

The Last Emperor

Chapter 1 – An Anniversary

“So many people had developed their own theories about why Muzzie had left The City of the Lost God. If it had just been him vanishing that day, it would have been put down to Muzzie being Muzzie, the eccentric owner of the best tavern in the city. The others going too though, that turned a mystery into something truly perplexing.

Aeony the queen of the dark angels had been abducted at the same time. Abducted was the favourite theory, even if it would have taken a small army to overpower Aeony. Caspian had vanished, along with his wife, Vella. Many thought of the loss of Caspian, as a major tragedy for the city. Tavern owners come and go, but heirs to the headship of the great library.....They really mattered.

The library brought the travellers and those seeking all manner of minor spells. Yes, losing Caspian was a huge blow for the City of the Lost God. They'd left behind a nine year old child, a boy called Olvir. He was well looked after, the library looked after its own. Other too had gone, vanished without trace. Seven in total, a number the guilds thought might well be significant. No one really knew where the seven had gone to, not for many, many years.....”



~ Two days before they vanished ~

Mussaneth Osranetherer, known to most as Muzzie, liked going on the occasional hunt in the sewers, especially when he was being paid. Imperial gold pieces too, not Tandalla coins that were notorious for their impurities. Adamaz had hired him and left it to him to hire his own half dozen or so fighters to help in the hunt. Why had Aeony tagged along ? He'd known the dark angel for many years and as far as he could tell, she was there purely out of a love of the hunt. Aeony was with him at a junction of two major tunnels. They'd both been watching the hired fighters, working out who was, and who wasn't, worth their pay.

“The big man from Avald.” Said Aeony. “Looks like a farmer to me. I doubt if he'll be seeing his home again.”

“He does seem ill at ease most of the time.” Said Muzzie. “Holds his blade as though it might bite him....Never a good sign.”

No wagers, even Muzzie drew the line at betting which of their mercenaries, was going to be killed by the sewer lizards. The lizards were fairly rare, but so were the hunts. Very dangerous, every group of hunters lost at least one fighter. It cost a lot to hire hunters to go after the lizards, but Adamaz had funded the entire hunt and any incidentals. His gift to Caspian and Vella, for the tenth anniversary of their marriage.

“No bets, that would anger the Gods.” Said Muzzie. “I think we'll lose the sorcerer from Quron.”

“Her.....She's the only one of them with a little fame.” Said Aeony.

“Yes....But sewer tunnels don't suit magic users.”

“Nonsense.....I'll bet five imperial on the farmer dying first.” Said Aeony.

At one time five imperial would have been a huge sum to him. Recently though, his tavern had been doing well. Merchants from along the pilgrim trail, were filling his rooms. Still, he'd wagered money on far worse evils than the death of a farmer from Avald.

“Make it ten.....I’ll take the sorcerer to die first.”

No shaking hands, he trusted the dark angel and she trusted him, or at least he hoped she did. They nodded at one another and the bet was accepted. Dark angels wore little when hunting, or at most other times. Taller than he liked his women to be, but he wasn’t immune to Aeony’s charms. There was the perfume too, the aroma of an excited dark angel. A mixture of the scent of a female and powerful pheromones. He’d slept with Aeony a few times in the past and the experience had been wonderful and terrifying, in about equal parts.

“Lizards.....I can see lizards.” Someone shouted.

“Good, I was worried we might return without meat for the banquet.” Said Muzzie.

Sewer lizards looked a little like the six legged growlers, who infested parts of the rifts. Tougher though, stronger and far more dangerous than any growler. Strange to hunt for meat in a filthy, stinking sewer, but the flesh of a sewer lizard was the most delicious delicacy on the rifts. Only the meat of a female though, the males tasted like fresh vomit. There was an added problem, of course there was. Something that tasted delicious in the sewers, below a city of hungry hybrids. There’d be no lizards left if they were easy to hunt. Sewer lizards mated for life. Kill the female and you faced a male in berserker rage. Kill the male and ditto, the female wanted to kill you and everyone with you. Every lizard hunt lost one fighter, often two.

“Come on Muzzie.....Run, or we’ll miss the fun.” Shouted Aeony.

