

The Last Emperor

Chapter 15 – Back To Seren’s Edge

“Bird was hurt and some of his feathers looked scorched, but he was alive. Galla’s pet was flapping about, until Runa picked him up. She obviously liked him and began to fold her shirt around his injured body.”



Galla was never sure of Bizzi’s title and position since he’d been the headman at Seren’s Edge. Still a little pedantic for her liking, though both Caspian and Muzzie, seemed to think highly of him. Other Dredgers and their families, had joined the army as it went through towns and villages. By the time Tandalla was part of the new and growing empire, Bizzi appeared to be the leader of several hundred Dredgers. Not fighters, not really....Though Galla knew Dredgers could fight well if provoked. Mainly there as diggers and builders, Bizzi had overseen the construction of the stockade around the large and semi-permanent encampment near the Void Gate. The stockade was strong and had been built at record speed. Muzzie was telling everyone how well Bizzi had done in organising it. Galla had given Bizzi a few pieces of what had turned out to be, good advice. He’d come to see her again, for a conversation that Galla later wished had never happened.

“Whole families were left behind in Seren’s Edge.” Bizzi had said. “I know they all had the chance to come with us, but setting out to cross the desert isn’t easy. They’re probably still there, thirty or more Dredger families. Running short of food by now and probably being attacked by rogue hybrid raiding parties.”

“You’re probably right, Bizzi.” She’d said. “I just don’t see how I can help ?”

“Muzzie keeps saying we did a good job of building the stockade. He owes us, the Dredgers, though he might not appreciate me telling him that. You have his ear, Galla. Tell him I only need fifty of his best fighters to rescue my people from Seren’s Edge.”

“Oh dear, if I ask he’ll expect me to go with you.” Galla had said. “I’m sure I must have mentioned my poor old bones needing a good rest.”

“It means a lot.....Think of thirty families, or more.....Stuck in that dreadful place. No food and drinking dirty water. Imagine it for a moment, Galla.”

Of course she’d seen Muzzie about it and of course he’d insisted on her going with the soldiers. He’d given Bizzi a hundred of the best of the best, mainly veterans of numerous wars and territorial disputes. The two surviving archers from Gorshan had been added to their party. Muzzie thought they needed a fight they could actually win. Galla had brought Maya with her as her apprentice, though leaving the girl behind would have been next to impossible.

“Back to Seren’s Edge.....I left things there when we left in such a hurry.” Maya had said.

Muzzie had done his magic on the Void Gate and Bizzi had led them through. It had all been so fast, as though there hadn’t been time to travel anywhere at all. There it was in front of them though, at the bottom of a slight rise in the ground.

“Seren’s Edge.....I never thought I’d see this place again.” Said Bizzi.

“There’s no place like home.” Said Maya. “Strangely.....I do miss it a little. I was born here after all, it was my home from being tiny.”

“Stupid Maya.....You’re still tiny.” Squawked Bird.

“Do you want all your feathers pulled out ?”

Bird squawked as Maya pretended to go for him, but it was all good harmless fun. He liked her, even if her pet would never admit it. He sometimes travelled on the girl’s shoulder, which was almost unknown.

“Alright.....Quiet you two.” Said Galla. “Bird.....Go with the soldiers and make sure there are no rogues waiting to ambush them.”

“On my way.” Said Bird.

The soldiers had been briefed before entering the Void Gate. They had a good idea on the layout of the town, though the fallen tower had shocked a few. Bizzi had seen it before, yet he kept mentioning how terrible it looked and what it meant for Seren’s Edge.

“Travellers were guided by the high tower.” He said.

“I know, that’s how Muzzie brought us here.” Said Galla. “Go a certain distance straight out of the main doors of Ingar Sans and you’ll see the top of the high tower.....Oh, and watch out for sand growlers.”

“A few years and this will be a ghost town.....We need to evacuate everyone.” Said Bizzi.

The soldiers had spread out in a wide circle and were slowly moving through the town. Prodding at debris as they went, to make sure there were no rogues hiding in ruined buildings. There was a shout near the pile of rubble that had once been the town bar. Galla noticed that her bird was fluttering about near the shouting soldiers.

“It seems they’ve found something.” Said Galla.

