

The Last Emperor

Chapter 22 – Remembered Skills

“There would be many of them though, the ex-leaders and usurped Kings of small nations all over the rifts. They’d all be heading towards wherever Muzzie had his base. Every ex or would-be sovereign of every tiny city or state, would be hoping that Muzzie was in the mood to give them power over....Wherever it was.”



The irony wasn't lost on Caspian. If he managed to stay alive and kill Casto, it would be because LLud had given him the sword of Mozzrik the Usurper. The same LLud Narren who he and Vella had killed. Killed twice in a way, if he was being honest about it. Casto Ganaan began to swing his huge sword about in a very meaningful and intimidating way. Close up, Caspian was certain it was the largest demon blade he had ever seen. He'd heard some were sentient and actually bit into the soul of those who dared face their owners in battle.

“I had heard you were larger.” Said Casto. “A famous warrior they said. I see now that I was misinformed.”

Casto spoke the common tongue perfectly, better than many who served in Muzzie's army. Ezzagory of a demon city on the arse end of the rifts, yet Leng must have sent teachers to finish off Casto's education. Caspian knew not to reply, to ignore all insults and attempts to goad him. Many remembered skills were coming back to him, from the hours spent being trained by Merrick and Muzzie. Arguing with an opponent could easily lead to a lack of focus. Lack of focus could easily lead to death.

“Don't dance about.....Kill him.” Someone yelled.

A gruff voice using the old empire language. It could have been one of the army trying to encourage Caspian, or one of Casto's elite city garrison. They were dancing around each other, fights to the death tended to begin like that. Both of them trying to gain an edge in some way, by observing the other. A tendency to favour a way of turning, could mean your opponent on the funeral pyre that night, rather than you. Caspian had thought the rage that came from holding Mozzrik's blade might fade a little as he became used to it. It hadn't faded even slightly. Caspian still wanted to gut Casto and do a victory dance on his entrails.

“Idiot !” Yelled Casto.

A silly trick Merrick would have laughed at. Startle your opponent and then strike. Caspian wasn't startled and his body remembered how to move. Muscle memory, long remembered instincts and reflexes. As that huge sword came at his neck, Caspian blocked the blow and pushed it away. Casto did a turn to his right, which Caspian watched and would remember. Blocking like that required strength and would eventually cause fatigue. Casto had that huge heavy sword to carry though and that huge heavy armour.

“Well done, Caspian.” Yelled General Dhülen.

They went for each other several times, blocking and swerving away to avoid a counter attack. Caspian remembered Merrick telling him to vary everything, even if it took longer.

“Golden rule, Casp.” Merrick had told him, often. “There is always more time than you think.”

Caspian swung away to his left, or swerved to his right, or even moved towards Casto and jumped quickly to one side. Always different, giving Casto no routine to use against him. On the other hand, Casto had been trained well by someone who'd probably trained Demon royalty. All about style, they'd have lasted less than a day on the streets of the City of the Lost God. There was Casto, always swerving the same way, after a failed attempt to skewer Caspian with that enormous damned sword.

"A break.....They need a break." Someone yelled.

"No break until one of them is dead." Shouted another.

The enormous sword looked like a demon blade, but it obviously wasn't. All that strength to wield it and Casto never seemed to get tired. Caspian on the other hand, had never even danced with Vella for the length of time he'd been dancing around the Ezzagory of Segin-Unadaris. It had to happen, that huge blade caught him across the back of his left shoulder, cutting right through his armour. It didn't bite him, or his soul would have been on the way to the wastes of eternity. It hurt though, it fucking hurt. The demon garrison were going wild.

"Finish him.....Finish him." They yelled.

Some yelled in other languages, though the sentiment was probably the same. Caspian was bleeding a lot and down on his knees, almost an invitation to have his head removed from his shoulders.

Caspian saw no need to get up; he finally had a chance to rest for a few seconds. Casto's people were shouting for him to finish the job, while Casto walked around the inner edge of the circle. Oh, the Ezzagory thought it was all over and sadly.....Caspian thought he might be right.

"Give us his head." Someone yelled.

"We want his head.....Give us the head." Several yelled.