Muzzie couldn’t stop himself doing it, putting his hand on the wall at tight turns in the sewer tunnels. The dreadful stain on his hands, was going to take days to wash off. He’d just caught up with Aeony, only to realise they’d both been wrong. Not far away, a female lizard was busy disembowelling a fighter from the city, one of regulars from the grubby hell hole that Barus had the nerve to call a tavern.

“The bet still stands.” Said Aeony.

“Fine.”

The females had a red mark on the back of their heads, just about the only way to tell if you faced a male or a female. Muzzie did it from of years of battle reflexes. Contained in his belt was a finger, now little more than a piece of very ancient bone. The Hand of Arcadis, or what was left of it. The rest of the hand hadn’t been seen for several millennia. As he thought of the magic available through the finger bone, he called out to Aeony.

“Keep back, I’m going to use dark magic.....Keep Back.”

He didn’t think it through, or he might have fought the female for a while, giving his own fighters a chance to get to him. It was all about reflexes though and on the whole, his had served him well over the years. A disruptive spell to destroy the lizard’s internal organs, without ruining the flash. A list of spells rose up in front of him, which only his eyes could see. The lizard refused to wait though and was advancing on Aeony.

“Anytime you’re ready.....Barkeeper.” Shouted Aeony.

Muzzie had defeated many enemies with the bone finger, even one who was supposed to be unkillable. He mentally selected the disruption spell and unleashed it at the female lizard. It worked well, usually the bone finger did far better than he’d expected. The lizard cried out, a truly pitiful sound. For a second, Muzzie actually felt a little pity for the dying brute. Its body glowed for a moment, a brownish tinge that seemed to hurt it. Then it was dead and lying in the filth. Aeony used her long prehensile tail, to prod the dead beast.

“Definitely dead.....But you know what happens now.” Said Aeony.

“The male will come for us.”

There was an angry shriek and the sound of something large running through water. When Muzzie heard a very hybrid sounding gurgle, he knew they'd got things slightly wrong, again. Aeony was quicker than him at realizing it wasn't them the male was attacking.

"It's going after the others." Yelled Aeony.

How the male knew its mate was dead, was just one of the secret mysteries the rift was likely to keep. Some kind of mental signal, electricity through the sewer water, or maybe it simply heard the female's dying breath. It knew though and it was going to kill them all, or die in the attempt.

"This way.....Behind us." Shouted Aeony.

Her hearing was so sharp, her reflexes so good. Not for the first time, the dark angel was making him realise he was getting on a bit, even for a demon hybrid. Muzzie had the usual four arms and two muscular legs of a high level, pure blood demon. His skin had the faint red colour too, which denoted purity of demon blood. The lower set of arms gave away his hybrid status. They were stubs, barely formed. There was some Dredger demon in him and a tiny amount of Shelzak. The real damage to him socially though, was the small amount of Genova, or angels as most called them. Muzzie was tolerated in the city, but that little bit of angel in his ancestry....He'd be killed on sight in some parts of the rifts. They could always tell though, the damned pure bloods could always tell what he was.

"Crap.....That fucking thing has just cost me ten imperial." Shouted Aeony.

It was a constant game of catch-up, with them always arriving a little late. The male lizard had killed the sorcerer and was biting lumps out of her soft parts. It seemed to like the taste of sorcerer, judging by the look on its face as it chewed. Aeony went crazy, hurtling at the angry male. Muzzie considered that by organising the hunt, he'd done his part in obtaining meat for the banquet. Not to mention that he alone, had killed the female.

He felt no shame in watching, as Aeony and the surviving fighters took on the sewer lizard. Aeony really, she had the hardened end to her tail, that was as sharp as a spear tip. She had the razor like claws and strength. Some of the other fighters managed to land blows, but it was really Aeony who killed the male lizard. When it was over, the dark angel kicked the lifeless carcass.

"Are you sure it's inedible, Muzzie?" Aeony asked. "It seems such a waste of meat."

"Trust me; the males have the foulest taste of anything on the rifts."

"If you say so.....You're the expert."

The surviving fighters would deal with the bodies of the fallen. No compensation for their families, the dead had already been well paid. Their names would be given as part of the anniversary ceremony and written into a memoir of the day. Immortality of a sort and definitely a better end than most fighters on the rifts. As for Muzzie.....He was going to be using his hybrid strength to carry the dead female lizard to The Dome.

