

## The Last Emperor

### Chapter 26 – Orders Of The Divine

**“The Defender Tavern in Annill, not somewhere LLud Narren considered his natural habitat. The creatures of darkness were forming groups now, as if catching him was the most important thing in their miserable existence.”**



Estrin-Okanan opened her eyes and knew instantly that something massive had happened to the rifts. That something was time, millennia after millennia of time. The young female who'd woken her was a full blood Dredger, who probably had no idea she wasn't really a full blood. Tiny pieces of something else were in her ancestry, tiny pieces of lots of things. After thousands upon thousands of years, none of the girl's people would realise they were hybrids.

“Careful, Maya.....She's awake.”

Was it her ? Had she altered the Dredgers and forgotten about it ? Later she'd remember but her memories could take days to fall into place. So many memories from so many millions upon millions of years. No, she remembered that Tomma-Goran had altered the Dredgers, to make them more useful to him. He'd had massive ambitions, had Tomma. Little of what he'd planned had ever happened and now.....He'd been cast into the wastes. Estrin meant to sigh as she stood up, but it came out as a growl.

“Please don't hurt her.....We mean you no harm.”

Another hybrid, a tall strong male. Did he think he was a pure blood upper level demon ? Estrin doubted it.....There was Genova blood in him and his life had to be full of confusion and contradictions. Angel blood in a demon.....Estrin almost felt sorry for the four armed, red skinned demon hybrid. There was a dark angel too and.....A winged Chinnura was sat on the floor. They were rare, even when the warriors of Mendera had walked the rifts. Now.....The purple winged Chinnura might well be unique. Did she realise that ?

“I woke you up.” Said Maya.

There were ways of dealing with intruders, some pleasant and others, which were far from pleasant. Estrin liked the girl child, she reminded her of the girl who'd visited so many worlds. That girl had been her, though most had called her Estrid then. Estrin changed from being a dragon, into a Dredger girl, just like Maya. She hugged Maya and decided to listen to what her visitors had to say. Not as a child though, she changed her appearance to that of a young, adult human female. She knew their names now and that the one called Muzzie had been cursed by prophecy.

“Oh, Muzzie.....I'm surprised you accepted the challenge.” Said Estrin. “To become the last emperor.....Most would have found a way to say no. Aeony here with you, a dark angel.....Now that is an interesting pairing. Maya, a Dredger child and of all things....Nethra, a Chinnura. I am Estrin-Okanan, though you may all call me Estrin.”

Muzzie was bowing to her, though she could feel the question in his mind. He'd have to ask her, that too was part of his destiny. Mussaneth Osranetherer had to know the limitations of the empire he was hoping to create.

“Thank you for not throwing us out.” Said Muzzie. “I was sent here, by just about everyone who has given me advice, asked for or unsolicited. All of them told me to come to Mount Erran. And the sleeper in the mountain was mentioned by the ghost of Wēland Raag.”

“Ahhh.....I sense his essence has passed on.” Said Estrin. “Wēland wasn’t good, but neither was he evil. The rifts will be poorer for his passing. I want to hear everything he told you, Muzzie.”

They had no supplies with them and the cavern had never been intended for receiving visitors. Estrin would need some time, before her full powers returned. A few simple things were easy to change. After all, she was the most powerful of the nine divines. First decent lighting and white marble to replace the black stone walls and floors. Tables full of food and wine next, with plenty of water for those who weren’t fond of wine. A few minions too, there to make sure her guests had everything they needed. All of it done in, almost, an instant.

“Eat...Drink.....We can talk as we eat.” Said Estrin.

“Can I just ask.....You mentioned I’d be the last emperor.” Said Muzzie.

“If you can win the siege of Quron and survive internal intrigue.” Said Estrin. “There will always be intrigue, Muzzie. Survive and become emperor.....Yes, then you will be the last emperor of all the rifts.”

“Why will Muzzie be the last ?” Asked Maya

The Dredger girl had genuine affection for Muzzie, she thought of him as a she might think of her father. Estrin ran her hand through Maya’s hair and like Muzzie; she noticed it felt like fondling a scrubbing brush.

“Don’t worry.....If Muzzie becomes emperor; he will have a very long life.” Said Estrin. “There will be a Switch relatively soon, the multiverse will reset. The first rift usually survives, though nothing is certain. What will replace the rifts ? That is for none of us to know. It’s highly unlikely they’ll accept an emperor from the City of the Lost God to lead them. Muzzie will be the last emperor of all the rifts.”

