

The Last Emperor

Chapter 5 - Annill

““He’s telling the truth.” Said Galla.

For a taller woman it would have been a perfect entrance, but Galla was quite small, some would say tiny. She stomped down the side of a dune and then stood with the fire behind her.”



Caspian had told them all to keep well away from the temple, until told it was safe. Yet there was Vella trying to run across the soft sand. It had to be tiring work; she’d arrive feeling hot and wretched. At least she looked to be on her own.

“Please look after Vella.....I’m going down, into Nara-Unadaris.” Said Caspian.

“Be careful, there might be quite a drop at the bottom of the hole.”

“If there is, I’ll come back and see if our Dredger friends have ropes.” Said Caspian.

Walking down the funnel of fused sand was easy. Sometimes the sand crackled under his weight, but there was never any feeling that he might fall, or that it would all collapse. It was different near the bottom; the layer of melted sand was thinner and more fragile. Caspian caused a sheet of fused sand to fall away and land on the beautiful mosaic floor. It made a sound like breaking glass, but far louder.

“Are you alright ?” Yelled Muzzie.

“Yeah, though I might need some ropes.”

Muzzie’s lights were still down there and the mosaic floor wasn’t far away. Caspian could see plants depicted in the floor and some very strange reptilian creatures. Probably a drop of twenty five to thirty feet. Tantalisingly close, but still enough of a drop to kill him, or leave him with horrendous injuries. Caspian carefully walked around the bottom of the funnel.

“There has to be piles of sand.....Stands to reason.” He muttered.

The sand had to have covered most of the temple and only part of it had been melted and fused by Muzzie’s release of pure chaos. There had to be sand below him, it wasn’t rational to think otherwise. Caspian thought he saw a hint of orange sand. As he shifted his weight to get a better look.....

“Fuck.” He muttered.

He was falling and although he wasn’t the sort to give up.....The few spells he knew weren’t that appropriate to the situation and he’d need time to remember them. His back hit soft sand, just as he was about to use the recall incantation for The Ring of Volkin. Dangerous anyway, the ring was close to the City of the Lost God, maybe close enough for the boiling blood business to kick in.....

“Why do I get involved in these things.” He muttered.

Caspian rolled down a hill of sand, until he dropped again, though only three feet, four at the most. He landed face first onto the mosaic floor. As he got up on his knees, there still seemed to be inanimate objects trying to hurt him. Pieces of fused sand from the funnel were falling; one piece sliced a chunk out of his forearm. Caspian put his arms over his head and waited for the debris to stop falling.

“Are you alright, Caspian.” Yelled Muzzie. “Are you.....Alive down there ?”

Above him was a hole where the funnel had been. Getting out wasn't going to be easy, though Caspian hoped rebuilding the temple, would remove that problem.

"Yes, and I know what needs to be done." Shouted Caspian. "Get well away from here, take Vella with you. I'll count to two hundred and then.....I'll give the rebuild command."

"Is it safe.....With you still down there ?" Shouted Vella.

"Yes, of course.....I'll be fine.....Run Vella, get well clear."

Would it be safe ? Caspian didn't know, though logic indicated he would be. The Older Race were incredibly wise and ensuring the safety of whoever set off the rebuild, sounded like it should be near the top of anyone's list of priorities. But, as with so many other things, there was no way to be certain.

"I love you, Caspian." Yelled Vella.

"I love you too."

In his mind, Caspian began a very slow count up to two hundred. Actually three hundred, he was going to make sure Muzzie and Vella had plenty of time to reach a safe distance. Caspian stood up and walked around the mosaic floor, trying to see any evidence that Nara-Unadaris had come to life. He'd used the real name on the surface and felt some heavy vibrations. It was still nice to see a green pulsating light, quite a distance to his right. The temple was alive, or as alive as any such place ever is. It seemed to take a long time to count to three hundred.

"Ich'k Nash Volten Ash't." Yelled Caspian.

