

Mendera Temple

Chapter 22 – To Trap a Deity

“Kittara had always loved the blackness of her skin, how it glistened like freshly cut obsidian.”

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Uah Trin hadn't changed at all over the millennia and that pleased Estrid. The lake was the same, the impractical yet very ornamental fishing boats were the same, only the people had changed. They were shorter than when Estrid had been brought there for her awakening and there were far more of them.

“Time has treated them well.” Said Hol.

“Kittara would approve, she has a soft spot for them.” Said Estrid.

Naming Kittara made them all pause; their friend had been beyond gateway for a very long time, even by Menderan standards.

“Do you ever see her ?” Asked Sveta

They all missed Kittara and it was as though a chill wind had suddenly sprung up over the idyllic lake.

“No,” said Estrid, “she stepped into the darkness and out of my view a long time ago.”

A group of Uah children were walking up a gangway onto one of the boats. The sun was shining on a perfect day and it was hard to believe it was the day the multiverse might end. Estrid had told them that actually ending was an unlikely outcome, but it was a possibility.

“More likely the multiverse will shift balance, so far that most life can no longer exist within it.” She'd told them.

Most life was the key term. Something would still survive and enjoy the new multiverse, but no one wanted to think about what 'they' might be.

“We need to go,” said Estrid, “I just wanted to see Uah Trin before we left.”

“Is there any chance that Kittara might return to help us ?” Asked Hol.

“None at all.”

Jen was there with the entire elite of The Damned, all eight thousand of them. From a small private guard for The Chalne, the elite had grown into one of the most feared forces in the multiverse. How well they'd survive against a living God had yet to be seen though. Jen had been looking after her warriors, but she approached Estrid.

“You're sure it starts today Estrid ?”

The deity laughed and playfully slapped Jen on the shoulder.

“Only a warrior would dare ask me that Jen. Come, Sevril will attack the nest in two hours' time, we must move to the rifts.”

Sveta made her own way to the nest, but everyone else waited for Estrid to create a portal. The adult Uah moved their children out of the way and then prostrated themselves as their goddess created the portal to the nest. The Uah had no skill with weapons or magic, but over a thousand of them had insisted on following Estrid to the nest. Slowly The Damned and the Uah moved through the portal and into a huge chamber that Charadask had created deep under the rift.

“You've gone even more native.” Said Estrid.

Delmus was now dressed in the full armour of a demon general, complete with a blood insignia painted on his shield.

“I now command the 84th and 87th demon legions. For some reason Neosto thought I was the right person for the job.” Replied Delmus.

“Why did you bring the civilians ?” Asked Luri.

The Damned had gone up a ramp and headed towards the surface, but the Uah were wandering around and resembled a group of tourists on a day out.

“Not civilians,” said Estrid, “they’re Uah and they may be more use than you think.”

Charadask didn’t seem too impressed with the visitors to his home. He made a lot of spitting sounds and left, the sound of his feet tapping on the ground continuing long after he’d left the chamber.

“Ignore him, it’s the day he’s been planning for, built the nest for.” Said Luri.

Hol followed Jen and the rest of The Damned as they headed towards the surface. Sventa though was needed in the trap room, though she still wasn’t quite sure of her role. Estrid simply beckoned to her flock of eager Uah and in an instant they were gone from the chamber and standing among the demon troops. There might have been cause for concern, battle hardened demon troops aren’t famous for their tolerance of humans. But Estrid merely smiled at the demons and led her people to the very front of where the front line would be.

“What they gonna do ?” Asked a demon warrior.

“Chant.” Replied Estrid.

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Tomma-Goran was watching Sevril-Narge when he felt Estrid in his head.

“It’s today Tomma, I hope you’re ready.”

He’d been keeping away from the bug goddess, she’d sworn to destroy him if he interfered in her affairs again, had sworn it in front of the other deities. As he watched she sent off another aspect of herself, probably the aspect that was going to discover the trap in the nest.

“I’m watching her now,” he said, “I’m ready, she can’t possibly refuse the challenge. The loss of face would destroy her.”