"We mustn't forget the reason we're here.....The meat." He said.

Almost a relief to find the dead female lizard was still there, though it would have taken something with huge strength, to carry it away. Muzzie had enough Dredger demon in him to carry the carcass with relative ease. First he slapped his huge hand against the back of the dead lizard.

"Yes, plenty of flesh on her.....Everyone at the anniversary meal will get a portion." He said.

"Or at least enough to get a taste." Said Aeony. "Vella has a large family and Adamaz seems to have invited half the Sorcerers Guild."

"Well....He is in charge of the library.....And he paid for the hunt." Said Muzzie.

Muzzie lifted the dead lizard onto his shoulder. Once again, he thought carrying home the results of a hunt, had felt easier when he'd been younger.

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~ The night before anniversary day ~

Galla had the usually yellow skin of the city, which made it obvious there was Dredger blood in her. Nearly everyone had some Dredger demon in their past, plus a few other ancestors who'd been demons of one kind or another. A tiny few had some human in the makeup and Galla was one of them. Not that anyone made a huge fuss about human blood anymore, though it still wasn't seen as something to brag about. Galla was an apothecary and an empath, probably the best still living in the city. As usual when leaving her shop, there were a lot of things to check, recheck and then check again.

"I might not be back tonight, bird." She yelled.

She was near the door to her shop, but her pet bird was in her living quarters, at the top of the building. Her pet had good ears though, despite its huge age. A good strong voice too.

"Stupid Galla.....Your keys are up here."

She had no idea what species the bird was, it had been given to her in lieu of payment, by a metal merchant seeking a very special potion. That had been.....She had to think....Close to six hundred years ago and she never had given her bird a name. It had looked close to death a few times, though there it was, squawking at her from its cage.

"Damn.....My right knee is playing up today." Muttered Galla.

Lots of steps up to where she lived, Galla tried to only climb them twice a day. Her rather moth eaten pet was looking through the bars of its spacious cage. Galla picked up her large bunch of keys and glared at her bird.

"Have I forgotten anything else?" She asked.

Silence, it was one of her bird's regular tricks. She loved her feathered friend and had fought a chaos creature one night, to protect him. There were also times when she wanted to throttle her pet, very slowly.

"I could cover your cage when I leave." Said Galla.

The threat usually worked, because it had been carried out. Rare, though there had been times when she'd left the bird in darkness for a few hours. It hated it and seemed to be scared of something in the dark....Though like her; it seemed to have a lot of strange fears and anxieties. Galla grabbed the heavy cover, which rarely went over the cage.

"I mean it.....Bird."

"Stupid Galla....Mean Galla."

"Just, tell me.....I'll bring you back a few treats."

Treats and threats, it had been the same routine for years. There were times, when her bird felt more like a tiny, feathered, scruffy....Foul mouthed child. A child who often seemed to have a better memory than her.

"You need to put a special powder in your bag." Said the bird.

"Yes, yes.....Of course. Anything else?"

"No.....Don't forget my treats."

"I won't."

Galla used the occasional potion, but like gesture magic, she considered potions to be for fools and charlatans. Her powders were all in very tough paper envelopes. The extra special ones were incredibly lethal, even Galla was very careful with them. Just the thing if she was attacked on the street, she'd used one to kill a high level servant of chaos. Tear the envelope, sprinkle the powder over your enemy and.....Zap, they were dead. Nothing had ever survived her extra special powders; she put one in her pocket, then another, just in case.

"Damn, I'll be late." Galla muttered.

"Stupid Galla."

Damned bird, she should have put a curse on the metal merchant, until he'd come up with gold to pay her, or something useful. Who needed a moth eaten bird with a huge attitude problem. Galla leant against her front door and felt the street outside. She was sure the reason most empaths were a little neurotic, was because they fully understood the dangers....Out there.

"Silver lady.....watch over me tonight." Galla mumbled.

No sign of anyone out there meaning her harm. Galla opened her front door and walked out into the street in the Old Town area of the city. It looked quite sinister at night, but then again, so did just about anywhere. Not for the first time, she locked the door behind her and wished she'd hired two guards for the night, or maybe one very tough Shelzak demon. They were incredibly tough, even Muzzie was nervous about upsetting Shelzaks.

