

The Last Emperor

Chapter 10 – A Little Truth

“For someone usually described as taciturn, Muzzie knew he’d overdone the whole conversational part of their conversation. He wasn’t good at it; he’d never have been described as a people person, despite running a popular drinking establishment.”



Runa had to admit it; Muzzie knew his way around Castle Gorshan. The door between the huge buttresses and then a spiral staircase that went right up to the throne chamber. Getting to the throne chamber was still on trust, but she had no doubt that Muzzie was taking them in the right direction. Vella and Caspian had been with Muzzie in Gorshan, though both of them kept saying they’d arrived by a different route last time. Someone was probably guiding Muzzie, which was fine by Runa, as long as they weren’t guided over a cliff, or into a Vargouille den.

“Careful on stairs that look blasted by magic.” Said Galla. “Test that they’re still safe.”

“How do we do that ?” Asked Maya.

“Get an adult to stamp on them a few times.” Said Muzzie. “Carefully stamp on them of course, in case that step collapses.”

Maya was going to need looking after, everyone had realised that. Like all kids, she seemed happiest when getting in the way and being yelled at. Putting her at the front was likely to get the girl killed, as was putting at the back. Muzzie went up the stairs first, with Aeony behind him. Maya was with Aeony, sometimes trying to occupy the same personal space. Aeony muttered about damn Dredger kids and Maya complained about feeling over protected. Both of them said it with a smile though. With a little luck, the damn Dredger kid might see home again.

“Second floor....One more and we rest.” Said Vella. “You did promise us, Muzzie. You said we’d rest on the third floor.”

“I think I said after the third floor.” Said Muzzie. “Fine though, we could even get out the bedrolls and make camp. The days on Gorshan are nothing like on the rifts, I remember that from last time. A full dark-light cycle here is almost two days in Annill time. We’ll need to work to our own clock.”

“This place keeps getting better.” Said Sensan.

“I don’t mind sleeping while it’s light outside.” Said Maya.

“You’ll get a headache that refuses to go away.” Said Caspian. “There’s a tendency to nap too, at inappropriate moments. We’ll need to watch one another.”

“Just keeps getting better.” Mumbled Sensan.

“We’ve still got to make sure this floor is clear.” Said Muzzie. “We can’t risk leaving an enemy behind us. Plus.....The day.....”

“Isn’t going to get any longer.” Said Maya.

“Yeah, very funny.....Damn kids.” Said Muzzie.

That floor was full of large rooms and wide corridors. Rooms where important people had once looked after affairs of state, though now everything was covered in dirt, the furniture almost rotted completely away. So far, everything that had happened in Gorshan, seemed to have occurred a very long time ago. A wide wooden staircase had once gone down to the floor below, but that appeared

to have rotted away in Gorshan's distant past. It had collapsed, leaving a pile of debris on the first floor.

"Everything was old when we were last here." Said Muzzie. "It was nothing like this though.....So much ruin and decay. Even though it's Gorshan the place of evil, I hate to see it reduced to this."

"Good that you knew about the backstairs, or we'd have been searching for a way up." Said Nethra.

"Very convenient." Said Runa. "Some might think you were being guided by someone."

The conversation might have become heated, if Aeony hadn't discovered something. Not far from where they'd come up the back stairs.....

"A kill, something fed here." Said Aeony. "The flesh is dry and turning bad, but it hasn't been here that long."

Runa looked and the decaying meat matched the grey of the grubby floor. Without the dark angel's unusually good eyesight, the remains might never have been noticed.

"What do you think, Muzzie.....A Vargouille's meal?" Asked Caspian.

"Well.....No being certain, but it seems likely." Said Muzzie. "None of the windows have any intact glass left in them. Any night hunters with wings, can pretty much come and go as they please."

Nethra made Runa gasp, as she pushed a finger into the putrid meat and then sucked her finger.

Even for a tough hybrid with undetermined ancestry, it was a strange thing to do.

"Oh, can you warn me if you intend to do that again." Said Runa.

"Yeah.....Yuk!" Said Maya.

Nethra ignored them and closed her eyes, while still sucking her finger.

"Definitely a hybrid, almost certainly part Ubari, with a good pinch of human." Said Nethra.

"Well....We now know we're not the only creatures here who aren't monsters. Oh, and it was probably a female."

"You can tell all that from a taste?" Asked Sensan.

"Yes.....If the meat was fresher, I could give you her age and a good idea of where she'd been born."

"We should say a few words over her." Said Vella.

"I know the Gnuishi, the Ubari prayer for the dead." Said Galla.

