

## The Last Emperor

### Chapter 27 – City Of The Lost God

**“Everyone wanted to begin the fight for the City of the Lost God, but armies weren’t easy things to move. The Dredger camp near Mount Erran had to be packed up and everyone moved back to the stockade.”**



General Dhūlen had seen the Goddess before; he’d attended the gathering of imperial advisers, who’d welcomed her to Galla’s palace in Aarabash. Not used to the etiquette of such meetings, he’d put out his hand to shake hers. There had been a hush, with Dhūlen left looking at his slightly scaly hand, which was creased by many scars. Estrin had saved him from further embarrassment, by grasping his hand and shaking it firmly. Her hand had felt cool and there had been a brightness in her green eyes. Apart from that, he remembered little. That evening had been a huge whirl, talk of laying siege to the City of the Lost God, merging with sadness that Tomma-Goran was no longer among the living.

“The divine one is expecting you.....Go straight in.” Said the minion.

A minion of the Goddess, he’d seen a few of them around wherever Estrin was staying. He’d thought they were created as required, but Nethra had told him they were the oldest and most faithful of Estrin’s clerics. None of them looked particularly old, but serving a living God probably meant looking as they did.....Forever. Used as her servants and her guards, there was always a good number of minions around Estrin. The Goddess was currently living in a large tent near the western edge of the stockade. She walked towards him and took hold of his hand.

“General Dhūlen.....I’m pleased you had time to come and see me.”

Had anyone ever refused an invitation to see her ? Dhūlen doubted it.

Pretty looking in a way, he knew she’d based her appearance on the Dredger women. Estrin could have been Maya’s older sister, or maybe an aunt.

“Come.....Sit with me.” Said Estrin.

Sit with her meant next to her, on quite a small sofa. Officially the Terak had never believed in the nine divines, but Dhūlen knew Estrin could lay waste to half the rifts, if she was of a mind to. There was no denying the immense power she wielded. Talk to a cleric and you heard the history of the Gods according to the official religion of the rifts. Consult a good librarian and you’d hear a more pragmatic account of life, the multiverse and the Gods.

General Dhūlen preferred the pragmatic history of the seven separate dimensions, which formed the seven rifts. The multiverse was sentient according to the pragmatic view of things. The multiverse had created all the Gods, from the old reptilian deities, right up to the nine divines. Of course there was a whole mass of minor Gods and deities that seemed to have sprung up from somewhere. Then there were beings of power like the Silver Lady. It all sounded like a mess, but if you believed in a thinking multiverse, most of it made sense. There had to be a large number of deities, to get everything done. Plus.....If a top level God like Tomma died, there had to be someone to take over his essential skills and self-appointed duties.

“Muzzie told me you’re concerned about me hunting at night.” Said Estrin.

“Not now I know it’s you.” Said Dhūlen. “We found several dead chaos creatures and the obvious conclusion, was that a larger chaos beast was feeding on them.”

“I never actually eat their flesh, General.” Said Estrin.

She laughed, as if it was the most preposterous notion she’d ever heard. He’d seen the remains in the cave and.....The Gods seemed to work to a different moral code to their subjects.

“I was wondering if you planned to hunt these things regularly ?” Asked Dhūlen. “If you are, I can cut back on the night patrols. Our fighters need to catch up on their sleep all the way back to.....When we hired them. We do work them hard.”

“While I’m here, or on the Pilgrim Trail.” Said Estrin. “Once the army begins to move close to The City of the Lost God, I’ll hunt closer to the Great River and the surrounding farmlands.....Perhaps as far out as the Ring Of Volkin.....Would you like to come hunting with me, General ? You can see what I do.”

“If you really don’t mind.....That would be wonderful.” Said Dhūlen.

“Good.....Bring Belso and a dozen fighters here just after dark.” Said Estrin. “My minions can transport you all to.....Now where to hunt ? I heard some pilgrims have been attacked on the trail into Tandalla. I think, we’ll hunt there tonight.”

“Perfect, I’m looking forward to it.” Said Dhūlen.

Not a total lie, he was looking forward to seeing how the Goddess ripped apart her enemies. On the other hand, there was an old army saying that only a fool gets between a deity and their prey.

