

The Last Emperor

Chapter 28 – Consequences & Intrigue

“Sokkolf was a crook, everyone in Tandalla knew that. Head jailer was a low paid job though, with few prospects for promotion. If Sokkolf made relatives pay for extra food for their jailed loved ones, no one really cared.”



Muzzie had walked into the Void Gate, with the intention of going to Annill. The city council was going to allow Dhūlen to hire another four thousand greys, the experienced mature soldiers. The old soldiers many called them, but Dhūlen respected the greys. As he'd pointed out many times, they stood their ground when under attack. The city of Annill expected something in return though. Everyone did of course, from the smallest town to the largest city. There would be support for the new emperor, but a little quid-pro-quo was expected. His guards were still with him on the other side of the Void Gate, but he definitely hadn't arrived in Annill.

“Don't worry, I recognise where we are.” Said Muzzie. “The ruins of Ingar Sans on the fourth rift.....I suspect a friend needs to see me. Probably the Silver Lady herself.”

Where it had all begun, the doors to the ruins were slightly ajar. It still took Muzzie and three of his guards, to open the doors wide enough to get inside. Sandy and dry in that part of the fourth rift, the sand seemed to get into every nook and cranny. The door gave access to a hallway, where several chairs had been lined up against a wall. No food, but some goblets had been left on a table, along with a large carafe of wine.

“Your guards can wait here.....They'll come to no harm.” Said a disembodied female voice.

Muzzie expected an argument, but his guards seemed quite happy to let him carry on alone. The wine probably had something to do with it, and the sinister surroundings. Soldiers were gossips who happily believed every fantastical tale they heard. They probably didn't fancy meeting the infamous Silver Lady.

“You know where I'll be waiting.” Said the voice.

Most likely, the same place they'd talked before. Muzzie just about remembered the way through the maze of ruined hallways and half collapsed chambers. It had been a long way from the others then, to avoid eavesdropping by those with exceptionally good hearing.

“I never thought I'd see this place again.” He muttered.

Ingar Sans was rarely visited; as with many old ruins in the dunes, it was linked to sinister goings on. Some false of course, warriors' stories and travellers' highly suspect tales. Some were genuine though. Muzzie was glad of his ability to produce a light globe and have it light his way.

“Not far now, Muzzie.....I can feel where you are.”

His own footprints in the dust, showed him the way through the final few turns. The chamber where the Lady waited for him, was well lit. There she was, sat at a table covered with refreshments. Last time they'd been sat next to mounds of dust and rubble. This time the large chamber was spotlessly clean.

“Here you are.....Last time I welcomed you as Muzzie, the bar owner.” Said the Lady. “Now I welcome you as Mussaneth Osranetherer, who is well on the road to becoming the new emperor.”

“A long, tough road.....I'm starting to feel my age.”

The Lady nodded at the chair and when he was sat, she poured him a glass of wine. Muzzie sipped his wine and ate a small cake, that looked as though it had been baked in Annill; that very morning. "You're starting to sound like Galla." Said the Lady. "Always asking the deities to mend her old bones and joints. All part of getting old of course.....Things that can never be fully healed, so have to be endured."

"Oh, these cakes are delicious." Said Muzzie.

"I'll give some to your guards. Are they obedient, Muzzie ? Nothing here will deliberately harm your warriors, but if they decide to wander about. Will they stay where they are ?"

"Yes.....They're well trained and obey orders without question." Said Muzzie.

Or at least that was how Muzzie wanted them to be. The truth was, that he didn't know if boredom might start them exploring. If being nosey got one or two killed.....It would be the ones who didn't obey orders.

"I brought you here to congratulate you on what you've achieved." Said the Lady. "Putting Zin Thriaxer back on the throne of Kahan was a piece of genius. That is a land that will never run out of gold. If there's time....I may well tell you how that tiny nation acquires so much wealth."

"I have been wondering about that." Said Muzzie.

"If there's time, Muzzie.....If there's time." Said the Lady. "Consider yourself congratulated on how far you've come. There will be changes in the balance though. You can't stir things up, without there being resulting intrigues and unforeseen consequences. Mainly.....I brought you here to talk about those consequences.