No burying her, it would mean going all the way back outside. Muzzie and Aeony pushed junk and rubble on top of what was left of the hybrid Ubari female. All the time Galla was wailing and uttering solemn word in the old Ubari tongue. The whole affair was strangely comforting.

"If I die here and you live, Galla." Said Nethra. "Say those words over my body."

"And for me, though I hope it never comes to pass." Said the archer in a leather jerkin.

It had all been stressful for Runa, especially finding a dead hybrid. Stress drove Runa, she almost thrived on it. Once calm returned though, it was if parts of her mind turned off.

"I'm so tired, Muzzie.....Give the order and I'll sleep right here, right now." Said Runa.

"Only one more floor.....And the day....."

"Isn't getting any longer." Maya finished for him.

There'd been a lot of action on the stairs in the past, a massive battle by the look of it. Many blast marks from the powerful spells of skilled magic users. One step failed the wobble test, so they had to jump past it. Muzzie was the first out of the stairwell and into the third floor. He instantly began to put his finger over his lips and mime saying the word shush.

"Vargouille, I remember their stench." Whispered Vella.

They were in the first room they entered, hundreds of them. They had the stench of death about them and there was the sound.....Like a thousand screeching, howling wolves, but much, much louder. The remaining archers kept back, waiting for the order to fire. Runa strung her bow; it

seemed like the best weapon to use. Muzzie took them closer to the foul pack of flying wolves, the Vargouille.

“Remember; don’t let them scratch you.....That would be bad, very bad.” Said Galla.

As Muzzie readied his sword, Runa pulled an arrow from her quiver. She’d heard Caspian and Vella talk about killing hundreds of Vargouille and she didn’t want to doubt them. The hundreds clinging to the far wall though, their sheer numbers ! As the archers began to fire their arrows, Runa used her bow. Not that she expected them to win the fight, there were simply too many of the brutes.

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Galla had been around for a very long time, she had knowledge of Gorshan and its Vargouille. Travellers’ tales could be inaccurate, but she’d lived in the City of the Lost God, when it had boasted of having a huge standing army. That army had sent out units to gather intelligence on places like Gorshan. Explorers really, sent to find out about some of the most dangerous places on the rifts and beyond. Quite a few of those explorers never returned, but those who did.....Galla had made a point of reading the reports and journals of those who’d commanded them. The handwritten journals still existed in the library, gathering dust in the restricted section. Galla had read them all though, some many times.

“Fire Muzzie, you must remember they run from fire.” She yelled. “Remember last time you were here.....You beat them then.”

“We used our lamp oil to burn them.” Said Muzzie.

“And ended up trying to find our way in complete and utter darkness.” Said Caspian.

The archers were doing well, though Runa was better than either of them. The flying wolves were dying, but they were still gradually advancing towards them. If the Vargouille decided to rush them, it was probably all over. They were a new threat to the creatures, an unknown. Once they got over their hesitancy.....

“A fire spell, a tiny one.....Things have changed in Gorshan in the last few millennia. Try a very small fire spell, Muzzie.” Galla yelled.

“Oh, I just know this won’t end well.” Muttered Muzzie.

“Just do it.” Said Nethra.

Poor Muzzie, he knew any spell in Gorshan might misfire, very badly. A lost arm, an incinerated leg, even death by being blown apart. She’d given them a list of why not to use magic, which she was now telling Muzzie to ignore. Galla saw a small fire ball appear above Muzzie’s head, which vanished. No, not vanished....It was moving forward, just very, very slowly.

“What by the nine demon gods is that ?” Said Maya.

Muzzie’s fire ball had become a tiny red point of light, which was moving so slowly that it looked to be barely moving at all. He hadn’t died while creating it, but it seemed to be as good as useless.

“Stay back child, keep behind me.” Said Aeony.

“I had an idea, which Dhali Drahl helped me with.” Shouted Galla. “Not sure if it will work, but if it does.....It will change everything. Keep them busy !”

Galla hadn’t mentioned it to anyone, just in case there was no need to try the bright red powders. Many magic users look down on potions and she was one of them. Everyone respected powders, though most didn’t think of them as being good at destructive magic. There was a chance the weird Gorshan effect on magic might kill her, but there was no other option. Sensan had run at the Vargouille, hacking and slashing with his blade. They were hard to kill though and just one scratch and Sensan wouldn’t be seeing his home again. Aeony too was taking risks, using her teeth and claws on the dreadful brutes. Aeony’s tail skewered one of them in the chest, which just seemed to

slow it down a little. Vargouille were famously hard to kill, according to all the books she'd read. Muzzie's tiny fireball finally connected with one of the Vargouille pack.

"Wow, slow but deadly." Yelled Nethra. "Do it again, Muzzie."

