

## The Last Emperor

### Chapter 4 - Portals

**“Dark Angels weren’t part of the natural world; every one of them had been created out of fire and chaos, by powerful sorcery. New dark angels were rare, creating them a skill now known to very few. They all had their own personal quirks and foibles.”**



“It’s not that I don’t trust you, though I don’t know any of you.” Said Pio-Xanash. “I’m just naturally wary and I’ve seen some bad crap happen in my very long life. And well, it has to be said.....I get the feeling there’s a lot you’re not telling me.”

Muzzie had passed the test, the great grandfather of the last emperor, had reacted to seeing him. Reacted was too small a word, Pio had frothed at the mouth, stopped breathing for a few seconds and finally; collapsed in a heap. It was a good thing; Muzzie was accepted as the one, the future emperor of all the rifts. That didn’t stop the Dredger kids running away when they saw him coming. “Aren’t you supposed to tell Muzzie everything ?” Asked Caspian.

“I do have a desire to tell him everything since I was born, every tiny detail.....It’s quite disconcerting. Who’d be happy to give up every secret, every tiny bit of private information ? I can resist the urge though and I’ve no intention of giving up my secrets, until you take me somewhere safe.”

At one time Muzzie would have happily put Pio’s feet to the fire, which was far from just being an old meaningless expression. A few minutes with a hot fire and the old guy would be telling everything he knew, to whoever wanted to hear it. It wasn’t just that Muzzie had mellowed a little. Everyone liked Pio; he was a bit of a character.

“I know the rifts reasonably well, or at least I did.” Said Galla. “Things change, the sands are constantly moving. Where do you want us to take you ?”

“Not a town really, more of a city.” Said Pio. “It won’t have been washed away by the shifting dunes, though many towns have suffered such a fate. I want to go to Annill, which is.....”

“The city furthest east on the third rift.” Said Aeony. “Just getting there would take years on foot, maybe decades.”

“Be reasonable, Pio.” Said Muzzie. “You know I’m cursed by prophecy. I can’t rest until I become emperor and neither can my companions. There must be somewhere closer we can take you ?”

Pio grabbed his arm, with far more strength than he looked capable of. Muzzie didn’t resist, as the great grandfather of Xanash, the 34th emperor, pulled him through a door into the room where he slept. The face in front of his, was still smiling, though it was the sort of hard looking face, you didn’t want to annoy.

“I know Muzzie, knew it right away.....Do they know ?” Asked Pio, nodding towards the closed door. “Know what ?”

“Play it that way if you like.” Said Pio. “You’re too new Muzzie, too shiny. You’re cursed sure enough, complete the prophecy or die in the attempt. You’re not what I was expecting though.....Far too new and far too much demon in you.....I know you should be a warrior from the time when pure blood humans ruled the rifts.”

Muzzie was fast wondering what Pio would look like with a limp. Withholding vital information and now he knew too much. The local Dredgers might object to their favourite storekeeper being softened up a little, but Muzzie had never met a Dredger he couldn't beat in a fight.

"I can think of easier ways to get at what you know." Said Muzzie. "Easier than spending a huge part of my life trudging across the rifts to Annill."

Pio looked worried, as though he'd only just realised the seven newcomers in Seren's Edge, didn't dote on the guy who ran the general store.

"No need for that kind of talk, I'm not going to take up too much of your time." Said Pio. "We'll need to go to the portals, which will be buried again by now. The Dredgers can dig them out though, that's why it's worth taking them with us."

"So.....We're now taking the entire town population with us ?" Asked Muzzie.

"Not all, I think half will want to stay here, now you've dealt with the rogues. I know how to activate the portals, so we can get to Annill in just a few days. I am on your side Muzzie; I've been carrying the information you need for a very long time."

"Yes, but taking all those families.....And their children..."

"They'll be useful, Muzzie.....Dredgers are as tough as old boots and damned good fighters."

Muzzie was still angry, though he was good at hiding it. They'd recued the old guy; the information should have then been his. The Silver Lady had even implied he could set his own agenda, but Pio could at least give him a place to start. Muzzie leant in really close, almost pushing his face into Pio's.

