

The Last Emperor

Chapter 21 – Maya The Healer

““Long live the emperor.” Someone shouted.

The chant was taken up and repeated by thousands of voices, as Mussaneth Osranetherer entered the city that was certain to be his within a day, maybe two. The only question now was how much death and carnage there’d be, before the leaders of the city surrendered.”



Faal ran through the door, hoping the collapsing gate chamber didn’t destroy the tower as it fell apart. He used his sword on two guards in the corridor, rather than magic. There had to be stairs leading down and he found them about ten yards along the corridor. Sensible to keep running, but he didn’t. Faal, sword in hand, waited for Runa to catch up with him. He could hear her feet, pounding on the wooden floor as she ran.

“Not far Runa.....Keep running.” He shouted.

Running as though the crawling chaos itself was after her, Runa appeared around a corner in the corridor. Good, she looked to be unhurt and up on her toes, running like the wind.

“Down here.” He shouted.

Stairs spaced for walking were often difficult to run down. Faal could hear the gate chamber collapsing, but didn’t want to risk a tumble on the steep stairs. Runa was right behind him now; he could hear her breathing hard as she ran. There came a point when Faal realised they had to be beyond the bottom of the tower and the spiral staircase was taking them below ground. The air became warmer and the sound of falling masonry, sounded far fainter. By the time they crashed through a battered looking door and into some kind of cavern, the world was completely quiet.

“I think.....We can safely rest here for a minute or two.” Said Faal.

“I don’t believe we survived that.” Muttered Runa. “Wow, it’s so warm down here.”

There was a rumble and a little vibration, as the huge city gates collapsed, somewhere above them. Runa nodded at him, as if acknowledging that half of what needed to be done, had been done.

“Now we just need to survive and re-join the army.” Said Faal.

“I’m hungry.” Said Runa.

“You’re always hungry.”

No lamps on the walls in the cavern, or the glow of lighting orbs. Faal used a spell to create two bright spheres of light, which he sent ahead of them, into the cavern. It wasn’t the sort of cavern with sparkling crystals on the wall and the tinkling sound of running water. It was a grubby looking hole in the ground, with an odd smell.

“Come on, there must be another way out.” Said Runa.

The smell reminded Faal of the carrion creatures of the rifts, the brutes who preyed on the weak, injured and dying. He kept his sword ready, but they found another door without being attacked.

That door too, was old and barely held up by its hinges. Beyond the door was a passage, really just a fissure in the rocks.

“Only a slight gradient.....But it’s going down, deeper below the city.” Said Runa.

“Maybe not a bad thing, and.....We’ve been lucky with our choice of direction, so far.” Said Faal.

“Faal the eighth, the lucky.....Fine, I’m getting used to the dry heat down here.” Said Runa.

Gradually the gap in the rocks took them down, ever deeper below the demon city above them. Battles were probably being fought above them, yet the only sound was water dripping, somewhere a long way off. The passageway ended abruptly at what looked like a solid wall of rock.

“Looks like we turn round and try another way.” Said Runa.

“Not yet.....I won’t believe my luck has failed, until I’ve had a good look around.” Said Faal.

There had been a door to get there and a pathway that in places, looked to have been polished by the passing of many feet. Faal refused to believe they were all coming to look at a solid wall of rock. He noticed what looked like a crack in the rock, yet there was a piece of plant dangling from it.

“Give me a hand, Runa.” He said. “I think this stone has been moved recently.”

Trial and error really, a mixture of pushing at one point, while twisting at another. A heavy piece of rock came away from the wall, leaving a hole Faal could have just about crawled into. The edges of the rock were smooth, it had been moved many times before.

“I can see a light, a flickering light.” Said Runa. “A long way into the tunnel.....Looks to me like someone is using an oil lamp.”

“I’ll put us in darkness for a moment.” Said Faal.

Once he’d dispelled the light, he could see it too. Definitely a flickering oil lamp, at least fifty feet along the tunnel in the rock wall. Faal didn’t want to go first, he’d heard of too many people whose life had ended after the words, ‘I’ll go in front.’ He had the magic skills though and the ability to produce spheres of light.

“I’ll go first.” Said Faal.

“Good.” Said Runa.

Once again, he had the idea that Runa wasn’t really enjoying her time in Segin-Unadaris. Faal had to move a few things on his belt and push his sword in front of him, but he fitted into the tunnel. It felt strange to be in a narrow tunnel leading to somewhere that might well be dangerous, but so far that day, his luck hadn’t let him down.

