

The Last Emperor

Chapter 23 – Mount Erran

“Muzzie looked towards the freezing summit of Mount Erran and her eyes followed his gaze. It had to be awful up there. Every year a few pilgrims climbed the mountain and only a tiny number ever returned.”



Muzzie was proud of his army, as he watched them march out of Segin-Unadaris, heading towards the open connection for the Void Gate. Just under two thousand of Leng’s elite garrison had joined his forces. A few had been left behind to help keep order, along with five hundred of his best hybrid warriors. The Hive Mother had promised an end to the war, but the city had plenty of thieves and rival factions. For a while a small garrison would be required to keep the peace. They’d won the battle for the demon city and were leaving with a larger army than they’d arrived with. That was a statement to Leng and anyone else who might have doubted him.....

“Hmmm.....I still think we should have left a larger garrison.” Said Faal.

“Yes, General Dhūlen thought so too.” Said Muzzie. “I trust the Hive Mother; she has no reason to lie to me and a lot to gain by being part of the new empire. The army can rest and heal for ten days, maybe longer if Galla thinks some need it. Then we’ll take our fighters to Mount Erran.”

“To dig deep and find.....Whoever it is you need to find.” Said Aeony.

“There have always been rumours about Mount Erran.” Said Faal. “Some of the most ancient scrolls on the rifts, talk about something sleeping there....Waiting to be woken.”

There had been a meeting, where Muzzie had talked about going to Mount Erran next. He’d asked for opinions and nodded as each of the eight had given their views. No one had said no, he hadn’t expected anyone would. Galla had mentioned the awful weather they might face. The holy mountain on the Pilgrim Trail was the highest place on the rifts. Once thought to be the legendary home of the Gods. Only if the Gods thrived on perpetual ice and cutting winds. Muzzie had listened to every comment and thanked everyone for their opinions. In truth he’d made up his mind to go there, when the Hive Mother had told him it was important and someone was waiting there. So far, everyone offering advice on where to take his army had mentioned going to the holy mountain.

“.....and of course, you have to visit Mount Erran.” LLud Narran had told him.

From the Silver Lady and Wēland Raag, right through to Faalrh Ha’adask and now Ginnda-Aanash, the Hive Mother. All of them and others had said that Muzzie needed to go to Mount Erran and control the remains of an ancient city there. It was even in the journal of Pio-Xanash. Go to the holy mountain.....It was about the only thing everyone seemed to agree on.

“I hope you’re not going to give the army Aarabash again ?” Asked Aeony. “They deserve somewhere better.....Somewhere they can enjoy themselves.”

The idea hadn’t arrived in his head at that moment, though he hadn’t mentioned it to anyone. When he’d sat and talked to Zin Thriaxer, the deposed King of Kahan. Muzzie had been impressed by the usurped ruler of that tiny Kingdom. Zin had lost so much, yet he hadn’t given up. He had gold too, lots of it and he was willing to put quite a bit of it into Muzzie’s war chest.

"I was thinking of setting the Void Gate for Kahan." Said Muzzie. "I hear the weather is good there and the local population is friendly. The best part of the second rift, or so I'm told. Of course.....If the army were to deal with the usurper while enjoying themselves....."

"Muzzie.....I have to say I'm impressed." Said Faal. "Zin Thriaxer will make a loyal ally and.....Even when I was growing up; Kahan was famous for having far more gold than they could spend."

"You crafty old.....I never saw that one coming." Said Aeony.

"Only the warriors who are fit and well." Said Muzzie. "We'll need to keep an eye on that and set a guard on the Void Gate. No bandaged and limping fighters can go to Kahan.....That would create totally the wrong impression."

"I can help set that up." Said Faal. "I'll tell Dhūlen there can be no looting while I'm at it."

"Hmmmmm not too much looting, but the army needs to have a little fun." Said Muzzie.

"Loot the warriors and family of the usurper." Said Aeony. "Problem solved.....Who is the usurper our fighters are to.....Accidentally remove from the throne, while having a little rest and recuperation?"

"It's one of Zin's cousins; these things usually are family feuds. As to his name.....I don't think Zin told me. I'm sure the army will know his name fairly quickly, he has set himself up as the new ruler of Kahan."

"When do you intend to start un-usurping the throne of Kahan?" Asked Faal.

When did his fairly new plan need to begin? Muzzie thought that there was no time like the present. A new ally in the fertile second rift would add another source of food and wine for the essential supply lines. His army was growing all the time.

