

The Last Emperor

Chapter 6 – Almost Paradise

“Galla hadn’t been exactly a recluse in the City of the Lost God, her apothecary shop saw a steady flow of customers. It was sometimes difficult though, no one really likes to talk to an empath. They imagined Galla could see their deepest thoughts and desires. Which of course, she often could.”



Annill; at the furthest point east on the third rift. There was a major, well-kept road heading west from Annill. There were even watchtowers on the road west and two small towns within a three day trudge. To the east was the shimmering edge to the rift, a wall of dull yellow light that reached up to touch the sky and surrounded the entire third rift. There was no way any further east. Many rumours and ideas had grown up over the millennia, about entering the shimmer at the edge of the rift. Many wild ideas and rumours, with just one certainty to all of them.....Try to enter the shimmer and you died. It was well noted and as theories went, it was accepted and replicable.

Unsurprisingly, very few tried to go further east from Annill. There was a road from the hill, around the edge of the lake and through the miles of thick vegetation. It would take them to Annill, but it didn’t look a well-used road. There were fallen branches to be moved, though Dredgers were good at that sort of thing. The big worry, at least to Muzzie, were the number of skeletal remains on the road. There were dozens of them, all belonging to creatures of a kind he’d never seen before. Something nasty was going on in the thick vegetation, the kids had already been told to never stray from the road.

“How will we collect fruit ?” Maya had asked.

“We’ll go in groups, the adults.....Your parents can gather what needs to be gathered.”

Armed parents with Muzzie and a few of the others as guards, though the kids didn’t need to hear that. Maya and her friends were treating using the road as a huge adventure and he saw no problem with that.....As long as they kept to the road. On some parts of the road it was possible to see the walls of Annill through the trees and it was likely, Annill could see them. Depending on how well disposed the inhabitants of the city were feeling towards visitors, they might send out a patrol to help them, maybe, but it wasn’t a high possibility. Aeony was flying above them; she’d been in the air all morning. As heavy as a hybrid warrior, flying had to be tiring, even with her huge wingspan. There was something about dark angels though, something added to the mix during their creation. Muzzie knew Aeony could fly all day, he’d seen her do it above the City of the Lost God. As she swooped down to land, he put his hand up to signal a halt.

“Pass it along; we’re stopping for a meal.” He shouted.

No need to pass it along, not really. Muzzie had a voice that was loud, deep and carried well. It was rumoured that if he yelled at a customer in his tavern, people heard him at the top of the Dome. He moved towards Aeony in an attempt to keep their conversation from being overheard.

“Well, can we safely fish at the lake ?” He asked. “I was relying on fish to keep everyone fed. They could probably survive on fruit and nuts.....They won’t like it though.”

“The lake is large and deep, Muzzie.” Said Aeony. “I guarantee something nasty will have crawled in there over the years and thrived, probably quite a few nasty somethings. Fed by fresh water from below ground, or so I’ve heard. Wonderful water for fish.....But not just for fish.”

Muzzie knew when Aeony was leading up to something, it was like the almost a paradise conversation. She gave out news in tiny amounts, which could sometimes be annoying.

“We’ve known each other a long time, Aeony.” Said Muzzie. “You saw something, I can tell. What was it ?”

“What was it.....Something large, I could tell that much.” Said Aeony. “It swam deep, but when it was at the far east of the lake, it was caught in the light from the shimmer. Long, very long.....Like a huge fish with an even longer tail. It could eat all of us in one bite.....”

“Fuck.....The Dredgers will have to learn to survive on just fruit and berries.” Muttered Muzzie.

It wasn’t going to be easy; they had to get water from the lake. He was beginning to think of ways to quickly and safely, fill their water barrels. Maybe find a shallow area near the edge and weight the barrels in some way.....

“Don’t give up on fishing, Muzzie.” Said Aeony. “From above I could see all of the lake and it’s full of fish. Vast numbers of them, even though the creature must be thinning out their numbers. If you were to use one of your detonation spells in the shallows.....”

