

The Last Emperor

Chapter 18 – Gifts and Numbers

“Machines didn’t work for long on the rifts. Electricity was understood and a few simple devices worked for a while. Nothing complex survived though and for the most part, the would-be engineers had given up trying.”



“This can’t be him.” Said Muzzie. “Not Faal the great and mighty, or whatever legends call him.” The prisoner dressed in rags looked roughly human in shape, though no human had ever had a skull that extended at the back. Like an egg on his shoulders and of course, he had a rather strange number of fingers. Muzzie had met a few magic users with everything from four fingers on each hand, to a full eight. Faal, if it really was him ? Had five fingers on his left hand and six on his right. The other noticeable thing about the magician was the smell. He’d probably had a few washes over the millennia he’d been imprisoned, but none of them had been recent. He had that awful smell of rotting vegetables, mixed with very stale sweat.

“I’m sure it’s him, but all he keeps saying is how lucky he is.” Said Runa.

“Lucky.....I’m so very lucky.” Mumbled Faal.

“He put thoughts into my head.” Said Maya. “Such clever thoughts.....I can’t quite believe it’s the same person, but it is.”

“I too was given directions.” Said Muzzie. “Still.....Whatever he is, or now isn’t. He needs a wash and some decent clothes. We can hardly walk Faal the great and mighty out of here with him looking like this.”

“He remained here because he wanted to, I’m sure of it.” Said Galla. “A child with magical ability could have released the wards holding him here.”

“This was his refuge, his safe place.” Muttered Aeony. “Faal might have placed the wards that kept the fake wall in place. He might not thank you for taking him out of here.”

“He needs a good wash.” Said Maya.

He did, the stench was beginning to make the sixth rift air, seem almost pleasant.

“Yes, I’ll get my guard to scrub him down and give him some of their spare clothing.” Said Muzzie.

“Not your guard, they’ll be too brutal.” Said Galla. “I’m sure Runa will help me ? We’ll wash him properly.....All we need from your fighters are a few clothes and some shoes.”

Poor Runa, she could hardly say no.

“I’ll help.....I doubt if humans have anything that horrific between their legs.” Said Runa.

“Give Galla what she needs.” Muzzie told the leader of his personal guard.

Galla and Runa washed Faal as though he was a lost child. Galla had been right though, his fighters would have been a little brutal, even if was unintended. Muzzie wandered around the chamber, which was quite large. Faal had been living in a small part of the chamber, though there was no sign of him ever having food and fresh water. There was a bed, or more accurately the remains of a bed. Like his clothing, the bedding had become nothing but stinking rags. Aeony had joined him, wrinkling her nose at the smell of unwashed magician.

“How did he survive ?” Asked Aeony.

“The lords of chaos have their ways.....One seems to be sustaining life in ways we may never understand.” Said Muzzie. “Ahh, I see a glint of gold.....He had a few personal items.”

None of it had any enchantments Muzzie could sense, but the magician obviously hadn't been in rags when he'd arrived at the Necropolis. There were gold rings; several arm bands and even some kind of ceremonial chain for around his neck. All of it under the red dust and detritus around Faal's bed.

“All of this is top quality.” Said Aeony. “If I ever doubted we'd found Faalfh Ha'adask, that doubt has gone. These are the adornments of a wealthy person.”

“Put them in your pack.....We'll examine them later.” Said Muzzie.

In many ways, Faal looked worse now he was clean. His bald egg shaped head, shone in the light from their lamps. Some clothes fitted him, while others didn't. The shoes he'd been given were far too large for his tiny feet. All combined it gave Faal the great and mighty, a very strange look. The magician grabbed Muzzie's arm, causing several of his guard to draw their swords.

“I was expecting someone.” Said Faal. “Not you.....But you'll do. A barkeeper as emperor.....Whatever next ?”

There had been something there in Faal's eyes, a momentary flicker of intelligence. Then it was gone and Maya was leading the magician out of the chamber. Faal was back to his talking about nonsense.

“Eight is lucky child.....You must know that.” Said Faal.

