

The Last Emperor

Chapter 7 – Temple Of The Flame

“Vella liked their room at the Defender, even if it was a little small. The bed was large and comfortable and as they couldn’t hear those in the nearby rooms, it was assumed they couldn’t be heard by them.”



It wasn’t as if Annill was completely unknown to them, a place on the map with ‘here be monsters,’ written below the name of Annill City. Everyone in the City of the Lost God knew of the place, some even had living kin who’d ended up there. There was a messenger service on the rifts, though it was expensive and famously slow. Muzzie had picked up his knowledge of the city from tales told around the fire in his bar, told by travellers on cold winter’s nights. Apocryphal stories with plenty of added action for effect. No one ever called out such tales as lies, that was considered impolite. Travellers’ tales were how most learned about faraway places. Annill on the far edge of the third rift, was just about as far away as most had heard of. Muzzie was pretty sure he could find most of the major landmarks in the city, but everything else....He knew it might all be nonsense from the mouths of weary travellers.....

“Now, that is what I call a tavern.” Said Sensan.

“The Annill Defender, though most just call it the Defender.” Said Muzzie. “If my very old knowledge is still correct and if he hasn’t died, I know the owner. Merrick is his name, a former thief from the slums in the City of the Lost God, until he came into money.”

“I take it that came into money, means what it usually means for thieves ?” Asked Runa.

“Maybe, there were a lot of rumours at the time.” Said Muzzie. “Merrick is a decent hybrid, at least for a professional thief. Oh, by the way.....My tavern has more rooms than the Defender.”

Muzzie had fought beside Merrick and his wife Nethra. There’d even been a time when Muzzie had helped them escape from Silsk, the previous queen of the dark angels. Looking at the Defender with its stone walls, on a really good corner with plenty of passing traffic. He felt rather envious.

“I love your Tavern, I met Vella there.” Said Caspian. “This is such a good location though.”

“Yeah fine, let’s see if Merrick is still alive, or dead after upsetting the wrong person.” Said Muzzie.

“It’ll be nice to see Merrick again.” Said Galla. “And Nethra of course, she was one of my best customers.”

They’d left their things with the Dredgers, who were all waiting in a corner of Temple Square. Aeony had been left with them as a guard, though the citizens of Annill seemed to think of them all as visiting heroes. Eventually the moment would arrive, the generosity of the people of Annill, would evaporate. At the moment every street seller was giving them food. Some clerics had actually been giving them small gold coins; Muzzie had quite a few in his pocket. Eventually though, the tavern owner would expect gold in return for their food and lodgings, which might be awkward if it wasn’t Merrick. Muzzie had just about enough gold to survive for a few day and the others were in much the same situation. No one attends an anniversary feast, with a full purse, in case a prophecy of an Old God sends them across the rifts.

“Wow, busy for the time of day.” Said Vella. “Your place was never this busy, at least not when I worked there.”

“No shifty looking characters sleeping off the night before.” Added Runa.

Muzzie would remember all the digs and jibes, for when he was back home. Then he’d remind them all about running down the biggest and best tavern in the City of the Lost God. Or would he be going back home, ever ? He’d never heard of an emperor who’d returned home to his old life. It was the yell that told him Merrick still lived and still owned the Defender. A blood curdling war cry that brought back so many memories of past battles and blades covered in blood.

“Mussaneth Osranetherer.” Shouted Merrick. “Of all the people I thought might walk in here today, your name isn’t even on the list.”

“And you’re still one of the few people who can pronounce my name.” Shouted Muzzie.

Merrick was alive, which could well mean agreeing to their lodgings going onto a bill to be paid much later, or maybe not at all. Small and wiry for a hybrid who’d specialised in smuggling illegals into the city. Tough though, very tough. Brave too, he’d refused to have sex with Silsk. That took guts and despite gaining a few scars for his impudence, Merrick had survived that piece of stupidity. Muzzie reached across the bar and grabbed Merrick’s arms.

“Weren’t you supposed to be heading for Avald ?” Asked Muzzie.

“Yes, sorry....We told everyone that.” Said Merrick. “I used some of my contacts to arrange transport here, to Annill. It took us a while, close on a year in the back of a cart.”

“And Nethra, are you two still together ?”

“Look to your right, Muzzie.”

Hybrid could describe everything from an eighteen foot tall pure blood demon, with a touch of something else in its ancestry, right through to a small Dredger child, like Maya. They were all hybrids, usually a Dredger base with bit of something else in the mix. No one knew what was added to the Dredger in Nethra, not even her. The small hybrid female was looking at him, with eyes wide open.

“Muzzie.....I never thought I’d see you again.” She yelled.