“Then we carefully collect all the dead fish.” Said Muzzie. “Salt some, dry a few and cook the rest. With luck there’ll be fish on the menu until we walk through the gates of Annill.”

Aeony was giving that look again, the one which meant there was another piece of bad news on the way.

“They’ll have seen me by now, flying across the lake.” Said Aeony. “There was a war a very long time ago, where my kind sided with an enemy of Annill. A brutal war, many of the ruling families of Annill were wiped out. Much of Annill was reduced to rubble, so.....I can’t guarantee they’ll welcome me into the city.”

“Hmmm....A bridge to be crossed when we get to it.” Said Muzzie.

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Galla hadn’t been exactly a recluse in the City of the Lost God, her apothecary shop saw a steady flow of customers. It was sometimes difficult though, no one really likes to talk to an empath. They imagined Galla could see their deepest thoughts and desires. Which of course, she often could. Fine if those desires are legal and socially acceptable, but not so fine if they aren’t. Galla had become used to customers buying her powders and potions, with as little interaction as possible. Not all of them, she had a few customers who were friends. They’d happily sit on the sofa in her living area and talk about the latest gossip. It was different with the Dredgers though, saving the lives of at least three of the children, had made her someone they trusted. Even Bizzi tended to use her as a sounding board.....

“You should travel on the cart, Galla.” Said Bizzi. “This road is uneven and I know your joints can be painful.”

Galla did indeed have what she thought of as her old bones and joints. She’d cured some life threatening maladies for the great and good of the City, but had never managed to ease her own aches and pains. She suspected it was a penalty of some kind, a payment demanded from the Gods, for the gifts they’d given her.

“If I travel in the cart all day, my ancient joints might seize up completely.” She said.

“Yes, I can see that.....I was hoping for a word or two, if it’s convenient ?” Asked Bizzi.

Galla liked to walk close enough to the cart to be able to climb on it if the need arose. She also kept far enough to the rear of it, to avoid hearing hours of gossip from the Dredgers pushing it. Galla liked gossip, but Dredger gossip was famous for being dull and boring. She looked around and they were alone, with no one within earshot. Even her bird had flown off somewhere.

"I'm not busy and we're as alone as we're ever likely to be." Said Galla. "So yes, it is convenient. Ask whatever it is you want to ask?"

"Not all, but some of my people have asked.....Perhaps Muzzie might need them on his journey?"

Galla had been expecting it, though she'd expected Pio to be the one to ask, provided he was the leader of the Dredgers. People always say they want a quiet life, until one appears on the horizon. Then a life of turmoil and danger, seems nowhere near as bad as they'd imagined.

"I'm sure he'd love some Dredgers to travel on from Annill." Said Galla. "At the moment you're his entire army, but that will change. After Annill there will be some serious fighting and you travel with children, lots of them. Think it through before offering your long term service to Muzzie."

"Thank you.....I will think about it and discuss it with my people." Said Bizzi.

Galla had never really taken to Bizzi, though if there was ever a time for a slow and thoughtful leader of the Dredgers, it was now. He wandered off towards the front of their small army of Dredgers, with their kids and carts. Her bird returned and landed on her shoulder. No insults or shrieking at her, which was unusual.

"Galla.....There is something you should see." Said her pet.

Her pet had whispered, something he'd never done before. She had thought it was possible for him to whisper. Galla was beginning to build a theory about the changes in her bird. That could wait though; her pet was obviously concerned about something.

"What is it?" She asked.

"Come see.....I will show you."

Her bird flew to the left of the uneven road and then on, into the trees. It was where no one was supposed to go, at least not alone. She trusted her pet though, he'd never once put her in danger, in all the centuries she'd had him. Galla felt in her pocket for one of her strong powders, before trudging into the trees and undergrowth.

"Not too fast, Bird.....Damned vines."

"Hurry, Galla.....Hurry." Hissed her bird.

She had a knife, enchanted and sharp enough to cut through thick stems and vines. Hard slow work though and her pet always seemed to be fluttering about further into the trees. On she trudged and as the humidity grew among the dense foliage, the aches in her bones increased.