There was a problem related to the depth of his knowledge, they came with the territory for a librarian. Three lines of the language of the Older Race, should start the temple rebuilding. But and it was a very big but, scholars had assumed the same three lines, would work on any Older Race temple. If it didn't, if the commands were all unique. Caspian would need to be dug out of the hole and Pio would ridicule him, forever.

"Ich'k Nash Sedent Sac'd."

It was only slight, but the floor under his feet definitely began to vibrate. Tempting to yell a profanity, but the three lines had to be spoken together and in the right order.

"Ich'k Nash Knowen Dis't."

Earthquakes were rare in the City of the Lost God, though Caspian had lived through two of them. The second one was the worst, more of a chaos storm than ground tremors. The rumbling and vibrations around him, felt worse than that second earthquake. It was time to yell the profanity.

"Fuck." Yelled Caspian.

Instinctively, he put his hands up to stop some debris from hitting him. The pieces of rubble hit an invisible screen of some kind, a protective shield. Such a device made sense, though it was a miracle it still worked. No one was sure how long ago the Older Race had ruled the rifts; there were too few known dates to use as points of reference. It had been a very long time ago though; every scholar was agreed about that.

"A truly staggering number of years." Muttered Caspian.

According to the ancient tomes, the rebuild happened quite quickly. Quickly for such a huge structure as a stone temple.....It might takes hours. Caspian sat on the floor and leant against the shield that was protecting him. Despite the noise and the stress, he was asleep within a matter of minutes. Well.....It had been a long and tiring day.

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Bizzi had his faults and wasn't Galla's favourite person among the Dredgers, but he was no fool. No matter what Caspian might do, his people would probably be there for a day or so, moving tons of

sand from one place to another. It was what Dredgers did after all; it had been their job for many millennia. It was said by some that Tomma-Goran had cursed them with being movers of earth and rocks. Maybe so, but that curse meant Dredgers tended to always have work and food on the table. No sooner had Caspian vanished across the dunes, when Bizzi ordered the tents and yurts to be put up. No sharing for Galla, she had saved the lives of at least three Dredger children. She'd been given her own yurt and quite a lot of privacy. Only a small yurt, but it was big enough for her needs.

"Oh, so you've decided to show up." She muttered at her bird.

"Dead I was....Back now I am..... Galla Sinsa-Ennaria."

Her bird had a weird sense of humour, always had. Using her full name though, that was a first. Galla only used it on official documents; she was affiliated to the Sorcerers Guild. She was the only working empath in the City of the Lost God, or at least the only one with the right paperwork. The bird must have heard her use her full name at some and time and remembered it.

"Are you alright, bird ? Come here; let me have a look at you ?"

She rubbed her pet's head, something he always enjoyed. He looked fine and healthy, though there was a slight smell of burning as she ruffled his wing feathers.

"Poor thing.....Did you get caught in one of Muzzie's spells ?" She asked.

"Maybe.....Muzzie is stupid." Said her bird. "Dead I was.....Completely dead."

Galla couldn't see or sense anything wrong with her pet, yet there was something. It was the same sensation she'd had in the Upper Dome, on the day of Caspian and Vella's wedding anniversary.

There was something, her bird's voice was even slightly different.

"Be careful around Muzzie's spells, he uses a lot of raw chaos." Said Galla. "Get too close and you might get changed into something.....Unnatural."

Which was something Galla's mother used to say. In Tandalla it meant something, but out on the rifts.....Just about everything that walked, flew or slivered, looked fairly unnatural.

"Hungry Galla.....I'm hungry." Muttered her pet.

"Yes, so am I.....I'll go and find something after I get my things organised."

"I'll go."

No calling her silly or stupid, there was definitely something wrong with her bird. Plus, her pet had normally spent most of the day in its cage in her apothecary shop. Nothing that predominantly lives in a cage, ever uses the phrase 'I'll go.' Muzzie was at the bottom of it all, she was sure of that.

