

The Last Emperor

Chapter 8 - Gorshan

“Vella always claimed to dread time spent in a library, though that was largely a lie. She tended to read to be entertained, fiction rather than serious tomes. An epic story of a small number of heroes beating ridiculous odds was her ideal book, especially if it contained a little romance.”



Muzzie had known the moment would arrive, Aeony had been hinting at it, every time their paths had crossed. Not that he was averse to sleeping with the dark angel; they'd shared a bed many times at his tavern. There'd always been the excuse that no one said no to a dark angel, though secretly, he thoroughly enjoyed sex with Aeony. For creatures who couldn't breed in the usual way, dark angels certainly put a lot of effort and expertise into coupling with hybrids. Surprisingly keen on the comfort of a proper bed, Aeony had invited herself into his room. It had been a while for both of them and the sex had been amazing. Muzzie was sure he'd heard the bedframe crack during their second, or maybe third coupling. He was currently looking at a peaceful Aeony, as she slept next to him. Muzzie liked to think the smile on her face, was totally down to him. So far, sleep was refusing to come to him.....

“Barkeeper.....Wake up.....Muzzie.”

Wake up; he hadn't managed to get to sleep that night, not one wink. Or had he, the room came into focus and Aeony was still asleep and not using her tongue on his genitals, in very creative ways. He had been asleep, but now he was awake. The room felt cold and the voice had probably been part of the dream. Muzzie cuddled up to Aeony, while pulling a blanket over both of them.

“No, barkeeper.....Don't go back to sleep.”

So, not part of the dream after all. Muzzie carefully got up and realised what a cold night it was in Annill. He put on his long jacket, the one he'd only just dug out of his pack. As he warmed up a bit, he looked around the room. The ghost was by the window and beckoning to him.

“Here, Muzzie.....It's important.”

Ghosts didn't scare Muzzie, he'd seen quite a few, usually down near the river or close to Podd's bone yard. The City of the Lost God, seemed to attract the nebulous spirits, who for one reason or another, had yet to go wherever they went to. Muzzie had the distinct impression that some ghosts haunted where they'd once lived, because where they were going wasn't likely to be a pleasant experience. The ghost might be happy stood by the window, but standing in a cold draft wasn't Muzzie's idea of fun. He sat in a chair and pulled his long jacket around him.

“Keep your voice down.” Muzzie hissed. “Who are you ghost ? Why are you troubling me tonight ?”

The ghost was grey rather than white, which made it hard to see, even in the glow of the usual ultraviolet wash of the rifts. Unusually, though Muzzie wasn't certain, the ghost had the shape of a human, a pure blood human. A male by the look of him, in the robes of some kind of cleric. He was speaking in old imperial, which Muzzie had learned as a child.

“I am, or rather I was LLud Narren, the most powerful sorcerer on the rifts and adviser to Tomma-Goran, a living Deity.”

“Ahhh, the source of all our problems.” Said Muzzie. “Your little trap has caused so much trouble for me and many others. Have you come to beg for forgiveness ? If you have, I’ve no intention of forgiving you.”

“My trap to punish anyone going through my collection of artefacts.” Said LLud. “Almost intended as a joke, though someone changed it a quite a bit. My trap was never intended to trap you, barkeeper.”

“Alright.....We’ve all been the victims of a prophecy never intended for me.” Said Muzzie. “That only makes me feel worse and those I travel with.....Have no idea I’m not really the one who was originally intended to be emperor. So, ghost of a long dead sorcerer.....Why disturb my sleep ?”

The ghost of LLud Narren gained a little colour, a shade of pale lilac. Maybe talking to the living gave him strength. Caspian and Vella had killed the ancient sorcerer, they happily admitted to that. It gave them a claim to everything in LLud’s chambers, at least according to them. How they’d killed one of the most powerful magic users who’d ever lived ? They weren’t keen on discussing that and Muzzie suspected that more than a little good luck had been involved.

