

The Last Emperor

Chapter 19 – Segin-Unadaris

“Tomma-Goran the deity had built the sewers when he’d built his city. They were smelly, dirty and home to many unpleasant creatures, but they’d last forever.”



Every army needs it; time for rest and recuperation. His warriors had lost some of their own, though far less than Muzzie had anticipated. The Necropolis hadn’t contained thousands of the undead and he hadn’t attempted to clear out the central nexus. One day he might bring an army back to eradicate the undead, but for now.....He’d finished with the sixth rift.

“You could have at least locked the Void Gate on the city gates of Tandalla.” Said Vella. “I think the army were expecting better than a few days in Aarabash.”

“They brew some good beer, but otherwise.....It’s a shit hole.” Said Nethra.

Caspian had extended the already huge tent he lived in. It was now higher and covered more space than many houses in Tandalla. Probably Vella’s idea, to increase their perceived importance. Muzzie quite liked it and the whole nomadic feel of the massive tent. Everyone had been invited for a meal and more importantly, all of the eight had turned up. Maya was there too, of course. General Dhūlen had made some complimentary remarks about living under canvas, which Vella had obviously appreciated.

“Cities are fine, but give me the bohemian life every time. As long as there’s good food of course.....And the best wines.” Dhūlen had said.

“We have lots of those.” Vella had replied.

Someone, again probably Vella, had mixed a little Ashunt oil into the oil for the lamps. The perfume was wonderfully relaxing and reminded Muzzie of nights out on the rifts with Lilleth. Not an anecdote he could share with Aeony next to him.

“Yes....You could have set the gate to Annill.” Said Runa. “Most of the army comes from there and I’m sure a few nights at home would have been appreciated.”

“Muzzie has been instructed by the best, the journals of Xanash the fourteenth.” Said Dhūlen.

They were sitting on the floor, a huge circular rug to be exact. Servants were placing their food and drinks in front of them, on small tables. Even Galla seemed to be enjoying the meal, though she had mentioned probably needing help to get up again. Old joints and bones had been mentioned more than once.

“Not just the fourteenth, Xanash the sixteenth mentioned the problem.” Said Muzzie. “Let your army return home, even for just a short time.....And they’ll get too comfortable. Back home with their family and loved ones and many will never return. No thought of the pay they’ll never receive. It can’t compete with their own bed and mother’s cooking.”

There was laughter, which sounded genuine, rather than being polite.

“Yes.....Yes, I see the problem.” Said Vella. “Surely a few days in Tandalla though.....Very few of them have a mother there. Anything has to be better than a rather drab farming town.....Even if they brew good beer.”

“Some very good beer.” Added Nethra.

“Muzzie has obviously read some Xanash the tenth.” Said Faal. “Never let the army loose in somewhere with too many temptations. Especially when some of the locals still consider it an army of occupation. There will be fights, perhaps some deaths among the good folk of Tandalla.”

“What sort of temptations?” Asked Maya.

“You’ll find out when you’re older.” Said Galla.

Muzzie had to laugh at the face Maya was pulling, as Galla looked the other way.

“Yes, you understand, Faal.” Said Muzzie. “Let my army loose in Tandalla and I’d have to pay fines to get some released by the city militia. Much.....Much safer to let them relax in Aarabash. If they need temptations of a certain kind, they’ll find those inside the tents of the camp followers.”

“Every temptation you could imagine, or so I’ve heard.” Said Aeony. “All yours.....For an hour or so and if you have enough in your purse.”

“Runa would know about that.....She would appear to be our expert on such temptations.” Said Vella.

Muzzie had heard rumour about Runa visiting a particular Ubari female on a fairly regular basis. No harm in it, he might well have been doing the same if he wasn’t sharing a bed with Aeony. Runa believed her private life should be private; she’d made that clear on a number of occasions. There was tension, which Runa didn’t seem likely to lessen.

“Caspian.....Control your wife’s tongue, or I will.” Said Runa.

“You could try, if the Ubari has left you with the energy.” Said Vella.

They had seemed to be friends, but too much wine had been known to create enemies out of friends. As long as no one drew a blade, Muzzie saw no problem with letting them get it out of their system. It wasn’t his place to silence them anyway; it was the home of Vella and Caspian.