"Fine, but no more surprises.....I don't like surprises." Muzzie muttered.

"As I said before.....I am on your side."

"And I'm sure you'll get a chance to prove that, during the journey to Annill." Said Muzzie.

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Aeony carried the two sacks of grain in her claws and dropped them next to one of the carts. There were lots of Dredger kids watching her, all of them wide eyed. A couple of them were already waving at her, as she gradually emptied the general store of useful items. Actually, not all the supplies were being taken, those remaining in Seren's Edge needed to eat. Pio had been right about who'd remain, but also wrong in a very crucial way.

"The young ones like you, Aeony." Said Sensan. "Don't get too attached, or they'll drive you crazy."

"The half of the population staying are elderly." She said. "The half going with us are the Dredgers with children. Understandable I suppose, but it's a death sentence for the town."

"My view is.....That's not my problem." Said Sensan.

Sensan went back to loading supplies on the two only usable carts in the town. Aeony fetched what Muzzie had agreed with Pio, and Sensan and Runa loaded up the carts. A hard slog of a job, which would be finished by nightfall. The following morning, they'd begin the two or three day trudge to the ancient portals. Once again, Pio wasn't being totally cooperative.

"I know most of the ancient portals." Aeony had said. "They all start Ingar something or Nara this or that. Which one are we heading for ?"

"I'm not good with names, but I'll be able to get us there."

Aeony had exchanged a look with Muzzie. They were going to have trouble with Pio; he was only giving them tiny drips of information, when it couldn't be avoided. Then again his great grandson, Xanash the last emperor was famous for being something of an arsehole. Or at least it was rumoured in the surviving historical tomes from that period.

"Can I ride on the cart when we leave ?" Asked Maya.

"No, but you can help push it." Said Sensan.

The carts were large, heavy contraptions. Designed to be pulled by Farrags, the local four legged beasts of burden. Being a small town with limited food supplies, the locals had long ago eaten their Farrags. Adult Dredgers were strong though and tough. They'd be able to push the carts all the way to Annill.

"Where the hell is Muzzie?" Asked Runa. "We could do with his strong back."

"He's helping Galla get the adult Dredgers organised." Said Aeony. "I was with them earlier and Bizzi only has two speeds, slow and stop."

"Bizzi.....Cute name." Said Runa.

"Dredger language is nothing like the common tongue." Said Aeony. "To them Bizzi means strength, or determination. However you look at it, the local headman was badly named."

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Galla had counted them a few times, twenty or so adults and thirty or so kids. Not exactly an army for Muzzie, but Dredgers had a hard external shell and their toughness was legendary. They also had their thing, something that tended to mean anyone wanting a hybrid to bully, found an easier target than a Dredger hybrid. Attack a Dredger and they kept coming back at you, armed with anything they could pick up. Dredgers would carry on fighting back, even if they couldn't possibly win. Or to put it simply.....

"Dredgers might hide, but if attacked....They never run away from a fight." Said Galla. "I don't think they can, it's part of their instinctive behaviour."

"Even the young ones will defend themselves." Said Muzzie. "I've no doubt most of them will make it to Annill. We have to leave in the morning though, not next week."

Bizzi Molybennial Xyobraxi glared at him; there had already been a few harsh words. Bizzi had the same problem as Muzzie; a long and very distinguished family name, that few could pronounce and almost no one could remember, or at least not in full. Everyone called him Bizzi.

"We can either prepare to leave properly, or some of my people will die." Said Bizzi. "Simple as that.....We need three days, ideally four."

Galla had heard most of the arguments, though she was there to help Maya's mother, the unofficial matriarch of the Dredgers. Shelter was needed for the journey, which meant yurts made out of animal skins. Backpacks too, to make sure everyone had clean clothes and their most precious family heirlooms. Everything was there, all in storage for a very long time. It all just needed to be checked over and repacked.....Oh, with a little cleaning too. Bizzi was right, it was all a four day job, but Muzzie wasn't going to give him four days. It wasn't that Bizzi was lazy or inefficient, he was just thorough. The men in his family had been headman for many generations and they'd all earned a reputation for being thorough. They'd never had to deal with anyone quite like Muzzie.