It wasn't just his own remembered skills running around inside Caspian's head. He'd never used the trick himself, but he'd watched Merrick use it. It was a day when.....Caspian always said it was when they were out near the Great River, hunting down a bandit gang. In truth the group put together by Merrick, were little better than bandits themselves. Caspian had his own bandit to deal with, when he'd seen Merrick slashed twice across his back. Merrick had gone down and looked likely to die. The amount of blood, the way he'd hit the ground like a felled tree. Merrick survived, though he probably still had scars to remind him of that day. Merrick had played dead and Caspian thought it might work for him too. Either way, it was the only move he had left. Caspian went forward and ended up on his knees and hands, though Mozzrik's blade was next to his hand. Caspian even groaned, a groan of pain that was only slightly exaggerated. Casto's city garrison began to chant.

"Give us his head.....Give us his head."

Merrick had used sound, though it took him a while to admit it. No looking, Caspian listened and heard Casto's boots as they thudded across the ring towards him. As the footsteps stopped, Caspian had a second or two, before that huge sword found his neck. He'd lost a lot of blood, but fear and rage had the power to drive him on, especially rage. Caspian grabbed the sword and felt a new rush of anger and rage. He spun around and rose to his feet.

"How dare you think you could beat me." He yelled.

Casto was no fool, rather than carrying on with the attack, he turned away. He turned to his right, the same way he always turned. There was chainmail below Casto's armour and the top of his boots. The chainmail didn't even slow down the sword of Mozzrik the Usurper, as Caspian dug deep into the Ezzagory's hip. Caspian sliced through bone and muscle, yet Casto still tried a final massive blow with that huge blade he carried. Caspian actually laughed.

"You can't beat me, warlord." Shouted Caspian.

A thrust from Caspian's forearm and Casto was trying to stand on the leg with a destroyed hip. The warlord of the city didn't so much topple, as fold up into a ball on the ground. There was a gap between armour and neck guard and Caspian knew what had to be done. Caspian of the City of the Lost God, added his name to the history of the rifts that day. He sliced through the exposed neck and gave Casto an honourable death. Muzzie's army began to chant for him. A little late perhaps, encouragement a little earlier would have been nice. In all fairness, Caspian hadn't given himself much chance of killing the Ezzagory of Segin-Unadaris.

"Caspian.....Caspian.....Caspian....." The army were chanting.

The enchanted blade was keeping him on his feet, with a mixture of rage and a good old fashioned bad mood. He needed to leave the ring on his own two feet, to be declared the victor. He looked towards where the city garrison had been stood, but they'd vanished, merged into the crowd. Caspian had won, though that didn't mean the war was over. Though without a warlord to lead them, the battle for the city had to be almost over. Caspian turned and saw Vella waiting for him and Galla, holding one of her famous powders.

"Caspian.....This way.....I'm here." Said Vella.

Once he dropped the sword, he'd be relying on the love of Vella and those powders, to get him through the next day or so. He healed fast, most hybrids did. There were limits though and he seemed to be drenched in his own blood. There were splashes of the Ezzagory's yellow coloured blood with splashes of green, but most of it, was Caspian's own blood.

"Come on Caspian.....Just a few more steps." Shouted Maya.

He stepped over the outer edge of the circle. Arms were ready to grab him, as he dropped Mozzrik's blade. Caspian suddenly felt so tired. Vella was hugging him, kissing him, as he was carried into the privacy of a tent.

"I knew you'd win.....I just knew it." Said Vella.

Soldiers pulled off his armour, so that Galla could sprinkle a powder over the wound in his back. No bedside manner at all, Galla kept tutting and saying how dreadful the wound was. Maya handed him a glass of something that looked green and sticky.

"Looks awful, but drink it all." Said Maya. "I made it myself and it'll do you good."

Wonderful stuff, it tasted to be about two thirds alcohol. There was more of Galla's muttering and some pain as his wound was cleaned and covered in a dressing. After that he was allowed to sleep. Strangely Caspian didn't dream about fame, fortune or even Muzzie giving him a grand title of some kind. Caspian dreamt of the fun to come, when Vella touched the sword of Mozzrik the Usurper. He opened an eye and.....Good, the sword was with his armour, in a corner of the tent.

"Sexual.....It's always sexual with women.....I've no idea why." LLud had said.

As he drifted into a deep sleep, Caspian had a huge grin on his face.

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Nethra only found out about Caspian winning the combat with Casto, when she found Muzzie. The runners were earning their keep, rushing through the city with news, orders and general gossip. One had just arrived to inform Muzzie that Caspian the Great, had killed the Ezzagory in single combat. Nethra didn't begrudge Caspian being called the great, but it was going to take some getting used to. As for Muzzie.....The Hive Mother had been right about Muzzie being where all the fire and smoke was at its worst.

