

## The Last Emperor

### Chapter 35 – An Imperial Palace

**“Out of the corner of his eye, Bizzi noticed that the architect seemed rooted to the spot. Poor Garus had probably been in a state of shock, since the Lady had taken her first bite out of the heart of a heretic cleric.”**



The dark angel had carried Pinthrad like a child in her arms, which he'd hated. He wasn't a fast runner though, so being carried seemed essential. One of the veteran dark angels, she spoke old imperial as well as him. She'd slung him over her shoulder, but he couldn't breathe properly while being carried like that.

“I refuse to be carried like a sack of rubbish.” He'd said.

In the end he'd clung to her back, with his arms wrapped around her neck. It was actually quite a pleasant experience. Not for long though, he was soon on his feet again. There had been a battle at the main doors to the emperor's chambers, though the enemy had moved on.

“I can see Runa.” Yelled Muzzie.

Runa was alive, but surrounded by the dead, some imperial fighters and some Quron assassins. They all looked fairly alike in the dark, but Aeony had better eyes than most.

“See the tattoo on her neck ? A Dagger across a book.....She was a Quron assassin.”

“Not even trying to hide who they were; the arrogance.” Said Muzzie.

“At least Runa still lives.” Said Aeony. “The healers will find her, we need to rush.....Maya and the child need our help.”

No more flying, but even clinging to a dark angel's back, while they were running; was a pleasant experience. Not that he'd mention any of it to his wife. Being involved in a fight was bad enough, without being carried around by a dark angel. He wasn't that heavy, though he knew he had to be slowing her down. Soon they were some distance behind Muzzie and the others. His dark angel slowed down and seemed to be listening.

“I'll put you down, Pinthrad.” She whispered. “I sense others in our way and they're not my sisters.”

The stockade was full of warriors from right across the rifts. Not knowing those in front of them, didn't necessarily mean they were enemies. On the other hand, it paid to be careful. As his dark angel moved closer to the wall and crouched down, he followed her.

“As we're going to fight together.....What is your name ?” He asked.

“My name is long.....You may call me Cas.”

At one time he'd have known all the dark angels and some of their history. Times had changed though and those who had once been allies, were often treated with mistrust. Pinthrad hoped that might change. Cas sniffed the air and there was just enough light to see her face. She obviously didn't care for whoever, or whatever, was in front of them. The large dark angel was almost snarling. “Pure blood Shelzak, mixed with Ubari.....A touch of something that lurks in dark places, and we have.....The odour of Quron.” Whispered Cas. “Ready your spells sorcerer, we are certain to need them.”

It seemed there'd be no more crouching in the semi-darkness, or moving slowly. Long blue steel blade in her hand, Cas ran down the hallway. Pinthrad did his best to keep up with her, while

creating a few generic spells in his mind. Fire was always good and easy to mix with other spells. Chaos explosions were superb, but he'd only be able to fire off three, maybe four at the most. Disruption was good; he'd used that when the militia had attacked the guild building. Again, he'd only be able to use disruption a few times. Fire was best; he could keep up a slow and steady wall of white hot flames.

"Someone is here.....I stink a dark angel." Someone shouted.

"Better by far, than the stench of Quron." Yelled Cas.

How had their enemies avoided Muzzie and Aeony hurtling through the hallways ? Pinthrad couldn't be certain, but there were side tunnels and doors. Any of them might lead to places where assassins could hide. His thoughts were disturbed by the sounds of battle. A deep gurgling sound, followed by a scream.....It seemed that Cas's blade had found an assassin's throat.

"Come on Pinthrad." Yelled Cas. "Fight.....Or do I have to kill them all ?"

It was Sokkolf all over again, constantly ridiculing him for being timid. Him.....Where had Sokkolf been when he and Babaef had kept the militia from invading the guild building. Pinthrad's fingers crackled with fire as he created a light orb and sent it up to the ceiling.

"Run, run away, Quron scum." Hissed Pinthrad. "Or, none of you will live to return home."

Flames came from Pinthrad's fingers, a fire spell with a difference. A slight stickiness added to the flames, a kind of almost liquid feel to it, as it left his hand. It was like aiming a water pump, but the assassins were covered in flames, rather than water. There was a hand on his arm.

