

The Last Emperor

Chapter 9 – Traps & Surprises

“Galla had a bag over her shoulder, which had to contain several hundred powders. Some would get them through the wall and into the sealed off room. Others were incredibly powerful and dangerous. Galla mentioned that some could bring death to any living thing that walked, crawled or breathed.”



Nethra had known there'd be a serious argument, though she really wasn't trying to be awkward. Merrick viewed it as her wanting to punish him in some way, for all his crazy schemes that had come to nothing. Yes, there were still a few open wounds with regard to the hybrid she shared a bed with. She'd had to sell her dead mother's jewellery to get him out of a particularly nasty consequence of yet another, Merrick get rich quick scheme. Her mother had only owned two items worth selling, she hadn't really been a 'things' type of woman. Two nice pieces of jewellery which Nethra treasured, gone to stop Merrick from having his legs broken in multiple place. Open wound or not, it wasn't why she was determined to go with Muzzie, when he entered the gateway to Gorshan.

“Tell me.....” She yelled. “Could we have escaped the city without help from Muzzie ?”

“That was a lifetime ago.....Nothing to do with now.” Said Merrick.

She'd asked the same question at least six times and Merrick kept ignoring her, swerving around the question, or as now, refusing to take it seriously. Nethra had no idea what part of a demon was inside her, but she knew it wasn't one famed for patience. She was becoming angry, very angry, angry enough to hurt Merrick and regret it later. Nethra picked up the love of her life and slammed him against the floor of their bedroom.

“Bastard.....Answer the question.” She yelled. “Would we have lived to get to Annill, if Galla hadn't risked her life to help us ?”

“Get off me !” Shouted Merrick. “Too much Shelzak in you.....No one else wanted you.”

Not Shelzak, they were tough but normally as thick as a post. Whatever demon had mated with one of her ancestors, it had been tough and clever. Dark too.....If Merrick had seen some of her dreams, he'd have thought twice about hitting her. Only a light thump on her chest, though he followed it up with shoving her, sending her sprawling across the room.

“Enough.....You're not going to Gorshan.” Shouted Merrick.

Only a reflex, he'd been involved in a lot of street fights. Merrick, the hybrid she'd decided was her mate for life, had touched the hilt of his blade. Something in her began to wake up, as the darkness within her grew. Her claws became longer, her teeth sharper. Muscles on her back moved about, becoming much, much stronger. Even her wings changed.....No being tired now; Nethra could outfly Aeony if she had a mind to. If she'd had to guess, Nethra would have said the demon part of her was a second tier demon from beyond Leng, maybe even a first tier bringer of chaos. She ran a claw across Merrick's shoulder, causing him to yell out.

“Hey.....Stop it; I don't want to have to hurt you.” Said Merrick.

Again the touch on his blade, which was really beginning to annoy her. Without willing it to happen, Nethra's body went from little more than a play fight, into full combat potential. Even her eyes changed, with everything taking on a slightly red tinge.

“Hurt me.....As if you could hurt me.” She said.

Merrick yelled out, as she picked him up and pushed him up against their bedroom wall. Someone came in, probably one of the room cleaners. They had been making a lot of noise; someone had probably been tasked with checking on them. Whoever it was, apologised and left. That made her angry, everything seemed determined to make her so.....Fucking angry. Merrick must have noticed the change in her.

“Nethra.....Baby, it’s me.....Do anything silly and you’ll regret it later.”

“I might.....Though you’ll still be dead.”

There were a few seconds, when she was close to digging her claws into his forehead and ripping off his face, eyes, nose, and that daft looking Dredger shovel mouth. Tear it all away and leave a screaming, blind Merrick, who’d probably take a few hours to die. She pushed one claw in, before something inside her, decided to slumber once again. Her lips still didn’t feel like her lips, as she pressed them again Merrick’s cheek.

“I’m going to Gorshan with Muzzie.....You can’t stop me.” She said.

