

The Last Emperor

Chapter 3 – Seren’s Edge

“What was beyond the shimmering purple edge to the rift ? Aeony knew that if you asked ten of the cleverest scholars in the great library, you’d get at least twenty different opinions.”



Their pairing had just happened, once the fighting had begun. Galla could spot where the rogue hybrids were hiding, or skulking, or simply waiting for a chance to kill them. Galla wasn’t good at hand to hand fighting and was especially bad at ranged attacks. Runa had joined her though and she had a bow and a quiver full of arrows. Then there was Galla’s bird.

“Here Galla, here.....Stupid Rogue is hiding.” Screeched her bird.

For a tiny bird, he could make a massive amount of noise. His voice was shrill and had a lot of general squawking mixed in with the words. Of course the rogue tried to swat her pet out of the air, but so far, none of them had come close to hitting him. Her bird was tiny, scrawny and incredibly fast. So far, Galla and Runa had dealt with four hybrids.....With the help of her bird.

“Quick Galla.....Quick.” Shrieked her pet.

So far none of them had simply ignored her bird, though Galla knew how irritating he could be. Like the others, up he leapt, trying to crush her bird with a crude stone axe. Runa fired an arrow and the rogue screamed, as the barbed arrow tore through his throat. The rogue might have been a female; rogues were as tricky to sex as Nesh bugs. Galla had decided to consider them all as males, to make like easier.

“Got him.....Well done, Runa.” Said Galla.

“Yes.....That’s the sixth.” Said Runa.

“It’s the fifth.” Said Galla.

“You’re sure ?”

“Yes.”

Her bird chose that moment to hurtle over their heads, looking for more rogues waiting in ambush.

“Silly Runa.” He cackled.

“Sorry.....I know he can be annoying.” Said Galla.

“That’s fine; I’m getting to like him.” Said Runa. “Does he have a name ?”

“I’ve called him pest or nuisance for close to three centuries. I might stick with those.”

The rogues had come out to face them in large numbers, the moment Muzzie had led them down the Main Street of Seren’s Edge. Main Street was too good a word; it implied something well maintained and likely to last longer than the first heavy rains. The road was rough, almost nothing but loose rubble and cracked cobble stones. It was in even worse condition, after Muzzie had answered flying arrows, with two fireballs. Several of the rogues had become piles of cinders and Aeony had been hit by several arrows. After that.....Things had become a little confusing. Galla had wandered around for a while, before finding Runa. There was the sound of a heavy detonation from the direction of the high tower.

“Muzzie and another of his fireballs.” Said Runa. “He kept saying we shouldn’t wipe out all the rogues.”

“Wipe them out.....There are dozens of them and seven of us.” Said Galla. “That’s assuming Aeony is still alive.”

“She’ll be fine.” Said Runa. “Dark angels are as tough as steel nails. It’s this Pio-Xanash I’m worried about. I don’t give much for his chances with Muzzie using fireballs.”

An arrow went past Galla’s left ear, close enough for her to hear it hit a stone wall. That kind of thing had been happening far too often for her liking.

“Bird !” Yelled Galla. “Find that damned rogue that just shot at me.”

Most of the buildings were just walls, usually with little in the way of a roof. From a distance Seren’s Edge looked like a thriving community. Close up, it was a town of ruins and decay.

“Here Galla.....It’s here....Quick.” Shrieked her bird.

The rogues didn’t get any brighter, or learn from watching their friends die. Silvery skin and six arms, the rogues appeared to have no Dredger in their ancestry, but a huge amount of Meru demon.

Tough creatures, born fighters. Sadly Galla didn’t sense they were that bright. Another one leapt at her bird, to have his head cracked apart by one of Runa’s arrows.

“I should recover the last two arrows.....Watch my back.” Said Runa.

