

## Mendera – Empire

### Chapter 20 – Estrid

**“Considering the Temple, the State and the Military were all controlled by one person, the excesses of The Chalné were mercifully few.” – Cleric Ojetin**

“So Lurisiana and Delmuninager have decided to pay me a visit.”

Finding Monazin-Conosin, the last of the Deities had been a bit of an anti-climax. They’d been looking for so long and then Chlo found a planet with just one huge life sign. The problem was, as Chlo pointed out.

“He must want to found, because it’s a fake life sign.”

The head staring at them from the back of the cavern had intelligent eyes, but they were reptilian. Dark eyes with just a slit at the centre and they gave nothing away. He could be pleased to see them or about to burn them to a cinder, there was no telling. The head turned and seemed to study the roof of the cavern.

“Of course you’re known as Delmus now, since you stopped selling drugs and being a part time assassin in the City of the Lost God. Oh how you’ve come along.”

The head snapped towards Delmus and Luri noticed how the skin over the face was a darker green than that of Tomma and the neck looked more muscular.

“What does the name Sikush mean ?” Asked Monazin, his face about six inches away from Delmus.

“Listen. It means listen.” Said Luri.

The head moved towards her and the whole rear of the cavern seemed to move as she heard the sound of huge feet moving sideways.

“So Luri you know something. You’ve come a long way since you served the dark forces, but I won’t dwell on that. If you ever want to know why you’ve that blue sheen to you skin come and ask me, when you’re alone. Unlike Neosto I won’t expect anything in return for the information. Now, you know something, but do you know how he came by the name ?”

Luri had heard rumours and remembered a story Sikush had told her. At the time she’d thought it part of his theatrics, but it was all she had.

“He once taught a group of inattentive students who he shouted ‘listen’ to all day. In the end the students started calling him listen, or in their language Sikush.”

There was a clattering sound and a large clawed hand touched her gently on the shoulder, while the head roared with laughter.

“Is that the tale he’s telling ? Dear girl the students were all Holy warriors and far from being inattentive they had grave concerns over his orders. But in the end the name was meant with affection and they followed him into battle.”

The huge head again seemed to study the cavern wall for a very long time. Delmus looked at her and shrugged.

“Estrin-Okanan trapped in a child, she won’t like that, oh no she won’t like that.”

Silence again as the head moved and the deity concentrated on something else.

“Tell Sikush I’ll come to Mendera, but when ? Tell him I’ll be there for the descent of Mexin 7. Now leave me to wake up properly, go on, be off with you.”

Mexin 7 was due to descend or go supernova as some called it in about fifty millions years, almost tomorrow for a deity.

“Yes !” Said Luri.

The sleepy God and Delmus both looked in her direction.

“I would like to know about my origins.”

There was the sound of friendly chuckling as the head lowered to the ground.

“I’ll give you that knowledge at the descent. Anything else ?”

They both shook their heads and walked out of the cavern before transferring their realities to Mendera.

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“It’s not a question of sides. They’ll all turn up in Mendera to see you.” Said Tomma.

Sikush hated Estrelle 4, hated the place with a passion, but so did everyone else, so he and Tomma-Goran the deity of the City of the Lost God had the place to themselves. Estrelle 4 was beautiful, the plant life lush, the fauna harmless and well behaved. The problem was the rainfall. It always rained on Estrelle 4, where rainfall wasn’t measured in inches per year, but in Imperial flasks per hour. Nowhere in the multiverse had as much rain.

“Oh yes,” he replied, “they’ll all start off as my friends, even bringing gifts to Mendera. But as soon as they imagine I’m taking sides they’ll become enemies overnight.”

Tomma had stopped the rain in a half mile wide circle around them and already the small green amphibian creatures were looking uncomfortable. So used to living in a constant deluge that their respiratory system couldn’t cope without it. They’d die in another hour, but the unexpected visitors would be gone by then.

“She’ll need to destroy what’s left of your city.” Said Sikush.

The ancient deity squelched about in the mud like a huge version of the amphibians. He looked like their great King, returned to walk among them.

“Thrax did so much rebuilding,” he replied, “I barley recognise the place. Let her destroy it, but there is a problem in the catacombs. A problem we can no longer ignore.”