"I'm not being awkward; I just know how these sorts of things go wrong." Said Muzzie. "The families staying will try to grab more of the food. One or two of the families leaving, will wait until the final morning, to decide to stay. You might find a few of the rogues come back, to try and steal anything they can. What can go wrong will go wrong. At the end of four days, you'll ask me to wait another four days. We must set out in the morning."

"He's right.....Decide on a thing and get it done.....Quickly." Said Galla.

Bizzi was shaking his head and Galla knew what was coming next. The local Dredgers seemed to look upon Muzzie and the rest of them, as being on a mission to save Pio and everyone else in Seren's Edge. Galla knew Bizzi was in for a surprise.

"No, it can't be done.....Or at least it can't be done right." Said Bizzi.

“Then we’ll leave without you.” Said Muzzie. “I’m happy to tie Pio up and throw him in one of the carts. If he still refuses to be helpful, I’ll leave him out on the dunes. I’m not wasting any more time on Seren’s Edge. Come with us or stay here, the choice is yours.”

At one time, headmen had always carried some kind of sacred weapon. The way Bizzi was looking at Muzzie was like a Dredger getting ready for a fight. With no weapon to back up the glare, nothing happened. Maya’s mother looked at Galla and nodded, before carrying on with getting the yurts checked and packed. Difficult to be certain, but Galla thought that if Bizzi decided to stay in Seren’s Edge, he might just have the elderly for company. Muzzie looked to be about to say something else, until Galla grabbed his arm.

“Leave him alone, for now.” She hissed. “I can read a situation Muzzie, it’s how I’ve earned a living since before you were born. No guarantees, but I think everyone who wants to go, will be leaving Seren’s Edge in the morning.”

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It wasn’t that Caspian wanted to show off. He was sure he knew the name of the temple that held the portals they needed to use. By showing Pio what he knew and hinting that he knew even more, he might get the taciturn old guy to open up a bit more.

“I might not have travelled as much as some.” Said Caspian. “I do have access to all the forbidden volumes in the great library. The ancient temples weren’t all built by humans, though most were. The ruins near here are remnants of an older civilisation.”

“Nonsense, everything prior to demons ruling the rifts was built by humans.” Said Pio.

“You don’t know everything, Pio.” Said Vella. “Even I know about the Older Race.”

They’d gone to his store to help Pio collect and bag up anything he wanted to take with him. Not just general supplies, he’d had a surprising number of personal possessions he refused to leave behind. Pio had already told them he thought Seren’s Edge was dead. Everyone who went there, was directed by seeing the high tower. It was famous and visible for miles on days without sand storms. With the tower toppled, no one would go to Seren’s Edge.

“One of the Nara named temples, I think.” Said Caspian. “A human named temple complex, though they always renamed the temples of other races and peoples. Nara-Unadaris....That’s were we’ll be going to. Am I right, Pio ?”

The look told him he was right, before Pio opened his mouth. No need of Galla’s empath skills, when someone emotes their feelings in every facial expression.

“Fine.....You know where we’re going.” Said Pio. “I know how to unlock the portals though. Can you do that.....I’ll bet a hundred imperial in gold, that you can’t.”

Caspian knew the true name of the temple complex and he could speak it in the old tongue. There was no need for codes or tricks, the true name would activate everything. Not that he felt a need to tell Pio that.

“He seems to underestimate us, Vella.” Said Caspian. “Perhaps we should tell him the story about going to Gorshan.”

“You two.....I don’t believe it.” Snapped Pio.

“We went there and released an Angel, a Genova.” Said Vella.

“And we returned in one piece.” Added Caspian.

Pio muttered about them being there to help him, not invent wild stories. They’d done it though; they’d taken the smug smile off his face.

“Nara-Unadaris, who’d have thought we’d be going there.” Muttered Caspian.