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Runa wasn't really a friend of Faal's; being honest she wasn't sure she even liked him. They had fought side by side in Segin-Unadaris though, the demon city. Faal had proven himself to be tough, skilled with a blade and best of all, reliable. She'd ended up running after him to escape the collapsing city doors and Faal had waited for her. You never really knew how someone would react to a desperate situation, until one arrived. In her mind, Faal had gone beyond simply proving himself that day. When Faal had asked to go with her to Tandalla, she'd been very pleased to have his company. Not that either of them had expected to be looking for experienced fighters in the city jail.....

"Here you go, fifty in gold." Said Runa. "No tricks, or adding on extra costs, Sokkolf.....If I want to, I expect to empty the jail for fifty imperial pieces."

Sokkolf was a crook, everyone in Tandalla knew that. Head jailer was a low paid job though, with few prospects for promotion. If Sokkolf made relatives pay for extra food for their jailed loved ones, no one really cared. There were other ways too; that the head jailer managed to get his job to pay more than the pittance the city paid him. Not that Runa cared, as long as he kept to their deal.

"Take them all.....I'll even throw in Jerak One Eye and the crazy guy who eats bugs." Said Sokkolf.

"We just want experienced fighters who can still use a blade." Said Faal.

"There are plenty of those in here, if you can control them." Said Sokkolf. "A few years in this place.....It changes sane men, turns them into feral beasts. You wouldn't believe some of the things I've seen."

Runa had brought Faal with her and a handful of warriors from the imperial garrison. They hadn't been included to deal with feral prisoners. Runa had arrived at the jail with guards, to deter Sokkolf from going back on their deal.

"Have you separated the best ones from the rest ?" Asked Runa.

“The gems from the dross.....Yes, there are just over two hundred of them.” Said Sokkolf. “Can’t have two hundred of them in one place..... Like wild beasts, they’d try to escape. I’ve put them into cells on the lowest level. Twelve per cell.....Not that they’ve been any trouble. Rumours have spread.....They think serving Muzzie will make them wealthy.”

“For the really good fighters.....That might be right.” Said Faal.

There were rows of cells, usually with far too many men crammed into them. There were also wide chambers, where the food was cooked. Conjugal visits too, probably another money earner for Sokkolf. One of the prisoners was having stand up sex against a wall, with a woman who might have been his wife, girlfriend, or a lady of the night. Runa was beginning to understand how a few years in Tandalla jail, could change a man. Lighting everywhere was dim, with large areas of shadow.

“I had the best two hundred put in this section.” Said Sokkolf. “If you’re willing to be a little less fussy.....I could find you another hundred.”

When it happened, the man came hurtling out of the shadows. The dim lighting was probably another money earner for Sokkolf. Lamp oil was expensive, right across the rifts. He was probably either selling it, or keeping the gold intended to buy it. Runa saw a running man close to Faal, and the glint of a blade.

“Watch out.....Behind you, Faal.....A blade.” Shouted Runa.

Faal was fast for someone who was a magician, rather than a fighter. He turned and grabbed the hand holding the knife. Faal said just two words, in a language Runa didn’t know. Faal’s attacker began to disintegrate, forming a heap of grey dust on the floor. Eventually the blade fell to the ground, right in the centre of the dust.

“Wow.....I’ll give you ten gold to teach me that trick.” Said Sokkolf.

“You have to be born an Emarduk.....And I am the last of my kind.” Said Faal

“You let the prisoners carry weapons ?” Asked Runa.

“Relatives come to see the prisoners.” Said Sokkolf. “I don’t have enough jailers to search everyone. We don’t get many attacks, they know what will happen. If one of my jailers is hurt, we kill the prisoner involved. No mercy, no appeal.”

“Crap.....I wish we could take every prisoner with us.” Said Runa.

Runa had arrived in the prison, determined not to care what conditions were like. She just needed a couple of hundred decent fighters, their signatures on a recruitment sheet and a few personal details. Everything else should have been immaterial.....But now.