A blueish skin, like the finest blue steel. Small wings that could get Nethra into the air, though she did tire quite quickly. Her tail looked harmless, but it was incredible strong and dextrous. Nethra could rip someone apart with that tail of hers, or simply crush their throat. One of the best fighters Muzzie had ever met and she was running straight at him. He just hoped her smile meant he wasn’t about to get another new bruise, or a scar.

“Nethra.....Whatever it is, I’m sorry.” Said Muzzie.

“No throttling the guests until they’ve paid.” Said Merrick.

No need to worry, Nethra leapt at him, grabbing him around the top of his chest. With her toe claws barely touching the floor of the tavern, Nethra hugged him. A strong hug that made it hard to breathe, though her intentions seemed good.

“Oh, Muzzie.....Muzzie.....I have missed you.” Said Nethra.

“And I’ve missed you too.” Muzzie said and he meant it.

“You can’t take her.” Said Merrick. “Whatever crazy nonsense you’re up to, you can’t take Nethra with you.”

Nethra was still clinging to him, with dark red eyes that actually seemed to be full of tears. Muzzie had helped Merrick survive a few disasters of his own making. Obviously Nethra was good at remembering past good deeds.

“No.....I’m here to gain information in Annill, nothing more.” Said Muzzie. “Oh, and you mentioned guests paying bills. For a while at least, that might be difficult for me....Actually for us.”

"I'm sure we can work something out." Said Merrick. "I have some money of yours anyway, from the pay Sajaha owed you."

It had been a long time ago, but forgetting he'd been owed money. Sajaha had been a sorcerer; he'd died while digging up parts of the Ring of Volkin. Muzzie and Lilleth had been hired as body guards. Maybe he'd assumed his pay was forfeited by not keeping the sorcerer alive ?

"We grabbed everything when we left the city." Said Nethra. "Some of the gold was yours, Muzzie. Several thousand imperial.....It's still in a box in the cellar."

"Wow, that could be very useful." Said Muzzie.

"Yeah, sorry.....We were in a hurry." Said Merrick. "We can work something out on food and board, for you and your group. But.....You're not taking Nethra when you leave."

"Fine, I came here with no intention of asking her."

The thing was.....Now that Merrick had seeded the thought in his head; it was actually a really good idea.

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Vella liked their room at the Defender, even if it was a little small. The bed was large and comfortable and as they couldn't hear those in the nearby rooms, it was assumed they couldn't be heard by them. No bath, just a quick rub over with a cloth from a bowl full of cold water. There were fragrant herbs in the water, which had made Caspian and her smell a little better. All that time trudging across the rifts, with no proper bed to sleep in, yet their first thoughts weren't about sleeping. Vella had been the one to mention sex; it had been a while since they'd had the luxury of a bed. There had been a brief moment of intimacy in a tent, both of them trying to keep as quiet as possible. Caspian had smiled at her suggestion and started to undress.

Her husband was quite strange looking; there had been far more handsome lovers in her past. Their sex life was good, though there was nothing reckless about it, or spontaneous. She hadn't even loved Caspian when she'd first responded to his 'I love you,' with 'I love you too.' He lived in the Dome though, with its fresh running water and proper lighting. The Dome even had heating in the winter. Best of all, Caspian was known to be on his way to the top, his prospects were excellent. Gradually though, Vella had fallen in love with him. She had no idea why, she simply loved him. Maybe it was still being a little grubby; she had his hot body odour in her nose as Caspian thrust into her. It had been a while, longer than she could remember them not having sex. Both of them had needs, urges and desires, which badly needed to be satisfied. The sex had been wonderful and they seemed to get little sleep, if any. Vella was still awake as the start of full light, came through the room's windows.

"I think.....I'm going to like Merrick's tavern." She muttered.

"Me too."

"Oh, you're awake."

Turning towards him in a comfortable bed was wonderful, as was the smell of sex rising from their bodies. A need had been satisfied though, passions fully sated. She kissed Caspian, but her thoughts were no longer dominated by ideas of coupling. Vella wanted a bath, a proper bath in quite a lot of hot scented water. Vella had carried metal baths around in Muzzie's tavern, along with jug after jug of hot water from the kitchens. It would be nice to enjoy that luxury herself, even if the cost would be added to their eventual bill.

"Our first day in a strange city." Said Caspian. "Muzzie thinks our lack of money is something that requires attention. I have an idea about that, which means a visit to the Great Library of Annill. Will you come with me ?"

"I must have a bath, maybe an hour lying in hot water." She said. "Then.....I too have my orders."

"Oh, where is Muzzie sending you?"