“Yes, very clever.” Said Pio. “Now help me pack the books I want to take. If they’re left here the Dredgers will probably burn them.”

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Aeony had been surprised that by the time full light was becoming the ultraviolet backwash, everything was packed up. They’d done the impossible according to Bizzi, they were ready to leave. Muzzie had used some very unobvious threats to get it done, but sometimes a good leader needed to use a little aggression. True, Aeony was a dark angel who considered aggression to be part of getting anything done. She was beginning to reassess her judgement of Muzzie.

“The fool might make a good leader.” She muttered. “Maybe even a passable emperor, provided he has decent advisors.”

Dark Angels weren’t part of the natural world; every one of them had been created out of fire and chaos, by powerful sorcery. New dark angels were rare, creating them a skill now known to very few. They all had their own personal quirks and foibles. Aeony sometimes slept in a bed, though she preferred to fold her wings around her and sleep while perched on a rooftop. Somewhere high, a place where she could wake occasionally and look out over the world below. The high tower would have been ideal, if it hadn’t fallen. Aeony had dug her claws into the corner of the roof of a ruined building. She had no idea what it had once been and not the slightest inclination to find out. It was the highest spot in Seren’s Edge and her place to sleep for just a single night. As she felt sleep arriving in her mind, she used her tail to brace herself. At first, the noise from below had been purely annoying. No curiosity about who might be in trouble, it was just irritating to have her sleep disturbed. Aeony parted her wings slightly, so that her eyes could examine the street below.

“Damned Growlers, the brutes are a curse.” She mumbled.

Food had been spilled in the process of bagging and loading onto the carts. Other bags that had been found to contain grain beginning to go bad, had been simply left near the now destroyed Seren’s Edge bar. It was hardly surprising that a few Growlers had been attracted to the town. The voice though, for some reason it brought Aeony fully awake. Just a kid, one of many. This one had a bit more about her than the other. A lot of potential as Silsk would have said.

“Oh, Maya.....I need my sleep.” Aeony muttered.

A few flaps of her wings and the dark angel was ready to fly. Not exactly happy about it, but the young Dredger child was being pursued by several hungry Growlers. The words coming out of the child’s mouth were mainly threats; with a few choice swear words added into the mix. No fear though, no screams for help.

“This one.....Deserves to live.” Aeony muttered.

Aeony had sharp claws on her feet and her hands, plus a jaw full of wicked looking teeth. She favoured her front claws in a fight, though they had been known to cause problems while having sex. Grab at a partner in the heat of passion and.....There had been a few unpleasant incidents. Aeony dropped from the roof and didn’t use her wings until she was quite close to the ground.

“Oh, I hate Growlers.” She mumbled. “I really....Hate them.”

There were too many of them and they seemed to be everywhere on the rifts. They multiplied at an alarming rate and ate anything, even things that didn’t seem intended to be eaten. Growlers had become an infestation right across the rifts and things were likely to get worse, before they got better. Aeony spread her wings and hurtled towards the Growlers chasing Maya. Not that the dark angel would have admitted it, but Growler hunting could be fun.

“This is how to do it.....Maya.” Yelled Aeony.

The young Dredger female was carrying a blade with a bloody edge; she'd obviously fought with the brutes chasing her. Maya actually grinned at her, as Aeony flew past. The dark angel grabbed a Growler with her rear claws and carried it over the rubble strewn ground. One of the stone blocks from the high tower would do, it had to be heavy and in just the right place. Aeony let go of the Growler, just as it couldn't avoid hitting the huge stone. There was a wet crunching sound, as the brute collided with the stone. It was irresistible; Aeony had to taste its blood.

"Urgghhh.....I know some like roast Growler.....But that carrion aftertaste."

Unless she was literally starving, Growler meat wasn't for her. She still chewed at a tiny piece of Growler flesh, while pulling a face.

"To me.....Run this way, Maya." She yelled.