“How soon is relatively soon ?” Asked Aeony.

“Soon is all I will say.....Only a tiny number will know the exact moment.” Said Estrin.

“But the first rift will survive ?” Asked Muzzie.

“It always has in the past.” Said Nethra.

“Yes, your Chinnura understands such things.” Said Estrin. “There are no guarantees, but I would suggest....That you make the City of the Lost God the base for your imperial army. Of course.....You need to make that city yours first.”

“What.....What is a switch ?” Asked Maya.

“So many different hybrids....I find it hard to judge.” Said Estrin. “Most adults find it hard to deal with the idea of the Switch. Is Maya old enough to hear it, Muzzie ?”

“I promised to bring her in here with me.” Said Muzzie. “Knowing will change her life, but she has the right to know.”

Estrin had seen advanced civilisations crumble, once they realised the Switch was approaching. Often it seemed that individuals could accept, that which terrified their governments.

“Remember that relatively soon, doesn’t mean tomorrow.” Said Estrin. “You will grow up and have children and they will have their children.....That cycle will go on for a long time yet. There is no advance without adaptation and change though and just about nothing exists forever.”

“Does anything exist forever ?” Asked Muzzie.

“A few things.....But like all knowledge of a previous Switch, such things are considered to be forbidden knowledge. Each Switch must start with a clean slate... At least that is the theory. Some places and a relatively very tiny number of living entities, do survive the end of everything.”

“I’ve heard about the eternal.” Said Nethra. “My people say they will exist forever.”

Estrin turned her arm back to being a dragon claw, which she drummed against the floor. A crude way to get silence and attention, but it invariably worked.

“Some would say knowledge of the Switch is forbidden knowledge.” Said Estrin. “But I will tell Maya, knowing that few Dredgers, if any, will believe her.”

“I won’t tell anyone.” Said Maya.

“Yes you will child, everyone always does.” Said Estrin. “The end of everything is too big a secret for anyone to keep. Kings and emperors always tell someone, so I don’t expect any better from a young apothecary. The multiverse periodically decides to wipe everything and start again. Not quite everything is destroyed, but almost all worlds and their people, are wiped away in almost a single moment in time. There are signs in advance, for those with the skill to see them. Those signs too, are forbidden knowledge. For a short time, the multiverse is almost empty and devoid of life. Then the bubble universes form and the stellar nurseries appear. Soon there are worlds around those stars.....Eventually there will be life on those worlds, intelligent life. The great cycle of the Switch begins again and may go on for a longer number of years, than any number you could ever find a book large enough to write it in. Now Maya, you know what happens at a Switch. Not a good name for it, but has the advantage of being simple and accurate.”

“What are stellar nurseries ?” Asked Maya.

“A place where stars are born, Child.” Said Estrin. “No more answers from me. Go and find a good librarian if you want to know more. They might give you access to the forbidden section of their library.....If you ask nicely.”

“I have so many questions.” Said Muzzie. “Please don’t go.”

“Sorcerers created my kind, but.....I too have so many questions.” Added Aeony.

Estrin had been looking into their minds and the memories of the thousands of Dredgers, who still toiled away outside. She changed her appearance to that of the average young female hybrid. Basically a Dredger hybrid with a touch of Shelzak and enough Ubari to give her extra height. Estrin kept her long flowing red hair, which she’d favoured for countless millennia.

“This is how I shall look now.” She said. “You needn’t worry about me leaving; I intend to be with you during the siege of the City of the Lost God. I have orders for Muzzie.....Orders from the Divine. I might even answer a few questions, though I’m not making any promises.”

“You can stay with Galla and me.” Said Maya. “We have a huge palace in Aarabash.”

“Aarabash is nice.....But a little provincial.” Said Muzzie. “There are some very nice rooms available at the Void Gate.”

“I am one of the nine, Muzzie.” Said Estrin. “I have no need of Void Gates to travel where I please. The palace of Galla and Maya sounds fine to me. Come to Aarabash this evening and bring all of your advisers. General Dhūlen too, it’s been a long time since I’ve talked to a Terak. You’re about to be very busy, Muzzie.....Very busy indeed.”