“I can hear voices.” Said Faal.

“That’s Nethra, talking to someone.” Said Runa.

Like a cork out of a bottle, they both came out of the tunnel. Faal immediately sent up three light spheres to the roof of the chamber they were in. Faal had seen the Hive Mother before; he’d once had a long conversation with her on the ultimate fate of the rifts. Others might have been scared by the appearance of the huge, dangerous looking creature, but not him. The Hive Mother was talking to Nethra, who looked quite happy to be close to what looked like a monstrous insect.

“Ahhh.....Now Faal.” Said Ginnda-Aanash, The Hive Mother. “What a day of wonders this is. I so rarely see old friends, but now two turn up in a single day.”

“It has been a long time Hive Mother.....Several millennia since we last talked.” Said Faal.

“You know me well enough to call me Ginnda, old friend. Nethra has been trying to talk me into supporting Muzzie in the battle for Segin-Unadaris. What do you have to say on the matter?”

“Is there anything to eat?” Asked Runa. “It’s hours since we ate.....I’m starving.”

~

~

Caspian had wondered if Galla and her cart would be with the army, as it poured into the demon city. He’d seen her though, with Maya. According to General Dhūlen, Maya was trained enough to do most of the battlefield healing, while Galla dealt with anyone brought to her cart. It all seemed a bit soon to put the Dredger girl in the front line, but if Dhūlen was happy.....He was the general after all. Not that the army was going anywhere, not yet. They had crept forward, until they were just over an arrow’s reach from the city walls of Segin-Unadaris. There were siege machines in the city,

firing huge arrows over the walls. Their aim seemed to be dreadful, but one had skewered a soldier not that far to Caspian's left. Vella was stood quite close to the warrior, as the arrow impaled him, fixing him into the dry, stony ground. The soldier had died instantly, without uttering a word. Vella had just shrugged, as though it was nothing. There was a rumbling sound and a few pieces of stone fell from the tower next to the main gates.

"Get ready.....We'll be going in fast when the gates open." Yelled General Dhūlen.

Caspian had always wondered how emperors acquired such vast armies. The last Xanash, the thirty fourth in his line, was reputed to have once put eighty thousand well trained warriors onto the field of battle. Some ancient tomes said the truth was slightly less, while others talked about a hundred thousand marching out to destroy the enemies of Xanash the thirty fourth.

Caspian was beginning to understand the dynamics of large armies and why Muzzie had been so insistent on building reliable supply lines. Muzzie had a few victories under his belt now and he appeared to be favoured by the Gods and the Angels, the Genova. Every village on the fifth rift seemed to be sending eager fighters to the camp at the Void Gate. It had started as a trickle, which was becoming a flood. The Dredgers were constantly having to enlarge the area surrounded by the stockade. Two thousand had marched out of Annill and although there was no official count yet, Dhūlen had mentioned having five thousand warriors stood outside the walls of Segin-Unadaris. Muzzie's talk of having an army of fifty thousand when they attacked Quron, no longer seemed purely wishful thinking. There was a loud rumble from the direction of the main gates.

"Yes.....I knew we could rely on Faal." Shouted Vella.

The tower next to the gates was coming apart, though it was the stone gate chamber that was of most interest. Crumbling was the right word, as the entire chamber which surrounded the huge gates, began to disintegrate. Those gates had taken years to construct and put in place. They were a statement by Leng, a sign to the rifts that their demon city was there to stay. Now it seemed that if your enemy had the services of a near legendary magician, gates alone wouldn't keep your city safe.

"The gates.....The gates are falling." Someone yelled.

"Any moment now.....Be ready." Shouted Dhūlen.

Caspian gasped as one of the gates toppled and crushed a length of the city wall, as it fell. The other gate twisted as it fell, bounced off the remains of the tower and ended up on its side. It was blocking the main roadway into the city, but there was a gap.....A way in for the army of the new empire.

Caspian knew there'd be no waiting for the dust to settle.

"Attack.....The way is open.....Attack." Shouted General Dhūlen.