"Tonight.....I'll instruct Dhūlen to whisper in the ear of those he trusts." Said Muzzie.

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Galla preferred being inside the stockade, to trying to heal wounded fighters in the back of her cart, or worse, while they were lying on the ground. Not just because her back didn't bend as well as it once had. Galla understood the link between dirt and infected wounds. Surprisingly there were still many who didn't. Her powders worked well and she had the services of healers travelling with the camp followers. Screening out the bad and incompetent healers had been easy now she wore Mosca's ring, his misery. Not many were inept, but Galla didn't want any healer working on Muzzie's army, who she wouldn't want treating her. Some warriors died of their wounds on the battlefield, though Galla was determined that any wounded warriors reaching the healers in the stockade, would live.

"Clean buildings, with plenty of attentive healers." Said Bizzi. "This is all a bit different to most of the armies I've travelled with."

"Bizzi." Yelled Maya, while rushing to hug him.

No matter what else might be going on, the Void Gate was regularly aimed at Aarabash, the main source of fresh food for the ever growing army. Galla had heard that Bizzi was being recalled to lead the Dredgers. Who would get the governor's palace in the farming city? Muzzie was currently keeping that to himself. The Dredgers needed Bizzi. He might be pedantic and annoying, but he was also thorough and efficient.

"Clean is good, Bizzi." Said Galla. "We rarely lose anyone who arrives here alive and I take every death as a personal failure. How are you now? Fully recovered?"

"I still can't get used to the idea.....You died and came back." Said Maya.

“That I did, though I didn’t expect all the fuss.” Said Bizzi. “Dredger families are naming their new born after me and not just the boy children. There’ll soon be girls called Bizzi, rushing around the stockade.”

Poor Bizzi, he looked incredibly embarrassed by the fame many would have loved.

“I had my own problems that day, but I heard you were dead, Bizzi.” Said Galla. “There you were, killed by a chaos enforcer. Not the tiniest spark of live left in your smashed body. The Silver Lady did something and you were alive again.....That is such a rare thing. Get used to the fame; they’ll probably name a Dredger city after you.”

“But lots of people have come back from the dead.” Said Bizzi. “Vella told me it happened to her during her first trip to Gorshan.”

“Yes, but Vella isn’t a Dredger.....She’d a hybrid.” Said Galla. “I hate to say it, but pure blood Dredger’s aren’t usually that.....Interesting. People expect you to be boring.”

“Hey !” Yelled Maya.

“Don’t be ashamed, child.” Said Bizzi. “A God gave us many gifts, so that we could be the diggers and builders of the rifts.”

It was nice to see Bizzi again, but the longer they talked, the less Galla understood why he’d decided to visit the dwellings used by her healers. They were a bit off the beaten track.

“Do you need healing, Bizzi ?” Asked Galla. “Sadly my own old joints refuse to be healed by my skills, but I can probably relieve yours. If anything is worrying you, now is the time to ask.”

“I’m good with stiff joints.” Said Maya.

“She is.....Maya is the only reason I can still walk.....Gifted she is, gifted.” Said Galla.

“Oh, you don’t know.....I see that now.” Said Bizzi. “Muzzie said you’d know by now, but there is a lot going on.”

“No riddles, it’s too early in the day.....Out with it, Bizzi.” Said Galla.

“I’m back here now, permanently.” Said Bizzi. “Belso was doing most of the work anyway. The new imperial governor of Aarabash needs to watch Belso. I’m beginning to suspect he may be dishonest. Anyway, that is now your problem.”

Galla was wearing the misery ring, which didn’t read minds, but it did give her a view of Bizzi’s essence, his soul. He was feeling guilty about being the bearer of, what he considered to be, bad news. Part of her knew the answer before the question was asked.

“Why would that be my problem ?” Galla Asked.

“It’s you; Galla.....You’re to be the new imperial governor of Aarabash.”

“Wow.” Said Maya.

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Their compound within the stockade had been expanded again, though neither of them wanted to leave their tents for a mansion in Tandalla, or even Annill. Not yet, a permanent mansion or palace could wait, until Muzzie was proclaimed emperor in Leng itself. All of the eight lived in the Void Gate buildings, or in amongst the tents of the stockade. Vella realised that moving to a city, would take Caspian outside of the group who advised and influenced the new emperor.