Sikush nodded, the problem of the undead was well known. The 1<sup>st</sup> rift was never cleared away in any switch, so the undead in the catacombs below the city carried on, and on, for countless billions upon billions of years. There were lots of them too, no one was quite sure how many.

“Kittara might give them a route to the surface by destroying the city.” Said Tomma.

“If they do get out I’ll send The Damned against them.”

A large green creature flew over them and veered off to the left as Tomma moved around.

“Is Estrid taking to Kittara ?” Asked Tomma.

Sikush looked towards the twin setting suns and caught the rainbow glitter in the unnamed falls that fell over five thousand feet from the plateau above. Nowhere had so many awe inspiring falls, but then nowhere else had anywhere near the rainfall.

“Yes an instant bond. They’re all on Ixir now, deep in the levels. Soon they’ll make a move below level 40 and I can send Sventa in to gain their trust.”

“What did you promise the female Genova ?” Asked Tomma.

“A mortal body, nothing more. She didn’t even seem concerned about what it looked like as long as it was female and could feel and had full corporeal existence. She may get the bonus of immortality, but I never mentioned that to her.”

Tomma started to twist his upper torso in the manner that meant he was about to leave.

“I’ll see if I can slow Sevril and her Dracc army down a bit.” He Said.

Sikush was alone as the twin suns set over Estrelle 4 and as his feet sank into the mud he hated the place even more.

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Piaff Ojetin looked at the rather dusty Astrolabe tucked away in a corner of the Imperial vaults and realised he wanted it and wanted it very badly.

“Sikush did say I could have my choice of ornaments to furnish my new home.”

Chlo had given his mind the slightest of nudges, implanted the tiniest of desires and Ojetin’s own mind had done the rest. Now she just had to play the game.

“But this is hardly an ornament Ojetin ! It has great value.” She said.

Of course he’d be given the Astrolabe. After all the empire had spent over a billion imperial credits to ensure Mo had the resources to find it. How many had died to bring it to where it lay, covered in dust ? Mo had taken her to his private store late one evening.

“We found it at last,” he said, “and I never want to see it again. Take it to Mendera and tell Sikush I’ll be there at the start of the next age of the Temple.”

What was Mo planning to do with the next half a billion years ? Chlo had no idea, but suspected much of it would be spent drunk in an assortment of brothels. He’d earned it though.

“But it’s covered in dust,” said Ojetin, “I doubt Sikush even remembers it’s here. I am after all doing him a huge favour by joining the mission to NKG0056.”

Chlo looked at him and hesitated in the way she did when contacting Sikush and Ojetin waited. After a suitably long period she smiled at him.

“Sikush says you can have the Astrolabe, but you have to leave it to a member of The Damned in your final wishes.”

“No problem, I was planning to leave the house and all its contents to Luri anyway.”

Chlo could almost hear the gears of Sikush’s great plan slotting into place.

“I’ll have it dusted off and sent to you,” said Chlo, “and there is one other thing.”

“Yes ?” Said Ojetin.

“Sikush asked if you’d use your skills to get it working ?”

“Of course, of course.”

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Sventa hated Ixir, the hydrocarbons in the air that others thought of as just a bad smell seemed to make her very soul itch. The noise of the crowded streets, the casual violence and routine violation of the weak. It all sapped her, made her already nebulous form even fainter. Sventa felt herself being drawn into the grey between realities and resisted, far too many Genova had become lost in there, unable to regain any solid form at all.

“Down, get down !”

She heard Kittara shout and saw the child bounce off the wall after being hit by blaster fire. She could sense that something had saved Estrid from serious harm, but the girl seemed to trying to remove some sort of shield and enemies were closer than she realised.

“Now I’ve got you.”

She heard the assassin mutter as she lay hidden on the path. All Genova are drawn to spiritual energy, have a need to protect it that even over rides self-preservation. Sventa quickly looked into the soul of the assassin and found Jen Lynn, a girl from the colonies, who had millions of years of race memories of Angels.

“No !” Shouted Sventa

Jen Lynn turned towards her, the blaster fire going wide.