"Not Muzzie, Galla, and she was quite insistent." Said Vella. "Merrick arranged for our Dredgers to set up camp in a field just inside the city walls. Galla wants me to make sure they're comfortable. She doesn't trust Aeony to look after their needs, or something like that."

"She might have a point." Said Caspian. "Why doesn't she look after them?"

"Ahh, her movement are a secret. All I know is that Galla is looking for ingredients for her powders and potions. Where and how? I have no idea."

"Galla can be quite fierce, I'm glad she's on our side." Said Caspian. "Now....I must get up and dressed. I'll tell Nethra about your bath, as I leave."

"I like Nethra."

"HmMMMM."

It was her husband's give away sign that he found a female attractive, the HmMMMM. Vella knew he'd never betray her, but he'd never admit to liking the look of anyone else. She found it quite endearing, definitely one of his nicer quirks. She watched as he used the bowl of water to wash, giving his genitals a good rub, his bits as he called them. Their bits fitted well, though all hybrids were slightly different and some wouldn't fit at all. Trying to make incompatible genitals fit, had actually caused a few deaths in the city, though Vella didn't know how. She trusted the source of the story though and trusted that it was true.

"Hey, are you watching me?" Asked Caspian.

"Of course I am.....You watch me."

They exchanged a grin. Caspian had something in his ancestry that made him different to her, even if their bits did fit in a very pleasurable way. Galla had realised, in the way only she seemed to sense things. A few weeks before their wedding day, Galla had warned her their union was unlikely to be blessed with children.

"Your choice Vella. It all depends on how much you want children?" Galla has asked her.

There never had been a discussion with Caspian about it and besides, by then she was in love with him. After going to Gorshan things had changed, she was pregnant and expecting a child. Olvir was a gift, Vella was sure of it, a reward for rescuing an angel from Gorshan, that place of evil. Her son was likely to be an only child and she still hadn't talked about it with Caspian. He had to know why all their hot, sweaty and energetic passion, wasn't going to give Olvir a little sister, or a brother. She waited for Caspian to be fully dressed and ready to leave, before calling to him.

"Over here, Casp." She said.

She kissed him with some passion and enjoyed it when his hand found her bare breast. He had to know, it was only fair that he knew they were lucky to have Olvir. When to tell him though, the time and place were hardly ideal. Maybe that night.....Or maybe when they were back home.

"Go on.....Off to the library, Casp. Before I drag you back into bed with me."

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Galla's bird was tucked between her coat and her blouse. Not too tight for him, being there kept him safe and away from prying eyes. She'd already given him a few instructions, but a little running over the basics couldn't hurt.

"Come out Bird, just your head." She said.

His blue feathers were beginning to grow back among the scruffy looking yellow ones. Her bird would never have won prizes for beauty, though he looked better than he had after whatever spell of Muzzie's had caught him.

"Silly Galla." Muttered her pet.

Talking to her bird on the streets of Annill felt weird, but it was a strange city full of strange and varied hybrids. They'd probably seen weirder things than an apothecary talking to a bird.

"It's important, Bird. She might not like birds.....She might not like me. Dhali has a dubious reputation, so stay hidden unless I tell you to come out."

"I know.....I know, hide from the evil crazy lady.....Stupid Galla."

In a way it was nice to have her pet back to his old insulting self, he'd been far too polite lately. Sudden changes could cause anxiety, even what appeared to be good changes. Her bird vanished back under her coat, though she could feel him moving around.

Dhali was rare, someone on the rifts who used their second name for business. Most simply used their first names, it made life easier. Dhali had one of those second names; it sort of rhymed with her first. Dhali Mahli, or Dhali Hahli.....No good, Galla had forgotten it. It would come back if she stopped trying so hard to remember.

"She wasn't always a problem." Galla muttered. "I have heard some say her sudden bad reputation was based on lies."

"Who's reputation."

"Shush Bird.....Not a sound now."

Dhali Drahl, that was it, Galla knew it would pop into her mind if she stopped trying. Dhali had been a successful apothecary in Tandalla, way back before the pilgrim trail became as dangerous as now. There were rumours that she'd used her abilities to bring about several deaths. Not merciful deaths or avenging victims against those deemed untouchable. It was rumoured, the whole thing was a huge heap of rumours.....That Dhali had killed for money. She'd fled Tandalla and as often happens to those with a tarnished reputation, she'd ended up in Annill. Galla realised she didn't quite know which way to go at the next corner. Not lost, she'd never admit to being lost....Just a little uncertain to go left or right. Luckily there was a nearby citizen of Annill, an Ubari hybrid on his way somewhere.

"Excuse me.....I'm looking for Dhali Drahl's place of business."

"The Emporium.....You're almost there.....Left here and you'll see the sign."

