

The Last Emperor

Chapter 14 - Tandalla

“At some time during the night, Nethra’s wings had taken on a purple colour and there were more camp legends about such things than there were soldiers. Every family would have that relative, the one claiming to be an expert on the ancient ones.”



Muzzie had become involved in setting up his quarters in the building surrounding the Void Gate. There were several nice rooms, which Aeony had looked over and approved. Windows with some kind of crystal rather than glass, they seemed to let the warmth of the sun in better than glass. By the time Aeony had finished, their quarters looked quite luxurious. She’d even flown back to Dessine to buy bedding and fabrics. For a famed dark angel, the female he shared a bed with, was becoming surprisingly domesticated. Not tame of course, no one would ever have dared to suggest Aeony was becoming tame. As Muzzie looked over their rooms, he decided that there was something to be said for a little opulence. Not too much, but their rooms looked so much better than his bedroom back at his tavern in the City of the Lost God.

“Our warriors have built a strong stockade around their camp.” Said Muzzie. “The essential supplies are here, on the ground floor.....We’re ready to march on Tandalla.”

“You need to talk to Caspian.” Said Aeony. “Actually I think it was Vella, so have a stern word with them both.”

“Is this about them hiring their own guards ?” Asked Muzzie.

“Not their guards, that might just about be alright.” Said Aeony. “They’ve offered extra gold to six of the best fighters, to be their personal guard. They’re your fighters, Muzzie.....Something has to be done. Caspian will start getting above himself if you allow this.”

Muzzie already knew about Caspian’s six guards and he’d decided it was only six out of about two thousand and the extras hired in Medenar and Dessine. It wasn’t a huge dent in his army, but Aeony was right. Allow it and Vella would start pushing Caspian to want a title of some kind, something hinting at next emperor in waiting. Eventually Muzzie might find himself facing Caspian as an enemy. “I need to talk to Dhūlen.” Said Muzzie. “I’ll stop and deal with the Caspian problem on the way.”

“Vella is the real problem.”

“I know.” Said Muzzie.

Out of their quarters and there were so many faces he didn’t recognise. Most were cleaning and repairing whatever needed cleaning. A huge number of men and women had joined the camp followers and it was hard to tell who belonged and who didn’t. A guard had been placed on the store rooms, after a few things had gone missing. Two female Ubari hybrids smiled at him, before carrying on with whatever they were doing. Muzzie was still coming to terms with being almost universally popular.

“Good morning.” He said.

They both bowed to him, without saying a word. Muzzie hoped that one day, being treated as an emperor would be normal. At the moment it was still taking a bit of getting used to. The throne his army had built had significantly changed the way he was treated. A sturdy throne with long handles, allowing his warriors to carry him into battle. He’d moaned about the lack of beasts to ride, so

Dhūlen had set a sizeable part of the grey guard to work. The massive throne had been the result. Built to a remembered design of the one used by Xanash the fifteenth, or maybe sixteenth, Dhūlen hadn't been certain. Aeony hadn't laughed about it, as he'd expected. She viewed it as instant respect for him and by association, her too. Muzzie reached the circle of tents being used by Caspian, Vella and their ever growing number of servants, guards and general domestic staff. The servants Muzzie was fine with, but not a personal guard.

"Caspian.....Where are you ?" Yelled Muzzie.

A face came out of a tent and the manservant appeared, the one hired by Vella in Medenar. A Dredger hybrid with a lot of Dredger in his ancestry, his skin was dark yellow.

"I need to see your master." Said Muzzie.

"Is he expecting you ?"

"Get him out here.....Now !" Shouted Muzzie.

The servant ran to another tent, the largest in the circle. At least Muzzie knew where Caspian and Vella had created a home away from home. Caspian appeared, looking as though he'd still been dressing.

"Muzzie.....Join me, I was about to have breakfast." Said Caspian.

A wonderful smell of cooking had followed Caspian out of the tent. Muzzie had eaten, but there was no harm in being sociable.