Caspian ran and as he ran, he yelled an ancient battle cry he'd read in one of the oldest of the forbidden scrolls. Altered a little for Muzzie, but the basic idea of the battle cry, was eternal. Vella by his side, it was either a wonderful day for victory, or the day they'd die. Either way, nothing was ever going to be quite the same again. They were attacking a city that meant a lot to Leng. A huge positive statement by Muzzie and his army.....As long as they won.

"We run to battle for Tomma-Goran and the nine divines." Yelled Caspian.

"I fight for Muzzie, the true emperor."

"Our enemies will be crushed this day."

"We run to battle for Tomma-Goran and the nine divines."

Tomma-Goran was dead of course, but that didn't really matter. It was the style of his words, the way they made Caspian feel. Vella began to shout the words and others picked them up. As the front of the army entered the city, it seemed to be the only sound Caspian could hear.

"We run to battle for Tomma-Goran and the nine divines."

~ ~

Muzzie was near the back of his army, watching as those at the front had poured through the gap between the massive city gates. He'd heard his name mentioned in a battle cry, but with so many voices shouting at the same time, he hadn't heard the full four lines. He was proud that so many fighters a long way from home, would run into battle, while calling out his name.

"I thought you and Nethra had thinned out the archers." He said to Aeony. "There still seem to be a great number of them. They're doing a lot of damage, Aeony.....A lot of damage."

Muzzie had no real concern for himself. There were rumours all over the rifts, that anyone attacking the new emperor would suffer agony in the wastes. With his shining armour and famous shield, he was easy to spot, yet no one had yet aimed an arrow his way.

"No excuses" Said Aeony....."But Nethra vanished and I was being attacked by their siege machines. You didn't want too much damage.....I did what I could without damaging the city walls."

"A little damage is fine.....If it saves the lives of my warriors." Said Muzzie. "There is a spell I've used on the aggressive feral beasts of the rifts. It should mean fewer casualties from arrow wounds."

Not a new spell granted to him by possessing the Hand of Arcadis. The immolation spell had been a piece of serendipity. He'd been playing with the spells in the shrivelled finger bone and had found the strange, but useful spell. Immolation had many meanings to the ancients, some not really that obvious. He stopped the soldiers carrying him into battle on his massive throne. There were even two warriors tasked with helping him up onto the throne and down again. The main bulk of the army went around him, as if Muzzie was a boulder in a stream.

"Look.....Look, Aeony.....Another warrior won't see their family again." Said Muzzie

Why the archers on the walls had singled out the warrior was unknown. The three arrows in their chest hinted at a grudge, or a famed warrior known to the defenders of the demon city. Muzzie had a few famous names in his army and one day, he'd take the time to get to know them. To hell with trying to avoid using raw chaos, his soldiers were dying. Muzzie created the immolation spell and aimed it at the walkway along the castle wall, to the right of the collapsed gate.

"That'll deal with them." Said Muzzie.

The spell manifested as a yellow cloud, a highly corrosive cloud. It covered the top of the castle wall and almost immediately, there was the sound of screaming. The sound of screaming intensified, with a few of the archers jumping from the walls. Sure death from that height. Some of Muzzie's warriors ran to look at the dead defenders, but quickly moved away from them.

"Nasty, but not contagious." Muzzie said to Aeony.

"You'll get no argument from me." Said Aeony. "Anything is fine, if it saves a few of our fighters. I'm beginning to think the original owner of the finger bones had to be nasty, even for a human."

"According to the few ancient books Caspian has seen, Arcadis was a quiet and scholarly man."

"You're forgetting one thing." Said Aeony. "History books are written by the winning side."

"True.....I intend to employ skilled authors to write my history." Said Muzzie.

The flesh of the dead still bubbled, as though their skin was being boiled off the bones. It was an horrendous way to die, but better than his soldiers. Muzzie created a second spell and aimed it at the castle wall to his left. He had no desire to see the effects of the spell again. That it worked was enough for him. Muzzie was helped back onto his throne and his cheering soldiers carried him through the gap in the gates and into Segin-Unadaris.

"Long live the emperor." Someone shouted.

The chant was taken up and repeated by thousands of voices, as Mussaneth Osranetherer entered the city that was certain to be his within a day, maybe two. The only question now was how much death and carnage there'd be, before the leaders of the city surrendered.

~ ~

Nethra listened to Faal talking to the Hive Mother, without adding any comments, or trying to make Faal look foolish. That moment would come, though with luck, the magician wouldn't blame her. "We've known each other since before the fall of The Nest, Ginnda." Said Faal. "I never claim to always be right, but on this occasion.....Offering your support to Muzzie is the right thing to do. Think of all the lives that will be saved."