"Stupid Galla." She heard through the door.

One day soon she was going to throttle that bird, cook it and eat it. She'd been promising herself that for at least two centuries, maybe three but one day.....

It wasn't far to the Dome, but there was a lot of waiting for trouble to pass her by. At one point, Galla used a lesser powder to change her appearance for a while. A journey that would have taken half an hour during full daylight, had taken her over an hour. Beyond the mountains behind the Dome, she could see the approaching glow of full daylight.

There was no dawn or dusk on the rifts, no real total darkness for those who could see using the constant ultraviolet background wash. At a fairly fixed time, what passed for full daylight arrived on the rifts. About fifteen imperial hours later, the daylight became the dark background wash, until daylight arrived again. Why use imperial times and dates? They worked and were consistent, whereas every major demon city on the rifts, clung to its own confusing methods of measuring the passing of time. Tandalla had their own hour and a thirty five hour day. Quron had over twenty tiny months. The City of the Lost God kept to imperial time, mainly because it worked well.

"Galla, you're early."

"I've a busy day.....Every room in the upper Dome needs to be cleansed."

An apprentice from the library, she had no idea of his name. There had been a plague in the city, twenty years before, followed by an invasion of chaos creatures. The city had survived, it always survived. Many had died and Galla no longer recognised even a third of the apprentices.

"Adamaz is in a mood." Said the apprentice.

"He always is after spending money." Said Galla.

The apprentice was standing at the door to the secret entrance to the Dome. Not really a secret, just about everyone Galla knew, could use the entrance, if there was a need. Even the walls had grubby marks, where innumerable hands had rubbed and prodded, to activate the portal. It was now less of a secret entrance and more about convenience. A way into the Dome without walking up the hundreds of steps in the Towers and crossing the bridge on a cold, rainy morning.

"Do you know the hand gestures?" Asked the apprentice.

So much for secrecy.

"Yes."

Galla rubbed her hand over the wall and prodded her index finger at a certain spot. A spinning purple portal appeared, her way into the Dome. Once there had been dangerous beasts on the stairs in the Towers, but Aeony and her dark angels had dealt with them. Rumours persisted of fearsome beasts in the flooded lower levels, but they didn't seem to bother anyone. Galla stepped into the

portal and was instantly in the Dome. More accurately she was in a corridor that would take her into the library's refectory, where she was hoping to get a hot drink.

"Galla.....Now I know everything will go well." Said Vella.

"Join me.....I need some Ashunt root tea, before I can function." Said Galla.

Vella, the young woman from the slums who'd been a barmaid at Muzzie's. There were rumours about how she'd earned money for life's little luxuries, before winning Caspian's heart. Most of the barmaids at the tavern were known to offer intimate services, but not all of them. Whatever the truth, Vella had married Caspian and given him a son. Such things tended to mean previous indiscretions being ignored, or at least not discussed. Personally....Galla liked Vella.

"Food too.....I need a second breakfast." Said Vella.

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~ Anniversary Day ~

In truth, Caspian had known from a very young age, that he wasn't handsome. He didn't even have the rugged good looks of a warrior. Let's be really, brutally truthful and then never mention it again. Caspian was short and quite yellow, with the ears of a Dredger, so there was no mistaking at least part of his makeup. Even his mother would have to admit that Caspian was fairly ugly, some might even say grotesque, which was the word the first girl to see his genitals had said. Her brothers had beaten him and he'd largely given up on a sex life. Not that he didn't have friends and admirers. Wealth, or at least the future potential for wealth can have a wonderful effect on someone's attractiveness. One day Caspian was going to take over from Adamaz and become the head of the great library. As for Vella, the young ex-barmaid with whom he was about to celebrate ten years of happy marriage.

"You live in the Dome don't you ? I've always wanted to see the Dome."

She's said that night, which now seemed so long ago. Caspian was no fool; he knew his position in the library probably had something to do with her interest in him. That was then though and they'd been through so much together. The love between them had been through a couple of rocky patches, but it was genuine and mutual. As second in command of the library and next in line for the top job, Caspian was already wealthy. He'd also developed a bit of a strut in his walk, which many thought suited him. As he entered the Dome, dressed in the finest robes the city had to offer, he knew all eyes were on him.

