

## Mendera – Empire

### Chapter 18 – Shout at the Gates !

**“Delmus though was one of The Damned and he reached for that inner certainty, the self-assurance that all that mattered was the security of the empire.”**

Sevril-Narge or the great bug God as some called her slept on. There had been the incident of being woken up by someone and her decision to destroy the whole planetary system, but she was calmer now. There had been a taste of real power there, perhaps one of The Chalne’s minions had been involved ? Oh how she’d enjoy going to Mendera and ripping it to pieces, once she was fully awake. She felt the rift and it felt too young, like bread that hasn’t quite cooled enough to eat. Once the rift felt older, much older, then she’d be fully awake. Sevril had arrived in the rifts and dug herself in, thrown hundreds of tons of rock over herself and tried to get back to sleep. If only those awful other deities would let her sleep ! The Chalne was the worst though, destroying all her Dracc and the small rift she’d created for them. Oh how he’d pay ! Her chaos minion had also been destroyed and they were becoming hard to find and even harder to train up.

‘Tap, Tap, Tap, Tap, Tap.’

There is was again, that awful sorcerer Charadask was tapping away on the rifts with those damn pointy legs of his. She could hear him ! Sevril changed the nature of the rock around her, made it denser to keep the sound out, added more layers, yet still she could hear it.

‘Tap, Tap, Tap, Tap, Tap.’

She’d tried to destroy him several times, now she didn’t bother trying. How do you kill anything that doesn’t really exist in current reality ? Sevril was very clever when fully awake and knew that the eternal had played some part in making Charadask indestructible. Another reason to hate him, another reason to destroy him and everyone he cared for. If only they’d give her time to wake up properly ! With her Dracc gone Sumahn was free to move out of Annill, perhaps send battle hardened troops to help other ephemerals ! How she hated people !

They were like a plague that infected the multiverse, with their obsession with time, probably because they had so little of it. Years indeed ! She’d know when it was time to wake by the billions of years the rocks had aged and by then they’d all be dust. Their existence was pointless and futile anyway, over in a blink of an eye, so why did Sumahn bother with them ? As to the fool Tomma who’d built that ridiculous city on the 1<sup>st</sup> rift ! Her anger woke part of her that really wanted to remain asleep and a darkness swept over her thoughts.

The eternal was a nuisance, but he did keep her enemies in check, they did owe him some kind of allegiance, though why was still a mystery to her. She wouldn’t kill him, just teach him a lesson. Destroy a few buildings in Mendera and pull the legs off that bitch he seemed so fond of, Kittara, yes that was her name. Make him suffer, but leave him alive.

“First I’ll deal with Tomma though.” She muttered in her sleep.

He’d once challenged her to the fabled run, the great race back through eternity. Challenged her and in front of the other deities ! The doubts crept into her intellect though and more of it woke up before it was properly organised. Perhaps destroying any of Mendera was a risk, considering what was kept there ? She’d just kill Kittara and perhaps Luri ? Yes it would be Luri, she hated that bitch ! The ground shook as Sevril remembered the shame of backing down from the challenge. People may be ephemeral, but they know when they were created, it’s just where they’re going to that seems to

cause so many of their wars and problems. Tomma had challenged her to a run back through the wastes of eternity. Sevril chuckled in her sleep at the countless stupid civilisations she'd seen try to fight a time war.

'We have time travel, let's go back in time and destroy our enemy's planet, mother, solar system before they were born.' Yawn !

As if the multiverse would allow such a simple strategy to exist without safeguards ! If they were lucky they'd find the eternal waiting there to explain the error of their ways. If they were unlucky ? Sevril shivered a little and thought that maybe upsetting Sikush was a mistake, she'd just ignore the obviously unintended attack on her and keep well away from Mendera.

"But Tomma must pay !"

Yes he'd challenged her to run beside him in a race, back through eternity, to before reality itself existed. Her memories of that place were cloudy, even when her vast intellect was fully awake. Something was coalescing, swirling into being. Was it them, the deities being formed ? Something was there, something Sikush now kept locked away beneath the quiet streets of Mendera. Now about a quarter of her mind was awake and she wondered about sending an aspect of herself to Mendera to apologise for the hurt she'd done to The Damned ? No that might be read as her not taking it seriously, she'd go herself when she was awake. As for Tomma ?