The tiny red dot of fire had hit the Vargouille and the effect had been instant. The brute hadn't even had a chance to scream, as its body was burned to ash. Its pack were only feral creatures, but they understood pain and they recognised fire. Their wailing and shrieking gave Galla new hope. The bright red powders would work, she knew it. Galla poured some of the powder onto the palm of her hand, as Muzzie created another miniscule fireball.

"No being tempted to make a huge fireball. Muzzie." She yelled. "Something bigger might leave us without our emperor."

"I know.....I know.....Small is good, large is stupid." Muzzie yelled back at her.

Aeony was doing a victory dance, as she killed another of the flying wolves. Great, wonderful if there hadn't been at least another hundred and fifty of the brutes to deal with. Galla gave a quiet prayer to Estrin-Okanan, wisest and most powerful of the Gods.

"If the life of your humble servant means anything to you ? Help me now, Estrin."

Just one word in a demon language that was old when Gorshan had been a thriving city. Galla flicked her palm, sending the powder up into the air. It formed a perfect circle, which she simply blew hard at, with as much force as her old lungs could create. The circle of powder grew, as it hurtled towards the pack of Vargouille.

"Well.....This will either work, or I'm about to look a fool....A soon to be dead fool." She muttered.

The bright red powder became fire, as it spread out and engulfed at least a dozen of the creatures. Vargouille definitely didn't like fire; they began shrieking as soon as it touched them. Caspian had told her that the Vargouille he'd seen in Gorshan had normally been quiet. A lot seemed to have changed in the last few thousand years. They were yelling and wailing, as the fire consumed them. There could be no mercy; Galla poured more of the bright red powder onto the palm of her hand....

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Sensan always said he wasn't scared of death.....Actually he was as terrified by the idea as much as all the other men of violence, who claim not to be scared of dying. Death might be a doorway to somewhere else, or it might be a time for the karmic scales to be balanced. On the whole, it was that option which worried him most.

"Oh, Sensan.....Sensan....I did say be careful about being scratched." Galla muttered at him.

"One Vargouille claw has scraped right down to one of his rib bones." Said Aeony.

They'd won the battle. With Galla's bright red fire powders and Muzzie's tiny fireballs, all the Vargouille had been killed. Not all by fire, the archers and Runa had killed quite a few with their arrows. Interestingly, the brutes had shown no instinctive fear of Aeony. It seemed their memory of the dark angels was yet another thing that had changed with the passing of several millennia. Runa had pulled up his shirt, to show no less than three Vargouille claw marks on his side. Sensan thought he'd soon be dead; the only questions that mattered were how long it would all take and how painful it was going to be.

"Oh, that looks dreadful." Said Maya.

"It feels pretty bad too." Said Sensan.

Someone had tried to send the Dredger kid away, but he'd said she could stay. If her family remained in Muzzie's army, she was probably going to see much worse than his death. The claw marks hurt like hell, though he wasn't feeling too bad. A bit nauseous and giddy if he tried to stand up, but otherwise, he'd felt worse.

"I was scratched by one of them, just a small scratch." Said Vella. "It took all the power of a dying King to heal me. Your wounds don't even look inflamed."

"I need a Vargouille paw to look at.....Preferably one with all its claws still attached." Said Galla.

"I saw one of their bodies, which had an unburned left front leg." Said the archer with a metal breastplate.

Galla was given an entire bloody, severed left leg of one of the brutes, which didn't seem to worry her at all. The apothecary used a sharp knife to dig a Vargouille claw out of the huge paw. Sensan watched as she probed the paw with her knife, all the time muttering and nodding her head. She even dug about in the bag she carried everywhere, finding a magnifier. After looking at the claw for quite some time, she looked happy.

"Things change, living creatures alter with time." Said Galla. "I believe Gorshan may have moved on a hundred thousand years, or more, since Caspian arrived here to rescue Vella. There is nothing in the old books about ambush predators and every book mentions Vargouille paws having a poison gland for every claw. This dead specimen has no poison glands."

"Wow, that is good news." Said Sensan. "I was worried about meeting my uncle Denyll again in the next life.....He was a nasty old bastard."

Everyone laughed, though Galla seemed determined to bring down the happy atmosphere.

"I can't guarantee they'll all be toxin free, so be careful." Said Galla. "I do feel though, we can be a little optimistic about dealing with any other Vargouille we come across."

"In the name of Nigon.....Smile, Galla.....It won't kill you." Said Runa.

Muzzie announced they'd be staying there for the night, or rather their own definition of what was night. A few hours sleep, though as far away from the dead Vargouille as possible. They were even being allowed to have a small fire.

"We'll need to have a watch." Muzzie said. "No ultra violet here, so everyone can take a turn."