“A bit hypocritical for a girl who once earned a few coins for being the.....Temptation in Muzzie’s tavern.” Shouted Runa.

A whispered piece of gossip so old, that the truth of it didn’t really matter. Lie or the truth, it had the power to hurt Vella. Muzzie knew of course, though no one would hear the truth from him. Vella was up on her feet, a clenched fist, but no weapon.

“Stop.....This is ridiculous.” Yelled Galla.

No one wanted to get in the way of the two angry women. Caspian could have tried to reason with Vella, but he looked to be in a state of shock. Runa ran at Vella, again just a fist ready to strike.

Muzzie had drunk quite a bit and at that moment, he saw no problem with letting them thump one another a few times. It was an age old way of solving disputes and was only likely to end with both of them getting a few livid bruises. He should have realised of course. Vella grabbed Runa’s hair and slapped her across the face.

“No.....Stop them fighting.” Yelled Maya.

“Yes.....This is silly, we’re all friends.” Shouted Muzzie. “Save the anger for when we get to Segin-Unadaris.”

It all happened so fast, that there was no chance of stopping it. Runa had obviously decided the slapped face demanded punishing. Vella was strong, but Runa had the training and experience. Runa twisted herself free of Vella and aimed a blow at her face. A hard blow, right in the centre of Vella’s face. Such a hard blow, that Vella ended up going backwards, to end up sat on her backside. Runa was still holding up a bloody fist. When Muzzie saw Vella’s, probably broken and bloody nose, the problem finally occurred to him. Neither of them was writhing about, as their blood boiled in their veins. There for all to see was the proof.....There was no curse.

“Crap.....I just realised.” Aeony hissed in his ear. “The fucking curse.”

"Too much wine, I only just thought of it." He hissed back.

Galla was kind of crawling over the floor towards Vella, her bag of healing equipment being dragged behind her.

"See.....You shouldn't fight like that.....Ever." Yelled Maya.

Poor Maya, she was right. Aeony left his side to comfort the child. Seeing the blood of battle against an enemy was one thing. She should never have seen blood spilled at Caspian's dinner table.

"Calm down everyone." Muzzie Yelled. "A terrible thing, but I'm sure Galla can heal a nose. No more though, save your aggression for the enemy."

Who did know the curse was a huge lie? Aeony knew and he suspected some of the others had suspicions. Being honest, he no longer remembered who did know, or who might have an idea it was all nonsense.

"I need a clean towel." Yelled Galla. "I'm not getting up from down here, so someone needs to bring me one."

"I'll get it." Said Caspian.

They all needed to know and Muzzie needed to tell them. He had a personal guard now, more than enough of a deterrent to anyone wanting to hack him to pieces. Would any of them pack up their things and go home? They were doing well, the army had done well. Anyone leaving was saying goodbye to a fair chance of fame and fortune. As he thought about it, Muzzie thought it was a safe bet, that none of them would leave, even Galla, despite her old achy joints. Aeony was back with him, still hugging an upset Maya.

"I'm going to tell them about the curse." Said Muzzie. "I'm going to tell them right now. I bet no one wants to leave."

"How much.....How much do you bet?" Asked Aeony.

"I didn't mean it like that.....But alright, fine. Name your bet?"

Maya was there so Aeony whispered to him about doing something that always made him gasp with pleasure. She'd agreed to do it once a day for an entire month, if he won the bet. Muzzie would never have claimed to be an expert on pleasing females in bed, but he knew what made Aeony's pupils dilate. She accepted his bet and hands were shaken.

"Sorry.....I know it's been a strange night." Shouted Muzzie. "Before you go to your beds, I have something to tell you all. I think you may all need a strong drink and be sat down for this."

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"Food Galla.....Silly Galla."

Damn, she'd drunk too much wine in Caspian's huge tent. Galla had also noticed that as she got older, getting a good night's sleep was more and more important. She wasn't a bright and bubbly two hundred year old any more, or even a healthy three hundred year old. There had been the start of the glow of a new day, when she'd finally crawled into bed.

"Go away Bird." She said.

"Hungry Galla.....Food Galla."