"Rift six and a bit." She chuckled in her sleep.

She created another rift between the 6<sup>th</sup> and 7<sup>th</sup>, one with no gateway entrances. Of course those who mattered would know it was there, but the ephemerals wouldn't. She once again thought how nice it would be if the multiverse was only populated by the major players. She'd send not one, but two aspects of herself to look after the new rift and ensure it wasn't interfered with. Then she needed a chaos minion, or perhaps a few to start up Dracc production. Sevril looked over the wall on the 7<sup>th</sup> rift and looked into the necromancer's district. Hideous creatures, useless as they were, but so easy to convert to her need. They'd need time of course to train and then create her Dracc army, but she had time, plenty of time.

"You'll do nicely."

A chaos being thrashed about, sending off attack spells of frightening proportions, even bringing down a wall of his house. Now that will be the talk of beyond the gates for weeks. She had him firmly in her grasp, or rather the grasp of her invisible aspect, now she needed one more. There were lots of twinkles of power coming from the palace of Neosto, but did she want another enemy ? He'd know she'd been there and enough of her was now awake for her to be cautious. She turned her gaze back to the city beyond the gates and saw a bright flash of power. A Dark Angel ! Oh no, they were perfect for the task, but she'd need to spend all her time keeping the damn creature under control. Another flash of power and this was a chaos inducer, perfect. Sevril picked the woman up and brought both her captures to her created rift. First wipe their personal memories, but leave their skills. Sevril was proud of her almost unique ability to manipulate the minds of such creatures.

"A few days and they'll think they've worked for me willingly for millennia."

Sevril moved in her sleep and chuckled. Yes her plan was going well, and by the time she woke a vast army of the best and toughest Dracc would be ready. Then she'd go to Mendera and make peace with Sikush, perhaps take him a gift. Maybe even something nice for his bitch Kittara.

On the 6<sup>th</sup> rift Charadask felt the bug God settle in her sleep. He moved down inside the Nest to a large room he'd cut from the rock for a special purpose. In the room he started to spin a web, a large silver glistening web of enormous strength.

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Kittara left the Western Sentinel temple with the usual feeling of elation. Yes it could hold your soul up in front of you and beat you with it, showing you all the worst bits and going over your failings with glee. But the sentinels never screamed at her and to Kittara that was the thing that truly astounded her. It was the period of Remembrance and the courtyard was full of smiling clerics, some of whom were only alive because Sikush would be upset if she gave them a long slow death. The sentinel knew this, had shown her the deep and unredeemable darkness that inhabited her soul and yet she'd walked out without the alarms going off. No screaming, no summoning of The Damned, no being banished to the wastes or the rifts. She felt the sentinel wanted to please her. Absurd of course, but Sikush had told her she was essential to some long term grand plan.

"Good morning Kittara."

A young cleric with his awful sweaty faced wife and their two grimy children. With population control a fact of everyday life on Mendera, how had Dissard Pequem been allowed to breed two children ?

"Good morning Dissard."

Ideally she'd have returned the greeting with 'go fuck yourself,' and had in fact used those very words to one of the Lewin family back in the 3<sup>rd</sup>, or was it the 4<sup>th</sup> age of the temple ? Chlo had given her so many lessons on acceptable behaviour since and some shouting. Now she was a civilised hypocrite, just like every other smiling face in the crowd.

"Why are they all smiling when it's Remembrance ?" Asked Hol Azreemy.

Kittara liked Hol, the newest recruit into The Damned. Hol was a local girl, born into a cleric family. To push hard to get into the Guard must have caused trouble with her family, yet she'd kept at it. Now Hol was the only Menderan bred member of The Damned and she never let people forget that. "Because they're brain dead clerics who should have been gelded at birth." She replied. Too loud, or just right ? Her comment had been heard and the smile vanished from many of the face, families started moving away from her.

"I wish they'd all just stay away." Said Hol.

