

## The Last Emperor

### Chapter 34 - Assassination

**“Galla had her pet with her, sat on her shoulder. Had he turned up so that the Silver Lady could get a good look at LLud Narren’s magical artefacts, weapons and gadgets ? Much as she loved Bird, he was still under the influence of the Lady.”**



There had been a few deaths in the stockade, throats cut mainly, likely to be the work of bandits. The dead had been stripped of their gold purses and all valuables. The number of camp followers had increased since they’d taken the City of the Lost God. It seemed everyone wanted to be part of Muzzie’s new empire. Victory brought trouble though, bandits looking for easy money. Caspian had added two Ubari fighters to his entourage and they went everywhere with him. As Vella went everywhere he went, she was guarded too. They were on their way to see Muzzie; summoned to see him.

“What do you think he means by a matter of some importance ?” Asked Vella.

“Maybe he’s finally decided on our punishment for burning down his bar.” Said Caspian.

“I thought we’d been forgiven for that.”

“You never know with Muzzie.” Said Caspian. “He might ask us to pay for building the replacement. I heard he’s going to use the best Tandallan marble.”

“Oh.....Can we afford that ?” Asked Vella.

“Yes, but let’s hear what he wants, before we start worrying.”

Muzzie summoning them to his rooms, had become more frequent, but still quite rare. The last time there had been talk of them being flogged. It was worrying, but not that worrying. Caspian doubted if Muzzie meant them any real harm. He was Caspian the Great after all.

“More guards outside the imperial rooms, that’s new.” Said Vella.

“Everyone is worried about cutthroats and vagabonds....Something should be done about it.”

A deputation had been to see General Dhūlen, who had agreed the situation was bad. He’d agreed to use the army to seek out and kill the bandits. The army had better things to do though, including keeping the streets safe in the City of the Lost God. Maybe Dhūlen hadn’t lied, but not one bandit had been dealt with. Vella and Caspian were allowed to see the emperor, without surrendering their weapons.

“Ahhhhhh Caspian.” Said Muzzie. “Your feats on the field of battle, never cease to amaze me. Taking control of the library.....All on your own. Vella too.....Clearing out the Towers, after centuries of them being infested by all kinds of unpleasant creatures.....Wonderful.....Wonderful.”

The story was a few days old now, but Muzzie seemed keen on going through the key points again. Not that Caspian minded; it probably meant they weren’t going to be asked to pay for rebuilding Muzzie’s bar.

“Dhali saved us all, by turning into the weapon.” Said Vella.

“But she was working for you, Vella.” Said Muzzie. “One of the officers told me you had to threaten her to get her to fight.....Take credit where it’s due.”

“And you said she kept falling asleep.” Added Caspian.

“Well, yes.....There was that.” Said Vella. “In the end though, she did become the weapon.”

“You’re just proving to me.....I can’t do without you both.” Said Muzzie. “Food now I think and some drinks.....I’m sure you’re hungry.”

Alarm bells had begun in Caspian’s head. More tiny tinkling bells than anything huge and ear splitting. He’d asked to remain in the City of the Lost God, to take over the running of the Great Library. Now Muzzie was saying he couldn’t do without them.....

“You always have good things to eat, when we see you.” Said Vella.

“And some of the herbal tea you like, from Annill.” Said Muzzie.

Muzzie would know, there had been no secret about it. Caspian had always wanted to help Muzzie and then return home. Adamaz retiring had just meant returning home a little sooner than planned. Vella was pleased, she wanted to look after their son and an army fighting siege after siege, was no place for young Olvir. They ate and drank the herbal tea, which was truly dreadful, but Vella enjoyed it.

“Of course.....The matter of my bar being destroyed, is now closed.” Said Muzzie. “I won’t even ask you to finance any of the rebuilding work.”

Vella had once worked for Muzzie and still thought a lot of him. She was almost preening herself in the glow of his praise and kind words. If she did understand where Muzzie was going, she wasn’t showing it.

“Now.....Why did I ask you both here ? You must be curious.”

“Of course we are.” Said Caspian.