"Careful, Pinthrad.....Not so much that we can't escape the inferno." Said Cas.

She was right, turning the entire hallways into a mass of flames, might well hurt them and those living in the Void Gate rooms. As Pinthrad stopped pouring fire onto the assassins, a blade came for him, out of the semi-darkness. Cas used her claws and there was the body of an assassin at their feet, with his throat torn out.

"Thank you." Said Pinthrad.

"Come on, we need to find the others." Said Cas.

There were so many of the assassins, it made him wonder how they'd managed to get there in such large numbers. Many could create portals; he was particularly good at it himself. To move so many though reliably, safely and without being noticed. That though, was a mystery for another day. Cas used her blade and claws, while he used fire. When several of the assassins were nothing but balls of fire, he used a force spell. The burning were pushed against their unharmed friends. Pinthrad had to admire their courage.....None of them were running away.

"More fire now.....Keep them away from us, Pinthrad." Said Cas.

"Ezzel.....You may call me Ezzel."

Very few called him by his first name, but in extreme circumstances. One thing was certain, he'd tell his wife a very edited version of his part in the fight and definitely nothing about Cas. Pinthrad used fire spells, until there seemed to be no assassins who weren't dead, or horrifically injured. Awful to see, but they did seem intent of killing Cas and him.

"There are more of them.....It seems half of Quron is here." Said Cas.

Assassinating Muzzie had been a gamble for whoever had ordered the attack. If it had worked, it would have been the end of the new empire. Get it wrong though and Quron would lose its famed army of assassins. Not that Ezzel Pinthrad expected to survive the night. He was almost out of enough chaos energy to use spells. Cas was still fighting, but there was a bad wound in her side. Yet there they were in front of them, the seemingly endless numbers of Quron assassins.

"I can kill them all with one chaos explosion." Said Pinthrad. "We'll die too though and they'll need to dig our bodies out of the rubble."

"Do it, Ezzel.....Use the spell." Yelled Cas.

It would take everything he had left of stored chaos energy and what courage he possessed. As Pinthrad pictured the face of his wife and felt for the mental switch to use the deadly spell, they arrived.

"The army.....Our army." Said Cas. "About time too.....Bloody useless."

The stockade wasn't far away, with so many warriors, that no one was sure how many thousands served the new emperor. Yet, for some reason Pinthrad had never wondered where they were. Questions would be asked though; heads would fall to the executioners axe. Even General Dhūlen might find himself having to answer some awkward questions. The hallway filled with armed warriors, all of them on the right side, their side. Pinthrad heard later that not a single assassin made it home to Quron.

"Better late than never, I suppose." Said Pinthrad.

The army had lamps and seemed to have decided that they might be late, but they'd now be very efficient. They checked if any of the enemy were still clinging onto life and finished them off. A healer arrived, a Dredger girl not much older than Maya. Pinthrad hoped someone had rescued Maya and the child, but that task now had to fall on other shoulders. Cas was sat, leaning against the wall, while her wound was treated. He sat next to her.

"Well.....Are you going to live?" He asked.

"This.....This is a scratch, Ezzel." Said Cas.

Cas leant her head on his shoulder and.....There were no lips involved, but he did kiss her on the cheek, very close to her lips. Yes, there would have to be a lot of careful thought, before he told his wife about the events of the night.

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Maya had explored most of the rooms in the Void Gate building, but not that thoroughly. Faal had used magic to look over the entire complex and had announced it to be free of any enemies, or strange creatures. That had been then though, a very long time ago. A lot had happened since then, a lot of new warriors had arrived and a lot of new people had pitched their tents with the camp followers. Maya remembered the recent spate of murders. Was all that part of a plot by Quron?

"Just so long as no one hurts you, little one." Whispered Maya.

Her own mother had called her little one when she's been a baby, or so she'd once been told. The baby Ancient One seemed to be picking up her mood. No happy sounds, no clicking noises from the back of her throat. Uula Podda was being quiet and perfectly still. Maya was walking slowly away from where Muzzie and Aeony usually slept. There was a sound, a whisper shared between people using a language Maya didn't understand. Only those not supposed to be there, would be whispering. Maya hugged Uula, hoping that the child remained quiet.

