

The Last Emperor

Chapter 25 – Inside The Mountain

“General Dhūlen was the other side of Mount Erran, organising regular patrols along that part of the Pilgrim Trail. Patrols could be risky for his warriors, but without patrols, the Dredger camp was open to attack.”



Ginnda-Aanash, The Hive Mother, had obviously decided to make an impression. Several converted chaos creatures had travelled with her, the sorcerers who'd caused so much trouble for Dhūlen and the army. All the servants looking after her were tall Ubari females. Even the shortest towered over every warrior in Muzzie's personal guard. Muzzie was prepared; he'd seen Ginnda in her den, deep below the demon city. Despite being warned about her appearance, many in his army had looked shocked as she'd stepped out of the Void Gate. A few had bowed low, thinking it was Sevril-Narge, the bug goddess; returned from the wastes. It was known that for the Gods, death wasn't always as permanent as it was for most who inhabited the rifts. It wasn't every day that his fighters saw a huge creature walking through the camp, who looked like a massive, well armoured spider.

“I hope she doesn't hold a grudge.” Said Caspian. “I did kill her warlord, her Ezzagory.”

“By killing him, you stopped the carnage.” Said Vella. “You saved the lives of thousands of her people.”

“Get to know her, Caspian.” Said Muzzie. “Vella too, you both need to make her a friend. Ginnda has lived a very long life, mostly in places the ancient scholars never visited. You'll find enough knowledge in her head to.....You'll need another section in that Great Library of yours.”

“I hadn't thought of it like that.” Said Vella.

“You should.....And she's an unstoppable killing machine.” Said Muzzie. “Make her like us.....If it helps, consider that an order from your emperor.”

No throne being carried by his warriors. No armour, or even the enchanted shield that was supposed to stop anything aimed at him. Muzzie went to meet the Hive Mother, on his feet and wearing just trousers, a shirt and a thin jacket. He was even wearing sandals, which didn't fill with sand the way his boots did. Ginnda seemed even larger than he remembered. Her feet thudded against the rocky ground and sent up clouds of sand, when she walked across sand. There was a sound too, as though Ginnda was quietly muttering to herself.

“Welcome Hive Mother, to the imperial stockade.” Said Muzzie. “I've had an underground supply room made into a comfortable bedroom. From what I saw in Segin-Unadaris, I'm hoping you find it to your liking.”

“I'm sure I will.” Said Ginnda.

There was a strange moment, where the huge Hive Mother, put her delicate hands on his shoulders. Muzzie wondered if she might attempt a kiss of some kind. He'd had a few strange encounters when drunk; a kiss from Ginnda wouldn't be the weirdest creature to kiss him. No kiss, she patted his shoulders in a quite soothing manner.

“There are separate quarters for your servants.” Said Muzzie. “Once you're settled in, Aeony and I are hoping you can join us tonight. Your recent correspondence has given me a lot to think about. Caspian and Vella will be there too.....Have you any preference for food ?”

“Anything.....Though I prefer meat to vegetables.” Said Ginnda.

“Yes. Aeony calls it twigs and leaves.” Said Muzzie. “It keeps body and soul together, but personally.....I’ll never enjoy it. There will be plenty of meat, Ginnda. We’re having a feast in your honour.”

As Ginnda walked away, the smell was still there. A lot less than in her lair in the demon city, but the odour was definitely there. The smell of a large creature kept for too long in an enclosed space. Ideally she needed a good wash and then rinsing down. Muzzie wondered if there was a way of making it sound like a huge honour. There were probably a few in the tent city of the camp followers, capable of making it an erotic experience.

“There’s a.....Our guest has an unforgettable odour.” Said Vella.

Vella had a way with words, that could make a ‘fuck off and die’, sound like flirting. It was one of her most valued skills when she’d worked in his bar.

“A nice way to put it.....I suggest we eat outside tonight.” Said Caspian.

“With the size of our guest of honour, we were always going to be eating outside” Said Muzzie. “I’ve asked General Dhūlen to arrange for a field kitchen to be set up near my rooms.”

“Why do you think she’s here ?” Asked Vella.

“Yes.....She’ll want something.....Bound to.” Added Caspian.