Her pet didn't look starved, but they had a routine and she always fed him as she got out of bed. Galla pulled back the blankets and got to her feet. There were some Nesh bugs in a jar, freshly caught by the Dredger kids. Galla was currently paying them a few coppers to gather her pet's favourite food.

"Squashed or still wriggling, Bird?" She asked.

"Alive.....Taste bad dead."

Half a dozen in a bowl, though he'd probably have to chase a few around her yurt. He needed the exercise; her pet was looking a bit tubby lately. Too many Nesh bugs probably. He ate quickly; all the bugs had gone within a few minutes.

"Soldiers outside.....Galla." Said Bird.

"Oh, yes.....I forgot they'd be coming."

Better than a guard dog was her pet, his hearing was better than some night hunting creatures of the rifts. Galla poked her heads through the flap on her tent. Half a dozen soldiers were there, a low ranking officer and five soldiers. Not an impressive looking bunch, but they were only needed to subdue a common thief.

"I'll be with you in a moment." Said Galla.

"No problem.....Whenever you're ready." Said the officer.

Galla dressed and gave her face a quick wipe, which would have to do. She gave her pet two more bugs, which he ate as though he was starving. For a moment he looked at her with a look of real intelligence. She was using his eyes, the Silver Lady.

"Don't go home, Galla." Her bird said, though it wasn't his voice. "You still have a large part to play, especially when Muzzie reaches Leng."

"No one is leaving, everyone agreed to stay." Said Galla. "We've all come too far and I've invested a lot of gold to get Muzzie onto the throne in Leng. I sold my most treasured possession to Dhali Drahl, the apothecary in Annill. Caspian too has invested too much to run back to the City of the Lost God. He borrowed from Chenad against future sales of spells and the paper to write them on. Runa has been forgiven and Vella's nose should heal without leaving any scars.....We're all one big happy family again.....Or at least no more screwed up than we were."

"Good.....Good." Said Bird. "Once the army arrives at Quron, I can no longer help you. Remember that and if you need anything.....Ask me before then."

"I will, thank you."

Bird's eyes changed back to being those of a bird. A clever bird, but the real intelligence had left them. Galla went outside and smiled, as she saw the soldiers had brought a cart with them, for her to travel in.

"A nice thought, officer." She said. "It isn't likely to be far though and for this to work, I really need to be on foot."

Galla already knew roughly which way to go. It was the ring, the Misery of Mosca, though Galla hated that name for it. Being an empath didn't mean being a mind reader, as she must have told people over a thousand times. The ring amplified her seeing skills though, until she could see how people were inclined to behave. Not good or evil, which were largely meaningless terms. But, if someone was inclined to be dishonest, the ring gave them a glowing saffron coloured aura. Better still, the aura was visible through walls and could be spotted at a little distance. Not for miles, but get close enough and they'd find the thief. The ring had already shown her a glow in an unsurprising direction.

"This way.....Our thief seems to live among the camp followers." Said Galla.

"I should have known." Said the officer. "Every piece of trouble seems to originate from where they've pitched their tents. There have been three murders in as many weeks."

"Horrible.....One of them had her throat cut.....From ear to ear." Muttered a soldier.

They might moan, but Galla would have bet a lot that all of the soldiers with her, had enjoyed the pleasures on offer among the camp followers. Dhūlen had made the comment that it did keep all the

trouble in one place. One thing had been agreed among all of the eight; somewhere that catered for every temptation of the flesh, was essential for any army.

"We need them alive." Said Galla. "They will have contacts to buy what they steal. The emperor requires names for those contacts."

"For the emperor.....They will be brought back alive."

The officer banged his hand on his chest, as he said for the emperor. Galla had seen that once or twice before, but had heard the practise was growing. The army was likely to proclaim Muzzie a living deity if Quron fell. Then he really would be unstoppable. The ring was showing Galla a hint of saffron above one of the few buildings constructed of wood.

"There.....They're in there." She said, while pointing.

She was using terms like they and them, but had no real idea if they were looking for an organised gang of thieves, or a lone bored army spouse, who'd decided to make some gold on the side. A lot of expensive kit had vanished from the stores and it couldn't be allowed to continue. Probably an effect of the ring; Galla had the distinct idea they weren't looking for a hardened gang of criminals. As Galla approached the door of the wooden shack. They were in there, two bright glowing auras.