“I was sent to discuss a matter, one Galla the apothecary was supposed to deal with.” Said LLud.

“Then there is another issue, one that can be resolved to our mutual benefit.”

“I always like a little mutual benefit.” Said Muzzie.

“Yes, but first there is your use of far too much chaos energy.” Said LLud. “Ignore the warnings if you like, but you can’t be emperor if you’re dead. Too many are noticing you, Muzzie. The sort of creatures you don’t want noticing you. Keep the really powerful spells for emergencies, or.....You could end up as a pile of ashes out on the rifts.”

“I take it the Silver Lady sent you ?” Asked Muzzie.

LLud merely nodded, no one sent by her liked to use her name, even the dead.

“Fine, I’ll go back to using the finger bone, as I have for years.” Said Muzzie. “I’ll keep the rest of the Hand of Arcadis for matters of life or death.”

“Perfect.....Now about when you get to Gorshan.” Said LLud. “I take it you are aware that Gorshan is your next step on the way to becoming emperor ?”

“Yes, Gorshan was mentioned so many times by Pio-Xanash.” Said Muzzie. “Then Runa was given a book which contained Pio’s version of how my journey should progress. After Annill I go to Gorshan in an attempt to waken a dead king. No one is happy of course; Vella still refuses to even talk about going.”

“Not Haakon Raag, he has long ago passed beyond any chance to talk to him.” Said LLud. “You need to find the body of his brother, the cleric Wēland Raag. Don’t be fooled by him being a cleric in life, Wēland was a far more brutal man than his brother Haakon. Find the body and rely on the expertise of Galla the apothecary. With luck, Wēland Raag will tell you.....What is the phrase ? Something to your advantage.”

“Good, the book Runa found gets a bit vague after Gorshan.” Said Muzzie. “It hints at Tandalla, or maybe I’ll be going to Mount Erran on the pilgrim trail. Not that I know what to do when I get to either of them.”

“Trust those setting your path, Muzzie. Talk to Wēland, he will know.” Said LLud.

That seemed to be it, though the now lilac coloured ghost, showed no sign of leaving. Muzzie remembered a mention of something to their mutual benefit. Aeony was looking restless and Muzzie’s libido was also becoming restless. He really wanted LLud gone so he could enjoy some more coupling with the dark angel.

“You mentioned something else, something to our mutual benefit.” Said Muzzie.

“Not an easy subject and it will require a little trust, both ways.” Said LLud. “In Gorshan you will discover a magical sceptre once owned by me. I’ll leave you to work out how to activate it, if you wish to. One option will send me to oblivion, which is a far better idea than what true death may have waiting for me. The second option will make me far more corporeal. Still dead in most ways, but I will be able to communicate properly with the living. The choice of my fate.....Is in your hands.”

“And I have to ask.....What about my part of the mutual benefit ?”

“Ahhh, that requires trust.” Said LLud. “Make me more corporeal and I will have access to all the secrets of the ancient human empires. Their knowledge, their wealth.....Their weapons. I will reward you Muzzie and I promise, you won’t be disappointed.”

“Very well, if I find the sceptre and it works, I will help you.”

“That’s all I ask.” Said LLud.

The room was dark after the glowing ghost had gone and Muzzie realised how cold he’d become. He had a huge erection though, at just the thought of more sex with Aeony.

“Who was that ?” Aeony asked.

“Just a night visitor, I’ll explain in the morning.”

Muzzie lost all interest in LLud Narren as Aeony reached for what was between his legs. He’d tell her about Gorshan later and about the sorcerer asking him for a favour.

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Caspian had risen early, leaving Vella to sleep for another hour or so. Not just fully dressed, he’d put on his sword belt and hidden two daggers in his clothing. Between them, Galla and he had brought a lot of gold into the Defender, a staggering amount of gold. Enough to finance more than one war and everyone in Annill must have heard about it. The local kids had treated it as some kind of parade.