There was a door Maya knew about, though its location would be difficult to find, in the low lighting along the hallway. From memory; a worn door, it rattled a little if you leant on it. She moved slowly, pushing the wall after every two or three paces. The wall squeaked as she leant on a certain spot and then there was a very quiet, but definite rattle. There was another whisper, not that far away. It was risky, but remaining where they were, probably meant being killed. Maya thumped the wall at a certain spot and a doorway opened. It made a loud grinding sound, which would travel for some distance.

"Crap.....We need to move little one." She muttered.

The whisper became several loud voices. Many heavy footsteps began, as Maya walked through the door and into a narrow passage. By some method she didn't understand, the door closed behind them. A rattling door near where they'd been, it wouldn't take a genius to work it out. Their enemies might push the right place by trial and error, or simply batter down the door.

"We need a stone door between us and them, Uula." She muttered.

The child moved around, until she was on her shoulder and looking down the long, narrow passage. Not much to see, the only light was the glow of a lamp at least ten yards away. Enough light to see there was nothing to trip over. Memories were coming back, of a nice, solid stone door she'd found while exploring. Maya was at the glowing lamp, when they began bashing the door behind her. Maya hugged the child, who was trembling.

"Don't worry.....I know these passageways far better than them."

Up two sets of stairs and a long gallery opened up on her right. From there you could get a view of the square where the Void Gate was situated. Maya had once watched General Dhūlen, as he'd led several hundred warriors into battle. Not that Maya wanted to see the Void Gate that night, the door she sought was to her left. The child began making scared squeaking sounds.

"Soon we'll be safely hidden away." Said Maya.

Those long legs and arms were too tight around her throat, but it wasn't the right time to tell Uula, or try and loosen her grip. Choking a little, Maya found the doorway, in what looked like a solid stone wall. She's originally found it by counting windows, which needed daylight, time and her almost insane curiosity. Maya was certain that Quron assassins would never find the door.

"Here we go, Uula.....A push here, a thump there.....And....."

Probably rarely ever used, the stone door opened silently. Once she and the child were inside the long, thin room; the door closed. Maya finally relaxed, knowing they were safe. She'd sleep and by morning, the invaders would have been dealt with. First things first, she loosened Uula's grip on her throat.

"I love you.....But you have to stop choking me."

There was a little light coming through the window, or it might have been part of the building's ventilation system. A large opening in the wall, a long way from the ground below. Maya kept away from the window, but didn't think the child was likely to tumble out of it. The baby Ancient One, definitely wasn't that stupid.

"Hungry ? Of course you are.....Food for both of us and some water. Then we'll sleep."

Nesh bugs for Uula and slightly stale bread for her. Not the best meal in the world, but it felt like a banquet. A little water and Maya was ready to close her eyes for a few hours. Only after relieving herself out of the window and onto a roof below. The child would do what she always did; Uula would find a dark corner to answer the call of nature. Finally; with Uula lying on her chest, Maya easily drifted off into an untroubled sleep.

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Bizzi, chief of many thousand Dredgers; felt the darkness near the entrance to the catacombs. He'd been summoned by the Silver Lady and ordered to go there by Muzzie. There was no way of avoiding it, though he had thought of a few good excuses. The Lady had brought him back from the dead though, so he owed her his gratitude and loyalty. Then there was the well wrapped meat in the bag he had over his shoulder.

"You're going to her shrine, so an offering is expected." Nethra had told him. "One of the dark angels acquired the heart of a heretic, a non-believer."

She'd given him the piece of meat and it had felt soft and unpleasant. Bizzi hadn't opened the package of fresh meat. He saw no reason why Nethra would lie about it being the heart of a cleric who'd worshipped a rival chaos deity to the Lady.

"She is likely to eat it then and there.....In front of you, Bizzi." Nethra had said. "Warn the architect.....His life might depend on how he reacts."