“My mother always says eight is lucky.” Said Maya.

“Stupid Faal.” Screeched Bird.

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General Dhūlen had no idea that Faal had been found. There were runners now, young fighters whose one job was to keep the commanders of the army informed and orders up to date. It was a good system, but it wasn't perfect. Dhūlen also had no idea that Nethra had found the ring he sought, the Misery of Mosca.....

“We've found what's left of some kind of machine.” Said one of the scouts. “There are metal parts that haven't corroded.”

“On the sixth rift.....That's impossible.” Said Dhūlen.

Technology wasn't unknown to those who dwelt on the rifts. A tiny few of the wanderers who ended up in Annill had come from worlds full of technology. It was the rifts though and their almost sentient hatred of technology. Machines didn't work for long on the rifts. Electricity was understood and a few simple devices worked for a while. Nothing complex survived though and for the most part, the would-be engineers had given up trying. The rifts were left with ancient means to get things done. Wooden and stone tools and huge amounts of muscle power. People with strong backs were the technology of the rifts. There was magic of course, if you could afford the services of a competent magician.

“Definitely metal.....Something huge, but not on wheels. I was sent to inform you.” Said the scout.

“Is it far away ?”

“That way.” The scout said, while pointing. “About half an imperial mile away.”

The oldest of the empires had given the rifts a mathematics system and it was still used. It worked and the rifts were like that.....If it worked, why change it ? Even the dark angels had never suggested that talk of miles, feet and gallons was blasphemous.

“Very well, show me this machine.” Said Dhūlen.

If his wings had worked properly, Dhūlen might have risked the journey with just the two of them.

The undead were tough and fast, but couldn't fly. The undead seemed to like being outside though

and half a mile was a lot of outside. He'd learned to respect the undead brutes and took a force of two hundred fighters with him, to see the impossible piece of technology.

"Did you touch the machine?" Asked Dhūlen. "How did it feel?"

"Cool.....Almost cold to the touch.....Smooth too, very smooth." Said the scout.

Metal that felt cold on the sixth rift. Another impossibility, even his Terak blade felt warm to the touch. Dhūlen knew it was significant and had his own theory about the alleged machine. He wanted to see it with his own eyes, before saying anything to the new emperor. The undead might like the outside, but obviously not that particular part of the outside. They were almost there, without being attacked by the brutes. Meanwhile, his scout noticed something high up in the sky.

"It's the Chinnura my General.....Likely to be looking for us and now heading this way."

Nethra of course, though the army had taken to calling her the Chinnura. A name that meant some kind of super being, or just someone who looked out of the ordinary. Only time would tell if the creature with purple wings was something special. The sixth rift definitely suited her, she arrived at speed, just as they arrived at the pieces of dark blue metal scattered across the ground.

"Nethra, your timing is perfect." Said Dhūlen. "My scouts appear to have found a machine, or what remains of it."

"My advice.....Leave it alone." Said Nethra. "There can be only one source of this machine and admitting it exists, is the worst kind of heresy. You really don't want to cause Aeony to be angry."

"The Menderans you mean?" Asked Dhūlen.

Nethra actually bowed her head and some of his warriors did the same. A general hush came over his troops, which was a rare thing indeed, for warriors far away from home.

"Of course I mean.....Them." Said Nethra. "Some say they're still out there, watching and waiting. Dredger children still believe that if you say Mendera three times and spin about. One of the imperial guard will appear, The Damned. They believe the imperial fighter will slice their head from their shoulders. Leave the machine and walk away, General."

"So.....We're now scared of children's tales? Did you find me for any particular reason?" Asked Dhūlen.

Maybe a scare story for the young and feeble minded, but Dhūlen was beginning to wonder if leaving the machine alone was the best course of action. Getting a reputation for being a heretic might seriously damage his reputation. Mild heresy was fine, almost expected. Serious heresy might mean social ruin, or even an assassin's blade in the dark.

"I came to tell you that Faalíh Hařadask has been found." Said Nethra. "The emperor found him and is taking him to the Void Gate."