Good, the rather ancient rumours were still good; Dhali hadn't died, or sold her business. Six or seven buildings along the prosperous looking street and one had a sign for Dhali Drahl's Emporium. Emporium indeed, as if a simple store or shop wasn't good enough for an apothecary from Tandalla. Galla stopped in front of the heavy looking door, with a sign on it saying the Emporium was open.

"Careful Galla." Squawked her bird.

"I know."

Behind the first door was a short lobby with another door at the end, with another sign saying Dhali was open for business. As Galla put out her hand to touch the door, she felt something, a definite tingle.

"Really Galla.....Be very careful."

"Be quiet Bird."

As far as she was aware, Dhali Drahl had never claimed to be an empath. There were other ways to read the intent of a visitor to her business though, methods that used magic. Annill had to have several magical adepts with sufficient skill. Touch the door and Dhali would know who she was and what she wanted. There was even a chance she'd know about Muzzie and the prophecy driving him. Still, she needed to open the door and it would save a lot of time on introducing herself. The tingle

became worse as Galla touched the door. A push and she was inside the Emporium, which smelled of herbs and Ashunt oil.

"Galla.....Your presence in my humble store, honours me." Said Dhali Drahl.

Her empath skills were sometimes good and sometimes.....There were bad days. It wasn't something Galla could increase at will, but touching someone helped. She touched Dhali's hand, as though it was done out of affection. There wasn't a criminal genius behind the smile. Dhali was no better or worse than those Galla travelled with. She was probably morally far superior to Sensan, who worried Galla sometimes. So, the apothecary from Tandalla had strayed into the darker areas of her arts....There were times when Galla had done things she wasn't particularly proud of. During a very long life there were so many opportunities to be bad. Sometimes it felt churlish to avoid them all.

"Well.....Did you like what you found ?" Asked Dhali. "Can we work together ?"

"I could ask you the same."

They laughed and Dhali invited her to sit with her and have some herbal tea from Quron, which she promised her was the best on the rifts. Had they actually met before, or was Galla basing everything on rumours ? Digging through her memory, she found their paths had crossed three times in about the same number of centuries. None of those meetings had been that memorable. Dhali was a good host; it took her a while to bring up anything to do with business. In the end, the small talk simply petered out to a natural end.....

"So Galla, you've come to me in search of ingredients ?" Asked Dhali.

"Yes, though not just ingredients." Said Galla. "Your trick with the door is clever, but I've learned to keep my thoughts private, even from other empaths. Some may leave home with nothing in their pockets but a few Quron gold pieces, but not me. I've seen too much and my footsteps have been diverted on more than one occasion. I wish to buy ingredients and I'm hoping you might want to buy something I always carry, something really special."

"Something owned by the famous Galla, of course I'm interested. What have you brought for me to look at ?"

Galla didn't want to sell the blade that was always at the bottom of the bag she carried. Galla had no idea what it might do to anyone she stabbed with it, until a cleric of the old dark deities had attacked her. He'd died in agony, from just a scratch by the evil blade, made from metal that had fallen from the sky. Podd the bone collector had found the knife while digging close to the river. He'd been so terrified of whatever emanated from the blade, that he'd been happy to sell it to her. Galla removed its sheath and placed the blade on the table next to their cups and the remains of Dhali's breakfast. Her bird hated the blade; it was guaranteed to keep him quiet and hidden while it was on the table.

"Oh, that is.....Incredible." Said Dhali. "I can feel where I think it came from....May I touch it ?"

"Just the tip of a finger to begin with.....Build up gradually to actually holding it." Said Galla.

Dhali kept her finger on the handle of the blade, for about five seconds. She then went back into her chair as though a chaos enforcer was chasing her.

"Amazing, such pure evil.....It must be from.....'Dhali mouthed the word Leng'."

"Yes, though I think it was made somewhere even further beyond gateway." Said Galla.

Even Galla was loathe to mention Leng out loud. There were tales that the word was listened for, by those with dark powers. Supposedly they brought misfortune to anyone they considered unworthy of name the city beyond gateway. Nonsense of course, though the dark angels never named Leng directly. If such creatures thought they might be unworthy.....

"Oh, Galla.....What a monstrous, wonderful dagger.....Is it stolen ?" Asked Dhali.

“No, definitely not. I can’t say where I acquired it, though I can guarantee, no one is searching for it.” Despite the warning, Dhali picked up the blade made from black metal and held it tight for a few seconds. The look in her eyes as she placed the blade back on the table, was of someone hearing a voice they couldn’t quite recognise.

“I’d be careful about holding it too often, Dhali.” Said Galla. “Remember where it comes from and who may have created it.”

“Thank you Galla, though some might say I’m already beyond help.....Tell me now, be honest with me. Have you ever had the need to use it on someone ?”