"Thank you, though I can't stay long."

The tent looked larger on the inside, with several areas separated off. One was probably where Caspian and Vella slept, though there was no sign of her. Fabrics on the walls and rugs on the floor. It reminded Muzzie of the tents and huts of the nomads, who used the Pilgrim Trail.

"Vella was up and out at full light." Said Caspian. "Please.....Sit. It's amazing what N'Fady can produce in one pan so quickly."

A tall Ubari hybrid female brought the food. Probably the N'Fady who could work wonders with one pan and what could be found in the supply stores. The food smelled wonderful and tasted delicious. Some kind of herbal drink to wash it down and Muzzie was glad he'd accepted the invitation to breakfast.

"I can see Vella's guiding hand here." Said Muzzie. "She reorganised the kitchens in my tavern and everyone said the food was better. We had far fewer customers complaining of bad guts. Mind you.....She did upset the cook. Your wife can be a little.....Abrasive."

Caspian was giving him a certain stare. He had a few flaws, but no one could call the future head of the great library, stupid.

"You've come about the guards.....And you know they were Vella's idea." Said Caspian.

"I have, old friend.....They need to be re-join my army."

"But Galla has hired several Dredgers."

"To push her cart, Casp.....Not as a small private army." Said Muzzie. "They have to go and you need to tell Vella she can't hire any more. I can remember when she was happy with a few coppers as tips and what she could scavenge from the tavern kitchens."

"Times change, Muzzie." Said Caspian. "I can remember when we were happy to sit in front of the fire in your long bar and drink beer.....Not very good beer at that. In a way it's your fault."

"My fault !" Snapped Muzzie.

N'Fady topped up his drink from a large copper kettle and Muzzie wondered about hiring domestic staff in Tandalla, once it was his.

“You’ve given us all such high expectations.” Said Caspian. “Like it or not, you’ve become quite inspiring. Being a librarian’s wife for years, then seeing what we all might be.....She’ll be fine though, I’ll tell her the guards have to go. I might get a few bruises, but I’ll tell her.”

“So.....Your wife will probably be leading a revolt by the time we reach Quron ?”

“Maybe.....And it will all be your fault.” Said Caspian.

If it hadn’t been breakfast time, Muzzie might have suggested sharing a beer, or two. It was great though, laughing and reminiscing with Caspian. In a way his old friend was right, the tension and ambitions were his fault. Tell your friends you want to be emperor and they’ll probably chuckle. Show them you might actually manage to succeed and they’ll begin thinking about what might be in it for them. Caspian might well become King of the City of the Lost God. As for Vella ? Muzzie knew he had to think of something for her, something genuine and not just a title to keep her happy. Muzzie was a little late when he left the tent.

“We must do this more often.” Said Muzzie.

“Yes, have a regular breakfast meeting.”

It wouldn’t happen and they both knew that, which was sad, but realistic. Things had changed and yes, most of that was his fault. And now Dhūlen would be a bit prickly, at being kept waiting.

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General Dhūlen had given the order, after being seen talking with Muzzie. They were going to march on Tandalla that very day, as soon as the army was equipped and ready. That might take a couple of hours, but Galla still had so much to do. Maya was helping her, though the Dredger girl still had so much to learn. Her obvious excitement about attacking Tandalla, wasn’t helping. The child was picking things up as though she had four thumbs and no fingers.

“Don’t be so worried about picking up my powders.” Said Galla. “The packets might look like thin paper, but they’re sealed by an old and powerful spell. Until I rip them open, they’re quite safe. There are one or two that even I treat with respect. It’ll be a while before I let you near them, Maya.”

“Will the soldiers go into battle straight away, when we arrive ?” Asked Maya.

“No, the general will march them up to city.” Said Galla. “Remaining out of range of the defenders of course. Then Muzzie will issue a demand to be their emperor. The elders of Tandalla will then reply. Depending on that reply, we may be going to war. It’s not a quick process; it might be tomorrow before there’s a battle, if there ever is one. No one really wants to fight.”

