

## The Last Emperor

### Chapter 12 – Raag The Cleric

**“It’s obvious something terrible happened here.” Said Maya. “What did happen to Gorshan ?”**  
**“That.....Is never talked about, child.” Said Nethra. “They still listen, the angels are still listening.**  
**Only someone very brave will talk about events in Gorshan. Or a fool.....Ask Galla, she might be**  
**brave enough, or stupid enough.”**



Galla had given Sensan something to make him sleep. He hadn’t been pleased, though he had swallowed a little from one of her packets of powder. As soon as they’d picked him up, his screaming in agony was threatening to bring the attention, of every nasty creature in the castle.

“A powder or I hit you over the head.” Muzzie had told him. “Your choice ?”

Sensibly, Sensan had chosen to swallow a little powder. Once they were on the top floor of the castle, the general level of dirt and rubble was less than on the other floors. No intact furniture, though the floor near the windows was fairly clean. Galla had them place Sensan on the floor and Runa had put a spare jacket under his head as a pillow.

“We need to keep moving.” Muzzie had told her. “Fix him up as best you can. If we need to leave him here for a while, he needs to be able to defend himself.”

“First I need to examine him.” Galla has said.

It was easier to prod and feel broken bones, if the injured person was asleep. All the horrific damage was down Sensan’s left the side; the brute must have stomped on him a few times. His left eye was destroyed, completely beyond repair. There were powerful sorcerers who claimed to be able to perform miraculous healings. From Galla’s experience, most were frauds.

“A glass eyes for you, Sensan.” Galla muttered. “Or a patch.....A patch over one eye would go well with your profession.”

She’d already added the eye to her mental list, of damage beyond her ability to heal. Three beaks in his left leg, which meant stretching and using splints on the entire leg. As it was, the broken bones weren’t guaranteed to heal at exactly the right angle. Sensan was probably going to walk with a limp for the rest of his days.

“That too, will suit the head of the Guild of Assassins.” She muttered.

A suspected cracked hip bone, though her fingers alone couldn’t confirm that. A definite crack in two of his lower vertebra and more cracked ribs than were worth counting. Then, judging by the blood leaking out with his urine, Sensan had some internal bleeding. Galla had the ability and enough powders to heal it all, apart from that ruined eye. The only problem was going to be time. Galla removed the eye and threw it from the window, to make sure there could be no argument about saving the damned thing. By the time Galla saw Muzzie, her mental list of damage to Sensan, had become a long written list in chalk on a black slate tile.

“He’ll forever have a limp and need a glass eye, but he’ll live.” Galla said.

“Will he be able to fight again ?”

“Oh yes, a lot of warriors have a pronounced limps.” She said. “Pio-Xanash had a damaged knee joint, but was a fighter of some fame.”

The next question was inevitable, though she knew Muzzie wasn’t going to like the answer.

“How long to get him up on his feet ?” Asked Muzzie. “Not perfect, I don’t expect him to be fully healed. Just able to walk and draw his sword.....How long, Galla ?”

“Time here is strange, so I’ll use rift time.....He has bleeding inside, Muzzie. Some of his internal organs were stomped on.”

“How long, Galla ? Just give me a number of hours ?”

“Four to five days.....The bones will heal quickly, but his insides will take longer. He’ll be healed enough to travel when there is no blood in his urine.”

“Four to five days !” Shouted Muzzie. “No, no.....That will never do.”

“Unless you’re going to abandon him, he needs that time to heal.” Snapped Galla.

She knew why Muzzie was angry; it would mean splitting up their forces again. Ideally Sensan needed two strong fighters to protect him while he healed. That would leave perilously few in the group carrying on to the dead king’s chambers. Who to leave with Sensan, wasn’t a decision Galla would have liked to make, but luckily it was Muzzie’s choice.

“No.....No, Galla.....I’d never abandon anyone.” Said Muzzie. “There may be arguments, but we’re all family now and families have fights.”

“Who will you leave with Sensan ?” Galla asked.

“You and.....Runa. Yes, she will be ideal, an expert with the bow.”

Galla nodded at him, it was a decent choice, though she might have chosen differently. Right or wrong, it was his decision. They were after all, his to command.