“I want to read the proclamation again.” Said Vella. “Out loud.....Please let me read it to you....It sounds so much better spoken out loud.”

Caspian was being visited twice a day by Maya, but he was much better than he’d been after the fight with the Ezzagory of the demon city. He was propped up in bed by several pillows and covered in a blanket. Most days he could walk right round their compound twice, purely for exercise. Even Galla had said he’d received help from someone, perhaps even one of the nine divines.

“The amount of blood he lost.....No one could have survived that.” Galla had told her.

Some kind of divine intervention was a nice idea, but Vella wasn't sure. None of them knew how complicated Casp's ancestry was. She knew him intimately, every inch of him. He wasn't an ordinary hybrid, even Adamaz; the head of the library had mentioned that. Caspian was the heir to the Great Library when Adamaz stepped aside or died. It was a job no ordinary hybrid librarian would have been chosen for. Yes, there was something special about her husband. He'd suffered ghastly looking wounds before and survived. Even his.....Private parts were strange, though they fitted hers quite well.

“Alright.....Read it out if you must.” Said Casp. “Then I want the book on Mount Erran.....Runa left it here somewhere.”

“Alright.....I'll skip the bit about being able to etch the title into your armour.” Said Vella. “Being able to hire your own guards.....About time, but not that important.”

“Get to it, love of my life.” Said Casp. “We both know the lines you want to read.”

“You'd have written it far better than Faal.” Muttered Vella.

“I tend to agree.....Read it Vella, before we both die of old age.”

Vella had read it to him before, several times earlier that morning. To Caspian it meant more than a title, it meant huge wealth and power, if Muzzie succeeded in becoming emperor of all the rifts. Oh, and if both Vella and Casp survived.

“.....Let's see.....It is proclaimed by Emperor Mussaneth Osranetherer, that Caspian of the City of the Lost God.....It goes on a bit.....Will henceforth be known as Caspian the Fearless. Member of the sacred circle of imperial advisers and defender of his highness, the emperor.....Oh, Casp....It still makes my neck tingle when I read it.”

“Go on.....You know you want to read it.” Said Casp. “Then I really do need to study the book on Mount Erran.”

“I promise this is the last time today.” Said Vella. “It is proclaimed that Caspian's wife Vella is also made a member of the emperor's sacred circle of advisers. They and their children will be called defenders of the emperor, in perpetuity.”

“I like our son getting a kind of title.” Said Casp. “Now.....That book, please.”

Runa had brought the book from where the most valuable and ancient tomes were stored. Some were priceless, too valuable to keep in a tent. The book was close to the sword, which was leant against Vella's bedside table. The sword, the blade of Mozzrik the Usurper. Vella always felt slightly hot, just from looking at the sword. It was in a scabbard now, which meant she could move it around without touching it. Oh, what she became when she touched that blade. They'd taken an oath in the army's temple, both of them had sworn to never tell a living soul, or a dead one, what happened when she touched Mozzrik's sword. It excited Vella and scared her.....She'd never known that such unbridled passion lurked inside her. Almost like a wild beast. Vella ignored the blade as best she could, though using it was becoming addictive. She picked up the large leather bound book and gave it to Caspian.

“So.....What do you think we'll find in the depths of the holy mountain?” Vella asked.

“You'll hear rumours about everything from an Ancient One to sleeping Gods.” Said Casp. “The book mentions a sleeper waiting to be woken. It also mentions some other ideas, all with ambiguous clues. Being totally honest, I have no idea what we'll dig up.”

“Come of Casp, I won't tell anyone if you guess wrong.” Said Vella. “Take a guess?”

“Alright.....The Gods were known to hide from their worshippers. Sometimes the divines got fed up with being prayed at for this and that and being moaned at about every bad winter. They often hid

for a while.....It's well documented. I think we'll wake up one of the nine divines, hiding from all the people praying for this that and the other."

"Oh, I hope you're wrong Casp, that's a depressing thought.....Hiding Gods."

"Your turn, Vella. What's your guess?"

"An Ancient One.....Though I do know it might not be friendly."

Vella cuddled up to Caspian, as he read the epic tome. Her education had been thorough, mainly from reading much of the forbidden section of the Great Library. She knew the old imperial language and could read most of what the book contained.

"It says the holy mountain is near Tandalla, Casp." Vella said. "I'd always heard it was close to the City of the Lost God."