“Can I go ?.....please Galla.....Can I go ?” Pleaded Maya.

“Alright child.....Just be very, very careful.”

Bizzi watched the young Dredger hurtle across the ground. Maya was back on six legs for speed over a fairly rough surface.

“Bit young isn’t she ?” Asked Bizzi. “I mean, for getting into a fight.”

“That child survived an entire night in Gorshan.....On her own.” Said Galla.

Bizzi nodded at her and never mentioned Maya’s age again.

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Muzzie had been given Mount Erran as a potential next step by Wēland Raag. The holy mountain on the Pilgrim trail. Despite Wēland’s assertion that taking the mountaintop stronghold was essential, he had a closer target in mind, for now. Mount Erran felt too close to the City of the Lost God and his army was a long way from being ready to fight that battle.

“A farming town, Muzzie.....It seems a strange next step for the new empire.” Said Caspian.

“The army needs food, Caspian.” Said Muzzie. “Large amounts of it now and more and more of it as their numbers grow. Living off the land will turn the population against us.”

More wisdom from Chenad, from the journal of Xanash the seventh, though it was really common sense. Build a huge army and you’d need a huge amount of food. Caspian was in the emperor’s quarters, along with Dhūlen and Runa. They were all looking at a map Muzzie had hastily scribbled on a large piece of parchment.

“Makes sense, our fighters need to eat well to fight well.” Said Dhūlen.

“My father always said bad supply lines had lost more wars than bad generals.” Said Runa.

“I think I’d have liked your father.” Said Dhūlen.

“Aarabash.” Said Muzzie, pointing at a circle on the map. “Fifth rift farming town about a two day cart journey from Tandalla. Aarabash is the source of all the wonderful food in the Tandalla markets.”

“The good people of Tandalla might complain.” Said Runa. “If we take all that food for our army.”
“I have no intention of stopping food to.....What is now our city. Tandalla is now a valuable part of the new empire. We can look at who they’re selling food to; I see no problem with diverting some of that to our stores. There will be complaints of course, but they’ll get used to the new arrangements.”

“Will they stick to the new arrangements once the army isn’t outside their town ?” Asked Caspian. Many thought the people Muzzie invited to his campaign meetings were fairly random, an idea he saw no reason to dispel. In fact they were all there for a reason, especially Runa.

“It’s all in the journal of a Xanash whose number I forget.” Said Muzzie. “Supply lines need to be established and then protected. We will be leaving a garrison force in Aarabash to ensure the supplies always flow. Runa.....You will know who among our officers were born and raised in farming communities. The soldiers too, those with a farming background will settle in. Who knows, they may marry and put down a few roots. It all helps with the stability of our supply lines.”

“That.....Is a brilliant idea.” Said Caspian.

“Thank the long dead Xanash and his journal.” Said Muzzie.

“How large a garrison were you thinking of ?” Asked Dhūlen.

“Not too large, I’ll leave that up to you.” Said Muzzie. “Work with Runa on it and come up with a plan. Of course, seeing Aarabash will help. I’ve heard there are town walls, though nothing as strong as Tandalla’s.”

“When do we go to Aarabash ?” Asked Caspian.

“That depends on Bizzi.” Said Muzzie. “The Void Gate is wonderful, yet it can only be connected with one destination at a time. I was thinking of seeing how things progress in Seren’s Edge. We should have seen a few refugees arrive by now.”

“I’d like to see the place again.” Said Caspian.

“Me too, though not all the memories are good.” Said Runa.

“And.....I can hardly be the one left behind.” Added Dhūlen.

“Come on then.....My guard are ready and waiting.” Said Muzzie.

Muzzie’s personal guard seemed to swirl around him now, like a band of deadly dancers. At one time they just felt like an assorted group of fighters. Now though.....They were his, defenders of the emperor. When the army arrived in Aarabash he was determined to put some time into getting to know his guard, the warriors who were prepared to protect him with their lives.

“Let the guards go first.” Said Dhūlen.

Muzzie hung back, as half his personal guard vanished into the Void Gate. The idea was to wait for one of them to return and say the destination looked safe. That seemed to be overdoing the whole protection thing. Muzzie counted to twenty and stepped through the gate. He was quickly joined by the others and the rest of his guard.