"I'll take a turn." Said Maya.

"Good, you can take the first watch with me." Said Muzzie. "No falling asleep, Maya.....Or you'll be in trouble."

"I won't.....I'll stay awake."

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The glow from the fire was nice and it didn't seem to be attracting anything unpleasant. It was still light outside when Muzzie finished his turn on watch. After waking Maya and making sure she was comfortably under a blanket near the fire, he went to join Aeony. They'd put their bedrolls together, after finding a clean area of floor a little distance from everyone else. Close enough to see the others, but far enough for a little privacy. Aeony had her eyes open, they were reflecting the firelight. Not that open eyes meant a dark angel was awake. Muzzie was snuggling up against her, when Aeony moved. Her aroma told him she was eager for sex, far more than anything she was doing with her hands. Dark angels constantly exuded chemicals which attracted males of just about any type of hybrid. Some said it was one way they obtained food, which was something Muzzie didn't want to think about, or at least not dwell on. Pheromones according to the members of the Sorcerers Guild who still talked to him. A wonderful scent that no male could resist, though Merrick had managed to spurn Silsk.

"I missed you." Aeony muttered.

He loved the way she gasped as he entered her. The sex was wonderful, it always was. Beyond wonderful, as her pheromones acted like a drug. Thrusting into Aeony was all he wanted to do, forever. No food, no water, no sleep....Everything else in the world was non-essential, as long as he

was thrusting his dick into Aeony. At one point he had a dream about them floating up against the ceiling, while the dark angel gently flapped her wings. Part of his mind was aware enough to know it wasn't really a dream. There they were, clinging to each other, with her thrusting back, as he thrust into her.

"I hope this never ends." He muttered.

Muzzie let his mind drift, it added tenfold to the physical pleasure. Aeony became over excited and dug a claw into his back. Even that was swallowed up by his senses and added to the pleasure. There was something about being wrapped up in the wings of a dark angel, while driving his dick into her. At one point it had to be a dream. They were outside the castle and he could look back at the windows with no glass. Muzzie could have sworn he saw Galla's bird flying past them and calling them stupid. High above the ground Aeony took them, until.....

"Don't try to wake up too quickly." Said Aeony. "There'll be less confusion in your mind, if you let the dark angel scent work its way out of you, gradually."

No fire and it was a different part of Gorshan Castle, though the floor was still filthy and covered in millennia of junk and rubble. They were close to some huge windows with just a few remaining shards of shattered glass.

"We're still on the third floor, but on the opposite side of the castle to the others." Said Aeony.

"Did.....Did we really fly in the sky over Gorshan?" Muzzie asked.

"Yes, we did."

It took a while, for the fuzzy orange glow at the edge of his eyes, to go away. Muzzie suspected the feeling of euphoria was part of the afterglow, which with luck, would last for hours. Aeony offered him her water bottle, which he just about emptied.

"Alright, I'm as normal as I'll ever be." He said. "Why bring us here? I'm assuming there is a reason?"

"Privacy, especially from Galla." Said Aeony. "I know she can't read minds. I sometimes get the feeling she can see far too much of what's in here."

Aeony was tapping the side of her head and he understood. Galla had told him many times that empaths only picked up moods and strong emotions, but like Aeony, he didn't quite believe it.

"Her bird too.....I'm sure I saw it flying near us, unless I was dreaming." He said.

"No, it was there.....Shouting insults at us." Said Aeony. "Her pet is obviously her eyes and ears when she can't physically get to somewhere."

"Useful though.....A damned nuisance of course, though the bird is useful." Said Muzzie.

"Oh yes, useful.....And he can be quite amusing."

Yes, though they both obviously loved Galla and her pest of a bird. There had to be more of a reason though, for them both to be shivering on the far side of Gorshan Castle. They could have been in their bedrolls, having sex again. Muzzie waited for Aeony to explain.....The dark angel grabbed his shoulder and rubbed her finger over his shoulder blade. She then showed him a finger with blood on it, his blood.

"Look at this." Said Aeony.

"Yeah, my blood.....Yellow with a few swirls of red. I'd recognise it anywhere. You dug a claw into me at an intimate moment, I felt it. It seems that too, wasn't part of a dream."

She was looking at him, as though he wasn't understanding something vital. Muzzie wouldn't have liked to fight off a pack of Vargouille in his current laid back state of mind, but he was fully awake.

"I cut Runa with a claw when we had a brief falling out." Said Aeony. "I can understand a curse knowing something was minor, almost accidental. You though.....You're him Muzzie, the one cursed

by prophecy. You're the one destined to be the Emperor of all the rifts. I should have been killed, my blood boiling in my arteries. Actually I should have been blasted by gods' fire for wounding you."