"One day.....I will cook that bird." She mumbled.

Her bird became just flapping wings on the side of a tree. Galla might have missed him, if she hadn't owned him so long. Small and scrawny he might be, but she knew her pet. He was silent, such a rare event that Galla began to walk very slowly and carefully. There was a small clearing beyond the tree where her pet was still fluttering his wings. The scene in the clearing caused her to crouch down and hide behind a bush. Too late, she noticed the bush was covered in tiny orange bugs. Galla contented herself with remembering that the vast majority of bugs on the rifts were harmless. As for the rest that weren't?.....She chose to ignore that possibility.

There were animals in the clearing, creatures with six legs like a growler, but these were covered in light green fur. Larger than growlers too and they were grunting at one another. Galla had never seen or heard of anything like them, though the rifts were full of living creatures no one had yet described in books. The grunting became louder, as the animals carried on ripping something apart,

something wearing clothes and boots. An intelligent, thinking hybrid was being pulled apart and eaten right in front of her. Not one of Bizzi's Dredgers, the hybrid being devoured raw, looked more like an Ubari hybrid, mixed with a little Shelzak. Probably a citizen of Annill before it had been killed, or maybe a traveller on the main road west. Tough looking, what was left of it, many times tougher than their Dredgers. So tempting to use one of her powders to kill most of them. There was no guarantee of getting them all and there were probably thousands of them in amongst the trees. Galla carefully moved away from the bush, the clearing and the half eaten hybrid. Her bird was on her shoulder about halfway back to the road. He was silent for a while, a change in character that looked to be a fixture.

"Thank you Bird, I needed to see that." She muttered. "It was important."

Bizzi needed to know, though she'd probably tell Muzzie first. The animals with green fur were too fierce and large to ignore. No one should be allowed to gather fruit, without several friends to guard them. The Dredgers trudging along the road should definitely not be strung out in a line for hundreds of yards, as they were now. The name of the game now was keeping together, Muzzie would understand.

"They don't like fire, Galla.....Hate it." Said her pet. "Use fire.....Let Muzzie know."

Galla held her pet in her hands and ignored its struggles. She rubbed her bird's head, which always calmed him down. She genuinely doted on the creature, who had been her sole companion for a very long time. Friends and the occasional lovers had come and gone, but her bird was always there.

"Now, now.....I'm not going to hurt you, stop struggling. I just want a really good look at you."

"Silly Galla."

The change in character had come after he'd been close to Muzzie and the use of raw chaos in spells. Galla had a theory and the moment had come to put it to the test. It might mean upsetting someone it was best not to upset.....But she had to know.

"So, Bird.....You say you died." She said.

"Died I did.....Came back I did.....Silly Galla."

"And what came back with you, Bird ?.....I have an idea."

"Dead I was.....Alive now.....Stupid Galla."

They were near the road, close enough to see one of the carts. It was close enough for Galla, the revealing of what had come back with her pet, might be very dramatic. There was a chance that she might be killed, though that seemed unlikely. Galla closed her eyes and used her empath skills to examine her bird. He struggled again....

"Keep still, you know I'd never hurt you." She said.

There was something in there, a trace of something hiding in amongst the feathers and whatever consciousness her pet possessed. A trace that grew and grew, as Galla realised she'd been right. She opened her eyes and her bird was looking at her, really looking at her, as though it could see her soul.

"Oh Galla, Galla.....I should never have underestimated you."

The voice that she recognised, the voice that could never come out of the throat of her scrawny bird. It was her, the Silver Lady. Galla felt a need to kneel, though her joints refused to let her bend in the right places.

"I am sorry.....I wasn't sure if it was you." Said Galla. "Thank you for giving new life to my pet."

"Oh, Muzzie killed him and brought him back." Said the Lady. "That surprised me, the fact that Muzzie the bar owner can bring back the dead. I simply entered your bird to use his eyes.....And his voice if there was a need to tell you something."