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Maya had returned to Nethra, in the chamber at the bottom of the treasury tower. She’d wandered around because of an inability to sleep, yet now; Maya was asleep as soon as she stretched out on the floor. She only seemed to have just closed her eyes, when someone was shoving her around and squeezing her arm.

“Wake up girl, wake up.”

“Sorry mum, I promise to do my chores.”

As Maya fully woke up, Nethra was laughing at her.

“Ahh, so now I’m your mum am I ? Don’t get used to the long nights, or you’ll sleep half the day away when we get home.” Said Nethra.

A few mouthfuls of the infamous twigs and leaves and Maya felt better. It wasn’t a real substitute for proper food, but it would keep her alive. As she became fully awake, there was the question of how much to tell Nethra, about her nocturnal exploits. There was one thing that was good news and would please Nethra. Maya had noticed a slightly unpleasant smell and realised it wasn’t all coming from Nethra. They both needed a bath.

“I couldn’t sleep last night.” Said Maya. “I know it was wrong, but I explored the other side of the treasury.”

“Oh, that is so dangerous.” Said Nethra. “You are such a.....Your mother needs to beat you, twice a day. Do I have to tie you up when I go to sleep ?”

“Sorry, I’m really sorry.....I found water though.” Said Maya. “Truthfully, I never saw it, but I know where it is. I’m a Dredger and we’re extremely good at finding water.”

“We really should wait here; it’s where Bird will bring the others.” Said Nethra.

“But the water cistern is on the route they’ll take to get here.”

“How do you know that ?” Asked Nethra.

“It’s obvious, that’s the only useable passage from where they are.”

“Hey, how much exploring did you do ?”

“A lot, I was wandering about for hours.....It’s safe, there are no Vargouille.”

Which was sort of true, after LLud had killed the huge brute that had nearly eaten her. Nethra was grinning from ear to ear and Maya knew she was going to agree to them finding the water cistern.

“Alright, we’ll go and find the water.” Said Nethra. “Just remember how upset your mum will be if I have to tell her you’d been eaten by something nasty. So, no more night time exploring, agreed ?”

“Agreed.” Said Maya.

Everything felt so much less threatening now Maya wasn’t on her own. Some of it was probably because she knew the passage now and the hole in the wall. Even the bugs in the treasury no longer scared her, as they scuttled away. No lamps, though Nethra did have a bottle of the bioluminescent chemicals. Still night outside and likely to be for over a day, but moonlight was entering the castle through numerous windows, holes and cracks in the walls.

“Wow, this place has seen better days.” Said Nethra. “What a mess, they definitely cleared the place out in a hurry. Be honest, Maya.....Did you spend the night looking for gold.”

“Some of the night, though I didn’t find any.”

Sort of the truth, LLud Narren had found the gold. Maya liked Nethra, but felt the possession of two bars of pure Gorshan gold, might test their friendship a little too far. Keep the gold secret, LLud had told her, advice she intended to keep.

“This way.....I don’t think the Vargouille come this far past the treasury wall.” Said Maya.

Through the room where LLud had turned the brute into a pile of ashes and even the ashes had gone. On, through another room and then along a wide passage with rooms on either side. Maya was now well beyond anywhere she’d explored. There it was though, the wonderful smell of pure, fresh water.

“I can smell water.....You were right, it’s very close.” Said Nethra.

“It’s obvious something terrible happened here.” Said Maya. “What did happen to Gorshan ?”

“That.....Is never talked about, child.” Said Nethra. “They still listen, the angels are still listening. Only someone very brave will talk about events in Gorshan. Or a fool.....Ask Galla, she might be brave enough, or stupid enough.”

“Tell me Nethra ? I’m not a child, I walk on two legs. You owe me; I found water for you to bathe in.”

“We haven’t found it yet.”

The passage had probably been designed so that trolleys could get from an entrance somewhere, to the storage areas. Trolleys loaded with gold and pushed by servants of the king. Turns in the passage were gentle. There had probably been drawings on the walls, though all that was left were a few fragments.

“I’d love to have seen Gorshan when the king was alive.” Said Maya. “It must have been a beautiful place.”

“Pure blood humans here then, Maya. You’d have been tied up and burned alive.”

“Ewwwww.....Here, the door on the left.”