"Ahh, that is because the order of places visited, follows the ancient Pilgrim Trail. Mount Erran is on the fifth rift and the City of the Lost God is on the first rift. But.....The correct order to visit the holy places has always been Mount Erran, then City of the Lost God. They're actually over two to three year's journey from one another.....Unless you have a working Void Gate. Tandalla is on the fifth rift and about a six to eight day journey from the holy mountain."

"I hope whatever we find is friendly." Said Vella.

"So do I.....So do I." Muttered Casp.

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Bird seemed to be making a bid for independence, or so it seemed to Runa. Maybe it was the Silver Lady wanting to see more than the inside of Galla's tent? For whatever reason, Runa often found herself with Galla's pet bird, flying around her. He was useful, with his incredibly sharp vision and the ability to view the rifts from a couple of hundred feet up in the sky. Bird still hurled insults at her, but Runa was becoming increasingly fond of Galla's feathered pet.

"The sullen sky could mean a storm on the way." Said General Dhūlen. "We can dig in to shelter from it, but honestly.....I'd prefer to head back to the stockade. We've lost two waggons out of the eighty sent from Aarabash. It was bound to happen sooner or later, and they're probably at the bottom of the Quella Traps."

Runa had been given the task of finding the waggons, or at least discovering what had happened to them. Two days late, but sometimes the Void Gate dropped waggons quite a long way out in the dunes. It was quirky, but still an amazing way to travel huge distances. Runa was one of the eight and, in theory, outranked Dhūlen. Plus, her orders had come directly from Muzzie and Dhūlen wouldn't want to upset the new emperor.

"Sorry, I'm not fond of sand storms, but.....Muzzie ordered me to find the waggons. If there's a gang of bandits operating in the area, we need to know." Said Runa. "They need to be dealt with long before our warriors start to go hungry."

Runa was lucky to have a hundred of the best fighters in the army and their General to lead them. That too, she was sure was because Muzzie had given Dhūlen a hard time over the missing waggons. It had to be done though; there could be no turning a blind eye to potential bandits in the area.

"Fine, we'll carry on with a zig-zag pattern search across the dunes." Said Dhūlen. "How about your Bird, can he see anything from way up there?"

Not her bird, but she'd let that one go. One morning, she had woken up to find him perched on a lamp fitting in her room. It had been quite a relief to discover that Galla's pet was house trained.

"Let's find out." Said Runa.

Runa gave the loud shriek she'd heard Galla and Maya use, to summon Bird. She also clapped her hands twice, which had worked in the past. He was a small dark mark against the sky, which quickly became a large ball of feathers sat on her shoulder.

"Any sign of the waggons, Bird?" Asked Runa.

She'd wanted to give him a proper name, but Galla hadn't liked the idea. It seemed he'd been known as Bird for several centuries and Galla had become used to calling him that.

"He's too old for a new name." Galla had muttered.

"Maybe.....Something dark on the sand." Said Bird.

"Show us where." Said Runa.

Quite easy to please, Runa gave him two live nesh bugs out of a jar in her pocket. Bird would eat dead bugs, though he sulked for a while after eating them. He hurtled up into the sky and headed towards the deepest and highest area of dunes.

"I hope he's right." Said Dhūlen. "I don't like that sky.....Definitely a storm on the way."

"If we have to dig in, we dig in and wait it out." Said Runa. "We have to know what happened to those two waggons."

Faal would have called it luck. Then again he called everything good his luck and everything bad was just one of those things. The wind rose and moved the sand about quite a bit, but it never became anything like a genuine sand storm. Bird kept far enough in front of them to give them a direction of travel, but close enough to be seen.

"He's wagging one wing.....Is Bird hurt?" Asked Dhūlen.

"No, it means he's there.....Flying over whatever he found."

The ambush had been well planned and the results were hidden in the valley between two enormous dunes. Two waggons that had probably been separated from the main party by the weather, or the eccentric behaviour of the Void Gate. Just two waggons full of food, no one in the army was going hungry. They might though, if the thieves thought it was easy pickings. They'd hire more of their kind and soon.....Half the army would be hunting them across the dunes.

"Crap.....They had children with them." Said Dhūlen.

"The waggons let anyone get on, if they have room." Said Runa. "It can be useful; I've got on a supply waggon to get back from Aarabash. Looks like an entire family were on one of the waggons."