Muzzie knew, Ginnda had sent him three letters, delivered by her own team of couriers. A bit old fashioned, but the Hive Mother still used wax seals, which he was sure hadn’t been tampered with. The three letters had spelled out her hopes for what she might do for the new empire and of course.....What the new empire might do for her. Ginnda wanted a formal agreement to the broad brush stroke ideas he’d given her. Muzzie didn’t object; a proper agreement was good for everyone....No misunderstandings. Caspian and Vella would hear what they needed to know, when Muzzie decided they needed to know about it.

“You may be right, Caspian.” Said Muzzie. “You’re probably right.”

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An army can act like one warrior, and appear to have the emotions of a single person. Many had thought Belso Gurd needed to lose his head to the executioners axe. It was justice after all; he had embezzled a small fortune in gold from the imperial treasury. When he’d been spared though, there wasn’t a single fighter in the army, who didn’t want to celebrate with him. It would have required a lot of effort to find a single warrior, who had the smallest criticism of Belso. It was what armies did, they bonded together. Every piece of good news, was treated as though it was everyone’s good news. Belso was one of them and if things had been different, it could have been any one of them, hoping for Galla to be merciful. Runa had suggested having the celebration in Kahan. Not only was everything in that kingdom still largely free of charge, it also prevented any potential friction with the good people of Aarabash. After all, Belso had stolen the money intended for civic improvements in their city.....

“Has anyone discovered where the gold went to ?” Asked Faal.

Runa wouldn’t have admitted to being drunk, but she had been joining in with the celebrations. They were in the biggest and best bar in Kahan, in what was claimed to be, the best fighters guild hall on the rifts. A fighters guild in a land without much in the way of a standing army. It was a nice place though and the drinks were good and so far.....No one had been asked to pay for anything. Faal had turned out to be more of a party animal than Runa would have guessed.

“I don’t think Belso stashed it somewhere.” Said Runa. “I get the feeling he spent most of it on junk and wild living. Then there’s the palace Galla now lives in. A small fortune was spent on that place.”

"All that money.....Just so Galla can live in a palace." Said Faal.

"According to young Maya, it is a beautiful place." Said Runa.

No one had expected Runa to keep an eye on Belso; she was just there for the free drinks. She was beginning to think Faal was there for pretty much the same reason. She did shout at Belso though, when he began dancing on a table. The fool still had a limp from where Aeony had knocked him from the city walls of Tandalla. Belso merely looked in her direction and waved.

"Too drunk to listen to you." Said Faal. "I hope they have good healers in Kahan. He's bound to fall over and break something before morning."

The sound of fighting had to contend with the noise of the encouraging crowd cheering Belso. By the time Runa heard the clash of sword on shield, the fighting seemed close, maybe in the entrance hall of the fighters guild. Runa was armed; everyone around Belso had at least a sword down their belt. Being sober enough to use a weapon.....That was a different matter. By the time Runa had a blade in her hand, the fight was there, among them. At least three dozen fighters had come through the door, all wearing the uniform of the dead usurper.

"Fuck." Said Faal. "I've drunk far too much to fight."

"Being drunk doesn't make you immune from being stabbed." Said Runa.

"You make a good point, Runa.....Lead on.....Lead on."

A piece of local political mischief, which Runa didn't appreciate being caught up in. On the other hand, she knew that Faal and Nethra had assassinated the false king, the usurper. Like it or not, the local petty intrigues of Kahan, were now her problems too.

"Kill them.....Kill the enemies of King Zin Thriaxer." Yelled Runa.

A deity somewhere had to be keeping Belso alive and in reasonably good health. As one of the interlopers aimed a sword at Belso's chest, one of the bar staff got in the way. The young local hybrid fell dead to the ground, leaving Belso unscathed. Runa's father had talked about the Goddess Tenneth-Sisanath protecting drunks and fools. Maybe her father had been right. Some of Muzzie's warriors were now fighting back, but most still seemed shocked and confused.

"Fighters of the new emperor." Runa Shouted. "Arm yourselves.....Fight or you'll not see another morning."