Her arrows, rogue arrows, Galla had noticed Runa collecting all the arrows she could find. Galla wasn’t totally helpless against arrows, she knew a few useful cantrips. Just small sparkle spells and blinding flashes, but enough to take a rogue out the fight for a while.

“Bird....Look after Runa.” Galla shouted.

Galla was curious, her empath side was sensing Muzzie was up to something. Even more than plain curiosity, she was immensely pleased that he was alive. Others were with him, including Caspian and Vella.

“Hurry up; Runa.....Muzzie is planning something.....Something huge.”

Runa arrived at a run, while shoving used arrows into her quiver.

“What is he going to do ?” Asked Runa.

“I have no idea, but it scares him.....Just a little. He’s near the bar....Caspian and Vella are with him.”

They crossed the road, which had no right to be called a road. The bar was in a fairly solid looking building, quite close to the high tower. It was the only structure with a cart at the rear of it and a stack of barrels. Not definite proof it was the town bar, but Galla was willing to accept that the building Muzzie was considering blowing up, was the Seren’s Edge bar. Galla felt Muzzie charging up a spell. Not a fireball this time, but something far worse.....A spell that called on chaos itself.

“Down.....Find something solid to get behind.” Shouted Galla. “Bird.....Come to me, now !”

Finding cover was easier said than done, though Galla did find two large stones that might once have been part of a fine looking building. Stones just about large enough to shield her from the explosion Muzzie was about to set off. Her bird dug for a space in her clothing, as Runa flattened herself behind another large stone.

“Doesn’t he care about killing the old man ?” Shouted Runa.

“Apparently not.”

The explosion made the huge stones vibrate and then there was a wall of hot air hurtling over Galla. No flames, though the hot air hurt and was going to leave some burns on exposed areas of her skin. Her bird was safe under her clothing, but she still felt fear in him. The smell of singed hair, made Galla realise her hair was on fire.

“Damn.....Muzzie has brought hell to the rifts.” She shouted.

Just pulling her hood over her head, was enough to stop her hair from becoming nothing but ash. There’d be painful burns though, once the initial shock was over. When Galla had the courage to

look over the top of the stones, she found a ruined scorched landscape. Runa was braver than her, actually walking towards the hole in the ground, that had once been the town bar.

“Why ?.....Why so much destruction ?” Yelled Runa.

The bar was gone, but the famous high tower was still there. It had been built well by humans, though that had been thousands of years ago. Ground tremors, winds and sand storms, had all taken their toll on the huge tower of stone. Muzzie’s explosion was too much for the already weakened tower. It began slowly, with the tower beginning to wobble from side to side. When it fell though, it happened very fast. Galla hid herself behind the stones again, hoping that Runa had the sense to get under cover. When the tower fell, it felt as though the Gods themselves, were hammering the ground with mighty hammers.

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Being angry most of the time, seemed the natural state of mind for a dark angel. They’d targeted her; the damned rogues had grouped their archers and tried to kill her. It was the sheer audacity of it, the lack of respect for what she was, who she was. Aeony, the queen of the dark angels in the City of the Lost God. A title won by hard work, combat and being feared.

“They’re all going to die.” She muttered. “Every last one of them.”

Aeony had found a gap between two derelict buildings, quite close to the famous high tower. There were several arrows in her back and more were deep into her wings. She thought about a dozen arrows had hit her, though she wasn’t certain. Her wings were the key to her survival. She’d only removed two arrows from her wings, when the hybrid archers found where she was hiding.

“....Oh, their deaths will be slow and painful...” She mumbled.

As arrows hit all around her, Aeony leapt up and hoped her wings would still lift her into the air. It was taking a lot of effort, but she was up and away, heading towards the high tower. If her wings failed, she’d use the age worn stairs. Another arrow went deep into her side.

“You will all die for this.” She shrieked.