The run back to the beginning of the deities, the hurtling of two racing gods right back to the moment the wastes of eternity spewed them out. It was legendary, even though no deity had probably ever had the nerve to do it. It was etched deep into their psyche and there was no way Sevril could refuse his challenge. Of course it might well mean his destruction as well as hers, but Tomma was ready for that. The big question was whether Sevril was willing to risk being destroyed. “I’ll wait in the hills to the north of the nest.” He told Estrid.

There was a slight swirl in the fabric of the multiverse and Tomma was invisible and waiting in the hills, crouching his enormous body, like a predator waiting to pounce. An ambush hunter, yes that was what he felt like. He could see the tens of thousands of demon warriors manning the defences, The Damned staying apart, but taking up the front line.

“Do it right Estrid.” He muttered to himself.

At the very front of the troops defending the nest was Estrid and with her seemed to be a large number of clerics. Tomma had no idea what she was planning, but if he was confused then no doubt Sevril would be too. His daughter was in the nest, though it had been a very long time since he’d thought of Luri in those terms. He hoped she survived the day, but he had no real paternal feeling for her.

“I see the aspect.” He told Estrid.

It was going exactly as Estrid had predicted. An aspect of Sevril-Narge moved forward, almost as though sniffing the ground. Then it vanished, plunging deep into the ground, before appearing again and vanishing once more. It had gone to tell the deity herself that a god trap had been built on the rift. There could only be one outcome!

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The darkness had been acting very strangely for some time. People from Leng came to watch a section of their horizon become a giant purple storm, which swirled and sent out the occasional orange flash. Not that they got too close ! No one had ever seen the darkness act in this way and there were rumours of doom and destruction throughout the city. Then on a day when the purple storm seemed particularly active, the darkness split and almost seemed to give birth to a small creature. A creature that appeared to be made of flames and born out of darkness. Then the darkness calmed down, the purple storm dispersed and everything returned to as it had been for billions of years. It was all very impressive, if anyone had dared to get close enough to see it. Kittara stood still for a very long time. She wasn't used to solid objects and proper light, if the ultra violet wash of a rift morning called be called proper light. Her memories of Leng now seemed like dreams and she needed to pull them to the surface of her consciousness. Gradually Kittara remembered who she'd been in the city and where she'd lived. How long had it been though ? She had the impression that a vast amount of time had passed, but she couldn't be sure. Kittara was dressed in the robes of a Lummel priest, lots of layers of dark cloth and a hood. She pulled back the hood and ran her fingers through her hair, pleased to find it still felt like her hair. Her house, that would be her first destination and it would give her a chance to see the edges of the city again. The first few steps were awkward, the ground seemed to get in her way, it had been a long time since she'd been fully corporeal. A few yards though and she was used to the feel of walking again and she began to enjoy the sensation.

"The dark one, she has returned !"

The first people she saw were farmers, who grew most of the food for the city. Their bodies looked different, as did the fruit on the vines. Similar to her memories of them, but subtly different.

"Do you know me ?" She asked an old woman.

It was no good. The woman ignored her and simply bowed and averted her gaze. It was the same with the others, they shouted out and cheered until she was among them and then they'd barely look in her direction. How long had it been ? Was Neola still alive ? She picked a red fruit from a vine and enjoyed the taste of flesh, the feel of the juice running down her throat. Sensations, so good to feel things properly again and to eat real food.

Her mansion was gone. There was another building there now and it had beautiful gardens, but they weren't her gardens. Kittara allowed her body to become a mist of particles and simply walked through the wall of the building that had dared to replace her home. The servants inside the building screamed and ran, but the lady of the house was made of sterner stuff. The woman wore expensive clothing, but even her style of dress looked strange to Kittara. The woman bowed low, but she kept watching.

"Do you know me ?" Asked Kittara.

"Yes, you are the dark one. Everyone is taught about you. I am your servant, may I show you ?"

The woman led her to a small private shrine in the garden and there was her statue, surrounded by fresh flowers. Two oil lamps filled the shrine with the scent of Ashunt blooms.

"You are our dark saviour. We knew you'd return to save us."

The statue was a good likeness and Kittara picked it up and then replaced it among the blooms.