"Good, I won't be sorry to leave the sixth rift. Was there anything else?"

There was and as soon as he saw the old, heavily corroded ring he knew.....On top of the talk of heresy, it felt as though whichever deity looked after his good fortune, was ignoring him.

"I found this, the Misery of Mosca." Said Nethra. "I wanted you to hear it from my lips and not as camp fire gossip."

"Where did you find it?"

"Ahhh, General.....That is a bit too personal to tell." Said Nethra. "I looked where I'd have hidden my personal misery. I found the ring at the second place I looked."

"Surely there can be no harm in telling me?"

"Where would you hide your personal misery, General?" Asked Nethra.

"Yes.....I understand." Said Dhūlen. "I have buyers waiting if I did find it. They'll pay a very good price. Perhaps we could work something out, between us?"

"I'll give Galla the first chance to buy it, I owe her that." Said Nethra. "If she doesn't want it, I'll come and talk to you about your buyers. Is that alright?"

"Yes.....Can I touch it, Nethra? I've heard so many things about Mosca's famous ring." Said Dhūlen.

"Here.....I don't think touching it once ever hurt anyone." Said Nethra.

General Dhūlen didn't put the ring on his finger; he merely let it rest on the palm of his hand. The red ground of the sixth rift became dark red, very dark red. He could see into the souls of those around him, or least it felt as though he could. Two hundred experienced fighters.....The terrible things they'd seen and experienced. He'd probably done worse, but he didn't desire to see more of it. He handed the ring back to Nethra.

"It.....Wasn't what I expected." Said Dhūlen. "What do you see when it's in your hand?"

"That too.....Is far too personal to tell." Said Nethra. "From what I've been told, you need to wear the ring to get the full effect, the dangerous consequences."

"I've no desire to see more." Said Dhūlen.

It was the truth, the ring had scared him and although he'd sell it for Nethra, he had no intention of using it again.

"I must go now and find Galla." Said Nethra. "Leave the machine alone, General. Eventually the sixth rift will bury it under dust and rubble, which is the best place for it."

Nethra flew away, quickly becoming a dot in the sky. Dhūlen looked at the pieces of metal that had probably been uncovered by some kind of dry, rainless storm. There was the impression of something large waiting to be dug up and he had two hundred warriors to do it. A long machine, judging by the shape under the dust and rubble.

Perhaps one of the legendary flying machines, though that kind of talk was beyond simple heresy.

He picked up a tiny piece of blue metal and put it in his pocket. A reminder, a memento of a machine that couldn't be allowed to have existed.

"There is nothing here.....Do you understand?" He asked the scout. "We found nothing."

"I understand, General."

Turning off his imagination would take a while. Dhūlen thought of an empire with so many metal flying machines, that they could sacrifice them to be destroyed by the sixth rift. How had they even flown them there? His warriors seemed to have lost interest and were keeping well away from the where the machine was likely to be. The Menderans weren't just the stuff of childhood horrors, they scared adults too. General Dhūlen gathered his warriors and headed back to the Void Gate.

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Aeony wondered what her dark angel sisters would make of her collection of perfumes and lotions for her bath. She'd even considered hiring a servant to help her bathe and dress. Vella had talked about it too, but it just seemed so....Decadent. Success and money opened up all kinds of possibilities, some wonderful but questionable. When Aeony smelt her bathing lotion on Faal, she decided that just maybe, she'd gone down the path to decadence, as far as was sensible. Faal was still drifting between being capable of a few coherent words and being a mindless fool. Being lucky still seemed to be his obsession.

"I bet you feel better?" Asked Aeony. "How long is it since you last had a proper bath?"

"Several millennia, I'm not sure." Said Faal. "I was supposed to meet someone.....They never turned up."

"He seems better." Said Muzzie.

"Hmmm.....Until he starts saying the word lucky, at least fifty times." Said Aeony.

Just her, Muzzie and the legendary Faal the great and mighty. Back at their rooms at the Void Gate. Bird had already been told, several times, that the magician was ready and cleaned up enough, to meet the Silver Lady. Their guest had been fed, bathed and dressed, in a spare robe of Caspian's. "I like this robe.....I'll call it my lucky robe." Said Faal.