“Hired guards, Caspian.....They’ll already be thinking of ways to steal it.”

Merrick had told him, as the bags of gold coins had been stacked in the basement. A strong room in the basement, with a metal reinforced door. It was where Merrick kept his own valuables and according to Merrick and Nethra, it had never been broken into. Caspian knew the reputation of guards hired by the day, though they were all that was available.

“I know people Caspian, good people.” Merrick had said. “Cheaper than the hired guards, no middle man getting rich. Reliable too, you have my word.”

It made sense at the time. They always say if you want to hire someone to protect against thieves, hire the best thief in the city. Merrick was a successful thief; he’d managed to buy The Defender for cash and had enough money to refurbish the rooms. Using Merrick’s friends and cronies had made sense that night, but now, in the light of a new morning.....Caspian had run down the basement stairs, expecting to find an empty strong room.

“Another come to check their gold.” Said Merrick. “Still here, Caspian.....Still here. We had Galla down here an hour before full light, didn’t we lads ?”

“I’m not a lad.” Muttered a female voice.

“Sorry Jenda.....How much gold do you think we have here ?” Asked Merrick.

“Enough to buy all of Annill, Boss....Twice over.” Said Jenda.

“Three times over.” Someone muttered.

Caspian understood, Jenda using the word Boss had made it all clear. Merrick wasn’t a retired thief and rogue for hire, he still was a thief and the people guarding the basement were members of his gang. No wonder he trusted them....Merrick had a reputation for being tough and Nethra could win a fight against just about anyone.

"I can see my gold is in good hands." Said Caspian.

"Not just good, the best." Someone said.

There had to be close to a dozen armed fighters in the hallways, the strong room and near the stairs. There was even one heavily armoured warrior sat in a chair and armed with a crossbow. It would take a small army to get at the gold and even then, most of them would die in the process. Caspian was heading back to the stairs, when Merrick stood in his way.

"I heard you're taking Nethra to the Temple of the Flame?" Asked Merrick.

"Yes, I am.....Is that a problem?"

"No, she can be very helpful to you in Annill." Said Merrick. "Not Gorshan though, or anywhere else you might end up. I can provide fighters to go with you to Gorshan, as many as you need. No Nethra though.....Are we agreed on that?"

Caspian remembered Gorshan with its ruined buildings and tight turns in corridors and passageways. Take too many warriors and they'd end up getting in each other's way. On the other hand, Caspian had learned a few lessons from his previous visit to the massive ruins of Gorshan.

"Yes, I understand.....Nethra remains in Annill." Said Caspian. "Three or four fighters who are good with a bow would be useful. They'll need lots of arrows, barrels full of arrows. There will be a lot of Vargouille in Gorshan and last time.....We ran out of arrows."

"I'll find you the best three or four archers in Annill." Said Merrick.

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Aeony too, had left her bed long before full light. Actually she'd left Muzzie's bed, after he'd been needed elsewhere. She was wary of a temple run by what sounded like crazy fanatics, who still worshipped a human deity in a temple constructed by humans. In the City of the Lost God, she'd have arranged for the temple to be demolished and the priests executed. Burned alive probably, or a public flaying. The citizenry always appreciated a good skinning. Religious tolerance was fine, in moderation. Those who ruled Annill, seemed to have begun to tolerate the intolerable.

"Next they'll be worshipping the likes of Sevril-Narge, the bug goddess." She muttered.

It was heresy and dark angels were famous for slaughtering heretics. Aeony continued to mutter about the state of affairs in Annill, as she clambered up the outside of the Defender Tavern. Sharp claws on feet and hands, plus a strong tail that was like having an extra arm. Aeony quickly reached the roof, from where she could see a large part of the city.

"They even burn a red flame for the entire world to see.....Cursed heretics."