"My mansion used to be here."

"There is still one wall and pillar of your home, they are preserved in the garden. Would you like to see them ?"

Kittara shook her head.

"When did I leave Leng ?"

“Just after the 9,000th anniversary of the last blood war.”

“Years, sorry I mean seasons, how many seasons ?”

The woman was smiling now, Kittara realised that talking to the dark saviour would probably make her famous for life.

“Hundreds of thousands of seasons. The date is carved on the altar of the great temple erected in your honour.”

Hundreds of thousands, that meant Neola was dead and that saddened her more than she'd expected. Kittara left the house and walked towards the centre of Leng. Even if Neosto had built a new palace, his ego would mean it being the largest building in the city and easy to spot.

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Luri was with Charadask in the nest control room when the ground began to shake.

“They're coming.” Said the insect sorcerer.

She knew all the deities would converge on the nest, they had no alternative. Estrid had chosen a side, she'd positioned herself outside the nest and was offering her full powers to the empire.

“I just hope they don't all attack.” She said.

Charadask made the odd cackling sound that emphasised his ‘bugness’ as Delmus called it.

“The others will just watch Luri. Our real problem will be Sevril.”

Delmus was standing next to her and Sventa was sat on the floor in a corner. Delmus wanted to be outside for the fight, but he knew she might need him. Sventa was crucial to the plan, but the dark angel seemed to drift off into a world of her own lately. Without the influence of Kittara, the creature seemed to be losing her mind.

“Are you ready Sventa ?” Luri asked.

Two very dark eyes looked at her and the head nodded, but there was no verbal response. Sikush was the only one who seemed to have any control over Sventa and he seemed to have complete faith in her.

“She will be going where no living creature is supposed to go,” he'd said, “and she's going willingly.”

Luri smiled at Sventa and wished that Mo was with them, he'd built up some kind of rapport with the dark angel. But Mo was now just a rich merchant on the rifts and Sikush had told them to leave him in peace.

“I must be at one with the trap,” said Charadask, “make sure I'm not disturbed.”

The sorcerer leant against the control panel and appeared to go into a deep sleep. Luri drew her Nurigen blade and kept her feet as the ground tremors became more extreme. Pieces of furniture began to wobble around, but the nest had been built to survive even the worst quake that was likely to occur. Delmus grinned at her and turned on his favourite weapon, his beloved RM9.

“It's a miracle that thing still works.” She said.

“Built to last.” He said, giving the weapon a loving slap.

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Hol was a bit bemused when the chanting started. Over a thousand of the Uah completely ignored the ground tremors and simply began to chant in unison. Then the words began to make sense and she realised they were chanting an old Menderan children's nursery rhyme, that most clerics learn by heart.

“Very nice, but it would be nice if they carried weapons.” She said.

Jen simply pointed to the plain in front of the nest.

“Look !”

A hole had appeared in the ground and a claw was coming out of it. Another claw reached up and then the horned head of Sevril-Narge rose from the ground, followed by her body. So violent was her exit from the ground, that boulders showered down on the demon army, killing many and maiming others.

"It begins." Said Jen.

"Is it bad to say I enjoy days like this ?" Asked Hol.

"Ask me that if we're alive in the morning."

Sevril walked towards the nest, turning her head from side to side and rubbing her ears with her claws. It was obvious that if nothing else, the chanting was causing her distress. As the bug goddess stopped about fifty yards from Estrid, the other deities appeared. Sumahn-Nerish had even left his beloved Annill to come and watch the fight. They all had to be there, two deities were in direct conflict and it could only end with one of them being destroyed. Monazin-Conosin was the largest, laying himself on the ground and waiting to see which way the balance shifted. They all knew that the day would end with some action required from them, it all depended on who survived, Sevril or Estrid. The only Deity not waiting in front of the nest was Tomma, who remained hidden in the hills.

"You've been too long with ephemerals," snorted Sevril, "I'm stronger than you now."

Estrid still kept in human form and merely walked closer to the huge form of Sevril-Narge.

"So Sevril, you've finally had the courage to step out from behind your army of insects."