Galla had lost track of the number of creatures and hybrids who she’d killed and that was without the numbers others had killed with her powders. Good, bad and a little of both, her potions and powders must have given an early death to hundreds. Yet there had been something about the death of the cleric....It had felt like the blade had consumed his essence.

“There was a huge man, a cleric of the old dark deities.” Said Galla. “He’d already killed two of my friends and was intent on killing me. I scratched the back of his hand with the blade and he died. From what I saw, his death was painful and unpleasant.”

“I have to have it.....Talk in imperial gold pieces....How many for the dagger ?” Asked Dhali.

Dhali had held the blade far too soon; she was under its influence. Asked for a million imperial, she’d have gladly sold the Emporium to possess it, maybe even sell those she loved into perpetual servitude. Not that Galla would ask for such a huge price. Muzzie had said money was an issue, so Galla would sell one of her precious artefacts, the blade from beyond Leng. Famous heroes with charm and charisma, could hire armies on the promise of what riches he’d have once the war was won. Muzzie wasn’t famous and being honest about him, there wasn’t much charm or charisma. So, Galla would get the best price she could, without bankrupting Dhali Drahl.

“I need a whole list of ingredients and I will pay extra for acquiring them quickly.” Said Galla. “Once we know how much they will cost, I will offset it with my asking price for the blade. Strictly speaking, such an artefact is priceless, so it won’t be cheap. But.....Work with me on prices for my ingredients and I’ll come up with a very good price for the blade.”

“Wonderful.....Wonderful, Galla.” Said Dhali. “Please.....Tell me what ingredients you need ?”

Dhali lifted up a white stone tile and a piece of charcoal, which was a little quaint. All the stores in the City of the Lost God now used paper and ink, even Winshin’s general store.

“Firstly I will need fresh Amstera Miltus, the essence of an innocent. Fresh is essential, no more than two days old.”

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Caspian had mentioned Vella’s bath requirements to Nethra, when almost on a whim; he’d decided to ask her to go with him to see the head librarian of the Great Library of Annill. There was little chance of needing a bodyguard, librarians rarely settled disputes with violence. Mainly it was because he didn’t know Annill at all and having Nethra with him would instantly give him quite a bit of credibility out on the streets. Plus, there was a chance he’d get lost without her to show him the way.

“Fine, Caspian....Been a while since we’ve teamed up.” Nethra said. “Are you expecting trouble ?”

“From Chenad the head librarian ? I don’t think so.” Said Caspian. “I just thought it would give us a chance to talk.”

“No.....Merrick would gut you all while you slept, if there was any chance of me joining your.....Whatever it is.” Said Nethra. “I’ll help you in Annill, but I won’t permanently join you.”

“Fair enough, though it’s bound to come up again.” Said Caspian.

“Just remember about the whole gutting thing and an angry Merrick.”

Outside the Defender and Caspian was instantly glad he'd asked Nethra to join him. She seemed to know everyone and they knew her. No looking at his ancient map or asking the way, Nethra knew the quick way to the Great Library, through the back alleys. Plus they had a little history to talk about, though Vella had been her friend more than him. The day Merrick and Nethra had left the City of the Lost God, with everything they owned stacked up in a cart. They'd got away about a day ahead of being in serious trouble for yet another of Merrick's bad choices. Some in the slums still told the story at family gatherings. The tale of Merrick and his many close shaves with prison, or worse.

“You know Merrick better than any of us; he seems different now, more focused.” Said Caspian.

“I threatened to leave him so often that it had no effect.” Said Nethra. “When I actually packed all my things and hired guards for the journey to Quron.....He changed. I never did leave and since we've been in Annill, Merrick has behaved. No more crazy schemes that can't fail.....Until they do.”

“Is there nothing likely to persuade Merrick to let you leave Annill ?” He asked.

“No.....Forget all about that idea.”

There was communication from the main library in the City of the Lost God and the Great library of Annill. Annill was an offshoot of the main library and their structure and organisation were almost identical. Several messengers were used every year, though it was a painfully slow process. Caspian was sure Chenad was alive and well, though Nethra's gossip was up to date.

“He married, badly.....One of his female apprentices and she ran off with another female apprentice. It was a quiet week in Annill; the news was the talk of the city.”

It was all recent news, something he'd never received and was unlikely to hear about. Chenad was unlikely to mention his marital problem in an inter-library message. Nethra was a mine of information, including knowing that the library were doing well as the centre of learning in Annill. They had no enchanted paper, so selling spells wasn't available as a way to bring in money. Instead the Great Library of Annill, had become a college of a sort, a place for the sons and daughters of the wealthy to learn history, languages and even a little theology. According to Nethra the library was thriving and Chenad lived a life of pampered luxury.