The voice was nearly hers, though there was an underlying growl. By the time she let Merrick drop to the floor like a pile of dirty washing, Nethra was back to being her usual self. One fairly long lasting effect of her demon rage was stronger muscles, which could last for nearly a year. Everything else was almost gone. Nethra had reached their bedroom door, before Merrick spoke.

“Alright, go with them.....Come back though, afterwards.” He said. “Please don’t go forever.”

“Of course I won’t you idiot.....I love you.”

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Hiring fighters was one thing, finding a commander to lead them into battle was another. Emperors tended to be figureheads, even if they did have a huge number of battle magic spells at their disposal. Sensan could train fighters and Runa’s family were a respected military family that had commanded the army of the City of the Lost God, for generations. Muzzie knew his limitations and he had no idea about battlefield tactics. He’d never commanded an army and it wasn’t something you could pick up as you went along. Well.....You could, but you weren’t likely to live for very long. Not just Sensan and Runa telling him what needed to be done, even Galla had told him.

“You need a general, Muzzie.” She’d said. “One known in Annill, a famous leader who the fighters you’re hiring will follow.”

“Do you have anyone in mind ?” He’d asked.

“No, I’ve no idea about the local military.” Galla had said. “I do know you don’t fall for the old, his men hated him, but he brought them home alive. You want a popular general whose troops named their kids after him. Or her of course, there are a few good female generals.”

“Yes, I’m sure Merrick will be able to recommend someone.” Muzzie had said.

“No, No, Muzzie.....No sooner do I think you’re understanding.....”Galla had snapped. “Ask Merrick if you need a good man to climb drainpipes and relieve the wealthy of their baubles. Not for this though, he’d pick the most corrupt general in Annill.”

Muzzie knew what he owed Galla; she’d sold something precious to help fund his army. He wasn’t sure what she’d sold, but it had to have meant a lot to her. They were friends too, but he sometimes wished he had lackeys, capable of throwing her in a nice, deep dungeon. Not forever of course, just for a while. He looked at her and heard the battle cry of his ancestors in his mind. Not there for long, he calmed quickly and squeezed Galla’s hand.

“Sorry.....I do realise all this must be new to you.” Galla had said.

“Always be honest with me I need one able and honest adviser.” Muzzie had muttered. “After a few victories and as the army grows, no one will tell me I’ve had a stupid idea. Promise me you’ll be my one honest old friend.”

“And do you promise not to throw me into the dungeons ?”

“Ahhh, never have dark thoughts about a skilled empath.” Muzzie had said. “Yes, I give you my word that I will never harm a hair on your head. No dungeons for Galla Sinsa-Ennaria, I give you my promise as future emperor. Now.....Who do I ask about a general ?”

“Chenad of course, the head librarian. Caspian knows him and without being rude, they’re like two beans from the same vine.”

“Chenad.....No, I will trust your judgement.” Muzzie had said. “I’ll ask him to ponder on it and come up with a few names for when we return from Gorshan.”

If we return really, Muzzie couldn’t see them exploring the ancient human city, without someone being seriously hurt, or worse. There was a lot of human in Galla, though she rarely mentioned it. Yet even she called Gorshan the place of evil.

“Caspian told me Chenad is the main source of information on the wars fought on the third rift.”

Galla had said. “He’s read everything there is on the subject and he’s written several books on military tactics. He’s obsessed with historical battles, according to Caspian. If there’s someone who will know of a good general for you, it will be Chenad. He could probably help you whittle down a long list to a short list.”

Muzzie was currently sat in what he’d heard was the council chamber of Annill library. One of the great libraries, rivalling the Great Library in the City of the Lost God and surpassing the knowledge held in the demon library in Unadaris on the sixth rift. Chenad wasn’t running a back street library.....As Galla had told him many times. Chenad was a citizen of Annill, of some renown.

“He’ll see you now.”