How the water was pumped there was likely to remain a mystery, though the cistern had to contain thousands upon thousands of gallons. As usual, everything looked old and there was the sound of dripping water. Maya had been around the others for a while and now viewed time as they did. If the cistern still worked, it was likely to carry on working long after they’d returned to Annill. Maya pushed her face into the water and drank.....

“Oh, that was delicious.....I hadn’t realised how thirsty I was.” Said Maya.

Nethra had her head under the water for a good five minutes. When she brought her drenched head out, there was a huge grin on her face.

“Wonderful.....Now I’m going to soak for a while.” Said Nethra. “Then we can wait here for the others to arrive.”

Maya did wonder if they should bathe in the clean water that others would be drinking. There was a huge amount of water though and there was only the two of them. Maya undressed and joined Nethra, as she swam around in the giant cistern.

“Now you owe me, Nethra.” Said Maya. “There is only you and me here.....What happened to Gorshan?”

“Fine.....Though I want you to swear that you’ll never tell another living soul.”

“I swear.....No one will ever hear it from me.” Said Maya.

“Child or not, there are those who listen.....You might not survive breaking that oath. Anyway.....It was the end of everything.” Said Nethra. “A ridiculous war between the Genova, the angels and the human sorcerers of Gorshan. It started because King Haakon Raag decided to marry for love. Fine if he hadn’t been in love with a pure blood Genova. From what I’ve heard, Inanna was also in love with him. There was a huge war that went on for centuries and it only ended after.....The damage you can see all around you, Maya. Haakon Raag was sealed inside a frozen piece of time, which may account for the strange time differences between here and the rifts. Inanna was imprisoned here, not far from where we are. She was released by Vella, yes, our Vella. That is all you’ll get out of me, which is a lot more than you’d have heard from Galla. A war of love and vanity destroyed the once powerful Gorshan.”

“I heard King Haakon Raag was dead.” Said Maya.

“He is.....Though I meant it; I’ll tell you nothing else.” Said Nethra.

“Was it so unthinkable? A human and an angel being in love.”

Nethra actually hit her, a none too gentle slap across her face.

“No more.....Or I just might throw you out of a window and say a Vargouille ate you.” Said Nethra. She was smiling, but Maya decided not to push her luck. She nodded at Nethra.

“Never another question.....I swear.” Said Maya.

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Vella had known the way and they weren’t far from the throne room. Nethra was with Maya, somewhere. Now Galla had been left with Sensan. To Vella it felt like they’d left two of the best and most lethal members of the group behind. It had been Muzzie’s choice and they did have him and Aeony at the front, wherever they went. The two archers loaned to them by Merrick were at the rear, which was something. Vella was becoming a bit cynical about the archers, who seemed intent on avoiding fighting. Caspian, her beloved Caspian was, as always, by her side. Vella was currently looking at a grubby wall, that was in the way.....

“It needs to go.....Blow it up, please.” She said to Muzzie.

“Really, no going another way? We’re blowing the place up.” Said Aeony.

“It looks like a partition wall.....Nothing that matters.” Said Caspian.

Muzzie wasn’t going to tell her to find another way. He’d been all about time, right from the start. Get in and out of Gorshan, as quickly as possible. Vella knew they were likely to be carrying Sensan to the doorway to Annull, once Muzzie had spoken to Weland Raag, the cleric.

“Alright everyone, move back.” Said Muzzie.

“Just like that.....You might bring the entire castle down.” Said Aeony.

“We haven’t got time to search for another way, that might not even exist....Please, Aeony.....Move out of the way.” Said Muzzie.

The dark angel moved and Muzzie began his usual procedure, as though he was dragging the spell out of somewhere. His whole torso trembled, as he flung all four of his arms in the direction of the wall. Not much of a boom, though just about anyone in the castle would have heard it. A wide section of the wall crumbled and fell apart, bringing a large piece of the ceiling down with it. For a few moments they were breathing in the dust and dirt of many millennia. As the dust settled, Vella was pleased with the outcome....

"There.....See it ? There is the door I needed to find."

"You've a good memory of this place." Said Aeony.

"I hated this place, still do. Sadly, it'll be etched into my memory forever." Said Vella. "This way, the throne room isn't far now."