Kittara nodded and walked towards the statue of Mardoun, herself in an earlier switch. She was pleased to see Hol keeping up with her. Hol was new but her rapport with Chlo was already legendary. That kind of quick response to orders can save not only your life, but also the lives of your friends. True on the surface Hol lacked the obvious touch of darkness most of the Guard seem to possess, but Kittara could see it was there, it just needed the right trigger to bring it out.

"Two Kivar warships," said Hol looking up, "are they coming to Remembrance ?"

As she looked across at the girl Kittara realised the resemblance was becoming uncanny. Not only was Hol's hair the same colour as hers, but so was the uniform, the boots, the belt. Hol even seemed to have darkened her naturally fair skin. It was hero worship on an unhealthy scale, but Kittara found it very flattering.

"No," she replied, " they're just invited to the tournament after. Remembrance is never open to outsiders."

Kittara looked at the two matt black Kivar craft as they hung in a nose down attitude over the centre of the city. They had bits that jutted out in all the right places to look exactly what they were, half mile long instruments of lethality. The energy being used to keep them there was incredible, enough to power whole planets. Of course it would have been far easier to land at the Guard barracks, but that wouldn't have looked so impressive. Plus the Kivar were proud of their authority to park over the city. It was just about the only thing they gained from the war. That though was a long time ago,

it was now the 14<sup>th</sup> age of the temple and the Kivar had been loyal allies for billions of years. Kittara still thought of them as creatures without souls after seeing with Babak how they travelled around their planet so fast, but she didn't want to think about that today.

Sikush was sat below the statue and smiling at them, actually beckoning them over. Other years he'd been morose, even aggressive with members of The Damned, but this year seemed to be different. "You're just in time," he said, "I'm about to follow Abijah's soul."

Sikush stood and as with every other year the crowd of clerics was too large to fit into the area and scuffling started to take place.

"Why do so many clerics come here?" Asked Hol.

Sikush gave a gently laugh and held the new recruits hand.

"I am head of the Menderan temple. They have a right to be here, but this year the numbers are too large. I'll get Chlo to move them back."

Kittara noticed Jen getting angry with a senior cleric who was trying to push his way closer to Sikush with a party of about twenty followers. There were heated words and then the sound of someone being struck.

"Jen hit him." Someone said.

Kittara was pleased and hoped Chlo had it recorded for them all to enjoy later, but that meant the Mercs being called and yet more disruption.

"The Mercs took hours to bring order the year you followed my soul." Kittara said.

Now it was her soul, but at the time it seemed like Kittara had been diminished and she was little more than a vessel for the essence of Mardoun. Now she was grateful for the skills and advice, but most of the time the only voice in her head was hers and that was how she liked it.

"This is ridiculous," Sikush said, "keep close to me."

He was off and they were rushed along with him, the crowd falling back and crushing those behind. Just as there seemed to be the danger of a serious disorder Chlo arrived with at least a thousand heavily armed members of The Damned and formed a circle around the temple precincts.

The circle then began to push the crowd back, clerics, councillors, holders of high office, even the Mercs found themselves pushed back. This had the effect of reducing the pressure of people inside the circle and Sikush found himself in the centre of an open space with Kittara and Hol stood next to him. Kittara caught a wave from the sentinel roof and realised Babak was up there. Kittara waved back and recognised many of the other faces enjoying the perfect view of the public disorder below. Abijah had died a long time ago and life moves on. No one had expected Babak to attend Remembrance as some kind of grieving widower, but Kittara was glad he'd found a good vantage point. A Mercs weapon was fired into the air and someone in the crowd screamed.

"We'll worry about legality later," Said Sikush.

This was the worst year Kittara could remember, though there had been eight deaths one year in the 12<sup>th</sup> age of the temple. The Mercs were officially in control of the city and they were trying to resist being cleared from the precincts. Kittara had a group of Mercs trying to give her a hard time one evening, so perhaps it was time to show them who really ran the city. Jen as always seemed in the thick of the squabble and as another weapon fired reports came over the common channel of Jen killing a Merc squad leader.

"Best year yet." Kittara said smiling at Sikush.