“A place of learning.....I tried to talk Adamaz into that, but he'd never agree to it.” Said Caspian.

As they arrived at the impressive entrance to the library, Caspian realised the big advantage Annill had over the City of the Lost God, was space. Legend had it that Tomma-Goran had chosen the site for his city because of spiritual reasons. A strip of land between the river and the mountains, which meant every major building, crowded together in one central area. Annill on the other hand was built on a large open, fertile plain near Lake Nigon. The Great Library of Annill had room for all the stone columns and impressive statues of past head librarians.

“I bet there's even a long cloister.” Said Caspian.

“Actually, they have two internal squares and both have cloisters.” Said Nethra.

“It's the space, Nethra....They have space to build their cloisters.”

There were uniformed guards at the main doors, which looked a huge step up from the scruffy apprentices who greeted those who entered his library. Space and by the look of it, enough money to hire proper guards.

“Do you want me to go in with you ?” Asked Nethra.

“Of course I do.....Listen to everything and tell me all the obvious lies, after we leave.”

Nethra and Merrick had been friends, fellow adventurers to some fairly dangerous places. Caspian already felt relaxed enough with her to hold her hand, to make sure Nethra couldn't return to the

Defender. Word had obviously reached the library about him; the guards opened the doors and stood to attention. Caspian still introduced himself, out of politeness.

"I'm Caspian from the Library in the City of the Lost God." He said. "I wish to see Chenad on a matter of some importance."

"You are to wait in the council chamber."

A council chamber, which implied a council ran the library. Another huge improvement over having Adamaz making every decision and micromanaging everyone. Caspian decided then and there to keep a written journal. There would be quite a few changes when he became head librarian. Chenad didn't keep them waiting; barely long enough to drink the obligatory cup of herbal tea. The guards were actually smiling as they were taken to Chenad's office.

"They're not normally this friendly." Whispered Nethra. "They seem a little in awe of you."

Technically he was their ultimate boss and the City of the Lost God was a city built by a living deity. Not that there was any way Caspian could order Chenad to do anything if he wasn't inclined to do it. Caspian had a plan to hook Chenad with the chance to make more money for the library, a lot more money.

"Caspian.....I was just reading your message from autumn on the first rift." Said Chenad. "It has taken a third of an imperial year to reach me and there was blood on the package. To see you in person.....But where are my manners, please sit down. I'll order some tea and a few things to nibble while we talk."

Chenad was him, albeit an older version. In many ways it was like looking in a mirror. Chenad too had a lot of Dredger in him, enough to have the same yellow skin. He looked to be about the same height and build, though a touch of something else, had made the shovel mouth more presentable. Caspian briefly wondered if Chenad had the same slight bend in his genitals. They were going to get on, everyone likes people who look like them, it was instinctive. They talked about the latest gossip in both of their cities, though Caspian remembered not to mention Chenad's family. There could be nothing that might lead to mention of the runaway wife. Nethra joined in, though eventually Caspian felt it was time to mention why he was there.

"I am, as I'm sure you will have heard, here to support a lawful claim for Mussaneth Osranetherer to be proclaimed Emperor of all the Rifts." Said Caspian.

"Yes, I heard such a rumour while you were still obtaining lodgings at the Annill Defender." Said Chenad.

"You probably know him as Muzzie." Said Nethra.

"Yes..... And by all accounts Muzzie is a well-known and likeable character." Said Chenad. "To be truthful though, I try to stay out of politics. Choose a side and you alienate half the population."

"We're talking about an emperor, Chenad." Said Caspian. "That's well beyond what I'd call politics."

Wine arrived, seemingly unbidden. Chenad remarked on it being a really good quality wine, obtained for him by Merrick. Caspian sipped the wine and only drank a third of what was in his glass.

"I had no intention of offending you." Said Chenad. "I'm assuming you have some sort of proposition, regarding Muzzie ? I promise to listen with an open mind."

"I know Muzzie; he'd make a great emperor." Said Nethra.

"I'm sure he would, but I don't see an army marching behind him." Said Chenad.

The heart of the problem and Chenad had given Caspian the perfect opportunity to mention the two basic essentials of a war, money and warriors.

“Exactly.....There are thousands of warriors in Annill, most of them left here after numerous wars, revolts and disputes about leadership. We could hire ten armies, but they’d need to be clothed, fed and equipped.”

“And most importantly.....Paid.” Added Chenad.

“Only the crazy fight for no pay.” Said Nethra.

“I need money from you, Chenad.” Said Caspian. “In return I can give you an opportunity that will repay you tenfold.”

“I’m listening.”