There was no door in the doorway; most of the wooden doors had fallen apart from rot and decay. The frame was still there, though even that was cracked. Gorshan was dead, finished. Though its death throes were likely to go on for many thousands of years. Vella was in a kind of daydream as she walked through the doorframe and up the stairs.

"No.....Aeony and I will go in front, Vella." Said Muzzie.

"Of course.....I think the long days here are affecting me." Said Vella.

It was nice to be in the middle of the group. Vella could let her mind drift, in the certainty others would be focused and alert. In her mind she could see the stairs as they'd been when she and Caspian had run up them, while Muzzie had fought off a group of Vargouille.

"You must remember these stairs, Casp ?"

"I do, but not as well as you seem to.....It was a long time ago." Said Caspian.

The stairs were the back way into the throne room. It looked like a meeting room, with line after line of stone chairs. All the chairs faced the royal throne of the Raag dynasty, who had ruled Gorshan for as long as anyone could remember. There were hints about a little demon ancestry somewhere in their past, though that may have all been nonsense. Vella walked right up to the throne.

"He died here, King Haakon Raag, the last King of Gorshan." Said Vella. "I was here and saw him die.....Now there isn't even a trace of his bones. Not even a patch of dust to show where he fell."

"It sounds like you liked him ?" Asked Aeony.

"I think I must have, just a little.....His only real crime was loving the wrong person." Said Vella.

She had no idea why, but Vella sat on the throne. There was a legend that as long as the throne remained in Gorshan, the Raag line would survive. It seemed, the legend had been wrong.

"Where do we go next ?" Asked Muzzie.

"Through the wall behind me." Said Vella. "Not by blowing it up.....There are hidden levers and switches. I need to go in front now; there are many tricks and traps. I will open every door and.....Only walk where I walk."

"As Sensan would say.....This place keeps getting better." Muttered Aeony.

"Can we stay here ?" Asked Breast Plate.

"I doubt if we'll be coming back this way." Said Vella.

"We stay together." Snapped Muzzie.

Yes, one of them had been killed quite soon after arriving in the castle. The attitude of the archers was still surprising Vella. They were being well paid for their services and were seldom at the front of any fight. Maybe more attempts should have been made to make them one of the group ? Whatever the reason for their bad attitude, it was too late to do anything about it. Vella walk up to the wall behind the throne and thumped her hand against a plain beige tile. A section of the wall went back, making a terrible grating sound as it went over grit on the floor.

“Well, at least it worked.” Said Muzzie.

“We’re going to where the angel was waiting for me.” Said Vella. “Don’t ask me how, but I know Wēland Raag waits for us in the same place. Long dead of course, though his ghost is waiting for us.”  
“To think, I was hoping to get in and out of Gorshan in a single day.” Muttered Muzzie.

The last time Vella had walked along the secret corridor, an angel had been in her head, telling her where to go and how to safely open every door and deactivate every trap. Maybe that was why it was still there, so clear in her memory. Another blank wall and two place to be thumped or prodded. Another door that made a lot of noise, but opened.

“Keep to the left here, walk where I walk.” Said Vella.

Several doors opened by pressure pads hidden in the wall, or small levers in out of the way places. It was nerve wracking, but didn’t actually take that long. Vella knew it was the last door when she reached it and also the heaviest. A huge stone door dovetailed into the wall on stone hinges. She heard the click as it unlocked, though it refused to move as she pushed it.

“The last door and I think this one needs Muzzie strength.” Said Vella.

In the end just about everyone was pushing the door, as it grated over the filthy floor. Beyond the door was a room Vella recognised. It looked as though there was a lamp in the room. It was a wraith though, the glowing ghost of a dead human cleric.

“The cleric Wēland Raag.” Muttered Vella.

“Yes, and I know you, Vella.” Said Wēland. “Another has been watching you, though I was asked not to reveal their name. I have to say Mussaneth Osranetherer isn’t quite what I was expecting. There is a certain something though, an aura about him. Welcome to you all, to what remains of the once mighty Gorshan.”

“I never thought I’d be so glad to meet a human cleric.” Said Aeony.

“What I have to say is for Muzzie’s ears only.” Said Wēland. “He is the one driven by prophecy. Just for a short while, the rest of you must go back into the corridor.”

“Really.....Back there ?” Asked Caspian.