Sikush smiled back and reached his hand into the air, a bright arc of lightning reached from it to the cloudless sky and the blast of sound had every ephemeral holding their ears. The sky began to darken and Kittara caught a view of the Pequem family who had found themselves in the front row.

Dissard looked terrified and the children were huddling on the floor. Kittara's day just seemed to keep getting better. The darkening of the sky was normal, just part of the theatrics that Sikush seemed to love, 'and they can see the show better,' he'd once said to her. The lightning wasn't normal though and the crowd crushed back as far as it could until the three of them had the entire training area to themselves. No recording was ever broadcast of the Remembrance events, no live feeds to Channel 77 on Ixir. Despite the almost annual disorder these were supposed to be private and intimate proceedings.

"People of Mendera." Said Sikush.

His voice didn't seem loud, but everyone heard it and everyone was silent. As Mo had once told her, 'no one in their right mind fucks with an eternal'. Kittara had a flash memory of a delightful night fucking with the eternal, but quickly let it go, this wasn't the time.

"This is Remembrance. A time when we think of our fallen, a time of contemplation and dignity."

The Mercs stopped arguing with Jen and even ignored their fallen squad leader. The darkness deepened across the temple precincts, but beyond bright sunlight still lit Mendera.

Suddenly there was an image of Abijah walking towards the elite troops on Antuum. No recording or probe this, it seemed to be the reality of the moment brought onto the training grounds and it stood thirty feet high. The sounds of Abijah's footsteps filled the air, the smell of the decaying rubbish in the bins she walked past. Everyone watching felt themselves to be there with her and everyone knew what was about to happen. There was a quick scuffle in the crowd as someone tried to use a recording device and it was taken off them by a member of the Guard.

"Dignity !" Shouted Sikush.

They watched as the Kivar troops fired their weapons at Abijah, felt the impossible heat she'd withstood and then she'd gone and only a small heap of cinders remained. No screaming, no anguish, just gone. The darkness was now almost absolute and the crowd now perfectly quiet and still.

"I see her soul." Someone at the back called out.

The tiny bright sparks that Kittara had seen at so many Remembrance events started to form. At first just tiny parts of the essence that was Abijah, hardly worth giving a percentage to. They'd go off to join other tiny parts of someone's soul, someone who'd never have a clue they were, in a way, descended from one of the mighty immortal warriors of Mendera. Perhaps one day they stand up to a bully or rescue a friend from an accident and everyone would wonder where the courage had come from. The sparkling went on for some time, with hundreds of tiny fragments hurtling off to find new living creatures to inhabit. Then a large piece came away and shone like a miniature sun.

"Must be 65%, maybe 70." Said Hol.

Good that was enough to transfer some awareness, worth Sikush sending the Genova out to trace, as they'd done with Kittara. There was nothing in the picture for over a minute and then it changed to a scene of flying over water at high speed in the dark. All attention went to Chlo, but she had no idea where the essence was. The only people who could find it were the Genova and they could take years. Unless of course they got lucky and recognised the planet, but a small fishing village was coming into view with no sign of lighting, so things didn't look good for recognition of the landscape.

"No lights, no sign of electricity." Muttered Hol.

Kittara had grown up in a poor family, so she didn't see the village as being too bad, but then the picture went up and over the village and headed towards a larger inland town. Still no light, no signs of modern technology.

"Where is it ?" Someone shouted.

They were silenced by the crowd near them, no one wanted to miss the slightest sound coming from the picture. On the essence went, like a moth hunting a flame. Over miles of trees, constantly heading towards the large town. A stable just outside the town, but no one recognised the strange four legged beasts that were standing outside it.

"Please don't let Abijah be a monster." Hol muttered.

Kittara smiled to herself and wondered how Hol would have reacted to her original form. The soul moved on, over the top of countless rows of darkened house, which were now getting the first glimmer of light from the rising sun. Blue light ! That wasn't good news for the long term survival of the creatures on the planet, but everyone just wanted to see where Abijah ended up. Through a tavern the essence went and up the stairs and into the chamber of a young girl just about to give birth.

"She looks very poor." Someone commented.

"She looks like us." Hol said with some relief.