Galla was actually trembling. The Silver Lady was known to be cruel when it suited her and she had forced her to show herself. If there was a need for another blood sacrifice, there was only her to pay it.

"I am so sorry.....If there is any way....."

"Quiet Galla.....You've carried out all the observances on all of my feast days. Most loyal of my followers, I'm not about to hurt you, or your pet." Said the Lady. "Keep this secret though, none of the others need to know that what your bird sees.....I also see."

"I won't tell anyone, you have my word."

"One other thing.....Pio-Xanash mustn't be allowed to enter Annill." Said the Lady. "He must have an accident of some kind. He knows too many in the city, especially as you have a dark angel among you. He will deliberately cause trouble for his own ends. Tell Muzzie as though it's your idea, though he's probably thought the same thing himself. Pio-Xanash must die.....He's served his purpose."

"I'll tell him, I'm sure I can persuade Muzzie."

"I'm sure you can."

The Silver Lady had gone; Galla was left looking at the face of her pet. She rubbed his head for a while, until she realised the day was ending. Full light was about to become the ultraviolet wash that passed for night on the rifts. Her knees wouldn't let her run, but Galla managed a good pace. She had to find Muzzie and tell him Pio couldn't be allowed to enter Annill. There was also the matter of the carnivore creatures in amongst the trees.

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They'd set a watch and cut branches from the smaller trees to build a crude thicket fence around their camp. Keeping a fire burning all night had been talked about, but according to Aeony....

"I know the third rift.....Many more creatures will be attracted to the light of the fire, than those it scares away."

Despite being woken up for the middle watch, Runa had slept reasonably well. There had been some large animal noises quite close to their camp. The hastily built fence appeared to work, there had been no attacks during the hours of the ultraviolet wash. Runa had woken up as the first light of what passed for morning, hit her eyelids. It had been agreed the previous day, when the lakeshore was still some way off.

"First thing will be to fill the water barrels in the shallows at the edge of the lake." Muzzie had said.

"Is the water safe to drink?" Asked Vella.

Runa had dreaded the question coming up, though someone was bound to ask. In truth, safe or not, they'd have to drink it. They still had a four day walk to the gates of Annill and their water barrels only held enough water for another day.

"Yes, the water will be good." Caspian had said. "Lake Nigon is fed from the same underground source as the wells of Annill."

"There are a lot of fish in the lake, the water must be good." Aeony had added.

Pio had made a joke about the water being fine, as long as you didn't mind the added fish crap. A few had laughed, though most didn't. Something had changed; even the Dredger kids were avoiding Pio. Runa was pleased they were going to leave him behind when they left Annill.

She'd helped in the easy work of rolling empty barrels into the lake. She'd then sweated and struggled with the hard work of getting full barrels onto the carts. It had all been so easy in a way, no sign of the huge beast Aeony had seen from high above the lake. A few ripples a long way from the shore, seen by several of the kids. Nothing scary though. Despite being told to be quiet and not run

about, a few of the kids had actually begun to play in the water. Bizzi had quickly restored order, but Runa thought they were all becoming far too relaxed.

"Quiet children, or you'll scare off the fish." Muzzie had said.

That had got their attention; no Dredger wants to live on fruit and berries for long. Muzzie had gone through the plan with everyone, several times. It wasn't that hard to understand, though a few of the kids seemed slow on the uptake.

".....not hard to understand." Sensan had told them. "Muzzie creates an explosion away from the shore. That will kill lots of fish. Then guess who runs into the water to collect the fish?"

"We do!" Maya had yelled, with obvious glee.

Runa was currently stood on the rather muddy shoreline and armed with a long and very well balanced spear. Sensan had taken the spear from the store room in Ingar Sans, where their journey had begun. After carrying it for so long and so many miles he seemed happy it was going to see some use. Her job and the job of every adult, was simple, they were there as guards; to make sure nothing ate the Dredger kids. The kids were going to be busy, filling their hands, clothes, pockets and anywhere else they could think of, with dead fish. It was all an incredibly simple plan, which was why Runa thought it stood a good chance of working.