"All those waves of chaos....There are always consequences." She mumbled.

Tempting to see Muzzie and throttle the truth out of him, but there was the whole curse business with the Silver Lady. Galla would watch him though....Something had been done to her bird.

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Caspian had no idea where he was, when a hand grabbed his shoulder and gave it a none too gentle shake.

"Wake up; the Dredgers need to work here."

Runa had woken him, though he wondered why she was obviously so irritated. All around them was a beautiful temple, with Dredgers clearing away the few areas of remaining sand. He'd done it, Caspian had rebuilt the temple and most importantly, he'd survived the experience.

"The temple.....It's magnificent." He said.

"Yes.....Look, everyone is busy and we couldn't move you out of the way, Caspian. The shield around you has only just stopped working. So.....You did a great job, but we need to move away from here." Her attitude had gone from weird and confusing in his mind, to downright annoying. He should have been yelling at her, but his main mental state was still awe and wonder. He'd only ever seen

drawings of Older Race temples. The real thing was so much better than a drawing.....The stone columns were actually shining with many different colours.

"The portals.....Have they been rebuilt ?" He asked.

"Yes and they're free of sand."

"I must see them." Said Caspian. "The real thing, after just seeing lots of old drawings on ageing yellow parchment."

Runa was stood in front of him and as he went to go around her, she was in front of him again. It took him another three tries, before he realised she was deliberately getting in his way.

"No, I can't allow that.....The Dredgers are busy." Said Runa. "I'm to take you back to where we set up camp."

Caspian liked to think he was as reasonable as anyone else he knew. Yes, there was a tendency to want his own way on things, but he was going to be head of the great library, one day. To be spoken to in such a manner.....He placed his hand on the curved blade he'd found in Ingar Sans.

"Who do you think you are ?" He shouted. "Ordering me about as though someone made you boss. I'll go where I damn well please."

Runa handled her sword and for a moment, things looked dangerous. Caspian knew Runa was better than him with a blade and that he might die. There was the curse though, that was supposed to stop them fighting one another. In the heat of the moment though, Runa might have forgotten about that. After a very tense minute or so, Runa took her hand off her sword.

"I'm sorry, Caspian." Said Runa. "It's just that Pio has been going on about it since Vella came running back. He's been stirring everyone up, saying you were deliberately sleeping while everyone else worked. I try not to listen, but after a few hours of it....."

"I do understand and you're forgiven." Said Caspian. "Let's rebel against granddaddy Xanash. I say we need to look at the portals."

"Yes, Pio can screw himself." Said Runa.

The portals were deep inside the temple complex, though there was lighting now, thanks to the rebuild. Lots of stairs and a few ramps. No one was sure how large the Older Race had been, though the stairs were designed for someone with a longer pace. Still two legs though, at least according to ancient drawings. Wider than most Dredger hybrids though, the doorways were built for broader people.

"There are moving platforms, but as the temple predates the City of the Lost God....."

"Yeah, safer to use the stairs, I understand." Said Runa.

Caspian used the time to think about the Pio-Xanash problem. Something had to be done; he was far too good at rabble rousing. Left to his own devices and Pio could be leading the group, by the time they arrived in Annull. Muzzie had sort of half joked a few times, about putting Pio's feet to the fire. The more Caspian was in the old guy's company, the more he began to think it sounded a good idea. Nothing too extreme, Pio would probably cave in to a few serious threats. Tell everything he knew, or vanish into a hole on the ground, somewhere out on the rifts.

"Wow, I knew they'd be impressive, but this....." Said Caspian. "If we ever understand a tiny part of their technology, it'll transform life on the rifts."

They were there in a line, the five portals of Nara-Unadaris. Large statues of their Gods, who for some reason had all been designed and carved to look pregnant. Reptilian Gods of course, every intelligent race creates their Gods in their own image. Caspian remembered drawings of pregnant deities in an incredibly old book. It seemed the Older Race had a thing about fertility. Each of the five portal statues was throbbing and giving off a pale green glow.