He might say that, but Chenad’s eyes had gone hard, granite eyed as he’d heard it called. It did sound crooked, there was just no better way to approach it.

“At my library the bulk of our money comes from selling spells.” Said Caspian. “Everyone has to come to us for certain types of spells. Farmers travel a huge distance for love spells, or something to make their wife have a boy child. Then there are the everyday infections and diseases. Everyone comes to us and we rarely charge them more than a few silver coins. Even so, I wouldn’t mind betting we had four times your revenue last year.”

“But we don’t have the correct enchanted paper to write the spells on.” Said Chenad.

“I do and I’m already supplying a small amount to the temple in Tandalla.” Said Caspian. “With the size of the population in Annill and the number of farms in the area.....I can give you the means to make your library very wealthy....I can make you personally very wealthy.”

“There would need to be guarded convoys to bring the paper to Annill.” Said Chenad. “Expensive, but you’re right. Even if we charged just a few silver coins, the revenue would be far more than we earn from the school. Would Adamaz agree to it though ? He can be a little set in his ways.”

“I won the argument about sending paper to Tandalla.” Said Caspian. “Besides.....When I return home it will be as one of the advisers of a new emperor, along with his victorious army. Things will change at the library....I give you my word, you will have your paper.”

“Your word is good enough for me, Caspian. I have a library council to keep happy now though, they’ll need a contract with your signature on it.”

“Then you shall have a contract.” Said Caspian.

Poor Chenad, he was being asked to take a huge risk. He might hand over a full purse of gold, or two and never see Caspian again. On the other hand the likely return on an investment could be huge. Previous emperors had given away entire regions to those who’d backed them. The head librarian of Annill, looked at his desk for a few moments.

“Very well, Caspian.” Said Chenad. “How much money do you need now, today ?”

“Enough to hire and equip an army.”

“Enough to hire a victorious army.” Added Nethra.

Chenad left his office for a while, so long that Caspian thought he might have changed his mind. When he returned, he had three of the guards with him, pushing a heavy leather bag on a trolley used for books.

“I will lend you four of my guards to get you safely back to the Defender, with the bag.” Said Chenad. Caspian had seen that type of bag before, made of tough leather and reinforced by metal studs. The kind of bag used by senior members of the military, to hold their kit. It took three of the guards to lift it onto the desk. Chenad spent a while, looking for the right key on a large ring in his drawer.

“Do either of you remember Tarin ?” Asked Chenad. “He was emperor of the first rift for a while, a long time ago.”

“Yes, I actually knew Tarin.” Said Caspian.

“Merrick heard he was dead, killed by bandits out near Nara-Odil on the first rift.” Said Nethra.

“Reasonably accurate, though the bandits were really a raiding party of rogues.” Said Chenad. “For some bizarre reason I was named by Tarin as his heir. Not as emperor of course, just all his worldly goods and his famous armour.”

Chenad found the right key and opened the leather bag. Caspian noticed a glint of gold as the top of the bag was folded back.

“In a way, you’re the perfect person to receive the contents of the bag.” Said Chenad. “The treasury of a dead emperor, going to help the prospects of a would be emperor.....Come and look, both of you. Will this do, will it pay for a victorious army ?”

The bag was large and it was full of imperial gold pieces. Not just the common single gold piece, but halves and quarters, which were rare on the rifts. Caspian had never seen such wealth in one bag before, he doubted if anyone had.

“Thank you, Chenad.....This is perfect.” Said Caspian.

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No one had wanted to go, yet Runa had volunteered. It wasn’t just that Pio-Xanash had reminded her of her father, though that was part of it. At the end, no matter what his faults; Pio had picked up a sword and defended the Dredger kids against a monster. Bizzi was going with her, he’d known Pio all the time he’d run the general store in Seren’s Edge. Some of the kids had wanted to go, but talking to his family about his death.....No, Runa had decided that Bizzi and her, were enough of a crowd. Aeony turning up as she was getting ready to leave, had been a surprise. No asking for explanations though, if Aeony wanted to go, she was more than welcome. Merrick had said Annill was a safe city to walk around, at least during the hours of full light. Runa was still feeling cautious and being accompanied by a dark angel made her feel more confident about walking over a mile across the city, and back.

“Who are we seeing ?” Asked Aeony. “I heard there are six separate offshoots of the Xanash line, none of them called Xanash anymore.”

“Use the name of a famous emperor and some will come looking for money.” Said Bizzi.

“Or to settle a long held grudge.” Said Runa. “Merrick told me to ignore the people born since Pio moved to Seren’s Edge. He called it ignoring the newbies. Then there was one family known to be descended from a bastard child of the long dead emperor. To cut out all the Merrick’isms.....We’re left with one family that were known to Pio, even if it was a century or so ago. They live in a decent area of Annill, though it’s a bit of distance from the Defender.”

