

The Last Emperor

Chapter 40 – Portal To Leng

“There were rumours among the army, of course there were. An army didn’t really march on its stomach; it trundled along on rumours and hearsay. Luckily, the rumours were that the Silver Lady had promised Muzzie that he’d be given great wealth while in Leng.”



There were other cities and towns to fight, there always would be. Muzzie had decided to rest while his imperial army reduced Quron to rubble and dust. There’d be some buildings left standing to be used by passing nomads, but everything else would be destroyed. Not that Muzzie intended to be a brutal emperor. It was just that every wise and powerful person he’d met on his quest to be emperor, had told him to make an example of Quron. Hopefully creating a hole in the ground where the ancient city had once stood, would take away the need to destroy any other cities. Resting had seemed necessary, his wounds had been numerous and some had been deep. Muzzie didn’t want to arrive limping along the streets of Leng. Oh no, that would never do.....

“I saw Faal this morning.....He’s still sulking.” Said Muzzie.

“Creating a door to enter Leng was his thing.” Said Aeony. “Now we have Uula, who can create a portal into the heart of the City of Leng. Our child of the Ancient Ones, had stolen his big day.....Or at least it will seem that way to Faal.”

When had the dark angel who shared his bed, become so good at reading those around her ? Muzzie hadn’t realised Faal could get jealous, yet Aeony was probably right. They were in their quarters at the Void Gate. Despite the army being given time to heal up and enjoy a little good food and the pleasures, to be found inside the tents of the camp followers, the Void Gate was busy. Some potential enemies had sent messengers with sealed proclamations, accepting Muzzie as their emperor. A few had sent armed warriors to join his victorious army. Annill had sent an extra five thousand experienced fighters, without being asked. Dhūlen had informed him that the Dredgers needed to expand the stockade again, as Muzzie was soon likely to have an army of a quarter of a million fighters. Even Xanash the thirty forth, had never managed that.

“I do owe Faal a gift.” Said Muzzie. “Something to thank him for recovering the famed Quron archive. To be honest.....Apart from it needing to be expensive and conspicuous, I have no idea what to give him.”

“I take it price is no problem ?” Asked Aeony. “I did hear that Zin Thriaxer, King of Kahan, has given another eight chests of gold to the imperial treasury.”

“Yes.....Restoring Zin to his throne was one my more clever moves.” Said Muzzie. “I don’t care where the gold comes from, with such a large empire to run.”

“A decent beast to ride, my dear.” Said Aeony. “Faal has that ridiculous beast he calls a Shuud. If you’re not worried about the cost, there are decent beasts to be bought on the third rift.”

“Ahhh, yes.....Of course.” Said Muzzie. “I’ll ask Nethra to involve Merrick in finding a proper mount for Faal. Keep it secret though.....I want to see his face, when he’s riding something that doesn’t swerve about all the time. I might well get his new beast some armour....Imagine how good Faal will look, riding his beast in armour.”

“Will you be taking the entire army to Leng ?” Asked Aeony.

“Not all of them; even a city as large and wealthy as Leng, might not like having to feed and house such a large force.” Said Muzzie. “I wanted to ask the Silver Lady a little more about Leng, before deciding on a few things. I spoke to Bird and requested her presence.....At a time of her choosing, of course.”

“May I be there.....When you talk to her ?” Asked Aeony.

“Yes.....You and I should have no secrets.” Said Muzzie. “The Lady can be strange though.....Last time I saw her, she was talking about putting flowers on my tomb.....I’m hoping she meant in a very, very long time from now.”

“Knowing you.....There’ll be a note in your will, about being buried under that bar of yours.”

“Yes, you reminded me.....I must see how Bizzi is getting on with rebuilding my tavern.” Said Muzzie.

Aeony was looking at him with her head leaning over slightly to the left. He knew her pretty well by now. The dark angel who’d decided to bond with him, had some piece of advice for him, but was wondering if it was the right time to mention it.

“Alright out with it.....I’m in the mood to agree to just about anything.” Said Muzzie.

“Belso Gurd survived the siege of Quron.” Said Aeony. “Only just and Galla had to use all her skills to heal him.....But Belso lives.”