The numbers were about even, but the army had the benefit of recent experience, and they'd won some tough fights. Even Belso found a sword and began hacking at the fighters of the dead usurper. Runa quickly sent two of the enemy to meet whichever maker they worshipped. Well-armed, with nice shiny light armour, but their attackers didn't seem that experienced. As Muzzie's army began hacking and stabbing in a methodical manner, the numbers began to swing in their favour. Soon, their enemies were trying to get out of the door and escape.

"Don't let them escape." Someone yelled. "They'll be back with more of their friends."

Hacking until the floor was awash with blood. Some green blood with splashes of red, some was even the blue blood of the Ubari. Not the kind of fighting Runa enjoyed, but it had to be done. Let a few escape and they were likely to find reinforcement and return in greater numbers. Faal seemed to be enjoying himself. He was only using a short sword, but still managed to take the head off an enemy with a single sweeping blow from his blade.

"Come on, a few are making a run for it." Belso shouted.

For an injured and very drunk fighter, Belso was doing quite well. There was still the limp, but the blood on his sword spoke volumes about his success in the fight. The fight moved out into the entrance hall of the guild and eventually right out onto the stone steps that went down to the street. There were a few armed citizens on the street, all seemingly loyal to King Zin. The remnants of the

dead usurper's supporters were quickly hacked to pieces. One or two did try to surrender, but no one was in the mood to notice. Just by pure chance, Runa was left facing the last warrior still standing against them. Or, maybe there is no such thing as luck. It did seem as though something had placed them there, facing each other on the steps of the fighters guild.

"Careful, I've seen this one fight." Said Faal. "He killed four of our warriors and nearly put an end to Belso."

"Good.....Finally a worthy adversary." Said Runa.

Her opponent had several ribbons on his chest, probably to signify he'd fought in a few of the minor skirmishes Kahan had been involved in. Runa had seen it so often, and knew it was true. There is only one way to learn how to fight well, it needs to be experienced. Fight a hundred tough battles and survive and you can call yourself a warrior.

"I am Runa from the City of the Lost God.....May I know the name of my enemy?"

No reply at all, he didn't even shake his head at her. Runa never took success in any fight for granted and her opponent had killed several in Muzzie's army. Drunken soldiers though, all far more intoxicated than she'd been that night. Runa deliberately moved slowly, aiming a sloppy sword blow at his left shoulder. He turned and took his longsword in a wide arc, aimed to slice through her throat. Runa knew the move; her father had probably invented it.

"Idiot." She said.

Most fighters have an aversion to getting up close to an enemy, though it can often be the safe option. Runa moved close to her enemy and safe from the wide arc of his sword. Once there, she drove her blade up into his chest. A quick circular movement with her sword to shred whatever internal organs his type of hybrid might have in its chest.....Her opponent was dead before landing as a crumpled heap in the street. A pool of yellow blood quickly formed around his dead body.

"He had good training.....No real experience." Runa muttered.

"We should leave this place." Said Faal. "There may be more of them.....Maybe a lot more of them."

"Good.....Be honest Faal, how do I look?" Runa asked. "I don't wish to look as though I work in a slaughterhouse."

There was blood on her skirt, but it was difficult for her to tell how much had ended up on the rest of her. Runa gave a little twirl in front of Faal.

"Well.....There are a few blood stains, but overall.....Not too bad." Said Faal.

"Then I propose that we go back to the bar." Said Runa. "I'm in the mood to celebrate Belso surviving yet another time when he looked certain to die. I want a few drinks down my throat, Faal.....Quite a few drinks. If of course.....There is someone left to serve us."

"If there isn't.....We shall serve ourselves." Said Faal.

Being honest, Runa preferred the company of other warriors, preferably female fighters. When drunk a male would do, but most of her long term relationships had been with hybrid females. Faal had asked her about three times to share his bed. He looked alright and seemed fairly normal, if you ignored the whole imprisoning himself in the Necropolis business. It was him being an Emarduk, the last of the bird like sentient beings. Ewwww.....all those feathers. She'd get drunk with him, but there'd be no sharing a bed. Well....Unless she reached what she called the point of no return. So drunk and desperate for sex, that she'd happily mount a full blood Shelzak.