"Reminding me of a battle lost won't help your cause." Said Ginnda. "I lost a lot of friends when The Nest fell....And I had the shame of running away."

"That was a long time ago, the Terak ruled the rifts." Said Faal. "Running away from them wasn't weakness, it was good sense."

"Still not helping your cause, Faal." Said Ginnda. "Charm and flattery wouldn't work either, but reminding me of a famous defeat.....I'm sure you used to be better at the diplomacy side of things."

"Alas, I was held prisoner in the Necropolis on the sixth rift, for a very long time. My charm and diplomacy skills are a little rusty." Said Faal.

"Who held you prisoner ?" Asked Ginnda.

"A long story.....It was me, I imprisoned myself in the Necropolis."

"Ahhh.....I see." Muttered Ginnda.

There were no expressions to observe with the Hive Mother, or much in the way of body language. Ginnda was the ultimate creation of Sevril-Narge, who many called the bug goddess. Ginnda looked like a huge insect, complete with an armoured carapace covering most of her body and head. There was a voice to listen to though, a voice that gave a hint as to Ginnda's moods. The 'Ahhh.....I see,' spoke volumes to those willing to think about what they heard. Faal had dug a hole for himself and still seemed to be digging.

"We're all tired, Hive Mother." Said Runa. "To be honest, I thought you were probably nothing but a myth. Really, you should talk to Muzzie. Listen to what he wants to achieve and I think you'll be impressed."

"There is a way to the surface, though I haven't left my chamber for many years." Said Ginnda. "I feel that if Muzzie wants my trust, he should show me some of his. No guards, no having chaos spells ready to use....I would know if there were. Tell Muzzie to come and see me on his own. I give you the promise of a Hive Mother, that he won't be harmed."

"I'm not sure if that would....." Began Faal.

"I will bring Muzzie here, just him and I.....Is that acceptable ?" Asked Nethra.

Faal would dislike her for a while, but Nethra could live with that. Turning down the meeting could well mean the difference between bringing a new ally into empire, or the total destruction of Segin-Unadaris. Faal was one of the greatest magicians to ever walk the rifts. He'd just been on his own for far too long.

"That is acceptable, Nethra." Said Ginnda. "I will open the door to the stairs up to the surface. It is a long climb, so you should all leave immediately. Be careful once you reach the surface, factions in the city are fighting old rivals. Head towards the smoke and flames near the Keep. There you'll find Muzzie and his personal guard."

There was a message locked into Nethra's mind, an offer from the Ancient Ones to Ginnda. It had arrived with her new purple wings and Nethra assumed the two were linked in some way. Being a Chinnura came with certain obligations, Nethra understood that. There had been doubts though, about whether she'd have the opportunity to deliver the message to the Hive Mother.

"I have other matters to discuss." Said Nethra. "Please allow me a little more time with you, Hive Mother.....A few moments in private."

If Ginnda was surprised, there was no way of knowing. Faal glared at her a little, while Runa scooped up some fruit off a table and put it in her backpack. For a tall slender creature, Runa always seemed to be chewing at something.

"Very well.....The others can use the stairs behind me." Said Ginnda. "I'll give you a little time, Nethra from the rifts."

Runa slapped her on the shoulder as she left, while Faal the great and mighty, became Faal the sulky and moody. Nethra had stolen his thunder and although she'd wanted to avoid it, they were probably never going to be friends.

"You can talk now, Nethra." Said Ginnda. "Even Faal's magic can't penetrate the defences of my chamber. Every word we speak, will be totally private."

The message had to have been placed deep in her mind, or Ginnda would already know every detail. A simple offer really, in return for a favour. It was the terms of the offer that made it special. All that power in return for something that sounded insignificant. Nethra was just the messenger and if Ginnda said no, the offer would never be repeated. If the Hive Mother agreed.....Nethra had no idea how she'd be personally involved, but it sounded.....Complicated. She told Ginnda the message in full, twice.

"Really.....That much power?" Asked Ginnda.

"Yes.....I never spoke to the Ancient Ones, but the message arrived with the purple wings."

For the first time, Nethra could feel tension coming off Ginnda in waves. She was tapping her fingers on the ground, while making a faint growling sound.