"Clearing out the barracks of the garrison hasn't been easy." Muzzie said. "There are two pretty tough sorcerers in there.....If I have to; I'll bring the whole building down. Prefer not to of course, I want to add a fairly intact Segin-Unadaris to the empire."

“They’ve had generations to prepare for a siege.” Said Faal. “Every doorway and corner seems to be trapped.”

Faal was there, with Runa closer to the barracks with several of Muzzie’s senior officers. Nethra was glad they’d made it safely back from the Hive Mother’s den, but she had her own business with Muzzie. She needed to talk to him in private, which his guards wouldn’t be keen on, not in the middle of a battle. The sooner he talked to Ginnda-Aanash, the Hive Mother; the quicker the killing would stop. Nethra decided to be honest and refuse to accept no for an answer.

“I need to talk to you Muzzie.....In private.” She said.

“Later, Nethra. Once the defenders have been dug out of the barracks.” Said Muzzie.

“It needs to be now, old friend.”

“I said later.....I’m needed here.” Said Muzzie.

She knew Muzzie was a strange hybrid, with a lot of high level demon in the mix. Add on a little angel, Genova and he might kill you while in a rage and then feel remorse for the next couple of years. A weird personality and despite the remorse, you’d still be very dead. Nethra decided to use an old friend card from the days she’d run contraband through the sewers with Muzzie. Only a bar owner then, but old debts of friendship never expired.

“Remember when I helped you out, Muzzie.” She said. “I’ve lost count of the times I came into the sewers to get you and Merrick out of trouble. You’d have lost an arm if I hadn’t dragged your grubby carcass out of the outfall near Podd’s yard. Got hurt myself that day.....”

“I remember and I’m grateful, very grateful.” Said Muzzie. “What has got into you Nethra ?”

“You need to do something for me, no questions asked. Then we’ll be.....Not completely square, but you’ll owe me a hell of a lot less.”

“Fine.....What do I need to do ?” Asked Muzzie.

“It begins with us taking in private.....No guards, just you and me.”

“For fuck sake.....Fine.” Muttered Muzzie.

Muzzie talked to the captain of his personal guard, who shook his head. Muzzie yelled at him quite a bit about the emperor being obeyed without question. He also reminded him that he, Mussaneth Osranetherer, was the new emperor. Nethra actually felt sorry for the captain of the guard. If Aeony had been there, she’d probably have never got a few minutes alone with Muzzie.

“This needs to be important, Nethra.” Said Muzzie. “Or you and I will be having an unpleasant conversation in the very near future.”

Nethra followed Muzzie, as he took a winding route through the rubble. Some of the city had been damaged, it was inevitable. The war still went on though; an arrow bouncing off a wall reminded them of that. Muzzie took no notice and took them into a ruined grain store, which had tumbled over to one side. Not ideal cover, but it would make them a hard target for enemy archers.

“You’re a good friend, Nethra.” Said Muzzie. “Or I’d have never agreed to this madness.....So, tell me what has to be so damned private ?”

Muzzie’s guards were still there, she never had expected them to keep away. Far enough away for privacy though, she could see their helmet plumes bobbing amongst the rubble. It was now or never and Muzzie still might assume she was crazy and say no.

“I’ve seen the Hive Mother.” Said Nethra. “She can end the fighting and give you the city. She wants to see you on your own, with just me to take you there. If she believes you’re the best option for her city, she’ll stop the defenders fighting your army.”

“Can she really do that ?” Asked Muzzie. “Can she stop them all from fighting ?”

“Ginnda-Aanash, the Hive Mother can make them all fight to the death, or become peaceable.....All in an instant with just a thought. It is what she does.....She is the Hive Mother.”

“And I just have to convince her I’d make a good emperor ?” Asked Muzzie.

“Yes old friend, use your words.” Said Nethra. “Convince her in the same way you’ve convinced so many others.”

Muzzie didn’t smile, he seemed lost in thought. The city would be theirs anyway and she couldn’t tell Muzzie about the offer from the Ancient Ones. Ginnda would probably leave her city if Muzzie didn’t meet her. All those generations of wisdom, lost to the new empire. All Muzzie could see, the only selling point for the risk of seeing Ginnda alone; was the saving of lives. Nethra hoped that was enough.

“I wouldn’t do it for anyone else.....Take me to see the Hive Mother.” Said Muzzie.

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Aeony might not have even known about the waggon, if it hadn’t been for Galla’s pet bird. Banned from going anywhere near the battle, he was their only link to the Silver Lady. Of course the damn bird had gone flapping after Maya, he seemed to genuinely like Galla’s new apprentice. Galla had threatened to cut off his Nesh bug supply and Bird was now well behaved. He kept to the area around the Void Gate and had earned quite a few future treats by getting help for the waggon. Not that the waggon had been hard to find. Aeony had headed straight for the sound of bellowing Jangar beasts.....