“Five portals.....Why are they pregnant ?” Asked Runa.

“Honestly.....I can only guess that it signifies a love of fertility.” Said Caspian. “Four of the portals go to fixed locations, it’s how they moved their holy men and warriors around their empire. The fifth portal can take you just about anywhere, if you know the right words.”

Dredger kids were everywhere and he had been ignoring them. When Caspian looked, they were cleaning the floors and dusting the portal statues. It seemed a working life started early for Dredger youngsters.

“Wow, these kids are doing a good job.” He said.

“Which is the fifth portal, Caspian ?” Asked Runa. “What are the words to reach Annill ?”

Up to that moment he’d trusted Runa, but now.....Those two questions would make him expendable, if Pio wished to be rid of him. Caspian looked at Runa, not knowing what to say, but determined not to answer the question. She too, looked awkward and unsure what to do next. It was Runa who broke the silence.

“No, Caspian.....Don’t tell me. What I don’t know, I can’t tell to another. He gets into my head; I think Pio might be a sorcerer, or an empath like Galla. I just don’t know why I let him get into my head.....”

“Tell the truth, does her remind you of your father ?” Asked Caspian.

“Yes, he does.....Just a little.”

“You must resist that, Runa.....Remember.....Fuck Pio-Xanash.”

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Aeony had captured Pio, if capture was the right word ? The Dredger families doted on the grandfather of the last emperor, or great grandfather, it was all becoming a bit confusing. Aeony had volunteered to abduct the unpleasant old guy, mainly because he might screw up Muzzie fulfilling the prophecy. The sooner Muzzie became emperor, the sooner Aeony could return to her sister dark angels. Leave it too long and they’d pick a new queen and then.....Things could get complicated.

“Did you have any trouble getting him ?” Asked Caspian.

“No.....He was so confident he was safe, he wasn’t even being careful.” Said Aeony.

She’d been watching him for a while, as he went from tent to tent and yurt to yurt. Talking to Dredger families, being fed and giving them the latest poisonous news as per Pio-Xanash. His movements helped, everyone would assume he was visiting another family.

“More importantly, were you seen ?” Asked Muzzie.

“No, I’m not an idiot.”

Muzzie nodded at her, before picking up Pio as though he was a doll. Muzzie had stripped to the waist for the occasion and seemed to be all muscles and red tinged skin. He wasn’t bad for his age, even if there was that annoying bit of Genova in his ancestry. Aeony had shared the tavern owner’s bed a few times and if the opportunity arose.....She’d probably share it again.

“You can probably guess why you’re here, Pio.” Said Muzzie.

Pio wasn’t bound or gagged, there didn’t seem to be a need. They’d lit the fire a long way out on the dunes, definitely far enough away to avoid being seen or heard by the Dredgers. At the bottom of a natural gully, so that even the light from their fire wouldn’t travel far. It surprised Aeony when Pio tried to run; she hadn’t thought he had it in him.

“Heading your way, Runa.” Shouted Vella.

They were all there, everyone with an interest in Muzzie fulfilling his destiny. Actually, all of them apart from Galla. The apothecary had something to do and had mentioned arriving later.

“I’ve got him.” Said Runa.

Runa was young, fit and well trained. On the other hand, Pio had fought in a great many wars and skirmishes. It was Runa who won, though there'd be a bruise on her face for a while. Muzzie helped her drag Pio towards the fire, dropping him close enough to feel the heat.

"There's no need for this." Said Muzzie. "Just tell me what you were supposed to tell me, when I arrived in Seren's Edge."

"You should kill him now, he won't talk." Said Sensan. "I know the type....If he does talk, he'll just tell you endless lies and nonsense."

"He's got a point." Added Aeony.