"Stay where you all are, until I yell Go." Shouted Muzzie.

"What will you yell?" Asked Maya.

Muzzie just wagged a huge finger at her, they'd all worked out that Maya was determined to be the joker among them. Muzzie stood looking out across the lake for a while, concentrating on something only he could see. He moved his hands from side to side and sometimes up and down. Eventually something appeared that everyone would be able to see. A yellow glowing ball appeared above the head of the would be emperor. It grew for a while, until it was larger than Muzzie.

"Get ready." Shouted Caspian.

Muzzie shot his hands forward and the large yellow ball, hurtled across the surface of Lake Nigon. Quite a way out, the glowing ball entered the water of the lake. For a few seconds, Runa could see it below the surface. It was going deeper though and was quickly out of sight. It was gone for so long, that Runa began to think things had gone wrong. Muzzie had seemed like a crazy shaman up to then, always doing strange things, but always winning when it mattered. Perhaps he wasn't favoured by the Gods after all? The explosion deep in the lake, stopped her thinking about much at all, for a few seconds. It was huge, too huge. Someone was muttering about it being too huge, though she couldn't tell who. Aeon had made a comment that the monster of the lake, whatever it was, could have swallowed them all, in one go. It would have noticed any explosion in the lake, but one that huge....

"Move.....Back, there's a large wave coming this way." Shouted Caspian.

Runa saw the wave approaching and it was probably as tall as Muzzie. Not exactly the village destroyer that was once said to have rushed across the lake near Tandalla, leaving hundreds dead. The wave was going to be an inconvenience, a creator of muddy ground. There was a chance it might have engulfed some of the kids, so it was wise to get everyone higher up the shoreline. Then as they all watched the wave recede, it almost looked like a miracle had occurred.

"Fish.....Lots of fish, some still wriggling." Shouted Bizzi.

"Thousands of fish." Yelled young Maya.

It was quite a sight and not just the muddy edge of the lake was covered in dead and dying fish. The shallow water was full of them, like a vast carpet of wriggling fish. Runa had only been on what she

called a twigs and berries diet for a few days, but she was already hating the idea of eating more of it. The fish looked so.....Delicious. Everyone looked frozen though, glued to the spot.

“Go !.....Go !” Yelled Muzzie. “Grab as many fish as you can.”

Caution forgotten, everyone ran into the water. It was the kids doing the real work; the adults were just there to keep them safe. Though....Runa was sure she saw Vella put a large fish in a bag. Muzzie was, as always, out in front. He had his back to everyone, as he scanned the waters of the massive lake. Runa had chosen a spear, in the hope it might stab deep if the monster appeared. Every adult was out there, knee deep among the flapping and wriggling fish. Even Pio had arrived in his old armour from his days of wars and skirmishes. He carried a large sword and had chaos runes painted on his leather armour. Runa hated to admit it, but Pio looked quite impressive, as he stood guard over the kids.

“Hurry.....Grab what you can and take the fish back to the shore.” Yelled Galla.

Yes, even poor Galla with her hatred of cold water and bad joints, was there. In her right hand she carried a packet of some kind, probably one of her famous magical powders. Runa knew Galla a little and her reputation far better. That packet in the apothecary’s hand was probably more lethal than any sword being used that day.

“The fish.....They look so.....Wonderful.” Yelled one of the kids.

They did and the Dredger kids were collecting a lot. So many that the adults helped them carry the fish to the high shoreline, before piling them in heaps. That amount alone was enough to feed everyone until they entered Annil, yet they’d only moved a small amount of what was there.

“Go Again.....We’ve a lot of hungry mouths.” Yelled Muzzie.

Back they went, with Vella and Galla helping to gather fish. So many wonderful, delicious looking fish, that they began to reject anything small, or not quite as attractive as the rest. The kids were loaded down with the second haul of fish, when the expected happened. It was the lake the monster thought of as home and they’d invaded it with a loud explosion and noisy Dredger kids. No roar, no sound at all, but the water began to vibrate.....