The female hybrid looked mostly Ubari, which seemed quite common in Annill. The slightly blue tinge to her skin didn’t disturb him, though the two horns at the side of her head, did cause him to stare at her for a few seconds. She smiled at him, everyone he met seemed happy to have him in Annill. After a lifetime being the owner of a tavern, with a slightly iffy reputation. Him and his tavern....People smiling at him and being pleased to see him, was going to take some getting used to. A door was opened and the tall Ubari hybrid, led him right up to the large desk.

“Ahhhh, Muzzie.....Emperor Muzzie.” Said Chenad. “Galla did mention why you were coming to see me.....Sit.....Please sit down.”

Galla was right, Chenad was older than Caspian, but they really could have been beans pulled from the same vine. The Ubari poured drinks and Muzzie drank his without realising what it was. After Galla going on about what a big deal Chenad was in Annill, he was actually feeling a little nervous.

“Yes, as you will have heard.” Said Muzzie. “I can easily find a thousand good warriors, but I need a general to turn a thousand fighters into an army that thinks as one. I was hoping you might have a few names to suggest ?”

“There is only one name worth considering.” Said Chenad. “He once commanded the combined armies of the first rift. To win over the rifts you need a general who your warriors respect. When it comes to the approval of Leng on the other hand.....That requires someone quite different. There is only one choice and he currently lives in Annill. Muzzie, you need General Dhülen.”

Muzzie had heard a few names from Merrick and a few more from the growing number of fighters on his payroll. He’d heard of none of them, though the name Dhülen was known to him. Not

everything he'd heard was good, but maybe he needed someone with a good reputation for winning battles, but also a reputation for having flexible morality.

"I've heard of General Dhūlen, he once led an army against the City of the Lost God." Said Muzzie.

"In the days when that city still had an army." Said Chenad. "A long time ago and you'd have trouble finding a general who wasn't once an enemy. Pay him well, keep your promises and you'll have no trouble with Dhūlen."

"He's part Terak." Said Muzzie.

"Only a very tiny part from a long dead ancestor." Said Chenad. "Who of us is perfect, Muzzie ? The Terak ancestry will do him no harm in Leng, they'll like that. Let me get him here when you return to Annill. Talk to Dhūlen and I guarantee you'll choose him."

Who of them was perfect indeed ? Maybe just an expression, or Chenad knew of the tiny piece of Genova in Muzzie's makeup. Genova were hated more than the Terak, so Muzzie could hardly refuse to see the general.

"Very well, I'll see him when I return."

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A lot had been achieved in four days, Aeony had been quite surprised. Hiring fighters would take time, but several hundred had already signed an oath to serve Muzzie and consider him their emperor. That mattered, really mattered. Arrive in a quiet rift town with hundreds of soldiers shouting about their emperor and the town would soon be loyal to Muzzie. As for Muzzie seeing General Dhūlen when they returned.....The general was part Terak, who'd been enemies of the dark angels for millennia. On the other hand and as Muzzie kept saying, the general only had a tiny bit of Terak in his blood. Aeony had decided to be pragmatic about the whole business. If Dhūlen became the general for their forces, she'd give him her total cooperation. If Muzzie chose someone else, they'd get her full cooperation. Unless Muzzie hired a growler as general, she'd give her support to just about anyone.

"I can see the advantage of powders." Said Aeony. "You'd never be able to carry that many potions." Galla had a bag over her shoulder, which had to contain several hundred powders. Some would get them through the wall and into the sealed off room. Others were incredibly powerful and dangerous. Galla mentioned that some could bring death to any living thing that walked, crawled or breathed.

"Yes, Dhali Drahl found every ingredient I required." Said Galla. "Some I haven't used in years and a few.....I've never created before. I'm really getting a little excited by the idea of trying them out."

"Just tell me when I need to get out of the way."

"Oh, I will Aeony.....I will."

Their secret trip to Gorshan seemed to be known to everyone, yet the priests of the temple, hadn't stopped them entering the catacombs. Nethra had said they were almost hermits, locked up for life in their temple to a cursed human deity.