Sevril-Narge hurtled at Estrid, her jaws open, her claws reaching to rend flesh. The chanting rose and Sevril hit an invisible barrier. Her jaw was pushed to one side, her face and right side was severely squashed by the momentum of her charge. The deity almost fell over, but she managed to keep her feet and backed away snarling. She lashed out with her tail, killing large numbers of demon warriors and several of The Damned. Still she couldn't land a blow on Estrid, her tail meeting an impenetrable invisible wall.

"Be careful," shouted Estrid, "I might have to chastise you."

The elite of The Damned were all armed with Nurigen weapons and they were stabbing at any part of Sevril they could reach. They drew blood of a kind, but the deity just ignored their blows and paced to the side of Estrid, to attack again. Hol used a disruption spell on the bug goddess, but it was useless and had no effect. Sevril lunged again and once more the chanting increased and her jaw hit the wall. This time though her front claws ripped into the Uah, killing at least twenty of them. For the first time Sevril gave a loud evil laugh and began walking to the other side of Estrid.

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There was no mistaking the imperial palace, though it was now several miles from its previous location. Any doubt was taken from her mind when she saw Neosto coming out with a dozen of his guards. For a brief second Kittara wondered if she was still welcome in his palace, but then she saw Silky was with him and she was actually waving to her. Sikush had often told her that even immortals could look old and now she saw that in Neosto and Silky. Physically they looked the same, but there was something about them, even the way they walked. Perhaps it was mental anguish from seeing generation after generation make the same mistakes ? Silky looked about to hug her, but then changed her mind.

"I knew you'd return in time to fight the deities." She said.

Kittara smiled at her and looked at Neosto.

"Kittara has other battles." He said.

"But I thought....."

"Leave us now Silky, I need to talk to Kittara."

They walked through room after room of his new palace and it was even more vast than the old one. "This is the fourth palace I've had since you went," he said, "one was destroyed by a quake that ruined much of the city."

There seemed to be more and more vast empty rooms. To many the empty space would have seemed lonely, but to Neosto it meant privacy. Eventually he seemed happy they had complete privacy and he took her to a group of chairs around a plain wooden table.

"I don't want to know about where you went," he said, "but did you gain the power you needed for the battle you must face?"

Neosto looked so nervous of her. It was so strange to see the demon emperor, who had terrified her during her initiation and yet know she could turn him inside out just by willing it to happen.

"Yes I did."

He touched her hand, but she sensed real fear in him now.

"You are of course welcome to stay in Leng as long as you want....."

Kittara gave a chuckle that was far darker and more cynical than she'd intended.

"Did Neola live to a good age?" She asked.

"Yes, she had many daughters and they too bore many children. She died a peaceful death and is buried in the vaults below the palace. I can get a servant to show you her tomb, if you wish?"

If she wished indeed. How scared he was of her and perhaps with reason. Kittara Empress of Leng, it had a certain ring to it. She chuckled and enjoyed the fear she was causing him.

"I will visit her tomb and leave some Ashunt blooms, but don't worry I'll soon be gone from Leng. I realise there is only room for one ruler here and I have no wish to fill that role."

She stood and watched as he went to a chest in the corner and brought out her Nurigen blade.

"I had the servants keep all your things," said Neosto, "but only this has survived the ravages of time."

"Thank you, I appreciate you looking after it."

The webbing to strap it to her back was rotten, so she simply held the sword in her left hand.

"I have a favour I'd like to ask of you." She said. "I'd like to take Silky with me to Mendera."

Neosto hesitated and she realised that despite the brutality he often showed towards her, he really had feeling for the chaos invoker. Mind you that was what invokers did. They used their powers to get under the skin of people who were useful to them, make themselves desired or loved if desire didn't do the trick. Kittara knew she wasn't immune to Silky and her tricks, but Sikush had promised her a new home if she wished.

"Only if she wishes to go," she added, "and I promise she will be looked after."

He nodded at her, after all he had no way of stopping her taking whatever she wanted.

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Charadask had walked into the web room and inserted himself into the web and then the scratching at the walls had started.

"He's glowing, is he supposed to glow?" Asked Luri.

The sorcerer was glowing like a furnace and they could both feel heat coming off his shell.