Runa had seen vast areas covered in bodies in the past, as if entire towns had been slaughtered. It wasn't that bad, just the waggon crews and a family who'd obviously wanted to get to the stockade. Some poor fighter was about to hear some truly dreadful news. It was the children, two hybrid kids who looked very young. Runa hoped their deaths had been quick, though she doubted it.

"Can Bird find this place again?" Asked Dhūlen.

"Yes, no problem."

"Then we'll kill the bandits now and bury the bodies later." Said Dhūlen.

Runa summoned Bird and after giving him another wriggling bug, she told him what was required. Galla was right, her pet did seem to be brighter now, far quicker at understanding the situation.

"Silly Runa.....You want me to find bad people."

"I do, Bird.....Can you do it?" Asked Runa.

"Yes.....They must all die."

"They will Bird.....They definitely will."

Ideally one of the thieves would go back alive, to be interrogated. The warriors had seen the dead children though and they had a score to settle. Runa knew that all the bandits would die in battle, even if they tried to surrender.

“Fresh bugs all the way to Quron, Bird.....If you find the bandits quickly.” Said Runa.

Bird hurtled up into the sky. Maybe he'd already spotted something while looking for the empty waggons. He headed straight as an arrow, to their left, in the direction of the road that eventually ended at the gates of Tandalla. Again the weather was keeping its worst for another day. The wind picked up; there were tiny tornadoes of sand at the top of a few dunes. Never once was it bad enough to slow them down, or make her recall Bird. It took several hours for Bird to find something and begin wagging his wings again.

“Be dark by the time we get there, or close to it.” Said Dhūlen. “If we make camp though, the bastards could be gone by morning.”

“I know light cantrips.” Sais Runa. “Some of the warriors will have lamps in the packs. They're your soldiers, General.....Personally I say we fight them in the dark if it comes to it.”

“I can tell you're from a military family.” Said Dhūlen. “Alright.....If we have to, we'll attack them in the dark.”

The general talked to his fighters, telling them the importance of moving quietly when they reached where the bandits were likely to be camped. There were to be no lights until the last moment, though sand was a long way from being the worst ground to trudge across in the dark.

“No lighting lamps until Runa has used a light spell.” Said Dhūlen. “With luck they'll be startled.....Then you light the lamps we have and attack them.”

“With really good luck they'll be asleep.” Someone yelled.

It wasn't quite full dark when they came over the top of a small dune and saw the bandit's tents. Bird had been perched on her shoulder since the light had begun to disappear, with the end of another day on the rifts. Runa could still see a little in the constant ultraviolet glow. There were four tents and several heaps of army supplies in a few small carts; covered over and the covers tied down against the weather. The thieves were probably ready to leave with their ill-gotten gains in the morning. How many bandits were they going to face in semidarkness ? It could be anything from five or six, to more than Runa liked to think about. She took hold of Bird and gently pushed him under her clothing. He began to make an unhappy chuntering sound.

“Shhhhhush.” Runa whispered at him.

There was a danger of crushing Galla's pet in a fight, but he couldn't fly in the fast approaching darkness. Better tucked up inside her jacket than flapping about in a panic. Runa looked at Dhūlen, just as he was becoming difficult to see. He nodded at her. Runa put everything she had into the simple light cantrip. When she released it, the bandit camp was suddenly lit up like a sacred tree on the Feast of Nigon.

“Attack.....Attack.” Shouted Dhūlen.

Some fighters lit lamps where they were, others managed it while running. Only about eight or nine lamps, but it would be enough. Runa favoured a bow as her weapon, but only a fool fires arrows in the dark. She pulled a short sword out of her belt and ran at the closest tent. It had to be startling for the thieves. Miles from anywhere and expecting to have a peaceful night. Then a large number of imperial fighters arrived, seeking vengeance for the murdered family. A woman ran out of the tent with an axe in her right hand. Runa stabbed her short sword into the woman's throat and ripped it sideways out of her neck. There was a lot of blood very quickly, a torrent of the stuff. Runa wasn't like Nethra; she didn't enjoy the blood and the accompanying smell of death. There were enemies to kill though and Runa knew she was a good fighter, with bow or sword.

“For Muzzie !” She yelled. “For the emperor !”

Inside the tent it went from being well lit as Runa turned one way, or darkness as she found herself behind a dividing wall. Her own cantrip had stopped, or been cancelled out by rival magic. Someone cut her and by the time she spun around, they'd gone. A painful cut in her side, though experience and fighters instincts, told her it wasn't serious. All of Dhūlen's fighters had an army breastplate and shoulder guards. When a man came towards her in just a light jacket, Runa thrust her sword into his chest. It became brutal, close quarters fighting. She stepped over the body of a young soldier she recognised, one of Muzzie's fighters. When the tent seemed to only contain the dead and dying, Runa went outside into the night.