“First waggon I’ve seen pulled by Jangar beasts in.....Years.” Said the warrior. “This waggon is pulled by two of them. Looks like they went off the trail through the traps. It can happen if they don’t know the area.”

Several members of the army had seen the waggon begin to slip sideways into the Quella Traps, the deep pits covered in sand, which had already claimed a few small carts. There was ooze at the bottom of the traps, a sticky mess that seemed to almost love grabbing at anything silly enough to stray from the path. More of the army had arrived to help, some with ropes, but the waggon was huge and heavy.

“I’ve never seen two live tame Jangar.” Said Aeony. “Rare to see a waggon that big these days.”

The Jangar were domesticated beasts of burden, once common on the rifts. Now though, times on the rifts had become hard, the golden era over. Most domestic Jangar had been slaughtered for food. The poor creatures knew death was pulling at them. Their bellowing had become desperate and very loud.

“Stupid Jangar.....Soon be dead.” Said Bird.

“Annoying, but he has a point.” Said Aeony. “They’re magnificent beasts, but you can’t save them. Cut them loose and drag the waggon out. You might be able to save everyone on the waggon.”

The soldier looked shocked and didn’t rush to do as she’d suggested. He was probably new and didn’t realise the error in not understanding that her suggestions were really orders.

“Jangar like that.....They’re worth a fortune.” Said the warrior. “Easily worth more than the waggon and everything on it.”

It wasn’t that he didn’t want to save the people, or at least Aeony hoped she wasn’t misreading his young smiling face. They could probably get everyone off the waggon and still have a fifty-fifty chance of having two live Jangar at the end of the day. The waggon was truly huge though, an old eight wheeler from the days when entire families took years travelling along the Pilgrim Trail. Such a waggon might well have eighty to ninety hybrids travelling in it, all of them now terrified.

“Not stupid.....Warrior is right.” Said Bird.

Aeony let her dark angel instincts take hold of her for a moment. She had no intention of devouring anyone in the army, but she looked at the warrior as though she just might dig out his liver and eat it. Her natural pheromones increased with such desires, as did the darkness of her eyes. Even Bird would sense that she was now someone it didn't pay to upset.

"No.....We're saving the waggon and everyone in it." Said Aeony.

Even her voice was harsher, deeper and definitely not to be ignored.

"Bird.....We need more strong backs." Said Aeony. "Most of the army are still in Segin-Unadaris. Go to the camp followers tents and tell them I sent you. I want their strongest people and I want them here now.....Tell them to bring ropes."

"Yes, Aeony." Said Bird.

Next the young warrior, who looked a little scared and likely to do anything to please her. Some of it was her pheromones. Fear mixed with lust was one of the most powerful combinations on the rifts, which was why the dark angels used it.

"You.....Get them to cut the harnesses, the beasts can't be saved."

"Yes Aeony." Said the warrior.

"Think about it.....Anyone who can afford two Jangar beasts must be wealthy." Said Aeony. "I'm sure they'll want to rewards whoever saves them.....Now, get more ropes, lots more ropes."

"Straight away, Aeony." Said the warrior.

He ran off towards the stockade, looking happy again. Who was in the waggon ? It had to be someone with wealth and power. They probably used to have power somewhere and were now on the run. The eight wheeler was old, though it hinted at wealth, even without the beasts pulling it. Such musings were time consuming though, especially when the identity of those on the waggon was easy to discover.

"Time to get busy." She muttered.

Wings were wonderful; she'd often wondered why some powerful biovisere had never given wings to their army of hybrids. Aeony didn't know the entire history of the rifts, but as far as she knew, winged hybrids were quite rare. Her wings took her straight to the waggon, where the warriors had almost cut the harness that kept the bellowing beasts attached to the waggon.

"Do you need help ?" Asked Aeony.

"We're almost finished."

The poor beasts might not be bright, but they had panic in their eyes. Aeony was clambering over the waggon, when the bellowing stopped. A King's ransom they'd been worth, but now the rare domestic Jangar beasts were dying, suffocated by fine sand. They'd keep sinking down, until the sticky ooze held their bones in its embrace for as long as the rifts survived.

"Poor mindless brutes." She mumbled.