Round the tower, hiding from archers, she rose up above the ground and the archers. Halfway up the tower, Aeony rested on the spiral stone stairs and removed all the arrows from her wings and body. Fourteen in total, easily enough to have killed her. Luck, pure luck, seemed to have been on her side. Of course, the Silver Lady might have been watching and bending luck, just a little. No arrows had penetrated anything vital and her wings would heal very quickly. There had been blood loss, though there was an easy cure for that. Ripping the liver out of a few rogues and eating them raw, would fix just about everything. As she flapped her wings and took to the air, the tower moved, ever so slightly. Just a wobble, but the high tower was prophesied to stand there until the end of time.

“End of time my backside.” Muttered Aeony.

Well out of the range of arrows, it was almost a pleasure to fly up to the top of the tower. A flat area with a solid stone floor and even a little shelter from the ever present wind. Seemingly the tower would have made a perfect lookout for the rogues. The stairs were long though and the tower very high. The average rogue hybrid would have taken the best part of the full light hours, to get to the top. Then they faced the journey back down. There was also the fact that most hybrids were happiest on the ground, or digging beneath it.

“This high up.....Not their idea of fun.” She mumbled.

There was a good view, right to the shimmering edge of the rift, close to fifty thousand imperial miles away. At that distance objects became too small for even her eyes to see. What was beyond the shimmering purple edge to the rift ? Aeony knew that if you asked ten of the cleverest scholars

in the great library, you'd get at least twenty different opinions. Like the full light which returned every day and the eccentricities of the Gods.....It was, as it was and trying to understand some things, just produced a two day headache. There was a bang from below her and a flash of fire. "Careful Muzzie.....I felt another wobble." She mumbled.

The fireball appeared to have been aimed at the bar, though she had no idea why. Seren's Edge had once been a large town; some of the buildings were some distance from the high tower. There had to be some of the population still in a few of those buildings. Rogues were parasitic creatures, pillaging for what they needed. Somewhere out there, in the several square miles of the town. There had to be entire families of Dredger hybrids, hiding, waiting for things to get better.

"Ahhh.....There you are Pio-Xanash.....Or you might be there." Aeony muttered.

The house with a solid looking roof, was quite a way out of town. Not the ideal place for a general store, but there was a cart outside and the cart wasn't empty. Too far for her to see details, but a full cart tended to mean supplies, in most places. Sacks on the cart and one or two barrels. It meant the building with wooden implements hanging up outside, wasn't the general store. That made sense; the building had looked quite dilapidated. Aeony had nowhere else to be and she couldn't sit at the top of the tower forever.

"Alright Pio-Xanash.....Let's see if you're at home." She mumbled.

Friendly and talkative would be nice, though Aeony would settle for finding him grumpy and alive. A few practise beats of her wings and they still hurt. She could get there though; the house wasn't that far away. Most of the journey would be a long downward glide, which wasn't going to put a strain on her wings.

"Oh, you fool Aeony.....The unguent."

Aeony blamed the lack of focus on pain, though everything was hurting a lot less. She had a small bag attached to the webbing that was just about her only clothing. In the bag was one of Galla's famous unguents. Expensive, Aeony had paid half an imperial gold piece, for the small jar of grey ointment. She used about a third of the jar on her various wounds. Some healed so quickly that she could see wounds healing, closing, becoming less livid.

"That....Feels so fucking good." She yelled.

No gliding now, Aeony stepped off the top of the high tower and dropped like a stone. Wings wrapped tight around her, she fell until she was about a third of the way from the bottom. Wings open and a few flaps.....She was soaring above the ruined town of Seren's Edge. The unguent had improved her mood to the point where she shrieked at the town, as if challenging the rogues to attack her. Over the ruined roofs and the few that were still solid, all the time shrieking her defiance at any who might get in her way. Aeony landed on the roof of the suspected general store. Wings again wrapped around her, she perched on the corner of the roof, surveying the ground below. No sign of archers or rogues with swords and axes. They'd arrive, but none of them had wings, so she had a while.

"Crap.....What did you do Muzzie ?" She yelled.