No ! Today the multiverse was being indecisive and over the girl the essence went and through the far wall of the bed chamber. Another spark of life would find the child, but the essence of Abijah moved on and towards a high tower on a distant hill. There were murmurs of approval as the soul moved towards the obviously prestigious mansion with its large central tower. A moat could be seen and battlements, the structure looked more like a castle as the essence moved closer. There were torches on the walls and men in uniform patrolling the walls. Through the walls the soul went and up towards the tower. A sorcerer ? Necromancer ? Perhaps the local War Lord's wife, or concubine ? Kittara liked the obvious signs of power and money as much as the others, but there is a lot to be said for being poor and inconspicuous.

"Ahhhh." Sikush sighed.

"She's perfect." Said Hol.

It's very difficult to be beautiful and poised with your legs spread and a midwife fiddling with your most intimate area, but the girl on the bed accomplished it. The soul went straight through the elderly midwife and into the girl and almost immediately the baby's head started to appear, pushing its way into the world. The midwife was garrulous, good ! Even if it was all gibberish to them it would give Chlo plenty to use as a template to translate the language. The young mother only seemed to have eyes for her child and as the midwife bit through the umbilical cord, she put out to her arms for her baby.

The picture began to fade and the last image was of the mother holding the child to her breast. Kittara knew the Genova would find the child, but it might take fifteen, perhaps twenty years. The Angels were strange creatures and seemed to be able to find anything, but they did have a bad habit of getting side tracked or finding nonsense to worry about.

"So. A boy !." Sikush was saying to her.

Kittara hadn't noticed the sex and was annoyed at herself. A boy ! The planet didn't look like one where women would do well, but then again very few women were challenged to duels or expected to hunt wild creatures. If the child died before the Genova found it ? Sikush was happy and started to ask for requests from the crowd. Good ! There had been years when he'd cried for hours and she'd never left his side, but this year looked like being a good one.

"Thrax," someone called, "show us Thrax again."

Sikush rarely did re runs of souls moving on, but he nodded and seemed ready to show again the destination all those years ago of the soul of the much loved Thrax. Kittara didn't want to be there, in fact she had something she wanted to do, no, needed to do. Since Neosto had given her the tablet

of spells an idea had been forming in her mind, an idea she'd probably only get away with if Sikush was completely engrossed in something else. Should she take Hol ? The girl was looking wide eyed at the essence of Thrax moving over the alien landscape. Would she want to leave ?

"Hol," she began, "let's go to my place."

"Ok."

Kittara took them to her lounge and instantly began to pull weapons and equipment out of store. Her hands seemed to constantly shimmer as a small mountain of equipment began to build on the table.

"I'm going on a journey Hol, a dangerous journey. Do you want to come ?"

Hol just looked at her, thousands of questions forming in her eyes.

"You'll need equipment if you're coming and a back pack."

That was it, keep her busy, stop the girl asking lots of questions that she might not like the answers to. Then Chlo appeared, much earlier than she'd anticipated.

"No Kittara and especially not today when he might need you."

"I'm going Chlo, so either lock me up or help me."

Chlo looked angry and Kittara realised what she was asking went well beyond a favour from a friend, she was asking her to conspire in going rogue for a while. Not a joking kind of going rogue, not something that could be considered a misunderstanding. In the 9<sup>th</sup> age of the temple she'd asked permission to go and had been told no. Not just no, but never, it was a crazy idea, she'd probably be killed and at the very least cause a war. Chlo's gaze never left her.

"You can't take Hol. She'll die."

"But she wants to go !"

It was a silly lie, but for some reason it really mattered to her that Hol went along. Chlo looked at Hol and raised her eyebrows slightly.

"Yes. I want to go." Said Hol.

Bless the girl. Kittara noticed Hol was pushing some of her favourite foods into a stasis container and decided that was a good idea. The Damned may not need to eat, but a week on the rifts without your favourite foods ! Kittara's hand shimmered and she smiled as it held a stasis jar. No matter what the argument might lead to, Chlo was still giving them access to the imperial stores.

"Do you even know where she wants to take you child ?"