Nothing else could fly like a dark angel; it was the way their wings could move around to just about any angle. Aeony twisted her wing muscles right round, to give thrust to hurtle forward. She could even have one wing keeping her up in the air, while the other pushed her forward, at speed. The original dark angels had been created by converting angels, the Genova. Now they were created from the remains of their own ancestors. Maya knew what to do as Aeony flew straight at her, she ducked.

"This is.....Quite enjoyable." Yelled Aeony.

Again, a smile from Maya as she flew past her. Just in time, the Growler behind Maya, was almost on top of the child. The dark angel deliberately collided head on with the Growler, using all her claws to eviscerate the beast. They formed a tumbling mass, which became redder and redder, as the Growler was ripped apart. When she was on her feet again, Aeony had to try again.

"Maybe this one will taste better." She mumbled.

It didn't, if anything the bitter aftertaste was far worse. It just seemed such a waste, to leave so much meat to rot where it lay. By her reckoning, just one of the Growlers remained. There it was, fighting the kid and by the look of it, the kid was winning. Dredger blood was yellow with a little red in it, depending on the makeup of the Dredger's ancestors. The splashes of blood on the ground near Maya, were the deep crimson of Growler blood.

"Keep stabbing at it, kid." Shouted Aeony.

"I can kill it." Yelled Maya. "I've killed one already tonight.....Leave it to me."

The Growler looked likely to lose, but they could get really dangerous when wounded. They had pincers to bite at tough food and if it caught Maya with those.....

"I'll just even things up a bit." Said Aeony.

Six legs meant an injured Growler could spin about at quite a speed. They tended to spin about and use their pincers, if they were losing a fight. Aeony used her blade on two of its legs, purely to make it a fairer fight. Maya was a good fighter; she just didn't have the weight to put behind a blow with her sword. It took her quite a while to deliver the fatal blow, though Aeony still cheered pretty loudly.

"You know how to use a sword.....Who taught you?" She asked.

"Most of the best fighters were killed by the rogues." Said Maya. "My mum taught me the basics and Pio taught quite a few of us a few tricks."

"What do you think of Pio-Xanash?" Asked Aeony.

"He's alright."

"Come on, be honest.....We just fought together, Kid." Said Aeony. "I promise not to repeat what you tell me.....So, what do you think of great granddaddy Pio?"

Maya was young, still running about on six legs, rather than walking upright. Dredgers matured fast though and the kid seemed brighter than most. Behind the smile there was something, whenever Pio's name was mentioned.

"He was alright, but recently.....He's tried to get several families to leave and go to with him to Annill. It's not just a recent thing; he's been begging people to go with him." Said Maya.

"That's good to know, thank you."

There was more and after holding things back, Maya was likely to have more to tell.

"The adults forget I'm in the room, after we eat." Said Maya. "My mum and a few of the other adults don't trust Pio. They say he was far too friendly with the rogues. Of course, they might be saying that because they don't like him that much."

"Doesn't your mum like Pio?" Asked Aeony.

"No."

It was all froth and gossip, but it might mean something. She'd tell Muzzie the gist of it when they were on the long trudge to Annill. Of course, it might just mean that Maya's mum had taken against Pio for no real reason. That sort of thing happened in small towns like Seren's Edge.

"It's a long walk back.....I can carry you, if you like?" Asked Aeony.

"No, I don't need to be carried.....Thank you, but I can walk."

"Then, I'll walk with you."

They'd gone less than fifty yards, before Maya asked the question she'd probably been wanting to ask since Aeony had mentioned it.

"Do you really think I'm good with a sword?"

"Yes, you show real potential.....Potential is important to dark angels, we think of wasting it as a crime against yourself. I could teach you while we're travelling. Only if you want to."

"Yes, I'd like that." Said Maya.

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"I know some were hoping we'd get here sooner." Said Muzzie. "A three day journey on foot tends to take three days, especially when there are children involved."

"This is the fourth morning since leaving Seren's Edge." Said Pio.

"Alright, it took us three and a bit days.....At least we didn't lose anyone on the way." Said Muzzie. There had been several attacks by packs of Growlers and quite a few Dredgers had been wounded.

