

The Last Emperor

Chapter 2 – The Silver Lady

“Vella liked the storeroom, it had proper lights. Probably some kind of magic from the Lady, but the lamps along the wall looked real. The yellow light they produced, reminded Vella of their rooms in the Dome.”



Galla waited for someone to use a spell to create light, but it seemed everyone else had the same idea. They were in the dark and in an unknown location. It was sensible to conserve what magical abilities you possessed. She could hear them all muttering in the dark, though no one was throwing light orb magic up to the ceiling. Maybe none of them were that keen to see where they'd been sent to ?

Galla used a little gesture magic, a simple cantrip, described in the air with her left hand. A glowing ball of light appeared above her head and floated slowly towards the ceiling. She created another, and then another. Nice to have enough light to see the large chamber, but Galla was sure she knew where they were.

“You have the hand, Muzzie.” Said Galla. “Save an old apothecary some work....Light this chamber, so there are no worrying shadows, or dark corners.”

“Yes, of course.....Sorry.” Said Muzzie.

Muzzie was clutching the now complete Hand of Arcadis. Just the finger had given him more power than most in the Sorcerers Guild. She almost dreaded to think how much power he had now. A mere wave of his hand produced a line of bright lights, right up against the ceiling.

“This place looks to have seen better days.” Said Caspian. “Anyone have any idea where we are ?”

Galla hadn't intended to ignore Caspian's question, especially as she was fairly certain where they were. It was just that the consequences of being there were filling her mind, as they'd soon be occurring to everyone.

“Oh, my poor bird.....It will die.” Yelled Galla.

“A bird....My poor son might soon be an orphan.” Snapped Vella.

“Your child will be well looked after.” Said Galla. “My bird will starve to death in its cage.”

“The air has a strange smell.” Said Aeony.

Galla looked around the stone chamber and it really did look a bit squalid. The smell was probably nothing but stale air mixed with decay. There had been furniture once, tables and chairs that were now nothing but rotting wood. There was a feeling of age about the place, which reinforced her certainty of where they were. Sadly, there didn't appear to be a door to enter or leave the chamber.

“I think we're still in the city.” Said Sensan. “I've seen and heard about the deep parts of Old Town. We'll just need to find a way up to the surface.”

“Thank you, at least someone is trying to be helpful.” Said Vella.

“We're on the fourth rift; the smell in the air is unmistakable.” Said Galla. “Ignore the smell of decay and it's there, the background scent of the rift.....Though the fourth rift is a large place.”

“Yes, yes.....Galla is right.” Said Aeony. “I recognise it now.....I hate this rift, too much sand, too many deserts and far too hot.”

“My bird would have loved it here; he always hated cold winters in the city.” Said Galla.

Vella made a noise at the back of her throat. They'd always got on well in the past, but that had been in the city. Someone had sent them into the rifts though, a long way from home. Attitudes would change and Vella might turn into an enemy. Galla decided not to over think the fate of her bird. There was nothing she could do and he had achieved a remarkable age, for a bird. She looked at the others, marking them off on a mental list. She wondered how many would live to see their home again.

"Is Adamaz here?" Galla Asked. "I thought he was with us in LLud Narren's rooms."

"No, he was sleeping in the room used for the anniversary." Said Aeony.

"A pity.....A good librarian is always useful." Said Galla. "All that knowledge.....They soak it up like a sponge."

Caspian took offence at that for some bizarre reason and Galla realised everyone was probably scared. She knew she wasn't thinking that clearly. There were eight of them in the stone chamber and there weren't enough skilled fighters. Not that you could have too many warriors in such a situation.

Sensan was head of the Guild of Thraan, with everything that implied about his ability to fight and kill his enemies.

There was herself of course, with her own innate skills in magic. There were still two powders in her pocket that would kill just about anything. To Galla, that made her one of the most lethal people in the small group.

"Ahhhh....I just needed to focus." Said Galla. "I see the way out."

"Where is it?" Asked Runa.

Runa had training and good ancestry on her side. Her entire family for many generations, had been high up in the command of the city's army, when there had been an army to command. Eventually there would be an enemy to fight and Runa would prove her worth.

"I'll show you." Said Galla.

She'd ended up on the grubby floor, as had most of the others. Galla's bones and joints had seen a lot of cold damp winters though. It was awkward to stand, so Celli came to help her.