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Runa was trying to deal with the militia in Tandalla. It was the constant battle to get towns and cities to allow their best fighters to leave and join Muzzie’s army. She’d win of course, no one could say no to the emperor. They could delay things though and cause a few good fighters to change their minds. There wasn’t time for the usual games and petty squabbles, so Muzzie had given her permission to use bribery. The head of the Tandalla militia had stopped objecting to her recruiting who she wanted, after a relatively small number of gold coins had changed hands. Having Aeony there definitely helped. No one tends to argue with a dark angel, especially one who’d thrown quite a few Tandallan warriors from the city walls.

“The numbers aren’t going as well as I’d hoped.” Said Runa. “We’ll need to be here a month to sign up a couple of thousand good fighters.”

There with a hundred of the best; Dhūlen had personally selected her escort. Tandalla was part of the empire, a safe destination. Like their tents erected on the green in front of the main temple, Muzzie’s warriors were there to be seen, not to fight. To a local fighter with hungry children and little in their pocket, the tents on the green were a constant promise of a better life. It was working, but at an annoyingly slow pace.

“I heard that they’re accepting the greys in Annill.” Said Aeony. “I’m sure Muzzie wouldn’t mind and Dhūlen seems to like mature fighters.”

“Grandfather warriors according to Caspian.” Said Runa. “The greys fought well at the Necropolis though.....They stood their ground when attacked. While we have a little time though, I think we should carry on hiring the younger experienced fighters.”

Galla’s pet seemed to be her pet now; he always found somewhere to perch in her tent. Runa had come to the conclusion that Bird was bored by Aarabash and the farmlands of the fifth rift. If Galla minded losing her feathered companion, she’d never mentioned it.

“Time.....You don’t have time.” Said Bird.

He fluttered across her tent and landed on top of Runa's notes, on the disappointing rate of recruitment. Almost unconsciously, Runa took a live Nesh bug out of a jar and gave it to him.

"He looks bigger than when I last saw him." Said Aeony. "Or, I might be imagining it."

"You're not going crazy; he seems to have growth spirts." Said Runa. "Eventually he might need his own tent.....Come on Bird, explain yourself?"

There was the change, where Bird stopped pecking at Runa's papers and became very serious and very still.

"The City of the Lost God have the oldest Magicians Guild on the rifts." Said Bird. "They're not fools; their Seers are constantly listening for the name of their city, mixed in with hostile intent. Not just the guild, there are Seers in other cities, eager to earn a few favours, or some gold coins. They know.....They've known the next target for the army, since Muzzie began sending out scouts along the Pilgrim Trail. You don't have plenty of time; you have none at all. The City of the Lost God are already building their defences."

"Thank you for telling us." Said Aeony. "I'll let Muzzie know as soon as possible."

"The portals at the Ring of Volkin are being used again, the first time in many centuries. Not just fighters coming home to fight for the city of their birth. Sorcerers are arriving too.....Tell Muzzie it won't be an easy fight to take the city."

"We will, we'll make sure he knows." Said Runa.

Bird began pecking at her things again and Runa dug three Nesh bugs out the jar. She placed them on the table and watched as her pet chased them around. The final one nearly made it out of the tent. Whatever he became when linked to the Silver Lady, had gone. He was once again just a fairly clever pet.

"Wow, we should have assumed they'd know." Said Aeony. "So soon though.....I lived there most of my life and I still underestimated them."

"No time, but there is always some time." Said Runa. "Muzzie can't fight a war without a large army. We'll begin recruiting the greys straight away. I might even look through the prison cells before we leave Tandalla. Any experienced fighter with their limbs intact will do."

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Everyone wanted to begin the fight for the City of the Lost God, but armies weren't easy things to move. The Dredger camp near Mount Erran had to be packed up and everyone moved back to the stockade. Patrols needed to be assessed as to their usefulness. Some regular patrols might be increased, while others might be stopped. Recruitment was a key factor, the army needed to treble its size, to be sure of victory when it fought the city created by Tomma-Goran. None of these things could be done in a hurry; not if you wanted them done right. Above all those things, an army really does march on its stomach. Unless the food supply lines were protected, Muzzie's warriors would soon know what hunger felt like. Left to her own devices, Nethra had joined Bizzi, as he moved his people back to the stockade at the Void Gate. Maya was with them of course.....She turned up everywhere, whether she was invited, or not.

"The problem is.....We erected some of our tents, in amongst the rubble." Said Bizzi. "It made it quicker to get started at first light. Now.....It's a damned nuisance."

"Can you leave the tents and get new ones?" Asked Nethra. "We must be able to arrange for replacements from Annill."