Aeony was hoping to taste Pio's liver, after he was dead of course; she wasn't a feral beast. No mentioning that though.....It could make some people a little uncomfortable. Pio was looking intently at the fire, where the tip of a long sword was beginning to glow red hot.

"Kill me and you'll never hear what I know." Said Pio. "Burn me, cut me.....And I swear you'll never get a word out of me."

"Oh, if I had a gold piece for every time some asshole has said that." Said Muzzie.

"He'll talk as soon as the fire touches his skin.....They always talk." Added Sensan.

It was all a game of course, a rough script worked out before Aeony had gone to grab Pio-Xanash. All about a lot of very sincere sounding threats, hoping to get Pio to open his mouth. There might well be a touch on skin from the glowing longsword, though there was no intention of going further. Pio was going to talk or die, but if it came to it, his death would be fast and relatively painless.

"Careful, Muzzie.....I know things you won't want me to talk about." Shouted Pio.

Aeony had heard rumours about Muzzie's age, there was never anything definite or known to be a fact. He was getting on though; the lines on his face bore witness to a lot of years, hard years on the rifts. He could move quickly though when he had to and there were those muscles. Muzzie had Pio pinned to the ground in seconds, while he picked up the glowing longsword. Runa was there too. Holding onto Pio's arms. Caspian was a little late, before he too, was helping to hold Pio down against the stony bottom of the gulley.

"What did he mean about things he knows about Muzzie?" Yelled Sensan.

"It's his usual crap.....Lies to get into our heads and cause trouble." Said Runa.

Aeony had decided to sit where she was for now and enjoy the impromptu entertainment. If Pio escaped and ran.....Then she'd go after him. For now though, she was happy to sit and watch. Muzzie pressed the hot end of the sword against Pio's lower leg. Difficult to know the exact part of his leg, Caspian was getting in the way. Pio yelled though, he didn't appear to be someone who was good at handling pain.

"I don't think it's hot enough." Said Muzzie.

As if to prove the point, Muzzie jammed the red hot sword tip, against his own huge forearm. He left it there until the smell of burning skin seemed to fill the night air. Eventually he pulled the sword away and pushed it back into the fire.

"I thought so, no sizzle.....It needs to be much hotter." Said Muzzie.

Aeony could tell Pio had decided enough was enough. He was going to talk; he'd already stopped struggling to get up. She'd used fire herself, on those she thought knew some information she'd like to know. Only fanatics kept quiet when the heat touched their skin and Pio.....He might be a lot of things, but he wasn't a fanatic.

"I'd tell you.....I just don't know." Shouted Pio. "I knew once, or at least I think I did. There was a time, during the last days of the Army of Forty Thousand. I was injured and when I woke up, I no

longer knew what information was important. I think it's all there in my head.....Just all jumbled up."

"Why didn't you tell us?" Asked Runa.

"I thought you wouldn't believe me and we'd end up somewhere like this, but far sooner. Or you would believe me and I'd be killed. I have people I know in Annill. Once I was there, I would have told you."

"He's telling the truth." Said Galla.

For a taller woman it would have been a perfect entrance, but Galla was quite small, some would say tiny. She stomped down the side of a dune and then stood with the fire behind her.

"I've been close to Pio all day." Said Galla. "He doesn't know what Muzzie needs to know and that scares him. He's been around a long time and fought in some truly brutal wars. Add on the numberless substances he's taken to get to sleep, or for fun.....And the amount of strong beer he's consumed. It's a miracle he still remembers his own name."

Aeony thought it was time to offer her advice, even if they ignored it.

"I know killing him is tempting." She said. "Don't do it though, he might be useful in Annill.

And.....Even the garbled nonsense in his head might be useful. Listen to what he has to say and try to remember the bits that matter."

"How do we know what matters?" Asked Caspian.

"I can help with that." Said Galla. "Being an empath is a long way from being a mind reader, but I'll sense when he talks about something important.....Or at least something he thinks is important."

"More nonsense.....Another waste of time." Yelled Muzzie.