"Thank you.....Good to have someone here with good manners." Said Galla.

Celli must have been in the LLud rooms to be curious; there was no other reason for her to have been in those rooms. Celli was a casual, a waitress hired by the hour. Still, it was nice to have someone with the decency to help her to her feet. Galla found her mind drifting a little, as she walked towards a stone wall. Nothing immediately unusual about the wall, but Galla had many useful abilities.

"Yes.....I see it clearly now." Said Galla.

"What do you see, old friend?" Asked Muzzie.

Muzzie was there of course, the best tavern owner in the city. Were they friends? Galla thought they probably were, at least for now. None of them would be returning home soon though, her empath side was certain of that. For all she knew, Muzzie might not be her friend by the time she was in her shop again.

"You'll see." Said Galla. "You will see."

"I hate empaths.....All vague comments and strange stares." Said Aeony.

Aeony had to be the one out of the group, who was certain to survive. Dark angels were famously tough, or infamously dangerous, depending on if you were on their side. There was also the chance that some of her dark angel sisters, might come looking for her.

"Just tell us what you see, Galla." Snapped Caspian.

Caspian and Vella, the last of the eight. They still looked like two naughty children, getting involved in adult problems. They'd been through a lot though and couldn't be written off. Of course, none of them had been exactly well armed. No one expects to need armour and weapons at a wedding anniversary celebration.

"Here.....A nice wide doorway." Said Galla. "Human architecture by the look of it. If forced to take a guess, I'd say we're in part of Ingar Sans, in the centre of the worst desert on the fourth rift."

Ingar Sans, one of the oldest of the human temples to their own foul deities. It was one of the few places they could be on the fourth rift, with human style arches and underground chambers. Galla waved her hand at the wall to clear the simple hiding spell.

"Wide, but a very solid looking door." Said Muzzie. "I could blast it open.....Though that would look silly, if it's unlocked."

Galla put out her hand and had just given the door a push, when she felt something approaching. It might have been her removing the hide spell, but something was on its way. When it was close Galla realised what was about to arrive among them. She moved back from the door with some speed, surprising speed considering the way her joints ached.

"Get back.....It's the Lady.....Back." Said Galla.

"Who ?" Asked Sensan.

"Fool.....Only speak in her presence when spoken to." Said Galla.

"Upset the Silver Lady and none of us will ever see the city again." Said Aeony.

Some would know of the Lady and some wouldn't. It would only take one thing, one piece of what might be taken as disrespect. The Lady was known to punish disrespect by skinning and the crushing of bones.

"I still.....Who is approaching ?" Asked Sensan.

"Shut up.....Keep quiet." Said Muzzie.

"Speak again and I'll rip out your throat and offer you to her as a sacrifice." Said Aeony.

She'd want a blood sacrifice, the Lady always did. Galla looked around the room again, wondering who would be selected. There had to be a gift of blood though. As the door opened, Galla found it hard not to react. She wasn't surprised when Vella gasped.

"Galla, I have your strange pet." Said the Lady. "I could hardly let the poor thing starve. You have your faults, but you always put Ashunt blooms on my altar, on my feast days."

Sturdy looking legs and no less than six strong arms. The Silver Lady looked formidable, even without the raw magical power she could wield. In many ways her beautiful face was the most concerning thing about her appearance. That reputation for savagery, yet the Lady had such a wonderful face, almost the face of an angel.

"Thank you, the stupid bird means a lot to me." Said Galla.

Recovering her pet meant going close to the deity, though she wasn't really a God. The Silver Lady had been there before the city, a force for chaos who ruled that part of the first rift. Not a chaos lord, or an ancient one, the Lady had existed before any of them. Even the most ancient books in the great library, couldn't be precise about her. Apparently female, incredibly powerful and likely to be a one off, something created when the multiverse had been nothing but fire and dust. Galla got close enough to take her bird from one of the Lady's hands.

"Stupid Galla." Muttered the bird.

"Now, now.....Behave." Said Galla.

He knew when to be quiet and he knew when to burrow himself under her many layers of clothing. She did love the bird and might even give it a name, eventually. There he was, under her jacket and blouse, with just his scruffy head looking out.

"I am here, to finally carry out a favour for an Old God." Said the Lady.