Into the waggon through the gap in the cover behind where the beast driver would have once been sitting. Two drivers usually and both might already be at the bottom of the traps, thrown there by the jolt when the waggon tumbled from the pathway. It took Aeony's eyes a few seconds to get used to the semi darkness under the thick canvas cover. She'd expected either nobility, or a waggon full of farmers who'd stolen the waggon. About a dozen people stood around, while trying to grab hold of something solid. Everyone dressed in clothes that wouldn't have looked out of place in the Dome at the City of the Lost God. Was she in the presence of fleeing royalty of some kind ? None of them seemed shocked or scared of having a dark angel among them.

"Alright.....I'm here to get you to safety." Said Aeony. "Who is in charge ?"

"I am royal oath taker; I speak for Thriaxer the seventh." Said one of the women.

“Under the circumstance, I’m sure we can dispense with protocol.” Said a man. “I am Zin Thriaxer, the seventh of my line to hold the throne of Kahan. Sadly I was unlawfully removed by a usurper. I am hoping the new emperor may offer me some help in regaining the throne of Kahan.”

“First, your majesty needs to be safe.” Said Aeony. “Warriors will deal with the waggon, but I should begin taking you all to a place of safety.”

“My daughters.....Take them first.” Said Zin Thriaxer.

Aeony had heard of Kahan, a small kingdom in the drier parts of the second rift. As to who ruled the place ? She never had taken an interest in such things, unless they were likely to affect the City of the Lost God. Politicians were often boring and royalty were invariably vain.

“Line up and I’ll take you one at a time.” Said Aeony. “It won’t take long.”

“Jenda first.....You’re with child.” Said the usurped King of Kahan.

Aeony carefully held Jenda in her arms. Even heavily pregnant, the girl weighed hardly anything. They were the basic hybrid mix out on the second rift. From memory the people of Kahan prided themselves on having more human in their ancestry than most. Not that Aeony would hold that against Thriaxer the seventh. She liked his concern for his daughters. Where were his male line ? Probably wiped out during the war to take his throne from him. Aeony left Jenda among a small group of camp followers. They looked like a gang of ruffians, but they’d look after the girl.

“This is Jenda.....Make sure she’s treated well.” Said Aeony.

She looked a bit mobbed by an assortment of hybrids. They meant well though. As Aeony entered the waggon a second time, it lurched a little. The army were busy, helped by some huge Ubari hybrids from the camp followers. More ropes were tugging at the waggon, trying to pull it out of the traps.

“Next to go.” Said Aeony.

The next daughter was Alyz, a nervous girl with anxious eyes. Aeony held her tight and flew towards where her sister would be waiting, surrounded by camp followers. Aeony liked the ex-King of Kahan and his daughters. There would be many of them though, the ex-leaders and usurped Kings of small nations all over the rifts. They’d all be heading towards wherever Muzzie had his base. Every ex or would-be sovereign of every tiny city or state, would be hoping that Muzzie was in the mood to give them power over....Wherever it was. Aeony knew that most who came seeking the aid of the new emperor, would be disappointed. She placed Alyz near her sister.

“Stay here.....They look rough, but you’re safe.” Said Aeony.

“Hey, I get paid one full gold piece for my company.” Someone yelled.

There was another lurch as Aeony entered the waggon. It was a lurch in the right direction; the waggon was ever so slowly, heading out of the traps.

“Next to go.” Said Aeony.

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Ridiculous really, they’d spent a lot of time getting away from the attention of his own personal guard. Muzzie also suspected he wasn’t quite as fit as he had been. Being carried into battle in a huge throne hadn’t helped. The stairs down to see the Hive Mother seemed endless and he was dreading climbing them on the return journey.

“It’s a long way down.” Said Muzzie.

“Yes, it is..... Ginnda’s lair is lower than the well room.” Said Nethra.

“Describe her, Nethra ? I need to be prepared for her appearance. Looking shocked wouldn’t be a good start.”

Muzzie had thought diplomacy was something he simply didn't do and wasn't likely to ever be good at. Then it had occurred to him that running a bar was all about diplomacy, in a way. Keeping staff loyal required a huge amount of persuasion and.....He was loathe to even think of the word charm, but it did sometimes require charm. Then there were drunk and upset customers, the lifeblood of any bar. If he could convince a drunken Dredger that his wife having sex with three of his friends, wasn't the end of the world. Then he could convince the Hive Mother of his sincerity.