It had to be Muzzie; he was the only one of them with that kind of magical power. Not him really, it all came from the Hand of Arcadis he carried. No one really cares where a power comes from though. Muzzie could wield the power, so he received the respect and admiration. Aeony felt the swirling chaos, as the explosion ripped apart the Seren's Edge bar. To use such power.....Muzzie was either very confident, or stupid. Aeony was built for a life in high places, she knew how to use her claws, muscles and....Her long tail.

"If only I'd used an excuse to avoid that anniversary feast." She muttered.

Probably a sentiment that would run through her head, time and time again. Aeony crouched down and dug all her sharp claws into the roof. Her wings went over her face and then tight over her body. Lastly, she drove the sharp point on her tail into the roof, before using it to brace herself. All of it done in the few seconds, before the blast reached her. Hot air wasn't her enemy; dark angels were born of fire and chaos. The heat and dark magic actually finished healing her. By the time she was looking at the ruins of the bar, she felt better than she had in.....Many years. Everything around her, looked to be covered in dust and rubble.

"Muzzie must have had a good reason." She mumbled.

The Aeony, who'd left the City of the Lost God, would have looked for a door into the general store. She'd absorbed so much of the chaos, that Aeony felt different about the world and her place in it. She was a dark angel after all, one of the most feared creatures on the rifts.

"No....The most feared.....Second to none." She yelled.

The roof was wood, with a thin outer covering of some kind of brittle stone. Her first punch shattered the covering and cracked the roof below. Her second blow created a hole in the roof. Aeony used her huge strength to rip and tear, until the hole was large enough for her to drop into the building. As her feet found a floor in the building's attic, Aeony heard the sound of the high tower collapsing.

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Wave after wave of the rogues, were coming out of the bar. They'd hurt him in some way he didn't understand and then hundreds of them were pouring out onto the street. In the street was one thing, but every one of them then ran at him, waving whatever weapon they possessed. Even on a good day, it was action guaranteed to make him angry. With the green creature trying to eat his thigh, he was extra annoyed. He'd already used one fireball spell, but felt another was required. The Hand produced a list in his mind, from which he selected the fireball spell. Charging and releasing was easier than it had been with just the bone finger. It was all fast and efficient, with a fireball hitting the Seren's Edge bar, just a few seconds after he'd thought about creating it. Seeing the bright red flash, made him feel better. The noise like thunder was wonderful too, as was seeing so many dead rogue hybrids. The survivors went back into what was left of the bar, as they'd done after the last fireball.

"We should have a little peace now, for a while." Said Muzzie. "Can you get this thing off me, before it eats my entire leg?"

"Tricky.....It's obviously a magical creature." Said Caspian.

"Did you see who created it?" Asked Vella.

"It was when the archers went after Aeony." Said Muzzie. "One of their shamans, the ones in fancy robes, threw it at me. It was smaller then and hadn't begun eating me."

Muzzie prodded the green creature, which didn't seem to worry it at all. Nor did stabbing it, or simply trying to pull it out of his flesh. Pulling at it was painful, so he'd stopped them trying that. Slowly and inexorably, the thing that looked like a large bug, was burrowing into him. Muzzie gave it about an hour, before it reached his thigh bone. The pain was dreadful, fast becoming intolerable.

"I'll listen to any ideas, no matter how crazy." Said Muzzie.

"You won't like it....We could cut it out of you." Said Caspian.

"Crap.....I meant any idea that isn't crazy."

"When it's chewing at your bone marrow, you'll beg us to do it." Said Vella. "It'll be far easier and less painful.....If we do it now."

“No, no.....No!” Yelled Muzzie. “I’ll listen to any idea that doesn’t include cutting the little bastard out of me. Come on.....You must have other ideas ?”

Aeony chose that moment to fly over them, as she shrieked at the top of her voice. She headed towards the opposite end of the town.