“It can’t be, “said Jen Lynn, “so beautiful !”

Sventa had no orders about killing any potential assassins, but this one had tried to kill the Moon child and she had to be destroyed. Most citizens of the empire saw the Angels as almost jokes, like bugs that hovered around the strongest spiritual flames. But the oldest and wisest knew the Genova had once been the most powerful of warriors ever to guard the prison where the crawling chaos remained confined. Sventa started to glow and pointed her right index finger at Jen Lynn. No loud noise, no ball of fire. Jen Lynn had simply disintegrated and fallen into the stream as a cloud of ashes.

"Thank you." Said Kittara as she knelt beside the still retching Estrid.

Sventa seemed to walk down a set of steps over the stream that only she could see and then she knelt beside Estrid. She put her hand on the girl's head for a moment and then she'd gone. Instantly vanished, leaving Kittara and the girl once again in semi darkness. Had she gone too far by revealing herself and healing the child? She had only a brief conversation with Sikush about her role in his grand plan and she wasn't sure if she'd just helped or hindered it. Sventa moved through the grey back to Mendera and dreamed of getting the new corporeal body Sikush had promised her.

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Babak was used to most of his assignments being violent, he was after all a member of The Damned. He remembered a rather heated conversation between Sikush and the Maran Group ambassador. "My people aren't nursemaids, or peace keepers, they go in as a last resort and usual to kill or destroy."

He'd had his fair share of problems that needed taking care of with a sharp blade or a few disruption grenades, but today looked like being different.

"There ! See ? That building is where the head of the breeders lives." Said Chlo

The world spun again and solidified and the blue fields of a Menuran Sfargita farm could be clearly seen. He was stood in the rarely used bay 5 below the barracks and Chlo had been spinning views of Menura in front of his eyes until he was dizzy.

"You can step behind that harvester, try not to get seen."

His mission wasn't strictly secret, there was little to no chance of violence, yet he found his heart beating hard in his chest. As the picture became clearer than the walls of the bay Babak stepped onto Menura and started sneezing. Fucking Sfargita blooms, they always made him sneeze.

"Good luck." He heard Chlo call after him.

It was a harmless, almost comical mission, yet he felt more nervous than on Antuum ! Calming his thoughts he crouched behind the harvester and used Chlo to scan for life. Nothing, just the farmer and what was probably his wife in an upstairs room and no workers within a mile. Babak stood up and made for the side door of the long low two storey farmhouse.

"Be nice, smile a lot, no matter what he asks for say yes, I must have it !" Sikush had told him.

The door was locked, he knew it would be. He reached for Chlo and used her to move his reality to just inside the back kitchen of the farmhouse.

"Delian," he shouted, "Delian, it's Babak."

A shuffling sound came from a short distance away and then the sound of a door closing.

"Stay up there, it's someone to see me." He heard Delian say.

Babak had always thought of Menurans as almost children's story characters. They tended to be very plump, wore embroidered waist coats and were generally quite jolly. The miserable looking man walking into the kitchen was obviously the exception.

"Stop shouting my name you fool."

Delian sat down at the kitchen table and gave an annoyed wave at a chair as a sign for Babak to join him.

"It won't be cheap ! I'm taking a lot of risks."

Babak had nothing on him in the way of payment, but Chlo was ready to send him anything he needed. His orders were simple, give him anything he asks for. But Babak had also been given a few pieces of information as levers in case Delian was tempted to back out of the transaction.

"Didn't Sikush get your son out of a serious situation last year ?" He asked.

Babak didn't move as Delian slammed his fist down on the table. The middle aged farmer and head of the League of Breeders had whiskers in places that did indeed make him look like an over large pet, but he was now far from cute.

"I want plenty for this," he began, "especially this one."

Babak gave the smile he'd been practising in the mirror all the previous day.

"I am empowered to negotiate for Sikush, what do you want for it ?"

"I want twenty million imperial credits and twenty million Maran credits. The way you people squabble who knows which one of you is going to come out on top, so I want the Maran credits. I also want citizenship for my wife and I and for any children we may have."