“Why not ?” Asked Maya.

Galla looked at Maya’s young face, excited that there might be a battle and disappointed that it might not happen. When they had to attack Quron with all their army....Then the girl would understand why no good leader seeks war in a hurry.

“Muzzie won’t want to lose some of his fighters so early in the campaign.” Said Galla. “Tandalla won’t want to see their city damaged. Both sides want an excuse for a peaceful compromise, without looking weak.”

Maya had to have lost relatives during the fighting in Seren’s Edge. It was inconceivable that she hadn’t lost someone the girl cared about. Slowly her face took on a melancholy look.

“I do understand.....It was Nethra though and her purple wings.” Said Maya. “Some of the soldiers are saying that we can’t lose, that the ancient ones are on our side.”

At some time during the night, Nethra’s wings had taken on a purple colour and there were more camp legends about such things than there were soldiers. Every family would have that relative, the

one claiming to be an expert on the ancient ones. Galla believed she understood what was going on, though even she couldn't be certain.

"Some things aren't meant to be understood by us, child." Said Galla. "You'll hear so much nonsense today, from people who should know better. We're being watched by the ancients, I can almost taste their presence in the air. Older things too are out there, invisible but watching. With luck Muzzie will take Tandalla without a fight. If not....."

"If not what, Galla?" Asked Maya.

"Silly Maya.....No one can fight the ancients.....And live." Squawked Bird.

"Go away pest.....No filling her head with your overheard nonsense." Said Galla.

Galla was so annoyed, that she took a swipe at her pet to send him on his way. Not that she hit him of course, he could move like the wind.

"If not.....If there is a battle and it looks to be going against us." Said Galla. "If it's really bad, especially if I'm dead.....Run child and keep running until Tandalla is just a grubby mark where the sky meets the rift. Promise me you'll run."

Maya was scared, which hadn't been Galla's intent. Maybe for the best though, the child would probably run if the battle looked lost. If she saw a living ancient in battle.....The child would probably run all the way back to Seren's Edge.

"Come on, Maya.....Purple wings or not.....We have a lot to do." Said Galla. "Help me stack these powders in a few tough bags."

"I will, I'll work hard." Said Maya. "Galla.....What do the ancients look like?"

"Hm.....let me remember.....At least a dozen heads with jaws full of sharp teeth. Huge feet to trample you with and a thousand arms, all ending in clawed hands.....Perfect for slicing up your soft flesh.....Though I might have remembered it wrong."

Galla laughed at her own joke and Maya laughed with her. Hopefully the young Dredger would never know what one of the ancients really looked like. To look upon them was death, or so it was written on the walls of many tombs in the City of the Lost God. Carved into the stone in large characters, along with the famous rift greeting, whose origin was unknown.

'May chaos always pass you in the night.'

"Do all these powders in green packets, go into the same bag?" Asked Maya.

"Yes, that's right." Said Galla.

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General Dhūlen was a veteran, once leader of the largest army that had ever marched across the rifts. Once there had been a temptation to rebel, to assassinate the emperor of the day and set himself up on the throne. It had been Xanash the twenty sixth then, or perhaps the twenty seventh. The Xanash dynasty had ruled the rifts for so long.....No one could genuinely put a number of years to their uninterrupted reign. It had been a wet summer with fruit rotting on the tress, followed by the harshest winter in living memory. Such things fuel a need for change and for a day, an entire day, Dhūlen had considered being that force for change. It could have worked; it might very easily have worked.

"When the Void Gate opens, follow me through." Yelled Dhūlen.

Dhūlen had an estate on the second rift at the time and someone to share it with. To many his life would have seemed idyllic, the kind of existence most were working hard to achieve. Plenty of gold from past successful campaigns, a thriving farm attached to his estate and best of all, a woman he loved to enjoy it all with him. Even having a little Terak in his ancestry wasn't worrying his neighbours the way it might have a century before.