“It’s coming; the creature is on its way.” Yelled Muzzie.

“The beast.....I can see it, the monster is close.....So close.” Yelled Aeony.

Aeony was in the air, pointing at something out on the lake. When Runa saw the beast, she didn’t quite believe her eyes, not at first. The largest building Runa had ever seen was The Dome in the city where she’d spent most of her life. The monster of Lake Nigon was as large as The Dome and that was just what was on the surface. There had to be much, much more of it below the surface.

“We can’t fight that.” She said.

“We must.....Or it will kill everyone.” Said Muzzie.

The Dredger children were running, but a lot of them were still in the water. They seemed unwilling to drop the fish, as the beast entered shallow water. It came up and onto strange webbed feet. It had feet; the damned thing has feet, which were attached to powerful legs. Its head had at least six eyes and all of them were red with anger. It hated them; Runa could almost feel the hate. If it could, the brute would kill them all.

“Don’t just stand there.....Use your spear, Runa.” Shouted Vella.

Dreadful, her father would have been so ashamed of her, if he’d been alive to see it. Runa was determined to face the beast, even if killing it seemed impossible. She held her borrowed spear up and ready to strike, as she walked towards the monster.

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Caspian was scared, though he'd been scared so many times before. He'd been in so many dangerous situations, fighting some creatures who were supposed to be un-killable. Vella had been with him during all of those terrifying times and they'd survived it all. Once they'd been naked and unarmed in the deep cellars below the Great Library. Yet.....By some miracle they'd always come out of it in one piece. Sometimes injured and bloody, but always alive. It was being a couple, he was sure of it. Neither of them wanted to let the other one down. There was also an idea that having survived so much, they were almost certain to make it through the next life or death situation. That thought didn't take away his fear, but it did send him running to help Vella. His wife and mother of their son, was trying to drag a Dredger kid out of the way, before an enormous foot crushed them both. Only there was another child, not just one. The second child was struggling and he knew Vella would never simply walk away from the two kids.

"Take the child you're holding." He yelled. "I'll grab the other one."

His poor Vella, her face had two jagged wounds running across her left cheek. It was the huge beast that towered above them all. Every movement and its feet sent up stones and debris from the lakeshore. Everyone seemed to have cuts and bruises, but seeing Vella hurt like that.....Even that didn't make him braver, nothing ever did. Caspian just became more determined to pretend to be brave. Often in the past, pretending had saved his life and the lives of others.

"She's wrapped herself around my leg, Casp. I can't move." Said Vella.

Runa chose that moment to ram a spear into the foot of the beast. It had to be like a tiny splinter going into his own foot, yet the monster gave an enormous growl and took a step back. The spear might well have been enchanted of course and there was Inanna's prophecy. She was a genuine angel, one of the few surviving Genova. Inanna had told Vella many things, including having their son and that Caspian was destined to be head of the Great Library. It sounded wonderful, as if he couldn't be harmed by anything, or the prophecy would fail. There were a lot of prophecies though and Caspian had read a lot of epic tomes on the history of the rifts. He knew the graveyards were full of people whose prophecies hadn't quite worked out.

"I'll get her." He yelled.

No simply pulling the child away, though that was tempting. A tiny infant, who was obviously terrified. Caspian held her and promised to not hurt her. He promised several other things on the spur of the moment, most instantly forgotten. The important thing was having a calm Dredger child in his arms, as he ran back to the shoreline. Vella was right behind him and with him as the two kids were given into the care of one of the elderly Dredger matriarchs. Vella was actually smiling.

"Admit it Casp.....You miss this kind of thing." Said Vella.

The weird thing was, he did actually miss the danger and excitement.

"Look, Galla is on her own.....Come on." He yelled.

His curved blade ready, Caspian ran at Galla, knowing Vella would be with him and ready to fight. Aeony was above the beast, using her claws on its head and ears. For such a huge creature, it seemed to hate having Aeony scratching at its ears. It had to feel like flea bites to the monster, yet it screeched every time Aeony came close.