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The weather was just about perfect for flying. Warm now at the base of Mount Erran, but not too warm. A fresh breeze, but not too much wind. A reasonable amount of light, but not enough to strain her eyes. In truth Aeony could fly, see and hear, in some of the worst weather the rifts could

throw at her. Flying for pleasure though, that was a rare and wonderful thing. Not totally aimless flight, she'd wanted to get a good look at the door in the side of the mountain. Over the top of the Dredgers she flew, all of them carrying baskets full of rubble. They were all there working hard, the diggers, delvers and builders of the rifts. From the oldest great grandparents to the child barely old enough to carry a basket. They were all below her, carting away huge amounts of rubble and dust. None of them ever complained, they'd been given gifts of strength and stamina by the deity Tomma-Goran. It was their preordained destiny; to dig deep in the ground.....They were after all.....Dredgers. There was just enough of a narrow ledge, for Aeony to land in front of the door. As it was she probably bruised her right wing during the landing.

"Bizzi was right.....Muzzie will need a ramp to get here." Aeony muttered.

A huge heavy stone door, a good fifty feet tall and about a third of that wide. The sort of door which hinted at giants living beyond it, or even the giant reptiles that had once walked the rifts. Or of course, a race of tiny hybrids had constructed the door to intimidate any would-be bandits. It was impossible not to try. Aeony gave the door a gentle shove, which became a good hard push. No good, the door didn't even wobble.

"Yes.....A ramp and maybe even a battering ram." Aeony mumbled.

There was a blur of purple wings and Nethra landed with no more dignity that Aeony had managed. A slow collision with the door, which left Nethra crumpled up against the door, while trying to look calm.....As though she'd intended to collide with the door.

"Bizzi is right.....The ledge is a bit narrow." Said Nethra.

"Yes, there does need to be a ramp." Said Aeony. "Something heavy to batter the door down too. Unless Muzzie has a spell that can open it."

"What do you think is behind the door?" Asked Nethra.

"LLud Narren as good as told Muzzie that one of the nine divines is inside the mountain.....Sleeping through the millennia until they're needed." Said Aeony. "I just hope it's one of the Gods with a pleasant temperament."

"Oh yes, I hate to think Muzzie might wake up Sevril-Narge, the bug goddess." Said Nethra.

"Or..... Monazin-Conosin, the destroyer of worlds." Said Aeony.

Both Sevril and Monazin were supposed to be dead, but could any God truly die? Aeony was hoping the wisest and greatest of all the nine, was sleeping inside the holy mountain. Estrin-Okanan, who was supposed to generally be quite well disposed towards the mortal creatures, who lived their short lives on the rifts.

"I hope Faal really is lucky.....Or I'm sure we'll find Sevril." Said Nethra. "She'll be sleeping in the mountain, dreaming about her army of bugs."

"Don't let the Hive Mother hear you say that." Said Aeony. "I heard that Sevril created her.....Sevril's greatest creation, or so I've heard."

Aeony had no idea why she did it. She used the palm of her clawed hand, striking the stone door as hard as she could. It was like hitting a gong, a gong that refused to stop ringing. The noise was loud, quickly growing to deafening. Nethra put her head close to Aeony's.

"What did you do?" Yelled Nethra

"I have no idea." Shouted Aeony.

As the ringing sound diminished, it was replaced by the sound of the door scraping over the ground as it opened. Hundreds of tons or more in weight, the huge door slowly opened. There was darkness beyond the door, as it hit the wall after fully opening. Aeony was a dark angel, it was instinctive to

use her nose when there was nothing for her eyes to see, or her ears to hear. She sniffed at the darkness and.....There was something, a hint of something with a musky scent.

“Fuck.....What do we do now ?” Asked Nethra.

“Muzzie.....Forget all the plans, Muzzie needs to be here.” Said Aeony. “I’ll go and get him....Maya too, you need to get her. She’ll be in the Dredger camp somewhere. Take no nonsense from her family. Grab the girl if you have to and bring her here.”

“I will.....But why Maya ?”

“Muzzie promised she’d enter the mountain with him.” Said Aeony. “I’m getting to know him and the way her promised her.....I know it’s important, but I don’t know why. Thinking about it, I don’t think he does either.....Just get her.”

“I’ll bring her here.” Said Nethra.