"Oh Caspian.....You look so handsome." Said Runa.

"Thank you..... Adamaz thought the colour was a bit too much."

"Purple suits you." Said Runa.

Runa had once worked at Muzzie's, as a replacement for Vella. Her family were highly influential, her father had been a famous general when the City of the Lost God, had the largest standing army on the rifts. Not perhaps the job Runa had dreamed of, but after Caspian had married Vella, a lot of good families saw bar work as a way for their daughters to find suitable husbands. Runa had married the son of a metal trader in The Lanes. There was quite a bit of Dredger in Runa, but she was genuinely attractive. Probably the second prettiest hybrid in the Dome, after his beloved Vella of course.

"Have you seen Vella ?" Caspian asked.

"She's in the Upper Dome, her and the boy." Said Runa.

The boy, the phrase still filled him with pride. There had been a time in his life.....When he'd become resigned to being alone. Besides Dredger, there was a lot of human in Caspian and humans can't

mate with Dredgers, the bits don't fit ! He'd become used to the look of horror when young women saw his genitals.

"Trust me, this girl is discrete and clean and won't cost a fortune."

Those words from Sara one quiet night at Muzzie's had changed Caspian's life. The girl in question actually seemed delighted at the bits he had between his legs and the sex had been both electrifying and terrifying. Everything fitted and he still remembered the feeling of exultation as the courtesan had moaned beneath him. Sara had introduced him to a number of discrete hybrid women and he put his new found confidence at least partly down to having a good, no a superb sex life. He'd stopped using Sara to find courtesans for him after Vella moved into his quarters in the Dome. Vella must have known about it, but she'd never mentioned it, or teased him. Caspian was so caught up in his thoughts, that he nearly walked past his wife and son.

"Day dreaming Casp ?" Said Vella.

"Your robe looks wonderful." Said Olvir.

His son rubbed the edge of his purple robe and Caspian's heart was full of gratitude for what he had. Neither he nor his wife seemed to have the courage of adventurers. The places they'd been though, the enemies they'd fought. Vella had even used an enchanted blade to kill a legendary Roruss. Sometimes.....Caspian thought it was a miracle they'd survived long enough to have a child.

"Has Galla finished the cleansing ?" Asked Caspian.

"Not yet, she seems obsessed with being thorough." Said Vella.

"I'll have a word with her; we need to use the rooms at the top of the Dome."

As Caspian turned, he saw his Vella stood there, in a wonderful dress. Not the well-respected wife, not the mother of his son, not the barmaid who'd asked to see the inside of the Dome. It was his Vella stood there, the girl who'd stood beside him in so many dangerous and dreadful places.

".....And... I love your dress." He said.

"Go; use your charm on Galla, Casp. Or we'll all still be waiting here tomorrow, maybe the next day."

Tomma-Goran, one of the Old Deities had built the city. Probably the most social of the deities, he'd built the city to house the faithful and as a home for himself. For many millennia, Tomma-Goran had lived among his people. The general populace were in the city, with the aristocracy living in The Towers. A bridge led to the Dome, which was built on the mountains at the northern side of the city. Tomma-Goran was a deity, he built things to last. Later additions to his city occasionally crumbled, or were brought down by ground tremors. Not his original city though, it would last forever. Especially the Dome, where the original lighting still worked, as did the plumbing. Three levels to the Dome. A lower level which was where the apprentice librarians now lived. The Upper Dome where Tomma-Goran's close circle of advisers had called home. Then on top of it all, higher than the highest mountain peak were Tomma-Goran's personal quarters, the rooms at the top of the Dome. It was in the deity's reception area, that Caspian found Galla. The empath and apothecary had put her herbal candles everywhere. The air was thick with their odour.

"Have you found anything I need to worry about ?" Asked Caspian.

"Ignore the candles; they're just part of the ritual." Said Galla.

Caspian had a soft spot for the empath. She'd once given Vella an amulet, that might well have saved her life. Tiny in stature, but her presence was huge. Caspian had seen Galla take over a crowded meeting at the Sorcerers Guild. Galla was tapping the side of her head.