“Nice to know she’s still alive.” Said Vella.

“Yes, very.....Ideas guys ? It seems to be speeding up.” Said Muzzie.

“Do you know where the shaman went to ?” Asked Caspian. “The one who threw the green creature at you ?”

“Yes, he ran into the bar.”

“Killing him is likely to stop the magical effect.....The creature should die.” Said Vella.

“It’d have to be a certain kill, or he’s likely to increase the effect.” Said Caspian.

“So.....If we kill the shaman, you’re sure this thing will die ?” Asked Muzzie.

Both of them were shaking their heads, in a way that didn’t inspire confidence.

“Not completely certain.” Said Caspian.

“It should work and to be honest.....It’s the only chance you have of keeping that leg.” Said Vella.

The Hand of Arcadis put images and ideas into his head, in an attempt to explain the magic it could use. From past experience with the finger bone, Muzzie knew that some images were accurate, while others were worse than useless. There had been the immolation spell, which he’d used to wipe out a small army of mutant rift creatures. Wonderful, but Muzzie had merely wanted to keep them out of his compound. It was all hit and miss, with potentially catastrophic consequences.

“More of them.....Seren’s Edge seems to be a favourite place for rogue hybrids.” Said Caspian.

The entrance to the bar was just a pile of scorched and blackened stones. His fireball spells were devastating, yet the rogues were coming out again. A great many, as if there was an endless supply of them inside the bar.

“I’m beginning to think they must all be crazy.” Said Vella.

“There.....The shaman is giving them orders.” Said Caspian.

There he was, or maybe a she. Muzzie had heard it was hard to sex rogues and there didn’t seem any reliable way to tell them apart. All of them dressed in armour made of tough leather, with hoods to protect them from the regular sandstorms. The shaman was different; the robes were of a good quality and their mix of bright colours, made them stand out. The shaman twisted while shouting orders.

“Female.....I saw a breast as she turned.” Said Vella. “Four breasts, actually.”

“Sounds about right, Dredger mothers have six.” Said Muzzie.

At least fifty rogues were hurtling towards them, only the rough ground was limiting their speed. Muzzie was in too much pain to think of tactics, he simply used another fireball. It tore through the advancing rogues and added a little more destruction to the bar’s entrance. Most of the rogues were reduced to ash, though a few twisted bodies still twitched a little. As for the shaman.....She’d gone back into the bar before the fireball hit.

“That’s it.....That is fucking it.” Yelled Muzzie. “Find whatever cover you can find.....I’m using a spell from the Chaos Negoria selection of destructive magic. If I put it off much longer, the pain will make it impossible to concentrate. I think.....Oh yes, Santi Evage looks nice and dangerous, sacred detonation, or something like that. I’m not good with ancient languages.”

“What does it do.....Exactly ?” Asked Vella.

“I have no idea, but the hand is warning me against using it.....It sounds perfect.”

“Santi Evage means sacred destruction.” Said Caspian.

“That’ll do.....Get behind something solid.” Yelled Muzzie.

They were already behind a few large stone blocks, but they didn’t feel a good enough shield against sacred destruction. Behind them was a stone column, which must have fallen several millennia ago. The rest of the building it had belonged to was rubble, but that single surviving column look solid. It was also another fifty yards from the bar and Muzzie thought a bit of extra distance wasn’t a bad idea.

“The column....Get behind the column.” Muzzie shouted.

It took a while to get there, with rubble underfoot and a large green bug nibbling deeper into his flesh. Not bone yet, though it found a nerve to bite just as Muzzie reached the column. Hate went into the mix, as Muzzie let the spell build. All the time, the Hand was advising him not to use anything from the Chaos Negoria spells, but Muzzie wasn’t in the mood to listen. As soon as he saw Caspian and Vella crouching behind the stone column, Muzzie aimed the spell at the Seren’s Edge bar. He released the most powerful spell he’d ever heard of.