Even her voice was beautiful and gentle, though Galla knew the Lady had skinned and devoured many who'd had the stupidity to irritate her. Even her temple in the city, was ritually cleansed during the time of full darkness. Cleansing meant dismembering anyone in the temple, who the Lady thought shouldn't have been there. It was said she enjoyed devouring the members of other sects of chaos, of which there were many.

"Tomma-Goran wished for Mussaneth Osranetherer to be cursed by prophecy." Said the Lady. "I am here to give Muzzie a destiny, a place in the history of the rifts. Muzzie is destined to become the Last Emperor of all the rifts, from Gateway to the Well of Souls."

The Lady stopped talking and looked them over, as if daring any of them to naysay her, or tell her she was wrong. There wasn't a single dissenting voice.

"You seven must give an oath to go with Muzzie on his journey." Said the Lady. "You have no option, but break your oath and you will feel my wrath. I must warn you, there will be no returning to the City of the Lost God, until Leng itself has accepted Muzzie as their lawful emperor. Try to return before then and your blood will boil in your veins."

There were eight of them, not seven, though Galla wasn't about to mention it. The blood sacrifice of course, there was always a gift of blood, always. Then they'd be seven. Of course, there had to be someone who didn't understand the way of such things.....

"Great Lady, there are eight of us." Said Muzzie.

"Tomma-Goran was owed more than a few favours." Said the Lady. "I owe no one in this room anything. My time and the provisions I can provide, will need to be paid for. You may choose who, or I will decide, but one of you will become a sacrifice of blood."

According to legend, the Silver Lady had once demanded a similar sacrifice from the famous Tarin, when he'd been about to enter the dreadful catacombs beneath the city. Tarin had chosen badly that day.....The Lady always asked for blood and as a rule, it was best to let her decide on a suitable sacrifice.

"I humbly suggest that you choose whoever you feel is worthy." Said Galla.

No one liked that, but the alternative was likely to involve the settling of old scores. As a group, they were likely to sacrifice the most powerful warrior, or the most powerful magic user. They might even select Galla. She hadn't exactly gone out of her way to befriend most of them. No, it had to be the Lady who chose.

"I agree, the choice must be yours." Said Aeony.

"Yes, choose someone worthy." Added Muzzie.

It might have been that Muzzie's opinion counted the most; he was the one being cursed by prophecy. No more listening to what was said, the Lady moved towards Celli. It had to be Celli, though Galla pitied the poor girl. She wasn't one of them, not part of the group who'd entered the rooms to see Muzzie display the withered bone that gave him so much power. She'd been there out of pure curiosity. Celli would have as much blood in her veins as most in the room, but her death wouldn't weaken the group.

"My choice is made." Said the Lady.

The girl didn't beg for her life, or say anything. The Lady's six hands suddenly each held a long sharp blade. Most turned away, but Galla watched as Celli was sliced into unrecognisable pieces. Not

watching seemed disrespectful to the one being sacrificed. Giving their life as a sacrifice, was the last thing they'd ever do. Celli screamed twice and neither time was particularly loud. When the Silver Lady began to consume the girl, Galla lowered her head until it was all over. If it was all meant partly as a threat to the others, it worked. Galla was a good empath, a very good empath. She could feel the fear in just about everyone. Only Muzzie seemed totally immune, but it was his big day.

"Now.....One at a time, you must give an oath to follow Muzzie until he becomes emperor, or die in the attempt."

The Lady was covered in Celli's blood, which meant there were no objections, no questions. Galla was third to give the oath and it was quite complex. Blood boiling in veins was a constant theme. Try to kill Muzzie, trap him inside anywhere, generally try to be anything other than totally useful to Muzzie.....Your blood would boil. A good solid oath with terrible consequences for not keeping to it. Galla could see the obvious problem. Pretty soon, everyone would think of Muzzie as a millstone around their neck and hate him. There had been nothing about sarcastic comments to Muzzie, so Galla was hoping she'd get away with a lot of those. One good thing though, the Silver Lady had considered the issue about supplies and weapons.

"Ingar Sans is a large place, much of it in a dangerous condition." Said the Lady. "Don't wander far away from this room. There is a store room opposite this chamber. Weapons and armour are in there, with enough food and water to last for a journey of several days. Take what you need and wait for me to return. I need to have a talk with Mussaneth Osranetherer, your future emperor."