"Here....Up here is where I do my best work. There is something here, but I can't work out what it is.....So frustrating, Caspian. I will understand it though, you have my word."

“Are you sensing danger ? The anniversary celebrations can be moved to the refectory in the lower level. It’ll cause a delay, but if you think that’s safer than here ?”

Galla looked confused though he’d known her long enough to know that when the empath looked confused, her mind was sorting out ideas he couldn’t even grasp. It was the day to day things that could catch her out. He’d lost track of the number of times, when he’d had to send an apprentice chasing after her, because she’d left her huge bunch of keys on his desk.

“No, not danger, I can’t feel any kind of threat.... This is worse in a way, Caspian. There is something unknown here, or at least unknown to me. That is rare, very rare.....”

Galla looked up and Caspian’s gaze followed her. They were at the very top of the Dome, right under the very top domed ceiling. There it was above them, the mural depicting Tomma-Goran, builder of the city. The Old Deities could look like demons or humans, but their true form was neither of those. Tomma-Goran had been painted in lizard form, with horns on his head and a jaw full of sharp teeth. Nothing had been sanitised, the huge lizard looked terrifying. Muscular back legs and huge claws on each of his four feet. There were rumours that Tomma-Goran, could watch his quarters, through the eyes of his painted image. Caspian found himself whispering.

“Is it him.....Is....He watching us ?”

“No, I’ve never believed that.” Said Galla. “A lot of powerful magic users have lived within these walls though.....Something is here.”

Caspian had never really believed that either, he was just feeling nervous. Would Tomma-Goran waste his time watching the mundane goings on of a dome full of hybrid librarians ? Not unless he was incredibly bored.

“It’s.....We either need to move the feast, or have it here.” Said Caspian. “The meat is being cooked and that cost Adamaz more money than the last library refurbishment. Then there are all the friends and relatives who will be arriving....Very soon. Our son has been promised his first taste of lizard meat and.....Is it safe here, Galla ? Yes....Or no ?”

Galla opened a packet for one of her famous powders. She threw some of the contents into the air and sniffed at the powder as it came down. There was a smile on her face.

“I can sense no threat.” Said the empath.

It wasn’t an answer to the question he’d asked, but Caspian didn’t want his big day to be a failure. Such things are remembered and all being well, he was destined to have a very long life. The idea of being teased about the anniversary failure, for many millennia.....

“Good, then we’ll proceed as planned.” He said.

Vella had obviously wondered what was going on. She’d come looking for him, with a maid still trying to get her hair just right.

“Are there problems, Casp ? A few early guests have heard rumours.”

“No problem, we’ll be using this room for our anniversary feast.”

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Muzzie hated going to anything on his own, but Lilleth was visiting friends in Avald. Theirs had to be the most on and off relationship in the city. Some regulars at the bar assumed they were married. There had been the option of bringing one of the barmaids, but that seemed sadder than arriving alone. There was quite a crowd outside the building with the secret portal to the Dome. Muzzie had often wondered why there was any attempt at secrecy. Runa was there, helping those who couldn’t manage the few passes with their hand and a prod at the right spot.

“Muzzie.....No Lilleth with you ?” Asked Runa.

“Problems in Avald, one of her uncles has been jailed.”

"I'm alone too, Bodrin actually missed the social event of the decade....To attend a merchant's guild meeting in Bredon's Edge." Said Runa.

"I've said it before.....You're too good for him, Runa."

"His father knew my father; they fought together against the League of Forty Thousand. You know how these things work; we were informally betrothed when I was about twelve." Said Runa. "You're alone....I'm alone. We could pair up for the evening....."

It was scandalous really, tongues would wag. Muzzie felt the need to cause a little bit of stir, just to prove he still had what it took. He still hadn't totally forgiven Lilleth for not coming with him, even if it was an important family emergency.

"Aren't you on portal duty?" He asked.

"They'll cope without me."

He put out his hand and Runa held it, as they stepped into the spinning portal. Arriving at the Dome was instant and it always made him feel slightly giddy. Runa was hanging on to his arm, so she was either feeling giddy, or.....That was something he knew would be resolved after the feast. Runa's husband was powerful, but his neglect of his wife was criminal.