"It was just an accident." Said Muzzie.

"No, something is wrong, Muzzie." Said Aeony. "I think I could rip out your guts and nothing would happen. That matters, a few of the others badly want to be heading for home, or somewhere else that isn't Annill, or Gorshan."

She was concerned, which made it easier to say something he seemed to have said so often to so many of the women in his life. He hated saying it so much, that he'd experimented with the words and the emphasis. Then again, he had lived a very long and eventful life. Just thinking about saying it, caused a wave of depression in his mind.

"Aeony.....I can explain everything."

"Alright, tell me?"

"There is a little truth, which isn't too bad." Said Muzzie. "Then there is a huge fucking truth, that might affect how you feel about me. So, which do you want.....The little truth, or the huge fuck off truth?"

"Can't I have both?"

"One not enough huh?"

"Tell me both, Muzzie." Said Aeony. "I will try my hardest not let it change how I feel about you."

"How do you feel about me?"

"Oh, in the name of the seven holy.....Tell me, barkeeper.....Just tell me." Snapped Aeony. "Start with the little truth."

For someone usually described as taciturn, Muzzie knew he'd overdone the whole conversational part of their conversation. He wasn't good at it; he'd never have been described as a people person, despite running a popular drinking establishment.

"Alright.....There is no curse." Said Muzzie. "The Silver Lady made all that up, so that no one simply killed me and headed for home. The curse is fake, it doesn't exist.....But she said to avoid telling anyone about it, until they appeared to be committed to helping me."

"Oh, Muzzie.....I really could rip out your guts and go home." Said Aeony.

The dark angel laughed, long and hard she laughed. At one point Galla's bird found them, though a deliberately badly aimed piece of rubble, sent him flying away again. Through all of it, Aeony carried on laughing. Still, her laughter at his expense, was better than an angry dark angel. Eventually Aeony settled down and actually kissed him, quite passionately.

"Thank you for your little truth." She said. "Am I the first to know?"

"Yes, as far as I know."

"Keep it that way, at least for a while." Said Aeony. "I can think of one or two who'd cut your throat in your sleep and go home, if they knew. Sensan mainly, though I'd keep an eye on Runa too. She had a soft spot for Pio and she thinks you had him killed."

"Runa.....I thought she liked me." Said Muzzie.

"Yes, she does.....But she still might cut your throat if she knew there'd be no unpleasant consequence."

"I wish you'd stop mentioning my throat being cut." Said Muzzie.

"No curse, barkeeper.....No fucking curse."

Aeony began to chuckle, which was less weird than hearing her laugh. A cool breeze began from the direction of the mountains in the distance. Muzzie's head was full of people he knew and trusted, trying to cut his throat while he slept.

"A year, barkeeper, I'll give you a year from today." Said Aeony. "If we're still out in the arse end of the rifts, with you no closer to being emperor.....I'm going home. You should come with me and a few of the fighters you've hired. I can kill whoever is sat on my throne and regain my position as queen of the dark angels. You can deal with whichever of your greedy relatives has claimed your tavern. Agree to it, Muzzie.....A year and we both go home."

"Crap, you're right.....I bet my first cousin Doffle is already sleeping in my bed....The bastard." Muzzie recognised it as a dark angel thing, which made him feel quite proud. Aeony wrapped her arm around his, before grabbing his hand. The way dark angels swore an oath, it was actually hurting his hand.

"Give your oath.....A year, Muzzie." Said Aeony. "Then we go back home and reclaim what is rightfully ours. Unless you're well on the way to being emperor. Then we fight hard for every gold piece we can grab."

"I give my oath.....If I'm no further along the way to becoming emperor." Said Muzzie. "I will go home with you in a year's time."

"Good.....It is agreed."

"Caspian borrowed money from Chenad." Said Muzzie. "We'll owe a few people quite a lot of money in a years' time."

"Fuck them.....I'll be queen again, with my sisters fighting beside me." Said Aeony. "You know every low life, rogue and thief in the City of the Lost God. If anyone thinks we owe them money, they can fucking come and try to get it from us."

The way Aeony was moving about, Muzzie assumed she wanted to have sex again. But no, she was merely making herself more comfortable on the hard stone floor.

"Alright.....Now the huge truth, Muzzie.....Tell me everything?"

"What.....Now?"

"Yes now, barkeeper.....You'll feel better for telling me." Said Aeony.

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Vella had been on the final watch before waking everyone to start the day. She was wide awake and it was still light out, it had been light right through their sleeping time. She'd been to Gorshan before, but the length of the days still came as a bit of a shock. Daylight seemingly going on for days was one thing, but the long dark nights could be terrifying. Caspian was being awkward, claiming he hadn't slept and needed another hour under their blankets. She thought his face peering at her out of the bedding they shared, looked quite cute. Then again, she was slightly biased.