The words were spat out by Chlo. She'd caught them both out in silly lies and Kittara could feel the tension rising. They might both end up in a cell below the barracks today.

"Not, not exactly."

"Not exactly ! Well let me tell you what this crazy creature plans to do."

Kittara just wanted to cling to normality, so she kept packing food and water into her pack. A change of uniform ? Yes she had to look her best at the gates.

"She's going to hell and she wants to take you with her. She intends to take a week or so moving through the rifts and end up on the 7<sup>th</sup> rift. Then she wants to do what Mardoun is reported to have done. It may be a myth of course, probably is. This crazy bitch intends to shout a challenge at the gates and to fight whoever comes out."

Hol was still pushing things into her pack and gave Kittara a small smile. Not the sort of look that says 'you never told me that', or 'you're a crazy bitch.'

"Do you know what happens to you if someone famous comes out to answer the challenge ?"

Hol just shook her head and began checking her uniform was done up really tight, another thing she'd copied from Kittara.

“You’ll die ! Against a top level demon you’ll last about ten seconds and most of that will be spent in agony. You’ll be a long way from home with a demon shredding you and feeding the remains to its minions.”

“Enough !” Shouted Hol.

The torrent seemed to have drained Chlo, who just stood and looked at Hol.

“Is this all true ?” Hol asked Kittara.

“Yes, all of it.”

“Then you’ll need me with you. I still want to go.”

Chlo still looked angry and seemed to be getting ready for another outburst.

“No Chlo, no more. You either lock us up or help us. Keep us hidden from his sight Chlo until we’re too away far to be ordered back.”

Chlo simply nodded at her and vanished.

“Are you taking water ?” Hol asked her.

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When they’d been given the task of going to the Temple of the Tree of Life, Delmus had told her there wouldn’t be a tree.

“It’ll be a metaphorical tree of some kind.” He’d told her.

In actually fact there were trees, lots of trees in lots of well-kept gardens, but he was right. There was no ‘Tree of Life,’ just a surprisingly large number of normal trees. Luri felt sorry for Delmus, he’d been badly disappointed by the Shrine of the Fallen Women and was determined not to be taken in by temple names again.

“Good morning.” Said Luri returning a greeting.

“Bastards !” Whispered Delmus.

He didn’t hide his distaste for the large number of men and women who ran the temple.

“How the hell do they produce little acolytes ?” He’d asked a few weeks ago when their love making had been interrupted. They’d been told the rules about no fornication in the temple, but after Mendera they took that to mean in the public parts of the temple. That night they’d been in bed and enjoying some quiet pedestrian sex to help them sleep, when a single knock came at their chamber door. The knocks grew in number as they ignored them, until it seemed like a hundred people were hammering on the stout wooden door.

“Your sexual energy defiles the temple.”

They’d tried the woods and a few heads had appeared, tutting at them within seconds. They asked Chlo to take them back to Mendera in the evenings, but it appeared.

“Leaving the temple will be taken as a huge insult.”

They were both sure Chlo had chuckled, but they were left with no alternative but abstinence and they had been there a few weeks, things were getting very tense.

“Let’s check on the Moon Child.” Luri said.

Several times a day they went to the room where the growing infant slept in a sealed crystal box. They were allowed access at any time; after all they had brought the spirit of Estrin-Okanan, most powerful of all the ancient deities with them.

Finding the dull red jar that held the spirit had been a bit of an anti-climax after all the problems getting hold of the spider. They were directed to a dead asteroid orbiting a very dead planet that in turn orbited a cold yellow sun. Inside the hollow asteroid had been just a single dull red jar about three feet tall, with no decorations on it at all. At first they wondered if the true jar had already been removed from the asteroid, but Sikush had assured them the jar held the spirit. Despite being the

head of the temple they'd never seen Sikush behave in any way 'religious,' yet after touching the jar he seemed to gain a certain gravitas. For the first time Luri had thought of him as in some way holy. "How long until the baby is ready?" Luri asked one of the chanters.

The room that held The Moonchild was full of chanting men and women, their one task was to keep any other passing soul from gaining access to the precious child. Their low chanting gave an uneasy feel to the room.

"Not long, it will be tonight."