“There has been death here, recent death.” Said Dhūlen. “I can smell it.....Freshly spilled blood.”

Down the slight hill and the smell of blood became stronger. There were bodies among the ruins of the high tower, Dredger bodies and the mutilated remains of some of his fighters.

“We should return for more fighters, you’re not even wearing armour, Muzzie.” Said Dhūlen.

“Neither are you.....None of us expected to find anything like this. We carry on and whoever did this, will be destroyed.” Said Muzzie.

It was the problem with making assumptions and Tandalla had been a very easy victory. No one had expected serious trouble at Seren’s Edge, the town was a ruin. Muzzie tucked it away in his mind, the lesson not to assume anything, or anywhere was safe in future. Maya looked to have been

beaten before hiding herself between two stones from the collapsed high tower. Her lips were moving as Muzzie knelt down to pull her out of her hiding place.

“Quiet.....She’s trying to say something.” Said Muzzie.

“Eight arms.....It shows no mercy.” Muttered Maya.

Eight arms and powerful enough to cause the carnage around them. It sounded like a top level chaos enforcer, one of the really bad ones. Nonsense of course, such beings were rare and hardly likely to have been sent to a dump like Seren’s Edge. Unless.....LLud Narren had mentioned some lords of chaos not wanting the rifts to be unified under a single banner. Still.....A top level enforcer was an extreme solution. Muzzie pointed at one of his guards.

“You.....Carry the girl back through the gate. Get her looked at by one of the healers, a good one.”

The man hesitated; he’d probably been told his emperor could be awkward and unwilling to be guarded all the time.

“Do as your emperor commands.” Said Dhūlen.

The fighter picked up Maya and actually ran up the hill and through the Void Gate. The question now was simpler than why a near mythical creature had killed so many of his warriors. What Muzzie needed to know was important, she was crucial to his plans.....

“You.....Go back and bring more fighters.” Said Muzzie. “Tell them it is my order and anyone who hesitates to obey, will be beaten.”

“Yes my emperor.”

He’d really have them beaten. Muzzie was tired of rules made by others and fighters who looked at another for confirmation of his orders. It was over; they had to obey him without question.

“While we wait.....I’m going to use a locator spell to find Galla.” Said Muzzie.

He knew Galla pretty well after going to her shop for powders for this and that. Hundreds of years of buying remedies for minor ailments and you knew someone. Her personal scent, the way her face frowned if her knees were playing up. Muzzie concentrated on Galla as if she was stood in front of him, before using a basic locator spell. There was a red glow over the top of a nearby pile of rubble. Muzzie hoped for the best as the locator didn’t distinguish between the living and the dead. He had intended to wait for more fighters, but Galla might be alive, but severely injured.

“There.....” He said pointing. “Take care, I feel something.....I’m not sure what.”

Runa strung an arrow. At least she’d brought a sensible weapon; Muzzie just had a small ceremonial sword on his belt. Caspian had the weird curved blade he seemed to love, while Dhūlen had been sensible enough to be carrying a wicked looking longsword. There were his guards, but it was still not much of an army.

“Oh, that animal seems indestructible.” Said Caspian.

“I for one am very pleased he’s alive.” Said Muzzie.

Bird was hurt and some of his feathers looked scorched, but he was alive. Galla’s pet was flapping about, until Runa picked him up. She obviously liked him and began to fold her shirt around his injured body.

“And I can see Galla.....I’m sure it’s her.” Said Caspian.

“Careful.....A hundred fighters cut to pieces, yet Galla and her pet are left alive.” Said Muzzie. “Maya could have been lucky, but this much luck.....”

“You think it might be a trap ?” Asked Runa.

“I’m fairly certain it is a trap.”

“Look.....Our reinforcements have arrived.” Said Dhūlen.

It looked like slightly over a hundred warriors, running towards them. Not an inconsiderable force, but nothing to bother a top level chaos enforcer. Caspian was looking at Galla, using his fingers to check for a pulse and his cheek to see if she still breathed.

“Badly beaten and a few wounds.....She still lives though.” Said Caspian.