"Ginnda-Aanash is the last surviving creation of Sevril-Narge, the bug goddess." Said Nethra. "She has more legs than a sewer spider and more eyes than.....Anything I've ever seen. Armoured too, layers and layers of hard shell that protects every bit of her. Hands that look more delicate than yours; that can be a shock. What else ?.....Yes, she's big, huge actually. Ginnda must be at least twenty feet long, maybe longer.....And she can move quickly when she needs to."

Muzzie had once seen a top level chaos enforcer walking the streets near his bar. A rare thing, there had been a recent chaos storm. That had been about twenty feet long and truly terrifying to look at. Muzzie was sure he could greet Ginnda, without looking shocked or horrified. The stairs down still seemed to bottomless.....

"Great news about Caspian." Said Muzzie. "I only heard about the fight after it was over. Our Caspian killed the Ezzagory.....Who'd have thought that would happen. I must give him a title; he's wanted a title for a while."

"I think he might like Caspian the Great." Said Nethra.

"Oh, no.....That sounds awful, not at all right." Said Muzzie. "I was thinking of Caspian the Fearless. It could even be etched into his armour."

"I'm certain he'd love that." Said Nethra.

"Good, I'll get Faal to write an imperial proclamation." Said Muzzie. "Normally I'd ask Caspian to do it, but he can't write his own.....It wouldn't be right."

Nethra hadn't mentioned the smell when describing the Hive Mother. It hit him at the bottom of the stairs, the sharp smell of a large creature kept too long in one place. Not that unpleasant, as long as you weren't going to be there for long.

"Ginnda." Shouted Nethra. "I have brought the new emperor to see you. This is Mussaneth Osraneherer, who I told you about."

A large creature, but her colour merged well into the rocky walls of her chamber. The lighting was poor; Muzzie assumed the Hive Mother preferred it that way. He didn't see her, until she moved towards him. He was a little startled, but did his best to hide it.

"Muzzie.....I have spoken to Leng about you." Said Ginnda. "A connection during the period of light is very.....Tiring. They had a lot to say about you, most of it good. Even your union with a dark angel amuses them."

"I am pleased to hear that, Hive Mother." Said Muzzie.

He wasn't sure if being amused that she shared a bed with Aeony was a good thing, but it was Leng. Annoy them by not showing the proper respect and they could crush him like a bug.

"The final decision is mine, Muzzie. May I call you Muzzie ?"

"Yes of course, everyone does." He said.

"And you must call me Ginnda.....Talk to me, new emperor. Tell me how this all started, your journey to become emperor of all the rifts. Everything, I want hear it all. Most importantly I want to hear about why, what drives you. Fame and fortune can be assumed, everyone who says they don't want that, is a liar. Deeper though, there will be something deeper. Convince me that my city is safe with you and it's yours. Otherwise.....I will leave this place and you must fight to win Segin-Unadaris,

or give up and seek your fame elsewhere. Don't think winning the city will be easy.....The entire population will fight to the death. At best you'll add a ruined cinder to your empire. So, talk to me, Muzzie.....Convince me."

No lies, he had a pretty good idea that Ginnda would know if he lied. Muzzie talked to the huge creature like an old friend. He started from knowing his quest had been intended for a human hero, not a hybrid bar owner with a little Genova in his blood. His eight companions had never been his choice, which was quite hard to tell her. Telling Ginnda about the fake curse was even more embarrassing. The trip to Gorshan, asking Galla and Caspian to find the gold to finance his army.....It all sounded guaranteed to show him in the worst possible light.

"It was obvious Pio-Xanash had to die.....I ordered Galla to do it."

On and on it went, the taking of Tandalla and building an army of over five thousand trained warriors. By the time Faal was mentioned and the Necropolis, Muzzie was no longer feeling ashamed of what he'd ordered the army to do. He felt such a need to be honest, that he talked about the Silver Lady.

"I didn't realise for a while.....She instigated everything, even selecting my companions."

"Ahh, the Gods, Muzzie.....There can be no arguing with the Gods." Said Ginnda. "I have my own sources and from what I've heard, you could have had a worse mentor for the beginning of your quest. Tell me the why, Muzzie ? What gets you out of bed every morning ? You haven't mentioned the why."

"To me, it sounded as though you were cursed by prophecy." Said Nethra.

"In a way, I suppose I was.....First I did want to see my name on gold coins and hear a vast army chanting my name. The idea of fame can be intoxicating and addictive. Now though.....The rifts are becoming sinister places, even the Pilgrim Trail is too dangerous for many. Even the City of the Lost God has no army now; the militia protect its walls. I could go on and on, but it all comes down to one thing. Decline and decay isn't inevitable. The rifts could enter another golden age and I'd like to be the emperor to do it."