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Muzzie followed the Silver Lady, out of the stone chamber. She turned several corners and even clambered over the rubble from a cave-in. Eventually; she opened a heavy wooden door and entered a large, but empty chamber. It wasn't terrifying being alone with the Lady, though he'd have rather been somewhere else, actually just about anywhere else. At least she was no longer covered in Celli's blood. A nod of her head and two chairs appeared in the room.

"Sit Muzzie.....Sit.....We're far enough away from Galla here. Even she won't pick up your thoughts through such thick walls. I have a story to tell you and you aren't going to like it."

As the Lady sat, her six arms merged to become just two. He would never have ever thought of her as normal in any way. She did seem to have a deity style persona though and an informal one when required. A table appeared, with a metal jug and two pewter cups. She poured for him; the Lady actually filled his cup.

"A good wine.....Drink up, Muzzie. You've got a long way to travel and a near impossible task ahead of you."

Her transformation was complete; he was sat opposite a fairly normal looking woman, though there was still something troubling about her eyes. Her clothes were now similar to those worn by the nobility of the city. He sipped the wine and thought 'the don't talk unless spoken to' rule, probably didn't apply anymore.

"Thank you, the wine is excellent." He said.

"I have a confession Muzzie and a piece of knowledge.....Tomma-Goran was a friend, but he's now gone. Boiled away into the void, though few know that. I agreed to help move on his prophecy about an emperor for all the rifts. I became busy though and favours for dead friends, never seem that urgent."

"Oh, so I'm not going to be emperor after all?" He asked.

"I hope you will fulfil the prophecy, though.....The confession....It was never about you. It was supposed to have been a human general, from the age when they ruled the City of the Lost God. His name has faded from history, but it was supposed to have been him."

Muzzie filled his cup with wine, assuming he was allowed to. To be polite he did fill her cup too. The wine was good, but it wasn't shifting the pain between his eyes. Cursed by a prophecy that had been intended for a human general.....Lilleth would have laughed for days.

"It's all.....A bit of a shock." He said. "But....You really think I can do it, become emperor of all the rifts?"

"Yes I do....And I'll help you, when I can." She said. "Don't expect me to appear when called, but I will give you as much help as I may. I owe it to Tomma-Goran."

"Even though he wanted the other guy, the human." He said.

The Silver Lady just sort of shrugged at him. He had the six who'd taken an oath to follow him across the rifts and the help of the Silver Lady. Somewhere inside, he was beginning to believe, he might actually be able to fulfil the prophecy.

"I will do my best." He said. "Can I have Lilleth added to the group? We have fought together for many, many years."

"No, Muzzie.....Use what you've been given. One more confession, the prophecy might never have been triggered. You could well have lived a long and happy life as a tavern owner. LLud Narren set a trap in his room, based around someone finding the Hand of Arcadis. A prophecy from a long time ago began and because it was put in place by an Old God, it must run its course. You must become emperor Muzzie, or die in the attempt."

"Strangely.....I'm actually quite happy." He said. "It's as if my existence suddenly matters. My mother always believed I was destined to be more than just a barkeeper. It's a pity she's not alive to see me become emperor."

He finished his wine and waited to be told what came next. Maybe it was just his imagination, but the Silver Lady was smiling at him. The stories about those she'd killed were true; he'd heard first-hand accounts from those he trusted. There was definitely another side to her.

"Time for you to pick a weapon and fill a pack with supplies." Said the Lady. "One last thing.....You'll need to keep them on your side. The threats about what will occur if they turn on you. They're all fake.....They're scared now, but one day one of them will try their luck. Aeony would be my guess. You need to be their friend Muzzie, or they might cut you to pieces."

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"Ingar Sans is at the centre of a desert." Said Aeony. "Miles of dunes and heavy winds, to get to even the closest town. Lots of sand storms, so pick clothing that can cover your face."

Vella liked the storeroom, it had proper lights. Probably some kind of magic from the Lady, but the lamps along the wall looked real. The yellow light they produced, reminded Vella of their rooms in the Dome. There were the smells from the food too, and being able to nibble from bags of dried fruit. It all felt so different to when they'd arrived in the dark, stone chamber. Not that she was going to quickly forget how Celli had been killed.

"Now.....This sword was made for you." Said Caspian.