"I have no idea," said Delmus, "only he would know and he's the one cooking himself."

Sventa just remained sat in a corner, watching everything but saying nothing. The dark angel had wrapped her wings around her shoulders and hadn't spoken in some times.

"Sventa! Can you investigate the noises in the walls?" Asked Delmus.

There was no response, she just glared at him and went back to brooding.

"Wonderful," he said, "a sulky Genova is all we need."

"I'm not a Genova !" Shouted Sveta.

The scratching in the walls became louder and then the edge of a dark claw broke through. The claw was followed by an arm and then a whole section of the wall collapsed. Delmus had fought the Dracc, but this was something larger, something that had four muscular legs.

"She has sent an aspect of herself." Said Luri.

The noise was deafening as Delmus fired the RM9 and the flash blinded them all for a second. The aspect of the deity fell back, using the hole it had made in the wall for cover. Sveta was now on her feet and standing next to Delmus.

"The bug goddess hasn't given this aspect much power," she said, "she must need it all for herself." Charadask had gone from glowing to starting to disintegrate and now the whole massive web device was pulsating and giving off a yellow light. Delmus fired again as soon as the RM9 recharged, but the aspect seemed to realise the weapon might hurt, but it couldn't kill it. Sveta stepped forward and lifted her left hand and pointed at the creature and it began to give a pitiful wail and crouch on the floor.

"Fantastic," said Delmus, "can you destroy it?"

"I could, given time, but I have to leave soon."

"Why?!"

Sveta briefly nodded in the direction of Luri.

"I have to take her to somewhere she needs to be."

Delmus had wondered why Luri hadn't been using spells against the aspect and as she turned to look he realised why. Luri was rigid, looked frozen in place by some kind of powerful magic. Her right arm held her Nurigen blade and her left had a fireball ready to throw, but now she was frozen in that moment. Sveta sent a bolt of pure white energy from her left hand and the creature screamed again and tried to hide behind a supporting pillar.

"I have to take her now." Said Sveta.

Before Delmus could reply the dark angel had grabbed hold of Luri and they'd both vanished.

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Tomma-Goran watched as Sevril took several lunges at Estrid. Each had failed to do any harm to Estrid, but each time a few more chanters had died. Soon it would be Sevril fighting Estrid directly and that could simply not be allowed to happen. The bug goddess needed to be at the mercy of her own rage though, he needed her judgement slightly blurred for the plan to work. Tomma stood up and slowly walked towards his ancient and persistent enemy.

"Making a nuisance of yourself are you Sevril?"

She spun towards him, dropping the bodies of several of the Uah, who'd she been in the process of dismembering.

"I have no time for you, filthy god of the rift scum." She spat.

Tomma advanced to within a few feet of her.

"If you're afraid I understand," he said, "I will leave."

Sevril seemed to forget all about Estrid as she spun towards the deity who had built the City of the Lost God.

"Afraid !! Of an odious excuse for a deity like you !! Never."

He had her, at that moment he knew that she'd accept the challenge.

"Your arrogance will be your nemesis Sevril. In front of our fellow deities I challenge you to the run. If you dare to accept?"

Sevril was still stomping her feet in anger, but he could see she was thinking about his challenge. He couldn't allow her time to think of a way out.

"Run with me Sevril. Run back to the wastes of eternity to the point where we began. Winner takes all the power of the loser. Unless of course you really are scared?"

"I accept!" Shouted Sevril-Narge.

There was a slight swirl in the air and they both vanished from the rift. Estrid began to heal the wounded Uah and members of the Guard.

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Kittara was back in her old rooms in the palace on Mendera. Chlo had been in her head and welcomed her back, but seemed to know she'd need time to adjust, so she wasn't being swamped with routine messages. She had noticed that Sikush had asked her to share his bed that night and she was pleased to accept.

"These were my rooms when I first joined The Damned." She told Silky.

The rooms were still officially hers, there were even a few personal items that she'd ask Chlo to remove.

"I'd have you as a guest at my house, but....."

"I know," said Silky, "I won't mix well with a dark angel and a deity. These rooms are fine until I can find a permanent home."