“Yes.....I did say I’d make him an officer in the army, if he survived.” Said Muzzie. “The army like survivors like Belso. He’s going to Leng with the army of course.....Our good luck charm.”

“Drinkers too.....They like survivors and their tales.” Said Aeony. “Once you’re emperor, I think Belso would make a good person to run your bar. He’ll make mistakes, but if there is one person everyone loves in the army, it has to be Belso.”

“I hadn’t thought about who would run it.” Said Muzzie. “I’ll be busy with the day to day business of the empire. Muzzie’s bar becomes Belso’s bar.....It’ll take a little getting used to.”

“Keep the best upstairs room for us.” Said Aeony. “For when we’re in the mood to.....You know.”

“Oh yes.....I know.” Said Muzzie.

In the mood to remember days when too much ale, had caused a dark angel to sleep with a hybrid bar owner, with a touch of Genova in his ancestry. Muzzie knew exactly what Aeony was hinting at. They kissed and touched and there might have been more, if N’Fady hadn’t banged on the door three times, before entering their chambers. Everyone thought they had access to the emperor and as for privacy....It was getting harder to find a few private moments.

“Sorry.....The Hive mother has brought her personal guard from Segin-Unadaris.” Said N’Fady. “She wants them all to go to Leng with her. The problem is.....There isn’t enough space to accommodate them all in the stockade.”

Bizzi had already mentioned that there looked like being two people wanting every bed. It was going to be a mess, with lots of unhappy hybrids and assorted creatures of all types. But at the end of the day, it wasn’t that much of a disaster.

“Tents, N’Fady.” Said Aeony. “Tell them they need to double up.....Or we can supply tents.”

“You want me to say that to the Hive Mother ?” Asked N’Fady.

“Yes.....And I’ll probably ask you to upset many more people.” Said Muzzie. “Once we’re in Leng.....It will all be forgotten. Now go.....Tell Ginnda that her people have to double up for a few nights.”

~

~

Merrick had been allowed into the stockade. Muzzie had even signed a pass, allowing Merrick and several of his gang to get through the various guard posts. Merrick had learned his lesson, but would

any of his gang be able to resist stealing a full purse ? Nethra thought that one or two of them might end up being arrested and sent to the jail in Tandalla. Once that would have terrified her. Once the idea of being elsewhere, when Merrick was in her bed, would have astonished her. Nethra had changed though and she was fairly sure it had something to do with Uula Podda. Nethra had been given the egg for a while and anyone associated with the child of the Ancient Ones, never seemed quite the same again.

A lot of her attitude was because of the hugeness of the occasion. Muzzie had done it, he'd just about fulfilled his destiny.....Fuck, her old friend was going to be emperor of all the rifts. She was entitled to be dazzled by that !

Finding Maya and the child was proving to be awkward. According to Merrick, the army, the camp followers and assorted guests of the emperor, now amounted to a million, maybe more. There were even wild notions that there were too many.....So huge a number that the ground itself might crack and everyone would fall into the underworld. Idiots of course, but it was all adding to the general craziness. Purely by luck, Nethra found LLud Narren. He'd been coming out of a tent in the camp followers section of the stockade. Out of politeness, she didn't try to look at what kind of services were provided inside the large tent.

"LLud.....I'm looking for Maya." Said Nethra. "Don't claim to have no idea where she is. Where Maya goes, her child goes and I know you have some kind of connection with Uula."

"Only a slight connection, which is mystery, even to me." Said LLud. "Everyone is entitled to privacy, Nethra. I'm not asking for details, but roughly.....Why do you wish to find someone who may not want to be found ? Everyone is frantically busy at the moment, Maya might want a quiet moment."

There was the smell of sex on LLud. Not that Nethra was going to mention it. She wasn't a blackmailer and she'd eventually find Maya and the child, without LLud's help. LLud and Dhali were no longer married, but Dhali still seemed to be in love with the magician. LLud might have tastes that Dhali wasn't keen on satisfying.....But that was their business.

"I've changed, LLud." Said Nethra. "Drastic changes and they haven't stopped. I'm now strong enough to fly all the time and.....The urge to eat flesh has grown. I'm not me; I don't know who or what I am now, or might become. Despite all the fuss over going to Leng, I'm scared."