He'd been finding weapons for himself and now seemed obsessed with finding a rapier for her, or a good quality short sword. Her problem was refusing everything he found, without offending the father of her child and love of her life. As always, there was a moment for honesty.

"That is the ideal weapon for you, Casp." She said. "I'll find my own weapons. I'm thinking of three or four smaller blades, with three of them hidden among my clothing."

“And the fourth on your hip ?” Asked Sensan.

She hadn't even noticed him standing there, listening to them.

“Yes, one on the hip to discourage undesirables.” Said Vella. “At one time we travelled with a bit of a rogue called Waide. She's dead now, but she always said to never have just one blade. If it breaks, you've nothing left to defend yourself with, apart from a winning smile.”

“My father knew Waide; he had lots of stories about her.” Said Sensan. “Good idea about four blades. You're a natural.”

Poor Caspian was left looking at the blade he'd selected for her, as though it might bite him.

“For you, Caspian.....I recommend a curved blade and a dagger under your jacket.” Said Sensan.

Caspian went off with Sensan, to find that perfect weapon. There was a lot of choice and some really nice clothing and armour. Vella was pleased to be left alone, as she went through wooden tray after wooden tray, all full of wonderful looking blades. Not that all the weapons appeared to have been honestly acquired.

“No Runa, you can't have this sword.” Said Aeony. “I found it at the bottom of a pile of armour and I'm going to keep it.”

“But it has my family crest on the hilt.” Said Runa.

No more feuds and rows to get involved in, there had been enough of those. Vella wandered towards the back of the storeroom. Aeony and Runa would sort it out; there was the whole boiling blood threat if they turned on one another. Vella already had a decent blade on her hip and in a broken barrel; she saw the glint of well-made tempered steel.

“Wow, as if they were waiting for me.” She muttered.

Really good craftsmanship and steel tempered just long enough to be hard but not brittle. Three of them, all slightly different, but all of the same wonderful quality. All three had worn but useable scabbards. Vella was hiding the last one down the top of her boot, when Galla began to shout.

“The Lady.....She's returned.” Yelled Galla. “We're leaving; it's time to go out onto the rift.”

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Sensan had been in the city looking for finance, though he knew everyone thought he was there to see a client. As his clients tended to want someone killed, he knew there was no chance he'd become best friends with anyone in the group. The Guild of Thraan was going through a particularly lean period; people still remembered how his father had died. Not that he could explain his true reason for being in the city that day.

“When I open the door, walk in a straight line for about a mile.” Said the Lady. “If there are no sandstorms and the light is right.....To your left you should be able to see the top of the high tower of Seren's Edge.”

“Seren's Edge must be three or four days hard walking from here.” Said Aeony. “And I've heard it's now home to a gang of rogue hybrids who attack anyone on sight.”

The Silver Lady opened the huge outside doors to the last part of Ingar Sans still standing. In front of them lay miles of dunes and a heat that instantly dried the skin on Sensan's face. There was no sandstorm and not that much wind, yet it still felt like looking out on a part of hell.

“Crap.....May Nigon protect us all.” Muttered Vella.

“I doubt it; he's been dead since the third age of the city.” Said the Lady. “I never said fulfilling the prophecy was going to be easy. Ignore my suggestion if you like and find the closest friendly rift town. Not that there are many of those.”

“My destiny, my choice.” Said Muzzie. “Tell me who we're going to see at Seren's Edge ? I'm assuming we're going there to see someone.”

Muzzie had been quiet since his private discussion with the Silver Lady. Mentioning his destiny and his decision, sounded very much as though he was issuing his first order, as leader of their group. Muzzie was large enough and strong enough, to deserve respect, even without the oath they'd all taken.

"Fine.....Who are we looking for in Seren's Edge ?" Asked Aeony.

"Xanash was the thirty fourth emperor, though many legends always said he wasn't to be the last." Said the Lady. "He is long dead, though by some miracle his grandfather is still alive. Pio-Xanash may just be lucky and very long lived, or he really might be favoured by one of the Old Gods. Anyway.....Make sure he doesn't die in the battle. He owns the only general supplies store in Seren's Edge. Talk to him and then.....You're on your own."

The doors were almost closed behind them, when Caspian shouted the obvious question.

"What battle ?" He yelled.

"Aeony is right, rogue hybrids have infested Seren's Edge." Shouted the Lady. "They're brutal, vicious and will attack just about anyone they don't like the look of."