"Only a few go out to buy supplies." Nethra had said. "They probably have no idea what we're planning and where we're going."

The seven of them were going to Gorshan and Nethra would make it eight. Merrick had supplied three hybrid archers, who would be there to deal with the Vargouille. A force of eleven, twelve counting Galla's scrawny pet bird. Their entire army to get through Gorshan, speak to a long dead King and get safely home again. As if that wasn't enough to accomplish, Muzzie had told her about his piece of quid pro quo with LLud Narren.

"Will you throw his soul into the wastes, or make him more corporeal ?"

Aeony had asked Muzzie, after waking up next to him, following yet another night of satisfying their mutual lust. Their coupling had become a regular thing, which didn't worry her at all. Just so long as the barkeeper didn't start getting clingy.

"I haven't decided.....I might not decide LLud's fate until the very last moment." He'd told her.

They were all there, crammed into quite a narrow section of the catacombs. Almost everyone ready and waiting for Muzzie and her to be the first into the sealed off room. Well, almost everyone was there....

"Did anyone speak to Runa today?" Asked Caspian.

"Give her five more minutes, I saw her in the corridor this morning." Said Nethra. "She looked to have drunk too much the previous night.....And she had company in her room last night."

"I love gossip.....Who was it?" Asked Vella.

"None of your business." Said Runa.

"Glad you could join us." Said Muzzie.

"Sorry."

Aeony had seen the man with Runa, one of the new recruits. Quite good looking in a rather obvious kind of way. Aeony didn't begrudge Runa a little fun, as long as it didn't interfere with Muzzie's destiny. The prophecy had to be the number one priority for them all, or they'd never see home again.

"Be late again, for anything.....I'll give you a little scar as a reminder." Said Aeony.

Runa probably had a headache from hell and maybe the new recruit hadn't taken the edge off her needs. Whatever the reason, Runa went for her with a blade and of course, Aeony aimed her claws straight at Runa's throat.

"Stop.....Stop." Shouted Galla. "Are you both insane.....You took an oath that was witnessed by the Silver Lady. Fight each other and both of you will die."

"Pack it in.....Or I'm leaving you both here." Said Muzzie. "I'm sure we'll manage....I need people in Gorshan I can rely on."

"Crap.....It's just.....Sorry, it won't happen again." Said Runa.

"Yeah, sorry.....I've just been stuck in Annill too long." Said Aeony.

That was it; Aeony gave Runa a quick hug and slapped her on both shoulders. It was the way to do it, even eighteen foot tall hybrids settled aggression with a fellow warrior the same way. As far as Aeony was concerned it was over, no grudge left behind, or one expected from Runa. It was simply one of those things that can happen, when fighters get cooped up together. Only it wasn't that simple.....

"Alright, Galla.....Time for your wonderful powders." Said Muzzie. "Once Aeony and I have gone, send Sensan after us with a spare powder. If he doesn't return, start sending everyone. Begin with the archers."

Aeony took a powder from Galla and realised why things weren't that simple. She'd drawn blood from Runa's chin. Just a small cut, but it had been an attack that had drawn first blood. They'd turned on one another and according to the terms of the oath, they should have both been dead. Curled up bodies on the ground, with boiling blood bursting out of their arteries. Only they weren't dead.

"Use the powder the same time I do, Aeony." Said Muzzie.

Bedding over their shoulders and a backpack with a little food and water. They were so loaded up, they were almost certain to forget something.

"Lights Muzzie.....Use a spell here, or you might end up fumbling about in the dark." Said Runa.

"Oh yes, of course." Said Muzzie.

There was a reason why she wasn't dead, Aeony knew that. It might be that Muzzie had changed the curse in some way, now that they were sharing a bed most nights. No, from what the Silver Lady had said, Muzzie was controlled by the curse as much as the rest of them. She had to know what had happened, or not knowing would drive her crazy. They'd be sharing a bed roll in Gorshan and Muzzie would tell her.....She'd find out in Gorshan. Muzzie had a large bright sphere, hovering above his head.