"And you think the child is involved in these changes ?" Asked LLud.

"Yes, definitely.....I sometimes get things wrong, but not this. Uula is the cause of these changes, even if she has no idea how."

LLud was looking at her, as if genuinely concerned. Caspian and Vella had talked about him as being a heartless monster, but Nethra had never seen that side of him. Vargouille were becoming less murderous and even the Ancient Ones appeared to be less bound to chaos; if Uula was anything to go by. Another change in Nethra was her mind; she could understand many things, purely by intuition. The rifts were changing and it was all probably because of Muzzie. On the path to becoming emperor, he'd irrevocably altered the balance.

"Maya will know nothing." Said LLud. "The child has her words, which are surprisingly advanced. Some of her talk is in the old languages of the rifts. You'll know some of those, Nethra...But not all. I'm going to suggest that I come with you. Unless you require privacy ?"

"No.....I'm pleased that you'd like to be there." Said Nethra.

"Have you ever been dragged through the innards of strange beasts ?" Asked LLud.

LLud could sometimes sound at least eight parts crazy, but Nethra had heard the story about him being summoned by Maya and how it had gone, slightly awry.

"I heard the tale.....I'm willing to risk it." Said Nethra.

"I'm rarely summoned anymore, we should be alright." Said LLud. "Stand close to me.....When I feel the pull, I'll grab your arm."

He became like a beast bred to hunt prey. LLud sniffed the air and frequently stood quite still, as if listening for something. He'd once been the right hand of Tomma-Goran, so Nethra had faith in his weird antics.

"I have her.....The child has a certain aroma.....Not long now." Muttered LLud.

More sniffing the air and LLud actually let out a howl, like a wild beast. Nethra almost missed him grabbing her arm. They were gone from among the tents of the camp followers; it had felt like melting away into the air. For a few seconds, Nethra felt as though she was nothing but a nebulous cloud, hanging in the air of the rifts.

"Almost.....Almost." Muttered LLud.

Becoming solid again actually hurt. Every muscle in her body was complaining, though it was unclear why. There was one point on her chin, which was the only place on her body, that didn't ache.

"Oh, LLud.....That was so deeply unpleasant." Said Nethra. "I hope I can go home by a different means."

"Yes, not very nice.....Not a portal of course." Said LLud. "In a way, your body is scrambled and projected through the air to.....Here."

Here was an orchard, which smelled of various kinds of fruit. Once she'd have smelt the air and taken a guess that she was in one of the fertile areas of the fifth rift. Something had changed though; her memories were being used by it, the new version of herself. The air had a certain tang to it; the fruit around her was very close to being ripe, but needed a few more days. The ground itself, was putting out a mixture of spores, that gave her the year and a pretty good idea of position. LLud had brought them to the fifth rift, just a few miles from Aarabash.

"I know exactly where we are, LLud." Said Nethra. "I shouldn't know, but I do."

Maya was there, sitting on the trunk of a dead tree. Still so close to Maya, that they might have been a single being, was the child.

"Oh....LLud Narren." Snapped Maya. "I thought that you of all people, would respect my need for a little peace and quiet."

"It's Nethra.....Her need seemed great." Said LLud. "The child seems to have changed her. Then again, everyone in contact with the Ancient Ones, risks being changed. I believe Uula will be able to explain things to Nethra, but not necessarily in a standard language....That is why I have come with her."

"I need to know what I'm becoming." Added Nethra.

"Alright, but don't upset my child." Said Maya.

"I'm sure we won't." Said LLud.

LLud began a strange conversation with Uula Podda. Some of it was in words Nethra knew, but a lot of it seemed to be nothing but strange clicking sounds. It went on for some time, until Uula pointed her head at Nethra.

"She wishes you to sit close to her; close enough to touch." Said LLud. "Be warned though, when the child touches you, what is seen can't be unseen. The changes to what is now Nethra, will become faster. Soon you'll not be Nethra any longer."

"What will I become?"

"Let Uula touch you and you'll know." Said LLud.