"You can't replace personal items and memories." Said Maya. "Dredger families carry everything with them as they travel. They won't simply abandon those tents."

“Yes, those tents are their homes to them.” Said Bizzi. “We will need to pack everything up and take it all with us....Every last treasured piece of family history.”

Nethra understood, she'd brought a few small items Merrick had given her. Mostly small items of jewellery in pockets, or pinned to her clothing. She'd have killed anyone who attempted to take them from her. Hopefully, she'd have a few days at home before the battle for the City of the Lost God. Mariba it had been originally called by Tomma-Goran, though few alive had even heard that name.

“Then I will help you.” Said Nethra. “If it takes more strong backs, I will find them for you. Everything your Dredgers think precious to them....Will be packed and moved.”

Easily said and promised, but packing up the camp took hours. Nethra kept her word, packing up every tent, no matter how much rubble it meant trudging over. Her wings helped keep her on her feet, if the rubble began to shift. Muzzie hadn't set a time limit, but there was a constant feeling that everything was going too slowly. Everyone was folding up tents and packing up personal possessions. No one was guarding the large pile of boxes and bags. Maya noticed them first, simply because she didn't recognise them. Thousands of Dredgers had been in the camp, but Maya noticed something that didn't look right.

“There.....Those aren't our people.” Said Maya. “No one I know wears a green scarf.....It's bad luck.” Maya had earned a lot of trust and respect. If she thought the two people pulling at boxes were suspicious, then they were suspicious. No question about it.

“Hey.....You two !” Yelled Nethra. “Stay where you are.”

They tried to run away and only the guilty run away; it was one of the truths of the multiverse. Innocent people never pull a knife out of their belt and attempt to run away.

“I see them.....Damn thieves.” Yelled Bizzi.

Nethra needed a little warning to fly across places like the rubble. She needed to build up anger, to the point of rage. Besides, Bizzi and several adult Dredgers were getting close to the two suspected bandits. Nethra ran while shouting encouragement.

“Gut them, Bizzi.” She yelled. “Let the growlers feast on their entrails.”

“They're not Dredgers.....Not our people.” Shouted Maya.

Bizzi looked likely to get to the thieves first and that worried Nethra. Bizzi had already died once in Seren's Edge. Full death, the type that's normally permanent. Too much injury for even a Dredger body to cope with and....That's it, you're dead. The Silver Lady had brought him back, but she wasn't there with them, in the shadow of the holy mountain. Besides, she might think giving Bizzi a third try at life, was a little excessive. Nethra used her wings and still arrived near the bandits after Bizzi was swinging his sword at them. Nethra was also tired, even after flying less than fifty yards.

“Careful, Bizzi.....Wait for the others to get there.” Yelled Maya.

Dredgers were tough, almost legendary in being able to fight with dreadful wounds. Not perhaps that good at using a sword, but they were famous for not giving up. Pick a fight with a Dredger, male or female, and you had better win. Once engaged in a fight, only death stopped an angry Dredger.

“Wait for me.....I'll soon be there.” Yelled Nethra.

Bizzi swung his sword and missed. The closest of the bandits swung his sword and cut deep into Bizzi's left thigh. It was exactly how Nethra had feared the fight would go. She'd kill both of the thieves, but Bizzi would die; hacked to pieces by a dozen deep sword cuts.

“Bizzi.....Keep away from them.” Yelled Maya.

There would be no fresh miracles for Bizzi, Nethra knew that. When Caspian had faced the Ezzagory, many thought he would die. A larger number thought he would win though. He was after all, the

Great Caspian from the City of the Lost God. Perhaps Caspian had been granted a miracle ? Whatever the truth, the majority had expected him to win. As Bizzi swung his sword again, the unexpected miracle arrived. Bizzi's sword entered the throat of the thief. A quick pull to one side and the bandit bled out on the ground, while convulsed with pain.

"Again.....Same again, Bizzi." Yelled Nethra.

Bizzi stumbled while stepping around a large stone and that seemed to be it. He'd beaten one of the bandits, but the other one could easily thrust their sword into his back. Nethra was already wondering about how she was going to tell Muzzie that she'd failed to keep Bizzi safe. He was the leader of the Dredgers after all, an essential part of the new emperor's long term plans.

"You.....I know you !" Yelled Nethra.

Not a bluff, she was close enough to recognise the thief. A female hybrid with a hood covering most of her head. Bright yellow hair stuck out of the side of the hood. It was the hair that was the clincher. Merrick had several female rogues in his gang, but the yellow haired hybrid was a one off.