“The Gate is open.....Pointing at Tandalla.” Yelled Muzzie’s huge, booming voice.

At the end of that single day, when General Dhūlen might have taken his life on a different course, he’d decided he liked the life he had. No one wanted to assassinate generals, or at least not very often. He could enjoy his money in privacy; few could have pointed him out in a crowd, if he wasn’t wearing his armour. Becoming emperor would have changed everything, mostly for the worse. He’d never regretted that decision and as long as the promised gold arrived, he’d be completely loyal to Mussaneth Osranetherer and his descendants.

“With me.....Follow me.” Shouted Dhūlen.

Muzzie was right; some kind of beast to ride on would have been nice. Dhūlen walked into and through the Void Gate. The sands of the fifth rift were drier than anywhere else. The air had a crisper smell to it, though he still preferred the damper air that filled Annill. It crossed his mind that the warmer, drier air would suit Galla with her ageing joints and bones. Dhūlen looked behind him and the army were following him, marching six abreast.

“No looting.....Unless authorised.” Yelled Dhūlen.

Tandalla was in front of him, a good two miles away across the rift. Soon they’d spot Muzzie’s army and the alarms would begin. Gates would be closed and strengthened. Bowmen would take their places along the walls. Dhūlen had seen and done it all before, often on a far greater scale. Quron would be a challenge, but Tandalla..... If Muzzie hadn’t wanted to take the city intact, it could have been a burning carcass of a city by nightfall. The army had travelled about a mile over firm sand, when Runa arrived by his side.

“Every soldier I talk to, sounds eager for battle.” Said Runa.

“They’ll fight well when our emperor wishes it.” Said Dhūlen.

He liked Runa; he’d briefly served with her grandfather at the tail end of the last blood war. His guard seemed to sense who to push away and who to allow through. Runa was an army brat and always welcome. She did have a bad habit of listening to soldiers’ gossip though, and believing far too much of it. Dhūlen knew the way their conversation was likely to go. Not that he minded, the army was still some way from the walls of Tandalla.

“What do you think Nethra’s purple wings signify ?” Asked Runa.

“Nethra has some elder demon blood in her. I’m sure of it, even if she isn’t. One of the advantages of having a little Terak ancestry.” Said Dhūlen. “I see such thing clearer than most. As to what her purple wings signify.....I’m not sure yet.”

Yes, he saw things others could not and he knew several Genova were standing on a small hill to the right of the marching army. About twenty of them, all pure blood and all of immense age. Enough angels to destroy the emperor’s army and leave Tandalla as a smoking hole in the ground, if they wished to. That was the problem with Genova, you never knew what they intended, until it happened. How many angels were left in the multiverse, was a question for seers and philosophers. Dhūlen believed they still existed in great numbers.

“Halt.....Bring our warriors to a halt.” Yelled General Dhūlen.

“What’s happening ? Why are we stopping ?” Asked Runa.

“You will see, Runa.....You will see.”

Stopping a couple of thousand warriors wasn’t easy; it took a lot of shouted orders from their field officers. Some got it wrong and there was quite a bit of jostling. A few soldiers at the back of the army, actually fell over. Dhūlen glared and waited for the army to come to order again.

“Stay close to me, Runa.” He said.

With just his guard and Runa, Dhūlen walked towards the Genova. Muzzie had a little Genova in his blood, Chenad had told him that. No way to be certain, but Nethra's purple wings and Muzzie's ancestry, tended to indicate the angels were on Muzzie's side. On the other hand, Muzzie had been to Gorshan and conversed with the ghost of Wēland Raag. The angels hated Gorshan, though destroying that world had cost them a lot of lives. It was said they left Gorshan as a ruin, to be a warning to others. On the whole though, by his own mental tally..... Dhūlen thought the presence of the angels was good news for Muzzie and bad news for Tandalla.

"Do you see them yet?" He asked.