“Please, in the name of the eight great demon deities, please work.” He muttered.

Muzzie sat behind the column and curled up into a ball. Hands over his head, with his face pushed against his knees. When the explosion came, he was glad he’d moved another fifty yards away from the bar. It was huge, though huge wasn’t a big enough word. A truly staggering detonation, that left his ears ringing and his eyes streaming with mucus. The column had actually moved a little, pushing Muzzie a couple of feet as it moved. Muzzie felt the residual chaos energy and it was wonderful.

Nothing ached anymore and.....The pain in his leg had gone.

“That much chaos energy.....No one can call on that much.” Vella muttered.

“Muzzie did.” Said Caspian.

His leg didn’t hurt....The thought filled his head. Muzzie uncurled, letting the dust and pieces of rubble, fall off him. There was still a bloody mess of a hole in his leg, but the bug was gone. Actually not gone, the shrunken remains were lying near his feet. It was gone, the pain was gone and his leg would heal.

“The pain has gone!” He yelled.

Either the shaman was dead, or the residual chaos had killed the magical bug on his leg. Muzzie didn’t really care about the why and who; he was simply enjoying the ending of so much agony. Even the low rumbling sound, didn’t worry him that much.

“Fuck.....The high tower is collapsing.” Said Vella.

“No....Don’t talk.....”

It wasn’t nonsense; the high tower was twisting and moving from side to side. A few loose stones were already falling from near the top. All that pure chaos, released suddenly in a relatively small area. Muzzie rarely fretted about consequences, even a demon’s life was too short for that. As the high tower broke apart and collapsed, it did cross his mind that it might be his fault.

“Run.....Run as fast as you can.” Yelled Muzzie.

“Where to ?” Shouted Vella.

“Anywhere away from the high tower.”

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Runa assumed she was going to die and her end would be unpleasant. No light and something heavy was resting on her back. A mouth and throat full of dirt and whatever she was buried in, was hot, very hot. Shouting obscenities would have been a nice way to go out, but every breath was such an effort. The high tower of Seren’s Edge had fallen and it felt as though she’d been buried by some of it.

“Dig here, I can sense her.....Careful, she’s already been hurt.”

Galla’s voice somewhere above her, though the sound was muffled. Nothing seemed to happen for a while, nothing at all. Had they missed her ? Had they forgotten her ? Runa wanted to yell, but the dirt was clogging most of her throat. She was beginning to have hallucinations, yes that was it.

Galla’s voice was just the result of a lack of air. Soon she’d be dead and Runa didn’t find the thought terrifying. Better than slowly cooking under the hot ground.

“Silly Dredgers.....Here.....Runa is here.”

The bird, Galla’s ancient pet. Who was he calling Dredgers ? Another hallucination, it had to be. The tiny square of light made her blink and turn her head away. The light grew and many hands followed the light.

“Gentle.....Don’t pull at her so much.” Said Galla. “Lift the poor girl out.”

“I think she might be dead.” Someone said.

“No....Hurt but still alive.” Said Galla. “Come on; get her out of that hole.”

A rush of clean air and bright light in her face. It was all too much and Runa felt her consciousness fade away. Not that it mattered; hallucinations weren’t going to save her.

“Yek anasha.....Yek an Anasha.”

Runa woke and for a few seconds, the words meant nothing to her. Her mind was having enough trouble working out where she was and what had happened. The language of pure blood Dredgers was.....Runa suddenly understood.

“Yek an Anasha.” Or, is she awake in the common tongue of the rifts.

She was clean and wearing clean clothes. Someone had undressed her, washed her and then dressed her in clean clothing. That was quite scary and Runa hoped it had been Galla, or maybe Vella. Runa was on a bed in a house, there was even a window in one of the walls. Full dark outside, she must have been asleep for a while. A young Dredger child arrived, carrying a lamp.

“My brother thought you’d die.....I’m glad you didn’t.”

“Who washed me ?”