Ginnda was actually rubbing his shoulder with one of her small delicate hands. It was both disconcerting and comforting, at the same time.

"The city is your Muzzie, rule it wisely." Said Ginnda. "If you wish it, the garrison can be yours too. They're all well trained and having a few pure bloods in your army, will help in your dealings with other demon cities....Do you wish it ?"

"Yes, I wish it." Said Muzzie. "How many are there ?"

"Two and a half thousand, though some will have died in battle. I have the orders in my mind and I shall release them into the minds of the population. There will be no more fighting and the garrison will offer their allegiance to you.....I'd like to suggest where you go next. I'm sure you get a lot of suggestions and you can of course....Ignore them all."

"Ginnda is very wise." Said Nethra.

"I'm sure she is and yes, I'd like to hear the suggestions." Said Muzzie.

"Next has to be Mount Erran, the Holy Mountain." Said Ginnda. "Your Dredgers will need to dig deep to find them. You'll meet someone who will surprise you as much as seeing me. You need to see them, it is essential to your cause."

"I was going there anyway." Said Muzzie. "Who is there ? Are they waiting for me ?"

It was strange to see the huge creature shaking her head at him.

"Muzzie.....Muzzie. Where is the fun if I tell you everything." Said Ginnda. "Go to Mount Erran and dig deep, very deep. After Mount Erran you should set that Void Gate of yours to The City of the Lost

God. Yes.....I know it's your city and you're probably leaving it until last. An enemy that powerful at your back when you march on Quron ! That would be madness. You have friends in your old home and it might not be as tough a fight as you fear."

"I will think about it, I promise." Said Muzzie.

"Do more than think about it, Muzzie." Said Ginnda. "You'll need an army of at least twenty thousand for the siege of Quron. Where else can you go to get them ? Take the City of the Lost God; it's the key to everything that will follow."

"I really will think about it." Said Muzzie.

Muzzie was hoping to recruit more experienced soldiers from Annill, though Ginnda was right. There'd be far better fighters to hire in his home city. She was also right about him not wanting to attack the city where he had his tavern and knew so many people. The thought of attacking the great library and setting the towers aflame was horrifying. There was a hope that if he took Quron, the City of the Lost God, might surrender without a fight.

"It is your prophecy Muzzie, your journey." Said Ginnda. "You have the right to ignore any and all advice, and who am I to say.....You might find a less stony path all on your own."

It seemed the Hive Mother had finished with them, though Nethra mentioned returning later. She had known Ginnda out on the rifts, when she was part of a tribe. Muzzie assumed they were going to exchange many years of gossip. Doing all those stairs again; Nethra was obviously fitter than him.

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Nethra was completely focused when she'd accompanied Muzzie back to the army. She had dragged him away from his personal guard after all and was his sole protector. Not that Muzzie was exactly harmless, as liked to point out. No one even looked at them crooked, as they'd crossed from one side of the city to the other. Whatever thoughts Ginnda had put in the minds of the population was working. They walked past many dead bodies on the way, but none looked to have been recently killed. The war was over; Segin-Unadaris was now part of the new empire. It was far too easy to be complacent, to assume the city was safe. She should have been more alert, far more cautious. With her purple wings and tail, she didn't even look like part of Muzzie's army. Looters owned the streets until order was restored.....

"You got it.....It's dead." Someone yelled.

On her way to see Ginnda, though Nethra was yet to receive the package from the Ancient Ones. Not concentrating on her surroundings and an arrow meant to hit her in the face, had cut open her cheek. Not a dangerous wound, but it hurt, a lot. Nethra reacted in the tried and tested way to avoid another arrow, or two, heading her way. She fell to the ground and played dead.

"Careful, Rork.....The thing has a tail."

"Stab it.....Make sure it's dead.....Look at those claws."

Pain, anger.....It all started to shift Nethra into being a Chinnura. No need to look, their footsteps told her where they were. Four of them and the one called Rork favoured his right leg. Unlikely to be hybrids and more likely to be pure bloods, out looking for some easy gold and a little fun.

"Looks female."

"Stab it.....Kill it, Moss.....It might still be dangerous."

All pure bloods had long fancy names and without fail, they shortened them to things like Moss and Rork. Muzzie had once told her his mother had thrown him out of the house when he'd shortened Mussaneth to Muzzie. Rork came closer, probably intending to push a dagger into her back.

"It's got a bag.....Stab it and grab the bag, Rork."