"The palace is a great place to live. It tends to become permanent and I was here for many years."

Silky looked in the bathroom and seemed perplexed by the facilities until Kittara explain how they worked. Then the invoker walked to the bed and pulled back the sheets.

"Fresh sheets and plenty of room for two." She said.

Kittara laughed.

"We can play another time, there are so many things I should be doing."

Silky removed her robes and then stood there smiling at her, completely naked.

"You must let me thank you for rescuing me from Leng."

Rescue indeed, Silky had always seemed to relish the role Neosto had given her. But the way her skin shone in the Menderan sun did excite Kittara.

"I can't stay long." She said.

"An hour will do, or perhaps two."

Kittara was in the robed clothing of Leng, her final uniform she'd taken there had become too ragged to wear. She dropped the robes on the floor, but unlike Silky she was wearing underwear. Removing her panties gave her a chance to look at her legs and she liked the way her skin looked in the morning sun. Kittara had always loved the blackness of her skin, how it glistened like freshly cut obsidian. She couldn't help running her hand over her inner thigh.

"Come to bed and let me do that."

Kittara very gently kissed Silky and then lifted her up and carried her to the bed.

"Don't be too gentle Kittara."

Silky touched her and the pleasure started. It had been so long, she felt her body was going to explode at every touch. She'd known pleasure in Leng, long hours of pleasure. But in the darkness there had been no pleasure at all. Silky kissed the place on her inner thigh where she'd touched and then the invoker's head was between her legs.

"You taste different."

It was wonderful, the best since.....a very long time ago.

"Better or worse?" She asked.

“Oh better, far better.”

Tomma was chasing Sevril hard. He didn't need to win the run, but he had to keep her fairly close to ensure they arrived at about the same time.

“You can't win Sevril, you're going to boil away to nothing !” He shouted.

They were hurtling back through time, but that didn't mean they weren't a hazard to the rest of the multiverse. Tomma saw a palace being demolished in front of them and by the time they hit it, the building was a grand palace with hundreds of rooms. Sevril struck a castellated tower, sending it crashing into a grand hall. Tomma tried to swerve, but he sent the brickwork scattering like confetti. Looking back the building was a ruin and then as they hurtled on back through time the grand palace became just a pile of dirty bricks and scaffolding. Had they started a legend ? Would generations on that unknown planet talk of the night the fighting gods had destroyed the royal palace ? Tomma had no way of knowing.

“When I have your power I'll destroy them all,” cried Sevril, “the entire infection of human life.”

Faster and faster they went, until entire solar systems went from being decay to full life and became clouds of gas in the blink of an eye. Still they brought death and destruction, colliding with suns and causing super novae that they never saw, pushing planets out of orbit and dooming a whole diversity of life to destruction. Still Tomma goaded her to run faster.

“I knew you were all talk goddess of the bugs.”

Reality became a blur, switch after switch going past them, whole cycles of the multiverse appearing and vanishing as the infinite sequence of life played out around them. Tomma knew what would happen if reality was bent too far, so did Sevril, but her rage was filling her head. Tomma made a supreme effort and actually bit at her tail.

“Faster if you can !” He called.

The blur of reality faded from view and in an instant the multiverse had thrust them into the wastes of eternity, like a cleaner putting out the unpleasant waste. There was no return from the wastes, even for the gods. There was no time, no forward, no back, there was nothing. Only their physical forms created a bubble of reality around them and that would quickly collapse.

“I've won Sevril, we're both going to boil away to nothing.”

“No I've won, your power is mine !”

“You still don't understand,” said Tomma, “there was no great run by other deities. It was all a myth, but your stupidity and arrogance made you blind to that fact. You die here bug goddess.”

Sevril hit him with her tail and carried on hitting until Tomma-Goran was nothing but a pile of dead material, floating in the wastes of eternity. Sevril did indeed absorb his power, but she could see no way of escaping the wastes. Her intellect though was immense and she may well have found the method the chaos creatures used to leave the wastes, but at that moment a web of yellow light appeared and held her tightly.

“At last, I get to watch you die.”