“If we looked at everyone even vaguely suitable.....How many would that be ?” Asked Runa.

“Wealth of the empire causes crime. We’ve a record number of thieves and vagabonds.” Said Sokkolf. “I could line up the hopefuls a few at a time.....Might take you a day or so, but you could easily get five hundred fighters. Though.....I’m not saying they’d be that good. And.....I’d need to increase my fee.”

“No.....We have a deal.” Said Runa. “Fifty gold....No more. I know you want rid of the prisoners, Sokkolf. You’ll get the money for their food, even if the place is empty.”

“Can we talk, Runa ?” Asked Faal. “I’m not sure if Dhūlen will appreciate us emptying Tandalla prison into his army. We came for good fighters, not good thieves.”

Once Runa would have agreed, but she’d signed up thousands for the imperial army. If she couldn’t weed out the crazy and the useless in a couple of days, no one could.

“I can do this.....We’ll begin talking to the best ones now, this moment.” Said Runa. “Be prepared for a few days in Tandalla, Faal. My family has friends here.....We’ll have somewhere decent to stay.”

The first cell was emptied of its dozen or so prisoners. Sokkolf's jailers lined them up in an open chamber, where the man and woman were still fucking against a wall.

"Is he any good?" Asked Runa, pointing. "He seems to have stamina."

"No....That's Albas, the guy who eats bugs." Said one of the jailers.

Runa opened her ledger and approached the first would-be recruit. Two arms and two legs was the usual basic criteria, but there were a lot of different hybrids in Tandalla. Some had four arms, while a few had prehensile tails. A tiny number has small residual wings. Runa decided to tick her physical checklist, as long as they looked able to fight.

"Name?" She asked.

"Seb Runni.....Tandalla born and bred."

The first name in her ledger, with many hundred still to come. Seb gave the address of his family home and the full name of his father. His age of course, though some hybrids could have amazingly long lives. A signature came last and the promise of a signing fee, once Seb was away from the prison and in the army stockade. That was it, all done at lightning speed. Seb had a splodge of red paint put on the back of his hand, and.....

"Next." Yelled Runa.

Faal was right in a way; Dhūlen might look at some of the Tandallan prisoners with a scornful eye. They'd be alright though, numbers mattered during a siege. What you really wanted was wave after wave of warriors appearing over the hills. Scares the crap out your enemy. Even Albas the eater of bugs, could be part of a wave of fighters.

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Vella had used Estrin and still felt a little guilty about it. Was it possible to hide false motives from one of the divines? If Estrin had suspected something, she hadn't told Muzzie. First Vella had volunteered to help Galla recruit skilled healers for her new Healers Guild in Aarabash. Galla had been very appreciative of the help. Vella had then told Estrin that being able to set the Void Gate herself, would speed up the whole process. Vella had guessed that Estrin would be able to allow her to set the Void Gate. She was a God after all.....

"Does it still hurt?" Asked Casp.

Vella rubbed the bump on the back of her hand, which still hurt like hell. In theory she could now set the Void Gate for anywhere, though she hadn't tested her new ability.

"Still hurts.....But when it was being done.....That was agony." Said Vella.

N'Fady was going with them, the tall Ubari female hybrid Caspian had hired to run their household in the stockade. Tough and strong, she'd look like just another native of the city, once she'd put on a long cloak. They were also taking the four guards they'd hired together in Annill. Nothing to do with Muzzie's army, the experienced fighters were natives of Annill, born of families who'd been there for generations. Everyone knew why they were at the Void Gate, just after darkness had come to the rifts. Muzzie knew nothing about where they were going. He'd try and stop them, but of course.....Muzzie knew nothing about having a child.

"We're going to the City of the Lost God." Said Casp. "We have one and only one objective."

"I'm bringing my son back with us, my beloved Olvir." Said Vella.

"Once the siege begins, someone will take him hostage." Said Casp. "There's a strong chance he'll be killed."

"I don't care who gets in our way and who we have to kill." Said Vella. "We have to bring my son back here, to the safety of the stockade."