It was a ludicrous sum, but Chlo was keeping quiet, not even a private gasp in his ear. Babak was being left alone to get on with then job and he was now a little perturbed. He gave the farmer a cold hard stare.

"The empire will always come out on top, The Damned will ensure that. We never forget a threat and we always find our enemies."

It was a very un-subtle threat and Babak noticed Delian looked a lot less belligerent than he had been.

"No insult meant," began the farmer, "Ok, forget the Maran money, but I want the twenty in imperial and the citizenships."

Babak could have said yes and gone home with what he came for, but he remembered Sikush getting angry about citizenships for children.

"A few highly fertile couples and we'll have a permanent colony on Mendera that we can't get rid of." Sikush had said.

"Citizenship for you and your wife, but not for any children. But I can offer you a house anywhere you'd like on Mendera."

The house was a good move to soften the refusal of citizenship for any future offspring and the farmer nodded and walked from the room. In a minute he was back with a box about three feet square with holes cut in the top.

"She's never been registered with the league," said Delian, "so officially she doesn't exist and you never got her from me."

The box moved slightly and Babak couldn't resist opening the top slightly, a gently chirrup greeting him as the top opened. Inside was what some thought was a legend, an immature female Menura Cat.

"Who is it for ?" Asked Delian.

"It's a present for a very special lady."

"For twenty million and a house she must be fucking special !"

"Oh she is," said Babak, "she really is."

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Sventa hid in the warehouse below level 40 on Ixir, but she wasn't happy. The creatures outside didn't belong here, they didn't belong anywhere. She'd seen them, seen them in their millions in the dark places in the wastes of eternity, but who could have brought them here, to Ixir ? Sventa shuddered as she thought of those who had the power to do such a thing.

"Bitch ! I see you !" Shouted Juvan Swire.

Sventa melted back through the floor and re-joined the other making their way up the stairs. Albas looked very ill and although he wasn't going to die there are limits to what even a member of The Damned can take. He'd been touched by something outside of his own reality down there and he might never fully recover. As to Kittara ? She seemed almost energised by it.

"He is up there," said Sventa, "the man who ran up the stairs. He has something on him you need. I will help you."

Estrid and Princess looked so tired that she wondered how they'd made it this far.

"The rest of you stay here, Sventa and I will deal with Swire." Said Kittara.

Kittara started up the stairs while Sventa faded and drifted off through the ceiling. Sventa almost let herself fade away, the forces here were so painful to her, but she just kept a whisper of herself close to Juvan.

"Stop ! Stop there, I have a blaster aimed at you."

Swire looked scared and Sventa wondered if he realised the girl in rags he was aiming at was the legendary Kittara.

"So, Juvan Swire, why shouldn't I turn you to a heap of ash ?" Asked Kittara

"I have here," he pulled his sleeve up to reveal a bracelet, "a device that scares the creatures away. I don't know how you got in, but you won't get out in one piece without my help."

"So why are you still here ?"

Swire indicated the numerous gadgets on the floor around the door.

"I'm guessing they're not there to improve my health."

"They were to stop the creatures getting in, but I take your point. So we have a stand-off of sorts Juvan. How do you propose we get around it ?"

"Take me with you. I can get you past the beasts outside if you give me your word to take me safely to where I want to go."

"Where would that be Juvan ?"

Before he could answer Estrid came up the stairs. Curiosity and worry about Kittara had gotten the better of her and she walked towards Kittara.

"Stop, is this some kind of trick ?"

Swire looked scared and he lifted his blaster and got ready to fire at Estrid.

"Not a good idea." Whispered Sventa in his right ear.

As Swire spun in the direction of the voice his shot went wild and hit the wall. Kittara had the chance she needed and was instantly next to him. She swiftly used her boot knife to sever his arm above the bracelet and pushed him back into the mines. Even Sikush had no idea who had made the mini mines, but he had given an impressive description of their action, and Kittara was curious to see them in action. Swire trod on the first one and froze as it fired a blue beam at him. Then another of the mines fired at him, then another until all of them had him at the centre of needle thin beams of blue light. Then for the merest fraction of a second Juvan Swire knew what it was like to be at the centre of a super nova.

"Wow that was impressive." Said Kittara.