It was a trap, of course it was. The chaos creature had a battle cry that hurt the ears and induced fear in the bravest heart. It was stood there, on top of the ruins that had one been the town tavern. A sword in each of its eight hands and wearing leather armour with chaos runes burned into the leather like a brand. Said to be un-killable, though Muzzie had seen an enforcer die. More than a match for a hundred hybrid warriors though, more than a match for several hundred.

“It’s an enforcer, isn’t it ?” Asked Runa. “I’ve only ever seen drawings of them.”

“Yes, a very rare being.....I suspect it’s here to end my life.” Said Muzzie.

“Any hints on fighting it ?” Asked Dhūlen.

Muzzie hadn’t noticed them before, lying on the ground, side by side. It was the archers who’d gone right through Gorshan with him. There they were now, dead and ripped to pieces. It seemed wrong that they’d survived Gorshan to die in a shit hole like Seren’s Edge.

“We stand here and fight well.....” Began Caspian.

“And if we die, we die well.” Finished Muzzie.

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The fighters had found several dead Dredgers, who looked to have been literally pulled apart. Maya knew one of them, which was causing her to be very upset. Her pet bird was getting in a panic about something and Galla had given up trying to restore any semblance of order. Leather Jerkin the archer began to use his bow, when something in the ruins grabbed poor Bizzi. The leader of the Dredgers became a spinning ball of clothing, as something threw him high into the air. Bizzi landed close to Galla, though he looked to have been dead when thrown. It was the look of horror on his poor dead face.....

“It killed Bizzi.....Be very careful.” Galla Yelled.

A stone hit Leather Jerkin, just an ordinary looking pebble. Galla saw it thrown by something, though it was still using the ruined town tavern for cover. A pebble picked up off the ground and thrown with so much strength that it took the archer’s head apart. Blood and bone covered that shiny leather armour, as his body hit the ground. The survivor of so many horrors in Gorshan had died on the grubby streets of Seren’s Edge.

“I said.....Be careful.” Shouted Galla. “Keep under cover until we know what it is.”

No good, the fighters might have obeyed Bizzi, but they were taking little notice of her. Galla had an inkling that there might be a plan behind the mayhem, when her pet was plucked out of the air, by a set of nimble fingers. Nothing could do that, no living thing had that kind of speed and reach. The fingers were on a long thin hand, attached to an impossibly long arm. It was the grey colour of its skin, that gave Galla a solid hint about the being attacking them.

“It’s a chaos enforcer.” She yelled. “Listen to me, you can’t fight this thing. Run.....Hide among the ruins as best you can.”

Even Maya wasn’t listening to her. All everyone could see was one arm, which wasn’t a very impressive arm. Skinny, implying their enemy was scrawny in the extreme. If Maya hadn’t felt the need to run away, the soldiers definitely didn’t. As a group, they ran towards the ruined bar. Galla had no option; she followed them, while hoping for a miracle.

“I might be wrong, it might be something else.” She muttered.

Galla had seen an enforcer die, she'd killed it. Near the time when Yam Kermul had tried to take over the City of the Lost God. The streets had been overrun with creatures of chaos, some fairly harmless, though some weren't. The enforcer had tried to kill her on a rain soaked street in the middle of the night. One of her powders had killed it, one of her super powders that had never failed her. Galla hadn't felt the need to put one of her extra special powders in her pocket. After all, it was only a quick trip to Seren's Edge and back.

"Maya.....Please don't....." Galla yelled.

No good, the child had vanished into the ruins. The screaming of the warriors told Galla she'd been right, combined with the sound of breaking bones and dismembering. There was a smell too; the dreadful smell when hybrid viscera was pulled from the body and ripped apart. They were dying; Muzzie's soldiers were being killed in many varied and unpleasant ways.

"Galla the apothecary.....I was hoping they'd send me." Shouted the enforcer.

It threw Maya to one side as it approached, though the girl wasn't dead. Maya dragged herself into the gap between two huge stone slabs, that had once been part of the famous high tower. Galla doubted if the enforcer meant to kill her. She and the Dredger child were probably bait to lure the big catch....Muzzie the new emperor.

"Don't be too confident foul creature." Yelled Galla. "I've killed your kind before.....One touch from a few tiny particles of my powder and.....You'll be gone, lost forever in the wastes."