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LLud Narren wasn’t being melodramatic, when he’d called those who stalked him, the creatures of the darkness. They’d been around a very long time, but had always kept to the dark places, such as the catacombs beneath the City of the Lost God. Yam Kermul, the Lord of Death, had created millions of them as his foot soldiers. At one time they’d brought pain and death to every town and

village on the rifts. Once Yam Kermul had been destroyed, his foot soldiers largely vanished. Now they were claiming the dark again, the hours of darkness right across the rifts. LLud suspected they were the ones killing those who used the Pilgrim Trail. In a way, Muzzie had created the problem, though he'd be unaware of it. By winning battles and forming alliances, he was upsetting the balance. Things were changing and not all changes were good.

"I need somewhere for a few nights, Jenda." Said LLud. "They almost had me near the lake. Someone, a friend has promised to help. I just need somewhere safe. Talk to Merrick.....I have gold." "Merrick is on the road, looking after business." Said Jenda.

The Defender Tavern in Annill, not somewhere LLud Narren considered his natural habitat. The creatures of darkness were forming groups now, as if catching him was the most important thing in their miserable existence. And when they caught him? LLud had an awful feeling they intended to eat him, devour him in some way he didn't want to think about. He'd popped into the Defender occasionally for a drink and he did know Jenda, though not that well. Larger than most of the local militia, no one messed with Jenda. The large hybrid female was looking him over, but luckily, he'd used the right word.

"You said you have gold." Said Jenda.

"Yes, and I'm not too fussy." Said LLud. "A room in the cellar will do, just for a few nights. I'll need some food and a little beer, or wine."

"How many nights?" Asked Jenda.

She'd taken him into the cellars of the Defender, into the rooms used by Merrick's assorted gang of cut throats and thieves. LLud wasn't too worried; he could still be incorporeal at will. The cellars meant he could talk freely to the huge and muscular hybrid. If only Merrick had been there, he'd have understood. Clever was Merrick, sometimes too damned clever. Merrick had given him the tip about where to find the sword of Mozzrik the Usurper. For a fee of course.

"Seven.....No more than seven nights." Said LLud.

"Fifty gold for seven nights." Said Jenda. "Imperial gold, not Quron gold pieces....None of that shit. Imperial gold and we'll look after you as well as we'd look after our own mothers."

Gold pieces never corroded, or even discoloured. Everyone still preferred the gold of the oldest imperial empire. Gold pieces from that era were famous for their purity. Luckily, LLud had a few of those in the purse secured to his belt. As for looking after him as well as their mothers. Knowing Merrick's gang, that didn't sound as reassuring as Jenda had probably intended.

"Do you have guards down here all night?" Asked LLud.

"Of course we do.....And don't you get any ideas about Merrick's strong box. I'll gladly cut your throat as quickly as I'd open the veins of a local thief."

"You'll get no problems from me." Said LLud.

He handed over the fifty gold, which was a hefty price for a decent room. The room wasn't decent, it was barely habitable. Grubby blankets on the bed, with no sheets. The pillow smelled of the last two or three people to use the room. Too generally awful to have been used by a lady of the night, it was probably used by people like him. Those on the run from the local militia, or worse.

"I'll bring you breakfast in the morning." Said Jenda. "I can find you company too, if you want? Male, female, maybe a little of both. If you've got the gold, I can find you whatever you want."

"No thanks.....I just need a full nights' sleep."

Recently, LLud had rarely slept for more than two hours at a time. Less time than a Jangar nap, as the saying goes. He'd been too scared of waking up surrounded by the creatures of the dark. He'd had one or two nightmares about them chewing at his throat. Yes, it seemed that even those not

totally mortal, could still have bad dreams. LLud slept solidly until a noise somewhere woke him up. He peed into a grubby bucket, which had been provided by the Defender. He wasn't moaning, at least they had given him a bucket. A lot of pee, it meant he'd slept soundly for most of the night. There was one nagging thought.

"Something loud woke me." LLud muttered. "I just have no idea what it was."

The Defender had a few staff right through the night, mainly to stop any guest leaving without paying their bill. Or worse, helping themselves to some of Merrick's valuables. As breakfast might be a while in arriving, LLud went upstairs to the main bar, hoping to find food and a hot drink.

"Hello.....Any chance of something to eat?" LLud yelled.

The main doors were locked and bolted, which meant it was early morning. A little light was coming through a window shutter, but not much. LLud nearly fell over the body of what had probably been one of Merrick's night guards. Something had been chewing at him, mainly his face.