“I wasn’t expecting that.” Said Vella.

“It won’t be for long.” Said Wēland. “Please indulge the ghost of a long dead cleric. What I need to tell Muzzie is very important and very private.”

“Please wait outside.” Said Muzzie.

“You heard our emperor.....We wait in the corridor.” Said Aeony.

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Runa felt a little guilty using Sensan as bait. Galla had wanted them to drag him into a side room, after they’d heard something snuffling in the corridor. A definite snuffle, but in her experience, quite small creatures snuffled as loudly as huge ones. Then she’d caught a glimpse of something that looked like a rock cropper, but was larger than Muzzie. Something new to add to the list of the flora and fauna of Gorshan, the place of evil.

“I suppose it might be harmless, like rock croppers.” Said Runa.

“If it fed on plants, it’d be outside.” Said Galla. “If it’s prowling the corridors, trust me, it’ll be a meat eater.”

Runa’s idea was to leave Sensan where he was, out in the open and close to a window. When the creature came to take bites out of him, they’d fight it off. Hopefully they might actually kill it, though leaving it bloody and maimed would do. Runa was good with her bow and Galla had her incredible powders. There was also Bird flapping about, who’d proven himself to be of much more use than Runa had expected.

“Bird.....We need you to annoy it.” Said Runa. “Should be easy, annoying things seems to be your favourite skill.”

“Silly Runa.....Pretty Runa.”

The pretty was new, but maybe it meant Bird genuinely liked her. That could be useful, if she needed to ask him to do something dangerous.

“I’ll keep well back, with a disruption powder open and ready.” Said Galla. “Meanwhile, you go out into the corridor and lure it in here.”

Runa had a few ideas about how to lure the beast, but they all felt a bit silly. Waving her arms about, shouting obscenities at it. She’d even considered throwing some of the ever present rubble at it. Her one idea that really did stand a chance was blood, her blood. If it fed on flesh, it had to be attracted by fresh blood. The trick was to cut herself enough to attract the beast by the smell of her blood. While not actually doing permanent damage to any of her veins. Runa ran a blade down the outside of her leg.

“Holy Nigon, stop Runa.....That’s too much.” Said Galla.

“I only want to be the lure.....Once.” Said Runa.

She took the sharp edge of her blade right down to the top of her boot. There was a lot of blood coming from the wound, a fucking lot of blood.

“Be ready, Galla.”

Runa rushed into the corridor and there it was. Eyes going towards the sudden movement, hers. It roared like a predator and rushed towards her. It did look a bit like a harmless rock cropper, though no rock cropper had two rows of sharp teeth. No rock cropper had long razor sharp claws. Runa fired her bow to anger the beast, barely causing a cut in the skin beneath its thick fur. Instead of coming after her, it unfurled a long tongue out of its mouth and sent it towards her.

“By the nine great.....What the fuck are you ?” Yelled Galla.

The tongue moved like a living thing, wrapping itself around her leg. Then the tongue pulled at her and Runa was down onto her back.

“Galla.....I’m in trouble here !” Runa shouted.

Bird was agitated too; he flew off to hopefully get his owner, if owner was the right way to describe Galla. Often the apothecary seemed owned by her Bird. The tongue began to squeeze, twisting and constricting the flow of blood to Runa’s leg. Runa tried a thrust with her blade and the tongue did bleed. Putrid green blood, that stank of decay and death. It still kept pulling though and squeezing. “Galla ! I really might get killed by this thing.....Galla !” Yelled Runa.

As the tongue pulled her towards the claws and that mouth full of teeth, Runa really did think death might be close. Her blade was bothering the brute, but it was still dragging her closer. At the same time her leg was going dead from being constricted.

“Come on then you brute.” Runa Yelled. “You won’t find me an easy meal.....My blade still has a good sharp edge.”

The beast twisted its tongue, sending Runa over onto her stomach. It then began to pull her towards its mouth, like a fisherman landing a catch. Runa had one good hit somewhere on the brute; she’d felt her blade hit flesh. It was so difficult to fight when she was being twisted about.

“Galla !” Runa yelled.

Its jaws were so close and finally Galla was there. No it wasn’t Galla; it was Sensan stabbing at the creature with his sword. He was knocked against the corridor wall, but came back. Stabbing, hacking, Sensan looked dreadfully ill, but he had to be seriously hurting the brute. Damn, it had to be tough to kill.