Aeony moved, she knew she had to and do it quickly. The way Muzzie had picked up the sword again and then there was the rage in his eyes. Aeony was there in an instant holding back the sword blow intended for Pio-Xanash.

"Muzzie.....Muzzie, don't do this." She hissed at him. "This complicates things, but you have us all here to help you. Listen to me old friend.....Don't kill Pio, at least not for now. If you still want him dead when we've reached Annill, I'll do it for you."

Somewhere deep inside, Muzzie had become totally demon. Aeony understood, an extreme rage could turn her into something that lived to kill. It was natural, a way to maximise the likelihood of survival. Don't like something, think it might be a threat. Easy solution, rip it apart.

"Let Pio talk." Said Galla. "We'll all listen and try to remember as much as we can. I have a feeling it will all be useful, one day."

Muzzie must have decided the aggravation and irritation might be worth putting up with. He dropped the sword and Aeony relaxed, just a little. When the tavern owner sat on the ground, she knew Pio wasn't going to die, at least not that day.

"I don't want your entire life story, Pio." Said Muzzie. "Tell me what you think matters.....Tell me every tiny detail that might be important."

"Can I have some water?"

Muzzie nodded at Runa, who gave Pio her water flask.

"I said I have an urge to tell you everything since the day I was born." Said Pio. "Interestingly, one memory that feels special in some way, happened when I was a small child. My father was just an ordinary soldier then, though he did like to dabble in local politics....."

"How much of this are we supposed to be remember?" Asked Caspian.

"As much as you can.....No more interruptions." Said Muzzie.

“Anyway.....After a lot of rejections by those at the top.” Said Pio. “My father became a local decision maker, a councillor we’d call him now. We had celebrations all that day in our house. One guest made an impression on me, though it was a century or two until I served under him in the Blood Wars. That was the day I was introduced to Haakon Raag, the last King of Gorshan.....”

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After being ridiculously cautious, Bizzi had agreed to use the moving platforms in the temple complex. The Dredgers could use the stairs, but moving the carts that way would have meant removing their axles, covered tops and moving lots of timber parts by hand. The portals were deep inside the temple, even just carrying their supplies down so many stairs, would be back breaking work. In the end, after a lot of testing with inanimate objects, Bizzi had agreed to his people using the platforms.

There were several stone platforms of various sizes, two large enough to lift or lower a fully laden cart. Their movements looked unpredictable, but really weren’t. Within no time, even the Dredger kids were going up and down on them, seemingly for fun. No guard rails, no way of stopping them, though Vella hadn’t seen a single accident, even a minor one. Not that Vella’s mind was totally on getting everyone down to the bottom level of the temple.

“It was three times, Casp.” She said. “I was counting, Pio mentioned Gorshan on three separate occasions. You know that means Muzzie will want to go there. I’m not going there, not again.....Never.”

“He talked about a lot places, Vella.” Said Caspian. “Some of them no longer exist. We’ll worry about Gorshan if it seems likely we’ll be going there.”

“Do you ever listen to me ?” Vella snapped. “I just said I won’t go. Never again ! It’s not even a proper world.....Round Caspian; Gorshan is on a round world. Such an abomination.....It’s an insult to the Gods.”

“Yes.....I do listen to you.” Said Caspian. “I agree that round worlds are unnatural. But I need to get this right, or you me.....And everyone else, could end up just about anywhere.”

As if to emphasise that over fifty Dredgers were relying on Caspian’s calculations, young Maya ran past, shrieking as she went. Just play, she was chasing after about three other kids, who seemed just as excited. They were going to Annill, which meant a new home, hopefully a safe home.

“How are things going, Casp ?” Vella asked. “Have you found the right spot ?”

“I think so, based on what I was told by pilgrims last year. The lake has grown again and their information will be out of date. Here though, on the hillside.....I’m certain that will be a safe place to arrive.”