“My mother.”

There were pure blood Dredgers in the City of the Lost God. They didn’t scare Runa; she was used to seeing them digging out foundations for new buildings, or extending drains and water pipes.

Tomma-Goran had used Dredgers when building his city and their name was fairly self-explanatory.

Dredgers.....They Dredged. The child had the usual four arms and two legs, with a face that was pretty much the same kind of face as most Dredger hybrids. The kid’s mouth looked a little odd, but all pure bloods had their own quirks and differences. The kid was using her arms as extra legs to run around on six legs. Fairly soon she’d learn to walk upright.

“I can get my mother.....If you want to get out of bed ?”

“Let’s see if I can do it, before we pester your mum.” Said Runa.

Swinging her legs out of bed, was never normally so painful. Not that Runa wanted the child to see her pulling faces and obviously in pain.

“Are you alright ?”

“I’m just really stiff.....Things will loosen up.” Said Runa. “I’m Runa, what is your name ?”

“I’m Maya.”

A few minutes sat on the edge of the bed was enough; Runa could stand without grunting or pulling a face. Somewhere during the collapse of the high tower, she’d been struck by something, probably many somethings. It was going to take a while for her joints to loosen up.

“Good.....Come and see my family.....Your friend is with them.” Said Maya.

Maya was a name popular in Tandalla, or at least Runa had once heard it was. Maya's family were likely to have been pilgrims, who'd ended up in Seren's Edge. A lot of people on the rifts, seemed to end up in places they'd never intended going. Runa followed the girl through a door and into a large room with a fire burning in the grate. Food was being prepared, everywhere Runa looked.

"How are you, Runa?" Asked Galla. "They're cooking a feast in our honour."

"I'm very hungry, but why the feast?"

"Your sorcerer killed their Ezzagory, the chieftain of the rogue hybrids." Someone said.

"Muzzie blew apart the bar while the rogue's shaman was inside." Said Galla. "That finished them; the survivors are leaving Seren's Edge."

"You're all heroes." Added Maya.

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Sensan knew he'd have to move the dead rogues eventually; stepping over their dead bodies was becoming annoying. Every time he went for more beer, it was an obstacle course. It was hot in the general store; the whole damn town was hot and sticky. Pretty soon, the stench of corruption would begin.

"One more beer and I'll drag them out onto the street." Said Sensan.

There had been five of them guarding the old man, four in the store itself and one in the store room on the next floor. Sensan never treated any fight as a foregone conclusion, that was how stupid warriors died. It had been easy though; the rogue's had decent weapons, but just about zero training.

"I'll help you, there's a trolley out back." Said Pio.

Pio-Xanash, with the Pio meaning grandfather. When you were the great grandfather of the last emperor, the Pio had a far greater meaning. Everyone called him Pio and even the rogues treated the old guy with respect.

"No....You stay safe in here." Said Sensan. "At least until my friends deal with the rogues."

"You seem confident they will." Said Pio.

"They're.....A little strange, but from what I've seen.....Very effective."

Sensan had run when the high tower had come down. Not very heroic, but surviving seemed to be the most essential thing to do. He'd entered the general store almost by accident, looking for food and drink. He'd found the man Muzzie was looking for, being held prisoner by the, now dead, rogue guards. Sensan would of course, make his exploits sound far more heroic, when he told the story to the others. He liked Pio-Xanash, who besides being the great grandfather of someone famous, had quite a few stories of his own to tell. Pio had fought in the blood wars and had to be one of the few veterans of that war, who was still breathing. Sensan placed a mug of beer in front of Pio and picked up the dice.

"Mercy." Laughed Pio. "One more win and you'll own my store and the clothes I'm wearing."

"We're just playing for fun. As for payment of my winnings.....I'd settle for knowing what you know that's so damned important?"

Three six sided dice for a quite complicated game. So well-known though, that children were known to play it. Sensan threw the dice and for once luck left him.