"It's bleeding; keep stabbing.....It must die.....Everything that bleeds can die." Shouted Runa. Poor Sensan, he was hit several times by those sharp claws. He was flung against the wall, but he kept coming back. Galla might have failed her, but Sensan.....He kept coming back. Runa's leg was actually up against the two rows of sharp teeth, when Sensan's stabbing finished the beast. Runa saw the life go out of its eyes, as the tongue unwound from around her leg.

"You did it.....Thank you, Sensan.....Thank you."

No answer, he'd collapsed onto the ground and the dead creature was in front of his face. Galla chose that moment to arrive. Runa's anger evaporated on seeing the condition she was in. Her robe looked almost shredded and there were several bite marks on her arms.

"What happened to you ?" Asked Runa.

"There were two of them." Said Galla. "The other one is dead, but if I hadn't had my bird to distract it.....These things are hard to kill. I hope there are no more of them."

"Me too.....Sensan saved me, but he was bashed around quite a bit." Said Runa.

"Here.....Let me help you up, then I'll take a look at our hero." Said Galla.

It hurt; her leg was going to take a while to recover from being squeezed so hard. Runa leant against the wall, as Galla put her cheek against Sensan's mouth. There was the pressing of fingers against neck arteries and an opening of his jacket for Galla to listen to his chest. Through it all, Galla was shaking her head and muttering to herself.

"He's gone, Runa.....He was already so badly injured." Said Galla. "I'm amazed he managed to get on his feet and use a sword. Fighting this monster though.....It was too much for him."

"He was pronounced dead once before." Said Runa.

"Trust me.....I know death when I see it." Said Galla. "Sadly, poor Sensan won't be going home with us."

It was painful and she nearly fell. Runa had to see Sensan, to look upon his face. Galla helped her in the end, to kneel next to the member of their group who no one had really liked. Then again, can a professional assassin ever be truly liked ? Seeing his pale face made it real.....Sensan really was dead.

"What will we do with him.....Bury him here ?" Asked Runa.

"Both of us are injured, so we can't drag him anywhere." Said Galla. "I know it sounds awful, but we can't leave him to decay where he lies. There are the two dead beasts too. I'll incinerate Sensan and the brutes who killed him and tried to kill us. It really is the only sensible option."

More pain, as Runa leant forward and kissed Sensan. Just one kiss, on his lips.

"I can see why.....It just seems such an awful thing to do." Said Runa.

"We'll take his sword." Said Galla. "There are messengers who cross the rifts. We can send his sword to his family, with a note saying he died a hero's death. It might take a year or more for them to get it, but it will arrive eventually."

"Yes, I like that.....We'll send his sword to his people."

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Maya's mother made clothes to last, rather than look pretty. Compared to Nethra's clothing bought in Annill and created by some of the best clothiers in the city, Maya's thick and heavy trousers looked and felt dreadful. Not that Maya wasn't grateful for the food and clothing her mum provided, but she was hoping for much better, when her mum had the two gold bars.

"Nice to bathe, though putting grubby clothes on again.....I feel stinky again." Said Nethra.

"I left my pack behind with Galla." Said Maya. "I'm hoping she bothered to pick up my things. I've two sets of clean clothing."

"Yeah, I can't remember where I left my pack.....Too busy chasing a damned Dredger kid."



Plenty of water now and enough twigs and leaves to last them until the Feast of Nigon. Nothing to do but relax and wait for the others to arrive. Dark angels had a pretty good nose for fresh water, so Aeony was sure to find the cistern.

“Time to catch up on, oh so much missed sleep.” Said Nethra.

“I’ll sleep for a week when we get back to Annill, if my mum doesn’t fill my day with chores.”

Maya felt comfortable, secure and for the first time in a while, she’d had enough fresh water to take away the constant thirst. Plus, there was the gold which meant her mum not having to struggle to put food on the table. A happy, relaxed Dredger kid, quickly became a sleeping Dredger kid.

Strangely, the noises not far away woke her, but not Nethra.

“Nethra.” She hissed in her ear. “Someone is coming.”

“It’ll be Muzzie and the others.....Go back to sleep.”