It was so tempting to thank LLud for his help, but not let the child touch her. If she was about to become something strange, did she want to know? It was Merrick who made up her mind; all key

decisions seemed driven by her love for the crook and owner of the Defender Tavern in Annill. When fully changed, would she still want Merrick ? Would he want her ? The change might turn her into something ugly and disgusting. Nethra sat on the tree trunk and let the child touch her face with one of its hands. What Uula showed her required no language, though the child carried on with her clicking sounds from the back of her throat. The first feelings Nethra picked up were of friendship, Uula was definitely on their side. Then came a question, that was really just a gap in Uula's thoughts. Nethra knew the child was waiting for a response.

"Yes....Show me, Uula.....Show me everything."

The images pushed into her mind weren't dreadful. It seemed it was time for Nethra to be totally a Chinnura, a super being of the multiverse. The arrival of a child of the Ancient Ones had accelerated things, but it would have happened anyway. It was the balance again, the ever present balance between light and dark. Nethra was being shifted further into the light, but some of her darker urges, were shifting with her. That seemed strange, but there was no avoiding what was going to happen to her. Like a crawling bug turning into a flying one, Nethra could only wait for the time of her change.

Uula was showing her a creature very close to a dark angel with purple wings and far more magical ability than any dark angel. On the whole, Nethra liked the future she was being shown. There was the question of Merrick. Nethra sent the question into the mind of the child. Not just a sexually immature child, the Ancient Ones were egg layers. Would Uula even understand the notion of hybrid love ? Uula actually chuckled, a full on chuckle, before using words. The child whispered to her.

"You will find Merrick just as annoying.....And just as loveable."

Nethra hugged Uula and discovered what Maya probably already knew. Being hugged back by many very long arms and legs, was strange, but quite nice. Not every question had been answered by seeing her future self, but Nethra was content to now let time do what it did to everyone. Time changed every living thing, but at least Nethra now knew what to expect.

"Thank you, Uula and.....You too, Maya. That was exactly what I needed." Said Nethra.

They were looking at her, expecting to hear an explanation of what had occurred. Nethra could feel annoyance and frustration coming from both LLud and Maya. Being able to feel it, was also new.

"Are we leaving now ?" Asked LLud. "I'm sorry; the return trip will be just as unpleasant."

"Uula can send me anywhere I want to go." Said Nethra. "I will be going to the stockade, if you'd like to come with me, LLud ?"

"Yes please, Ancient One portals are famously pleasant." Said LLud.

Nethra kissed Maya on the cheek and thanked her for being understanding. She also promised not to tell anyone where she was hiding, even Muzzie. Uula produced a whirling purple portal and in no more than four or five seconds, LLud and her were at the huge field kitchen, right in the centre of the stockade. The kitchen produced plain but good food on demand, from first light to what passed for dusk on the rifts.

"Perfect place to arrive.....I'm starving." Said LLud.

~

~

So much had happened, relatively quickly. The Silver Lady had come to see Muzzie, which seemed to make him far happier. Aeony had been there, but was refusing to say anything about the meeting. There were rumours among the army, of course there were. An army didn't really march on its stomach; it trundled along on rumours and hearsay. Luckily, the rumours were that the Silver Lady had promised Muzzie that he'd be given great wealth while in Leng. Vella had seen so much while travelling with Muzzie, that nothing would surprise her.....

“Look back, Vella.....I know it’s supposed to be bad luck, but look back.” Said Casp.

The army had regrouped in the tent city close to what was left of Quron. There was no need to take the bulk of the army to the Void Gate, when Uula could create a massive portal straight to Leng. It made sense for Caspian and Vella to join the army at the tent city.

“I seem to remember an emperor’s niece was killed by the Gods.” Said Vella. “All she’d done was look back and Tenneth-Sisanat had flayed the skin from her bones.”

Even as Vella repeated the old legend, she could see the flaws in it. She’d never heard a sensible reason for Tenneth doing such a terrible thing.....But there was often no sense or logic behind the actions of the Gods.