Charadask was still attached to the web, his shell looked almost welded to it by the heat. He gave a long drawn out laugh and then crumbled to dust. Sevril struggled for a while longer, but then even her body had to succumb to inevitable and she fell apart, her body parts joining those of Tomma, her old enemy. The web lasted a few seconds longer and then it too collapsed and the small bubble of reality began to collapse. Something appeared, something that shouldn't have been there, a dark angel carrying a half dead member of The Damned.

“Hurry,” said Sventa, “I can't stay here for long, you must hurry.”

Sikush and Estrid had told her what must be done, if things were desperate and desperation seemed to define her situation. Luri walked away from Sventa and began to draw in the various body parts of the deities, adding them to her own body and absorbing their powers. She noticed Sventa was still waiting, just in case she was needed. The dark angel was burning, literally, the wastes were consuming her.

“Go Sventa, go now, I will be fine !” She screamed.

The dark angel vanished, but Luri had no way of knowing if she’d live. She had her own problems as the bubble around her was shrinking as she absorbed the last of her father’s powers. Few knew the secret to how chaos creatures left the wastes, but Luri did. Not from Estrid, or Sikush, but from Silky. Who would know the secret better than a converted chaos creature ? Normally chaos creatures, even converted invocers, took their secrets to the grave. The Empire must have promised Silky something huge for the knowledge. Luri made the hand movements and stepped slightly sideways and she was free of the wastes and falling. Below her she saw the 7th rift, Gateway far to the north. Luri braced herself as the sand dunes below seemed to rush to meet her.

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Delmus stopped firing the RM9 when the aspect of Sevril-Narge vanished from the control room. He stood there for a while wondering if Luri or Charadask would return, but the web was gone, all of it and he could feel that the nest was now dead, its function finished. As he inspected the hole in the wall there was a loud popping sound and Sventa appeared as a huddled body in the centre of where the web had been. Delmus rushed to her and he was pleased to see her eyes showed signs of life. Her wings though were badly burned and most of her flesh looked charred.

“Luri is a God.” She muttered to him.

“Hold on Sventa, I’ll take you to Estrid.”

He picked her up, trying not to crush her wings and began running for the ramp that would take him to the surface. It seemed to take him a long time to reach the landing that was about halfway to the surface and then the world seemed to turn inside out. To most of the creatures, people and other things that inhabited the multiverse nothing happened. To those that were attuned to such things though, the switch in the balance was devastating. He dropped Sventa and apologised to her as he picked her up again. She was actually smiling at him. Her voice was so faint he had to concentrate to hear her and her words sounded delusional.

“Dear Luri, our Chinnura, daughter of a god. She may now be a dark goddess, but she’s our dark goddess.”

He carried on running until he reached the entrance to the nest and saw the scene in front of him. The demon shamans were screaming to their gods and beating themselves, some were even pulling skin from their bodies. All of them had blood pouring from their eyes, the floor was covered in it.

“All is ruined, all is lost.” One screamed at him.

He carried on running around the demon temples, ignoring the dreadful sight of several priests committing self-immolation. The world was going crazy and Sventa was still smiling at him and muttering about the battle being won. He saw Estrid, still healing the wounded, but now she’d moved onto healing the injured demon warriors. She finished healing a warrior and then took Sventa from his arms and gently laid her on the ground.

“She’s so cold,” said Delmus, “is she supposed to be cold ?”

“Don’t worry, she’ll be fine.” Replied Estrid.

Estrid ran her hands over the dark angel and a light green mist lingered where she touched. Quite quickly Sventa looked far less charred and she was sitting up and looking around.

"I felt it, we won." She said.

"Won, what is this nonsense," said Delmus, "and where is Luri?"

Estrid touched his arm and the anxiety left him.

"She has left, with the other deities. They are no longer required to adjust the balance and will be looking for places to sleep once more. Soon I will join them in the long sleep."

"So Luri is a Goddess?"

Estrid smiled at him and kissed his cheek.

"In a way she always was Delmus, she just needed the right moment for her powers to awaken."

He was still confused. Delmus sat next to Sventa while she unfurled her wings to see how well they'd healed. Estrid had gone back to healing the wounded warriors, there seemed to be so many injured.