The beams had gone off and nothing was left of Swire, not the slightest trace. Kittara noticed Sveta was fading again and grabbed her arm.

"You didn't need to kill him." Said Sveta

"No, I didn't."

Kittara pulled the bracelet off the wrist and threw the rest of the arm away.

"Estrid. Please collect up your toys so we can leave."

As Estrid collected the mini mines and put them back in their box Kittara led Sveta back to the stairs to call up the others. As they got there she pulled the angel round to face her.

"Ok, three times now you've done your best to keep my friends alive, yet you don't really know any of us. My guess is you want something in return?"

Kittara's look softened and she leant towards the angel and kissed her gently on the lips.

"You've earned my help. Ask for what you want and I'll do my best to help you?"

Now her chance had come Sveta forgot the rehearsed words that had been in her head for so long and she hung onto Kittara while sobbing. Estrid tried to approach, but Kittara waved her away.

"Do you know what reproduction involves for a Genova female?" She asked Kittara.

The warrior shook her head. Of course she didn't know, no one did and it wasn't something the Genova wanted to talk about.

"It takes four of our kind to anchor you in this reality, while two more hold onto the male. So the most intimate of moments between lovers is shared by six other, often strangers. Our sex life isn't fleeting as rumours say, it's grotesque."

She looked into Kittara's eyes and saw not a member of The Damned looking back at her, but a troubled young woman.

"I just want to feel, to love, to be real, to exist !!" Said Sveta.

Princess gave up on Kittara returning for them and slowly came up the stairs with Albas in one arm and her Yakkie in the other. They found to their amazement the sight of Kittara hugging the Genova and saying.

"You have my word. I can do this for you, and I will do it soon."

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Neosto looked at the pile of ash and noticed a few pieces of gristle in it, recognisable organic remains, he had to be losing his touch. At one time he'd have reduced Nestor to a fine powder in seconds, but perhaps he was hampered by some sort of affection for his ex-chief adviser? He looked around the group of his minions wondering which one to promote to be the next Nestor. Most avoided his gaze, a few showed distinct signs of stress.

One female junior invoker was actually crying! Only two were looking at him with expectation and one of those was a Deducer. He hated Deducers, especially male ones who always seemed to want to over explain everything. Ahh the female was a chaos creature a senior Invoker no less.

"You! Silky. Step forward."

She had a swagger as she moved forward, that didn't bode well. If only Nestor hadn't kept giving advice he didn't want to hear, over and over again! He almost regretted turn him to ash, almost. Chaos creatures were always coming across the rifts and very few escaped his clutches. A brief period of intense re-education, a little surgery and they made excellent minions.

"Yes my Lord?" Said Silky

Her name had so many parts he'd called her Silky for short when she joined his court several million years before. He doubted she was an immortal, but chaos creatures, even converted ones seemed to ignore the usual cycle of life and death.

“If I make you my Chief Adviser what do you consider your duties to be ?”

She was grinning at him, he’d be beating her within the month. But given what he’d heard of her sexual tastes she’d probably enjoy that.

“I see my duties my Lord as listening to various intelligence sources we have and the more reliable informers we have in the worlds beyond the rifts. I will then offer you what I believe to be sound and impartial advice based on that intelligence.”

It was the perfect answer, any of the fools now leaning against his walls and looking smug could have given him that answer. Neosto scowled at his assembled minions and was pleased to see several more showing signs of stress.

“How do you propose not to end up as a pile of ash on my floor ?”

Two elderly women, humans came into the room and started to clean up the mess. Neosto waved them away and started to move the ash around with his foot.

“By not pushing my advice too hard, even if I think the advice is right. I will wait for more opportune times when my Lord has rested.”

“Do you think Nestor’s advice was wise and correct ?”

Very few of his minions were still leaning on his walls, they sensed the possibility of two immolations in one day and they tried to get a good view without drawing too much attention to themselves.

“Yes my Lord.”

Neosto kicked the ash a few more times before beckoning the human cleaners over to clean it away.

“Explain.”

Still that look of insolent confidence on the girls face. He’d have her beaten of course, but he’d send her a present afterwards.