“What if it’s not them ?” Asked Maya.

No good, Nethra was either asleep again or ignoring her. Maya went into the wide passage and listened. Somewhere towards the start of the passage, there was a group of creatures making a lot of noise. Loud voices, though too far away to understand the words. Heavy footsteps too probably, judging by the kind of stomping noise. Muzzie sort of stomped, Runa had mentioned it a few times.

“Like trying to move silently with a full grown Jangar Beast.” Runa told him, often.

Maya sat on the floor, with just her eyes and the top of her head, sticking out into the passage. Logic said it was Muzzie and the others.....Just about everything and everyone else in Gorshan seemed to be dead, or a mindless brute. Maya didn’t fully relax, until she could hear the voices clearly.

“.....and just as I thought I was going to die, Vella stabbed the Roruss. With a tiny knife she’d found, my wife killed the un-killable.”

“I wasn’t your wife then, Casp.”

“If I have to hear you two tell that story one more time.....” Said Muzzie.

Maya ran down the passage and threw her arms around Muzzie’s knees, the highest place she could reach.

“Muzzie.....I’m so glad you found us.” She said.

She’d forgotten about running away and the annoyance that must have caused. So much had happened since then, including her conversation with a long dead sorcerer. She could feel the tip of the royal sceptre in the top pocket of her jacket.

“Oh, so you want our company now.” Said Caspian. “Run out of food have you ?”

“No.....We found good water.....Lots of it.”

“Good.” Said Muzzie.

Nothing was as she’d imagined her reunion with the others would be. Maya realised that it wasn’t going to be a case of everything being forgiven, at least not for a while.

“Nethra is with me, but Bird went to find Galla.” Said Maya. “I’m honestly sorry if I caused any trouble.”

“Bird found Galla.” Said Vella. “We left Galla and Runa to look after Sensan; he was badly injured by something that attacked us on the stairs.”

“Will he be alright ?” Asked Maya.

“Galla said he’ll heal from his wounds.” Said Vella.

Muzzie went on to make several comments about Maya’s mother needing to beat her more often.

“I’m going to tell her to thrash you, twice a day.”

It sounded like a thing Muzzie might say, but not actually mean. He was a bit like that, mainly threats with no bite. Not always though and Maya was worried.

“Really.....You’re going to tell my mum I ran off ?”

“If he doesn’t, I will.” Said Vella. “The trouble you’ve caused girl, the trouble you’ve caused.”

Maya was young, but she knew when to be quiet and let adults forget about whatever it was she’d done. Everyone wanting to look at the water cistern helped and getting up to date with gossip from Nethra. Maya should have remained seen and not heard, at least for a few hours, but no.....

“The cistern must hold thousands upon thousands of gallons.....We bathed in it.” Said Maya.

They’d all just gone through a period of water rationing and had just put their heads into the cool, fresh water. Maya remembered the feeling, of having more than enough to drink, after a thirst that seemed to have gone on for days. Muzzie especially, had such a huge smile on his face. His smile didn’t last..

“You bathed in our drinking water ?” He asked.

“It was just the two of us.” Said Maya.

“You fill a bucket and wash yourself from the bucket.” Said Leather Jerkin. “Everyone knows that.”

“I don’t think we have a bucket.” Muttered Maya.

It had been Nethra’s idea, but telling them that might lose the last friend she seemed to have in the group. Even Caspian was talking about her needing a thorough beating. No one was giving Nethra a hard time and it wasn’t as if they’d made the water too dirty to drink. Maya played her ace card, mainly to escape from so many angry adults.

“Can we talk in private, Muzzie ?” She asked. “It is important.”

He didn’t take her far, but she wanted to be well away from everyone. Some had staggeringly good hearing and LLud had made her promise that only Muzzie was to hear her words.

“We need privacy.....LLud Narren spoke to me.” She whispered.

“Ahhh.....I see.” Said Muzzie.

They went right through one room full of broken shelving and into a narrow corridor on the other side. Gloomy, dusty with a layer of the ubiquitous rubble. It summed up how Maya was beginning to feel about Gorshan.

“This will do, we’re far enough away from even the keenest ears.” Said Muzzie.

“LLud Narren found me in the treasury, and we talked for a while about Gorshan and how he became a wraith. He asked me to give you this.....He said you’d know what to do with it.”