"Two of them, officer." She said. "To the left and a few feet back from the door."

No army is good at being stealthy; noise and intimidation are tools of their trade. There is a reason why armies often have drummers to play them into battle. The noise of battering down the door, plus a lot of shouting had probably ruined the element of surprise. Galla remained outside the wooden shack, until tranquillity was restored.

"Keep still.....I won't warn you again." Shouted a soldier.

The two of them, a boy and girl. The usual mixture for hybrids, with perhaps a little more human in them than was normal. Galla didn't need to use her empath skills; the ring was showing her everything about the two young hybrids. The boy was the elder, though both of them were barely adults. The girl had the more pronounced aura and had probably been the organiser.

"Are you sure it's them?" Asked the officer. "They.....They seem so young."

"Young and bored, it's them alright." Said Galla. "I wouldn't mind betting that their father, or mother, is one of the bravest fighters in the army."

"My dad is one of the emperor's personal guard." Said the girl.

"And I'm sure he wouldn't like to see his children branded as thieves." Said Galla.

Neither of them looked worried, but the ring was showing her their real feelings. That was why Galla had wanted the ring so badly. There was no hiding intentions and feelings from her. Galla was getting older, her poor joints becoming less able to move quickly. Having the ring might just save her life. Even the best assassin couldn't hide their intent from her.

"I'm sure we can forget about you two.....As your father is guarding the emperor." Said Galla.

She looked at the officer, who nodded at her. No one wanted branded young people and a father who might well be sent home in disgrace.

"We need the names of who bought the stolen boxes from the stores." Said the officer.

"Yes, tell us the names.....Promise never to steal again and you can go home." Said Galla.

They'd been good thieves; the shack was full of drums and crates, all with the imperial mark on them. Not exactly piled from floor to ceiling, but getting it back to the stores would need a few strong backs. They weren't talking to her. Just a pair of army brats, but they had to learn that thievery had consequences.

"Very well.....Then we have to talk to your father." Said Galla. "Who is he? I'm an empath, so don't try and lie to me."

Not an infallible empath, she'd thought the boy would talk. It was the girl who gave them four names, all of them known to the officer. It seemed there was a hardened criminal gang, but they were just fencing the army equipment. Galla looked hard into the girl's eyes.

"Thieve again and I'll brand you myself.....You don't steal from the emperor's army." Said Galla.

"We won't.....I give you my word." Said the girl.

"Mine too." Said the boy.

Maybe that was why Mosca had called the ring his misery ? Judging by the girl's aura, she wasn't destined for an honest life. As for the boy ?.....He just might turn out alright.

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Muzzie had hated doing it, but Vella had been so insistent. There was so much danger involved and it had meant briefly changing the destination of the Void Gate. Some in the Sorcerers Guild had enchanted orbs, which enabled them to talk to other sorcerers, right across the rifts. Everyone in the City of the Lost God, would know of his plans to become emperor. There was probably a price on his head, yet there Muzzie was, looking at the house Caspian and Vella had once called home. The part of the city where the wealthy lived, though few walked the streets after dark.

"We'll never see him from here." Said Vella. "We need to be closer."

Just him, the couple desperate to catch a glimpse of their son and three of Muzzie's toughest fighters. All of them dressed in dark clothing, complete with hoods to hide their faces. No actually seeing nine year old Olvir in person, that might put their son at risk. Actually, when Muzzie thought about it, Olvir was probably ten by now. Just a look from a distance and Vella had promised to be satisfied. Why had he agreed to the piece of insanity ?

"Now I know the curse isn't real, Muzzie. I demand to see my son....Just a glimpse will do."

The words had changed, as had her tone of voice. Vella had ambushed him early in the morning, with a gathering sense of urgency in her voice. Caspian had joined in, talking of his wife's desperation. When Aeony had joined in on Vella's side, it had been easier to agree than carry on fighting against the inevitable. Muzzie had agreed on a quick trip to the City of the Lost God and hopefully.....Back again.

"You're sure that's his room ?" Asked Muzzie.