The closest anyone had come to dying, was a male Dredger, during an argument with his wife. No one seemed to know how it had started, or at least no one was willing to say. At one point his angry wife had gone at him with a small axe. She must have still loved him, the wounds were bad, but the onlookers all agreed that she could have killed him. Galla was the hero of the trip, though she never fought a single Growler. The hand gestures and cantrips she hated using, had healed wounds and no one had died from infected Growler bites. Muzzie knew he owed Galla, she'd kept at least three Dredger kids from dying. He'd even smiled at some of her sarcastic comments about his leadership.

"Is this it?" Asked Sensan. "Are these few worn stones really Nara-Unadaris?"

"The portals will be deep below the sands." Said Pio. "The Dredgers can dig them out.....Unless Caspian still thinks he can rebuild the temple?"

"Rebuild.....There's nothing here to rebuild." Said Runa.

The picking and poisonous comments from Pio, had been going on since before their journey had begun. Muzzie noticed that Caspian simply ignored just about everything Pio said. Not that the others were necessarily on Caspian's side, apart from Vella of course. Muzzie wasn't that impressed

with the half a dozen weather beaten stones, most of them half buried in the dunes. Surprisingly, Caspian chose that moment to get vocal and a little angry.

"I am the next head librarian of the great library.....I think that should gain me a little respect. Most of the time I do actually know what I'm talking about. A few of the temples on the rifts weren't built by humans or demons. An Older Race built them and they had real power. Most can be rebuilt from a single stone, if you know how.....I do know how."

"But there's nothing left to rebuild." Said Runa.

"Enough.....I have heard of the Older Race." Said Galla. "The sands and the air itself, will be more than enough to rebuild the temple. Give Caspian the respect he deserves and.....An end to the poisonous comments."

They all knew who was spreading the poison. For three and a bit days, Pio had delighted in every opportunity to ridicule Caspian and his idea of rebuilding Nara-Unadaris. Probably because Pio didn't know the words of the ritual to begin the rebuild.

"Yes.....Caspian needs space to work and a little peace." Said Muzzie. "Move back everyone.....Well back."

"I'd like to stay with Caspian." Said Pio.

"To hear the words you claim won't work.....I don't think so." Said Caspian.

Muzzie was beginning to realise that if there came a point when Pio needed to be removed from the group by violent means, there might be quite a few volunteers for the job. Not Runa though, she seemed to view him as a father figure, or maybe a grandfather figure.

"Keep back with everyone else, Pio." Said Muzzie. "It's for your own safety."

"Fine, I was just hoping to be useful."

It wasn't just Muzzie with Caspian, as he walked towards the place that felt the right spot. Galla's bird flew over them a few times, calling them stupid, or that old favourite, idiots. Not that they took it personally, the bird was rude to everyone. Despite that, no one seemed to dislike the creature. When Caspian stopped and pointed at the sand, Galla's pet had gone.

"Here.....We're at the centre of what once was.....Ich'k Nash Indera." Said Caspian.

Muzzie didn't know the language of the Older Race, though he suspected he'd just heard Caspian speak it. Maybe it was his imagination.....The entire dune they were stood on, seemed to vibrate for a few seconds. Caspian drew his sword and prodded the sand with it.

"I need to get down there, from here." Said Caspian. "Right down, onto one of the original parts of the temple. They were really into mosaics, Muzzie. Find me an intact mosaic to stand on and I'll give you a rebuilt temple."

"How deep do I have to get you?" Asked Muzzie.

"About a hundred feet, at a guess."

"Does it matter if I break something?"

"No, it'll all be rebuilt."

Lilleth had given Muzzie a scarf when they'd last spent time together. A ludicrously small piece of silk, with a colourful design on it. Far too small for him, though he did value that scarf. There was nothing else to use though and he was sure Lilleth would understand. He shoved the scarf into the sand, at the spot where Caspian had prodded with his blade. There wasn't much wind, but he left enough of the scarf out in the open, to flutter in what breeze there was. Muzzie looked around and spotted a dune at quite some distance away, though he'd still be able to see the end of the scarf.