The entrance to the catacombs had a definite feeling of darkness about it. Hardly surprising when many believed thousands of the undead still lurked in the lowest levels. Then there was the Silver Lady's shrine, where sacrifices were made to her own particular version of chaos. To add another layer of general bad atmosphere, there were the stairs leading down to what were known as the training rooms. Training for what? No one ever wanted to give details, but Bizzi thought it had to be something unpleasant.

"I didn't realise we'd be going so close to the catacombs." Said Garus.

Garus Thraal wasn't the only architect left in the City of the Lost God, though he was the last to build a large civic building. Garus had designed the Fighters Guild building. That building had been destroyed during a heated dispute with the Assassins Guild. Still.....Garus had designed the now ruined building and when it was still standing, it had won a few awards. Muzzie had appointed Garus to design parts of his imperial palace, but Bizzi was to be the master builder of the project.

"You're his boss; Garus works for you.....Don't forget that." Muzzie had told him. "Not many large construction projects these days, Bizzi.....Garus needs the work, or so I've been told."

Garus had a lot of human in him, probably a little too much. It seemed the Thraal family had selectively bred to enhance the human part of their ancestry. They'd done it for centuries, until many of their facial features looks unsettlingly human. Not just their family, a lot of wealthy families in the City of the Lost God, thought it was important to look a little human. That was then, before human features could get your throat cut. How would the Lady react? She must have seen Garus before and he still lived, so.....Things might not be that bad.

"We're safe from bandits; they dare not operate near her shrine." Said Bizzi. "The light is bright today and everyone knows the inhabitants of the catacombs, rarely bother the city on bright days. We should be safe enough."

"Just remember, I do all the talking." Said Garus. "You and your Dredgers are needed to clear the ground. I don't want you getting above yourself."

Bizzi's people were already setting up a temporary camp, to begin clearing the ground within a day or so. Bizzi had met people like Garus before and the general rule seemed to be, give them enough rope.....Garus strode up to the Lady's shrine and called out to her.

"Silver Lady.....I am Garus, the architect you wished to see."

It was quiet near the shrine; nothing stirred, not even a Nesh bug. The shrine looked like a giant sarcophagus, there was even supposed to be a body inside it. The Lady's remains from when she'd been, whatever she had been then? No one was sure. There was a canopy over the shrine, which was just as well. A light drizzle had just begun.

"Summoning the Lady.....Is there anything special involved?" Asked Garus.

"No, just the usual method." Said Bizzi.

On top of the large sarcophagus was a statue of the Lady, dressed in robes. The statue had her lying on her side, while looking at whoever might be in front of her shrine. Everything in the finest marble; her face so well sculpted that it looked as though she might speak.

"Silver Lady.....My assistant carries the designs you wished to see." Said Garus.

Silence again, though there was something scuttling about in the nearby bushes. Bizzi might have told Garus how to obtain the attention of the Lady, but that assistant jibe.....It needed to be punished.

"This is ridiculous, Bizzi." Yelled Garus. "It's obvious you know what I need to do. Tell me, or I'll have you flogged."

Bizzi was large and well-muscled, as are most Dredger males. Actually, some of the females could have snapped Garus in two. Bizzi liked to think of himself as civilised and after all, he was the leader of the Dredgers in Muzzie's army. He had to set an example and that meant, no brawling in the street.

"Flogged.....You'll have me flogged?" Asked Bizzi. "You'll find that hard to do with a snapped neck."

"Are you threatening me?" Shouted Garus.

Bizzi grabbed the stupid looking lapels of the ludicrous suit Garus was wearing. He lifted him up, until the architect was just about having trouble breathing. Muzzie wouldn't approve, or then again, Bizzi thought he might. Garus could make spluttering sounds, but no actual words.

"I am in charge of the project." Said Bizzi. "The final plan will be mine; you were brought in to get the fiddly stuff right. Cause me too much trouble and I'll hire a proper architect from Tandalla."

Bizzi let the architect's feet touch the ground, enabling him to take a much needed breath. He still had a firm hold on his lapels though, in case he started getting awkward again.

"You get to design the edges of ceiling and the tops of doors.....All the bits of decorative plaster. The plan though, the design.....That will be mine. Do we understand one another?" Yelled Bizzi.