The doors clanged shut in a way that indicated they wouldn't be opening again. As if on cue, a slight wind picked up the sand and blew it in their faces.

"Cover your faces." Said Galla.

A little while to get faces covered, with a few of them needing help. Once they were ready, Muzzie issued an order they were destined to hear far too many times.

"Come on, we need to be moving. The day isn't getting any younger."

No one looked back at the doors, as though hoping they might open again. Sensan found it quite encouraging, that everyone was putting one foot in front of the other. Vella had a child waiting for her in the city, yet there she was, trudging across the dunes of the fourth rift. Sensan had creditors waiting to pounce and everyone would have somewhere they'd rather have been. Yet, they were there, following the barkeeper who wanted to be emperor.

"Anyone know how much full daylight we have left ?" Asked Caspian.

"About five hours until we need to make camp for the night." Said Galla.

"With what ?" Asked Caspian. "We don't have tents, or even any blankets."

"We huddle together and wait for full light.....We'll be fine." Said Muzzie.

"Keep an eye open for sand growlers." Said Galla. "They tend to hunt in the hour or so before total darkness."

"And they're certain to be hungry." Added Runa.

There was always someone in any group, who wouldn't let anything go. There's looked like it was going to be Caspian.

"Aeony has wings.....Couldn't she go on ahead and look for Xanash's grandfather ? She could bring him back to us, if he isn't too heavy."

Aeony gave Caspian a look which would have worried a Shelzak demon.

"Not a good idea, they're bound to attack me." Said Aeony. "I'll have to defend myself and if thing turn out especially bad, the man we need to see will be killed. I've fought in many battles on the rifts, trust me.....We need to stay together."

"Aeony is right.....We stay together and fight together." Said Muzzie.

Caspian looked about to argue about it, until Vella whispered something to him. A few minutes later, Aeony's dark angel eyes, spotted the top of the high tower at Seren's Edge.

"There....There." Yelled Aeony, while pointing.

"I can see it.....Just about." Said Sensan.

They turned left, or rather Muzzie headed towards the high tower and they followed. Sensan heard at least two sighs, when Caspian asked his next question.

“What happens if a sandstorm hides the tower ?”

“Then we do the huddling together business, until the storm passes.” Said Muzzie. “You have no servants here Caspian, no apprentices to do your bidding. You’re going to have to learn how to rough it out on the rifts.”

“We’ve fought in worse places than this.” Said Vella.

“I’m sure you have.” Said Muzzie.

Shortly after that the sand growlers attacked. Sensan had seen the ordinary growlers, who legend said had originated in a place called Ixir. They’d spread across many worlds and were even found in the dark, sinister places in the City of the Lost God. The sewers mainly, where they lived in an uneasy balance of power with the lizards. The sand growlers were larger than their smaller kin in the city. And as had been predicted by Runa, they seemed hungry.

“Damned things.....Just keep stabbing at them until they stop moving.” Said Aeony.

When they bit, they bit hard. Sensan yelled as one took a piece out of his left leg. He heard others cry out too, as the hungry brutes clawed and bit. Like large insects, they had many legs and a tough shell. Even Muzzie with his strength, was having to hit them many times. By the time the last one was either dead or immobile, everyone had bloody wounds. It was the first unpopular order from Muzzie, the first real test of his leadership.

“No washing wounds.....Use spare clothing as bandages.” Yelled Muzzie. “We’re still a long way from Seren’s Edge and we’ll need every single drop of water we’re carrying.”

Of course, Caspian just had to surprise everyone.

“He’s right; from now on our water is only for drinking.”

“I have a few healing unguents in my bag.” Added Galla. “I always carry a few with me and some potions to take the sting out of bites.”

There were a few mutters, but no one demanded water to wash wounds. It was getting close to full dark by the time everyone had been treated. As Muzzie pointed out, time to clean wounds was a bit of a luxury.

“Next time we may need to keep fighting on the run.”

No one fancied sleeping next to the pile of dead sand growlers, especially after Aeony said they happily fed on their own dead.

“Others will come to feed on the ones we killed.”

Even in semi darkness and feeling tired, they still managed to walk a fair distance further towards the high tower. It was only the tower vanishing into the darkness, which brought them to a halt. Not that it was total darkness for all of them. A good half of their number could see well in the ultraviolet background wash.