No one was likely to object, they were all very well paid, and in pure imperial gold pieces. Everyone around her nodded. Vella pictured Muzzie's bar in her head, then shifted her mental image to the stables at the rear. The gate began to glow and as far as Vella could tell, the gate was now set to take then directly to Muzzie's famous tavern.

"We don't return without Olvir.....Understood ?" Asked Casp.

They all nodded and N'Fady in particular, seemed happy that there might be some bloodshed involved. Vella stepped into the Void Gate first. She came out near the cages she knew well. It was where the kitchen kept creatures destined for the pot. There had been no time, or way to inform Vita that they were coming for Olvir. Even if there had been, it might have been a bad idea. The City of the Lost God knew that Muzzie was bringing his army to lay siege to Tomma-Goran's city. Vella and Caspian might well be attacked on sight.

"Spread out inside and keep your hoods over your faces." Said Vella. "If Casp and I are in trouble.....Make sure you save our son. Do anything you need to do, to protect Olvir.....Though try not to burn the bar to the ground. Muzzie might never forgive us for that."

Vella pulled her hood tight around her face. She wouldn't look out of place; it was a cool night in the city of her birth. Besides, many of the patrons of the bar wore hoods over their faces in high summer. It was that kind of establishment, where organised crime rubbed shoulders with wizards from the Dome and apprentice librarians from the Great Library.

"Here we go.....Look ordinary, merge into the crowd." Said Casp.

Vella opened the back door to Muzzie's bar and walked into the kitchen. Ideally Vita would have been there, but no one was there. Pots weren't being stirred; the fire wasn't being given wood to burn. Vella had memories flooding her mind, or her days in the bar. She'd often come to get a little left over food, after spending the night in her room with Casp.

"The bar next.....You know the plan." Said Vella. "Buy a drink.....Be one of the crowd."

There wasn't actually that much of a crowd. It was too early for the serious night time drinkers, and the day time drinkers would have gone home to sleep it off. Muzzie always claimed there were no casual drinkers in his bar, because life in the city was too short to do anything in moderation. The smell of beer and food brought back so many memories.....

"I can see Vita." Said Casp.

Vita, their maid who'd been poached from Muzzie, only to end up back in the bar when they'd been hurtled across the rifts by LLud Narren's silly tricks. Vita looked older than she had and quite tired. How long had it been since they'd come to see Olvir ? Taking their son then might have been taking him from safety to danger. Now though, things were very different. It didn't seem long since Vella had kissed her son goodbye, but he must have grown. That's what children did.....They grew up. Vella walked across the bar and touched Vita's arm.

"Don't be scared, or look startled.....It's me." Said Vella.

Vita recognised her, though the woman who'd once been her maid, had a few more lines on her face than Vella remembered. Life as part of Muzzie's army was exciting, but time seemed to hurtle past so fast. It already had to be a year, or two, since the Hive Mother's City, Segin-Unadaris, had been added to the empire. Vita hugged her and Vella hugged her back.

"You've come for the boy ?" Asked Vita. "I knew you would.....When the gossip started about Muzzie bringing his army in our direction."

"Is he well ?" Asked Vella.

"Yes.....Grows like a weed and always hungry." Said Vita. "He's upstairs, in the room above where you used to live. I've even started packing some of his things."

“You go, Vella.....I’ll stay with the others.” Said Casp. “Too many using the stairs will get noticed.” More memories as Vella followed Vita up the back stairs. Nethra and Merrick had one stayed in a room off the back stairs. They’d been hiding from the dark angels then, after Merrick had upset them in some way. There were memories of Casp sharing her bed, before sneaking away early in the morning. Not just Casp, there had been other lovers. Not a huge number, but Casp must have realised she was experienced in such things. He’d never mentioned it though, not once in all the years they’d been together.

“Oh, these stairs.....They seem to get steeper, as I get older.” Said Vita.

“You sound like Galla.” Said Vella.

“The apothecary.....I miss her powders.” Said Vita. “Did wonders for the callouses on my poor feet. Will she be coming back to her shop ?”