"Who is it ?" Yelled Maya.

Everyone ended up clustered around Bizzi and the yellow haired rogue. Several adult Dredgers were carrying shovels and were quite capable of killing Utu, the yellow haired. It was as if Utu turned to say something to Nethra. That was all Bizzi needed, he thrust his blade into her back. Bizzi lived and would be a hero, but Utu had died. Nethra wasn't friends with the yellow haired hybrid, but she had been one of Merrick's people. That also made her one of her people.

"Well done, Bizzi.....You got them both." Said Maya.

"Yes.....I thought you were in trouble there....For a while." Said Nethra.

Nethra did what was expected of her. She went through Utu's pockets, pulled down her hood, and had a good look at her face.

"Did you know her ?" Asked Bizzi.

"I thought I did, but now I can see her face.....She's just another dead thief." Said Nethra.

It all made sense really, if you had a gang of bandits who needed to eat. The Void Gate was being periodically aimed at Annill. No one would bother to look at who was using it to come back the other way. Merrick had obviously seen an opportunity, a chance for a little thievery. When she saw Merrick, she'd run through what were, and weren't, acceptable targets for banditry. There was a full purse in Utu's pocket.....The thieving had obviously been going well. Nethra gave the purse to Bizzi, to use as he saw fit.

"Come on.....We've still a dozen tents to pull down and pack up." Someone muttered.

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Muzzie hadn't known what to expect, when the Hive Mother had mentioned giving him the egg for safe keeping. It sounded as though she'd meant when he was fully established as emperor of the rifts. The more he thought about the conversation, the more he remembered being referred to as the perfect person to look after the egg.....Once he'd been crowned in Leng. No, he hadn't got it wrong, yet there was Ginnda in her temporary lair and there on the floor near her.....Was a large and very leathery looking, egg. He'd sent for Faal, in the hope that during his long and often strange life, he'd learned something about the eggs of the Ancient Ones. Muzzie had run a popular tavern. In fact, in theory at least, he still owned the best tavern in the City of the Lost God. He knew that if in doubt about what to say, stating the obvious gave you time to think.

"Well, Ginnda.....It is a very large egg." Said Muzzie.

"It is.....Nethra seemed to think the Ancient Ones watched it, at all times." Said Ginnda. "As I received no hindrance in bringing it to you.....I'm assuming they approve of you looking after it."

In a way it was an honour to be given the egg. In another way, Ginnda was playing him. If anything happened to the egg, the Ancient Ones were likely to give him a very long and agonising death. On the other hand, if it was to ever hatch out.....Having a young ancient one as part of his court, would make his army unstoppable. Like many things on the rifts, it was all a huge gamble.

“Touch it.....See if you sense what I feel coming from it.” Said Ginnda.

Faal was supposed to be there for this part, but he was obviously delayed. He was probably having trouble with his Shuud again. The beast seemed to have its own ideas about where Faal wanted to go. Touching the leathery egg of the most dangerous entity on the rifts, was like juggling razor sharp sabres, or at least it felt that way to Muzzie. Faal being vaporised was one thing, it was his job after all. Muzzie had hoped that being emperor would mean an end to risking his life in such a way.

Waiting for Faal would look weak and being honest.....He wanted to know what the egg felt like.

“Nethra believes the egg might be unique.” Said Muzzie.

“She may be right.” Said Ginnda. “Nothing lasts forever, even the Ancient Ones. If the Old Gods could become extinct, so can the Ancient Ones. You may now be in possession of their last unborn child. Think of what that might mean, my emperor.”

He had and although most of his ideas were exciting, a few were incredibly scary. If he got it wrong, if the egg was damaged.....He might end up in a cavern somewhere, being tortured for several millennia. It was no good; he had to put his hands on the egg. Muzzie knelt in front of the egg and gently placed both his hands on it.

“It’s very cool.” He said.

“And leathery.” Said Ginnda.

“Yes.....Yes.....And leathery.”

It was that game again, stating the obvious in the hope of a good idea popping into his head. The egg was large, cool to the touch and.....It was as leathery as the average reptile’s egg. There was something else too, though it was very faint. Slow and quiet, but definitely there.

“I’m sure I can....Yes I can feel it through my fingers.....A heartbeat.” Said Muzzie.

“I feel that too.....It is alive and one day, my emperor. It will hatch out.” Said Ginnda.