They’d only just set foot outside the tavern, when Runa noticed Galla walking across the small park in front of the Defender. She wasn’t alone; half a dozen armed guards were with her, two of them pushing a sack barrow. Hired mercenaries by the look of them, hired by the day, or even by the hour. On the barrow was a large reinforced canvas bag, the kind her father had used when going to war. Several children and young people were following Galla and her guards, pointing at her and carrying on as though it was a parade. Galla looked particularly pleased with herself.

“Where are you three going ?” Asked Galla. “I need to talk to you.”

“We’re going to see Pio’s family.” Said Bizzi.

Galla moved closer, though in that carnival atmosphere.....Runa doubted if their conversation was going to be totally private. Runa had no idea where Galla had gained a following of so many kids but they looked to be keen on following her into the tavern.

“Yes....That’s important; they need to be treated with respect.” Said Galla. “Get back as soon as you can, I need to talk to all three of you. We’re going to the Temple of the Flame in the morning, all of us.”

“Why ?” Asked Runa.

“No time to explain now.....Look, Caspian and Vella won’t like it, but we have to go to Gorshan. Horrible place full of Vargouille, nasty damned things. Bound to be there again, even if Vella says they were all killed. You only need a few to survive, they breed like humans.”

“Ewwwww.” Said Runa.

“I must go.....We will talk later.” Said Galla.

“What is in the bag ?” Asked Aeony.

“Not a conversation for out on the street.....You’ll be pleased though, you will definitely be very pleased.”

With that Galla and the guards were gone, followed into the tavern by a seemingly growing group of children and hybrid youngsters. It had all reminded Runa of when the travelling fayre from Quron arrived in the City of the Lost God. Her mind quickly returned to something Galla had said, something worrying.

“I’ve heard of Vargouille, Aeony.” Said Runa. “I’ve never seen one though. What are they, exactly ?”

“Imagine a huge wolf, the alpha male of a large pack.” Said Aeony. “Then give it venomous claws and a jaw full of razor sharp teeth. Bulk it up a bit and then give it wings. That my dear Runa, is a Vargouille. No plural, one Vargouille, or a dozen Vargouille, the name is the same. I fought them in Gorshan and they’re scared of my kind. With just me with you though.....We will need to be very careful in Gorshan.”

The route was fairly easy and Runa had packs of flying wolves on her mind. Merrick had told her to cross the small park and then straight on for a mile along Library Way.

“After a mile you’ll see a turning on the left with a yellow painted house on the corner. You want about the fourth house down, there’s a statue of a woman near the gates.” Merrick had told her. A statue and gates were signs of money; it seemed Pio’s family still had wealth. Runa focused on that and Gorshan, until she needed to stop dwelling on venomous claws and flying wolves.

“Where is the Temple of the Flame ?” She asked.

“This is my first time in Annill.” Said Bizzi.

“The other side of the city.” Said Aeony. “Annill was built around the ruins of a temple from the days when humans ruled this rift. A cult grew up, hybrids who worshipped the same deities as the humans. Strange people, we must never trust them. They rebuilt the temple and many of them spend their entire live within its outer walls. There is talk about them guarding ancient secrets, but.....”

“All temples encourage such rumours, their followers like that kind of thing and it’s known to increase donations.” Said Runa.

“Exactly.” Said Aeony.

The house was easy to find and there were dozens of grieving people inside, none of them using the name Xanash. Some were actually crying and taking Pio’s death far more seriously than Runa had expected. Runa deliberately drifted for a while, listening and nodding, without taking it all in. There couldn’t be much more depressing in the world than a house full of mourners dressed in their best go to the temple clothes. So much black and purple.....It brought back memories of them burying her father. One young girl, Kapes, talked about her grandfather’s, father having something that had belonged to Pio.

“He was supposed to doubt his own memory.” Kapes had told her. “The book is a great family secret, passed down for many generations.”

Runa still hadn't realised what Kapes was talking about, when the book was pushed into her hand as they left.

“You might find it useful.....We are the last of his direct family.” Said Kapes. “No one is interested now....It's all been far too long. Take the book, burn it if you like.”

Runa read the book as they walked back to the Defender. It was all there, with no confusion about what was right or wrong. Pio had written out the great secret, the one he was supposed to tell The One, the warrior cursed by prophecy. Then Pio had suffered the ravages of age, combat and a life of excess. He'd probably forgotten writing the secret down, in the language of the old empire.

“Is it interesting ?” Asked Aeony.

“Oh yes.....I can now say we are definitely going to Gorshan.”

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