A long way from being a brawl in the local bar, but Bizzi was feeling a little ashamed. For a few seconds he'd lost control. There had been a real desire to throttle the architect and have his body buried out on the rift.

"Yes.....I understand." Said Garus.

"The Lady can be dangerous.....Only speak when spoken to." Said Bizzi.

Bizzi knew what to do; the offering always had to come first. The heart of a heretic was perfect; she'd definitely eat it then and there, while they were watching. Bizzi was no expert on her, but like most in the City of the Lost God, he'd been sworn to serve her, while still a small child. There were the major temples to the nine, but for a Dredger.....The old dark deities offered more than a few kind words.

"The meat.....The Silver Lady will come for the offering." Said Bizzi.

No plate was required, or any special words. Bizzi ripped open the wrapping and placed the heart on the sarcophagus. Just in front of the statue of the Lady, but never on it. A few who'd got that wrong, had suffered her wrath. There it was on the marble, the perfect and very bloody heart of a cleric to a rival deity.

"It will be quick now.....No behaving revolted, or shocked, no matter what you see." Said Bizzi.

For most of his life, Bizzi had celebrated the Lady's feast days in out of the way places like Seren's Edge. Even tiny villages had a shrine to the Lady and whether there was one worshipper present, or several thousand.....She always appeared and it always happened fast.

"Ahhhh Bizzi, my dear Bizzi.....I see you've brought me an offering." Said the Lady.

No cracking of the marble, every appearance of the deity looked like a miracle. With the heart in her hands, the Lady swung around and ended up sat on the sarcophagus, her legs hanging over the side. She laughed as she bit into the heart. Quickly the marble skin looked real, the legs looked supple, her hair looked glossy and beautiful.

“Perfect, the heart of a blasphemer.....A heretic.” Said the Lady. “Such an offering wouldn’t be out of place on one of my feast days. You have my full attention, Bizzi. Though I can guess why you’re here. You’ve come to get my approval for the new imperial palace.”

“I have, your approval means a lot to the emperor.” Said Bizzi.

It was a large heart and the Lady was obviously enjoying every mouthful. Her dress becoming covered in blood and pieces of meat, didn’t seem to worry her. Garus looked a bit queasy, but Bizzi had seen far worse since joining Muzzie’s army.

“I have the plans in my bag. Muzzie likes them and if I can.....” Began Bizzi.

“No.....No need to see the plans, I trust you to know your job.” Said the Lady. “I just need to ask a few questions and then you can be on your way. Of course, I do expect sensible answers to my questions.”

“Yes.....Yes, what do you wish to know ?” Asked Bizzi.

“Will my shrine be safe, Bizzi ? It will be in the gardens of the palace, but the faithful will need access at any time of day, or night. Access without fear of being hurt in any way.....Is that guaranteed ?”

“Yes, the imperial guard will protect those visiting your shrine.” Said Bizzi. “They’ll be safer in the new palace gardens, than they are in much of the city.”

An odd question really, Muzzie had already been through the safety of her followers, on more than one occasion. That was how she was though, the Lady was completely unpredictable. Bizzi just hoped the list of questions didn’t go on for too long.

“The training rooms, Bizzi.....I need privacy in the training rooms.” Said the Lady. “After so long being able to do as please, I won’t tolerate any inference. Can you confirm I’ll still have my privacy ?” Something else Muzzie had already tried to reassure her about. No one really knew what the Lady did in the tunnels and rooms beneath her shrine. There were some scary rumours and the truth was likely to be even more terrifying.

“No interference, no inspections.” Said Bizzi. “Your shrine and the training rooms are yours, signed over to you as legally your property. It’s a much better arrangement than currently exists.”

Off the sarcophagus, the Lady paced back and forth in front of her shrine. Her height could vary and she had to be at least twelve feet tall. She’d finished eating the heart, but bits of it still clung to her robe.

“Good, Bizzi.....Muzzie was right to trust you with this.” Said the Lady.

“I have the plans with me....I could easily show you how the emperor’s palace will look.”