"Crap.....Hello.....Is anyone alive in this place?" LLud shouted.

A noise from behind the long bar.....Did he really want to investigate? He had a sword, which was still in his crappy, smelly room. LLud reminded himself that should he meet an angry Chaos Enforcer, he could vanish quicker than the feeling of goodwill, after the Feast of Nigon was over. He decided on a simple lie, which had worked on many occasions.

"You....I see you." He shouted. "Behind the bar.....I can see you."

LLud knew he must have annoyed someone truly powerful, when he didn't recognise the beast they'd sent to kill him. Two more of Merrick's guards were dead behind the bar and the creature had been eating parts of them. It was probably the beast stopping to eat, that had saved LLud's life. Basically the same shape as a standard hybrid, but its skin looked like dried mud. Two eyes where eyes usually were, plus a third in the centre of its forehead. LLud had lived a long life, followed by a long and surprisingly active death. He'd have sworn to never having seen that type of creature before. Someone.....Really wanted him dead.

"What the fuck are you?" Yelled LLud.

It had a war hammer, a heavy hammer that LLud doubted he'd be able to pick up. The beast used the hammer to smash apart a section of the long bar. It answered LLud's question with a long, loud growl. It was a chaos something or other, the slight purple aura gave that away. A chaos what though?.....Crap, the only chaos being LLud had never seen, was a Chaos Lord. Who the hell could afford to hire one of those?

"This is probably a huge mistake." Said LLud. "If we can just calm down and talk it over."

"You are marked for death." Shouted the creature. "Accept your fate.....It can't be avoided."

LLud could have easily stepped sideways out of the bar and onto the streets of Annill. He froze though and he wanted a name for whoever had marked him for assassination.

"Who has marked me for death?" Asked LLud.

The creature, who might have been a Chaos Lord, ignored the question. It roared at him and swung the huge war hammer. The hammer had a glow to it and was probably capable of sending him on his final journey, to the wastes of eternity. LLud made a grasp for his sword, before remembering it was still in his room. As the hammer came down towards his head, he became resigned to the idea of final, complete and forever death. It was better than hiding from his fate, while living in filthy rooms in damp cellars.

"I used to be chief sorcerer to a God." He yelled. "My opinion was respected by Tomma-Goran."

"He is dead.....Boiled away into the void."

The war hammer never connected with his skull. LLud felt the world shift a little and he was coughing and spluttering on a marble floor. A palace by the look of it, there were lots of people dressed in expensive looking clothing. The Defender was reasonably clean in the main areas, though his room in the cellar had been fairly disgusting. Wherever he'd been brought, was bright, clean and the air didn't smell of stale beer and unwashed bodies.

"I could leave this creature with you, Muzzie. If it got free though.....It is a thing of evil and killing it seems the safest option."

The entity that might be a Chaos Lord wasn't far away. It seemed to be frozen in some way, probably by the young woman who was prodding at it with her fingers. She had an aura he recognised, an aura very similar to his old master, the late Tomma-Goran. LLud had once known all of the nine and despite it being a very long time, he knew who was suggesting the creature of evil was killed.

"Estrin-Okanan.....I'm assuming I owe you my life, such as it is." Said LLud.

"Muzzie deserves your thanks, I merely agreed to his request." Said Estrin. "He's asked me to restore your fully corporeal, mortal essence. I can hardly do that if this Chaos Lord had crushed your skull on a tavern floor."

"Yes, you're right.....Safest to destroy the damn thing." Said Muzzie.

LLud wasn't sure who viewed him as a friend, or thought of him as a foe. Caspian and Vella were there, the people who'd killed him in the past, twice. He cringed automatically, until it was obvious Muzzie was talking about the Chaos Lord.

"Its war hammer might be useful." Said Aeony.

Estrin had always spoken out against the immolation of the faithful. Maybe her views had changed, though the chaos creature could never have been described as one of the faithful. The most powerful of the nine, merely touched the creature with an outstretched finger. It burned for a minute or so, in a cloud of white hot fire. It didn't cry out, not a single plea for mercy, or scream from the agony of the flames. The Chaos Lord was quickly reduced to being a pile of hot ashes, on the palace floor. There on the floor next to the ashes, was the huge war hammer.

"The war hammer is yours, Aeony." Said Estrin. "I'd give it a while to cool down."