She’d been there when Casp had explained his ideas to Muzzie. Officially Muzzie was the only one allowed to see Caspian’s charcoal drawing, but she’d made an exception for herself. She was his wife after all, mother of his child. The kids got everywhere though and to be honest.....Now Pio was known to be a bit of a fraud, he’d lost his group of faithful minions.

The idea was to arrive close to Annill, while avoiding ending up in a very deep lake. A further complication was the need to arrive at an Older Race temple, though that could mean a single small stone. On the floor was a charcoal drawn map, with Annill on one side and a hillside on the other. Casp was pointing at one of three X’s he’d drawn. To Vella it looked close to the shaded area, the very deep waters of Lake Nigon. A lake named after a long dead deity by the citizens of Annill. A name probably given as a joke, but use a name often enough and it sticks. Or so Caspian had told her. Her husband had an excellent memory, which was just as well. Everyone was relying on him to get them safely to Annill.

“Your place to arrive, looks a long way from the city.” Said Vella.

“It is a long way, a seven day walk.” Said Casp. “We’ll need to live off the land. Fish from the lake, fruit and seeds from the trees. It’s not a typical rift desert there, Vella. The land around Annill is famous for being almost a paradise.”

“Almost a paradise.....That begs an obvious question.” Said Vella.

“No spreading this around, it might all be nothing but traveller’s tall tales.” Said Casp. “There are a lot of damaged portals on the rifts and according to legend; portals with no proper destination are diverted to the lands near Annill. Where.....For some reason they breed in large numbers. Strange beasts from even stranger worlds. Not just mindless beasts, there are rumours of living Terak in the mountains of the third rift. But.....As I said, it might all be nonsense.”

“I hope so Casp.....There are so many children coming with us.” Said Vella.

There was a large waiting area in front of the portal statues and just about everyone was there. Bizzi had found something to be thorough about and pedantic. Several of the Dredger adults had been tasked with making sure that their family and that of their friends, ended up going through the portal.

“There can be no return to this place.” Caspian had told them. “There is only one chance to do this.....We need to get it right at the first try.”

The temple complex was of an almost unimaginable age. In theory the portal would remain open for several hours, long enough for everyone to be sent to Annill. There was the age of everything though; it had to be a concern. Caspian and her were going to wait and be the last two through the portal, just in case it needed to be activated more than once. If things went wrong and they were stuck in Nara-Unadaris ? As Casp had said.....

“It’s a long hot trudge back to Seren’s Edge.”

The scribbles near each X on the map were the words of activation, in a language no one had used for.....A staggeringly long period of time. Caspian was sure they were right and that he could speak them reasonably well. Again, if all else failed.....There was that long trudge to Seren’s Edge. Bizzi approached them, but stopped at a respectful distance. Everyone had been told that the map and all the scratching on it, were secret. Bizzi wasn’t the sort to use a dozen words, when two would do.

“We’re ready.”

It had been agreed, only she was allowed near Caspian, as he spoke the words of activation. He never had told anyone apart from Muzzie, which portal was the right one. Vella walked beside Casp, as he stopped in front of the statue of a reptilian deity, its body swollen and ready to give birth to multiple young. Caspian made clicking noises in his throat, that reminded her of the insects that ate everything decent in her garden, back home. Lots of clicking sounds, mixed in with a few noises that were almost like proper words. Eventually a swirling orange portal opened up, right in front of the statue of the very pregnant lizard deity.

“Go.....Go now.....The portal will take you to Annill.” Shouted Caspian.

Muzzie should have been first through the portal. A future emperor leading his people, even if they did only number around sixty. Well laid plans and all that, Maya had other ideas. The Dredger girl hurtled past Muzzie and was the first to vanish into the portal. It took a little time for everyone else to go through. The carts had quite a bit of inertia to overcome and the portal wasn’t that wide. One Dredger family managed to lose a child, who was found taking a nap behind a stone column. Nearly an hour after it had been activated, Bizzi was the last Dredger to leave for Annill. He waved and it was just them, left in a very large space that seemed full of echoes.