“Oh yes.....Tell us, Muzzie.” Said Vella.

Here it came, the huge punch in the guts that would leave them both gasping for air.

“I need you with me until I’m crowned in Leng.” Said Muzzie. “Sometimes being emperor means upsetting people. I’m sorry, but I can’t permit either of you to remain in the City of the Lost God. You’re both well-known and thought of as heroes.....I need you both.”

“But.....Adamaz is retiring.” Said Caspian.

“I’m sure he can carry on for a short time.” Said Muzzie.

“Olvir loves the stockade.....Lots of young people about his age.” Said Vella. “And.....I have to admit, I’d love to see the City of Leng.”

Caspian had wanted to argue about being expected to leave the Great Library, just when his lifelong ambition was about to happen. Adamaz was actually going to retire and announce that Caspian was taking over. If Vella had been on his side, he’d have made a huge fuss about being dragged off to Quron and then Leng. Vella wasn’t on his side though and he couldn’t win against her and Muzzie. Olvir concerned him, but their son was enjoying life in the stockade.

“Leng, with its famous canals and some of the most ancient temples of the rifts.” Said Muzzie. “I’ve never been there, but they have many drawings in the Great Library.”

“Faal lived there for many years and calls it a city of wonders.” Said Vella.

“Alright, I know when I’m beaten.” Said Caspian. “I’ll be with you until you’re crowned in Leng. Then there can be no more projects for me, no other tasks I have to complete. Vella and I will return to the City of the Lost God and take over from Adamaz.....Agreed ? I want to hear an agreement, from both of you.”

“That’s a bit.....I just wanted to see Leng.” Said Vella. “Very well, I agree.”

Muzzie was giving him a dark look, but there was no one else within earshot. It wasn’t as if the emperor had been disrespected in public. It was still a relief when Muzzie patted him on the shoulder, with his huge right hand.

“As I said, emperors sometimes have to upset people, even their friends.” Said Muzzie. “I give you my word; you can take over from Adamaz the day after I’m crowned. I need you running the Great Library. There was the deal with Chenad at the library in Annill. He needs to receive the enchanted paper he was promised, or he might want his money back.”

Good old Muzzie, he hadn’t changed that much. Money would always be there, in his top ten list of priorities. They hugged and then Vella joined in the hug. Caspian now felt it was official. He really would be able to leave the army after Leng.

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Muzzie had agreed; Nethra was going to get a few days in Annill, before the army began moving towards Quron. There’d be time for her to share a bed with Merrick again, even if only for a few nights. She’d also be able to yell at him a little, for sending his rogues to steal from the stockade. Not that she thought Merrick had anything to do with the recent murders. He liked to live close to the edge, but not that close. Even she couldn’t save him, if Muzzie suspected he was murdering and robbing inside the stockade. No, someone else was doing the killing and with luck, Merrick might have an idea of who it was. Nethra was looking forward to a little rest, sex and recuperation. First though, she had to make sure Ginnda-Aanash was happy, the Hive Mother.....

“I used my knowledge of your lair in Segin-Unadaris.” Said Nethra.

Was calling it Ginnda’s lair insulting ? Nethra hoped not, but diplomacy and using the appropriate words, had never been her thing.

“You’re close to the shrine of the Silver Lady and not far from the entrance to the catacombs.

According to Faal.” Said Nethra. “You’ll be at the centre of a power nexus. And let’s face it....He should know.”

To Nethra it was a dark and deep area of tunnels, but she hoped it was the Hive Mother’s idea of paradise. There was even a stream running along one tunnel, though there was no dampness where Ginnda would be living. In that respect, it was better than her fungal infested home in the demon city.

“There’s plenty of room for your guards to live down here.” Said Nethra.

Nethra was a winged creature, happiest in the air, or at least out in the open. It was hard for her to judge if an underground lair was a good one, but Ginnda was making her happy sounds. The huge spider like creature ran up a wall and hung from the ceiling, as if trying to see her temporary home from a new angle.