Maya handed the tip of the sceptre to Muzzie, who seemed pleased to receive it. He held it in his right hand and the corridor filled up with floating lights and strange, almost luminous shadows ran across the wall.

“It’s activated the Hand of Arcadis.” Said Muzzie. “There are a lot more options than LLud told me to expect. Fully corporeal, right through to throwing his soul into the abyss. He mentioned a need to trust whoever recovered the sceptre and I understand that now.”

“Please help him, Muzzie.” Said Maya.

“He’s not as nice as you probably think.” Said Muzzie. “When he served Neosto in Leng, his brutality was legendary.”

“I guessed he wasn’t that nice.” Said Maya. “He told me to ignore half of what I heard about him. One of my uncles used to say that and he was.....Mum called him a total bastard. LLud was nice to me though, so please help him.”

Muzzie gave her a long hard stare, before sitting on the stone base of a collapsed cabinet. There was just about room for two, so Maya sat next to him.

“Just supposing.....I gave you a choice, Maya.” Said Muzzie. “I tell everyone to forget about you running off. No telling your mother, no mention at all of a beating. But I wouldn’t save LLud; he’d go

into the abyss, forever. Or, I effectively bring LLud back from the dead and.....Your mother gets the full story about you hurtling off into the dark, on your own. I'll even let Vella tell her how you much you deserved to be thrashed. Which would you choose ?”

“But I brought you the sceptre, Muzzie.” She said. “That has to count for something.”

“It does and it will, just not right now.” Said Muzzie. “I'm not playing now.....Whatever you choose will happen. Do I make LLud Narren fully corporeal, or give him a full, final and true death ?”

Bruises healed and her mum never beat her that hard. There was always a lot of fuss made in her house when she deserved a thrashing, but it was never that bad. Not that she was going to tell Muzzie about that.

“You shouldn't expect me to make such a decision.” She said.

“The world is tough girl.....Tel me what to do and it will happen ?”

The gift of two bars of gold didn't enter into her choice. LLud might once have been an evil human sorcerer, but he'd been nice to her. He'd even saved her from a ferocious Vargouille, though that was another detail Muzzie didn't need to know.

“Save him, the best option there is on.....The sceptre thing.” She said.

Muzzie nodded at her and for a while, the floating lights increased. Then there was just the gloom and dust around them. The rubble too of course, which no one could explain. Always a layer or two of that rubble. The sceptre broke apart in Muzzie's hand, falling to the floor as hundreds of tiny pieces of crystal.

“It is done.....Wherever he might be; LLud is as close to being alive again as magic alone can give him.” Said Muzzie. “I just hope we haven't just given fresh life to an old enemy. Only time will tell.....Now we need to collect everyone and get back to Annill. I just hope Sensan doesn't need to be carried down all those stairs.”

“Are you going to tell my mum I ran off ?” She asked.

“No, of course not. Though.....You probably need to be extra nice to Vella for a while.”

Saying they were leaving was a very different thing to actually doing it. Everyone wanted a rest and a chance to fill empty water bottles and flasks. Then of course they wanted to do what they'd been so angry at her for doing. Everyone apart from Leather Jerkin, spent a long time treading water in the fresh water cistern. He used his battle helmet as a bucket and wiped himself down with a cloth.

“Can I stay with you all, after we get back.” Said Maya. “I mean.....We're all one big family now.”

“Your family have signed on to stay with Muzzie.” Said Caspian. “You will be travelling with us, right through to the Imperial Palace in Leng.”

“No....I mean travel with you, as we are now.” Said Maya. “Can we carry on as we are now ?”

“We can't take you into battle.” Said Muzzie. “Yes, we know you're tough.....But your mum would go crazy.”

“I could talk to her.”

“Oh.....Careful, Maya.....She might forbid you to go just about anywhere.” Said Nethra. “How about being very nice to Galla and getting Muzzie to ask her about taking you under her wing as an apprentice ?”

“I could do that.....Do you like the idea of being an apothecary's apprentice ?” Asked Muzzie.

“Yes I do and my mum couldn't object to that.” Said Maya.

Eventually they did get moving and by the time they were descending the long spiral staircase, Maya was feeling genuinely happy.

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