"Here we go." Said Muzzie.

Muzzie sprinkled a powder over his head. It looked like nothing but dust and Aeony sprinkled a similar powder over her own head. Two words that Galla had taught her and then a single gesture with her left hand. The world seemed to compress in on itself, the pressure hurt her ears. A bright flash and she was still stood next to Muzzie. They were in a dusty room full of dead things, the skeletal remains of many dead creatures. There was the smell of stale air, but it was breathable.

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Sensan had vanished and hadn't returned, which wasn't a perfect way to see if the room the other side of the wall was safe, but it would do. The archers had already gone, so she wasn't heading into the unknown with no protection from any Vargouille who might have used the doorway to get to Annill.

"Our turn, Runa." Said Galla. "Best if we use the powder at the same time."

"Fine."

Runa had her sword in her right hand, as if expecting trouble. Galla looked down the fold in her robe, seeing two tiny eyes.

"Keep still now, Bird." Galla muttered.

Her pet made a quiet chuntering sound, which meant he was feeling scared. Not that she blamed him; she was feeling quite a bit of anxiety. Sensan should have returned, problems or no problems. That way the rest of them wouldn't be entering the unknown. The plan, what there was of it, had been agreed far too quickly. Galla sprinkled the powder over her head and said the two words.

"Ingili.....Nontarque."

Old demon words to work a powder formulated by old demon magic. Ingili meant send me, though an exact translation was impossible. Throw me was equally accurate, or even move me. Nontarque meant forward and was a totally accurate translation. The gesture by her left arm showed exactly where Galla wanted to be sent.

"Oh, that hurt.....Like a hammer hitting my chest." Said Galla.

Some kind of compression, even poor Runa was coughing and struggling to breathe. Sensan wasn't far away, grinning at them. The three archers were in a far corner of the room, bows ready in case anything came through the doorway from Gorshan. Muzzie was stood near the mystical door, as if examining it. Galla was no fool and it was far from being her first time using old demon magic. A little compression was expected, but so much.....Something strange had occurred.

"You'll be fine.....Though the air stinks a little." Said Sensan.

There were a lot of dead creatures on the ground, though nearly all of them had been decayed down to a few bones and claws. Probably dead Vargouille, though Galla couldn't be certain. She prodded at one skeleton, causing it to fall apart.

"Hmmm, dead a long time." Said Galla. "I wonder why they didn't simply return home?"

"I had the same thought." Said Muzzie. "I can't see a trap on the door, but I'm no expert on such things. From what I remember, Gorshan was full of nasty traps and surprises."

"It was, they were everywhere." Said Vella.

The three of them arrived together, Caspian, Vella and Nethra.

I knew she'd be useful.....We need Lilleth." Said Muzzie. "She's the best person I know to disarm nasty surprises."

Galla felt another presence in the room, they definitely weren't alone. There, in a corner.....Hiding behind a small pile of the dead things.

"We have need of more light, Muzzie." Said Galla. "Nothing dreadful, at least I don't sense danger. Someone seems to have grabbed my robes as I came through."

"Ahhhh, yes.....I can hear Dredger claws on a stone floor." Said Aeony.

Muzzie created several light orbs, which rose up to the ceiling. There she was, though now the young female Dredger was walking on two legs.

"Maya, I should have known you'd try to join us." Said Aeony.

"Don't send me back, Aeony." Said Maya. "I have my sword and I remember every lesson.....Please don't send me back."

"We're not playing a game, child." Said Galla. "Gorshan is a place of evil, one of the worst places you could imagine. An evil place on a round world."

"An abomination." Muttered Sensan.

Aeony knelt next to the child and talked to her kindly, though the girl couldn't go with them. Let her calm down and Galla would send her back to the catacombs. From there she'd be able to find her way back to her parents.