“This is perfect, Nethra.” Said Ginnda. “Better than a home from home, my living quarters in Segin-Unadaris have become a little cramped and I have to say it.....Rather grubby. I have grown larger with every passing year, but my home was still the same size. I may be tempted to stay here for a while.”

“I’m glad you approve of my choice.” Said Nethra. “You’ll be quite close to Muzzie’s palace, when it’s built.”

“Will I have direct access when it’s built ?”

“Yes.....There are already four ways up to the surface.” Said Nethra. “An entrance to the imperial palace, will give you a fifth.”

“Perfect.....I will start to move in and get comfortable.” Said Ginnda.

Nethra could report back to Muzzie that all was well and the Hive Mother would be influencing the population of the city. Not total control, Ginnda required years to build up that kind of mental influence. She’d be able to create a city wide feeling of contentment, which might stop any plots and insurrection, while the army was dealing with Quron. It meant leaving Ginnda behind for the

toughest battle they were likely to have, but thousands of her full blood demon fighters, would be there; laying siege to Quron.

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Galla had her pet with her, sat on her shoulder. Had he turned up so that the Silver Lady could get a good look at LLud Narren's magical artefacts, weapons and gadgets ? Much as she loved Bird, he was still under the influence of the Lady. Sometimes the link was helpful, but it also meant that Muzzie's campaign to be emperor, had no privacy from the ancient deity. LLud was in a good mood and behaving like a showman in one of the camp followers' tents.....

"Prepare to be amazed, Galla Sinsa-Ennari." Said LLud. "As I take you into a world limited only by your imagination."

Galla liked to hear her full name used occasionally, it reminded her of her apothecary shop in the City of the Lost God. Her name was still there, above the door. She'd checked her shop was undamaged and that no one had stolen her stock. Apart from that, she was too busy to clean everything and spend a night in her own bed. Bird's cage would have to go of course, he'd become too used to being free to fly where he chose.

"Caspian told me about your weapon, which he used to blow open iron doors." Said Galla.

"They killed me with it too.....That artefact was destroyed. As you can see I have many other enchanted artefacts. Some are toys, while other will kill the unwary....Point at something Galla, and I will tell you what it does."

They were in LLud's old rooms in the Dome; he'd opened a portal to take them there, her and her Bird. His various devices were back in the drawers and cupboards and were now guarded by the best in Muzzie's army. Galla felt like a curious child, as she opened a cupboard and pointed at a long metallic staff.

"This.....This looks powerful. What does it do ?" She asked.

"The staff of Guranda.....Yes, a good choice." Said LLud. "To show you what it can do, we'll need an open window. Pull your robe nice and tight, Galla. For a while, we'll need to let in a cold north wind."

There was no north, south, west....Or even east; on the rifts. It was all a nonsense really, but it did make giving directions a little easier. Compass points were for round worlds and few on the rifts actually believed those existed. Galla had never seen the windows in the upper Dome opened, but LLud spoke four words in the human language and they opened wide.

"Oh.....You're right about that wind." Said Galla.

"I just rest the Guranda's staff on my shoulder." Said LLud. "I point is at that mountain top to the north east, and....."

Galla had reached the point where enough is enough. She was about to tell LLud he was too intelligent to use compass points, that he knew didn't exist on the flat rifts. She wanted to tell him, but the top of the mountain a good mile away, exploded.

"More.....More.....Again." Shouted Bird.

LLud used the weapon again, in a way Galla didn't understand. She hadn't seen him press anything, or hear him speak the words of a spell. Yet the mountain top became a few feet lower, as the summit blew apart. There was a huge orange ball of fire, accompanied by a sound like thunder.

"That will have to do.....People get angry if I destroy their landmarks." Said LLud.

"I can image they do.....Is that the weapon you'll use on the walls of Quron ?" Asked Galla.

"Oh no, that is far more powerful." Said LLud. "That isn't to be used this close to the City. I'll close the windows and then you can choose again.....From a drawer this time."

It was like the Feast of Nigon, but the strange magical and artefacts were everywhere. One drawer contained several bracelets. One solid gold bracelet looked out of place, simply because of its purity. No precious stones, just a bracelet of the finest yellow metal.