"Sensan the younger." Said Runa. "I didn't know he was in the city. How do you think he managed to get invited?"

"I heard he prefers to be called just Sensan."

Sensan the elder had been the leader of the Guild of Thraan, the assassin's guild. One night at the Shrine of the Dark Angels, Sensan the elder had been killed, along with a dozen of his best fighters. They'd been skinned and partially devoured, by a killer who'd never been caught. Such a death was hardly a recommendation for the guild and Sensan the younger was still finding it hard to find clients. Or so it was rumoured.....

"Sensan, I heard you'd booked my best room." Said Muzzie. "I have to admit, this is the last place I expected to see the leader of the Guild of Thraan."

"Please.....I have to know." Said Runa. "Who invited you?"

It was a larger issue than it appeared to be at first glance. Invitations anywhere to members of the guild, implied the host, or hostess, had need of an assassin. Was Caspian fed up with waiting for Adamaz to retire? Such things weren't unknown. Hybrids tended to have long lives, which could be a problem for their heirs. Adamaz was a converted chaos creature and in theory at least, he might live until the end of time. Or one day he might have a need to enter the catacombs and never be seen again. Muzzie didn't envy converted chaos creatures their immortality; it often came with a high price. Sensan was looking awkward and uncomfortable, a rare thing for someone from the guild.

"I have business here, though.....I have no invitation." Said Sensan. "I was hoping to run into someone who might vouch for me. Who better than Muzzie, well known tavern owner and hero, destroyer of Yam Kermul."

"Many were there that day and no one should speak that name lightly." Said Muzzie.

"Who is your business with?" Asked Runa.

A mistake, no one ever asked that question of an assassin, at least not a guild assassin. Mainly because you might not like the answer. There was also a chance that knowing such information, might get you killed.

"No Runa, the guild has its rules.....I will gladly vouch for Sensan."

There was no need to vouch for Sensan, merely entering the upper Dome together, seemed to be good enough. Sensan vanished into the crowd, to discuss his business. Runa was still holding Muzzie's hand, though she was giving him a certain look, a face full of concern.

"It's not you is it Muzzie?" She asked. "I hope you're not hiring the killers of Thraan."

"No Runa, surely you know me better than that? If I want someone killed, I'll get a blade and do it myself. After telling them of course and giving them a chance to defend themselves."

Runa smiled and kissed him on the cheek. Muzzie had known her father and there were times, in the right light, when Runa had the same steely look as her dead father.

"Sorry Muzzie....My father always liked you." Said Runa. "He believed the words of the angel."

"Oh, that nonsense.....Even I no longer dine out on that story."

Under the influence of a spell, Vella had travelled to Gorshan, the now derelict human city in a ruined world. Still home to some nasty creatures, rescuing Vella hadn't been easy. There had been an angel on Gorshan, a prisoner there. Inanna was the angel's name, a good angel, one of the original Genova. The angel had predicted many things, all in private while with Vella. One of those secrets concerned Muzzie, though Vella hadn't told him the prophecy for several years. It seemed he was to be the Last Emperor, the final demon emperor of all seven rifts. Him, a hybrid with a little angel in his blood.

"Me, the last emperor.....Nonsense." He said. "Come on Runa, I can smell the lizard meat and I'm determined to get more than just a taste....I did kill it."

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~ After the feast ~

Aeony had arrived late for the anniversary feast; there had been some trouble in the slums by the river. There was a small city militia, but when something bad happened, the dark angels were expected to sort it out. Sorting out the drunken mob in the slums, had been sorted out by killing the ring leader. Aeony was good at that kind of thing, even if she didn't particularly enjoy it. There was nothing quite like a little brutality and mindless slaughter, to maintain peace in the city. It also meant she had still been in time for the meal. No one was calling the main course sewer lizard anymore; it was now just lizard meat. Everyone knew what it was, but preferred not to have to think about where it had come from. Similarly the people at the feast wanted order in the City of the Lost God, but didn't really want to hear how the peace was enforced.

"Of course.....The City of the Lost God was originally named Mariba by Tomma-Goran." Said Caspian. It was late, or early the following day, depending on how you viewed it. The children had been put to bed in the rooms on the next floor down, with servants to keep an eye on them. Given the freedom to relax, nearly everyone was drunk, some very drunk.