"Where is Chelac?" Someone yelled, probably a bandit.

There was a yell in the darkness and Runa took a moment to create a light with a simple cantrip. A sword was swung at her and there was another cut she knew wasn't going to be fatal. Her shoulder took the blow and Runa promised herself that next time, she put on a full set of light armour.

"Bastard." She yelled.

Her opponent was probably someone important among the thieves; he was wearing armour that glinted in the yellow light of the orb she'd created. A male hybrid with a decent looking longsword and he seemed to know how to use it. They traded a few sword thrusts and Runa recognised some of the moves. Whoever he was, her opponent had been trained by someone's army. Runa had long ago ceased to believe in fighting etiquette and rules of engagement. Fighting in the dark against murderous bandits.....The only rule was to kill them, while trying to stay alive.

"I know you.....We've met before." Said her opponent.

As his face caught the light from her orb, she knew the face. An officer in the militia of the City of the Lost God. Something had happened to him and he'd become a bandit. Chelac something or other, she was probably fighting the leader of the thieves.

"Yes, you once knew my father." Said Runa.

His eyes reflected her light and Runa thrust with her short sword. Her sword went through his right eye and deep into his head. Runa knew Chelac was dead, though it annoyed her that she couldn't recall his full name. He'd been a friend of her father's and she should have remembered. The name seemed to pop into her mind, when she stopped trying so hard to recall it.

"Chelac Ruuni.....His daughter was one my friends."

Runa looked down at Chelac's body and felt sad that he was likely to rot where he lay. Bandits were rarely given a burial, especially if they'd killed entire families. Maybe it was a kind of justice and.....

"Even sand growlers need to eat." She muttered.

There was almost a dreadful accident when one of her own side came up on her fast, out of the shadows. Luckily they recognised each other and exchanged a greeting. Runa gave the man a pat on the shoulder as they moved away from each other.

"I think it might be over.....I think they're all dead." Said the fighter.

How could you know for certain in the dark, with just a few lamps and everyone looking pretty much the same? Runa wandered from tent to tent, looking for bandits she never found. She then looked around the carts full of supplies looted from the waggons. Again, all she found were bodies. Runa finally accepted they might have won the fight, when she heard General Dhūlen shouting.

"To me.....Come to me!" Dhūlen yelled.

Runa found him with his back against one of the carts. With him were at least twenty warriors, carrying what looked like most of the working oil lamps. It was nice to have a little order after so much death and mayhem.

"Is that it.....Are they all dead?" Asked Runa.

"It seems so, though their leader, Chelac.....He might have escaped."

"No, I killed him." Said Runa.

"Good.....There were fifteen of them, more than we thought." Said Dhūlen. "More than I expected, they probably needed extra people to move the stolen supplies."

Runa knew they'd lost at least one fighter; she'd stepped over his lifeless body in the semidarkness.

"How many did we lose ?" She asked.

"Two we know of and one seriously wounded.....She might lose an arm."

Runa sat near Dhūlen and listened as various fighters came to talk to him. It was easier to listen than to ask dozens of questions, and listening didn't aggravate people. The dead bandits were going to be left where they'd fallen. It seemed the carrion eaters who inhabited the dunes, were going to eat well for a while. As for the General's plans ?

"Get as much sleep as you can everyone." He'd said. "We leave with the carts when full light returns in the morning."

One day Runa would tell Dhūlen that Chelac was a friend of her father's but not then, when she was sat on the sand, not that far from where she'd left his body.

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Kahan City in the Kingdom of Kahan and the mob had taken to the streets. Not really a mob, though many of them were locals who'd been loyal to Zin Thriaxer, the deposed and lawful King. The bulk of the mob were soldiers out of uniform, though still well-armed. Muzzie's soldiers to be precise, doing their bit to put Zin back on the throne of Kahan.

"When a spot of rest in Kahan was mentioned, this isn't what I imagined." Said Faal.

"You dealt with the gates of Segin-Unadaris." Said Nethra. "You'll be Muzzie's go to person for such things now, his expert."