"I see something.....Like seeing the glow of wraiths in full light." Said Runa.

A few more paces and still at least fifty feet away from them and the Genova made themselves fully visible. Runa gasped, it was probably the first time she'd seen angels dressed for war. Maybe more than twenty, fully armoured and carrying dreadful looking weapons. Magic users really, rumours spoke of them using fire spells and pure chaos to destroy Gorshan.

"Are they.....Angels?" Asked Runa.

"Yes.....If they ask you anything, tell the truth.....They can sense a lie." Said Dhūlen.

Many assumed Genova were immortal, but they weren't, though some achieved a staggering age. Eventually though, they were as mortal as demons and humans. Dhūlen stopped less than six feet away from a female Genova he thought he recognised from paintings on temple walls. He bowed and Runa copied him.

"I am General Dhūlen, commander of the imperial army." He said.

"We know you and the one calling himself emperor. I am Aelfraed, daughter of Giron. We have been watching and deciding.....A decision has been made to help Mussaneth Osranetherer in his quest to become emperor."

Aelfraed, yes that was the name on the walls of some old temples. Tall, taller than him, which was a rare thing. Red hair and impressive in her silver armour. Aelfraed was holding a war axe, that even Aeony might have found too heavy to use.

"I appreciate your help and I'm sure the emperor will too." Said Dhūlen.

"Just a little help and only until your army reaches Quron." Said Aelfraed. "After that, you should have a large enough army to bring every rift under the emperor's control. Our presence alone should cause Tandalla to surrender, though our help comes at a price."

"I understand.....What do you require?" Asked Dhūlen.

Dhūlen saw the way Aelfraed was looking at him and remembered the legendary animosity between Genova and the Terak. Her eyes seemed to look into his soul.

"Tempting to ask for your wings, what remains of them." Said Aelfraed. "A Terak with wing intact.....Your existence here is an insult. I am.....We are of a mind to be generous. One day soon there will be a cost. For today, you can keep your wings."

Dhūlen bowed low and felt relieved. His wings were useless, but to a Terak, they defined who you were. Even tiny residual wings made him one of the people, one of the Terak.

"And.....We see your enemy are eager to die." Said Aelfraed. "Tandalla are about to send the first wave of their army against you. Go, Dhūlen and Runa of the City of the Lost God. Fight well and win your emperor his first battle."

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Armed forces and defences are a huge and seemingly mindless bureaucracy, even on the rifts. There were magnifiers with lenses and some had to be in the possession of scouts looking from the walls of Tandalla. It was inconceivable that no one had seen General Dhūlen talking to several Genova in a

friendly manner. Aeony had seen it all quite well with her dark angel eyes. The order to send out the first wave of fighters should have been cancelled. Orders were orders though, not intended to be questioned or disobeyed. Before the main council of war could react, the city gates had been opened and around two hundred defenders had charged out to fight the soldiers of the fake emperor. Not just the ordinary troops of Tandalla, the first wave had been the veterans of many previous wars and skirmishes. Good warriors, very good. The gates were closed behind them and they were unlikely to be aided by reinforcements.....

“See.....See, they’ve sent out warriors to attack us.” Said Aeony.

“Our orders are to stay here unless attacked.” Said Galla.

“But.....Look, Galla. I know that flag, the Old Dependables have been sent out.” Said Aeony. “We’re at war !”

In her heart of hearts, Aeony knew it wasn’t war, Tandalla wasn’t ruled by fools. Something had gone wrong, an order not reversed. It did give her a plausible reason though, for screeching a battle cry and taking to the air. She flew over the two hundred or so Tandalla forces, completely ignoring them. Muzzie’s army were keen, eager for blood, with high morale. They’d hack the Old Dependables to pieces in no time at all. Aeony wanted to attack the city, though only the defenders on the walls. It would be fun and with luck, her exploits would be heard about in taverns the length and breadth of the rifts.

“Oh.....So nice to use my wings.” She muttered.