"I think I should know my son's room." Snapped Vella.

He'd meant her child might have changed rooms, but arguing wouldn't achieve anything. It was a large house with the glow of oil lamps coming from a few windows. There'd be guards walking through at regular intervals, especially now Caspian and Vella weren't there. Muzzie wished he'd brought Galla, she'd know for sure, but to him.....Apart from the guards, the house felt empty.

"I think Muzzie means, is that still his room." Said Caspian.

"Think about it, why would he still be there ?" Asked Muzzie. "His parents have vanished and he'd be all alone in a large empty house. Would a relative have given him a home ?"

"Oh, that sounds awful." Said Caspian. "I hadn't thought about that happening. It makes sense of course; Olvir would need to be looked after."

They moved closer to the house, using a trellis covered in vines for cover. All getting closer achieved was confirming that the house looked empty.

"Vita.....She loved our son." Said Vella. "Vita wouldn't leave him on his own, or let some dreadful relative of ours grab him. Vita will have him I'm sure of it."

Muzzie remembered Vita; she'd been one of the best kitchen staff he'd ever had in his tavern. Vella had lured her away as a house maid, by offering her better pay. Come to think of it, Muzzie was still nursing a grudge about the whole business.

"Yes, I've never quite forgiven you for stealing Vita." Said Muzzie.

"All's fair in love and domestic staff, Muzzie." Muttered Vella.

"Shut up you two.....Where would Vita take Olvir ?" Asked Caspian.

Muzzie knew, he'd known the moment Vella had mentioned Vita. It would have been a choice between a hovel in the slums and somewhere with a warm fire in the long bar and decent food.

"It's obvious; she'd have taken herself off to my place." Said Muzzie. "Vita would have taken your son with her."

"My son in a common tavern." Muttered Vella.

"Hey, you used to work in that common tavern." Said Muzzie. "They'll be safe there and well fed."

"Sorry, it was a bit of a shock." Said Vella. "It's a long way to your tavern, right across the other side of the city."

"We don't walk across the city, we walk under it." Said Muzzie. "We'll use the sewers to keep hidden.....And out of the rain."

Heavy rain was common in the farmlands to the west, but not in the City of the Lost God. Muzzie chose to consider the sudden deluge as a good omen.

"The city's foul sewers." Said Caspian. "I had really hoped to live out my life without entering them, ever.....Ever again."

"At least we'll be out of the rain." Said Vella.

Gratings and drains next to the roadway were common. Gratings that opened to allow access to stairs into the sewers, were less common. Muzzie remembered such a grating not far from where they were. Soon, they were below ground and in the stench and darkness of the sewers. Tomma-Goran the deity had built the sewers when he'd built his city. They were smelly, dirty and home to many unpleasant creatures, but they'd last forever. One of Muzzie's guards had brought a lamp, which just seemed to accentuate the worrying areas of shadow.

"A little more light would help." Said Caspian.

"I have the Hand of Arcadis tucked inside my shirt." Said Muzzie. "I can give you more light than the brightest summer day."

Muzzie placed half a dozen glowing orbs above their heads and things began to happen. Something gave a low growl before running away. They were on a pathway next to a deep sewer channel and something jumped off the path and into the raw sewage. It all happened very fast, too quickly to see properly. As one of his soldiers said.....

"We've upset a lot of the things that call this place home."

Muzzie was at the front, he had to be. He was the only one who knew all the turns and where to go when tunnels crossed. There were a lot of noises of angry creatures, but no real problems. Muzzie felt his right foot caught in something, but easily pulled it free. They'd gone quite some distance before Caspian noticed.

"You've picked up a passenger, Muzzie." Said Caspian.

It looked like a young sewer growler, no more than two feet long. It had grabbed his foot, but his boots were made of thick lizard skin. There the growler was, trying hard to bite off Muzzie's foot.

"Damn !" Said Muzzie.

It didn't need a spell, stamping on the growler with his other foot sent the brute to an early grave. He kicked its dead body into the sewer water and there were no further incidents. They came to a set of steps leading up, but they didn't have the mark he'd left on the wall to signify the steps leading up to his tavern.

"Not these steps, but we're close.....Very close." Said Muzzie.