There was something about the slow and steady heartbeat of the unborn Ancient One. It made him feel relaxed, comfortable and completely safe. If he hadn’t touched the egg he might never have decided to trust whatever might hatch out in a few years, or in a few millennia.

“And when it does hatch out.....It’s likely to devour everyone it sees.” Said Faal. “This is a trap; Muzzie.....Let the Hive Mother keep the egg. Have nothing to do with it.....All the consequences I can think of from keeping the egg, are bad.”

Strangely he tended to agree with Faal, but he had felt the heartbeat. Muzzie didn’t trust Ginnda that much and he even had his doubts about Faal. That egg though, that steady unborn heart. That he trusted completely. One thing he was certain of.....If the egg was damaged, no one in his circle of advisers, his army, or the people who supported his army.....None of them would survive the vengeance of the Ancient Ones.

“Faal.....I have need of that memory of yours.” Said Muzzie. “No arguments.....I’m keeping the egg. What I need is all the information you can give me, everything that you think I need to know, to keep it safe.”

“I am very pleased to hear you say that.” Said Ginnda.

“Didn’t you hear me.....This is madness.” Yelled Faal. “You have to send it away....Let it be kept deep underground in the Hive Mother’s lair in Segin-Unadaris. From what I’ve heard, it was entrusted to her.”

Muzzie had a little of Galla's problem, old joints attached to old bones. He groaned a little, as he got to his feet. He wasn't really that angry. Faal had been rude before but unlike Galla, he hadn't known him for a great many years. Muzzie thought his magician, his eighth imperial adviser, needed putting in his place. He prodded Faal very hard, in the chest.

"You were given to me by the Silver Lady." Said Muzzie. "My magician, sworn to serve me without question. Yet here you are.....Questioning. I have decided to keep the egg, so we shall be keeping it here and keeping it safe. Do you understand?"

"Yes, of course I do.....Please forgive me." Said Faal.

"Put a brand on him.....Then he'll always know who he serves." Said Ginnda.

Muzzie ignored the comment and moved closer to Faal. For better or worse the magician was his eighth adviser, his lucky number eight. Get rid of him and there's be no obvious replacement.

"I know you don't want to, but.....Pick up the egg, Faal." Said Muzzie. "In your bare hands.....Carry it for me while we talk."

There were the necessary polite comments to Ginnda, before they left. Faal looking very uncomfortable about carrying the egg, as they walked the short distance to Muzzie's chambers.

"You can feel it.....I can tell by your face." Said Muzzie. "You can feel the beating heart."

"Yes.....And I don't mind admitting that it terrifies me." Said Faal.

"I need to know everything there is to know, about the egg." Said Muzzie. "Yes, there are risks.....But it can also make my empire unassailable. Help me Faal, be my expert on the Ancient Ones and their unborn child."

"I will, my emperor.....Of course I will." Said Faal. "Soon we'll have access to the forbidden section of the Great Library, in the City of the Lost God. There lies the best collection of ancient scrolls on the entire rift. There is where I will become your expert on the Ancient Ones."

Faal left and Muzzie pushed the egg into a drawer, underneath some of his clothes. The Hand of Arcadis was useful; it had a spell to make anything invisible without damaging it. Muzzie made the egg invisible and then rearranged the clothes around it.

"Perfect.....Everyone will assume it's in the secure stores." Muzzie muttered.

Aeony came and went twice. On the first occasion she told him that the City of the Lost God already knew his army was getting ready to attack. On the second occasion they had sex, which put him in a far more relaxed mood.

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Hunting chaos creatures with one of the nine divines. Belso Gurd could imagine how proud his mother would be of him, if she was still alive. The minions of a Goddess had brought him to the Pilgrim Trail as it snaked through the hills near Tandalla. The minions were women mainly; the most faithful of Estrin's clerics, though a few were men. Rumoured to be of almost unimaginable age, they'd served Estrin-Okanan since the rifts had been young. There was something about their eyes, an emptiness. Belso wondered if they'd long since ceased to be....Whatever creatures they'd once been. The minions had also brought General Dhülen into the hills, along with one of the regular night patrols. It was a very dark night; even the ever present ultraviolet wash was weak. Belso had assumed Estrin would arrive late, just to make a point. She was one of the nine after all. Much to his surprise she'd been there waiting for them.....