“Trust me.....If you ever needed a reminder about what has been achieved.....Look back.” Said Casp. Vella carried on marching with the army, though she did turn her head to look back. There it was, the sight that had been Muzzie’s dream for so long. It wasn’t that Quron was totally evil; they’d just stood between him and total victory. Not any more, most of the city was now nothing but smoking rubble.

“Some of the city is still burning.” Said Vella. “Am I supposed to be happy, or sad, Casp ?”

“A little of both, but remember my dear.....Our army destroyed Quron.” Said Casp. “No army had ever before laid siege to that city.....Muzzie’s army took it in a few days. That is something to be proud of.”

“Yes.....I see that, but I am sad.....It was such a beautiful city.” Said Vella.

“Please don’t mention being sad to Muzzie.” Said Casp. “He’ll get angry and might get us to pay for the rebuilding of his bar.”

Looking back became addictive. The Shinning Towers had gone, all of them toppled by chaos magic, or the strong backs and tools of the army. Bizzi’s Dredgers had helped, but most of them were busy building Muzzie’s palace in the City of the Lost God. A tiny part of the huge city wall was still there, as were a few of the houses outside of the wall. It really was confusing for Vella, as she felt proud and sad at the same time.

“The next city we see, will be Leng.” Said Casp. “I’ve heard so much about the canals and.....They have a library larger than our Great Library.”

“Ahhh.....So you’ll be in their library for days.” Said Vella.

“I might.....But everyone has to be at Muzzie’s coronation.”

Uula was by the side of the road that had once taken visitors and traders to Quron. There was the child, once again wrapped around Maya’s shoulders. Maya actually waved, as Vella took her first step into the massive portal the child had created. So wide, ten abreast could march through it. So high, that flying dark angels, could easily fly through it. A truly magnificent portal and Maya had claimed, Uula could create even large gateways to places far away. Vella blinked in the light of a very bright day in Leng. A quick look to check if Caspian was there with her. He was happy, a huge smile on his face.

“Finally here.....I’ve wanted to see Leng, since I was a child.” Said Casp.

“I already like it.....The air smells so clean.” Said Vella.

~ ~

Galla Sinsa-Ennari was actually enjoying walking with the army. The apothecary from the City of the Lost God, looked and felt much, much younger since LLud Narren had given her an unused miracle. A chance to be physically young again, but remember every experience in her very long life. Tomma-Goran had created the miracle. Who for ? Why it hadn’t been used ? Tomma had never been the

most efficient of the Gods and even LLud had no idea about whose miracle Galla had used. It was Tomma after all, who'd created a destiny, that had accidentally fallen upon Muzzie.

"Thank you for your company, Runa." Said Galla. "Are you fully healed now?"

"Yes, I'm my old self again.....Estrin did it, by just a touch of her hand." Said Runa.

"The Gods have an advantage over us hybrid healers." Said Galla. "Still.....I think I'm a pretty good healer. Try getting Estrin to come to your home in the middle of the night."

They both laughed and Galla realised she hadn't shared a joke with Runa, in quite some time.

Hopefully the fight for Muzzie to become emperor would soon be over. With luck it would end with a peaceful crowning in the main temple in Leng. They were walking some distance from the warriors of Muzzie's army, so Galla felt able to talk openly.

"I have visited Leng before." Said Galla. "Neosto was their King then, though he had the audacity to call himself an emperor. Nasty piece of work from what I recall."

"Weren't there quite a few Kings called Neosto?" Asked Runa.

"Yes, lots of them.....I forget the number of the last one." Said Galla. "They all had many children, who also had many children. The current Queen still clings to the name of Neosto, though I think she's merely a cousin of the last to hold the crown."

"Demon lineage can be complicated." Said Runa.

"Indeed it can." Said Galla. "I remember now, this one calls herself Queen Neola Neosto.....I think she's the seventh to use that name, but Caspian will know for sure."

They were right on the outer edge of the City of Leng. Soon the army would be taken away to whatever lodging were being provided. Galla doubted if it would be to the liking of the fighters; they were rather spoiled by life in the stockade at the Void Gate. Still, it was only for a day or so, then most of them would never see Leng again.

"You don't have to answer this, but I need to ask." Said Runa. "If the rulers of Leng are from such a dreadful lineage.....Why does Muzzie need to be crowned by them? Surely he can declare himself to be emperor?"