"Good.....Pio was helping me, but he's gone to help others." Said Galla. "I have a powder that will kill it. I need you two to stop it moving forward and crushing me."

Galla could be like that sometimes, abrupt and ordering everyone about. The problem was how hard it was to say no to a skilled empath. How could they stop a beast that huge from moving towards Galla? Caspian shrugged at Vella, before yelling a battle cry and running at the creature. Both of them began hacking at one of its feet, though Aeony probably saved their lives. The monster had

found one of their number to kill, though it was impossible to tell who. They were now just a tiny mass of blood and bones, being chewed by the brute's massive jaws. That was obviously too much for Aeony, her claws went for its eyes.

"Good.....It's moving back." Said Galla. "Well done, carry on doing whatever you did."

The monster of the lake probably knew they were there, stabbing at its foot. Caspian knew it was Aeony who was seriously worrying the beast. It had eight large eyes, though she was concentrating on just one of them. It was the eye furthest from its jaws and every time Caspian looked up, she was using all of her four sets of claws on it. Arms one moment, the claws on her feet the next. Muzzie had once said he'd seen Aeony eviscerate a feral Jangar beast in a matter of seconds.

"More.....I just need it to step right back." Said Galla. "When I throw the powder, hold your breath for at least a minute."

Could he do that ? A minute sounded a long time. In the flooded cellars though, he'd probably held his breath for far longer. It did cross Caspian's mind that Muzzie wasn't doing much with all those nice spells he had. Then he realised that using any of them would probably kill half of those who'd sworn to follow him to hell and back. Like it or not, the lives of everyone were in Galla's hands. The key moment was when Caspian felt something running over his face, something fluid but viscous. Vella was looking up.

"She did it, Aeony has destroyed the eye." Yelled Vella.

Aeony was also giving a loud cackling sound, probably the dark angel equivalent of a triumphant shout. Just one eye out of eight and Caspian didn't want to think about the fluid covering his head and shoulders. It worked though; a massive foot went back about half a pace. It was obviously enough for Galla to feel safe from being stomped on.

"Under the water if you can.....Hold your breath." Shouted Galla.

The water was filthy and there wasn't much of a depth to it. Caspian hugged Vella and relied on the weight of their weapons and armour, to take them to the bottom. Less than four feet of water over them, but it would have to do. There was no sound and Caspian attempted to count off the time. It had to have been close to three minutes, when Vella began pulling at his arm. They surfaced to a sight he never thought they'd see.

"Good, you're both safe.....What do you think ?" Asked Galla. "I've dealt with chaos enforcers, a Vargouille or two, maybe three....Even a couple of sorcerers from Leng. This though.....It's the biggest so far and was probably the most dangerous."

Caspian was still spluttering and trying to sneeze grubby water out of his nose. If anything, Vella seemed in a worse state than him. It seemed hybrids weren't designed to hold their breath in cold, grubby water. Who'd have guessed ?

"Wow, you did that with one of your powders ?" Asked Vella.

"Oh yes, my strongest powders are only for my own defence." Said Galla. "They can kill anything that walks, crawls or flies.....As long as it breathes, it will die. The pity is.....The ingredients are becoming hard to find."

Vella had once killed a Roruss, an ancient creature with a reputation for being indestructible. Mentioning it to Galla would seem like bragging, so he didn't. There was Galla, with the same triumphant expression on her face, as Vella had that day. Galla, the smallest of them all, was stood in front of her kill, the largest living thing Caspian had ever seen or heard of.

"Pio is dead; the beast must have eaten him." Said Galla. "I can see some parts of his armour, with chaos runes painted on them."

"That's dreadful.....He never did get to see his friends in Annill." Said Vella.

Looking around, there were a lot of wounded being cared for, which meant there'd be other deaths. The one encouraging thing, besides the dead monster, was the amount of fish. The shoreline was carpeted in layers of wonderful delicious looking fish.

"Hmmm, there could be a problem." Said Galla.