"Where is Muzzie?" Asked Caspian. "Does he want to get moving?"

"How did you sleep through it, Casp? They were having sex half the night and I think.....Muzzie and Aeony have gone somewhere private to have more sex."

"Wake me up when Muzzie gets back." Said Caspian.

That was it; the father of her child put his head back under the blankets. He even pretended to snore when she prodded him. Everyone else was up and dressed, which tended to mean wearing the clothes they'd slept in. Their two surviving archers were right over near the windows. Galla was feeding her bird from a cloth bag full of seeds, while Sensan went through his morning ritual of cleaning and sharpening the various blades he carried.

"Ahhhh, this place stinks of dark angel." Said Nethra. "They should go into another room to fuck, maybe even another world."

"They were flying.....I saw them." Said Maya.

The Dredger child said no more, which was a relief. Vella was determined to have a serious talk with the absent lovers, regarding appropriate behaviour in and around their camp.

“So.....I’m guessing we wait for them to return.” Said Runa.

“First clean water we find, I’m bathing in it.....I’m starting to stink.” Muttered Nethra.

“There is a fountain near the treasury; it’s fed by a deep tank of clean water.” Said Vella. “It was working when I was last here, but so much has changed.”

“There’s a treasury ?” Asked Sensan. “That sounds interesting.”

“Yes, and I know Muzzie wants to go there.” Said Vella. “We’ll go up to the fourth floor, through a passage to the treasury tower and then.....We go up more stairs to get to the reception area. That was where King Haakon Raag used to sit on his throne and receive petitions from his people. I’ve been there before.....I just hope it hasn’t been treated badly by time.”

Vella hadn’t meant to say so much, she felt a need to keep everyone together and busy, until Muzzie and Aeony came back from wherever they’d gone. From what she remembered the treasury hadn’t been full of gold or precious gems, though just mentioning the place had obviously piqued Sensan’s curiosity.

“There’s an entire tower for the royal treasury ?” Sensan asked.

“Yes.....Though we were running when we got there. I didn’t see much of it.”

“Probably full of empty rotting boxes.” Said Galla. “The treasure will have been taken away a very.....Very long time ago.”

“Treasure.....Treasure.....Silly treasure.” Squawked Galla’s bird.

Vella made the suggestion simply to keep everyone busy. She was sure mentioning the treasury tower had been a bad idea and.....If she was busy, her mouth tended to wander less.

“We could scout ahead.” Said Vella. “Just up the stairs to the fourth floor and back. Then, when Muzzie returns, we’ll know if the stairs are safe to use.”

“Yeah, I’m up for that.” Said Nethra. “If we get attacked by Vargouille, Galla can use her powders on them. We’ll be fine and it’ll stop us getting bored.”

“Oh, no !” Said Galla. “My old bones are only going up those stairs once and that will be when Muzzie is leading us. Going all the way up, just to come all the way down again.....You can do it without me.”

“Can we borrow your bird ?” Asked Runa. “I know he’ll ignore what we ask him to do, but I’m sure you can get him to tell you if we’re in trouble.”

“You did promise Maya’s mother you’d look after her kid.” Said Vella. “Lending us Bird will help keep her safe.”

Galla was glaring at her, which wasn’t a pleasant thing. Vella honestly couldn’t remember much of what Galla had said to the Dredger kid’s mum, but Galla obviously did. It had been way back in Seren’s Edge, which felt like a lifetime ago.

“Alright.....Bird, go with them and follow Maya.”

“Yes Galla.”

“Look after the damned kid, got it ?”

“Yes Galla.”

No insults from Bird, even he seemed to sense Galla wasn’t in the right mood to put up with nonsense. The big question was whether to take the archers, who everyone now thought of as Leather Jerkin and Breast plate. Would they even come if asked ?

“Tell the archers we need them, Runa.” Said Vella. “You know them better than I do.”

“Fine.....Hey, you two.” Yelled Runa. “Stop messing about over there, we’re going up a floor.”

The archers actually ran to obey Runa. Vella wondered what Runa's secret was and if it was possible to obtain some of it. Everyone was picking up weapons, well almost everyone.

"I'm staying with Galla and Caspian." Said Sensan. "It makes sense for me to remain here, in case the Vargouille attack the camp."

"Yeah.....He's right." Said Nethra. "It'll even up the numbers a bit."

Everyone looked relieved that Sensan was staying behind and Vella knew it had nothing to do with evening up numbers. No one liked the head of the Guild of Assassins; it was as simple as that.