Nethra went, leaving her alone in front of the darkness of the open doorway. Aeony sniffed at the darkness again and she knew the scent, but didn’t know it at the same time.

“This is just.....Too weird.” She mumbled.

It was as if the sound responded to her voice, the definite sound of something giggling in the darkness. Or, it might have been her mind hearing water tinkling somewhere and making more of it than just.....Water tinkling.

“Dealing with the nine is so, irritating.” Aeony muttered. “Muzzie can sort this out.”

Aeony shot over the Dredger camp, where Nethra was probably having a heated argument with Maya’s mother.

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General Dhūlen was the other side of Mount Erran, organising regular patrols along that part of the Pilgrim Trail. Patrols could be risky for his warriors, but without patrols, the Dredger camp was open to attack. If you didn’t know an enemy was out there, you couldn’t mount a credible defence. He’d heard arguments against the idea, but Muzzie was fully behind setting up daily patrols along a five mile section of the Pilgrim Trail. With so many hybrids able to see in the ultraviolet wash that always covered the rifts, Dhūlen was even setting up night patrols near where the Dredgers lived. He was determined that none of Bizzi’s people were going to end up as a meal, for whatever seemed to be killing pilgrims.....

“Same as the others, though these have been dead a while.” Said Belso. “A group of about eight pilgrims, carrying everything they owned on their backs. Something did more than just nibble at them after they were dead. Two of the women have been almost completely eaten.”

“Could it be growlers feeding on them ?” Asked Dhūlen.

“No.....We’re too high for growlers and it’s too cold here.” Said Belso. “Something with powerful jaws ate these pilgrims. It even cracked open their bones to get at the juice inside. No growler has teeth that strong.”

Belso was officially earning next to nothing, while working constant night shift with the garrison in Aarabash. Dhūlen had considered that a waste of Belso’s talents and Muzzie hadn’t needed much persuasion to agree. Belso Gurd had once been a guard for hire. He’d travelled the entire length of the Pilgrim Trail, several times. He knew the territory and the creatures who called it home. Dhūlen had tripled his pay and given Belso his old rank back. He was still a grunt, but a reasonably well paid grunt. The dead pilgrims had been found fifty yards off the trail, in what appeared to be a temporary camp they’d set up for the night.

“How long do you think they’ve been dead ?” Asked Dhūlen.

“Long enough for Mingal eggs to be laid in their flesh.....And hatch out.” Said Belso. “That and going by the amount of decay.....About three months since they were killed.”

“Truth now, Belso.....Have you seen it ?” Asked Dhūlen. “Whatever killed these people had to be large and powerful. Have you seen one of them ?”

“No, they seem to prefer hunting at night.” Said Belso. “Nothing has jaws that can crack hybrid bones though.....Well, apart from the dark angels. I can see why some started blaming them.”

“So can I.....But don’t mention that around Aeony.” Said Dhūlen. “You might not survive upsetting her for a second time.”

General Dhūlen got down on his knees to examine the leg bones of a dead pilgrim. A hybrid with a lot of Dredger in them. Their bones were thick and as strong as tempered steel. Yet there was, the place where teeth had ripped into the bone. It was done to get at the juice in the centre and.....As far as Dhūlen knew, very few had teeth that strong. The dark angels did, but he was going nowhere near that rumour. All sorts of weird creatures now wandered the rifts. His patrols would find one of them and with luck; it wouldn’t be a rogue dark angel. Dhūlen only had thirty warriors with him and the ground was hard. It wouldn’t be a popular order, but it had to be done.

“A shallow single large grave will do.” Said Dhūlen. “We need to bury them though. Their remains will already be attracting small predators and.....It’s the correct thing to do.”

“Yes, I’ll get it done right away.” Said Belso.

Dhūlen was a hybrid Terak, his people had worshipped Gods Belso would never have heard of. One thing Dhūlen had learned on the battlefields of the rifts, was that when it mattered, it paid to be respectful to all the Gods. Even the ones that seemed ridiculous. He’d get the pilgrims buried and even say a few words over them.

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Bizzi had enough to do, without Maya’s family threatening Nethra with shovels and picks. The debris removal work was covering a wide area and so far, the building of a ramp was still in the talking over stage. Luckily Bizzi was near where Maya was having a meal with her family, when things started to get nasty.