"This bracelet.....It seems to call out to me." Said Galla.

"Tomma once wore that." Said Bird.

"Your pet is right; Tomma once used the bracelet though for him it fitted perfectly on one of his mighty fingers." Said LLud. "One of Tomma's rings, which I thought had no more charges. I sense that it can be used one more time, but only one more time."

How did her pet know it had belonged to Tomma-Goran ? Galla left that problem for another day and pushed the bracelet high up onto her forearm.

"I have to know, LLud.....What does it do ?" Asked Galla.

"The ring of a God, it is of course.....Capable of a miracle." Said LLud. "No returning someone from the dead. If it could, I'd have used it on myself. There is a saying about being young again, but knowing what you know now. The ring will do that.....I've seen it work a miracle. You can be young again, yet still remember everything you know now. Every spell, every augmentation you might have.....All unharmed. You'll simply have the body you had as a young woman."

"How young a woman ?" Asked Galla. "I don't want to look like a child."

"It can vary I believe, but probably well past puberty." Said LLud. "Most likely the age when you had your first serious lover."

"Do it Galla.....No more old bones and joints." Said Bird.

"Imagine it, Galla." Said LLud. "You'll be young again, with many more millennia of life, in front of you. Yet.....You'll have all the skills, memories and powers you have now."

Muzzie might not like a younger version of her running his farming city of Aarabash. Age wasn't always pleasant, but it did add a certain gravitas. On the other hand.....The thought of having a full reset, a new life of many thousands of years.....

"How does the bracelet work ?" Asked Galla.

"You can't use it on yourself." Said LLud. "Even Tomma saw the problem with self-invoked miracles. I can say the words needed and from memory, there is no discomfort. Quite quickly, you'll be young again. You can even keep the bracelet, though it will only ever be a piece of attractive jewellery."

There'd be something unexpected, there always was with such things. Being young again though, it was worth risking a lot for. LLud knew her and that she'd hunt him down if there were any serious unwanted effects. Galla was wearing the ring, the Misery of Mosca. It was showing her that LLud was sincere and well meaning. The Ring.....She showed it to him, almost shoving it into his face.

"This ring may save my life one day." Said Galla. "Will it continue to work ?"

"Of course it will, everything will." Said LLud. "No one is an expert on miracles, but from what I've seen and heard, you'll have nothing to complain about."

"Do it Galla." Said Bird.

Galla wasn't one to talk it over with her friends. Actually, she wasn't one to have much in the way of friends. No pondering on it for days, that wasn't her thing either. A long dead God had left a miracle behind, much in the same way that he'd left a destiny for Muzzie. Galla decided to accept the miracle.

"Alright, LLud.....Do it." Said Galla.

"Are you sure ?"

"Yes.....And don't ask me again. I need a mirror, before we begin."

There was a mirror on the inside of a cupboard door. An old mirror, which gave everything, and her, a slight blue tinge. Not a large mirror, but it showed enough of her. There she was, looking every year of her very long and eventful life.

"I can get a better mirror.....There's one in my bedroom." Said LLud.

"No, this one will do.....Do it now, LLud." Said Galla. "Before I'm tempted to change my mind."

LLud leant forward and put his lips against the gold bracelet. As he kissed it, several words came out of his mouth, which she could barely hear. There was a little pain as the bracelet seemed to bite her, but LLud had been right; there was no serious discomfort. When her features in the mirror began to look distorted, she closed her eyes. It seemed quite a while before Bird spoke.....

"Galla.....You look beautiful." Said her pet.

On opening her eyes, Galla saw a face she liked. More a young woman than a girl and she had red hair. She'd been white haired for so long.....But the memories came back, of a certain hybrid young man, who'd loved her red hair. As for the rest of her.....She was lighter now, quite a lot lighter. Her clothes were hanging off her like a sack.

"I'll need clothes, LLud.....If only to go home in." Said Galla. "You seem to have everything.....Has a lady friend of yours left her clothes in a wardrobe.....Somewhere?"

"Yes.....I'll go and get them." Said LLud.