“I doubt it, though you never know.” Said Vella. “Galla is currently the imperial governor of a large city in the farmlands of the fifth rift.”

“Well.....That is a surprise.” Said Vita. “A pity though.....Her foot powders were marvellous.”

The top rooms of the tavern were too hot in the summer and a bit too cold in the winter. Not that Vella had minded, with Casp next to her under the blankets. Sometimes Nethra became a true creature of the night. She’d climb right to the top of the kitchen chimney. Once there she’d cling on with her claws and watch the dark angels coming and going from the Towers.

“This is Olvir’s room.” Said Vita.

Vella recognised the room. It had been used as a room for traders to stay, before the rooms at the rear had been built. Thinking about it, she remembered Runa using the room, when she’d worked for Muzzie. There was Olvir, looking at her and blinking. It hurt, but she could see it in his expression. For a few moments her own son didn’t recognise her. His birth had been painful, yet he was looking at her, as though she was a stranger. At last, his face changed.....

“Mother.....Vita said you’d come for me.” Said Olvir.

They hugged and he was taller, the top of his head was now halfway up her chest. How long had it been, since she’d last seen him ? It didn’t seem that long, but her life had been so frantic lately.

“Finish packing, you’re coming with us.” Said Vella. “There are others waiting in the bar and we have a portal open nearby.”

“Now.....You’re taking me now ?” Asked Olvir.

“Yes.....Just as soon as you’ve packed what you need.”

“Can I come too ?” Asked Vita.

“The way you’ve looked after my boy.....Of course you can.” Said Vella.

Vita must have been preparing to leave anyway; she was back quickly with a bag over her shoulder. Olvir had three bags, which Vella looked through and managed to cram just about everything into two. A few things were discarded, but there were no moans. Olvir knew that sometimes, sacrifices had to be made. Vella had three good blades, one on her hip and two hidden in her clothing. She handed an assassin’s blade to Vita.

“Anyone gets in your way.....Use it.” Said Vella.

“Do I get a knife ?” Asked Olvir.

“One day you will.....But not yet.”

Down the stairs, with Vita moaning about their steepness, while trying to carry a bag. The bar was starting to get busy, but no one was even looking in their direction. For a moment it looked like the deity of luck was smiling on them. Nothing ever quite goes perfectly though, it was almost an unwritten law of the rifts. Silly really, Vella hadn’t pulled her hood over her face, after hugging Olvir.

“Look.....It’s her.....That bitch Vella.” Someone yelled.

One of the storemen from Winshin’s supplies tried to hit her. Vella had known the male hybrid since being a child, yet he tried to break her skull with a heavy pewter jug. Vella took her own advice about what to do if anyone got in their way. She used her sword on the hybrid, thrusting it deep into his guts and then doing it again. Maybe not quite dead, but he was most of the way there as he fell to the grubby floor of Muzzie’s bar.

“Stay with me, Olvir.” Yelled Vella.

No real need to yell, he was by her side and showed no sign of panicking. As the mob started to unsheathe weapons, Casp and the guards came to life. They began to hack a way to the kitchen door. The mob reacted to being hacked at, in a fairly predictable way. Some fought back, while most retreated to the far end of the long bar. Vella pulled at her son’s arm.

“Keep behind me.....We’re leaving.” Said Vella.

A female hybrid got in her way and called her a whore. Vella rewarded her by thrusting her sword into the female’s throat. Not that Vella recognised her; she was just one of the mob.

“Keep moving.....Get outside before they regroup.” Shouted Casp.

Seen as traitors, they were probably the most hated people in the city. After Muzzie of course, who was on his way to lay siege to the City of the Lost God. The mob at the far end of the bar, began to move forward again.

“Surround them.....Kill them all, even the boy.” Someone yelled.

Vella kept threatening Muzzie’s regulars with her sword, as she and her son edged slowly towards the door. N’Fady was hurt, there was blood seeping through the sleeve of her jacket. One of their guards noticed and came to help her. Vella thought they hadn’t done that well in the fight, yet several bodies were now lying on the sawdust covered floorboards.