As seemed to be the normal for Faal, nothing quite fitted. The robe was a bit too small and the shorts underneath it, were a bit too large. Shoes had been a huge problem, Faal had the tiniest male feet Aeony had ever seen and she'd seen quite a few. Eventually the shoes of a young servant girl, had fitted him reasonably well. Nothing fitted perfectly, but there was now a certain something about Faal, an elegant dignity.

"Lucky.....Lucky.....Lucky.....Lucky.....Lucky....." Faal began muttering.

"Here we go." Said Aeony.

"How dare you !" Shouted Faal.

The magician waved his arms about, but he'd done that before. As no one had been turned into something unnatural, or burned to a cinder; it seemed Faal's magical abilities no longer worked. Aeony was beginning to become quite protective of Faal, the way one becomes protective of an ageing pet.

"Now.....Come on, calm yourself." She said.

"Inside his head somewhere is Faal as he used to be." Said Muzzie. "The directions he gave me were perfect and he made a few jokes about Galla and her cart. He's in there, lost in his own mind."

"Maybe he's hiding in there." Said Aeony. "He seems to have spent a long time hiding from something."

Success seemed to impress everyone, even the Silver Lady didn't suddenly arrive in their private quarters. She appeared in the reception area and asked a servant to announce her presence. Not that there was any chance of them saying they were too busy to receive her. Aeony went to fetch her and noticed the Silver Lady sometimes glided across the floor, her feet an inch or so above the ground. A neat and impressive trick, but Aeony preferred her wings.

"Did he come of his own free will ?" Asked the Lady.

"Yes, but he's not what we expected." Said Aeony. "All those years of imprisonment....His mind appears to have gone."

"HMMMMMM." Muttered the Lady.

There were the usual pleasantries, the offer of food and drink. The Silver Lady accepted a glass of wine, but refused the food. All the time Faal just stood there, silently looking at all three of them.

"One of you must have realised who he was waiting for ?" Asked the Lady.

"He was waiting for the one cursed by prophecy ?" Said Aeony.

"Aeony knows I wasn't first choice for the job." Said Muzzie. "He's been waiting for millennia, poor bastard. He might have been waiting there until the end of time."

The Lady walked up to Faal, pushing her face well into his personal space. Faal didn't react at all, just the blank face he could show the world when he seemed to vanish into his own mind.

"Don't feel too much sympathy for Faal." Said the Lady. "He is alive after all.....He just needs waking up."

She didn't even touch him. Just half a dozen words yelled into Faal's face; words that didn't even sound like a language. Noises really, loud and aggressive noises. Faal the great and mighty collapsed onto the floor.

"He's yours now, Muzzie. A gift if you like, my gift to you." Said the Lady. "Your eighth and final companion on the journey to be emperor. Try to keep him alive, he's your lucky number eight. Seven

is wonderfully mystical, but luck is better. Faal can bring you the kind of luck that attracts success and wealth. You will need wealth Mussaneth Osranetherer, when you have an entire empire to rule.”

Faal didn't look very impressive and definitely not lucky, as he lay sprawled across the tile floor.

“What can he do ?” Asked Aeony.

The lady kicked the magician, a good hard kick to his backside. He didn't get up, but she now had his attention. Faal yelled and looked at her, the way the prey looks at the hunter.

“Obligations and consequences, Faal.” Said the Lady. “You will serve Muzzie, or you're of no use to me. I can find another magician, but then you'll only be of use as food. Do you want to be food ?”

“No.”

“Get up then, be Faalrh Ha'adask.” Said the Lady. “Be the magician who was once the best and most powerful mage in Leng.”

“I ruled Leng.....Briefly, during the transition between emperors.” Said Faal.

He rose and adjusted his clothing. By the time the Lady vanished, their eighth member of the group, was looking quite handsome and impressive, at least for a human, or whatever he was. He seemed to have his mind back, though he still didn't look happy about it.