"Not a problem, I was created out of smoke and flames." Said Aeony. "A little hot metal doesn't worry me."

LLud was now the centre of attention, as he got to his feet. It had been several days since he'd had a proper wash and the clothes he was wearing hadn't been cleaned for weeks. To find himself in a palace, among such well-dressed people.....He was feeling a little ashamed of his appearance.

"Welcome to my home, LLud Narren." Said Galla. "Welcome to my palace in Aarabash .....My servants will give you hot water to bathe in and clean clothes. Then I believe Muzzie wishes to discuss a few things with you."

"I require some of his time." Said Estrin. "But yes.....LLud needs a long bath and a change of clothing, before he can feel comfortable."

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Galla had wondered if she'd still be head of her own household, when a living God had invited herself to stay. It seemed Estrin was going to be with them during the siege of the City of the Lost God. Muzzie had even muttered about Estrin being with them even longer than that. Estrin had turned out to be the perfect guest. She seemed to float from room to room, mainly playing with Maya. The living God had trained her apprentice apothecary in the use of magic and given her enough chaos energy to cast some very advanced spells. It was worrying in a way; Maya was likely to be changed, forever. It was impossible to spend that much time with one of the nine, without being

changed by their closeness. Still.....Maya's original fate had probably been to spend her entire life in Seren's Edge. Have children with a nice Dredger boy and have lots of dreams that never came to anything. Her life was going to be very different now.....

"Wow, LLud.....Now I can believe you were once the best sorcerer on the rifts." Said Vella.

"And in several other worlds." Said LLud.

Only ordinary robes, but with his hair brushed and a smell of perfumed oils, rather than sweat.....LLud Narren did look quite impressive. He even had a little strut in the way he walked. Faal must have been suffering a little magician-sorcerer envy, but he had the good grace to hide it well. Galla had objected to them all sitting on cushions on the floor.

"Wait until you're old enough to appreciate the pain from old bones and joints."

Large comfortable chairs had been provided, with a several tables for food and drink. An early supper really, while everyone asked LLud Narren a hundred and one questions. Galla had never held a grudge against the sorcerer, but like Muzzie, she didn't totally trust him.

"How can you be alive and still walk through walls?" Asked Maya.

"To be honest, I have no idea." Said LLud. "So many things were done to me, with so much chaos magic. Then there was a magical royal sceptre in the mix. Like some potion ingredients, the magic didn't seem to mix well. I am now not fully alive, but also a long way from being a wraith."

"It sounds dreadful.....but at least you're alive." Said Runa.

"Don't fall for it; he enjoys being an invisible burglar." Said Caspian.

"Well, yes.....I never claimed it was all bad." Said LLud.

In a way LLud was responsible for it all, everything. He'd set the trap on the more valuable of his magical artefacts, which had sent them all to Ingar Sans, LLud had also set up a link very badly, which had cursed Muzzie with a ludicrous destiny. A bar owner as emperor.....How wonderfully preposterous. Yes, it was all his fault and being honest; Galla wasn't sure if he was a fool, or someone far wiser than he seemed.

"Be honest now LLud." Said Galla. "Did you make a mistake in sending us all to Ingar Sans, all that time ago? Or did someone make it worth your while?"

"Yes, I'd like to finally know the truth about that." Said Aeony. "Has it all been a huge and complex conspiracy?"

"I never believed that accident crap." Said Nethra. "I know your history LLud. You're too clever to get something that wrong. Tell us.....Who was pulling your strings?"

"Who is still pulling them?" Added General Dhūlen.

"All very interesting, but Muzzie has asked me to help LLud." Said Estrin. "It's getting quite late and all of you will be busy tomorrow. Talk to LLud another time, but now.....I need to bring him back from the brink of something worse than death."

"Yes, of course.....Give Estrin peace and quiet, everyone." Said Muzzie.

Everyone took her ring for granted now, Mosca's ring, his self-proclaimed misery. Looking at Estrin showed her nothing, Galla hadn't expected it would. Muzzie though, he was as confused as her. Estrin had deliberately killed the conversation. Out of everyone in the room, only LLud Narren was feeling guilty about something big, something huge.

"This won't hurt and should only take a few seconds." Said Estrin. "There will be a price though; I will expect you to join Muzzie's army, until he's stood among the ashes of Quron."