"Now.....Is the door trapped ?" Asked Galla. "I need an arrow aimed right at the centre."

One of the archers nodded at her and let an arrow fly. The door looked like a huge mirror, with the occasional glimpse of a world beyond. The central square in Gorshan was in darkness and the door itself was covered in a millennia of dust and dirt. Very little could be seen of what awaited them in the place of evil. The arrow burned to ash, less than two feet from the door.

"So.....A fire trap, very nasty." Said Galla.

"Can you disarm it ?" Asked Muzzie

"Oh, Muzzie.....Muzzie, if we weren't good friends, I'd be insulted.....Of course I can."

She let her bird fly around, just in case she accidentally triggered the fire trap. She'd probably survive a minor fire trap, but her pet would be cooked. He flapped about for a while, before perching on a hip bone of a nearby skeleton.

"I'll soon have need of your eyes and ears, Bird." Said Galla.

"Silly Galla."

Galla felt the door and it was open and fixed on the main square of Gorshan Castle. The perfect spot if you were looking for a dead king to talk to. There it was, on the ceiling above her. Only a very minor fire trap, but enough to have trapped any Vargouille who'd arrived from Gorshan. Vicious beasts, but little more than brute animals. Fire was fire to them and after seeing a few of their pack burn; they'd have remained there and died of hunger, or probably thirst. Galla dealt with the trigger up on the ceiling from a distance.

"Another arrow, please."

It found another fire trap, which activated closer to the doorway. Galla would have been burned, but she was fast on her feet, considering her self-declared old bones and joints. She leapt back and after looking for a minute or two, she spotted it.

"Ahhh.....I can see the handiwork of a skilled human sorcerer." Said Galla. "One last trap to.....There, that should be it. Another arrow please."

That arrow passed through the door and vanished. Everyone seemed pleased; Caspian even gave a small cheer. Galla picked up her bird, who probably wasn't going to enjoy being first through the doorway to Gorshan.

"Don't be too long, or too hurried." Galla told him. "Fly around and get a feel for the place."

"Scared Galla.....Very scared."

"I know, but this door has been trapped for a very long time." She said. "No one will have gone back to Gorshan for over a thousand years. There will be no one waiting to hurt a small scrawny bird."

"Silly Galla."

Her pet rubbed his beak against her robes, his rare sign that he liked her. There was real feeling there; she hoped her bird returned in one piece. She'd have preferred to send Sensan, but sadly he didn't have wings. She ruffled her pet's feathers.

"Go on, you'll be fine.....Don't fly too far and be.....Very careful."

A quick rub of his head and she let go of her pet. Probably scared, but that didn't stop him hurtling through the door.

"Now we wait." Said Galla. "If my bird returns safely, it'll be our turn to go."

Being honest with herself, Galla had forgotten about Maya, the Dredger child. Aeony was supposed to be keeping an eye on her, though everyone was waiting for her bird to return. Maya ran for the doorway, with Aeony making a grab for her. The girl made it, leaving just a piece of her cloak in the dark angel's hand.

"Damn the girl." Yelled Aeony. "Too brave for her own good."

Aeony would have gone through the door after Maya, if Galla hadn't grabbed her arm. The dark angel was still trying to break free.

"No, we have no idea what's there." Yelled Galla. "There might not be air to breathe now, or it might be so hot it'll cook you alive. Time doesn't pass there, the same as it does on the rifts."

"She's right.....Gorshan is another world." Said Caspian.

"A horrible world." Added Vella.

"Wait.....Wait for my bird to return." Said Galla.

Aeony seemed to collapse into a dejected heap near the doorway. Galla's pet came back through the mystical door after about fifteen imperial minutes. He looked fine, as he went twice around the room and landed on her shoulder.

"Did you see the Dredger child?" Asked Aeony. "Tell me Bird.....Did you see Maya?"

"Yes.....Stupid Maya."

"Less insults Bird, is Maya alright?" Asked Galla.