LLud went, which meant Galla could let her robe drop to the floor. So much fabric, yet it had fitted her perfectly. Bird was still there, but he'd often seen her naked in her room above the apothecary shop.

"Galla.....Is.....Gorgeous." Said Bird.

"I must admit, Bird. I like the new me, which is really the old me. I haven't looked like this since.....Tomma-Goran was still alive."

She was still admiring herself when LLud returned with a choice of robes and dresses. She didn't even bother to cover up, as he dropped the clothes on a table.

"Galla...If I can suggest....."You've been in robes for too long." Said LLud. "There is a wonderful yellow dress, that would suit you perfectly."

It did suit her; she even spun around, to get a view of her bottom in the mirror. It had to have been four or five millennia, since she'd admired her rear in a mirror.

"It fits you perfectly." Said LLud.

"I know I look better and younger." Said Galla. "The best thing though.....Is no joints aching as I spin around."

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Nethra had once climbed the outside of Muzzie's tavern, to get a good look at the new dark angels; as they'd flown around the Towers. Aeony already had over two hundred new sisters and there was talk of creating many more. Recent events had shown the dark angels weren't unbeatable, but they were still just about the most dangerous fighters on the rifts. Plus they could fly and attack any enemy, no matter where they might be.....

"The perfect spot.....I hope they realise I'm a friend." Muttered Nethra.

Flying meant getting angry and then channelling the anger into rage. Then and only then, was Nethra able to fly as well as Aeony. Not a problem in battle. Nethra could get herself into a rage, mainly by thinking of Merrick's many flaws. She wasn't in the mood for anger, and anyway.....There weren't many high places she couldn't get to with her claws and talons. The portal had taken her to the base of the Dome. She was now climbing up, to sit at the pinnacle of the Tomma-Goran's famous upper Dome. It was a wonderfully dark night, with no clouds, and not one drop of rain. Perfect

weather for dark angel watching; for those able to see in the ultraviolet wash that always covered the rifts. The pinnacle of the Dome was so large, that it seemed almost flat. Nethra could see she wouldn't be alone in her vantage point.

"So, you too want to see Aeony's new sisters." Said Nethra.

"I've seen them, trying to learn how to do simple things." Said Itet. "I was like it once, a new born dark angel with nothing in my head, apart from the basic species memories. I could just about remember how to chew food. I was good at one thing, flying. It's where we excel; in the air, with our wings. I've come to see my sisters do what they're good at."

"I can understand that." Said Nethra. "You need to feel proud of them."

"Exactly."

They sat there, knees touching, waiting for the dark angels to appear. Most were living in the top two floors of the Towers, though some were being housed in the Lower Dome. They had to make an appearance; it was a perfect night for them to stretch their wings. Nethra knew Itet, though not that well. She remembered her occasionally sleeping with Muzzie. There never seemed any affection involved, just lots of very energetic sex. Noisy sex too, some living in nearby houses had complained.

"I can see one of them.....Watch, they'll all soon be flying around the Towers." Said Itet.

Just dark shadows moving against the ultraviolet wash. Out they came, sometimes one by one, and sometimes in small groups. They looked almost clumsy, as they clambered over the roof of the Towers. Once their wings began to flap, the clumsy new born dark angels, became dark princesses of the night.

"Oh.....I'd forgotten how beautiful your sisters can be." Said Nethra.

"Awkward as a three legged Shuud, until they fly." Said Itet. "Then.....They become true creatures of the night.....Wonderful."

Nethra gave up trying to count numbers in the dark, though there had to be well over two hundred dark angels giving them a display of precision flying. The dark angels were flying close together, yet Nethra never saw them collide, or even bump one another. It was wonderful and after Itet fell asleep leaning on her shoulder, Nethra carried on watching. She thought she recognised the new Silsk, but in the dark and at a bit of a distance....It might not have been her. The show came to a halt just as the sky lit up for the beginning of a new day on the first rift. Nethra gave Itet a gentle(ish) prod in the ribs.

"Wake up; they've all gone back inside." Said Nethra.

"Don't tell Aeony I fell asleep."

"Don't worry, it'll be our secret." Said Nethra.