"I've been along the trail as far as Roruss Rock, General." Said Estrin. "There are pilgrims on the trail, travelling in several slow moving waggons. No beasts to do the work, even the children are pushing the waggons. They'll all be very tired.....A perfect target for hungry beasts of the darkness."

"There's little light, even the ultraviolet wash is weak tonight." Said Dhülen.

“Did you make yourself known to the pilgrims, Estrin ?” Asked Belso.

Using her first name felt strange, but the Goddess had insisted. She was Estrin to everyone, though her minions still bowed to her when using her name.

“No.....As far as the pilgrims know, it’s just another very dark and lonely night in the hills. We could openly travel with them, which would make them far less likely to be attacked. Or we could silently follow them and deal with whatever might consider them to be prey. I’ll accept your decision on this, General.” Said Estrin.

The right way was to let the pilgrims be attacked and hope not too many of them had to be buried next to the Pilgrim trail. Tell them a Goddess was there to protect them and it would become something like a temple outing. So noisy and well lit, that no self-respecting creature of the darkness would turn up. Would Dhūlen go with the right choice though ? He might feel a need to be a nice guy.

“I think we should follow the pilgrims, without letting them know we’re here.” Said Dhūlen. “How about you, Belso.....What do you think ?”

“That really is the only sensible option.” Said Belso.

“Good.....I’ll have my minions following at a distance.” Said Estrin. “From what I’ve seen, these beasts like to come at their victims from behind.”

There had been no talk about divine guards, but there she was. A female minion in plain grey robes, keeping close to him. Belso was tempted to ask her name, but immensely old minions with empty eyes, made him nervous. He was glad she was there though, keeping close enough to offer protection, but not getting in his way. Belso sat on the dry ground, about thirty yards from where the waggons would go past. He sat with his knees up, his chin resting on his knees. The guardian minion sat near him and so far, hadn’t uttered a word. It was no use, Belso needed to break the silence.

“Do you have a name ?” he asked.

“There are just the two of us.....Talk and I’ll know your words are meant for me.”

A pleasant voice and like Estrin, she had the scent of sacred oils, which hung in the air around her. The Pilgrims obviously didn’t realise that travelling silently, meant more than just not speaking to one another. The sound of their waggons clattering over the uneven trail, could be heard for quite some time, before Belso saw a waggon silhouetted against the slight glow of the wash. He remained where he was, as did the minion.

On came the waggons, still clattering. They had edible birds somewhere; their noises became quite clear as the waggons went past. Kitchen implements hung up on pegs, bashed into other kitchen implements. Pilgrim families were famous for not speaking all night, but somewhere.....A baby let out a quiet cry. To a predator, the noises had to be enticing, a sign of enough food to last for many days. Belso didn’t get up until the last waggon was just a dark smudge against the ever present wash.

“Now we move.” He said.

Something was out there, just a few yards from the trail. As Belso and the minion trotted after the waggons, it was there, keeping up with them. He didn’t want a fight there; the idea was to have the battle where everyone could join in, especially Estrin. Besides, he wasn’t totally sure whatever seemed to be keeping pace with them, was an enemy. He moved closer to the minion and pointed where he could just about see.....Something. The minion nodded at him. Belso moved close enough to whisper.

“An enemy ?” He asked.



“Yes.”

He still wanted to wait, but their enemy had other ideas. The creature came at him and Belso pulled a sword from his belt. Runa had given him the blade, a kind of reward for not dying when flung off the city walls of Tandalla. A good sword, made by a skilled metal worker in the City of the Lost God. He swung the blade and felt it connect with something in the dark. The howl of pain could only ever have come from the throat of a chaos creature. A dreadful, haunting sound that he knew would come to him in nightmares for the rest of his life.

“Two more.....Behind us.....Two more.” Shouted the minion.

The creatures were following the waggons, which Belso had expected they would. Two to fight wasn't too bad for him and his minion, but there was a problem. The one he'd cut with his blade was still alive. It was making angry growling noises, as it came around to his right. As far as he knew, there was no golden rule about not annoying creatures of the darkness. Though, there probably should have been. At least there was no more need for silence; the beasts knew they were there.

“Two large beasts and a third that's hurt.....Can we do this ?” He yelled.

“There is always hope.” Said the minion.

Typical inspirational nonsense from a cleric; he wished he hadn't asked. It should have occurred to him that a minion could do more than use a sword. Some would have been powerful sorcerers once, or manipulators of the magic from the forest. There were barroom rumours that some clerics had dabbled in necromancy. It seemed credible; Estrin wasn't likely to surround herself with useless fools.