The powder Galla brought out of her pocket was a simple pain killer, for when her joints began to complain about the cold, or the damp, or being made to trudge for miles across rough ground. The enforcer didn't know what the powder was. It stopped moving towards her.

"If I fail they will give me an eternity of pain, you know that." Said the enforcer. "If you can use your powder quickly enough, I will die quickly. I really don't like either option, but dear Galla.....What must be done, must be done."

When it came at her, it ran quickly. Eight arms on a torso that wasn't that muscular. A head of course, though that was unremarkable. The two eyes and a mouth that could have been from any hybrid, though there was no hybrid blood in the enforcer. All that on top of two reasonably muscular legs. The danger was inside the being, according to all the ancient texts and academic tomes. Full of pure chaos, which gave it preternatural strength and made it, almost, invulnerable to any kind of damage. Enforcers really were the ultimate warrior....Just one could wipe out an army. Galla opened her powder, but the enforcer didn't flinch.

"One day I will look for you in the wastes and.....I will kill you." She said.

"You don't die now, apothecary.....For now, you're bait."

It stabbed Galla in the shoulder and then systematically beat her. Always being careful not to kill her, it broke two of the old bones in her ever aching legs. She'd thought nothing could have made her scream in pain anymore, but when she felt her legs break....Galla screamed. It went on for a while; it kicked her around when it seemed bored by hitting her. When the enforcer hit her hard in the face, she felt her eye socket crack apart. After that.....Galla allowed herself to sink into deep unconsciousness.

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Muzzie had left the Hand of Arcadis on the table in his quarters. It was after all, supposed to be a very quick visit to hurry up the refugees arriving from Seren's Edge. There was the tiny bone fragment, which was now part of a belt and rested constantly against his skin. The bone had its own list of spells, though none were likely to kill a chaos enforcer. There was an immolation spell that might injure it enough to allow him and his warriors to escape. He was beginning the spell as he

noticed the crumpled body of Bizzi, lying some distance away. It seemed a portent in a way.....Bizzi had survived so much, only to die where his own personal journey had begun.

“Come on Muzzie.....I was hoping you’d be a worthy adversary.” Yelled the enforcer.

“Thing of evil.....I’ve seen your kind die, screaming.” Shouted Muzzie.

“Galla yelled the same at me.....But where is she now ? Yes, I remember.....Close to death and half blind.”

The outer shell of his spell was there, like the scaffolding around a building. Fill it with enough raw chaos for the immolation spell and it would be ready to use on the enforcer. Muzzie had a slight worry that all that raw chaos, might actually strengthen the enforcer. If it did, it did.....The way things were; the situation could hardly get worse. Muzzie never did get to use the spell.....

“I didn’t summon you.....You have no business here.” Said the Silver Lady.

No portal, no gateway, the deity who probably wasn’t a real God, or perhaps she was.....Had simply appeared. There was that silver tinge to her skin, which only appeared when she was agitated.

Usually the silver skin meant someone was about to die, perhaps many were about to die.

“You know me.....I come and go where I’m sent. And...I come and go as I please.” Said the enforcer.

“Go.....Go back to your masters and tell them I forbade your presence here.”

Any sensible creature would have prostrated themselves on the ground and begged her to forgive their transgression. Not the enforcer, it still had a swagger about the way it moved. Whatever was going to happen would be huge, he’d seen the Silver Lady deal with those she considered needing to be cleansed, her term for killed and their remains obliterated. Muzzie just hoped he was far enough away from the enforcer, to avoid being caught in the coming obliteration.

“You need to leave Seren’s Edge.” Said the enforcer. “Interfere with what I’ve been instructed to do and I may have to destroy you too.”

No huge spells, no more threats, no summoning her own enforcer. The Silver Lady flicked her hand as though shooing away a nuisance and the enforcer died. The being fell to the ground like a felled tree. No, not dead....Muzzie saw its eyes moving around. It seemed the Lady had plans for the enforcer, before totally removing life from its body.

“You dare threaten me.....Your spirit will walk the wastes for eternity.” Said the Lady.