"He could and I'd say.....He might get away with it." Said Galla. "The problem is something I only remember being talked about a tiny number of times, in my very long life. The balance, Runa.....Now there are some who talk about little else. Muzzie has caused changes in the balance; most I believe are for the better. Take things too fast though.....There could be a war between the Gods themselves. No hybrids of the rifts could survive such a war. So, Muzzie will be crowned in Leng and by doing so, he'll be seen as being blessed by the old dark Gods from beyond Leng."

"Thank you Galla.....For the first time, it makes a kind of sense." Said Runa.

"Of course Estrin won't be there when Muzzie is crowned." Said Galla. "There was an invitation I believe, but one of the nine can hardly attend a coronation in Leng. Estrin will consider it to be a place of ultimate evil."

One road to the left would take the army to their temporary lodgings. Galla carried on following the road that ended in the centre of Leng. Runa was still by her side. As the road went over the top of a small hill, Leng was there.....Spread out before them.

"That is so beautiful." Said Runa. "I'd heard about the parks and canals, but I always thought Leng would be hot and dusty. This place is greener than the City of the Lost God."

"I've heard it described as dry and hotter than hell." Said Galla. "Obviously descriptions from those who've never been here. There are boats on the canals; they'll give you a tour of the city. We must use one of those boats while we're here."

“My father once told me that after seeing Leng; the leader of the Menderan Empire, had canals built in Mendera City.” Said Runa. “I think it must be true, my father was usually right about such things.”
“He was.....I’ve heard the same story.” Said Galla. “One of those who told me was actually old enough to have visited Mendera City. Again, Caspian will know.....There is a book on the Menderan Empire, in the restricted section of the Great Library.”

Galla felt the presence of her pet, before she heard the sound of wings fluttering around them. She and Bird had been together for a long time, a very long time. There he was, squawking at her, while flying around her head.

“Sit on my shoulder, Bird.....Or go away.” Said Galla. “You’re making me dizzy.”

Bird sat on her shoulder and became quiet. Galla rewarded her pet with a Nesh bug from a box that was always full and always in a pocket in her robes.

“Not seen you today.....Who have you been annoying, Bird ?” Asked Galla.

“He hasn’t slept in my quarters for days.” Added Runa.

“Faal.....I’ve been with Faal.” Said Bird. “He has lots of treats.”

“He’s also the closest thing we have to an expert on Leng.” Said Galla.

Bird just looked at her and Galla knew the Silver Lady was using him to gather information. No harm was likely to come to her pet and being used by the Lady, seemed to have positive consequences. Bird now sometimes spoke in proper sentences. He was also tougher than the bundle of feathers who’d lived in a cage in her Apothecary shop.

“Alright.....Keep your secrets.” Said Galla. “Just give me one honest answer. Will the Silver Lady be attending Muzzie’s coronation ?”

“Yes.....She will.” Said Bird.

Bigger, her pet had definitely put on bulk, as well as being taller when he was on her shoulder. Galla had done her best to deny it, but Bird was definitely bigger than he had been. Galla stroked the top of pet’s head and gave him another live, wriggling Nesh bug.

“Be careful, Bird.” Said Runa. “I heard that the demons of Leng, quite like to eat bird flesh.”

“Yes, I heard that too.” Added Galla.

Bird might wander off, but he was still very much hers. He scrunched himself up and crawled inside the top of her robes. Eventually, all that could be seen, were his scared eyes.

“I believe we’re both staying at the Invokers Guild.” Said Runa. “Do you know where that is ?”

“Yes.....We’ve another two miles to walk.” Said Galla.

~

~

Muzzie had insisted that Maya started pushing the child around in a cart.

“Only a small cart, Maya.” He’d said to her. “Barely larger than hybrid mothers use to push their babies in. It’ll look so much better when you’re part of my entourage; so much more professional and organised. We love Uula, but she’s too big to hang around your neck and shoulders.”