“Dark or not, we need to organise a watch.” Said Muzzie. “Do I have any volunteers ?”

“I can see perfectly....I’ll take first watch.” Said Galla.

Sensan had a little Shelzak in his ancestry, which gave him decent vision in ultraviolet. He volunteered and Aeony agreed to cover the last watch, the one that would end as full light arrived.

“We can look for tents and blankets in Seren’s Edge.” Said Muzzie. “For now, it’s not going to be that comfortable.”

“Yes, Muzzie.....We get huddled down.” Said Caspian.

No one had washed that day and the desert sands were hot. As Sensan huddled down, he hoped he wasn't the only one to have developed a hot hybrid odour. Moving about and getting close to the others, made him realise he wasn't the only who'd begun to smell a bit over ripe.

"Keep your weapons close." Muttered Muzzie.

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After three nights sleeping badly and three days living on dried fruit, Muzzie was feeling decidedly bad tempered. Not that he didn't like dried fruit, but for every meal, every day.... He didn't just fancy a little meat in his diet, he needed it. Add on not washing since the morning of the anniversary feast and he'd already decided Seren's Edge had to at least provide a decent meal, a bed for the night and a minimum of one hot bath. Even if he had to slaughter every psychotic rogue hybrid to get it.....

"I thought the high tower would be more impressive." Muttered Caspian.

"Built by humans over ten thousand years ago." Said Aeony. "One day it'll collapse completely and after that.....No one will be able to find the town."

"It looks a shit hole." Added Runa.

A shit hole with a fresh water well, a store full of supplies and the grandfather of the last emperor worthy of the name. Even if they didn't need to talk to Pio-Xanash, Muzzie knew they had to enter the town as harmless traders, or fight for what they needed. Oh....and preferably without killing the incredibly old guy who knew something important.

"What's the plan ?" Asked Sensan. "We can't just stroll into town."

They were all hiding behind some half prepared stones in the town quarry. It was the way most human towns had been built and most of the hybrid ones too. Nomadic peoples wandered the rifts looking for where the bedrock came to the surface. They'd then quarry the stones and build a town. The problem was that most rift towns were miles from any other rift towns. Seren's Edge was a shit hole, but compared to many hybrid towns, it was positively thriving.

"Who was Seren ?" Asked Vella.

"A hybrid wise woman who cured a famous warrior of a terrible disease." Said Galla.

"I heard she found something thought lost forever." Said Aeony.

"Yeah, I heard that.....Then they named the place after her." Added Muzzie.

"There are a lot of similar stories on the rifts." Said Galla.

A shit hole of a town named after a holy woman who'd either cured the local hero, or found something. The depressing thing was that the rift was full of such tales, most of them nonsense. Sensan was looking at him in a meaningful way, as was Aeony. Muzzie remembered they were expecting him to come up with a plan. Ordering staff about in the tavern had been easy, though he mainly yelled a lot and relied on various underpaid managers.

"I'm assuming the house with washtubs and barrels outside, is the store." Said Muzzie. "Could you fly there, Aeony.....And carry Xanash's grandfather back here ?"

"That.....Was my idea." Snapped Caspian.

"We're closer now.....Close enough to help Aeony if she's attacked." Said Muzzie.

"We stick together and fight together." Muttered Vella.

If Aeony's expression was pouring scorn on the idea, at least she didn't say it out loud.

"He might be in the bar, there's always a bar in these places." Said Aeony. "Then I have no idea what he looks like.....And he might not want to come peacefully. The main problem though is not knowing how the rogue hybrids might react. They might see us as people arriving to spend a little gold.....Or....."

"They could begin firing arrows at us, the instant we come into view." Said Sensan.

“Precisely.” Said Aeony.

There was only one way Muzzie could see, to find out whether the citizens of Seren’s Edge would view them as friend or foe. His idea was a little drastic, some might say foolhardy. Muzzie’s mind thought it was a good plan, because it was likely to mean it would get him closer to a hot bath and a decent meal. As if trying to push his decision along a risky path, Muzzie caught a smell of cooking coming from the town. It might have been someone frying up a dead growler, but he didn’t care. “Aeony will keep hidden and be our backup.” Said Muzzie. “The rest of us will walk into town as though we own the place.”

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