When Muzzie was emperor, she'd talk him into returning to Annill and doing what was required. The priests needed to be killed, every one of them. The Temple of the Flame needed to be reduced to rubble and the ground salted. For now though, the cooperation of the priests would be essential, so Aeony would show her benign face to anyone and everyone she met. The dark angel leapt from the roof and let her wings unfurl.

"One day.....One day I will return here with my sisters." She muttered.

No screeching her defiance to all those below, or yelling a challenge. Like a silent shadow, Aeony flew over the library building, the streets where the wealthy merchants lived and the official centre of religious life, the Temple erected to honour Estrin-Okanan. The most powerful and wise of all the deities officially worshipped throughout the rifts. On Aeony flew, breaking a rule she was aware of, a really important rule in Annill City.

"Fools.....They should be burning it to the ground." Aeony mumbled.

It wasn't law, but she'd heard that no one flew over the Temple of the Flame, no one. It might cause her to be shunned and unwelcome in the homes of those who still believed in the old human Gods.

To hell with them, she had no intention of visiting such homes. Plus, she was still a hero, one of the killers of the Monster of Lake Nigon. That had to count for something.....

“Lower.....I need to see where we’ll be coming.” She mumbled.

The temple covered a large area, right in the centre of Annill. There were rumours associated with the heretics and their temple; such places tend to breed rumours. The citizens of Annill had no real idea what was really going on inside the outer wall, so they invented ideas.....And those ideas gave birth to other ideas. Strange and weird rumours and ideas about the temple were now more prevalent than Nesh bugs on a hot sunny wall.

“Some say they still call upon the Great Crawling Chaos.”

Nethra had told her, before gripping the protection amulet she had on a chain around her neck. Aeony had heard such nonsense before, about any out of the way temple. She’d once heard rumours about the priests of Sevril-Narge in Tandalla eating young children. It was all rubbish of course, though sometimes people needed to believe in such things. In a system that praised a wise and wonderful deity, it had to be balanced by an evil of some kind.

“There is power down there.....I feel it.” Aeony muttered.

Not in the central building, the main part of the temple where access was restricted. Quite close to the outer wall and quite deep below ground, was something. Aeony risked there being guards with bows and went lower. It was the place to aim Galla at, when they all officially visited the temple. Certain parts were open to the non-believing majority of the population. In fact, the priests were said to encourage visitors, as long as they respected the locked door and chains across restricted parts of the temple.

“I see it now.....It’s a door.” Shrieked Aeony.

A doorway rather than a portal, though the energy of one could feel much like the other. Definitely a doorway and whereas portals closed after a while, doors to other worlds and places, could remain open forever, some thought they were eternal. A large doorway to somewhere was about two hundred feet below her, deep underground. Aeony flew even lower, actually passing between two small domes. Yes, there was a door, a massive door which might have been open since the beginning of time. Aeony left when the first group of priests started shouting abuse at her.

“Really, so rude.” She muttered. “Don’t they realise I’m one of the heroes who slew the monster of Lake Nigon.”

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They were all there, the seven of them and Nethra. Galla knew Vella might be awkward, but she was there, though she had a face like thunder. The Silver Lady had spoken to Galla through her bird. Then, to make things even more awkward, she’d been told not to mention where the information had come from.

“They trust you Galla. Get them through the doorway to Gorshan.”

Hearing the Silver Lady’s voice through the squawks of her bird was still weird, though she was getting used to it. If Runa hadn’t been given Pio’s book, Galla would have had to use the ‘trust me’ card and her reputation in the City of the Lost God. After Runa had the book, getting them to the doors of the Temple of the Flame had been easy. Actually not easy, but even Vella was no longer refusing to go to Gorshan. Pio had written that the next step on the road to fulfilling the prophecy was to talk to a long dead King of Gorshan. Galla could have been offended that Pio’s book was held in higher esteem than her pronouncements. In the end though, she was just glad everyone was stood in front of the open doors to the temple.