“No plans.....One last question.” Said the Lady.

Out of the corner of his eye, Bizzi noticed that the architect seemed rooted to the spot. Poor Garus had probably been in a state of shock, since the Lady had taken her first bite out of the heart of a heretic cleric. Better than him being pompous though, much better.

“My shrine will be in the gardens of Muzzie’s palace.” Said the Lady. “I will see the imperial palace all the time; those who visit my shrine will see it, every time they come here. Is the palace going to be pretty ? That is important, Bizzi.....Will it be pretty ?”

“Yes, my Lady.....It will look magnificent.” Said Bizzi.

“Good, it has to look pretty. You’re walking awkwardly.....Do you still have problems from when you were injured ?”

Injured indeed, a powerful chaos creature had crushed him and in the process, Bizzi had died. Very few deities could have brought him back from the wastes of eternity, but the Silver Lady had managed to do it. Yes, his lower back gave him bad days, but he was alive.

“Oh, it’s nothing.....Just a twinge every now and then.” Said Bizzi.

“Nonsense, I can see you’re in pain.....come here.”

Being hugged by the Lady at her normal size would have been scary. At her current height, she seemed to envelop him, like a solid cloud which smelled of fresh blood. Suddenly she had eight arms and all of them were holding him against her.

“That.....Feels so much better.” Said Bizzi.

Not a lie, or an exaggeration, his back really did feel wonderful; pain free. Bizzi felt brave enough to hug her back. They stood there for several minutes, as a warm glow took away all the pain in his damaged back and joints.

“Go now; tell Muzzie I approve of his palace.” Said the Lady. “Take your architect with you and never bring him here again. There is far too much human in him.”

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Maya had been woken by something once. It was that annoying thing, where she’d been woken up, but had no idea what had done it. A noise ? Someone bashing the stone door ? It definitely wasn’t the child; she was fast asleep and clinging to her arm. Just the first hint of light outside the window. Uula moved around a little and made her happy gurgling sound.

“Not getting up time yet.....I’m still so tired.” Muttered Maya.

Maya looked and listened for a few seconds and as it was quiet and peaceful, she went back to sleep again.

When the voices arrived, Maya still wasn’t in a hurry to wake up. In her mind somewhere she recognised the voices and the scents. She even knew their respective walks, despite still being half asleep. The scratchy walk and deep voice was Aeony, while Nethra walked silently, like an assassin, or a skilled thief. Their bodies briefly stopped light entering the room.

“I knew it had to be them, I have a weird link with the child.” Said Nethra.

“At least Maya found a comfortable place to hide.” Said Aeony.

Time to be fully awake, Maya picked up Uula and stood up. She groaned, the way Galla moaned when getting up from a sofa.

“Comfortable.....The stone floor has left me half crippled.” Said Maya.

“You’ve been around Galla too long.” Said Nethra. “You’ll be talking about your old joints next.”

“And her old bones.” Added Aeony.

Uula climbed up her body and onto her shoulder. She too seemed to know the two visitors were friends. Or of course, she was probably picking up Maya’s relaxed attitude.

“The child is getting big.” Said Nethra. “One day, fairly soon, you won’t be able to carry her.”

“When that happens, I’ll put her in a cart and push the cart.” Said Maya.

“There will come a time when she’s so heavy.” Said Aeony. “That you won’t have the strength to push the cart.”

“On that day I’ll get in the cart and Uula Podda can push me around.” Said Maya.

“Nice to know you’ve thought of everything.” Said Nethra.

They laughed, while Maya began to collect everything off the floor and put it back in her cloth bag. There wasn’t much to pick up and she was soon ready to leave their temporary sanctuary.

“Uula can talk, by the way.....She sensed something and told me we needed to run and hide.” Said Maya. “I suspect she knows more words than she’s letting on.”

“She really is growing very fast.” Said Aeony. “And that face.....She’ll soon look like an adult. That profile, the sense of repressed strength and power. Just hope she’s friendly and doesn’t eat us.”

No mention of the child biting her, that could remain a secret between her and Uula. It had been a weird situation and the child had reacted in a weird way, it happened.