Not much of a secret, but it might come in handy one day, if she needed a favour in return.

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Everyone in the City of the Lost God, had been inviting them to visit their homes; a few had invited him and Aeony to stay the night. Caspian and Vella had invited them to stay in their home for a few nights. Muzzie had seen their home in the best part of town; he'd even been to a few functions there. A comfortable home, he'd been tempted.

Sokkolf had offered them accommodation in the VIP wing of the Sorcerers Guild and even the Metal Workers Guild were keen to have them as guests. It seemed being emperor had suddenly made him a must have guest. Of course Aeony was now queen of the dark angels again, which meant many wanted to make her their best friend.

Adamaz had offered to clear out a part of the Dome where Tomma-Goran himself had once lived. That really had been tempting. To sleep in a room where a living deity had once slept. Did Gods

sleep ? There was definitely a room known as Tomma's bedroom. The strangest offer had been from Podd, though Muzzie was sure it had been well meant. A bed in an old and disused boiler hut.....No, that hadn't been even slightly tempting.

"My sisters have cleaned my old quarters in the Towers." Aeony had said. "Could be nice, there's a wonderful view of the city from up there. It's not as if you don't know some of them."

A definite dig about him sleeping with some of her sister dark angels. That all seemed a very long time ago. Aeony mentioned her bedroom being right at the top of the Towers and that sold the idea to Muzzie.

"I've always wondered what it'd be like to sleep up there." He'd said.

Dark angels were tough and although the top floor had been cleaned after the battle, there were still blood stains on walls. If it didn't bother them, it definitely didn't bother Muzzie. Aeony's room had been thoroughly cleaned and the bed was comfortable. Add on the view and Muzzie couldn't have been happier. He hadn't even minded Aeony being unusual vocal during their lovemaking. She obviously wanted to show her sisters that she was doing alright in that respect. Everything was just about perfect, until the Hive Mother decided to push a nightmare into his dreams.

"They're coming, Muzzie." Ginnda yelled, deep into his mind.

Her face arrived with the words and although he liked Ginnda, he must have screamed in his sleep. Those huge jaws and hairy parts to her mouth, which he still didn't understand. Plus, her eyes were so weird and alien.....

"Wake up, Muzzie.....Stop struggling with me." Said Aeony.

"It was Ginnda." Said Muzzie. "She's supposed to be putting out calm feelings, but what she put into my head....."

It came again, even though he was now wide awake. No screaming this time, no matter how close he seemed to be to her awful jaws.

"Muzzie, the Quron fighters are almost at the stockade." Hissed Ginnda's voice. "You must protect the child of the Ancient Ones. They will kill it and anyone else who lives anywhere near your rooms at the Void Gate."

"Alright, Ginnda.....Stop shouting inside my head." Said Muzzie.

The mind trick had to work both ways, the image of Ginnda vanished from his head. Muzzie sat there for a moment, while Aeony poured him a glass of wine. The middle of the night of course, everything bad always arrived during the darkest part of the night. He was the target of the Quron warriors, that was obvious, though he wasn't sleeping in his quarters that night. They'd kill Uula Podda though and anyone guarding his rooms. He had a recollection of Runa being given guard duty, while her emperor was away. She'd have at least a dozen fighters with her, but against assassins sent by Quron.....Runa wasn't likely to survive the night.

"Runa.....I know Runa was left guarding our rooms." Said Muzzie. "Who will be looking after the child ? I should know, but my head is still spinning."

"Maya, the girl volunteered for what she calls, Uula Podda duty." Said Aeony.

"On her own ?"

"Yes.....Why ? What's wrong, Muzzie ?" Asked Aeony.

"Something that should have been anticipated." Sais Muzzie. "While we're planning to attack Quron, they've been busy too. Ginnda sees and senses things.....Quron assassins are on their way to our quarters."

"They'll kill Maya and the child." Said Aeony.



"A child I swore to protect.....It'll be the end of us, the army.....Everything." Said Muzzie. "We need to get back to the Void Gate."