Aeony flew out to her right and came back in a huge curve, that took her well away from the walls. She came at the front wall of Tandalla from the side and as she suspected, the scouts and every other defender was watching the Old Dependables fighting Muzzie’s army. She pushed her adjustable wings back, giving her the best forward speed. At the very, very last moment, Aeony folded her wings right back. Elbows up and in front of her face, she hit the soldiers on the wall’s eastern tower. Dark angels are tough, she’d come through it all with a few minor bruises. The defenders of Tandalla though.....She saw two go over the edge and fall from the wall. Dark angels have tough compact flesh; she had to weigh three times as much as the average inhabitant of Tandalla. They all went down and Aeony was beginning to enjoy herself.

“Victory for the new emperor !” She yelled.

Officers had a red collar on their jackets and there was a plump looking officer trying to get to his feet. Officers in Tandalla had to eat better than the ordinary soldiers; she never remembered seeing one who was thin. She grabbed him, wrapping her tail round him to keep him tight against her.

“Struggle and I’ll claw out your liver and eat it while you watch.” She said.

One of her standard threats and it almost always worked. The officer was the usual Dredger hybrid, though he had a little Shelzak in his blood, she could smell it. Archers put two arrows into her right thigh, as she flew straight up, still holding the plump officer.

“Ahhhhh, a nice long wall next.” She muttered.

Fighting was special to a dark angel; it was what they lived for. Sex with Muzzie gave her a better buzz, but only slightly better. All sorts of wonderful hormones were messing with her thoughts and emotions. Ignoring the arrows in her thigh was easy. The wall, before attacking one of the city gates. The gates had all sorts of ways to defend themselves, some involving dropping huge boulders, or gallons of burning oil. Aeony was looking forward to seeing how much damage she could do, but first the long wall.....

“Time to let you go.” She said.

The officer looked pleased; he obviously didn't understand what she meant. After building up speed by going in a circle over the city, she dropped the officer on the start of the walkway that ran along the wall. It was wonderful, to see the number of defenders knocked over the edge of the wall. Of course Aeony had to land and use her sword to finish the job. She felt one of the Tandalla fighters jab his sword into her shoulder, but she was having so much fun. When there were no other soldiers coming forward to meet her, Aeony decided it was time to drop something from high up, onto the gate's defences.

She found an officer on another stretch of wall. Not quite as plump as the last, but he'd have to do. There was a lot of complex equipment above the doors, all of it designed to deliver death to any forces trying to break them down. Heavy weights, boiling oil, burning oils of various types and of course, several rows of archers. Aeony had visited Tandalla in the past and had always wondered how well such complex machinery, would cope with something heavy dropped from above. Aeony flew up to around three hundred feet above the gate and dropped the officer.

"Hmmmmm.....That's disappointing." Aeony mumbled.

Lots of noise and soldiers yelling at each other, for reasons that weren't obvious. Nothing dramatic though, no collapsing gates or exploding hot oil. More yelling down there and a few archers attempting to hit her. When the fire did arrive, it was dramatic enough to keep her happy. Beyond happy the inferno was close to making her feel orgasmic. Everything seemed to be ablaze, the gate had to eventually collapse. A large column of black smoke was rising into the air. She felt so good, though she was beginning to realise that sex with Muzzie did give her a far better buzz.

"I must do that again.....Next gate." She muttered.

There was a tune being played below her, by several people using long military horns. It was the withdrawal command coming from Tandalla. There might be few of the Old Dependables left to withdraw, though the meaning was clear. Tandalla were surrendering, Muzzie had won. Aeony was almost disappointed.....Just a little longer and she'd have destroyed a second gate. She turned and headed back to where an angry Galla was probably waiting to grumble at her.