“Did you really once rule Leng ?” Asked Aeony.

“Yes, for a period of half a year.” Said Faal. “When the time is right, I can take you there.....And the emperor's army.”

“We have some of your personal belongings.” Said Muzzie. “They're yours again.....Now that we know you're on our side.”

“Yes, on your side....I will serve you Mussaneth Osranetherer, until you release me from your service. Or of course, my luck runs out and I die.” Said Faal.

Maybe it was a joke, or maybe it wasn't. Aeony laughed anyway, as Faal put on the armbands and rings they'd found in his chamber in the Necropolis. Muzzie and her were obviously useless at sensing magical ability. When Faal put the ceremonial chain over his head and it settled on his shoulders, something happened. The magician's fingers glowed for a second or two, with a bright blue light.

“Ahhh, now I am complete.” Said Faalrh Ha'adask, the great and mighty, once briefly, ruler of Leng.

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Everyone had returned from the sixth rift. Galla found herself at that rare thing, a time when she wasn't incredibly busy. A few powders needed replacing, but that could wait. Her own health was still far from perfect, but half the healers among the camp followers, were visiting her. There were some very good healers following the army. It was strange, but a fact, that others can always heal you better than you can heal yourself. Muzzie had offered her rooms near his, but Galla preferred her yurt style of accommodation inside the enclosed stockade. It felt comfortable and Bird could come and go as he pleased. Plus, there always seemed to be someone arriving with food and Galla hated cooking for herself.

“Come in.....Come in....I can feel you waiting out there, Nethra.” Yelled Galla. “I am after all, an empath and a damn good one at that.”

Nethra knew the etiquette, never arrive empty handed. Galla doubted if she'd baked it, but Nethra had brought a pie and it smelled wonderful. Probably containing fresh fruit from Aarabash, cooked to perfection.

“Oh, I hope that tastes as good as it smells.” Said Galla.

“I'm sure it will, an aunt of Maya's made it.”

Bird was out and about, hiding in the shadows and picking up gossip. Probably just as well, he could annoy some of her visitors. Galla knew about Nethra finding the ring, it was the talk of the encampments. The trick was to deal with it, without creating any resentment. Nethra had brought a pie, which was a pretty good start. They ate the pie and drank some excellent Tandalla brewed ale, until Nethra had obviously decided the proper etiquette had been followed.

"I'm sure you already knew I found this?" Asked Nethra.

The ring in her hand looked like a piece of worthless junk. To Galla it had a dark aura, but those who weren't empaths wouldn't have noticed it. She had her own reasons for wanting the ring, which she had no intention of telling anyone.

"The Misery of Mosca." Said Galla. "From what I remember, he was supposed to have been a quiet and unassuming priest. Then he found the ring and became incredibly famous. Are you hoping to use the ring to be famous?"

"No, I was hoping to sell it to you." Said Nethra. "Merrick has a dream, an ambition really. He's wanted to buy the building opposite the Defender, for a very long time. We'll set it up as accommodation and food only. I know the ring is easily worth enough to make Merrick's dream a reality."

Galla could afford it; she'd left a considerable amount of gold with certified agents in Annill. The ring seemed to call out to her, though that was probably her own mind. She wanted the damn thing so badly.

"You let it touch your skin, Nethra." Said Galla. "That may be unwise.....What does it show you?"

"I never put it on my finger. Just holding it against my palm, shows me auras. Yours is purple, while Runa has a yellow aura and Maya has no aura at all. Everything seems clearer too, sharper and more real."

"Let me hold it." Said Galla.

She extended her arm towards Nethra, who dropped the grubby looking ring onto her palm. The effect was instant; the entire world seemed to darken. She could see Nethra's essence, the dark soul of a multiverse's super being. It was like another living thing lurking inside Nethra. So, Nethra really was that special. Not that Galla felt obliged to tell her.

"I really need to wear it properly.....Is that alright?" Asked Galla.

"Yes, of course you can."