“Your, or rather our policy is to give our full support to the eternal (may he die in agony), in his war with the deities. That part of the policy everyone is agreed upon.”

She looked around the room and nearly every head nodded furiously. It was safe to do so, as this was all well-known policy and approved by Neosto.

“Nestor and I both believed it would be wrong to miss out on the opportunity to gain control of the rifts while The Damned are busy elsewhere.”

She was wrong, Nestor had been wrong, but he wasn’t in the mood to explain himself.

“I thank you for your advice, but it is ill conceived and offensive to my person.”

He stood up to leave as two of his high level demon guards took Silky off for a thorough, but non-life threatening beating. Neosto contemplated the right present to placate Silky enough to get her into his bed. Use the opportunity to get control of the rifts indeed, insanity.

They still didn’t realise the war wasn’t really with the deities, it was with ‘them’ as the eternal called them. Perhaps the naivety of his minions was a good thing ? If they knew the ‘them’ was the multiverse itself ? Neosto walked slowly back to his private rooms and imagined the pleasures to come with Silky.

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Sikush silently and invisibly followed Kittara and Sventa through the rift entrance and into the ruined village just past the entrance.

“Is it always this dark ?” Asked the angel.

“This is mid-morning, at night there are no lights, not even a star in the sky.” Answered Kittara.

Sikush knew the history of the village and of who had lived there a very long time before. They’d abducted and tortured pilgrims heading for the deeper rifts, raped the pretty ones, males and females. Sikush was determined that the village would never be rebuilt.

“Does anyone still live here ?” Asked Sveta

“No, there were too many battles, I was in some of them, maybe all of them. In the end we won and the front line was pushed back to the 7<sup>th</sup> rift, but nothing wants to live here now.”

He left them to walk to the City of the Lost God, while he hurried ahead to ensure they weren't walking into trouble. The city looked deserted, but he knew countless millions of undead were still trapped in the catacombs. That much darkness concentrated in a small area brought those who attempted to use the power and some of them were even more dangerous than Kittara. Nothing there today and no sign of any chaos creatures roaming the area.

“Welcome to the City of the Lost God.” Said Kittara.

Kittara pushed the gates and one swung wide open, while the other massive door came out of its hinges and crashed to the ground. Kittara took hold of Sveta's hand and led her into the ancient city. Sikush kept his distance but was sure Kittara got a quick glimpse of him, damn the girl was a bit too alert. He went straight to the Shrine of the Dark Angel and hid himself amongst the statues. Even Chlo would have trouble recognising the decayed limestone image as the eternal. Eventually Kittara came into the shrine followed by the Genova.

“What was this place Kittara ?”

“The holy of holies for the dark residents of this city, the place where even their servants feared to come.”

He listened to their talk and realised Sveta was terrified by the place. Kittara stared straight at him, but looked away shaking her head.

“Are you ok Kittara ?”

“Yes, I'm fine, it's just this place.”

Kittara led the angel to the centre of the square and stood her in the depression.

“I feel, I feel rooted here.”

“Don't try and move, this may take a while.”

Kittara pulled the Jangar root from a bag and sprinkled it around Sveta, before loudly exclaiming.

“Sident, Sident, movrae argental.”

Kittara took the next two ingredients out of the bag and threw them at the angel's feet.

“Sident, Sident, amoretil, nevesh.” She screamed.

The statues of the Dark Angels started to move, it had been countless millennia since any words of power had been uttered in the shrine and dark forces were waking, some of them best left asleep.

There were two more ingredients, both of them powerful dark magic icons. Kittara placed them both on Sveta's feet.

“Sident, Sident, leminah, augmeni.”

There was a definite cackling from the dark angels, who were now jumping up and down on their pedestals and Sikush decided to reveal himself and smile at her. As if disbelieving her own eyes, Kittara turned away from him. She removed the hearts from their stasis boxes, the demon heart she bit into and then placed it in front of Sveta.

“Sident.”

Then she moved behind Sveta, bit into the virgin's heart and placed it behind the angel.

“Sident.”

Kittara started to weave a small ball of dark power in front of her, like a tear of the Damned, but this was dark purple and seemed to crackle with energy.