"I'll gladly give my oath of loyalty to Muzzie." Said LLud. "No disrespect meant, but can I confirm....I will be getting to live again? Full life, as though I was never killed."

"I will bring your essence back from the wastes, LLud." Said Estrin. "With your natural longevity, you could enjoy a very long second life."

"I'm sorry we killed you.....Twice." Said Vella. "We didn't really know you then."

There was a little general laughter, before Estrin put her hand on LLud's face. She stroked his right cheek and a warm glow followed her hand. Something happened, a living God needed to hold LLud up for a minute, or so. Eventually he was smiling and Galla could see his aura had changed.

"I can see it.....You're alive again, LLud." Said Galla. "Fully alive.....Glowing with energy like a new born baby."

Estrin talked about orders LLud now needed to obey, though there wasn't much in the way of details. LLud Narren gave his oath of loyalty to Muzzie and the New Empire. The really important news was an order from Estrin to Muzzie. There could be no argument about it, no discussion among the eight imperial advisers. Estrin would help them, but the siege of the City of the Lost God was to be the next step for the ever growing army.

"I never thought it would happen.....The army attacking where still feels like our home." Said Vella. "Everything can be rebuilt.....And the parts build by Tomma, are indestructible." Said Estrin.

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With Estrin gone, the chambers and caverns inside Mount Erran were empty. There was no need to shift millions of tons of rubble, or build a ramp up to the doorway into the mountain. Eventually, something would move in and call the caverns home, something always did. Bizzi was collecting his people together and the Dredgers had other work to do. The stockade needed to be expanded and made large enough to house thousands of new recruits.

"Where is Belso ?" Asked General Dhūlen. "He should be here, he knew I was coming."

Just as he asked the question, Dhūlen saw Belso coming along the Pilgrim Trail. Not walking, or even jogging, Belso was running. He was more than a little out of breath when he arrived.

"Sorry I'm late." Said Belso, between breaths. "Runa wanted advice on dealing with the Tandalla militia. She'll be there today, recruiting as many experienced fighters as she can."

"I'm personally going to Annill, to recruit warriors." Said Dhūlen. "That's why we need to deal with this matter now. Muzzie isn't keen on leaving a significant threat on the Pilgrim Trail. Our supply lines could be affected and our army will soon need a lot more food and supplies."

Muzzie wanted as many experienced fighters as he had the gold to hire. Thanks to Zin Thriaxer, the reinstated King of Kahan, the imperial coffers were fairly full. Dhūlen was personally going to Annill, while the Hive Mother had promised several thousand pure blood demons. Not that Ginnda's people were experienced in battle, but they were tough and pure blood demons were famously hard to kill. Dhūlen had already thought of ways that tough and hard to kill, would be useful in the fight for the City of the Lost God. He took Belso to where the night patrol had found something large, strange and not quite dead.

"It was still just about breathing, when the patrol found it." Said Dhūlen.

"Did they finish it off ?" Asked Belso.

"From what I was told, it died from its wounds." Said Dhūlen.

Belso did exactly what he'd done when the patrol had shown him the body. Belso walked around the dead beast, with a confused look on his face. Dhūlen had seen a lot of chaos creatures over the years, far too many. It had the look of a low level chaos enforcer, but it was different in many ways.

Belso had begun tutting as he prodded the body with his booted foot.

"I know you hired me as your expert on creatures found on the trail." Said Belso. "Truthfully.....I have no idea what this is. It looks a lot like the creatures of darkness that LLud Narren has mentioned to a



few of the patrols. I'd say that anything killing them off, is on our side. Even if they don't know they're on our side."

Dhūlen thought it was Estrin hunting the chaos beasts, though only Muzzie was allowed access to her at the moment. The divine one was working everyone hard, but seemed to be working hard herself. A siege against the City of the Lost God took a lot of organising. It had all to be done quickly, or rumours would begin to spread across the rifts. A forewarned enemy is ten times harder to beat than a surprised one.

"There are other dead beasts." Said Dhūlen. "In a cave a short walk from here. About six of them, according to the patrol. Something appears to have driven them in there. It then ripped them to pieces. Personally, I'd like a lot of good fighters with me, to face just one of them."

"Do you think the Goddess is hunting them?" Asked Belso.

"Maybe.....I'll see if Muzzie can find out." Said Dhūlen. "Come on, we need to see the slaughter in the cave."