“Leave my youngest daughter alone.” Yelled Maya’s mother. “You’re not taking Maya anywhere.”

Nethra was actually well liked; it was considered good luck to have a Chinnura around. It was known that Nethra had a liking for fresh meat and.....Start trying to drag away someone’s child with no proper explanation. Things had got really ugly, really quickly. Bizzi was determined to stop matters getting worse.

“Explain yourself, Nethra.” He yelled. “You’re known here and respected, but.....You can’t just grab Maya. Explain yourself.....Now.”

Nethra had a wound on her upper arm; someone must have already prodded at her with something sharp. She was no coward though. Heavily outnumbered, yet she was still holding onto a struggling Maya.

“Let me go.” Maya yelled.

“The mountain has opened and the child is needed.” Said Nethra. “Muzzie is about to enter Mount Erran. Maya was made a promise by the emperor. She is to go with him.....Tell them girl, say that is the truth.”

“Yes.....Muzzie did say I’d be there, when he found whatever sleeps in the holy mountain.” Said Maya.

Maya was no longer struggling and hearing that the emperor had need of Maya.....It changed everything. A Dredger child being there when the sleeper was awakened. It was something Bizzi

wouldn't ever have dreamt of happening. The angry crowd had heard Maya's words and were no longer waving their picks and shovel at Nethra. Bizzi had to make sure though, Maya was one of his people after all.....A Dredger child, born of a well-respected Dredger mother.

"I won't interfere with the emperor's business." Said Bizzi. "But before I let you take Maya, I need to ask. Will you guarantee as a Chinnura, that she will be safe."

Nethra looked up towards the summit of Mount Erran, as if she'd only just noticed it was there.

"Safe.....No one can be certain what sleeps inside the mountain." Said Nethra. "I can't guarantee any of us will be safe. What I can promise.....Is to give my life to protect Maya, if it comes to that. Is that enough for you?"

"It's enough for me." Said Maya's mother.

"What does Maya say?" Someone yelled.

"I am scared.....But I will go with Nethra." Said Maya.

Bizzi had seen it before with angry crowds. The mood could change drastically in a single moment. The crowd willing to hack Nethra to pieces, cheered the Chinnura as she held onto Maya and flew away with the child.

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By the time Nethra arrived with Maya, Muzzie had already created the spells and generated several bright lighting orbs. After pushing them along the ceiling, he realised the entrance passageway of the mountain, was very long.

"I briefly spoke to N'Fady, Caspian's servant." Said Aeony. "She's going to arrange for someone to come and look for us, if we're gone for more than a day."

"A good idea.....If it is an Ancient One inside the mountain, we might be devoured." Said Muzzie. His attitude contradicted his words. Muzzie was fairly certain the sleeper was one of the nine divines. One of the nine who might prefer to find Maya's face smiling at them, than the face of a badly scarred bar owner and would-be emperor. How the sleeper was awoken mattered. As LLud had said, it needed to be done carefully.

"Here is Nethra, looking a bit battered." Said Aeony.

Whatever had happened to Nethra, it must have started her Chinnura rage building up inside her. Without that rage, she'd never have been able to fly far enough and high enough, to carry Maya to the open doorway.

"You look to have had a fight." Said Aeony.

"One of Maya's aunts stabbed me, but the wound is mostly healed." Said Nethra. "None of the Dredgers were harmed.....Bizzi handled things well."

"You brought Maya, which is very good news." Said Muzzie.

"I've been stabbed, bashed with shovels and yelled at by angry Dredgers." Said Nethra. "You owe me an answer Muzzie.....Why the girl? What makes her matter?"

Muzzie crouched down and pushed his hand through Maya's hair, which still felt like fondling a scrubbing brush. Was it really sensible, to let the first face she saw be that of a rather feral Dredger child. Maya was no fool, but if she said the wrong thing.....

"I think we're about to awaken Estrin-Okanan, most powerful of all the Gods." Said Muzzie. "She won't appreciate being woken up. This isn't the first time she's hidden from her faithful, but irritating, worshippers. One of her common ways of appearing to the faithful, was as a young girl. I am hoping she might view Maya as a kind of kindred spirit."