“I hope no one else is taking a nap.” Said Caspian. “There’s no chance of coming back for them.”

“Bizzi organised a quick search after we found the sleepy kid. I think we’re probably alone.” Said Vella.

“Come on.....We’ll walk through together.” Said Caspian.

They kissed and Vella led the way towards the spinning vortex of energy. She’d used portals in the Dome, but none of those were as impressive, or as colourful. A moment’s hesitation before grabbing Casp’s hand and taking him into the portal.

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Sensan had wondered what would be at the other end of the portal. Caspian hadn’t been sure and said it could be anything from just a single block of stone, to a few intact temple walls.

“There will be something holy to the Older Race.” Caspian had said. “It might be half buried in the ground, so don’t expect to see a temple like Nara-Unadaris.”

He’d come through with a full cart behind him, so Sensan hadn’t dawdled to move away from where everyone was appearing. No spinning portal, though portals in the City of the Lost God, never had visible exits to portals. You were just there, looking at wherever you’d been sent. When he had the opportunity to look back, it was quite impressive. Dredgers were still arriving, through an intact stone arch. He recognised the style now; it was definitely an Older Race archway. Nothing else of course, the rest of the temple had long since become nothing but piles of rubble.

“Wow, that’s quite a view.” Said Muzzie.

It took Sensan’s eyes a moment to get used to all the greenery, after several days in a hot, sandy desert. They were all on a hillside, a serious hill that rose to at least a thousand feet above a large lake. Surrounding the lake was an area of lush, green vegetation. Beyond the lake was a walled city, which had to be Annill.

“I’ve travelled more than most, but I have to say.....That is an impressive looking city.” Said Sensan. Red stone, Sensan remembered Caspian talking about Annill being a city built from the local hard, red stone. There had to be a quarry somewhere, though there was no obvious sign of it. A strong and high city wall of red stone blocks, with several sets of large doors. The doors were open, almost welcoming. There had been some concern about the city doors.

“Usually Annill welcomes strangers, they are a city of strangers.” Aeony had said. “It’s joked that Tomma-Goran once turned the rifts on their edge and all the weird and crazy, rolled into Annill. Though, if they’ve had recent problems with bandits.....We might have to persuade them we’re harmless. And yeah....Before you ask. They’re not keen on my kind.”

There had been talk about hiding the dark angel in one of the carts, but Aeony had refused to play that game. She was going to do what she did well.....At least according to her she did it well.

“I’ll strut through the gates as though I own the place.”

There was no order given. Everyone knew Caspian and Vella were the last through the portal. When they appeared, everyone began to walk down the hill. Not easy to get loaded carts down a steep gradient. Sensan joined a team of Dredgers, who were using a lot of strength to stop a cart running away from them. He grabbed a break lever and pulled it hard back. The carts would arrive safely in Annill, but he’d sort of volunteered for a lot of hard, sweaty work.

“Will we be there at full dark ?” Asked a Dredger kid.

“Eyes play tricks and we’re up high.” Said Bizzi. “You won’t be in a proper bed for seven days, maybe eight.”

“Eight days, we’ll starve.” Said the child.

“You won’t starve in a land full of fruit and berries.” Said Sensan. “Live off the trees.....But, show anything you don’t recognise to your parents.”

“If it tastes bitter....Spit it out.” Added Galla.

And as everyone was excited, Galla’s words were probably the best advice the kids would hear that day. Sensan remained with the cart, even when it was safely down the hill and at the edge of the lush vegetation. There were rumours of strange creatures among the trees and vines, potentially dangerous creatures. Caspian had read a lot of ancient books and Aeony had heard numerous stories, that might turn out to be just that.....Stories. No one had made a fuss, no scaring the thirty or so kids travelling with them. Maybe it was just a reflex, but Sensan found his hand on his blade, as the cart entered the trees.

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