"Is that true?" Asked Sensan.

"Yes, though Mariba is a human name." Said Adamaz. "Be careful, or Aeony may feel a need to arrest you for heresy."

"Say what you like, I'm too drunk to care." Said Aeony. "Just don't begin worshipping the human deities, or I may have to sober up and do something about it."

"That lizard meat was good." Said Muzzie.

"Oh yes, and there was plenty of it." Said Galla.

Aeony lay back in a chair and looked up at the mural of Tomma-Goran. Officially the humans had never ruled the city; they had only ever come through its gates as slaves. Aeony knew the reality, that ownership of the city had changed at least six times over many thousands of years. From

demons to humans and then from humans to demons, the city had seen so many changes. Knowing it was one thing, but saying it.....That was still considered to be heresy.

“No Caspian, I’m too tired to undress and.....Far too drunk.” Said Muzzie.

“Come on, show me the finger bone.” Said Caspian. “I can reward you.....There are artefacts in LLud Narren’s old chambers, powerful human artefacts.”

“He’s not lying.” Added Vella. “We’re the only ones who can open the cabinet.”

There was an edge to Muzzie’s voice, he didn’t seem happy with what was going on. Plus, talk of human artefacts in the Dome was going beyond what she could ignore, even when drunk. It wasn’t nice to get out of the comfy chair. Adamaz was near her, fast asleep in a similar chair. She left him sleeping, he’d had a long and tiring day.

“Please, Caspian.” Said Aeony. “At least pretend to respect the heresy laws. You’re putting me in a really awkward position.”

“I’d like to see the bone.....I bet you would too, Aeony.” Said Galla.

She would.....Somewhere deep down there was a real curiosity. Aeony regularly talked to Podd, the city’s bone collector. Every big city needs a bone collector, though the job might be given another name. Someone to collect the dead and make sure there were no decaying bodies left in the streets. Occasionally Podd found something, often in the space between the slums and the river. Human bodies were still out there, deep down in the mud. Well preserved for their age. Yes, it was a huge crime, but Aeony had spent hours looking over Podd’s secret collection of dead humans.

“Only if Muzzie is happy about it.” Said Aeony.

“Not here, anyone could walk in.” Said Muzzie. “Give me a little privacy somewhere and I’ll show you the finger bone.....Not that I’ve forgotten talk of a reward.”

“Llud’s chambers have a bolt on the door.” Said Vella.

That signalled a group relocation to Llud’s part of the Upper Dome, whoever he was. Aeony had a very vague memory of a human sorcerer called LLud Narren. Just a paragraph or two in one of the forbidden tomes in the library. Aeony followed the others, even bolting the door when they were all inside.

“No giggling.....I know I’ve put on a bit of weight lately.” Said Muzzie.

The tavern owner had a surprising number of layers to his clothing. Eventually he was left with a wide leather belt over the top of shorts. He took off the belt and showed them a pocket in it, designed so that something white was always touching his skin.

“I had this made for me about five years ago, by a leatherworker in The Lanes.” Said Muzzie.

Out of the pocket in the belt, he removed a pure white finger bone.

“This is.....The Hand of Arcadis.” Said Muzzie. “Not much to look at, but its spells have saved my life.....Far too often for me to want to remember.”

“That is not the hand, it’s just one finger.” Said Vella.

“Llud Narren had the rest of the hand.” Added Caspian.

Caspian went to one of the dark wood cabinets on the wall and seemed to use a tiny metal key. After rummaging for a while, he brought out a box. A box just about large enough to hold a hand.

“I feel this moment should have a fanfare.” Said Caspian.

“Don’t be a tease.....Show them.” Said Vella.

The hand didn’t look that well preserved, but its condition seemed to match the finger Muzzie had been carrying in his belt for years.

“This is the Hand of Arcadis.” Said Caspian. “The entire hand, if Muzzie will add his finger.”

Aeony remembered something, as if something was tapping at her ear, trying to be heard.

“No, don’t link them all together.” She said.

Too late, the lights went out and everything around her smelled wrong. Aeony wasn’t certain, but she didn’t think they were still in the City of the Lost God.

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