“Let them take the boy, or I’ll kill you all.” Someone yelled from near the door.

It had to be a magic user; the threat was backed up by a fireball. It slammed into a table Muzzie used to say had been there for centuries. The heavy wooden table burst into flames and the mob retreated.

“Now Vella.....Run.” Yelled Casp. “You may not get another chance.”

Cutting, hacking and stabbing with her sword, Vella ran towards the door. No time to look back, but she heard Olvir breathing hard as he ran. One large Dredger hybrid tried to get in her way, but N’Fady brought her down with a vicious blow to her throat. Through the door to the bar, with Casp and the others close behind her. The door slammed closed, though Vella was sure it wasn’t their doing. There he was, using powerful magic to keep the door firmly closed.

“Adamaz.” Said Vella.

Adamaz, converted chaos creature and now the Head Librarian of the Great Library. At his feet were two dried husks, that had once been living hybrids. Vella knew how they’d died, it was how Adamaz fed.

“Thank you for helping us.” Said Caspian. “I never wanted to harm anyone in the city.”

“I know.....If war makes strange allies, it also creates unlikely enemies.” Said Adamaz. “You and I are still friends and.....I will protect the library from anyone who seeks to damage the books. You can tell Muzzie that the knowledge of the rifts for the last untold millennia, will be his when he takes the city.”

Adamaz had once wanted her dead, though that time had passed. She was a bar girl then, totally wrong as Casp’s wife. He’d just made it possible to save her son, so she hugged the head librarian.

“Thank you, Adamaz.” She said.

“Go.....Enter the Void Gate and get away from here.” Said Adamaz. “If the Gods decide to spare me, I’ll see you all soon.....When Muzzie arrives with his army.”

“I’ll reset the gate as soon as we’re there.” Vella sad to Casp. “No one will be following us through.” As she held her son’s hand and walked into the Void Gate, Vella knew Muzzie might never forgive them. The fireball used by Adamaz seemed to be taking hold in the ancient wooden building. There were already flames to be seen in two windows.

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Mussaneth Osranetherer, would-be emperor and bar owner, had no idea his famous tavern was being reduced to a heap of rubble and ashes. If he’d known, it would have spoiled his day. Actually it would have ruined his day, he’d loved that bar. As it was, the Silver Lady was making him feel deeply happy with her talk of intrigue and consequences.....

“.....that the prophecy was meant for a human hero, is true.” Said the Lady. “He wasn’t a particularly well known hero and today.....You’d find it hard to find his name anywhere. It was a prophecy created by Tomma-Goran, who would have known there was little chance of the hero ever becoming emperor. It was.....A nice idea and Tomma had a lot of nice ideas. He was famous for them.”

“Do you know the name of the human hero ?” Asked Muzzie.

“I didn’t.....But my faithful followers have been digging.” Said the Lady. “Not digging through ancient books, but digging through the ruins of Nara-Odil. It seemed important to know who was the intended hero of the prophecy. When you’re emperor, I’ll tell you everything about him. For now you get his name....Greggor Swift Arm he was known as, Greggor Ruus by his family name.”

“It is good to have a name for him.....It feels important to know.” Said Muzzie.

It did feel important for some reason, knowing Greggor’s name. The hero might never have amounted to much, but he was one intended to be cursed by prophecy.

“Before I go on to the intentions of the nine divines.....You should be careful of General Dhūlen, Muzzie.” Said the Lady. “He will try to kill you once you reach Leng.”

“I damn well knew it.....As they say, never trust a Terak.” Said Muzzie.

“There is also a saying about never trusting barkeepers.” Said the Lady. “Don’t kill Dhūlen; it will upset the high council of Leng. Slaughter all those standing with him, that will be expected. But.....Keep Dhūlen alive. That is really important.”

The really annoying thing was that Muzzie had known it; he’d sensed it in some way. He knew his General was turning against him.....Yet Dhūlen had lied to him and given his word he’d be loyal.