“Behind.....To your left !” Shouted the minion.

His sword was good; Runa had told him no fight had ever put a notch in the blade. Belso thrust in the direction he'd been told and felt his weapon go through flesh, before penetrating bone. A claw took a piece out of his shoulder, but he heard the creature hit the ground. He could smell his own blood, so he knew the minion would know he'd been wounded.

“Are you alright ?”

“Hurts.....But it won't kill me.” He replied.

Dhūlen had mentioned wanting a dozen trained fighters behind him, if he needed to tackle one of the creatures of darkness; two dozen warriors if they were available. Belso had killed one of the brutes, but another two of them were circling.

“I need you, Belso.” Said the minion. “Slow one of them down, cut it bad, cut it deep.....Drop to the ground after that. I'll do the rest.”

“Are you sure ?” He asked. “Seems.....Unfair.”

“You asked my name; it's Ningal. Hurt one of them badly, then get out of the way.”

“I will.”

The creatures of darkness stopped circling and they had to be fairly intelligent. They knew that Belso was the easier kill. Both of them ignored Ningal and headed towards him. The wash increased for a few moments, giving him a chance to see the beasts. Large, with clawed hands and lots of very sharp looking teeth. Powerful back legs, with a double set of claws where most creatures had feet. All designed to gut their enemy by ripping out their entrails. It was probably a rear leg claw that had damaged his shoulder. Luckily it wasn't his sword arm.

“If I haven't died yet.....Maybe I'm not destined to die.....Not here, not now.” He muttered.

Belso literally threw himself at the first of the beasts to get close enough. He dug his sword deep into its body and prayed to the nine, that none of the brute's claw managed to dig into his belly. The beast thrashed about and Belso yelled, as a claw ran over his right thigh. Again, he dug his sword in

deep, before dropping to the ground and playing dead. His life was now in the hands of Ningal. Her name meant Great Queen in the Old Imperial language. He heard her shriek, as the chaos energy went over his head and struck the last uninjured beast.

“Stay there, Belso.” Shouted Ningal.

It was impossible not to shift his head a little, to get a look at what was happening. The creature he’d struck was on the ground and smoking, as if it had been burned. It must have been the chaos spell he’d heard Ningal use. The fur on its body was still burning, though Belso noticed one thing above all. It looked very dead, which just left one of the beasts to be dealt with.

Ningal shrieked and raised her hand up to the sky. It seemed as if the minion was pulling lightning down from the sky. Her body glowed and Belso realised that the term ancient cleric, had implications. Ningal was a sorcerer and she might also be a converted chaos creature. The last surviving beast ran at him as he lay on the ground. Ningal raised her arms and seemed to be ready to cast a spell in his direction. Belso rolled onto his front and put his hands over his eyes. No use, the spell was so bright; he could see his finger bones through the flesh.

“My old dad knew a thing or two.” He mumbled. “Never get between a deity and their prey, he used to say. Never get between a minion and her prey either.”

There was another bright flash of light and the sound of something crying out in pain. Belso opened his eyes and saw only a kind of yellow curtain in front of his eyes. The dazzling effect of the spells would give him poor eyesight for a while. He heard her voice before her hand touched his shoulder.

“Belso.....Are you able to stand ?” Asked Ningal. “We got them.....All three of them are dead.”

He got to his feet and hoped he didn’t have blurred vision for days. He needed his eyes to work well; it was an essential part of being a good fighter.

“I can walk, but my eyes.....I’ll need to see Galla.” He said.

“You shouldn’t have looked up.”

The smell reminded him of the feast in Kahan, after the usurper had been killed. It was the smell of huge amounts of cooked meat. Quite close to them were two dead beasts, their flesh still smoking. What was Ningal, apart from being one of Estrin’s minions ? Belso was curious, but decided not ask. Maybe later, when his wounds had been treated and he could see properly.

“We should go to Estrin.....I will lead you.” Said Ningal.

It was a long way, the waggons moved slowly, but they’d had long enough to cover some distance.

There were two more of the dead beasts, though they’d been dismembered, rather than burned.

Estrin had obviously decided to reveal her presence to the pilgrims. A fire had been built, which gave enough light to enjoy an impromptu feast. There was Estrin, surrounded by children and looking like a quite ordinary young woman.

“Come Belso, sit with me.” Shouted Estrin. “There is food and.....I can heal your eyes.”

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