“So.....Which of you is going to tell me about the attack ?” Asked Maya. “How bad was it ?”

“The Quron assassins seem to have been wiped out.” Said Nethra. “Our losses were quite small, less than a hundred fighters. It seems some of the greys were told to stay in the stockade. A rumour was started that a drill would be going on.”

“Best guess is misinformation from Quron spies among the camp followers.” Said Aeony. “The worry is that we might have a few traitors among our warriors. Something strange happened last night, very few fighters answered the alarm. There will need to be a full investigation.”

“Is Galla alright ?” Asked Maya.

“Of course she is.....Galla is indestructible.” Said Nethra. “You’ll get a shock when you see her though....Galla has sort of.....”

“Galla has changed, quite a lot.” Said Aeony. “Best that we let you see for yourself.”

Galla had changed.....On a night when the world had felt as though it was being turned inside. Galla changing seemed perfectly appropriate.

“I heard Belso has been chasing after Galla.” Said Nethra.

“Don’t tease the girl.....Maya will know soon enough.” Said Aeony.

“I’m assuming Muzzie wasn’t hurt.” Said Maya. “Or changed in some weird way.”

“Muzzie too, is just about indestructible.” Said Nethra. “And our emperor.....Will never change.”

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Once Maya and the child were safely back in the stockade and protected by thousands upon thousands of loyal troops. Nethra could use the Void Gate to travel to Annill and a few days with Merrick. There were things to pick up from her quarters though and not just two bags full of clothes. Muzzie was paying her well and there was a lot more gold in her purse, than Nethra was used to having. Disposable income Faal called it, but Nethra thought of it as quite a bit of gold, she hadn’t expected to have. Not life changing extra gold, but enough to buy Merrick a few nice presents. The miserable bastard she’d married had gone through three birthdays while she’d been away.

“No.....It’s four birthdays.” She mumbled to herself.

There had been four feasts of Nigon too, and a few other holidays associated with minor Gods and Deities. Every one of them traditionally involved the exchanging of gifts. True, the stockade was a long way from Annill, but she could have sent Merrick something. The truth of course, was that the hybrid bar owner she loved, was incredibly good at annoying her.

“Oh, by the nine.....If only Merrick was a little less irritating.” She muttered.

He’d lied to her and even sent his gang of thieves to steal supplies from Muzzie’s army. Yet Nethra felt guilty for not sending him a few gifts over the last few years. That was another way he was annoying; she always felt guilty, even if it was his fault.

“If I hear one word about you having another woman in our bed.” She muttered.

She was strong, maybe as physically strong as a dark angel. Nethra picked up all her bags and walked towards the Void Gate. It was nice to hear all the gossip she overheard on the way. Galla seemed to be the favourite, with her sudden and unexpected return to youthfulness. Quite a few of the warriors she passed, were talking about chancing their arm, by trying to become intimate with the apothecary. Second most talked about news was the attempted assassination of the emperor, of course it was. If any of the crap floating about ended up on Merrick’s doorstep, she might cut his throat herself.

“None of my friends like him.” She mumbled.

Despite the muttering and thoughts of throat cutting, Nethra was still glad she’d bought a bag full of gifts for Merrick. Good quality gifts, she never knowingly bought crap for anyone.

“Still locked on Annill ?” She asked one of the warriors at the Void Gate.

“Yes, and we’ll be locked on there for a day at least. Lots of supplies, the war with Quron just heated up.”

Not easy to go against the flow of traffic, a waggon full of supplies nearly ran over her foot. It was nice though, to leave the Void Gate behind and look upon the city gates of her home city, Annill.

She’d put on a coat that covered her wings, but one of the guards on the gate still recognised her.

“Nethra returns.....Now things will liven up.”

“Has Merrick been behaving himself ?” She asked.

“Rarely a problem for the city guard these days.....Make of that what you will.”

Probably too busy trying to steal from Muzzie’s army and the traders among the camp followers.