Uula Podda was in the cart and seemed to enjoy having space to move around. The child of the Ancient Ones, obviously thought of Maya as her mother. The child touched Maya all the time and chattered to her constantly, with happy clicking sounds. The population liked seeing the child. Most bowed deeply to the young child and a few prostrated themselves on the ground. Muzzie congratulated himself on having a good idea. Taking Maya and the child for his meeting with Queen Neola, had definitely been a very good idea. Uula was now almost toilet trained, almost. It was hoped the local population might consider it good luck, if Uula defecated in the main temple.

“Did you instruct her on what’s expected of her ?” Muzzie asked Maya.

“Yes.....If we’re attacked, Uula will destroy them.” Said Maya.

Their first morning in Leng, with its bright skies and the sound of water tinkling in the canals. Muzzie and Aeony had spent a wonderful night in superb accommodation. Aeony had remarked that the bed was far better than the one they shared in their quarters at the Void Gate.

“That might be an overreaction.” Said Aeony. “Does the child understand the idea of a proportional response ? Killing Neola because she prodded Muzzie.....Uula needs to know what constitutes a genuine attack.”

“Honestly.....I think my child is now clever than I am.” Said Maya. “Trust her.....She’ll keep us alive, without, hopefully, starting a war with Leng.”

“We’re going to have to trust her.” Said Muzzie.

Uula was now the colour of gold, over the entirety of her body. It was making them the centre of attention, as they entered the main temple of Leng. It was where, if all went well, Muzzie would be crowned the next day.

“You understand the child, Maya.” Said Aeony. “Is she happy ? Is she content ?”

“Yes, she likes being pushed about in the cart.” Said Maya.

“Good.....Here we go.” Said Muzzie.

Faal had described much of Leng to Muzzie, though he’d been there when Neola’s uncle had been on the throne. Family squabbles were common among the royal family of Leng. It was rumoured that Neola had arranged the death of her uncle. Faal had other duties that morning, but Muzzie remembered his description of the inside of the temple.

“That must be her.....The woman next to the altar.” Said Aeony. “She won’t be alone.....Her guards will be watching from somewhere.”

“I imagined her.....Taller.” Said Muzzie.

There was a lot of space between the doors and the altar, all of it covered by marble tiles. The altar was black, a deep kind of black, that hinted at a darkness within.

“There is a tiny piece of the crawling chaos inside that altar.” Faal had told him. “When you accept the crown of emperor, you’ll effectively swear allegiance to the nine and the eternal chaos. Good luck with that contradiction old friend.”

The woman next to the altar was quite short, Aeony almost towered over her. Not quite alone, a male cleric in full ceremonial robes, came and stood beside her. No crown on her head, though her clothing screamed at how expensive it must have been.

“I’m glad you succeeded, Muzzie.” Said Neola. “A hybrid from the City of the Lost God, becomes emperor.....Of everything. You’re my emperor Muzzie, and I give you honour and my total respect. As you might have guessed, I am Queen Neola Neosto the seventh.....Ruler of Leng.”

It was a relief to hear her say it. No bowing, Faal had told him to avoid any kind of subservient behaviour.

“You will be their emperor, Muzzie.” Faal had said. “Always let them bow to you.....Never, ever bow to them.”

There were general introductions and it seemed the cleric brought by Neola, was a scribe, a keeper of official records.

“The scribe will note everything we say and record everything we agree.....Or don’t agree.” Said Neola.

“Will the records be kept confidential ?” Asked Muzzie

“Yes, only you and I will ever see them.” Said Neola. “I have just two things to ask of you, my emperor. I could make your life quite awkward, if I refused to put the crown on your head. I could

grant Kingship to the current leaders of Annil and Tandalla. Imagine how I could muddy the water and then double it.”

“That would cause a war between the new emperor and Leng.” Said Aeony.

“It might.....But I’m hoping it never comes to that.” Said Neola. “I have just two things to ask of our new emperor. I have heard that Mussaneth Osranetherer is an honourable hybrid. Just enough Genova in his ancestry to guarantee he’ll keep his word. I am willing to trust you Muzzie....Give me your word on these two things and I will happily place the crown on your head.”

