

# OF DECEPTION AND DIVINITY



Death and Destiny Trilogy, Book 3

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## PROLOGUE

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### *Primordial Waters of Nun Over 500 Years Ago*

Apep slithered through the ancient waters, his fifty-foot orange-and-black body of scales and strength gliding toward the shore and the battling witches. Forked tongue preceded lethally sharp fangs. He could taste his win in the black, smoky air, succulent and satisfying.

The sky opened and rained down bolts of lightning. The waters roughened, swirling in a vortex of magic and menace.

The god of war, chaos and death dipped deep below the water's surface, avoiding the blazing inferno the water witch had turned the liquid pool of life and death into. Ah, yes, Apep did so love fire witches, even more so when they came undone. And this one, well, her sinful soul would make a delicious meal for Ammit, the Eater of Hearts, the Devourer of the Dead.

Blessed war raged above him, damned souls below, sinking into the depths of Nun. The souls would find no peace in Duat, the realm of the dead and Apep's home, which Ra dared to cross over each night, shining his sun in the most reprehensible of places.

But not tonight and not for the next five centuries. Ra would lose, and Apep's influence in the mortal world would expand and deepen. No one could stop him. Not Ra, not without Ma'at by his side. Now, all he had was Sekhmet. And the cat goddess wouldn't be enough, had never been enough to thwart his violent toxicity, the saccharine addiction of chaos, falsehood and disorder mortals so loved.

Leaving behind the heated water, Apep came ashore. Marble-black eyes glistened with anticipation.

A thirty-foot tidal wave rose from Nun, a whirl of vicious water. Water spikes formed as it churned, harnessing the lethal intent of its mistress.

Wind whipped. Thunder crackled. And fire rampaged.

They spared nothing and all was dark, including the hearts of the dueling witches.

Whatever humanity they once claimed had bled away with each spell cast and life taken. They cared not for those sacrificed in their brutal battle to the death. Apep doubted if they recalled why they fought at all, but fight they did, with malevolent skill and gods-given magic.

The swirling spikes of water crashed onto the shore, the water witch's eyes blazing bright blue with power and murder. It didn't stop, moving at a speed the god's snake eyes could barely track.

Yet the path was clear, and the fire witch, surrounded by hundreds of balls of fire, stood her ground, an immovable force ready to meet an immovable force.

Slam. The spikes of water crashed into the balls of fire, up and over, drenching the fire witch's rotating weapons of war. The spikes of water pushed the fire witch back.

“Into the water with you,” the water witch screamed. “To your death.” Hands raised, palms out, the witch shoved against the night air, forcing the swirling spikes deeper into the balls of fire.

Back the fire witch went, her fire magic and endless lightning bolts no match for the water witch whose element of power soaked her feet and fueled her spells.

“Into the water. Into the water. Into. The. Water.”

Fireballs of protection keened, then exploded, a roaring of fire witch magic too weak to hold form and shield its mistress.

The churning spikes of water closed in, piercing fire-hot skin but dissolving under the heat of the fire witch’s molten body.

But the damage had been done, the fire witch’s balls of protection were no more. The witch was nearly drained of magic and energy.

The water witch snarled, sensing her victory, the same as Apep. Blue eyes as cold as the primordial waters from which she drew upon watched as liquid binds wrapped around the fire witch’s body, tentacles slowly pulling her away from land and into the wet, waiting embrace of Nun.

Apep slunk closer to the battle unwilling to miss the fall of Ra’s hope.

Desperate and cursing, the fire witch dug her fingers into the marshy ground, breaking nails and bones as she fought against the gripping tide of water drawing her to her death. Wet, red-gold hair clung to scalp, green eyes glistened with fear and vile screams of retribution scorched the wetland around her.

She knew. Yes, she knew.

Just a few more feet.

“Into the water with you!” The water witch yelled her spell over the top of her shrieking enemy and the thunderous rapids of the river, eager to add one more soul to its ravenous maw. “Into the water with y—”

Blood spurted from an arm suddenly ripped in two. The water witch howled her disbelief and pain. Cherry liquid escaped her mauled limb, and her face twisted in agony. She lifted her other arm, and her trembling lips spat a spell at the beast before her. The water witch’s severed arm hung from the predator’s mouth. The teeth clamped around it were long, thick, and bone-crushingly sharp.

Out her spell went, shards of water slamming into the black-and-gray fur of the gigantic cat, knocking him back but not down.

The cat ducked and dodged the next attacks, running with a swiftness that angered and confused the water witch.

Apep moved even closer, his anger leaving a swath of slimy scales in his wake. Up he went, shedding the lower half of his body and taking on the form of a two-legged male, his head still that of a hissing snake.

He’d seen this creature of Sekhmet’s twice before. Apep smiled, as much as one could with the head of a snake. “It won’t work, brother.” The god glanced upward at the starless sky. “The Mngwa is too late. Your fire witch has already failed. She is more *isfet* than *ma’at*. I win.”

But he hadn’t. Not yet. Not with the Mngwa stalking the water witch and keeping his massive body between her and his mate. His mere presence fueled the magic of the fire witch and granted her precious seconds to regain her strength and composure.

A couple of minutes, that was all the fire witch had needed. And the blasted cat had given it to her, willing to die for his witch, even though she’d killed many in her thirst for victory and vengeance.