Galla pushed it onto the smallest out of the seven fingers on her left hand. It was wonderful; she could see the essence of everyone in the encampment. Mosca had been a fool who'd had no idea what he'd possessed. It was as if the ring had granted her eyes the ability to see everything. The feeling was too good to give up for the price of a building in Annill. Galla left the ring on her finger. She also decided to tell Nethra what she'd probably long suspected.

"You are a genuine Chinnura, Nethra." Said Galla. "I can see it inside you, a tiny living piece of the multiverse. It will tend to align you with darkness and chaos, though I'm sure you know that?"

"Yes.....There have been times when I've felt such a rage.....But I can control it." Said Nethra.

"I want the ring and I want it to stay on my finger. You will need to trust me.....Do you trust me?"

"Of course I do.....You've helped me so many times in the past." Said Nethra. "You've helped Merrick too, sometimes when he really didn't deserve it."

Galla looked down and caught a glimpse of her own essence. She hadn't realised the ring would be able to do that. It wasn't a nice thing to see. Like having her soul held up in front of her, while the Gods pointed out every flaw and dark deed in her past.

"Are you alright?" Asked Nethra.

“Sorry, the ring will take some getting used to.” Said Galla. “I’ll be alright.....I could have taught Mosca a thing or two about misery. Anyway....I want to keep the ring on my finger. I have money in Annill and when we return there I will buy the building you want. I’ll then have the legal ownership transferred to you and Merrick. Both of you will own the building.”

“You don’t trust Merrick.” Said Nethra.

“No I don’t.....He won’t be able to sell the building unless you agree.” Said Galla. “Are you happy with what I’m suggesting ?”

“Yes, I am.”

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They were becoming far better organised. Caspian was quite impressed when the runner arrived and informed them about the meeting. Their presence was requested to introduce Faalfh Ha’adask as the emperor’s magician. No demanding their presence, which pleased Vella. They knew about Faal before the runner arrived, everyone did. They’d been fairly cordially invited to join the emperor for an evening meal. There was even mention of discussing the next step for the glorious army of the new empire.....

“One thing is certain, Muzzie didn’t word the message.” Said Vella.

“Might have been Aeony.” Said Caspian.

“No, she’d have demanded our attendance.....Might have been Galla.”

“I heard Muzzie has a new cook.....The food should be good.” Said Caspian.

The food turned out to be wonderful, the best meal Caspian had eaten since being abducted from the City of the Lost God. Some meals in Annill had been good, but they’d always lacked a certain something. All of the eight were there and General Dhūlen.

“The third course is about to be served.” Bellowed Muzzie from the head of the table. “It is to remind everyone that we’ve come a long way.”

Just a small plate with a tiny portion, but everyone chuckled, even Runa.

“Oh no, twigs and those damned leaves.” Muttered Runa.

The dry mix that had kept them all alive on their journey through Gorshan. Caspian gave a silent prayer to any deity who might hear it. He begged to never have to live on twigs, berries and leaves...Ever again.

“It’ll never replace proper food.” Said Nethra.

“Horrible.....But it kept us all alive.” Said Galla.

Caspian noted that they might moan, but everyone cleared their plate of the horrid dry mix, including him. Not everyone had survived Gorshan, though their death had nothing to do with twigs and leaves. Muzzie called for a toast to Sensan, their fallen hero.

“The new cook is famous for our fourth course this evening.” Yelled Muzzie. “But before it arrives, I’d like to introduce our eighth member of the group. Faalfh Ha’adask is a magician of legendary power and I’m sure he’ll make a wonderful number eight. As someone recently said to me. Seven is mystical, which is wonderful, but eight is for luck. Nothing is better than good luck.”

There had been wine with the first two courses and everyone was probably feeling the effect, Caspian knew he was. There was applause as Faal got to his feet and a few encouraging comments.

“Welcome Faal.” Said Galla. “I hope to learn a lot from you.”

“Yes.....Here’s to our lucky number eight.” Yelled Aeony.

Caspian had been invited to a few official functions at the Sorcerers Guild in the City of the Lost God. There had been quite a few introductions to new members, or those promoted to a higher office within the guild. Without fail, every one of them had felt the need to do something, to perform

some kind of magical display, even if it was just a simple spell. He was pleased that Faal didn't feel such things were beneath him.