Not something he wanted to hear at that particular moment. Caspian held Vella's hand and hoped there wasn't a mate for the dead brute, or thousands of offspring likely to seek vengeance. The rifts were like that, he wasn't just being a little over anxious.

"Oh, what would that be?" Caspian asked.

"There has been a balance in the lake, probably for thousands of years." Said Galla. "The monster ate the fish and stopped them over breeding. Now we've wrecked that balance.....Something will move into the lake and fill the gap.....Something always does find such opportunities. For the people of Annill, it might be worse than this monster."

"Ahhh, I think we can leave that for the good people of Annill to sort out." Said Vella.

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Strangely, the green furred inhabitants of the trees, never bothered them. Everyone had been worried, but there had been not one single attack. The general consensus was that keeping together had worked in discouraging attacks. Sadly Pio's hadn't been the only death on the lakeshore. Three adult Dredgers had perished and one child. Awful, terrible, though it could easily have been far worse. The dead, what could be found of them, had been buried that night, close to Lake Nigon. The good news had been the huge amount of fish, which meant a well fed group of Dredgers and Muzzie's friends, were looking at the open gates of Annill City. Sensan had always thought they'd get there, though he hadn't expected the welcoming committee. He was helping to push the lead cart and had a good view.

"Nice to be waved at.....Though, they're a strange looking lot." Said Bizzi.

Bizzi was a Dredger hybrid with two legs, four arms and shovel like jaws. Sensan had seen it before on the rifts; it was always the other people who looked weird, never you.

"They look strange, Bizzi.....We're travelling with a dark angel and a bar owner with red skin.... And I won't even mention Galla's scruffy little bird."

"Oh.....You know what I mean." Bizzi said, with a sigh.

Sensan did know what he meant and being honest about it, the crowd stood just outside the city gates, where a decidedly strange looking lot. Annill was known right across the rifts as the city of strangers. Many portals converged near that edge of the rift, probably why the city had been built there. Many portal systems no longer worked that well, or worked at all. For some unknown reason portals with no exit, tended to dump travellers near the edge of the lake. It meant a constant arrival of new involuntary migrants in Annill, who for one reason or another, never left.

"I've never seen a pure blood Ubari since.....Maybe forever." Said Galla, from the back of the cart.

Horns, wings and purple skin. Add on a height of at least eight feet and the Ubari definitely created an impression. They seemed to be a friendly crowd. All chattering away in a mixture of the common tongue, old imperial and their own languages. Sensan could understand about a quarter of what was being shouted and what he heard, sounded encouraging. Runa put it simply and accurately.

"We killed the monster, so now they love us." She said.

"Let's hope their good mood lasts while we're here." Said Bizzi.

The population must have had a good view from the city walls. Maybe not in detail, though they'd have seen Muzzie use magic and then a fight begin. At the end of it the monster was just a dead corpse lying in the shallows. No one needed to be a genius to put that two and two together.

“No one seems worried about us having a dark angel with us.” Said Sensan.

“That war was when even I was a child.” Said Galla. “Memories on the rifts tend to be long and some hold grudges for centuries.....But few will remember the dark angels were once an enemy.”

“Pio-Xanash would have remembered.” Said Bizzi.

There was a general muttering of agreement. Pio was going to be remembered as a hero and Sensan didn't begrudge him a little posthumous fame. There had been rumours that Pio was causing too much trouble, that he had outlived his usefulness. It would have been so easy for his already dead body to be thrown in the direction of the monster. All the confusion.....It would have been very easy. Not that Sensan would ever mention his suspicions to a living soul. After all, he had some dark secrets of his own he was determined to keep.

“Yes.....Poor Pio never did get to Annill.” He muttered.

Aeony flew through the open city gates and was cheered. Sensan was sweating as he entered Annill, from pushing the overloaded cart. Eager locals shoved food at him, which he would probably think twice about eating. A tall man in robes, probably a cleric, pushed small gold coins into Sensan's hand. Those.....He definitely would keep.

“I think.....I'm going to like it here.” Sensan muttered.

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