Sikush had told them a child was needed to hold the spirit of the great Goddess, a new born, free from any tarnish or defect. Delmus knew of many places where a new born could be had for the price of a drink, but it appeared Sikush needed a baby free from even the taint of an existing soul.

"It can hardly make a good vessel for Estrin if the body is come by in an illicit manner." Sikush had told them. Luri, normally the erudite one of the two summed it up in a very Delmus like way.

"Sikush knows some holy people who can create a baby with no fucking involved."

At the first the child in the crystal box had looked fully formed, but somehow mist like, as though it needed filling out. Today as Luri looked at it the child looked like an ordinary new born, but there was no movement, no hint of breathing or a pulsing heartbeat.

"The cost has been high." Said Delmus.

Luri knew what he meant. Their respect for the people of the temple had increased many fold when they realised most mornings seemed to start with a ritual cleansing of one of their number. That person was never seen again, but the child gained substance, seemed more anchored to reality. How many had given their lives, twenty five? No it was twenty seven when she thought about it.

Whatever powers they were using to build the pure child, their price was very high!

"We're ready for the spirit." Said one of the chanters.

Luri hadn't been expecting to take an active part on the ritual, but she was one of the bearers of the spirit. She looked around and saw that one of the chanters was pointing at the child's head. Luri dusted off the jar. A few Genova had got in and every one of them burst into a cloud of red dust on contact with the vessel. Some kind of ecstatic rapture? Luri wasn't sure, but she shuddered as she cleared their remains from the top of the jar. She carried the jar to the child, but what now?

"I think you just drop it." Said Delmus.

There was no way to open the stopper after billions of years of grime had given the top a perfectly fussed seal with the body of the jar. Luri held it up slightly and prepared to throw it at the ground, but saw the horrified look on the face of the head chanter. Damn these rituals! Why was confusion almost obligatory? Would it have hurt them to rehearse it with her the day before? He lifted the cover from the child and nodded at her.

"She's so beautiful." Said Luri.

It was her first unobstructed look at the Moon Child and the baby was so perfect that it took her breath away. She lifted the jar and slammed it against the floor. Nothing! No sparkle leaving the jar, no fizz, no sign of anything.

"She has life." Someone said.

Luri looked and yes the young baby girl was breathing steadily and softly crying. Normally a baby crying drove her crazy, but now it was the most beautiful sound in the multiverse.

"Pick her up you dope." Said Delmus.

Luri lifted the baby from the crystal and held it to her breast, its body felt warm and smelt slightly of flowers. The baby smiled at her and nuzzled against her tunic, trying to get to her nipples. The Damned may have many uses, but wet nurse wasn't one of them, so Luri looked around the room.

“Sikush will know what to do. Her first feed should be from the surrogate mother. Take her to Sikush, he will put her into stasis.”

Luri nodded and looked around for Delmus.

“Let’s pick up our things and take her home.” She said to him.

The baby girl looked up at Delmus and started to make friendly gurgling sounds. Luri looked around at the smiling faces and realised they must all have lost friends to bring Estrid into the world.

“Thank you.” She said.

A young girl chanter who she remembered calling an uptight arsehole looked at her.

“Tell Sikush that the people of the tree of life are forever at his service.”

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The 6<sup>th</sup> rift was in darkness, yet Kittara could clearly see the chaos creature as it searched for them. She let Hol sleep, they’d be going through the final rift soon and the girl would need to be alert. The creature kept away from the demon camp down by the rift entrance, everyone hated their company, including the demons. It turned and looked straight at her and never saw her, but she could see it. A small switch in her mind and it could be a heap of screaming, burning gristle. That would alert those who’d sent it though, so she’d have to leave that pleasure, at least for now.

“Do we go soon ?” Asked Hol.

Kittara had put so many cloaking spells over their camp, that they could have screamed at each other and not be seen or heard by anyone passing, or looking for them.

“Yes, but I want the chaos creature to leave before we move.”

She wasn’t scared of it, though they had once brought her to almost immobility with fear. Now she knew they died very easily and whatever the billions of years had done to her body, it had made her invulnerable to their touch.