"But the Void Gate will be locked on Aarabash." Said Aeony. "Locked because tonight they'll be bringing tons of fresh food to the stockade."

Muzzie had heard such talk before. Because the Void Gate worked so well, people had forgotten they had once survived without it. There were many other ways of creating a portal and one of them wasn't that far away.

"Pinthrad.....We have a Pinthrad." Said Muzzie. "I guarantee he'll be snoozing in his office at the Sorcerers Guild. We'll need a few of your sisters, the best fighters. Then we get Pinthrad to open a portal for us. From what I remember, Pinthrad is an expert at portals."

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Aeony carried Muzzie to the Sorcerers Guild, he trusted her to hold him in her claws, way up above the rooftops. She knew the city of course and the private balcony where Sokkolf could look out across the guild's gardens. Sokkolf the younger was his proper title, but everyone knew the leader of the guild as Sokkolf. He seemed quite surprised to have the emperor land on his balcony.

"Sorry for arriving uninvited." Said Aeony. "We have urgent need of Pinthrad."

Aeony had to give it to him, not everyone could keep calm as eight dark angels landed all around them. Sokkolf had the ability granted to few; to act calm in situations that would terrify lesser men. Muzzie always said it was all an act and underneath it all, Sokkolf was scared.

"My clerk.....You need the guild's clerk?" Asked Sokkolf.

"Yes.....Can I borrow him for a while?" Asked Muzzie.

"Of course, Pinthrad will be in his room.....Probably asleep."

Pinthrad was asleep, though a polite person might call it a nap. Aeony had selected six of her best fighters and then added the new Silsk. Mainly to see how she behaved, or didn't behave, like the original Silsk. The new holder of the famous name, was quite gentle while waking Pinthrad. That was definitely very un-Silsk like.

"Pinthrad.....Wake up, your emperor has need of your skills." Said Silsk.

"He was wounded in the battle.....Give him time to wake up." Said Muzzie.

It took a while, for Pinthrad to put on a robe over his night things, before giving a slight bow to his emperor. Pinthrad had always looked old and Aeony had known him for a very long time. Now he was walking awkwardly from his wounds and his left arm was in a sling.

"Sorry to look like this, Muzzie." Said Pinthrad. "My wife is an expert healer.....You reach an age though, when even healing spells need time to work."

As if to reinforce his words, Pinthrad stumbled a little, as he sat on a rather grand chair.

"I need you, old friend." Said Muzzie. "I'm told Quron forces are about to attack my rooms at the Void Gate. I need to protect those who are there. Can you give me a portal to take us all there?"

"I'd need to look into your mind for the exact destination point." Said Pinthrad. "The portal itself is usually the easy part. I can take us there and very importantly, back again."

Us.....Aeony had picked it up and she was sure Muzzie must have heard it too.

"Where we're going is dangerous." Said Muzzie. "There is no need for you to go with us."

"Nonsense.....You may need help getting back, or need to go somewhere else." Said Pinthrad. "If you need a portal in a hurry.....You need me there, with you."

"Silsk could look after him." Said Aeony. "Thinking about it, Pinthrad is right.....We might need him."

"Of course you do." Said Pinthrad. "And I may look a bit worse for wear, but I know some very useful spells. I'm told that Babaef and I, killed over two hundred of the city militia.....On our own."

That seemed to clinch it, Muzzie was nodding at Pinthrad and it seemed he was going with them.

“Look after him, Silsk.” Said Aeony. “Nothing must harm a hair on his head.”

“I’ll take care of him.” Said Silsk.

Pinthrad looked around and obviously decide he needed somewhere larger than his own sitting room. He went off at a good pace, with everyone following him. Three doors along the corridor, he took them into a guild practise room.

“This is where they teach heavy weapon skills.” Said Pinthrad. “Swinging axes around and that sort of thing.....Never seen the need for such things. But, plenty of room for a portal.”

Pinthrad was looking at them, as if asking if everyone was ready. Aeony had remembered him as being a little eccentric, but he seemed wasted as a clerk to the guild. There was talk of a Mrs Pinthrad, who was determined to keep her husband safe and away from mischief.