Muzzie had guessed there’d be a price levied by Leng, for making him emperor. He’d have actually respected Neola less, if she hadn’t asked for something. Just so long as she didn’t want half the imperial treasurer. He was beginning to enjoy being staggeringly wealthy.

“I am willing to listen.” Said Muzzie. “Tell me your demands ?”

“Oh, demands sound so brutal.” Said Neola. “I’m talking about two requests that will ensure you’re crowned emperor, with the full cooperation of Leng. We have the best chaos invokers in Leng and a few of those can use precognition to look far into the future. You will live a long life and be considered the greatest of all the emperors. I’m just asking for two things, to stop their being any friction between us.”

“Very well, tell me the first favour I can do for Leng ?” Asked Muzzie.

“These things work both ways.” Said Neola. “I give you my word, as Queen of Leng. We shall never attack your empire, or aid any of your enemies. In return, I’d like your word to never attack Leng. Give me your word and we’ll be friends forever.”

Uula made one of her clicking noises. Muzzie had almost forgotten Maya and the child of the Ancient Ones, were there with them. Uula was nodding her head at him.

“I never had any intention of attacking Leng.” Said Muzzie. “I happily give you my word.....My empire will never attack Leng, or aid others in doing so.”

“Thank you.” Said Neola.

The cleric used an old wooden pen, with an iron nib. He wrote into a book and nodded at Neola when his task was finished.

“My last request, though you may find it the hardest to agree to.” Said Neola. “As I said, my precogs have seen you living a long life. You will become immensely wealthy and powerful. You’ll be a popular emperor too and.....There have been very few of those. Never forget though, it was intended by those who cursed you with a prophecy. You are to be the last emperor of all the rifts. Hearing it though and believing it.....I guarantee you’ve thought about starting a lineage, with you as Osranetherer the first. Tell me if I’m wrong ?”

“Yes, why shouldn’t I dream of my line ruling for a few millennia ?” Asked Muzzie. “My descendants can hardly do worse than all those Xanash emperors.”

“There were dozens of them.....All brutal and callous.” Said Aeony. “Greedy too, they bled the rifts dry with their greed.”

“True.....Very true.” Said Neola. “When you feel your life is coming to a close, you’ll do what all emperor do, every single one. You’ll have a will created and several imperial decrees. You’ll name a successor, as a way of carrying on your dynasty. The rifts will be different then, Muzzie. Another emperor would cause wars and insurgency. Everything you’ll have created, would be destroyed in less than a century. Give me your word that you will not name a successor, or even vaguely hint at a name.”

“I know your family, Muzzie.” Said Aeony. “They’re all dreadful.....And we can never have children.”

“Most of my family aren’t cursed with Genova in their blood.” Said Muzzie.

Uula Podda was making a lot of noise, while nodding her head furiously.

"I had some concerns about the child being with you." Said Neola. "But even she appears to believe you should agree to my request."

She'd been right, being told he would be the last emperor, was different to actually believing it.

Muzzie had wanted to start a line, a dynasty that lasted for many millennia. Why not ? Xanash had done just that. No one could have everything they wanted though, even emperors.

"I give you my word." Said Muzzie. "I will never name a successor as emperor, or even vaguely hint at a name."

The cleric wrote in the book of records, though no seal added, or signatures in blood.

They'd both agreed to the terms of what had been asked for. And that seemed to be enough.

"While you're here.....Would you like to see the crown ?" Asked Neola.

"Oh, yes please." Said Maya.

"I think we must, or Maya will never speak to us again." Said Aeony.

The crown was brought from a room at the back of the temple. Covered in a green cloth, it was quite unexciting, until it was uncovered. Several pounds of the purest gold, supposedly looted during a raid on the Menderan Empire. Muzzie had to try the crown on, which made Maya go crazy.

"Am I the first to see you wear it ?.....Please tell me I'm the first ?" Pleaded Maya.

"You are the first." Said Muzzie.

Neola was actually laughing and handling an excited Maya, quite well. It seemed strange for a Queen of Leng to be laughing. Muzzie had heard so much about the dreadful legacy of Neosto the first, which meant his brutal descendants. A laughing Neola didn't fit what Muzzie had heard.

Maybe.....Just maybe, the balance was shifting.

~ ~