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Vella walked towards a set of city gates, which Aeony hadn't destroyed. There was no smoke now and the ruined gates were some distance away, but everyone had made a point of looking at them. Just a large hole in the wall, where there'd been a set of heavy city gates. Everyone was friendly now, or at least pretending to be. The Tandalla temple had arranged for carts full of flowers and lots of happy looking citizens, to give the flowers to the arriving army. Two days of feasting had been called, by the city elders. Vella smiled at everyone, though she still wasn't in a mood to be friendly to Caspian.

She'd arrived at their tented compound, to find Caspian had sent their guards away. Paid them a little bonus and sent them back to the army. Why? Muzzie hadn't liked them having guards. Vella hated to admit it, but her husband could be too eager to agree with Muzzie. She took a flower garland from a member of the Tandalla temple and hung it around her neck.

"You'd have been angry too, Nethra." Vella said. "I came home and.....No guards. I might talk to him again, eventually, but not for a while. It's not as if Muzzie can have Casp beaten or anything. He took the oath of the Silver Lady and even Muzzie has to obey the rules.....There's the whole nasty boiling blood thing."

"I can think of a way Muzzie could get round that." Said Nethra.

Vella had asked Nethra to join her, rather than Caspian. Nethra was her friend and the purple wings had made her very popular. Nethra had seemed the perfect choice to join her for the first day of the

feast. Now though, Vella was beginning to wonder about what she meant by Muzzie getting round the curse. Maybe Nethra hadn't been a good choice after all.

"How could Muzzie get around the curse?" Asked Vella.

Dhūlen was just inside the city gates, dressed in his finest robes. The hero of the day according to some. The Old Dependables had been destroyed, almost wiped out. According to Galla it was the mere presence of the Genova, that had given Muzzie the victory and Galla tended to know what she was talking about. Caspian was with Dhūlen.

Vella looked away, determined not to have anything to do with her husband. She'd refuse to sleep with him too, though not for longer than a few days. She'd known wives who'd overdone the whole withdrawal of intimacy business. Vella thoroughly enjoyed her sex life so punishing Casp meant punishing herself. Plus, she'd heard of husbands who had found what they desired in the arms of another. Caspian might sometimes be a little spineless, but he was hers.

"I could be a way for Muzzie to get around the Silver Lady's curse." Said Nethra.

Suddenly, Nethra had her full attention.

"How would that work?" Asked Vella.

"I've taken Sensan's place in the seven, but I never gave an oath to the Silver Lady. Just as an example, if someone were to disrespect Muzzie, I could punish them quite severely. I'm talking in general terms of course.....But I could leave such a person needing weeks, maybe months of healing. No order from Muzzie, so he'd be fine. Think of me as an independent punisher of anyone disrespecting the emperor. I'm sure you understand what I mean."

"Oh yes, Nethra.....Yes I do." Said Vella.

Nethra wasn't talking in generalities, it was a threat. Behave, accept the orders of the emperor, or suffer the consequences. Some might have reacted angrily, but Vella was a pragmatist most of the time. She'd poured beer in Muzzie's bar for years, rubbing shoulders with some of the worst villains in the city. She knew how to smile and get along with people.

"The fruit in Tandalla is wonderful; the city is famous for it." Said Vella. "If the feast hasn't begun, we should go to the market and get a selection.....My treat."

"Thank you, that sounds wonderful." Said Nethra.

"If there's time, we could get our hair restyled." Said Vella. "I know a wonderful place from the last time I came here with Casp."

"Yes, good idea.....I fancy my hair up for the feast." Said Nethra.

Male, female or a hybrid who was a little of both....Vella knew how to make them like her. Rarely by threats, usually by flattery. Before she'd met Casp, she'd learned how easily sex could be used to manipulate males.

"To be honest, I was dreading entering Tandalla." Said Vella. "I mean.....Underneath the smiles they must hate us. Now though, with the two of us.....I'm looking forward to the feast."

Nethra actually held her hand and she could withdraw her claws. Vella had never noticed that before. It seemed you really could learn something new about old friends.

"You'll be fine.....I won't let anything bad happen." Said Nethra. "After all.....I am the hybrid with the purple wings."