She knelt next to the enforcer, as though administering aid to a loved one. She ran her hand over its body and everywhere she touched, its flesh began to blister and boil. Muzzie looked away when the dying enforcer began to whimper. Eventually the once unstoppable being, was just a pool of bubbling fluid.

“This.....Is always the best part.” Muttered the Lady.

It was her way, Muzzie had heard about it before he’d witnessed it for himself. The Silver Lady consumed those offered as a sacrifice and she also consumed those stupid enough to get in her way. Consumed as in ate and often the way she ate was terrifying to watch, or repulsive enough to make the strongest stomach heave. The lady used her hands to scoop up large amounts of the bubbling remains of the enforcer. Having a good idea of what would happen next, didn’t make Muzzie immune to nausea and queasiness. The Lady ate the evil looking slime in her hands, every single bit of it. Then came a delighted sigh, as if the awful mess had been something delicious, something wholesome.

“You keep looking at the same body.....Was the dead Dredger important to you ?” Asked the lady.

“Yes, in a way.....Bizzi was the leader of the Dredgers in my army. His death will cause problems and.....I’d just started to like him.”

“Nothing is for nothing, that is the way of the rifts.” Said the Lady. “You must know that ?”

“Oh, I do.....Our lives are often too harsh to allow favours out of sentiment.....But how does....”

“Come with me.....You need this as much as you need Bizzi.” Said the Lady. “A legend associated with your new empire and its new emperor. I like new empire as a name.....You should encourage its use.”

The Lady scooped up more of the enforcer’s remains and walked towards the broken and twisted body of Bizzi. Muzzie didn’t know what to expect, though talk of creating a legend, made him expect something huge and impressive. The Lady put the enforcer’s remains in her mouth and chewed at them for quite some time. When she seemed happy they’d been chewed over for long enough, she spat the entire mess into Bizzi’s dead face.

“We’ll need water.” Shouted the Lady. “A cloth too, to wipe it away.....Before it burns the skin off his face.”

It should have been impossible, but many considered the Silver Lady to be a deity. Bizzi began to yell and claw at the skin on his face.

“Water.....Why do I need to ask twice ? Wipe him clean, before his face is burned to the bone.”

Several warriors brought water bottles and cloths; one seemed to be using a spare shirt. They washed Bizzi down until he stopped yelling. His face looked a little red and sore, but the leader of the Dredgers was alive. In truth he didn’t look that healthy, but he was definitely alive.

“His skin will heal.....Come Muzzie; we have to talk in private.” Said the Lady.

Nothing was ever for nothing on the rifts, everyone knew that. She was going to expect a favour for bringing Bizzi back from the dead, or maybe she needed something finding, or someone killing.

Sometimes deities were strangely reluctant to get their own hands dirty.

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There was a word on the rifts to describe someone who was neither one thing or another. Nethra had always been amused by the word, that was often used to describe her. On the rifts populated largely by hybrids, surely everyone was neither one thing or another ? Her purple wings had started Muzzie’s army using the term, which seemed to be used with respect, maybe even affection.

Chinnura was the word, which could mean one of the multiverse’s super creatures, or a hybrid who simply didn’t fit any easy description. Sometimes a word of praise, though often meant as an insult.

“May the nine divines bless our Chinnura.” Yelled a passing Ubari hybrid.

The nine divines, the oldest of the Gods routinely worshipped throughout all the rifts. Such a blessing was a good thing, even from the mouth of a passing Ubari. Nethra had meant to talk to Galla, but it seemed the apothecary had decided to lead the liberation of Seren’s Edge from the rogue hybrids. Bizzi had gone too and Muzzie had loaned them a hundred or so seasoned fighters. So, in theory, as Nethra heard the call for reinforcement for Bizzi, she wasn’t unduly concerned.

“Bizzi can be a bit of a worrier over nothing.”

Nethra muttered at the half dozen fighters entering the Void Gate at the same time as her. Others might have been revolted by the smell of blood that covered Seren’s Edge like a cheap perfume. To Nethra the odour was intoxicating. Something both terrible and wonderful had happened there and Nethra knew with certainty, that something not usually considered to be mortal, had been killed.

The fighters with her looked worried.

“It’s alright.....What happened here is now over.....Finished.” Said Nethra.