"Hiding.....Hiding she is, near the castle gates." Said her pet.

"Keeping hidden so we can't send her back." Said Nethra. "Maya is annoying and a pest, but you have to admire her courage."

There was a general mutter about Maya being brave, but a bit stupid in running through the door.

"What's it like in Gorshan, Bird?" Asked Muzzie. "What did you see?"

"Did you see any Vargouille?" Asked Vella.

It was strange, but her normally loud and annoying pet, seemed subdued by his brief time flying around Gorshan Castle.

"Nothing alive there.....Nothing.....Everything is dead." Said her bird.

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Runa had heard of other worlds, there was even a painting of Mendera City on their wall, when she'd been a child. That had gone into a trunk in the attic, after a few negative comments from the

dark angels. It seemed that using imperial gold pieces was fine, but hanging art on your wall wasn't. Heresy it was called, though Aeony still drank wine made by humans, when she could get it. Guilty secrets was what it was all about, everyone loves to have a guilty secret. Not that Gorshan was ever going to be anyone's guilty pleasure.

"No ultraviolet wash.....For the first time in my life, the world feels truly dark." Said Galla.

"Not totally dark, I can see Maya fussing about near the ruined barracks." Said Runa.

"On the rifts we never look up." Said Caspian. "Our sky is empty, right across every rift. So, why would we ever raise our eyes upwards? Here though.....Look up and be amazed."

There wasn't much light, but there was enough to avoid falling over several thousand years of dirt rubble and the remains of long dead creatures. Runa looked up and gasped.....Never really a believer, but she said a quick prayer to the deities her mother had worshiped. High above them, another entire world was hovering above Gorshan. Light was coming from it. Poor light admittedly, but better than no light at all.

"Don't be scared, it won't fall on us." Said Muzzie. "There are many of them, all rushing across the night sky of this world. Moons I'm told, though I was scared the first time I saw them."

"This.....I can see this place testing my sanity." Said Runa.

There were specks of light up there too, tiny but bright lights that seemed to be a long way above her. Runa had to look at her feet, to ease the pounding in her chest. Moons....A new word and something else to be scared of in Gorshan. Runa noticed Maya was there, looking up.....Runa held her hand, which was trembling.

"Don't worry, it won't fall on us." Said Runa. "Muzzie has been here before and knows about these moons."

Sensan grabbed hold of Maya, causing the poor girl to howl.

"Leave her; she's with us now, for better or worse." Said Muzzie. "Young Maya has seen one wonder and if we survive, she'll see more of them before we leave this world....leave her Sensan, leave her alone."

"She'll slow us down." Said Sensan.

"It's not a race.....Maya is coming with us." Snarled Muzzie.

Sensan actually gave Muzzie a slight bow, before letting go of the Dredger girl. Runa hadn't thought of Muzzie as even slightly imperial, until that moment.

"If you think moons are scary, wait until sunrise." Said Caspian. "A huge ball of fire will appear on the edge of this world and move across the sky."

"I'm not falling for that, you're making it up." Said Nethra.

"You just wait.....A huge ball of fire, you'll see." Said Vella.

Everything was so bizarre, it was a relief when Muzzie gave the order they'd all heard so often.

"Come on everyone." Said Muzzie. "We've a long way to go and the day only has so many hours.....Even here."

"Where are we going?" Asked Maya.

"To the highest chambers in the castle, right up to the dead king's personal rooms." Said Muzzie.

Galla's bird had been right, the entire place looked dead. Lots of rubble, though parts of the castle still looked intact. Lots of remains of dead creatures which were too decayed to recognise. Vella had told them all about huge packs of Vargouille, yet they had yet to see anything still living and breathing. A few trees maybe, a couple of bushes, but that was it.

"The bird was right.....This is a dead place." Said Runa.

"A thousand years might have passed in Gorshan, since we were last here." Said Caspian. "Maybe even ten thousand years."