"Don't worry, I'll keep Caspian safe." Said Galla.

"Thank you." Said Vella.

No one moved, so Vella headed towards the spiral stairs, with the others spread out behind her. A question came into her mind; one Galla might be able to answer.

"How much daylight are we likely to have left, Galla ?" Asked Vella.

"Gorshan is on a rotating world, which is now rotating slower than I'd have expected. No being totally certain, Vella.....Though I'd say you have about five hours until darkness, maybe six."

Vella went up the stairs first, with both archers behind her. Everyone else was in a kind of huddle, with Nethra at the rear. Muzzie would have hated the huddling, though it did make it easier to communicate with one another.

"Lots of blast marks.....There was an epic battle in this place." Said Runa.

"Can I go in front ?" Asked Maya.

"No." Said several voices together.

Bird must have quickly become bored with their slow pace; he hurtled up the stairs ahead of them. It felt different to ascending the stairs up to the third floor. No Muzzie in front with his huge number of powerful spells, ready and waiting to be used. No Aeony with her sharp claws and even sharper teeth. Vella felt slightly vulnerable, a feeling she wasn't enjoying. Soon Bird returned.

"Nothing nasty up there.....Vella." Said Bird. "No flying wolves, no monsters."

"Thank you, Bird." She replied.

"Now can I go in front ?"

"No !"

Vella had no real idea of how much time was passing. Maybe you had to be born on a world to develop a feel for such things. Nethra said it had taken an hour to reach the next floor up, though it felt less than that to Vella. They trusted Bird; he'd never given them false information, ever. Out of the stairwell and there was another huge high chamber, even grubbier than the one where they'd left a slumbering Caspian.

"What now ?" Asked Runa. "We could start checking rooms for Vargouille, I suppose."

"No Vargooole." Said Bird.

"Well.....I believe him." Said Nethra. "We could just head back.....Muzzie must be there by now."

"Galla will never let us hear the end of it, if we do nothing while we're here." Said Vella.

Vella had a moment, a sudden recollection of where she was standing. Different to the first time on Gorshan, some of the castle might have been rebuilt. She knew where they were though and where Muzzie wanted to take them.

"I know this place, though much has changed." Said Vella. "There used to be a passage that went through an enclosed canal, to come out at the treasury. We used it.....If it still exists."

"Sounds worth investigating." Said Runa.

"Is it far away.....This passage ?" Asked Nethra.

"No, come on.....I'll show you." Said Vella.

Her memory knew the way, even though doors had been moved, vast halls remodelled or even demolished. There was always a way through, even if it wasn't exactly the way Vella wanted to go. Across a wide chamber, along a narrow, rubble filled hallway. Clamber over far too many collapsed walls and Vella was there, even if it looked nothing like it had, perhaps a hundred thousand years before.

"Is this it?" Asked Maya.

"It's not much of a passageway." Added Nethra.

"Once you could walk from here to the treasury." Said Vella. "Though there were Vargouille in the way and flesh eating fish in the canal."

There was a way through, though it looked more like a narrow vent than a passage. Vella knelt on the floor, feeling sharp rubble digging into her knees. A little daylight was coming from somewhere, which was enough to see quite a long part of the low passage. There was a gap; it was probably still possible to get through, though only if you were no bigger than a child.

"They've rebuilt it.....It's now far too small for us to use." Said Vella.

"I could get through there." Said Maya.

"No!" Shouted several voices.

"I'll wait for you at the treasury." Said Maya.

Vella heard an intention in the girl's voice and made a grab for her. No good, Maya had gone back to rushing about on six legs again. Off the child went, rushing into the low and largely dark vent.

"No.....Come back." Yelled Vella.

"I can follow her." Said Nethra. "My body has the ability to squash down, until I can fit through tiny gaps. I'll find the Dredger kid and keep her safe."

"No, come with us, we'll go back for Muzzie....." Said Breast plate.

No use, Nethra was gone, quickly followed by Galla's pet bird. The bird even gave Vella a look before flying down the passage, a look of total disdain. It was a disaster, a monumental fuck up. Galla would hate her for losing her bird and Merrick might try to kill them all if Nethra was eaten by something.

As for the Dredger kid.....The damned pest was a stowaway, not even supposed to be with them.

Vella wanted to cry, but she was too angry to cry.

"That damned kid!" She yelled.

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"Yes now, barkeeper.....You'll feel better for telling me." Said Aeony.

"It's not really me, none of it." Said Muzzie.

"Of course you're you.....We share a bed, I'd know if it wasn't you." Said Aeony.