Something dropped onto his arm. It was a blob of something foul falling from the brickwork. He wiped it away and had a brief moment of nostalgia. He'd once helped Merrick deliver contraband through the sewers and a little sewer muck on his clothing, had once been normal.

"Here.....These steps will take us up into the stables courtyard." Said Muzzie.

Courtyard was a bit grand for the yard where they kept animals destined for the pot, but Muzzie liked the idea of having a stables. Not that he remembered any guest arriving on the back of any beast that required a stables. The three grooves cut into the sewer wall, told him they were below his beloved tavern.

"Oh, it'll take days to get the sewer stench out of my nostrils." Muttered a soldier.

"All this.....And we can't even drink ale in the long bar." Said Caspian.

The idea of just a quick glimpse of Olvir, quickly became useless as a plan. As Muzzie opened a grate and came up into the courtyard, he came face to face with Vita. She was busy throttling several edible birds, that were probably destined to feed the patrons of his tavern.

"Muzzie." Said Vita.

She hugged him, while ignoring one of the birds making a bid for freedom. Muzzie hugged her back and he felt a kind of relief. He'd tried to be a friend to Vita, but there would have been plenty of gossip after he'd vanished. It was nice to know that at least one person he'd employed, still seemed to think well of him.

"Vita." Said Vella and of course, they hugged. By then, the absconding bird was probably halfway to Bredon's Edge.

"We're looking for their son." Said Muzzie. "Did you bring him here?"

"Yes.....He's in front of the fire in the bar." Said Vita. "Do you want to see him?"

Caspian and Vella were both looking at him. Even in the shadowy darkness of the courtyard, he could see their eyes. He could either make them happy, or ruin their lives for a while. The harm was done though; Vita knew they were in the city.

"Why not.....But bring him out here." Said Muzzie. "Tell him seeing you both is a huge, never to be told, secret. That goes for you too, Vita. None of us was ever here."

"I understand well enough.....I'll go and fetch him." Said Vita.

Muzzie moved away, taking his soldiers with him. He heard the occasional voice when his parents talked to Olvir, but for the most part, they had privacy. Caspian and Vella looked so happy, but that wouldn't last. A few days and it would hit them, the knowledge that he might be an adult before they saw him again. Personally, Muzzie had never fancied the idea of children. When Vita took Olvir back into Muzzie's tavern, it was time to leave. His face and voice were too well known, he might have been noticed.

"We need to leave now." Said Muzzie. "I trust Vita, but someone may have noticed us."

"Back into the sewers?" Asked Caspian.

"Yes, there's an outfall that comes out close to Podd's yard." Said Muzzie. "From there it's not far to the open gateway back to the army."

"Podd's yard.....I'd love to see the bone collector again." Said Vella.

"No." Said Muzzie. "The next time we come back to the city, it will be with an army of fifty thousand. We'll be here to take the City of the Lost God in conquest and make it part of my new empire."

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Faal had created a small shower of silver coins, to fall on a market full of shoppers in Aarabash. He no longer wanted to be Faal the great and mighty, or any other version of that title. To be honest though, he wasn't sure how he wanted to be viewed by the wider population. There had been

magical gifts for Dredger kids and even a few near miraculous healings of the sick. He was liked; he'd overheard someone say he was fun and guaranteed to entertain. No, that made him sound like a fake magician at a children's birthday party. He wasn't the great and mighty anymore, but that was by choice. He definitely didn't want to swap the old epithet for Faal the funny and entertaining. He was currently stood with Muzzie and Dhūlen, as they used magnifiers to examine the city walls of Segin-Unadaris. Faal was determined to prove himself in the battle for the demon city, though he still wasn't sure how.

"I'd say they definitely know the army is here." Said Dhūlen. "I keep seeing the scouts on the wall, aiming magnifiers back at us."

"They've built a long wall to block access to the sixth rift." Said Muzzie. "That isn't on any of the drawings I've seen."

"It might be there to stop the spread of the undead." Said Faal.