“That is an impressive entrance.” Said Sensan.

The doors into the compound, the only way through the outer walls of the Temple of the Flame. Two huge hardened silver doors that had to be nearly fifty feet high and two feet thick. The doors hung so well on their hinges, that they were moving, ever so slightly, in the breeze.

“You have to give humans credit for their architecture.” Said Runa. “They knew how to build awe inspiring buildings.”

“They had the space here.....It’s all about having the space to build.” Said Caspian.

“How do we get permission to enter ?” Asked Aeony.

“No permission required.” Said Nethra. “All visitors are welcome as long as we don’t try to enter restricted areas or open locked doors.”

“How do we know if an area is restricted ?” Asked Vella.

“You’ll know.....I’ve been here many times.” Said Nethra. “Follow me; I know the part of the temple where Aeony felt something strange.”

“Not strange, I recognised the feeling. It was a door.....A huge door to another world.” Said Aeony. Nethra was first through the huge doors and onto the road that would take them to the temple itself. It was a garden within the outer walls, a well-kept, lush green garden.

“We need to go to the lesser shrine.” Said Nethra. “It’s a small building where visitors are encouraged to find peace through contemplation.”

Aeony mumbled something about heretics, but everyone else seemed enchanted by the gardens. Galla had been feeling a bit upstaged by a scruffy book written by Pio several centuries ago. Probably written during periods of intoxication by the look of his handwriting. She decided it was the perfect moment to show off her knowledge of human temples. Caspian was bound to mention some vague tome he’d once read in the library, but she was used to that.

“All the major human era temples are called the Temple of the Flame.” Said Galla. “Most of them are now nothing but a few partial walls and rubble. The temple in Annill is by far the best preserved and the only one I know still used as a place of worship.”

“There is the shrine to the Fallen Women in the Nikar Mountains.” Said Caspian. “I know that is still used and has many priests living in residence.”

“Really, Caspian.....How would you know that ?” Asked Muzzie.

Galla knew fallen women in that context meant something different to its meaning in Annill. That didn’t stop her joining in with the laughter. Even Vella was laughing at her husband’s obvious embarrassment.

“That’s not what I.....” Began Caspian.

“We’re not judging, even librarians need some fun.” Said Muzzie.

Caspian knew when to be quiet and the laughter had stopped by the time they reached the small Shrine of Contemplation. Contemplation of what precisely ? Galla was unsure and Nethra hadn’t mentioned it. The shrine was a circular stone building with a domed roof. It looked as though it would be cool in summer and freezing when the winter winds arrived in Annill. There was a chain across the stairs that led down to the lower parts of the temple. The two priests holding tools looked like the fairly standard Dreger hybrids, who populated most of the rifts.

“Oh.....We came especially to see the catacombs.” Said Nethra.

Nethra was probably known to the priests, who were looking at the rest of them with the now familiar mix of awe and admiration. Galla kept forgetting they were still the heroes of Annill, at least until everyone forgot the dead monster of the lake. Not all notoriety was a good thing, but on this occasion....One of the priests unhooked the chain.

“There was a small flood at the bottom of the stairs.” Said the priest. “We don’t want visitors being injured. Just be careful and you should be fine.”

“Enjoy seeing all the human skulls.” Said the other priest. “There are more in our catacombs than anywhere else, including the temple in Tandalla.”

“The lighting orbs are still turned on down there.” Added the first priest.

Nethra went first; she’d obviously seen the catacombs before. The stairs were a long set of spiral steps, somewhere you wouldn’t want visitors taking a tumble.

“The same lighting orbs we have in the Dome.” Said Vella.

“Yes, we’re definitely walking in the footsteps of humans.” Said Sensan.

Aeony gave a kind of growl, but no one spoke until they’d gone down the damp stairs and crossed the puddles at the bottom. Once past the stairs the catacombs began, with shelf after shelf full of human skeletons. Leg bones and arm bones looked a little different to the usual hybrids, but the skulls.....