Just the two of them and if pushed, Faal might have admitted he wasn't fond of Nethra. It was a quick in and out mission, while the army caused a lot of noise and confusion in the streets. If they killed many of the new King's supporters, that was good too. Runa would have been Faal's first choice of companion, but she was out on the dunes, looking for some missing supplies. Not that Muzzie had given him a choice.

"Who is the new King of Kahan ?" Asked Faal. "I've asked several people, but no one seems to know."

"A cousin of Zin's.....Caspian says it's always cousins with these things." Said Nethra. "Never did get a name, but I'm told he has a large red birthmark on his neck. We assassinate the guy in the royal chambers with the red birthmark.....Easy."

"Still.....A name would have been nice." Said Faal.

Nethra shrugged at him and Faal wished once again, that Runa had been free. Not that Faal considered assassination to be his thing anyway, but there was the whole getting in and out without, preferably being seen. That Faal liked, it was definitely his thing. Zin didn't want his royal palace damaged, so Faal had sort of volunteered for the job. He and Nethra were currently hiding among the bushes in what looked to be a small public park. Dark of course, the assassination was something best done during the darkest part of the night.

"I can see several guards near the palace gates." Said Nethra. "We could capture one of them and torture them for a name."

There were times when he simply didn't know if she was joking. Her face hadn't changed, but her tail was gently bumping against the ground. Muzzie had told him that if Nethra's tail was moving like that.....More than likely she was joking.

“Oh.....For a moment there.....” He muttered.

“Ahhhhh, you’re getting to know me, that’ll never do.” Said Nethra. “Come on, Zin’s people are leaving a rear door open for us.”

Faal didn’t mind Nethra leading the way. As long as the usurper died and Zin was back on the throne, Muzzie would be happy. Faal was still trying to create a role for himself and keeping Muzzie happy was essential. Nethra seemed to have perfect night vision, as she avoided the guards and went round the back of the huge palace. Faal followed her, while trying not to stumble over anything in the dark.

“There.....I remember Dhūlen mentioning a white door.” Whispered Faal.

The door was large, heavy and left slightly ajar. Nethra beat him there, though it took both of them to close the door after they gone inside. They left the lock as it was of course, for the return trip.

“That way.” whispered Nethra, while pointing.

The passageway was the definition of opulence. Kahan was only a small kingdom, but they were known to be incredibly wealthy. Faal’s feet seemed to fall into the deep pile luxury of the rugs. Every few feet magnificent antique chairs lines the corridor. Incredible artwork covered almost every inch of wall space.

“If only we were allowed to loot the palace.” Hissed Nethra.

Faal tended to agree, though he wasn’t about to admit it. Just two guards outside the royal bedchamber and one of those looked half asleep. Slumped in chairs, their weapons leant against the wall. Whoever the usurper was, he obviously thought he was safe, tucked up for the night in his newly acquired palace. Nethra pointed at the guards and ran her finger over her throat. Faal put his mouth against her ear.

“I can put them to sleep.....Better for stealth.”

Nethra nodded, though she looked disappointed that there’d be no need for violence. Faal softly said three words in the common tongue and pointed a finger at the guards. Easy as that, a simple spell he’d used on wounded fighters to give them a few hours of untroubled sleep. Both guards looked to be fast asleep, one was even snoring.

“Alright.....Just the usurper to deal with and we’re done.” Said Nethra.

Beyond the guards peacefully slumbering, was a huge bedchamber. Right in its centre was a bed large enough for an entire family to sleep in. The sleeping occupant of the bed didn’t look impressive, but who does in the middle of the night. A hybrid of some kind, almost everyone on the rifts had complex ancestry. Not young, but not that old either. Put him in the right clothing and Faal could see the man having a certain amount of dignified gravitas. It would have been nice to know the usurpers name, but it was him, there was a red birthmark on his neck.

“Hold him down.....I’ll get him to swallow the tincture.” Whispered Nethra.

Faal had never been a ruffian, but he was beginning to enjoy it, just a little. He had strength and the usurper was so startled at being woken. Faal held his arms, while Nethra straddled him, her hands holding his mouth closed. Faal was impressed; Nethra even spoke like a seasoned bandit.

“Calm.....We’re not here to kill you.” Said Nethra. “We want you for ransom my fine and wealthy friend. I have a sleeping potion.....Drink it and you’ll wake up far from here, but alive. Try to scream and my friend here will gut you. Less money if you’re dead, but still good money. Are you going to be good ? Are you going to be silent ?”