They were both still laughing as they arrived at the market. Vella would never have admitted it, but the fruit looked far better than at any market in the City of the Lost God. It was their market now of course, part of Muzzie's empire.

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Muzzie still saw Runa as his assessor of fighters, mainly due to her family having such a long military history. She didn't mind, but now that Sensan had died in Gorshan, it was a lot of work for one person.

"I'm making judgements based on hearsay, Muzzie." She'd told him. "I'll make mistakes and hire a few bad ones.....Has to happen. I need help."

"Who do you suggest?" Muzzie had asked her.

Runa had no idea why she suggested Aeony, though it did actually make sense. Muzzie was still keen on the seven being the decision makers on such things and Aeony probably had more fighting experience than any of them, including Muzzie. Dark angels lived for battle and were known to be good judges of warriors. At the time the name had popped into her head, anyone would have done, even Maya. Now though, as they walked past dozens of eager fighters looking for a new cause to fight for.....Yes, Aeony had been the perfect choice.

"We could hire another thousand here, Tandalla has some good fighters." Said Aeony.

"Muzzie is worried about supply lines." Said Runa. "And there's something Dhūlen calls the group dynamic. He thinks five hundred extra fighters would be manageable."

"Dhūlen is a good General.....For a Terak." Said Aeony. "If he wants five hundred good fighters, we'll find them for him."

There had to be three thousand potential recruits, lined up in the square in front of the Tandalla library. Everything from huge hybrids who looked about ninety percent high level demon; through to small Dredger hybrids with yellow skin and the familiar shovel mouth. All wearing the uniform of the last army they'd served in, or the best armour they could borrow. Sadly Runa could discard many simply because of obvious infirmities and immense age. She did it kindly though, they'd all once been tough and well trained warriors. She tapped one old warrior on the shoulder, who'd lost the bottom half of his left leg.

"Sorry.....Maybe another time." Said Runa.

Wounds healed, but not half a leg. Runa knew they'd never consider the one legged fighter, but she wanted to leave his dignity reasonably intact.

"Thank you." He said, as he left the square.

Some were easy to accept, though Runa exchanged a few words with every warrior who signed up to follow the new emperor, Mussaneth Osranetherer. After a triumph at Tandalla, even the usually cynical Runa was beginning to wonder if Muzzie would father an Osranetherer dynasty. As Runa passed or failed a growing number of fighters, Aeony offered her opinions. She actually knew some of the fighters, from when they'd arrived in the City of the Lost God to buy spells at the great library. Runa nearly tapped a man on the shoulder, who looked well past his best and had his left arm in a sling.

"I know you..... Belso." Said Aeony. "The city militia had you in jail for brawling. Never fuck with the militia of the City of the Lost God. They enjoy giving strangers a beating."

"Oh, I know.....I thought I'd never see home again." Said Belso.

"What happened to you?" Asked Runa.

"With all respect, she happened to me.....Her, the dark angel. Knocked me right off the city wall. I'm lucky to be alive. A broken arm, but it will heal."

"Tandalla walls are high." Said Aeony. "How are you alive to tell the tale?"

"Of all the people I could have landed on.....I fell on a Dredger beggar, a female." Said Belso.

"Did she die of it?" Asked Runa. "You look quite heavy to me."

“All muscle my lady, all muscle.” Said Belso. “No, the beggar still lives. She suffered less damage than I did.”

Runa laughed and decided to hire Belso. As Aeony put it.....

“Hire this fighter, he’s obviously lucky....We need some lucky warriors.” Said Aeony.

“You’re now in the army of the emperor, Belso.” Said Runa. “Make your arrangements; we’ll be leaving Tandalla after the feast.”

“And we can probably arrange for a few powders to heal that arm.” Said Aeony.

“Powders.....I prefer creams and potions.” Said Belso.

“Never, ever.....Let our apothecary hear you say that.” Said Runa.

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