"Wow, I bet this will be good." He muttered to Vella, as Faal rolled up the sleeves of his robe.

There weren't flesh and blood arms beneath the robe, there were now green feathers. Everyone gasped as the robe fell away, to reveal a body covered in layers of feathers.

"I've lived such a long life, that I sometimes need to take on my original form." Said Faal. "It reminds me of what I once was and that.....Sadly; I am the only living example of my kind. Some think I'm human, but I'm not even close to being one of them. I am the last of the Emarduk and you are the first to see me as I really am in.....It has to be at least fifty millennia."

Faal's body altered and shifted, to look more birdlike. He stepped back from the table, before extending wings that had to be twenty imperial feet, from wing tip to wing tip.

"Oh, so.....Beautiful." Said Aeony

"I've never seen feathers that green." Muttered Vella.

Faal's head was the last part of him to change, though it didn't become birdlike. The rear of his skull extended further and it too, became covered in the brightest greenest feathers Caspian had ever seen. No flapping his wings, Faal floated to the ceiling and then floated down again. There was a moment of nudity as Faal became.....Whatever his usual appearance was supposed to be. On with his robe and the master magician actually bowed to the table.

"Fucking marvellous." Yelled Runa.

"Long live the last of the Emarduk." Shouted Dhūlen.

Lots of applause followed and Faal gave a lot of appreciative nods to various people. Muzzie had probably been briefed by Faal, he seemed less surprised than most. The fourth course of the meal was a wonderful sweet pastry, which left Vella gushing with praise for the cook. There were another three courses and quite a lot of wine, before Muzzie stood up and addressed them. Not the ideal time to broach a serious subject, but Muzzie had a mellow and happy audience.

"There are easier places to conquer." Said Muzzie. "There are definitely cities that are less controversial for the army to attack. After a few days of rest, I'm seriously considering taking our forces to Segin-Unadaris."

"Isn't that a pure blood demon settlement?" Asked Runa. "That won't please Leng; they've an army garrisoned there, though my information might be out of date."

"I thought the ancient site on Mount Erran was our next step?" Asked Dhūlen.

So, Dhūlen had been caught unawares, the general who commanded the ever growing army.

Caspian woke up a little from an over indulgence on wonderful food and wine.

"It brings up an inevitable question." Said Caspian. "Are some towns and settlements considered to be friendly and left alone?"

Faal stood up, even though the conversation was a free for all, with no one else bothering to stand up to offer their opinion. Caspian couldn't decide if Muzzie's new mage was polite, or playing some sort of game. By standing, Faal had everyone's attention.

"Segin-Unadaris wasn't merely a settlement when I was last there, which.....I refuse to even think about the number of years." Said Faal. "It has been a city since Leng built a temple there and left a fully trained garrison. Full of pure bloods, they've been influencing Quron since it was a tiny village on the Pilgrim Trail. Take Segin-Unadaris and making Quron part of the empire will be much easier."

"An army with a Terak hybrid general takes over a full blood demon city." Said Dhūlen. "That would be suicide.....Leng would send every warrior they have to destroy us."

"That is assuming we could even succeed in taking the demon city." Said Galla.

Caspian had decided, Faal was playing a game. By remaining standing, he'd effectively made himself the centre of the discussion. Caspian whispered to his wife.

"I bet attacking Segin-Unadaris was Faal's idea."

"It would definitely make a statement of intent." Muttered Vella.

"Sorry Vella, you had something to add?" Shouted Muzzie. "You've been everywhere with me, including going to Gorshan twice. I'd appreciate your opinion."

Vella stood, which meant that Faal had to sit down. After ten years dealing with every guild and town council in the City of the Lost God, his wife needed no instructions on how to behave in meetings.

"No one seems worried about using the name, so I will." Said Vella. "Attacking a full blood demon city will send a statement of intent to Leng. Muzzie will be saying he intends to be the next emperor, no matter what it takes. I believe Leng will respect that."