"With all due respect.....That idea is fucking crazy." Said Nethra.

“No.....I’ve heard a few stories about Estrin.” Said Aeony. “He might be right and let’s be honest.....None of us can pretend to be a dragon.”

“A dragon.....Are we going to see a dragon ?” Asked Maya. “I’ve always wanted to see one, but my mother says they don’t really exist.”

“I’ve seen the painting of Tomma-Goran on the ceiling of The Dome, in the City of the Lost God. To me at least..... Like all the Gods, he looked like a large Dragon, with sharp teeth and wicked looking claws.” Said Nethra.

“We should begin walking; it will be a long way to the heart of the mountain.” Said Muzzie. “Did anyone bring food and water ?”

“I just brought Maya.” Said Nethra.

“I have some water, but only a little.”

“Then no food and little water, will have to do.” Said Muzzie. “Follow me and on the way I’ll tell Maya why I think Estrin will like her.”

“Is this the story about Slow Mo, the slum runner from Ixir ?” Asked Aeony. “Many think that Ixir never really existed.”

“Trust me; it did.....No giving away the ending.” Said Muzzie. “You always spoil the ending.”

“No I don’t.....I never do that.” Said Aeony.

Muzzie had heard the story of Mo from one of the travellers, who’d used his tavern as somewhere reasonably cheap to stay. The man was a wandering cleric, which gave his tale a little authenticity. There was something about the cleric too, a certainty that whatever he told you, was to be believed. A good trait for a conman of course, but Muzzie had never doubted the story was true.

“The story of Slow Mo takes place in the oldest empire, Maya.” Said Muzzie. “Mo was granted immortality, but his mother was an ordinary mortal.”

“How did he become immortal ?” Asked Maya.

“Ahhh, ask me questions now and I won’t have finished the story, until we’re stood in front of the walls of Quron. Save your questions for later.” Said Muzzie.

“I know the story by heart.....You can ask me later.” Said Aeony.

Aeony might remember it all, but Muzzie was finding his memory fading a little. The wandering cleric visiting his bar.....Had been a very long time ago.

“The tale was told through the eyes of Mo and what is true.....I’ll leave you to judge.” Said Muzzie.

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“I’m not awake yet Mo..... Did you like the amulet ?”

“Yes, my mother will love it.”

She walked towards him, her feet not quite touching the floor as she walked. She knelt in front of him and he could see the oil lamp through her. Her eyes were what he remembered forever, the intensity of their gaze.

“We’ll be good friends one day Mo..... Will you do me a favour ?”

He was usually good with random behaviour, it tended to be the norm in the slums, but he was still half asleep and his back felt like it was on fire. For all he knew, the wound might turn out to be fatal.

“Yes, of course..... anything.”

“When your mother, Miram dies, take her ashes to a temple of Nethesta, you’re sure to find one in the south. It’ll mean so much to both of them. Promise me you’ll do it.”

“I promise, it’ll be done.”

Her hand reached for his and for a fraction of a second, he felt her hand against his. His back no longer burned and he felt better than he had for some time.

"If I was awake..... I could do more." She said.

"Thank you, who are you ?" He asked.

"Oh, you'll know who I am one day, we'll be great friends. We might, just might save the entire multiverse."

She was fading away, drifting away from him like morning mist.

"Do you want to know what it says on the amulet ?"

"Yes."

"The gods are sleeping, but not forever – Estrin-Okanan."

Mo kept quiet after that, but twenty years later he did keep his promise. Miram had died from a particularly virulent strain of the usual seasonal flu. Mo travelled far to the south, splashing out on the fare for a tourist shuttle to the forests of Ixir-Strens continent. He found a temple of Nethesta that still had a regular congregation and he stood in line, to offer his mother's ashes to the high priestess.

"I'll take that."

She was young, almost still a child and dressed in the heavy robes of a senior cleric. Mo thought nothing of it, until she placed Miram's urn on the shrine. Not on the shelf where the public ashes go, but on the top shelf, the shelf kept for the rich, the powerful and elders of the temple. She turned towards him and he recognised the eyes, their intensity. Mo nodded at her and mouthed the words; 'Thank you.'

