kittara had relaxed.

She remembered everything about her life as a child, but some of it now felt strange, like it had happened to someone else. As the Uah had known her old self, the self that was three hundred feet tall and reptilian, she had decided to visit them and not to gloss over it, eves drop. Estrid walked close to the town meeting house, one of the few surviving buildings and heard Chenad talking.

"I'm sure them being returned to us is a good sign."

A few accenting voices, but quite a few angry replies too.

"No ! If Estrin-Okanan had found them worthy they wouldn't have been brought back."

So her act of mercy had backfired. Estrid could have walked through the wall and told them not to be stupid, that the return of the dead was a blessing, but something stopped her. She decided to let them sort it out in their own way and listened to Chenad arguing for the returned to be accepted, but then a voice, loud and female shouted.

“We can’t just banish them, they must be burned to appease our God.”

Estrid remembered her old self, the tired and angry deity who had sent the tidal wave and the tremors to punish the Uah, but punish for what ? She’d always been so sure of her actions, but something, perhaps the human in Estrid was changing her. She’d never questioned her true form before, but why were all the deities so huge and reptile like ? Then she remembered a very dark and troubled part of the wastes of eternity and realised who they looked like. Estrid could have instantly become a three hundred foot tall God, but she preferred to remain as Estrid and of course it made moving around unseen a little easier.

She changed her mind about not interfering and moved inside the meeting house and instantly a hush fell over the meeting and everyone fell to their knees.

“No one is unworthy, there will be no burning. Do you understand ?”

There were a lot of nodding heads and quite a few muttered positive comments. Estrid looked deep into Chenad and saw an old man, but one with quite a few years still left in him, he would do perfectly. She made signs at him to stand up.

“Do you have a deputy who could stand in for you ?” She asked.

There was confusion and a little fear in a few sets of eyes, including Chenad’s. Estrid decided that if this was the reaction her old self received for a simple enquiry, then a change was well overdue.

“Walk with me.” She said to the old man.

They left through the front door and past the half dozen imperial shuttle craft that were being used as temporary shelter for the Uah, Estrid briefly nodding at one of the Guard she recognised. They walked through the ruined village and Estrid found a wall that they both had room to sit on.

“I’ll let you into a secret,” she told him, “I need a teacher to help me adjust to this form.”

The head man looked tense and awkward and Estrid hoped he’d relax, or he’d be of no use to her.

“I could describe to you the wastes of eternity,” she continued, “the true nature of time, even another seven mathematical constants yet to be discovered. But I never knew curiosity until something of this moonchild affected me.”

She held the head man’s hand and gave him a little strength, perhaps she might one day extend his life, but for the moment she just wanted his trust. It was of course all her own fault. Part of her had awoken on her first trip to a sentinel with Kittara all those years ago, but it suited her to remain quietly hidden inside the child. Now she was full of curiosity about how people felt about what she did, what made them happy, what made them sad ? Curiosity no deity should ever have, but she was now stuck with it.

“I am of course at your service, but surely there is someone wiser ?” Said Chenad.

“No. You will teach me about..... people and in time I’ll show you things no ephemeral was ever meant to see. Will you come to Mendera City and be my teacher ?”

The old man looked uncertain, but he nodded at her.

“Good. Make your arrangements and I’ll come for you in a few days.”

Estrid realised that she hadn’t asked Sikush for a section of the palace for Chenad to use, but she couldn’t see that being a problem, he was after all the one with a lot to make up for !

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Kittara had waited, had smiled and accepted his numerous apologies, but now she was sat across him with the point of the eternal killer aimed at his chest. She knew he was awake, his eyes kept looking at her, almost daring her to do it. Eventually he spoke.

"I can only apologise so many times. In the same circumstances I'd do the same again, it was impossible for you to know."

The sex had been good, it had taken away much of her anger, it always did. The danger was that she didn't know what she wanted, so she dug the point of the blade into his skin. It actually penetrated his skin, but there was no blood. Perhaps he didn't bleed ? Again he was silent.

"You let me think she was going to die !" She said to him.

Even to herself it sounded strange. Of course most people died and all he'd done was to say Estrid should have five or six thousand good years. The anger was because he hadn't told her the truth, that Estrid was a deity. She kept the sword in her left hand and made a fist of her right, tried to hit him with it and failed, her hand stopping half an inch from his face.

"Hit me if it helps." He told her.

"Killing you might help."

The blade went in further, still no sign of pain from him and then she realised there were no signs of any disturbances in the multiverse, no pulsating lines where it prepared for the worst. She suddenly understood. The multiverse now knew her, had observed her for billions of years and knew Sikush was in no real danger. She threw the sword away, sent it crashing against his bedroom wall.

"That's why you gave it to me. You knew I could never use it."

She remained there, sat across him, just looking at him.

"How is Estrid ?" He asked.

"She seems fine, still the same, though she keeps hinting about your past misdeeds. What did you do to her ?"

Is that guilt on his face ? Kittara lays forward on him and kisses his cheek.

"What did she say ?" He asked.

"Nothing and Chlo says it happened so long ago that she has no memory of it."

He started to stroke her hair, his voice almost soothing.

"I have a lot to make up for."

Suddenly she sat back and to her own surprise she managed to give him a hard slap across the face.

"Bastard !" She shouted.

Again silence and again just the eyes watching her.

"Is Sventa taking all this well ?" He asked.

"Yes, if anything they seem even closer than before."

He started chuckling and it became impossible for her not to laugh with him.

"A deity and a dark angel, we're all doomed." He said.

His hand stopped stroking her hair and reached between her legs and her mood changed. At first she was going to refuse him, but then she realised she needed it too.

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