“I’d heard human skulls were weird.....This though.” Said Runa. “Makes me glad they’re all gone.”

“Not gone Runa, they’re still out there.” Said Aeony. “Even on the rifts there are pure blood humans, just far less of them than there once were.”

No familiar bone structure to the jaws for the Dredger shovel mouth. No pronounced bone ridges over the ears. No ridge of bone down the back of the head, assumed to be part of Dredger spiny protection from a past age. Human skulls were fairly rounded, with no protective ridges at all. Thin bones too, compared to the average hybrid. Galla became nervous as Aeony prodded a skull, thinking the dark angel might break it apart.

“Careful, Aeony.....We don’t need trouble with the priests.” Said Galla.

“Don’t worry, I hate live humans.” Said Aeony. “Their remains though.....They are the respected remains of a worthy adversary. Much in the way the fallen warrior women are respected in their shrine high up in the Nikar Mountains. I would have liked to meet this human in battle, but now.....No, I will honour their remains.”

Caspian looked at Aeony and nodded, as if to thank the dark angel. Nethra obviously knew her way through the catacombs and was getting into her stride as unofficial tour guide.

“There are believed to be over a million interred in the catacombs.” Said Nethra. “Most died in the constant war to keep control of the rifts. Annill didn’t even exist then, so their remains were placed here....In the catacombs below the ancient human temple.”

“Sorry to interrupt.” Said Galla. “You know this place, Nethra. Do the priests usually come down here, into the catacombs.”

“Not usually, though I can’t guarantee they won’t.....Why do you ask ?”

“Probably not a massive problem if they do.” Said Galla. “I was just concerned that they might not like my bird flying around among the dead.”

Not exactly stunned silence, though Muzzie’s mouth had dropped open. Not all of them had seen her bird appear out of her clothing. He’d been very quiet too, obviously wary of where they were.

“Come out bird, I have need of you and your wings.” Said Galla.

“Silly Galla.....I don’t like this place.”

“Come on bird, time to earn your keep.”

Vella actually gasped, as her bird flew up and onto Galla’s shoulder. Galla rubbed his chest feathers as she couldn’t reach his head. Was her bird getting larger ? Galla could usually give his head a rub when he was on her shoulder, so either he was getting bigger, or her arms were getting shorter.

"Aeony felt a door down here, a door to another world." Said Galla. "Like a portal, the same kind of chaos forces."

"I know.....Silly Galla." Said her pet.

"Then you should have no trouble finding it." Said Galla. "Fly through the catacombs, you're looking for the closest place to the door. If you can find the room where it is, that'd be perfect. The door is the important thing though....."

"I know.....Get as close as I can to it." Said her bird. "Then I call for you."

"That's it.....Go Bird.....Find the door."

Galla followed her pet at a very sedate pace; the damp air in the catacombs was doing her old bones and joints, no favours at all.

"That.....Is a very useful creature." Said Nethra.

"He has his moments." Said Galla. "He's saved my life twice, just by making a huge amount of noise at just the right moment."

"What's his name?" Asked Sensan.

"Sometimes it's Pest, other times I use Nuisance."

There would be no losing her pet, even though the catacombs covered a huge area. Easy to home in on the sound of his voice, which seemed loud enough to go through stone walls. His squawks had high notes and low, which bounced along walls and carried to everywhere.

"I found the door!!.....Silly Galla!!"

Not easy for a bird to feel comfortable in passageways with nowhere to perch, not to mention the shelves full of the bones of long dead human warriors. Her pet was still screeching at her, when they reached him. He'd been perched on top of a lighting orb, but jumped down as Galla arrived.

"Here Galla.....This wall."

He pecked at the stones, as if to make sure there could be no confusion in where he meant. The wall was on a corner and there was something about it, which Muzzie noticed too.

"The wall looks cleaner and newer than the others." Said Muzzie.