Out on the rifts and on her own, the large number of dead would have meant plenty to eat. Out of consideration for the living warriors and the need to be accepted among them, Nethra resisted the urge to feed. It was a waste though, the usual burying of the dead, or cremation. She saw Muzzie talking to the Silver Lady, though the ageless deity now looked like any one of a million other

hybrids. Nethra saw her clearly though, for what she really was. As Nethra looked, Muzzie waved to her, beckoning her to join them. So many deaths and the presence of a living deity.....Curiosity sent Nethra walking through the ruins to join them.

".....I guarantee Nethra will know the place." Said Muzzie.

"The Necropolis on the sixth rift." Said the Lady. "Someone there needs to be found and brought to me. There are of course, many items of power in the Necropolis and you are welcome to take those, all of them if you wish."

"There are also undead there, hiding in the shadows of that city of the dead." Said Nethra. "Fast on their feet and incredibly strong. They once came close to wiping out all life on the sixth rift."

"How do they survive now ?" Asked Muzzie. "Hiding in the deep places I once heard.....Do you know what they eat, Nethra ?"

Nethra had heard nearly a hundred and one ideas about what the undead ate, probably all nonsense. She'd come to her own conclusion, which sounded crazy, despite probably being right.

"How did the undead in the catacombs survive, sealed up below the City of the Lost God ? I've always thought that the lords of chaos have ways of nourishing those they value.....Vile and horrific ways of nourishing them." Said Nethra.

"Yes, I can see we were right to talk to Nethra." Said the Lady.

"Dhūlen must know more than I, his people built the Necropolis." Said Nethra.

"True, but it's always nice to get several different views.....A varied perspective." Said the Lady.

A dozen questions were swirling in Nethra's head, all of them fading away with the mention of Galla and Maya. You couldn't travel in a small cart for day after day, without bonding with those travelling with you.

"Galla and Maya were injured....Galla was left close to death." Said Muzzie. "Healers are with them and both of them will recover from the ordeal."

"What attacked them ?" Asked Nethra.

"A chaos enforcer.....Its remains are behind you." Said the Lady.

Nethra saw the liquid remains, which she knew could grant power if eaten. The Lady had probably eaten some of the foul smelling remains and once Nethra might have pleaded for her leavings. Living with Merrick had civilised her though, just a little.

"Once I'd have been interested in such a meal, but not now." Said Nethra.

"I was hoping to get Muzzie to try a mouthful." Said the Lady. "It would probably purge the Genova out of him and make it easier to enter Leng."

"Some of us think his angel ancestry, is the best part of him." Said Nethra. "So, it seems we're about to go to the sixth rift and enter the Necropolis ?"

"After Aarabash." Said Muzzie. "Once the farming town is ours and the garrison in place.....Then we'll use the Void Gate to get to the Necropolis."

Not something Nethra was looking forward to, though she did enjoy fighting a strong and determined opponent. There were rumours about the undead being there in huge numbers, maybe too many to be easily defeated. Mind you, there were wild rumours about many locations on the rifts. Most of them were probably untrue, or greatly exaggerated.

"I am needed elsewhere." Said the Lady. "When you have what I seek, let me know and I'll come for them."

It was strange to be looking at the Silver Lady one moment and the rubble behind her the next. Such flawless instantaneous movement was incredibly rare. A thought came to Nethra, something that should have been obvious, but hadn't been.....Until that moment.

“The bird.....She sees and hears through Galla’s pet.” Said Nethra. “Now I know, it’s so fucking obvious.”

“Probably why she arrived in time to save us.....The enforcer hurt Bird.” Said Muzzie.

Nethra looked around and warriors were still arriving in dribs and drabs. Soon half the army would be there, generally shuffling about and recovering bodies. There really didn’t seem any need for her to be there.

“Well, if you don’t need me ? I’ll go and see how Galla and the damn Dredger kid are doing.”

“Not so fast, there are families hiding in their homes.” Said Muzzie. “Not as many as we hoped, though still quite a few Dredgers and their kids. Up at the far end of town near where Pio had his store. Having you with us might encourage them to come out.....You and your fancy purple wings.”

“Hey, emperor or not, I can still thump you.”