“No eviscerating Dhūlen in front of the army.” Said the Lady. “I can see the hate coming off you in waves.”

“I want to.....And do worse to him.” Said Muzzie. “Don’t worry though; I won’t upset the high council. Dhūlen will survive and I’ll just kill the senior officers who stand with him.”

“Good.....Good.”

One day though, when he was the Last Emperor of the rifts and Leng were happy. Then he’d give Dhūlen to Aeony, with instructions to enjoy herself. The fucking Terak would suffer, even if it wasn’t for many years.

“Of course.....You must have realised the nine were behind it all ?” Asked the Lady.

It was a day for revelations that felt a bit like being slapped hard across the face. He had thought that finding Estrin was a little convenient, but she’d genuinely seemed confused at being woken from her long slumber.

“In future.....Assume I’m a fool who knows nothing.” Said Muzzie.

“Exactly who decided to use that idiot LLud Narren....That is lost in time.” Said the Lady. “One of the nine will have seen the benefits of having the prophecy come to life. Apathy has been the enemy of the rifts, for many millennia. It’s hard to do nothing, if someone is trying to build an empire. Even if you’d failed quite early, the rifts would have been stirred up. As it is, you seem likely to at least get to the gates of Quron.”

“Will I win the siege ?” Asked Muzzie.

“You overestimate me Muzzie. I see much, but everything in the future has many potential outcomes. Winning the battle for Quron is still uncertain. Looked at one way, you’ll come out of this as a hero, even if you die outside the city gates of Quron. The minstrels and bards will sing of your fame as long as there are hybrids to hear them.”

“On the whole.....I’d prefer to be a live hero.” Said Muzzie.

“Nothing lasts forever barkeeper.” Said the Lady. “.....Even emperors. Succeed and one day I will come and pay homage at your tomb. I will bring a dozen Ashunt flowers and sing a lament for Emperor Muzzie. You have my word on that.”

“Can we talk about something less morbid ?” Asked Muzzie.

She laughed, the Silver Lady actually laughed in a friendly way. It was alright for her, mortality wasn’t a problem for the deities. Even if she died, someone was sure to bring her back again. There were rumours that had already happened.

“Anyway, you’re owed some of the truth, Muzzie.” Said the Lady. “Exactly who had the idea to use you to be cursed by prophecy, may never be known. It was one of the nine though, that much is certain. That fool LLud was a fall guy, paid in promises to keep silent. As for the rest.....You’ve been living it since you were sent here, to Ingar Sans. Every hint from someone legendary, every piece of help from unexpected sources. There is no such thing as dumb luck, Muzzie. Nearly all of it was deliberate, even the egg from the Hive Mother.”

“Oh, that egg.....I intend to keep it.” Said Muzzie.

“Good.....Who knows, you may live long enough to see it hatch.”

“I still don’t understand why.” Said Muzzie. “Why me as emperor ? What is in it for the nine ?”

“I want to be cruel, but you don’t deserve it.”

“Be cruel.....I want the truth.” Said Muzzie.

“Very well.....You were a nobody. If you stirred things up and lost, who cares ? Another nobody dies in a pool of their own blood and failed ambitions. If you win though.....Think of it Muzzie. You become the last emperor of the rifts. The nine will congratulate themselves on putting you on the throne. To the nine.....That will give them control of everything.”

“So, the Gods are just a bunch of control freaks.....I knew it, I always fucking knew it.”

“Think of it as you being their choice.....Not the long dead Greggor.”

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Not that she had anything against the city, but Galla hadn’t wanted to go to Annill. There was an infection developing there though, even if it was fairly mild. A few individuals feeling a bit ill, was one thing. An entire army feeling under the weather, had the potential to be a disaster. Dhūlen had asked her to go and officially decided if the symptoms warranted not accepting further recruits from Annill, at least for a while. Muzzie would hate that of course, there were four thousand fighters waiting in Annill, to sign up for the imperial army. Galla was rubbing antiseptic over her hands, after examining a recruit who’d vomited that morning, twice. As he’d eaten the same food as the other recruits, food poisoning wasn’t likely.