“Damn this city, let it die.” She shouted.

She began to pull all of the dark energy of the city towards her and wind it up into the spinning ball of power. First of all the older buildings crumbled and fell, and then the newer ones. Whole streets fell and crashed to the ground and still Kittara kept pulling in more power. The sky started to become streaked by lightning, but the dark angels seemed to be enjoying the show and shrieked in delight.

Sikush decided to give her power, much more power than she herself could drain from the city, power enough to accomplish what no dark sorcerer had accomplished in billions of years. He felt her mind and placed a long forgotten end to the ritual there. Just a slight change, but enough to call upon the ancient deities themselves and demand their aid.

Kittara screamed the final words of the ritual.

“Sident, Sident, margano, humenda, svegah.”

Then she threw the entire sphere of power into the centre of the square and fell to her knees. There was a huge explosion and a cloud of hot air hit her, Kittara clung to the ground and closed her eyes. After a few minutes she looked up.

“What have I done ?”

Kittara looked at the depression in the centre of the square and all she could see was a heap of what looked like sticks and bones. She ran to it and knelt in front of it.

“Oh Sventa, you wanted a proper solid body and I’ve destroyed you.”

Kittara threw herself onto the heap of bones as if to cover her shame and started to weep. Then she felt the hand on her shoulder.

“Get up Kittara, she needs your help.” He said.

“I knew it was you.” She looked around. “Are you alone ?”

“Yes. I too can sometimes go on secret missions.”

Kittara held his hand and looked long and hard at the ruined landscape.

“All she wanted was a solid body, to feel the touch of another, to love. She’d helped me so many times, was it wrong to try ? Now I’ve killed her.”

“Kittara you’ve not killed her, you just didn’t get what you expected. Come on we must help her.”

As Sikush walked past her she looked again at the bundle of what looked like bones held together with leather straps and it seemed to move.

“Come on Sventa, the pain is over, let’s get you on your feet.” Said Sikush

Kittara went to help and between them they helped her to her feet.

“A dark angel !?” Said Kittara.

“Hardly surprising in this place, and you did change the last evocation.”

Sikush rubbed the dark angel’s legs and Kittara was certain that where he touched the muscle started to look stronger.

“Her wings Kittara, help me get them spread, so the blood gets to them.”

Sikush held one wing and Kittara the other as they gently spread them out to their full twelve foot span.

“Roarkkkk.”

“Her voice ! Is that how she’ll always sound ?”

“Kittara you’re beginning to sound like a cleric. She’ll speak well enough when she’s learned how to use this body. She’s now immortal, so there’s plenty of time for her to learn.”

Kittara looked around wondering if the place was still distorting her senses.

“She is immortal ?”

“Yes, you supplied so much energy and that last line. You changed a request for help into a demand to be obeyed. A bit risky, but it works and you now have your very own immortal dark angel.”

“I didn’t, couldn’t change the words. I wouldn’t know how.”

Sventa was giving her new leathery wings a few practise beats and already looked far stronger than the heap of bones she had looked earlier.

“You may not have known Kittara, but Mardoun did.”

The dark angel walked towards Kittara and grabbed her arm in very sharp talons.

“Kittara.”

The voice wasn’t unpleasant, but the claws would have seriously injured many people.

“You’ll have to teach her Kittara, she’s your responsibility now. You could try keeping her behind the force walls in your house, but I sense this lady will be hard to keep in or out of anywhere. Come on we should start walking to the rift entrance.”

Kittara started to pick Sventa up.

“No, let her walk, she needs to get her muscles working.”

One either side of Sventa they picked their way through the debris of the city and out onto the cobbled path through the ruined village.

“You unleashed a lot of power here Kittara, it will have been felt in some very distant places. I don’t think we’ve seen the last of these ruins.”

“Do you think she’ll ever forgive me ?”

“You made her an immortal with who knows what powers, she’ll forgive you.”

Sikush had the Dark Angel he needed, the first created since Tomma-Goran himself ruled the City of the Lost God, but the price was the destruction of the city. As to the undead ? He really didn’t see how they could now be kept imprisoned, some would find an exit to the 1<sup>st</sup> rift and then the rest would follow.