“Oh yes, I can remember getting a few bruises when I tried to throw you out of my tavern.” Said Muzzie.

“I just realised.....More damn Dredger kids like Maya.” Said Nethra.

“Yes.....Come on, let’s get this done.” Said Muzzie. “The army can then strip anything useful out of Seren’s Edge and the town can be left to decay and crumble to dust.”

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Aeony had missed events in Seren’s Edge, though it hadn’t shaken her the way it had disturbed others. Yes, an attacking chaos enforcer had been unexpected and almost impossible to deal with. One fact kept coming into Aeony’s mind. One of the most powerful beings to be found on the rifts, had come to kill Muzzie, yet Muzzie still lived and the enforcer was dead. Close to a hundred warriors had been killed and several Dredger families. But the enforcer being dead was a good sign, a definite positive omen for the future. Muzzie had even scooped up some of its decaying remains and they were in a glass jar on the shelf in their bathroom.

“I’m not likely to consume it.” He’d told her. “The Silver Lady said it will purge the angel blood out of me. I consider that as losing the best gift my mother left me, the only thing she had that was worth anything. I just want the awful gloop there though, on the shelf.”

Aeony had to do it. She’d opened the jar and taken a sniff of the contents. It was dreadful, worse than finding a dead body that had been out on the rifts for a couple of months.

“Ewww you can never eat that.” She’d said. “It’ll melt your insides and kill you.”

“Nethra said pretty much the same thing.” He’d said.

Aeony was currently flying around the walls of Aarabash and waving at the locals in a way she hoped looked friendly. A bit different to Tandalla, where they’d fired hundreds of arrows in her direction. The defenders on the walls shouted greetings and looked pleased to see Muzzie’s army not far from the town gates. Aarabash was a two day cart journey from Tandalla, or a walk of just over a day, or half a day for well-trained town council runner. The people behind the walls knew who commanded the army and which emperor it served. Muzzie had been expected and it might all be fake, but the good people of Aarabash seemed intent on making their new emperor welcome. A nice bright day on the fifth rift, though no one really understood why some days were bright and others were quite dull. Some seers and clerics claimed to have knowledge of such things, but Aeony had never met a seer who wasn’t at least half crazy. Still, the light on the rifts was preferable to the ball of fire that crossed the sky of Gorshan. That was dreadful.....What kept it up there ? Supposing it fell ? No, a nice bright rift day was what she knew and Aeony felt comfortable with things as they were.

“Well.....Do they seem friendly ?” Asked Muzzie, as she landed beside him.

Bright days were supposed to be a good sign, though Aeony had fought plenty of brutal battles on bright days. She decided to give Muzzie her views, without reference to the deities, omens, or soldiers' weird beliefs.

"The defenders on the walls are shouting welcome." Said Aeony. "As far as I could see, none of them are wearing armour. They've put several carts near the wide open gates. The carts are full of flower garlands to be given to our fighters. Rows of clerics in their best lilac robes, are waiting to greet your army.....Nothing in war is ever certain, but I'd say; they can't wait to welcome their new emperor."

"And the bright day is a good sign." Said Dhūlen.

Aeony didn't need to mention brutal wars on bright days.

"I've seen a lot of good people die on nice bright days." Said Nethra.

Things had changed until Galla was fully healed, everyone had new temporary duties. Nethra now walked at Muzzie's left hand and was a senior adviser. Vella was there too, as a kind of consultant. She was one of the few of them who'd actually once visited the town. There were a lot of 'kind of' roles until the injured were fully healed. Aeony had become a kind of guardian to the Dredgers, until Bizzi seemed to be well enough to lead them. Guardian indeed, she knew the role was going to be a pain in her rear. Muzzie was looking at the walls of Aarabash, as though looking hard enough would tell him the intentions of those inside.

"Did you see anyone wearing armour, Aeony?" Asked Muzzie.

"Not a single guard on the walls.....I only noticed two with a blade on their belt."

"And.....It is a wonderfully bright day." Said Vella.

Said with a smirk and everyone laughed, including Muzzie.

"We will accept the hospitality of our newest addition to the empire." Said Muzzie. "General Dhūlen, lead my army into Aarabash."

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