It wasn't far to the cave and the night patrol had hung a few lamps in the deepest part of the cave. It was probably instinct, the way so many of the chaos beasts had tried to hide in the deepest and darkest area of the cave. Not that it had done them any good.

"So many body parts.....Looks to me like more than six of them died here." Said Belso.

Some looked pulled apart, while other bodies showed crush injuries. Some hacking by claws, or a weapon of some kind. No magic used though, no sign of any spells being used in the cave. One beast's body looked to have stamped on, until it had burst apart. There was a lot of evil smelling fluid on the floor of the cave. Soon the stink of putrefaction would make things far worse.

"Get it burned, Belso." Said Dhūlen. "Cleanse this cave, or the remains may spread disease."

"If something is killing these things, can we reduce the number of patrols?" Asked Belso.

"I'd like to, that's what I was hoping." Said Dhūlen. "For now, we have to assume that whatever is killing creatures of the darkness, might enjoy killing our warriors. For a while, we'll increase the size of each patrol. I'll try to see the Goddess and confirm if this is her work."

"I'm told the divine looks like a young woman." Said Belso. "To think.....A young woman could be so brutal. She's ripped heads and arms from bodies."

General Dhūlen had a small metal flask in a pocket. He took a sip of the fierce alcoholic drink it contained and handed the flask to Belso.

"The best Ushong and it's genuine, none of the fake stuff." Said Dhūlen.

"That is.....Wonderful." Said Belso. "Been a while, who do you buy it from?"

Another sip from the flask for each of them and Dhūlen was feeling mellow, without feeling intoxicated. He ignored the question about his supplier of genuine Ushong. That was a secret he was determined to take to the grave with him.

"So, Belso.....You'd question the actions of a God?" Said Dhūlen. "You're a braver man than I'll ever be. Come on; let's get out of this cave. The place smells too much of death."

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Muzzie was genuinely beginning to like the Hive Mother, he was even getting used to her personal odour. He'd gone to see her, with just a small number of his guards. Going anywhere without them meant a lot of yelling and threats. In the end, it had become easier to simply take a few everywhere with him. He hated to admit it, but Aeony was far better at shooing them away than he was. Ginnda was in an underground food store, repurposed as her temporary lair. Her odour was stronger in the enclosed, underground space. Muzzie was getting used to it though and found it, maybe not pleasant, but not that bad either.

“Ginnda.....I’m pleased to see you’ve made the room your own.” Said Muzzie.

“The Void Gate is wonderful.” Said Ginnda. “Some of my servants have been back to Segin-Unadaris several times. Each time they pick up a few of my personal things. I am now.....Very comfortable here.”

Ginnda called it her lair and it looked like the lair of a huge spider. The walls had been covered in cloth of some kind, dyed to be the same colour as Ginnda. As with her lair in the demon city, once the lamps were turned down, the Hive Mother would be virtually invisible. There were couches for visitors, but Ginnda either stood, or clung to the wall. Muzzie wondered if Ginnda spun silk thread to trap her enemies, but thought the question might be inappropriate.

“I want you to be happy, Ginnda.” Said Muzzie. “I’m hoping you will come to Leng with me. Faal can get me there, but having someone with me who they know well.....It could make all the difference.”

“I’m making no promises, though I will stay with you until Quron is a burning ruin.” Said Ginnda. “I have a few grudges against Quron, a few old grievances. Ask me about Leng again, once we’re looking back as the towers of Quron collapse into the flames.”

“Very well, I won’t push you any further.” Said Muzzie. “Nethra mentioned you wanting to discuss something with me. It sounds strange, but she talked about a large egg.”

“Did Nethra mention her part in the safekeeping of the egg ?” Asked Ginnda.

“No.....She left that part out.”

“The Ancient Ones gave Nethra an egg, which she gave to me.” Said Ginnda. “No one argues with the Ancient Ones. Look after the egg; keep it safe, someone you trust will come for it....One day.....Maybe. I’ve decided that being kept in the emperor’s palace, is safer than my lair in Segin-Unadaris. Also, I can’t think of anyone better to keep it from harm, than the new emperor of the rifts.”

It sounded like a weird scam, but Muzzie trusted the Hive Mother. If she said the Ancient Ones had given her a huge egg to look after, then she really did have custody of a huge egg.

“What do you think will hatch out of this egg ?” Asked Muzzie.

“You need to ask ? An Ancient One of course.....What else could it be ?”

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