"My turn....Maybe I'll win this time." Said Pio.

He did and Sensan was left with nothing and no leverage for the information he sought. He'd actually listened to the rules set out by the Silver Lady, though he suspected many of them hadn't. Working against Muzzie was likely to end up with the whole boiling blood thing. Finding out information that might, or might not, be useful later. That hadn't even been mentioned.

“Ahhhhh, wonderful. My store is mine again.” Said Pio. “Not that I could ever have told you about the secret I’ve kept for.....It must be ten millennia, maybe eleven. Have you ever heard of Tomma-Goran ?”

“Yes of course, he created the City of the Lost God.” Said Sensan.

His knowledge of the Old God seemed to surprise Pio. Sensan began to wonder how long the general store proprietor, had been in Seren’s Edge and other hybrid towns in the arse end of the rifts.

“Tomma-Goran told me what to tell the one, the hero cursed by prophecy.” Said Pio. “I’ll recognise him, though I’ll know nothing about him. Your Muzzie doesn’t seem the sort to become emperor, but who am I to judge ? If I sense he’s the one, I’ll tell him everything. Tomma-Goran also put a lock on my mind.....I can only tell the one.”

“No way around it ?”

“I like you Sensan, but no.....No way around it.” Said Pio. “I can hear sounds in the room above us.....Might be worth investigating.”

It crossed Sensan’s mind that he hadn’t checked the rogue in the storeroom. It was rare for anyone to survive being run through by his blade, but he hadn’t checked.

“Alright.....but stay here.” Said Sensan.

“Did I mention fighting in the blood wars ? I’m not as harmless as I look.”

“I’m sure you’re not.....Please though, stay here.”

Up a flight of rickety stairs and the door to the storeroom was slightly ajar, just as he remembered leaving it. Blade held up, ready to strike, he entered the store room.

“Sensan, I thought you must be dead.” Said Aeony. “This isn’t as fresh as I’d like....The taste though....Wonderful.”

There was a lot of blood on the dark angel, all of it probably from the dead rogue she’d eviscerated. She was sat cross legged on the wooden floor, biting into the rogue’s raw liver. Insides have a certain smell, unique to most types of creatures, though it could be reliant of species. Dredgers’ viscera had a kind of wet mud odour. The rogue’s insides had a foul odour, though that didn’t seem to be bothering the dark angel.

“I’m very much alive.” Said Sensan. “In fact I found Pio-Xanash and I’ve been guarding him.”

“You found the general store owner....In the general store. Well done.....Very well done. Come on then, introduce me to him.”

Aeony didn’t discard the half eaten liver; she pushed it into the bag held in her webbing, which was just about her only clothing. Together they went back into the side of the store customers usually saw.

“Wow.....A living dark angel.” Said Pio. “Now I’m sure you’ll win.....Do you know Silsk ?”

“I did, she died many years ago.” Said Aeony. “I’m the queen now.....Did you ever meet Silsk ?”

“Yes and not just meet. For a while, Silsk and I were lovers. She was quite a character.”

“Oh yes, that she was.” Said Aeony.

A bizarre conversation about the last queen of the dark angels, who Sensan knew had been dead for so long, that several generations, had never heard of her. Aeony actually nibbled at the liver, before offering it to Pio. He simply waved it away, as though refusing a wonderful delicacy at a royal banquet. To add to the surreal quality of the moment, someone started banging on the outside door. No caution, Aeony pulled back the bolts and opened it wide. There was a little muttering, before an adult Dredger female walked in. She ignored everyone apart from Pio-Xanash.

“The strangers killed the Ezzagory. We’ve seen the body; a few have kicked what was left of her. There is a feast being held at my mother’s house....Everyone is welcome.”

The Dredger looked at Aeony, as if saying 'even you'. Not that the dark angel cared, or responded though Pio replied.

"I knew they could win....Tell your mother we'll all be there."

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