"There." He said, pointing. "We need to be on the top of that dune."

"That's.....A hell of a distance."



“Hey, I’m going to have to use powerful and unpredictable magic.” Said Muzzie.

“Fine.”

Only Caspian said it in a way that meant the opposite of fine. The bird came back, yelling that they were both stupid, even more stupid than Galla, according to her scruffy avian pet.

“Go away bird.” Yelled Muzzie. “Unless you like the idea of unpredictable chaos magic.”

“Silly Muzzie.” Screeched the bird.

It went though, hurtling over the sands in the direction of where the others were waiting.

“I’d have cooked and eaten that thing by now.....If I was Galla.” Said Muzzie.

“Oh, all the kids think he’s cute.”

Muzzie used a noise at the back of his throat, his usual noise when someone had said something he felt was too stupid to warrant a proper reply. He looked at the list of spells he could use, as it moved up and down in his mind.

“Something.....Chaotic I think, with lots of warnings.” Said Muzzie. “Let me see.....I can’t read the words, but the image of melting ground looks perfect.”

“We’re going to die, aren’t we, Muzzie ?”

“Hey ! A little faith.....I’ll get you were you need to be.” Said Muzzie.

Several people had suggested that he should spend time with a powerful sorcerer, learning what spells the hand now offered. He’d only just acquired the rest of the hand though and the sorcerers guild had long ago banned him from their learning rooms. There was Babaef, the high level pure blood demon who ran the guild. Babaef owed him a lot of favours, but he never left the City of the Lost God. Muzzie would just keep choosing spells by trial and error, until he found a decent teacher, or one of the spells killed him.

“Alright...Crouch down and cover your ears and eyes.” Said Muzzie.

They were a long way from the fluttering scarf, but well within range of some of the explosions the bone finger could give him. Muzzie did as he usually did at such times. He silently asked the nine great demon deities to watch over him, as he let the melting ground spell build. It wasn’t worth worrying Caspian, but when Muzzie used chaos based magic, he felt watched. Maybe the Silver Lady, or just a low level chaos enforcer. Something was watching though, he was certain of it. The spell took a while to build and even when he released it, nothing happened immediately. It was a truly huge spell, which would release waves of pure chaos. Even the background multiverse, wasn’t going to be in a hurry to release such potential carnage.

“It didn’t work.” Said Caspian.

“Patience.”

The bird had to pick then to come back, of course it did.

“Silly Muzzie.....Nothing Happened.” Shouted Galla’s pet.

“Go bird.....As fast as.....”

No use, the area in front of Muzzie and Caspian, became a glare of white hot sand. Muzzie pulled Caspian down and pushed his face into the sand, before trying to bury his own face. The heat was incredible, easily hot enough to leave burns on their skin. So much heat where the scarf had been tied, that Muzzie could hear the dunes screeching, as the moisture in them turned to steam.

“Fuck Muzzie.....” Yelled Caspian.

“It’s alright.....Keep your face in the sand.”

Everything was alright, as long as no one mentioned him killing Galla’s bird. It had to be dead; the damned thing had been flying right over where the heat was at its worst. Galla was rumoured to be able to kill by simply touching a person’s hand. Muzzie just hoped she understood it hadn’t been

deliberate. At least the worry stopped him thinking about the waves of chaos energy he'd unleashed. Adamaz the head librarian always said any use of pure chaos, brought consequences, usually fairly unpleasant consequences. When the sound of steam escaping from the dunes stopped. Muzzie took a tentative look at where he'd aimed the spell.

"Oh fuck.....Galla will never forgive me." Said Muzzie.

"Why.....Oh, I see what you mean."

On the sand not that far away, was a ball of smouldering feathers. Galla's pet bird, dead and probably half cooked. Muzzie ran, he could remember the Silver Lady telling him all the threats about boiling blood if his group turned on him, were nonsense. He also remembered her saying that one of them would eventually test the boundaries and realise it was all nonsense.