There were servants, so Caspian could wave at one of them, without disturbing the flow of the conversation. He managed to get another of the wonderful pastries and a fill up for his wine glass.

Galla was up on her poor damaged legs and insisting that attacking Segin-Unadaris was.....

".....it's a fair way to build the empire. No favourite cities, the armour will lay siege to anywhere and everywhere."

"I agree, we demand every city accepts Muzzie as their emperor." Said Caspian. "Without fear or favour....As Vella said, Leng will respect that."

Faal the great and mighty had a smile on his face as he stood up. Caspian still thought attacking a city with a garrison of fighters from Leng, had been the magician's idea. He too talked of Leng respecting a clear statement of intent and an emperor with the courage to carry it out. He went on for some time, while Caspian enjoyed the pastry. Muzzie didn't interrupt Faal, but he banged the table for attention the instant he stopped talking.

"We've heard a lot tonight, but I want to hear what my general has to say." Said Muzzie. "Be honest General Dhūlen, what do you think about taking the army to Segin-Unadaris?"

The general didn't stand. He actually took a sip from his wine glass, probably to gain a little thinking time.

"My presence will both annoy and please some in Leng." Said Dhūlen. "The Terak were allies of those beyond gateway, but I will be attacking those who Leng will view as theirs. So, from that point of view, the overall effect of my being your general, is probably neutral. As for taking the army to lay siege to the city.....Yes, win and Leng will respect the new empire and its new emperor. We have to win though, my emperor. Lose the battle for Segin-Unadaris and Leng will use everything at its disposal to hunt you down. As always, the final decision is yours."

Caspian didn't envy Muzzie having to make the decision. Then again, the hunting down business, probably held for everyone around the table. There was no hiding from Leng; even the dark angels were terrified of those beyond gateway. Muzzie fiddled with his wine glass and looked quite solemn.

"Yes, a few days to prepare and then.....We shall lay siege to the city of Segin-Unadaris."

Caspian found himself applauding the decision, though Galla didn't look pleased. Faal actually looked so happy, that Caspian thought he might start dancing about. They were an odd mixture of happy and glum faces.

"Where exactly is Segin-Unadaris?" Asked Maya.

The young Dredger hadn't been invited, though everyone had seen her sat to the left of Muzzie.

She'd eaten with them; though the servants made sure she was never given the tiniest drop of wine.

Nethra had found the girl some robes that fitted her reasonably well. Their unofficial extra person in the group, looked like the daughter of a wealthy potentate.

“Caspian.....Tell our guest about the demon city of Segin-Unadaris.” Said Muzzie.

“Well.....Unadaris means of the Gods, as I’m sure everyone knows.” Said Caspian.

“Yes, we’re all experts on the human tongue.” Said Runa, while chuckling.

“Not human, it’s the language handed down by the Old Gods.” Said Caspian. “Segin was their word for a gift, or a blessing. So, Segin-Unadaris means the Gift of the Gods. It started up as a small settlement next to just about the only safe route from the fifth rift to the sixth. Not that there is much traffic heading for the sixth rift, as we all know.”

“The sixth rift is a shit hole.” Muttered Aeony.

“Quite, but for some reason Leng still thinks the crossing point is of strategic value. It might just be nostalgia by now, but there is a large demon army garrison in the city. As for a little history.... Segin-Unadaris changed hands many times as a settlement.” Said Caspian. “Mainly different chaos cults fighting over the place, or a few waring demon factions. It grew to become a city once Leng put the garrison in place. Now the population probably exceeds that of Tandalla and they’re all pure blood demons.”

“They make very tough fighters.” Added Faal.

“How many demons are there ?” Asked Maya.

“Thousands, Maya.” Said Caspian. “All looking for a nice plump Dredger kid to eat.”

“I don’t care, I’m not scared.”

She probably wasn’t, but he was a little nervous, as he suspected, so was everyone else around that table. Taking Segin-Unadaris, The Gift of the Gods, would change everything, but failure was likely to mean death for everyone sat at the table.

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