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"Now do you know why I think you're needed here ?" Muzzie asked Maya.

"I don't understand many of the words, but Estrin is like me.....A young girl, almost a child."

"That is how she chooses to appear." Said Muzzie. "Though yes, I think she will like you and hopefully.....Trust you enough to be friendly when she does wake up."

"There was a time.....I'd have beaten you for such heresy, Muzzie." Said Aeony. "The multiverse doesn't exist and Nethesta is an evil goddess of our enemies. Now of course, I respect the beliefs of my emperor."

"Don't worry." Said Muzzie. "Once I'm proclaimed emperor of all the rifts....I promise to be as dull and narrow minded as every other emperor before me."

Muzzie laughed and Aeony managed a smile. Ixir though, the multiverse, even the goddess Nethesta.....It had to be like picking at a scab over a wound on the dark angel, one that would never heal. Heresy was heresy to her; it was how she'd been trained since being created. Muzzie kept up a steady pace, even when he heard the tinkling water that sounded like a voice, or a voice that sounded like tinkling water. Aeony stopped and spun her head around a little, before running to catch up with him.

"The voices of her long dead priests." Said Nethra. "They talk of her glory, for those who can understand the words. We're definitely going to find Estrin-Okanan, greatest of all the nine divines."

"Will I see a dragon ?" Asked Maya.

"Yes.....I think you probably will." Said Muzzie.

A turn in the passage and there was the smell again, the scent of flowers where no flowers grew. Muzzie had seen a living God before, most thought the Silver Lady was a deity of some kind. To wake up Estrin though.....It was dangerous, but excited him.

"Oh.....The audacity of.....It must be done." He muttered.

"Are you alright ?" Asked Aeony.

“Yes.....Fine.” He answered. “If anything happens to me.....Something really bad. Do your best to get Maya out of here. Take the girl to her mother.”

“I will.....Though nothing is going hurt you.” Said Aeony.

“Yes.....No one will harm our emperor.” Said Nethra.

It didn't feel like it, but they must have been walking for several hours. The lighting orbs began to fade, so one by one, Muzzie absorbed what was left of them and created new, bright, shining orbs of light. The voices of the dead priests became louder, but he still didn't understand what they said.

“We're getting close to the heart of Mount Erran.” Said Nethra.

Muzzie stopped and once again, ran his hand through Maya's hair.

“Rules now, Maya.” He said. “Not rules to be ignored. No running off, this is too serious for that. Do you understand ?”

“I won't.....I promise not to run away.” Said Maya.

“And whatever we find.....Be polite.” Said Muzzie. “We're waking up a God.....Being polite might keep us all alive. You have to be good, Maya.”

“I will be.....I'll be so polite.....I promise, Muzzie.”

“Good.”

The passage entered a chamber with black marble walls. A large chamber, most of his army would have fitted inside it. In the centre of the chamber and seemingly asleep on the floor, was a dragon. Probably not the right word to use about a sleeping God, but to Muzzie, it was a huge sleeping dragon.

“So, Maya.....You've now seen a dragon.” Said Aeony.

“It's.....Beautiful.” Said Maya.

“A sleeping God.....Stay close to me, Maya. We'll go and wake her together.” Said Muzzie.

They all walked towards the dragon, though Aeony did keep a little distance from the rest of them. She was getting ready, just in case things went horribly wrong. Muzzie didn't stop walking, until he and Maya were close enough to touch the dragon. It was breathing very slowly, or at least it appeared to be breathing. The scent of wild and exotic flowers, became stronger.

“How long has she been asleep ?” Asked Maya.

“Estrin has been sleeping, since before Tomma-Goran created his city.” Said Nethra. “At least that is the belief of my tribe.”

“Go to her, Maya.....Talk to her softly.” Said Muzzie. “See if you can, very carefully, get Estrin to wake up.”

Maya had been around Galla for quite a while, bravery and self-confidence had probably sunk into her, like water into a sponge. The Dredger girl knelt next to the head of the dragon. She touched the massive head, running her hand over the snout.

“Wake up Estrin.....Please wake up.” Said Maya.

Maya said it again and the dragon's eyes slowly opened. As the dragon moved a little, Muzzie wondered if it was the last thing he'd ever see.

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