Nethra hoped Merrick was going through a rare period of honesty, but she doubted it. The streets of Annill looked the same, as did the groups of kids playing in the main square. Past the Temple of the Nine and Nethra had a good view of home, The Defender Tavern. It had been called the Defender when Merrick had bought the place. Just a crappy bar then, with a few grubby rooms to rent out. Nethra had to admit it; Merrick had put a lot of time and hard work into improving the place. There it was, on the corner, opposite the temple. The outside paintwork had been redone, as he’d promised her.

“Home sweet home.....It is good to be back.” Nethra muttered.

There was a back way in, which would take her to the bedroom she shared with Merrick. Nice if she wanted privacy, but Nethra wanted to see the bar again. It had been repaired after no less than two attacks, or so she’d heard. It seemed nowhere was totally safe anymore, even a bar full of some of the toughest rogues on the rifts. Nethra’s hands were full of bags of clothes and presents. She kicked open the bar doors and strutted inside.

“Nethra.....Nethra is back.” Someone yelled.

Nethra wanted to shout back something rude. She didn’t though; it was just so nice to be known.

Not known as the Chinnura, the super being of the rifts. It was nice to be known as herself, Nethra who ran the Defender with Merrick.

“You’re late.” Yelled Merrick, from behind the bar.

“Yeah.....A waggon full of supplies nearly ran over my foot.” She replied.

There had been settling the Hive Mother into her new lair and the problem of finding where Maya had hidden herself away. But that was all a conversation for after they’d enjoyed getting hot and sweaty. No kissing in the bar, no romantic speeches about missing one another. Her bags went behind the bar, to be collected later, much later. Nethra grabbed Merrick’s hand and led him towards their bedroom.

“Been a while.....Too long.” Said Merrick.

“Far too long.” She agreed.

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Strangely, Galla wasn’t fed up with, or annoyed at, all the fighters saying how gorgeous she looked. Does any female hate being desired ? Some preferred the desire of another female, but desire is desire, no matter who is looking at you with lust in their eyes. It had been several millennia since Galla had been a young woman and she was enjoying the attention. Her work came first though, especially if it was potentially dangerous. The explosive devices needed her totally attention and focus, or her new youthful look might be vaporised.

“We’re ready to go, Galla.” Said Belso. “Are the explosives ready yet ?”

“They’ll be ready when I say so.....They need to be safe to carry.” Said Galla.

“Sorry, I’ll be patient.” Said Belso. “Did you think about what I asked ?”

He’d asked her to go to a bar in a tent, in the camp followers area, when they returned from a quick hit and run on Quron. A large tent it seemed, though Galla hadn’t actually seen it herself. Several other fighters had propositioned her that day; it had to be over a dozen. Belso wasn’t pretty, but she’d never had time for pretty males. Galla had always like rugged men and Belso was rugged to the point of being downright ugly. He had his faults, but Belso had something that was making her think, why not. It was just sex after all; she wasn’t going to marry him.

“Keep away until I call for you, and.....Who knows ? I might go the bar in a tent with you.”

“It’s a big and comfortable tent.” Said Belso.

“I’m sure it is.....Now go away, I need to concentrate.”

Once the Void Gate was locked on Annill, it couldn’t be moved. That was the accepted wisdom, which wasn’t totally true. It hadn’t been easy to reset it to outside Quron for a few minutes. There had been a few traffic snarl ups with supply waggons, but it had worked. By the time it was locked back on Annill, they were all there. Several dark Angels commanded by Itet. Belso with about a hundred of the greys, and last but not least.....Several sorcerers leant to them by the guild. Belso’s men were there as guards. The dark angels were there to drop explosives inside the walls of Quron. The sorcerers had the potential to lift some large devices and use force magic, to hurl them at major buildings inside the enemy city. It was quick revenge for the attempted assassination of Muzzie. With luck, it was so quick, the enemy wouldn’t be prepared. With even more luck, some serious damage might be done to the famous shining Towers of Quron.

“No matter what, it’ll show the inhabitants of Quron that their walls won’t keep them safe.”

Muzzie had told her, at a very quick and not very detailed briefing. It would work though, Galla had one of her feeling and her intuition was rarely wrong. She activated the final large device. When it hit something with some force, it would explode.

“Belso.....Belso.” Galla yelled. “Everything is ready.”

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