“Alright.....Create the portal.” Said Muzzie.

The outer frame arrived first, after Pinthrad had made a few hand gestures. Like wood, the frame was about twenty feet high, by the same wide. There it hung, as if defying gravity. Pinthrad muttered a few words and then looked hard at Muzzie.

“Think of where you wish to go, Muzzie.” Said Pinthrad. “Picture it in your mind.”

The frame filled with a blueish mist, which began to spill into the room.

“Come on, we need to enter the portal.” Said Pinthrad. “Portals created this fast and designed to cross rifts.....They never last that long. We have three minutes, maybe four.”

It wasn’t a race, but everyone moved quickly. It probably took less than half a minute, until they were all stood in a climate hotter than the City of the Lost God. Still night and the bright column of the Void Gate wasn’t that far away.

“We must hurry.....They may already be here.” Shouted Muzzie. “Run.....Follow me to my chambers.”

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The child had been agitated all night. No matter how much Maya tried to soothe Uula Podda, the baby Ancient One, refused to settle down. Maya had tried all the tricks her mother had used, to quieten fractious children. Her mother was an expert of course, all Dredger mothers were. It came from tending to have very large families. No few drops of Ushong Brandy in her drink, not yet anyway. Uula refused to sleep, so Maya couldn’t sleep either. As Uula clambered all over her and made squeaking sounds, Maya thanked the nine that at least baby Ancient Ones, didn’t cry.

“Oh, Uula.....I know you’re smart, I can sense it.” Said Maya. “I just wish you could talk to me.”

A Nesh bug soothed the child for all of a minute, before she began to make sad little squeaking sounds again. She was getting heavier and seemed intent on wrapping her long arms and legs, around Maya’s throat.

“I know you’re scared about something, but I need to breathe.” Muttered Maya.

As fast as Maya pulled at a leg to ease pressure on her throat, another arm, or leg, took its place. It felt as though Uula was building up to a panic attack, but Maya hadn’t expected to be bitten.

“Hey, don’t do that.” Said Maya.

Not a serious bite, but not playful either. Once Uula had her attention, she definitely and very deliberately, wanted to make eye contact.

“Hide.” Said Uula.

“Hide from what ?” Asked Maya. “Runa is commanding the guard tonight, we should be safe.”

Another bite on her shoulder, hard enough to bleed, if Maya had the luxury of time enough to look.

“Hide !” Yelled Uula, with almost a growl in her voice.

“Alright.....We’ll hide, though I can’t think where.” Said Maya.

Maya carried a large cloth bag everywhere, as did Galla. It was part of being a healer and an apothecary. You never knew when something might be needed, so it went in the bag. Maya put a tin of Nesh bugs in the bag, together with a full flask of water.

“A weapon.....We must take a weapon.” Muttered Maya.

They’d been in Muzzie and Aeony’s bedroom and there was one of Aeony’s daggers lying on a shelf, as if Maya was fated to borrow it for a while. A nasty demon blade that took a bite out of anyone its blade made contact with. It was inside a scabbard, or it might have tried to taste Maya’s flesh.

“Wonderfully evil.....The perfect weapon to hide with.” Muttered Maya. “As she shoved the weapon into her cloth bag.”

Uula made one of her happy sounds, the first for a while.

“We’re going to have a talk later young lady.” Said Maya. “We’ll start with biting and move onto you knowing more words than hide.”

The bag was heavy and so was the child. Maya hoped that not a lot of running was going to be involved with the hiding. She opened the doors and looked right and left. Right and some distance down the gloomy corridor, was the main entrance to the imperial chambers. The lighting was better when Muzzie was in residence, but there was still enough light to see. No noise, which tended to imply that no one had tried to get past Runa and those who guarded the main doors.

“Left seems a sensible direction.” Muttered Maya. “How about you Uula.....Does left sound a good idea ?”

Nothing, not a sound, or even a nod from the child’s head. Maya turned left, which went deeper into the buildings at the Void Gate. Maya had explored, she tended to explore everywhere. There were places to hide by turning left, places even Muzzie probably wasn’t aware of.

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