"An open door to Gorshan.....The wall was probably built to stop a thousand Vargouille arriving in Annill one night."

"A large room the other side." Said Galla. "I make it about forty feet from the wall to the door. What about you Aeony, I know you'll be feeling where it is?"

"Closer to fifty.....It'll be a large room." Said Aeony. "We need to be careful when we knock the wall down; there could be anything on the other side."

That started an argument, of course it did. Muzzie was all for knocking the wall inwards, though Caspian wanted to pull the stone blocks into the corridor.

"We can stack them out of the way." Insisted Caspian.

Nethra had the good sense to suggest either way was going to be too noisy and after all.....

"They might see me here and attack the tavern." Said Nethra. "We have to come back this way.....Do we really want to make enemies of a temple full of crazy priests?"

The arguments went on, while Galla rested her forehead on the wall and thought it through. Her bird flew up and sat on her shoulder, as if sharing her thoughts.

"You know how.....Don't you Bird?" She asked.

"Yes Galla.....No noise, we go through."

"See.....You might be cleverer than all of them." Said Galla.

It was really quite easy, one of her powders that didn't require exotic and hard to acquire ingredients. Muzzie could probably achieve the same result with the Hand of Arcadis, but she didn't

want to give him an excuse to use yet more raw chaos. By the time Galla turned to talk to them, the arguments had stopped. Everyone was looking at her and her pet.

"Through, we go through the wall without so much as leaving a scratch on the stones. It's simple really, though I will need a day or so to create the powders. We'll go through two at a time, with the toughest fighters going first." Said Galla. "The priests will assume we simply left the temple."

"Same trick when we come back.....I like it." Said Nethra. "No hundreds of angry priests."

"I'll go first and Aeony can come with me." Said Muzzie.

"Fine, I'll be with you.....We'll need your lighting spell, it might be totally dark in there." Said Aeony.

"I can feel the door, now we've been stood here for a while." Said Muzzie.

"Me too, like a low buzzing sound I can't quite hear properly." Said Runa.

"We need to set a day to go to Gorshan." Said Muzzie. "We'll need to talk to a few potential fighters and Galla will require time to create her famous powders."

"Will the powders need time for testing?" Asked Vella.

Galla wasn't tall, but she could still appear quite menacing, if the situation required it. She gave Vella her most threatening look and pretended to be angrier than she really felt.

"Dear child.....Out of respect for our long friendship, I will ignore that question." Said Galla.

"Sorry Galla."

"Silly Vella." Squawked her bird.

"Anyway.....Shall we say four days to get ready?" Asked Muzzie. "Four days and we leave on the morning of the fifth day. Will you all be ready?"

"I'll never be totally ready for Gorshan." Said Vella. "But yes, if I must.....I'll be ready."

Muzzie wasn't satisfied with nodding heads, he made everyone promise to be ready to leave Annill on the morning of the fifth day. Muzzie was learning and growing, after all the nonsense with Pio and the Dredgers. Galla always carried a piece of charcoal and a small tile to write on. Even stretching she found it hard to write at the top of the wall, but she managed it. She wrote her name on the top stone, so they'd know the place when they all returned.

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"No, we're not paying out any money until we've checked a few details." Said Runa.

"The longer you leave it, the more gold I'll be asking for."

Nethra and Sensan both had experience with armed men and the militia in the City of the Lost God. Muzzie had given them the job of interviewing potential soldiers for his army, which made sense.

There was an attitude though, as if the unemployed fighters were in some way, doing Muzzie a favour. The man was past his best fighting years and was wearing a uniform for a local noble, rather than any past army of Annill. He was lucky to have been asked in to see her and yet there it was, the attitude. As he was about the sixth man with an attitude problem, Runa decided to put him in his place, just a little. She pretended to look back through her notes.....

"Let me see, Rorkath isn't it?"

"Yes, that's me.....Born in Annill and like my father, they'll probably bury me here."