"Get them to like you, Muzzie. Or they might turn on you and cut you to pieces." She'd said.

Killing Galla's much loved pet, wasn't going to make them like him. Muzzie rushed up to the dead bird and cuddled it in his arms. The smell of cooked bird flesh, made the situation even more horrific. Caspian knelt in front of him and began digging a hole in the dune with his hands.

"We'll bury it and say we don't know what became of it." Said Caspian.

"Galla is the best empath you're every likely to meet." Said Muzzie. "Lying to her about her pet, will only make things worse."

"Tell her or lie, those seem to be the only options." Said Caspian.

Logically yes, but Muzzie had spent a few hours looking at the spells the hand could give him. A little time here and there, when it was his turn to be on watch. The three day trudge to get there hadn't been a total waste of time.

"There is a spell of minor revivification.....I'd never use it on a creature with a high level of consciousness, but a bird....."

"No, you can't give new life, not even to a pet bird." Said Caspian. "Taking life is easy, many do it every day. We've both done our share of killing. It's normal.....But giving life back ! It will be noticed, Muzzie. Someone will notice and be very pissed off."

Actually, Muzzie was more worried about using yet more prodigious amounts of raw chaos, but there was no need to mention that to Caspian. Releasing chaos in the City of the Lost God, was blamed for everything from ruined crops to the occasional plague. The list of potential consequences from his actions, wasn't yet spoiling his sleep, but he knew it would....Eventually. Fuck it, he was the one after all, cursed by prophecy and destined to be the last emperor of the rifts.

"I'm going to do it, Caspian."

"More use of pure chaos, Muzzie ?"

"We need Galla, Casp. She can't pack up her potions and go home, but she could become very uncooperative."

"Fine.....Un-cook the dead bird, or whatever you intend to do with it."

No pile of warnings in his head, as he examined the spell. Just selecting it was hard; it took all his concentration to activate the minor revivification spell. The amount of chaos it required wasn't huge and he'd never have used it on a dead Dredger, or their kids. Crap.....They could come back as something really unpleasant. A bird though.....It was just a damned bird. Muzzie held the bundle of burned feathers and released the spell.

"What now, Muzzie ?" Asked Caspian. "Is it supposed to do that ?"

Galla's pet was glowing a bright yellow and bouncing around the dunes like a crazy thing. Muzzie thought it was being healed, though he couldn't be sure.

"It's alive, Casp.....We might have to settle for weird and alive."

For a few minutes, the pet bird carried on bouncing around the dunes. When it became quiet, it ran towards Muzzie, stopping close enough to stare at him. There was something in those eyes, something that he'd have sworn, hadn't been there before. Then it was off upwards into the air, before buzzing them a few times.

"Silly Muzzie ! Stupid Caspian !" Shrieked Galla's pet, before flying in the direction of its owner.

"A thank you would have been nice." Said Caspian.

"It's a bird Casp, just a bird.....Let's see if the melting ground spell worked as intended."

It wasn't just his mind working overtime, Muzzie was sure of that. In his head he clearly heard the Silver Lady laughing about him returning life to the bird. So clear, she could have been there with them, walking across the dunes.

"Are you alright ?" Asked Caspian.

"Yes, just hearing voices. Nothing to get alarmed about."

The time spent talking about and using a spell on the bird, had given the molten sand time to solidify and cool, just a little. A tunnel going down would have been perfect. The spell had created something like a funnel, with a wide top and a narrow bottom. At the bottom of the hole was just darkness.

"Looks deeper than a hundred feet." Said Caspian. "I'd say.....Closer to two hundred."

"If the light was only a little better." Said Muzzie.

He used light spells outside and in the hours of full light, enough to get him yet another censure from the sorcerers guild. Sometimes though, problems needed looking at from an unusual angle. The light orbs went down and stopped above a floor, probably just over two hundred feet below them.

"Yes, look Casp.....Tell me what you see ?"

"I see a floor with a mosaic." Said Caspian. "Muzzie, old friend; you do know what you're doing and I'd happily fight anyone who says otherwise."

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