"Are you sure, girl?" Asked Ginnda. "There can be no mistakes.....I wouldn't be happy, Nethra."

An unhappy Hive Mother wasn't a good prospect. Being the bearer of bad news was rarely rewarded, but Nethra had brought good news, hadn't she.....

"I've given you the message in full." Said Nethra. "I am certain the offer is genuine and came from the Ancient Ones."

"You are guaranteeing that?"

There was only one acceptable answer, even if it might mean a painful death if things went wrong. No one disappointed the Hive Mother and lived to tell of it.

"Yes....I am." Said Nethra.

"Very well.....I need to consider matters." Said Ginnda. "When you return with Muzzie, I will give you my decision."

"Thank you Hive Mother." Said Nethra.

The deal on offer was so good, a fool would have said yes. Ginnda was no fool though and Nethra thought she had to see something about the offer, a complication. Fruit was on the table, probably put there by servants for Runa. Nethra would have preferred the flesh of something that had once breathed and had blood in its veins. She wasn't too fussy though and anything was better than going hungry. She put some fruit in her pack and headed towards the stairs.

"Be very careful, up there." Said Ginnda. "Various factions are using the siege as an excuse to attack their enemies. Casto Ganaan, the Ezzagory of the city, has his own agenda. He seems to be taking my

advice about a noble and glorious death. He's seeking a one-on-one fight with one of Muzzie's best fighters. Don't get involved in that fight."

"Who does he want to fight?" Asked Nethra.

"A hero of some fame.....Caspian of the City of the Lost God."

"Caspian!" Exclaimed Nethra.

"Ahhh, so he is that good.....Poor Casto." Said Ginnda. "I was quite fond of him."

"No.....Well, maybe." Said Nethra. "I've heard the stories about Caspian's heroic battles. He actually once killed a Roruss, or at least he and Vella killed it."

"Yes.....The killer of the un-killable.....I have heard that story about Caspian." Said Ginnda.

Nethra knew Caspian could be brave and heroic, but sometimes he could run for cover at the first sign of trouble. Could Caspian kill the Ezzagory of Segin-Unadaris? It seemed unlikely, but there were those in the army who could get the job done, if Caspian became a bloody footnote on the history of Muzzie's new empire.

"Caspian can be brave and heroic, Ginnda." Said Nethra. "He can also be a bit of an arsehole."

"So can Casto, my dear.....So can Casto. Luck will decide the matter....Luck will decide."

Nethra waved a goodbye as she began the very long climb up to the surface.

~ ~

"No.....Stop it bleeding, but leave the scar." Said Vella. "One day I'll show it to my son. Otherwise he'll never believe his mother was involved in laying siege to a demon city."

"Galla will tell me off if I leave the scar." Said Maya.

"It's not Galla's face.....It's mine." Said Vella. "Leave the scar alone."

The scar was bloody at the moment, but even healed, it would look hideous. Just below his wife's left eye, she'd look like one of the ruffians who frequented Muzzie's bar. There was already a scar on her other cheek, a souvenir of their first visit to Gorshan. A little sprinkle from one of Galla's packets of powder and Vella's gorgeous face would be as good as new. Caspian knew his wife pretty well and was certain that persuasion wouldn't work. The scar was there, maybe forever. Caspian could only smile and make the best of it.

"Well.....It'll remind you to duck quicker." Said Caspian.

"See, Maya.....My husband isn't bullying me over the scar." Said Vella.

Only because years of experience had taught him that attempts at persuasion, could mean a few nights in a guest bedroom.

"Then.....I'm finished, the wound is closed and won't bleed again." Said Maya.

A brief lull in the fighting and healers were tending to the wounded. A few would never be seeing home again, but only a mercifully small number had died. There were other healers, but Vella had requested Maya. Caspian could see why. The Dredger kid learned fast, was gentle and worked quickly. Stopping a wound bleeding quickly was essential, genuinely a life saver. When Galla decided to retire and rest her old bones in front of the fire, he could see Maya taking over her business.

"Caspian.....I challenge Caspian to single combat." Yelled a pure blood demon voice.

"Who challenges Caspian?" Someone shouted.

"I do..... Casto Ganaan, Ezzagory of Segin-Unadaris."