"Almost as good as new." Said Sventa, furling her wings up again.

"Where did you take her Sventa?"

The dark angel just glared at him and for a moment he thought she'd gone back to being sullen.

"To the wastes, but I won't tell you about that place. The important thing is that the war is over and we won."

He snapped, none of it made sense.

"Tell me how you annoying creature," he said, "stop talking in riddles."

She held his hand as though he was a child and he noticed there were now streaks of grey in her long red hair.

"Tomma-Goran is no more, he has boiled away, his body absorbed into to the wastes, as was Sevril-Narge. Luri took their powers and has become a powerful deity, a dark deity."

"Then surely she's our enemy and we lost."

"Delmus, things are seldom as they seem. Luri was always a dark Chinnura, she'd known that all her life. In many ways Luri was far more dangerous than her brother."

His head was spinning, none of it made sense.

"I never realised." He said.

"Yes you did. You couldn't have shared a bed for that long and not felt her true nature."

He put his head on his knees and thought back through the countless years they'd been together.

"Perhaps," he said, "is this my fault? Should I have done something?"

"Delmus, dear Delmus, it is her love for you, at least in part, that has shifted her loyalties in the direction of the empire. The balance has shifted irrevocably towards Sikush and the multiverse has been reset."

Delmus looked at the dark angel and realised she'd never spoken of such things as the balance before. Much seemed to have changed with the death of two gods.

"So Sventa, is the multiverse now darker or lighter?"

She laughed and got to her feet, pulling him up after her.

"Do those terms really mean anything? Some would call me dark and as for Kittara..... come, I'm going back to Mendera and I'll take you with me."

~ ~

Kittara didn't always like being on top, but with Sikush she enjoyed seeing the look in his eyes as she thrust up and down. They were both sweaty and tired, but they hadn't had sex in a very long time and they were unlikely to sleep at all.

"That feels so good." She said.

He smiled at her and gripped her thighs as she carried on thrusting. Sex with Silky had been good and she really could go for a long time without needing a dick inside her. It was him she'd missed.

Neosto had wanted her out of Leng, wanted her as far away as possible. Sikush though drew her in, kept her as close as he could, so close that she had to fall in love with him. It didn't mean she couldn't enjoy screwing other people, neither of them were crazy enough to believe that monogamy ever worked. She loved him and he loved her, it just was, like the sand storms on Mendera and the fact that the heat stopped at gateway. She didn't feel used or manipulated, she knew Sikush was as unable to stop loving her, as she was to stop loving him. There love just was, it had its own existence and constancy. It was why the sentinels tolerated her and creatures of light and dark could share her home.

"I love you." She said.

She relaxed her muscles and sat back as she felt his spasms. His control was good, but eventually he needed the sweet release of sexual climax.

"And I love you," he said, "and I've missed fucking you."

She kissed him and lay next to him. No reaching for underwear, neither of them minded sleeping on sticky sheets.

"So Luri is a goddess," she said, "Delmus will miss her."

"He seems to be handling it quite well. He's asked to be assigned to the Annill garrison again, he seems to think of it as home."

"He might see her again one day." She said.

Sikush gave a long sigh.

"I hope not. That would mean waking Estrid again and she really would hate me for that."

Kittara rolled towards him, close enough to see his eyes in the dimly lit room.

"People keep telling me how sad I must be, that I went through all that, only to miss the final battle."

"You can't tell them Kittara, they'd never understand."

She laid her head on his chest, still watching his eyes.

"When will I need to go?" She asked.

He stroked her hair and there seemed to be a tear in his left eye.

"No hurry," he said, "settle back into your old life. It would be nice to have you with me again, there are still a lot of problems in the empire."

"Yes that would be nice." She said.

Yes definitely a tear in his eye. She almost turned her head to ignore it, but decided to lean forward and kiss it away, tasting the salt.

"You missed the celebration for the new age of the temple," he said, "you could stay and enjoy the next one before going."

She felt happier, it wasn't a long time to spend with him in immortal terms, but it was longer than she'd expected.

"Yes," she said, "I'll be here for the celebrations and then I'll fight him."

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