“There are quite a few of the greys with mild general symptoms.” Said Galla. “Vomiting, high temperature, a little muscle weakness, headaches.....The entire gamut of symptoms that can indicate a large number of illnesses, or nothing at all. We can’t rule out us.....Are we being over sensitive to every cough and sneeze ?”

It was Dhūlen of course, though Galla didn’t want to say it directly. There had been a few fighters, who’d visited those camp followers offering various personal and intimate services. A few had developed a mild and non-specific infection of their private parts. Soon over three hundred fighters were suffering from a mild but annoying itch and a burning sensation when they passed water. The finger of blame had pointed at Dhūlen and the lack of what the soldiers began to call a ‘Pox Plan.’ The General was glaring at her.

“Not wanting to infect the entire army.....Is not being over sensitive.” Said Dhūlen.

Galla could deal with the problem efficiently, and without causing massive embarrassment to Muzzie. Anyone with a sore throat now and they’d start calling the army Muzzie’s grubby brigade. Some already were. Would Dhūlen go for her solution though ?

“I have a solution.....And you’ll still get your extra four thousand greys.” Said Galla.

Dhūlen’s frown vanished, to be replaced by the hint of a smile.

“I will make it sound easy, but it will require Bizzi and many of his Dredgers. I’ll also use many of the trainee healers, mainly because I trust them to get things done. Maya will be involved of course.....Getting her to not be involved in everything is the real trick. All of it I will do, you won’t have a single thing to worry about.”

Her ring, Mosca’s misery, was showing her the aura of a General who’d been juggling too many balls at the same time. By offering to juggle a few for him.....They just might become lifelong friends. Galla didn’t totally trust the Terak, but there weren’t many she did totally trust.

“Alright.....Tell me what you intend to do ?” Asked Dhūlen.

“There are many empty small towns on the rifts, most in far better condition than Seren’s Edge. There used to be a farming community out near Ingar Gols on the third rift. The annual rains moved north and Ingar Gols became a ruin in a desert. The town is still there though and it could be made habitable again. There is definitely enough room to house four thousand greys, until they’re feeling better and no longer infectious. Then.....We move them to the stockade. No chance of the city council in Annill changing their mind, or any of the greys heading home. By the time Muzzie is looking across the Great River at the City of the Lost God.....The extra four thousand greys will be there with the army.”

Bizzi would hate her, making the abandoned town habitable would be hard work. It was a good plan though and Dhūlen would know that.

“Thank you Galla.....Do it.” Said Dhūlen.

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Nethra was tired and wanting to be asleep on her bedroll. Estrin was keeping her busy, too busy some days. Not that the living God gave orders, she just expected things to be done. Like everyone else, Nethra didn’t want to disappoint the deity. The Void Gate had added to the lateness of the hour and Caspian was being blamed. Using it for personal business, Muzzie was really pissed off. Or at least that was the gossip she picked up on the way to her tent. Nethra had a room near Muzzie and a tent inside the stockade. The tent was the closer bed though and it had begun to feel like home. Nethra knew there was someone in her tent, as soon as she’d opened the tent flap. It was her nose rather than any super sense....There was the scent of a female Dredger in her home. Nethra crept in ready for a fight.....

“Oh Maya.....You really do get everywhere.” Nethra muttered.

The girl had a room in Galla’s palace in Aarabash and at least seven other beds to curl up on for the night. Yet there she was, sleeping on Nethra’s bedroll. The trainee apothecary opened her eyes.

“Sorry.....I’ll shift over.” Said Maya. “There’s room enough for both of us.”

Nethra hadn’t intended to throw Maya out of her tent. She’d intended to use her bed in the rooms surrounding the Void Gate. She was tired though and the bedroll looked so inviting to her tired mind. She lay next to Maya and was quickly close to a deep sleep. She had to ask, Maya would know. The damn Dredger girl seemed to know everything.

“What is all the commotion going on ? Why is Muzzie so annoyed ?”

“Muzzie is calling Vella and Caspian bastards.....It seems they burned his fucking bar down.”

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