So far it had all gone according to the traditional way to deal with such challenges. Caspian merely needed to accept the challenge. There could be no refusal, that would destroy his reputation until he died and beyond. A challenge to one-on-one combat, but Casto wasn't alone. Caspian could see him now, complete with red leather armour and the largest sword Caspian had ever seen. Surrounded by

at least a hundred of his elite garrison. Taller than him too, with far more muscles. Vella was looking at him with concern in her eyes, but there really was only one answer to the challenge.

"I am Caspian.....I accept the challenge to single combat."

"I'll find Muzzie." Said Vella.

"No....I was challenged, it is my fight." Said Caspian. "Besides, I've beaten bigger enemies than Casto Ganaan."

Caspian smiled at Vella and much to his relief, she smiled back. There'd be armour to decide on and a weapon. Caspian couldn't see anyone refusing him a loan of their favourite blade. The place of combat would be there, where the challenge had been given. The ground would need clearing of rubble though. No truce in the fighting going on in the rest of Segin-Unadaris. Around them though the space being used for Casto and Caspian to fight to the death.....That would be sacred ground and considered to be inviolable by both sides. General Dhülen was there, looking at him as though he was already a corpse, though Caspian thought he might be imagining that.

"Alright.....Get the combat area clean and worthy of such a fight." Yelled Dhülen.

While eager hands on both sides removed rubble from where Caspian was to fight Casto, the army had broken into a store that appeared to sell crockery. A bit mundane in the middle of a war, to be surrounded by plates and bowls. It seemed Caspian was intended to dress in armour there and pick a weapon. A table covered in plates, quickly became a table covered in swords.

"The best my warriors have." Said Dhülen. "There's also a choice of armour.....Or you can use what you're wearing. I'll give you time to change and.....Prepare in your own personal way."

General Dhülen went away, giving Caspian time to prepare for the fight and maybe, his death. Vella was still with him, picking up the occasional sword and looking it over.

"Use your own armour Casp; it's better than anything the army has." Said Vella. "As to swords.....There's a good choice, but I'm not feeling any enchantments on any of them."

"They look impressive." Said Caspian.

"Yes, top quality.....But I recommend using the curved blade you've been using all day. You know it and best of all.....It's never shown any signs of breaking."

The curved blade had come from the store room in Ingar Sans, where everything had really begun. A gift from the Silver Lady, though it had probably been in that store room since humans had ruled the rifts. A good blade, but he'd been hoping for something a little bit more, special.

"Don't be alarmed.....I honestly mean you no harm."

A tall male appeared after his voice. A tall male who looked human, though Caspian now knew that LLud Narren's ancestry was a little more complex than that. Caspian had killed LLud, who'd once been the official sorcerer of Tomma-Goran, the deity who'd built the City of the Lost God. Vella had helped of course.....Together they'd blown LLud apart, which tended to imply the dead sorcerer would be nursing a huge grudge. For a wraith of some kind, LLud Narren looked fairly solid.

"Hurt us and Muzzie will cast your soul into the wastes." Said Vella.

"Oh yes, I know he would." Said LLud. "Muzzie did me a huge favour, a debt I'll never be able to fully repay. We're all friends now, even you two."

"What do you want ?" Asked Caspian. "I'm a little busy now.....Preparing for a fight to the death."

"This might help.....Look upon the famous sword of Mozzrik the Usurper." Said LLud. "Mozzrik was the King of Tandalla when it was still just another town on the Pilgrim Trail. A light sword with a sharp edge.....Get close enough to this Ezzagory who challenged you, and you could take his head off his shoulders with a single blow."

"Sounds impressive." Said Caspian.

"It is, though the best part is the permanent enchantment." Said LLud, as he placed the sword on the table. "There is an inscription on the blade that goes on about valour and heroic deeds. Basically the sword gives those who wield it, more anger and aggression than a dozen Shelzak demons who saw you punch their kid sister..... Try it, pick it up."

Caspian picked up the sword and his idea of his place in the world changed. It was his world now, all of it. Everyone was there to help him, or they were an enemy. There was no middle ground, no people who were merely acquaintances. As for the Ezzagory.....Caspian wanted to gut him in front of a crowd and spread his entrails over.....Caspian put the sword down.

"Wow.....Wow." Said Caspian. "That is amazing ! If I can't win holding this sword, I don't deserve to. Where did you get it ?"