“Are they very dangerous ?”

“Only for whom it might tell of our presence.”

They’d done well to keep themselves hidden, but obviously there must have been rumours of strangers on the deep rifts, or the creature wouldn’t be sniffing the entrance to the 7<sup>th</sup> rift. The guard in the camp was the usual five hundred or so lower level demons with four or five high level commanders. Kittara could have them all screaming in agony in minutes and was looking forward to doing just that. The sport, the honourable fighting would come later, at the gates.

“Did Mardoun come this way ?” Asked Hol.

Kittara put an idea in the chaos creatures head, just a subtle one. Back in the city someone was enjoying the company of its mate. Kittara had no idea of the sex of the demon below, but the idea had made everything from Jangar to Dredger demons go home. The creature would resist the idea, but within the hour it would be gone.

Kittara still wasn’t sure how honest to be with Hol as she sat down near her and put her head on her knees. Tell the girl that when the 15<sup>th</sup> age of the temple was celebrated she’d be coming here again ? Not as an enemy, but as an honoured guest, brought through the gate and into the great city beyond to learn the ultimate in dark arts ? No, that was too much, but the truth about Mardoun and the gates ? Yes.

“Mardoun never did shout at the gates.” She said.

“But the story is on tablets in the temple. Are you sure ?”

Kittara had access to all of Mardoun’s life now, every memory, every night spent with Sikush and knew without doubt that Mardoun had never taunted the demons on gateway.

“I remember all her life Hol, it never happened.”

She could see the girl's eyes in the strange UV glow that seemed to fill all the rifts and there was no fear there, just a steady gaze.

"So we'll be the first?"

"Yes we will."

She didn't need to tell Hol that there was only a slight chance of her surviving to return to Mendera, the girl already knew that. Kittara eased the demon blade out of its webbing on her back and enjoyed the feel of the edge trying to bite her bare skin.

"Here take this. Be careful though it will bite you as eagerly as it bites your enemies."

Hol had a sword on her back, a very expensive sword that her parents had bought for her. It dripped with precious stones, the blue grey metal glistened expensive looking glints, but they both knew its only use was on the parade ground.

"Thank you." Said Hol.

"Soon we'll take one from a demon lord and you'll have your own."

Kittara watched as Hol ran the edge of the blade over her thigh, allowing it to taste her blood and then resisting the urge to scream. She was now certain that Hol had far more darkness in her than most people suspected and the thought pleased her.

"They'll smell you coming now." Said Kittara.

The blood hadn't flowed for long, but sticky lines of it had reached her knee. It was red with lines of grey in it. It had been so long since Kittara had seen her own blood that she'd forgotten about the grey streaks.

"Good. Then I won't need to go looking for them."

Kittara pulled the Nurigen off her back and together they left their camp and walked down the slope towards the five hundred or so demons guarding the rift entrance. There was no sign of the chaos creature, it was halfway back to the city to check on its mate.

"I'll deal with these." Said Kittara.

Five tears of the damned formed in front of her face and two of them she transferred to the camp of the demon guards. They'd only just realised they were under attack as Kittara turned them all to disconnected heaps of demon body parts. It wasn't sporting, but the real fight was on the other side of the rift. The other three tears she sent through the rift to deal with the guards on that side.

"Don't worry, there are millions more for you at gateway."

She'd seen the disappointed look on Hol's face as the demons were destroyed so easily. They both walked to the edge of the rift and looked at the wall of flame that seemed to cover the entrance.

"An illusion," she told Hol, "the interface of where our reality meets theirs."

"How do you know this?"

"In memories and dreams, mostly dreams I see Mardoun coming this way. She didn't come to shout at the wall, but at the head of a vast army of Holy Warriors."

Hol was tightening her boots and pulling out a boot knife to use in her left hand.

"Did they win?"

"Yes, but I died, she died."

Kittara pulled a garter of repulsion grenades off her thigh, there was no knowing what might be waiting for them on the 7<sup>th</sup> rift.

"Will we die?"

"Perhaps, but would you rather be anywhere else right now?"

Hol shook her head and together they stepped through the entrance to the 7<sup>th</sup> rift.