Being called an it was annoying and pushed her further into being a Chinnura. Her nails became claws; her teeth became longer and sharper. Her muscles shifted around and became stronger, which hurt. That pain added to the effect and Nethra could feel a tingle as the gash in her cheek, healed at an incredible speed.

“Touch my bag and I’ll kill you all.” Yelled Nethra.

A lie by omission really and Nethra usually liked to tell the truth. All four of them were going to die and one of them would provide her with a meal. She leapt to her feet and used her tail on Rork. Strong now, there were some wonderful muscles in her tail. She could use it as an extra limb when clawing her way up a building, or.....She stabbed the sharp end through Rork’s chest. Rork gurgled a little as he died and fell to the ground.

“Fuck.....It got Rork.”

They weren’t even good looters. The one with the bow tried to use it when she was far too close. He even had a pretty good short sword down his belt, that should have been his weapon of choice. Actually.....Up close and Nethra picked up the scent of a pure blood female. So, some of the looters were demon women. To Nethra, gender didn’t matter in a fight; she used her claws to rip out the woman’s throat. The two survivors ran, of course they did.

“Hey, don’t go.....I’m just starting to like you.” Shouted Nethra.

They really weren’t suited to the whole looting business. They didn’t split up and run through the mounds of rubble. They ran together, side by side, along the centre of the street. No lamps, but there were enough burning buildings to show where they were.

“Idiots.” Nethra muttered.

Nethra left her bag on the ground, it was empty anyway. She unfurled her wings and flew at the fleeing looters. One she picked up and threw against a wall. That one, she was no longer assuming gender, would be dead. Nethra had heard their neck break. The last one was a male; Nethra noticed that as she grappled him to the ground. He was yelling far too much and it was annoying.

“Shut up.....Be quiet and I won’t hurt you.” She shouted.

Another lie, she was getting better at making them sound convincing. Nethra needed to eat to replace what becoming a Chinnura took out of her. Nethra liked her meals to be fresh, the meat tasted better that way. One hand over his mouth, her other hand dug into his abdomen and pulled out the organ pure bloods had to do the job of a liver in hybrids. The looter stopped moving about quite quickly.

“Oh, I needed this.” She mumbled.

No need to hide and the Hive Mother wasn’t expecting her to arrive at a specific time. Nethra took her time over the meal and drank some of the looters blood. She was tempted to take the female corpse as a gift for Ginnda, but it was a long way down those stairs. A hell of a long way to carry a body.

“Time.....To find out what I’m giving Ginnda.”

Back to the bag, they’d told her to bring a large bag. The voices in her head had given her instruction and no one ever argues with the Ancient Ones. Get given something, give it to Ginnda and tell her to keep it safe. In return, Ginnda would receive some of the wisdom of the ancients. Nethra would like to have known more, but no one ever asks the Ancient Ones to explain their actions. Nethra sat on the ground, partially hidden by a smouldering shed of some kind.

“I am here.....I am ready.” She mumbled.

‘Keep it safe.’ Said the voice in her head.

“I will.”

A flash of purple light and it was in front of her. A large leathery looking object that would just about fit in her bag. Cool to the touch, as she lifted the object and put it in the bag. Not heavy, but not that light either. It looked for all the world, like a huge egg. The kind of leathery egg some reptiles laid.

"It just keeps getting weirder." Nethra muttered.

There were no more looters to contend with, the population of the city seemed to be staying in their homes. Halfway down the stairs to Ginnda's lair, Nethra decided to ask if she could sleep down there for the night. Becoming fully the Chinnura was tiring and it had already been a very long day. The thought of going back up those stairs.....No, she'd ask if it was alright to curl up in the Hive Mother's den. Ginnda was awake and waiting for her, Nethra knew she would be.

"Well.....What have you brought me ?" Asked Ginnda.

"I'm not sure; it might be an egg of some kind."

While Ginnda picked up the egg and examined it, Nethra remembered the words she was supposed to say.

"Keep it hidden and safe." Said Nethra. "It may be a long time from now, but someone will come to collect it. I'm told you will know you can trust them. Do you agree to keep the object safe ?"

"Yes, Nethra.....Of course I do.....An egg, I wonder what waits to hatch out ?"

"I'm just delivering it, I have no idea."

The Ancient Ones saw and heard all, everyone knew that. Ginnda glowed with a purple light for a while, before falling into what seemed to be a deep sleep. Receiving even part of the wisdom of the ancients, had to be tiring. Assuming the Hive Mother wouldn't mind, Nethra went to sleep on a comfortable looking rug.

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