"I am as corporeal as I wish to be." Said LLud. "That enables me to enter places no one else can enter. I've been looking for various items that are.....Unimportant to anyone except me. I told Muzzie I'd look out for anything he might find useful. I found the sword in the tomb of Mozzrik the Usurper. I think though, that you need the blade more than Muzzie."

"I want to hold it." Said Vella.

Vella grabbed the sword off the table and her expression changed. It was as if there was a fire dancing inside her eyes and the love of his life, was breathing like a professional wrestler. She quickly put the sword back on the table.

"Never ever.....Let me pick up that sword again." Said Vella. "I wanted to.....Amazing, but I'll never tell you what I wanted to do."

"Sexual.....It's always sexual with women.....I've no idea why." Said LLud. "I'll be going now.....Good luck Caspian and remember that you can win. If you lose, it will just have been one of those days.....Just bad luck and one of those days. Let Muzzie know I was here and helped....."

LLud backed away into the wall and was gone. Vella was looking a little flushed and unwilling to make eye contact.

"Was it.....Was it like he said.....Was it sexual ?" Asked Caspian.

"Come back alive and in one piece and I just might touch the blade and show you." Said Vella.

Caspian wore the armour he'd been putting together since they'd arrived at Annill, which seemed a very long time ago. Breastplate from a smith in Annill. Gauntlets from a street trader in Tandalla, purely because he liked the look of them. A helmet given to him by Muzzie and boots from.....He had no idea where they'd come from. Most of it had needed altering to fit him and the breastplate had once required repairs. He didn't look scruffy; he looked like one of the mercenaries sometimes hired for a particular task. Once he'd shoved Mozzrik the Usurper's blade down his belt, he definitely had to look like a ruffian.

"I know how I must look, Vella." Said Caspian. "I want Casto Ganaan to underestimate me."

"I understand." Said Vella.

A kiss, a long kiss that might be their final kiss. Caspian left the store, with Vella by his side. Dhūlen had obviously instructed the army to construct a fighting circle. Another inherited piece of history from the original human empire. The fighting circle had a diameter of eighteen feet, though no one knew the significance of the size. Eighteen feet across and leaving the circle while your opponent still lived, was unthinkable. Not fighting as well as you could while in the circle, was considered to be an insult to the Gods, the nine divines. The outer edge of the circle was marked with pieces of rubble and some cobblestones. For something built in a hurry, it looked impressive.

"This.....This is as close as you should get." Said Caspian.

A kiss on the cheek from Vella and yet another solemn look from Dhūlen. Caspian chose to believe that Dhūlen was trying to look serious, rather than thinking about funeral plans. Maya was there, in among the warriors who towered over her. At least the Dredger kid smiled and waved. Caspian didn't wave back, it was certain to infringe some piece of ancient etiquette. Somewhere, someone began to strike a drum in a slow steady beat.

"To your places." Someone yelled.

Caspian walked right up the edge of the ring, but didn't step inside, not yet. The Ezzagory did the same and Caspian could see that Casto was taller than him by a good six inches. Broader than him too, with much more in the way of obvious muscles. Casto had heavy armour though, very heavy looking armour. The sword the Ezzagory was holding with both hands, was almost longer than Caspian was tall.

"With swords as with so many other things in life." Muzzie had once told him. "Size doesn't really matter that much. Your skill in using what you have is the important thing."

They'd been practising at the time, with sword and shield. Caspian was happy to admit that whatever skills he possessed, were given to him by hours of training with Merrick and later on, Muzzie. Both of them had lacked style and fought like rogues from the worse parts of the City of the Lost God. Perfect people to train Caspian in using his blade like a street fighter. Dhūlen was there, standing to his left.

"Any final wishes, Caspian?" Asked Dhūlen. "I'll gladly pass on any messages you might have for a loved one, or friends."

Caspian moved closer to the general, it was a set of last words Caspian wouldn't want to be remembered for.

"If the Ezzagory kills me.....Tell Muzzie to give him a long and painful death." Hissed Caspian.

"I will, I promise." Said Dhūlen.

A bell rang somewhere and Casto entered the fighting ring, so Caspian did the same. They were both in there now, the ring only one of them would be leaving while still breathing. Caspian nodded at Casto, who nodded back at him.

"Begin." Someone shouted.

Caspian gripped the sword of Mozzrik the Usurper and the rage and anger, seemed strong enough to taint his soul. It was wonderful; Caspian had never felt so alive.

~ ~