Apep glanced back to the ancient waters. The rapids were beginning to calm, the chains on the ocean floor forming and preparing to reclaim its prisoners. He could hear the shrill screams of Mami Wata as she watched on from the Realm of the Gods, her water witch unable to stand against the combined might of Oya's chosen one and Sekhmet's Mngwa.

The god of chaos and disorder crept forward, black eyes traveling from the water witch and to the fire witch, making her way to her feet, protected behind the bulk of her familiar.

The beast roared when his mistress stood to her full height of six feet, hands and eyes on fire, chest heaving, and magic coalescing.

A towering wall of water rose from Nun, raced toward the shore, heeding the command of its water mistress. Liquid hands shot forward, grasping and clutching yet finding only layer upon layer of sizzling fire.

Fire and water grappled, linked in a deadly, violent clench. Chaos and disorder at its finest, *isfet* personified.

No, Ra would not win today. Nor would Oya secure her freedom and Sàngó the return of his consort. Mami Wata, well, the goddess of water and its creatures would simply have to wait for the fall of Ra and the ascension of Apep, of *ifset*. A seat beside the new King of Gods would be her reward, the mortal realm Mami Wata's betrothal gift.

Oya dropped from the sky, her physical form snatched from the Realm of the Gods by Nun's power-dampening chains. The chains yanked the goddess down and into her watery prison for another five hundred years. Her fire witch had broken too many of Ma'at's divine principles for the goddess of wind, thunderbolts, and fire to do anything other than succumb to her endless punishment.

Water and fire engulfed the land, the battling witches the epicenter of the disaster, their magic out of control, their minds on nothing but killing the other.

Apep cast his eyes upward one more time. There, plummeting toward Nun, a mystical chain around her ankles, the other working to secure the struggling goddess' wrists, was Mami Wata. Beautifully naked and cursing Ra with each downward spiral, Mami Wata raised her free hands and shoved the fleeting embers of her godly power outward and toward the dueling witches.

The second chain captured her wrists, hauling the mutinous goddess into Nun and to her waiting prison, Ra's cruel irony for a water goddess whose very existence aided Apep's coup.

A howl of abject horror had Apep's head and eyes lowering. Gone was the mountain of swirling fire. Gone was the wall of ice water. Gone was the Mngwa. His body, turned inside out, was now nothing but bloody chunks of organs and innards, a puddle of gooey hair and blood where once a mighty cat had stood.

Mami Wata's fleeting magical energy still sparked in the air around the dead beast, the fire witch's shield broken beyond repair. What was left of the mortal's sinful heart was no more. Her mate was slaughtered right before her eyes, the witch powerless to protect him.

"No, beloved. Please, don't die. Don't die. Nooooo!"

She bellowed her heartache to the quiet night sky. Tears soaked the remains of her mate over which she hung her head, shoulders shuddering from endless tears, knees and hands in the mud, defenses down and open for attack.

The water witch didn't disappoint. A tide of water grew behind the weeping fire witch, forming hundreds of spikes as it barreled toward its prey.

It struck, and Apep waited for the sobs of mourning to morph into cries of pain and misery. Instead, an explosion of fire and fury sent him and the water witch flying backward.

"All your fault. If it's the last thing I do, I swear, I'll kill you."

Everywhere he looked there were flames, untamed and hellfire hot. Not even the ancient waters of Nun dared to challenge the inferno, the water witch no longer able to command the element.

Apep heard her screeched spells from smoke-filled and burning lungs, frantic and futile.

Dropping to the ground, Apep returned to his preferred corporeal form, the fifty-foot snake. Slithering away from the fiery tempest, Apep rejoined Nun. The water was far too hot for comfort, the fire witch's magic unchained, her broken and bleeding heart a threat to every living creature.

Ra was a fool. Fire witches were too destructive, impatient and soft-hearted to defeat anyone, no less their base instincts.

*Every five hundred years, in the year of Ra, a fire witch born to the Temple of Oya and a water witch born to the Temple of Mami Wata will mark the beginning of the end and rebirth. Ma'at demands balance, and these witches will bring both destruction and another five hundred years of peace for mortals. All the old will be washed away like sand after an early morning tide. Pray for Oya's fire witch and her invincible Mngwa, for they will be all that stands between mortals and a liquid grave with serpents. Pray for Mami Wata's water witch, whose desire for power will know no bounds. Mortals cannot know love without hate, good without evil, fire without water. The Day of the Serpents will be upon you, repent your sins before it's too late.*

Ra's decree over a thousand years ago, whispered in the ears of preternaturals, was passed along like an inevitable but unwanted disease, from one generation to the next. Ra was a shrewd god, indeed, seeing the profit of the war between Oya and Mami Wata for the gods of the realm. Yet such benefits were outweighed by the cost Ra had not anticipated but eventually paid.

From a safe distance, Apep watched as the fire spread, the water witch morbidly silent. Yes, Ammit would devour many heart-souls tonight, beginning with the shattered heart of Ra's fire witch. The woman was no legend but a wonderful blight on the human realm.

Slinking down and away, Apep began his journey home where he'd wait, impatiently, for the next fire witch to be born. Would she be as gloriously chaotic as her predecessors? Apep knew she would, knew that not even her mate would have the power to constrain her fury.

Five hundred years, yes, five more centuries and another battle between water and fire and Apep's coup would be complete. The Reign of Isfet was a foregone conclusion, and the Day of Serpents would be his rise to King of Gods.