The moment had arrived and although Muzzie had suspected Aeony might find it mildly amusing that there was no curse, no boiling blood. As for the prophecy being intended for a human hero.....Dark angels did have a particular hatred for pure blood humans. Muzzie did his best to calm the whirlwind of his thoughts and tell Aeony everything.

"The prophecy was never about me, ever." He said. "The Silver Lady told me that, right at the beginning. LLud Narren, a human sorcerer caused the problem, though I think some of it might be down to pure bad luck."

"Who was the prophecy intended for?" Asked Aeony.

No, Muzzie was going to keep swerving away from that question, until he'd told her everything else. It was for her own good of course. She'd probably hate herself for ripping his head off his shoulders, eventually.

“We will get to that.” Said Muzzie. “LLud set a trap to catch anyone trying to steal anything from his collection of powerful magical artefacts. They’d be immediately shifted to the human temple of Ingar Sans. Does that ring a bell ?”

“It begins to.....So we were caught up in the trap after Caspian opened a cupboard. Fucking Caspian, I should have known it’d all be his fault. But.....Who was the prophecy intended for, Muzzie ? Who should be cursed with trying to become emperor ?”

“I will tell you, right at the end.” Said Muzzie. “The next and biggest part of the problem, I think was bad luck, nothing but an accident. The Tomma-Goran prophecy was lurking out there, somewhere. The Silver Lady implied that such God given prophecies never cease to be active. It was in the Dome somewhere, maybe locked into the fabric of the building. When Caspian opened the cupboard, the prophecy became linked with LLud’s nasty little trap.”

“Now.....Now it all makes a weird kind of sense.” Said Aeony. “So you got someone else’s destiny....I’ve heard of that happening before. Do they know ? Is there a pure blood Demon Lord in Leng, furious that you received the prophecy ?”

“Actually, no one knows who the hero was, not now.” Said Muzzie. “Even the Silver Lady wasn’t sure of his name, the prophecy was supposed to have been delivered a very long time ago. The hero intended to be emperor of all the rifts has been dead for.....An almost unimaginable length of time.”

“Wow.....Caspian might be able to give you a name.” Said Aeony. “The great library has the names of all the demon heroes who amounted to anything. Your guy must be pretty high up on those lists.” The moment had arrived, to admit he’d received the destiny of a human hero, one he didn’t have a name for.

“You won’t find a name in the library in the City of the Lost God.” Said Muzzie. “All those records were purged a very long time ago. The Silver Lady told me though, so there is no doubt about it....I received the prophecy intended for a human hero.”

“A human.” Muttered Aeony. “I don’t think you should mention that to the others, ever.”

Her expression was hard to read, but she wasn’t screaming heretic at him and reaching for her blade. The dark angel’s eyes looked sad for a while, as though she was thinking things over. Aeony tended not to hug unless they were having sex. She did thump his left shoulder a few times, which he’s seen other dark angels do to their friend. It hurt a little, but he knew it was a good thing, a positive thing.

“We’ll do it, Muzzie.....You’ll do it, with my help. There can be no failing a destiny intended for a fucking human. You will succeed and you will become emperor. I give you my oath to help you succeed, or die in the attempt.”

“Thank you Aeony, that means a lot to me.” Said Muzzie.

He grinned at her, while she still seemed to be looking him over, trying to work things out in her head.

“I still think we should both only give it another year.” Said Aeony.

“Fine.....Then we go home and I kill my cousin Doffle to get my tavern back.”

They both laughed and although Aeony didn’t hug, she did give his hand a squeeze. Things might have progressed to more coupling, if the sound of Caspian’s voice hadn’t floated in from somewhere.

“Muzzie ! Aeony ! Where are you !” Yelled Caspian.

“In here, near the windows.” Shouted Muzzie.

Aeony gave her war cry, which was intended to carry for miles and instil fear into the hearts of enemies. If Caspian couldn't follow that sound, he didn't deserve to find them. When Caspian did arrive, he'd obviously been running for a while. Gasping for air and covered in sweat, he no longer looked like the heir apparent to the Great Library.

"It's awful, terrible.....Maya ran away." Said Caspian.

"She'll come back when she's hungry." Said Aeony.

"But.....Vella told me Galla's bird went with Maya." Said Caspian.

"They'll probably be fine, Caspian." Said Aeony. "Both of them will return when their bellies begin to rumble."

Poor Caspian, he looked like the boy who'd shouted fire, only to find out that no one was particularly interested.

"Nethra went after them.....Through a crack in the wall." Said Caspian.

"Fuck.....Merrick will go crazy if anything happens to her." Said Muzzie. "Where is this crack in the wall?"

"On the fourth floor."

"Crap, Caspian.....You're supposed to watch them." Said Muzzie. "Why did you let them go up to the fourth floor?"

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