Nethra was different to most on the rifts, very different. Waking up to find a winged monster on his chest.....Faal would have nodded and wasn’t surprised when the usurper nodded his head. Nethra let go of his mouth and there wasn’t a sound, not even a nervous gasp. Nethra got the green jar out of a

pocket and removed the cap. Faal had seen the bottle of tincture Nethra had bought from someone among the camp followers. A woman with skill in such things had fermented the various roots and herbs, before mixing them with alcohol. The tincture was powerful and worth the half gold piece Nethra had paid for it. The usurper swallowed every drop.

“There.....Now you’ll sleep.” Said Nethra.

When the muscle spasms started, Faal held the usurper down, while Nethra kept his mouth firmly closed. She must have used such tinctures before; she knew the right moment to release her hold on the mouth. There was an eruption of vomit waiting to come out of the man in the bed. A lot of foul smelling vomit and there was a lot of blood in that vomit. It carried on for a while; Faal was even splattered by it.

“Wonderful.....Just as I’d hoped.” Said Nethra. “The cook will get blamed.....They might even hang him, or her.”

The usurper’s lifeless eyes were left looking at the bedroom ceiling. Dead, completely dead, surrounded by his own vomit.

“You lied to someone on the edge of death.” Said Faal. “One day, his spirit will come looking for you.”

“Then his spirit will have to join a very long queue.”

The journey back was easy, most of the royal guards still busy trying to calm the mob. On the whole, Faal had enjoyed briefly being a cut throat, even if no throat had actually been cut. The important thing was that Muzzie would be happy.

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Aeony had been wondering about trying to create a camp near the summit of Mount Erran.

Everyone had different ideas on a solution to trying to exist in the extreme cold and Muzzie.....He was keeping things to himself. The bulk of the army was still preparing and still enjoying themselves in Kahan. Zin Thriaxer was King again and for Muzzie’s army, just about everything was free. Dhūlen was there, looking at the famous sheer north wall of the holy mountain. Bizzi had been invited to; as Muzzie put it, give his expert view on a little digging. Add on a couple of hundred fighters for protection and that it was it.....Apart from Maya of course. The young healer always seemed to turn up everywhere.

“It’s pleasant here, the climate warm and....On the whole, dry.” Said Muzzie. “We could make our temporary camp here.”

“We’ll need a second camp near the summit.” Said Dhūlen. “Getting supplies up there to the diggers.....We really need to discuss this with everyone.”

“I was told it’s cold enough up there to freeze the blood in your veins.” Said Maya.

“Yes, those kinds of rumours are everywhere.” Said Muzzie. “Not complete nonsense, surviving up there would be a constant battle. Faal talked about using chaos magic to heat the air around the summit.....Might work, but there is no need.”

“I knew you had a plan.....Tell us what you intend to do ?” Asked Aeony.

Muzzie looked towards the freezing summit of Mount Erran and her eyes followed his gaze. It had to be awful up there. Every year a few pilgrims climbed the mountain and only a tiny number ever returned. Aeony felt sorry for Bizzi. He was certain to lose a lot of his Dredgers during the digging.

“Just about everyone I’ve seen has talked about digging down from the summit.” Said Muzzie. “That makes sense, it’s the way you dig everything up. You dig down to it.”

“That is the usual way.” Said Dhūlen.

"I might have agreed, if it hadn't been for the cleric Wēland Raag." Said Muzzie. "He spoke to me in private for several hours, telling me many things. I can hear Faal saying it was all nothing but travellers' tales and nonsense. I trust what Wēland told me.....Everything he said has come to pass. I have no intention of ever seeing the summit of the holy mountain."

"You're going in from the side.....I knew it." Said Aeony.

"Digging through all that solid rock.....That'll be impossible." Said Bizzi. "Well.....My Dredgers could do it, but it'll take at least a year, or more."

"Impossible Muzzie.....You can't dig out the side of Mount Erran." Said Dhūlen.

"There is a door, according to Wēland." Said Muzzie. "A hidden door, beyond the sheer north wall. Just a few feet of rock between us and that door. Can you do it for me, Bizzi ? The ultimate sacrilege of bringing down much of the famous north face ?"

"Just a few feet of rock ?" Asked Bizzi.

"Yes.....And I'll even use chaos magic to shatter the rocks." Said Muzzie. "All you need to do is cart away the rubble."

"Oh yes, my emperor." Said Bizzi. "My Dredgers can do that for you."

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