Nearly all major cities on the rifts were walled, though often just around the oldest parts and those where the leaders lived. Segin-Unadaris had expanded since it was built; there was even a growing hybrid workforce, though that was all kept outside the walls. Faal could see a flurry of activity as those outside the walls, brought themselves and their valuable, inside the walls. The confusion and subsequent overcrowding was considered a good thing for Muzzie's army.

"I see no rivers or lakes." Said Muzzie. "I'm assuming they have wells.....Is there a vulnerability there?"

Caspian arrived with Runa, which was a surprise. Faal put it down to Runa trying to redeem herself in the eyes of those who were fond of Vella.

"We were just talking about interfering with their water supply." Said Muzzie.

"Segin-Unadaris has deep wells, all behind their walls." Said Caspian. "The water has a yellow colour given to it by a wide assortment of impurities. Countless generations have drunk the water though, with no sign of ill effects. Personally, I'd look for another potential weakness."

Nethra joined them, glaring at the city as though offering a personal challenge.

"How about an old fashioned siege?" Asked Dhūlen. "We camp out around their walls and starve them out. All the time we offer them a guarantee the city won't be looted if they accept Muzzie as their emperor."

"No.....We're here to make a statement, so make it." Said Nethra. "There needs to be a bloody example made of somewhere, so do it here. Blast out a large section of the wall and leave the army to create carnage."

Faal could have destroyed a section of the wall and he knew Muzzie had the Hand of Arcadis in his possession, he could feel the power it held, even in his sleep. Creating a way into the city was easy, but Faal decided to keep silent and listen, for a while.

"No siege, that could take years to work." Said Muzzie. "Plus, there's always the possibility that other demon cities will send reinforcements. No.....We need a better idea. Come on, you're some of my eight advisers.....Advise me?"

"I already said it, blast their walls down." Said Nethra.

"I want to add Segin-Unadaris to the new empire, not turn it into a smoking hole in the ground.

Quron will be our example to those who doubt us, not this city. Any other ideas?"

"Their gates are strong and are warded with powerful magic." Said Caspian. "Not to mention being guarded by a garrison of high level demon warriors. I hate to say it.....But blasting out sections of the walls, is our best option."

Even as the idea had formed in his head, Faal knew his chance of succeeding and surviving, was no better than fifty-fifty. It was his chance though, to define himself to Muzzie and those who surrounded him. He really couldn't become Faal the funny and entertaining.

"I'll do it." Said Faal. "I have the skills to disable the magic on the city gates. I've also more than enough battle skills to fight off any defenders who get in my way. I'll sneak in with the frightened hybrids entering the city. No one is probably looking too closely at those arriving. Once inside I'm sure I can open the gates for the army."

"Getting out again sounds like it would be suicide." Said Nethra.

"I'll hide.....Go to ground. Trust me, I can do this." Said Faal.

"You'd need someone to watch your back." Said Muzzie.

"I'll go." Said Nethra.

"Too conspicuous, even when covered in a cloak from head to foot." Said Faal. "I'll take Runa, if she'll agree to go?"

"I go where the emperor commands." Said Runa.

Not the answer Faal was hoping for, but understandable. For a while, Runa was going to be very good, the one who always followed orders. All eyes were looking towards Muzzie.

"Very well, the two of you will infiltrate Segin-Unadaris and open the city gates." Said Muzzie. "Leave immediately and may the nine divines watch over you. Most importantly, don't get killed."

Immediately had to be a little flexible, they'd need weapons, supplies and enough clothing to hide their true features. It was a relief when Runa approached him with a huge grin on her face. Muzzie was leaving by then, with everyone else following him.

"We'll need to smell like high level demons." Said Runa. "Or at least the hybrid versions who are usually forbidden inside the walls."

"Yes, even Muzzie has the slight scent of a high level demon." Said Faal. "Though no one is likely to mention it to him. I can easily create the same effect with a simple spell."

Runa was smiling at him, yet didn't reply. She was wondering about asking him something, but not sure if she should. He hadn't seen the signs for millennia, but he still remembered the ins and outs of body language.

"Out with it, Runa? I'm just about un-offendable and rarely get angry when questioned."

"The truth.....What are our chances?" Asked Runa.

"I'm fairly sure we'll be able to sneak in and open the gates." Said Faal. "After that.....I have a few tricks up my sleeve."

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