"Forgive me Rorkath, but it has to be said." Said Runa. "You're not a young man and your uniform has probably never seen battle. Do you know how many unemployed fighters there are in Annill?"

Rorkath was probably a proud man and she had no problem with that. As he handled the knife on his belt, she slammed her sword down on the table. Sensan merely looked at her and smiled.

"Don't kill this one, Runa." Said Sensan. "I'm fed up with dealing with wailing wives and grieving mothers."

A lie, but Rorkath didn't know that. He stopped handling his blade.

"I have no idea; it must be a large number." Said Rorkath.

"Tens of thousands and we need to hire only a thousand or so of the best.....Are you the best ?"
Asked Runa.

"I.....I'm sure I could be."

Sensan had wanted to use a standard form, written by hired clerics, with just the name of the fighter added by them. Runa had insisted on writing everything out fresh, for every man who wanted to march with Muzzie. Mainly men, though there was a small number of women sat waiting in the long bar at the Defender. Runa wrote Rorkath's full name on a piece of parchment. Him watching her write it would make it more important, more special.

"I'll get you to sign this today, but no gold will be paid until a few things are checked." Said Runa. "If everything looks fine, you will be paid a hiring fee of five imperial. After that.....Those marching with Muzzie will be well paid, most will become very wealthy. Do you want to sign today ? Or will you return to your wife and tell her you don't like the idea of being rich ?"

"I'll sign today." Said Rorkath.

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Vella always claimed to dread time spent in a library, though that was largely a lie. She tended to read to be entertained, fiction rather than serious tomes. An epic story of a small number of heroes beating ridiculous odds was her ideal book, especially if it contained a little romance. Truthfully though she was enjoying being in the Great Library of Annill, because the smell of parchment and inks, reminded her of home and the library in the City of the Lost God. There was always a slight mustiness about a large library, which was like a sign on the wall, saying 'Home.' Caspian and her were in the restricted section, going through the library's entire selection of books on Gorshan.....Three mildew damaged volumes.

"These books don't even show the long set of steps I used to get into the city." Said Vella.

"Gorshan started as a castle for the king and grew into a city." Said Caspian. "That's why everything is so crowded together, with narrow roads and hidden passages. Your way in is just a back entrance. No way to be sure, but I think the door in the temple, will take us to the main entry point into Gorshan Castle."

Despite hating the idea of going back there, Vella was interested in where they might be going. She'd assumed they'd be using the long set of steps again and the tunnel into the underground canals.

"Show me, where do you think we'll arrive, Casp ?" She asked.

The map of Gorshan had been drawn by a human hand and it went right across at least a dozen pages of the book. Gorshan during its best days, the edges of the map were decorated with flowers and various types of birds. No hint of the Vargouille, or the other unpleasant creatures that now called the ruins home. Caspian was pointing at an open area near the massive main gates of the castle.

"Here, the area used by visiting merchants." Said Casp. "Gorshan was a trading centre for the entire region. They could use gateways to enter the castle and avoid a long journey through the mountains. Being sensible, there is a guard post near the gates, just in case anyone appears who isn't welcome in Gorshan. If you look here.....It'll be a ruin now, but the barracks for the guards was quite large."

"I still can't quite believe we're going back there." Said Vella.

"It'll be fine.....Merrick is giving us three or four expert archers." Said Casp. "Aeony will be with us and Galla, with her pockets full of powders. Then there's Muzzie, who brought down the high tower at Seren's Edge. We'll be fine, Vella. There and back before the creatures notice us."

Vella remembered the book on Gorshan she'd read back home, the one in the forbidden section of the library in the City of the Lost God. There had been no flowers around the map in that book, no colourful birds. There had been hints of Vargouille hiding in the ruins. A claw here, a jaw full of sharp teeth there. It was going to be dreadful in Gorshan, but Casp was still unwilling to admit it.

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