"A lot can happen in a thousand years." Added Vella.

Muzzie had warned them magic could be quite erratic in Gorshan, something to do with the changing characteristics from one world to another. Galla's powders would work, but spells.....They might work, do nothing, or in an extreme case, kill you. Galla had nodded all the time Muzzie had warned them about using magic while there, as if giving her official agreement. Muzzie and Caspian had lights, cold light produced by a mixture of chemicals in jars. No magic or chaos required, though the light produced wasn't that good. Shake the jar and you had just about enough light to look at a map, for a couple of hours.

"This map shows the route we took last time, it is accurate." Muttered Caspian.

"I know, but we're still going the way I want to go." Said Muzzie.

"But that's.....Do you know how crazy that sounds?" Asked Caspian.

"We're going through the old barracks.....That's my last word on the subject." Snarled Muzzie.

They'd argued a few times, Caspian with his maps and Muzzie with his.....All he seemed to have was confidence and one hell of an attitude. Runa had faith in Muzzie; his confidence appeared to be contagious. There was something about the way he walked in exactly the right places, to get them across areas of rubble. To her, someone or something was leading Muzzie through the ruins. It had added hours to their journey, to come at the castle from the far side.

"Muzzie.....Please take pity on my old bones." Said Galla. "I need a rest, a drink and if possible.....A mouthful or two of food."

"I could do with a quick rest." Added Nethra.

"Alright, we'll stop for a rest." Said Muzzie. "Stay alert though. Just because we haven't seen anything alive, doesn't mean we're the only living beings in Gorshan."

As Runa took a sip of water and ate some dried fruit, a narrow bead of light appeared, where the ground met the sky. It grew and the light grew, until it was lighter than the brightest day on the rifts.

"Fuck.....It really is a ball of fire." Said Nethra.

"And the sky will soon be blue.....Gorshan has a blue sky." Said Vella.

"So many wonders." Said Maya.

The Dredger girl had no food or water of her own, but was given plenty by everyone. Even Sensan made sure she had enough water to last a few days. For better or worse, Maya was one of them now, one of Muzzie's band of fighters. Not long after Muzzie had once again mentioned the day not getting any longer, they went over the top of a truly mountainous pile of rubble.

"Wow, that is impressive." Said Sensan. "No wonder the castle is still solid....All that buttressing."

"Designed and built to last forever." Said Galla.

Gorshan like a lot of other castles, had been built as a solid stone keep on the side of a mountain. Over the years the keep had become a large castle and the mountain had been dug into and extended. What geology was original and what was human made had become impossible to tell. To ensure it didn't break apart and fall down the mountain, massive buttresses had been added to that side of the castle. Huge stone and brick constructions that kept the castle walls anchored against the mountainside.

"There, between the two main buttresses is a door." Said Muzzie. "That is our way into Gorshan Castle. Through the door, along a corridor and then up a very long set of stairs."

"How do you know all this Muzzie?" Asked Caspian. "None of it is on my maps or mentioned in the books."

"Trust me Caspian; I have a good source.....Let's leave it at that." Said Muzzie.

"Why the secrecy?" Asked Vella.

"I have my reasons.....Come on, getting through the door might take a while."

About halfway to the buttresses and the door they still hadn't seen, Nethra came to a sudden stop. Her claws began to extend as her wings gently flapped.

"It's.....Alive." Said Nethra.

Runa respected Nethra and if she said something was alive, it was alive. Not that Runa could see any sign of a threat. She held her sword ready and did a quick three hundred and sixty degree turn.

"I can't see anything." Said Runa.

"Neither can I." Added Muzzie.

It was open ground, full of rubble, old stone blocks and a solitary stone statue. Apart from that, there was nothing between them and where the door was supposed to be. Runa didn't like the daylight on Gorshan; its brightness hurt her eyes. She put a hand up as shade against the brightness and slowly scanned the hillside.

"I know this sounds crazy.....But I'm sure the statue moved." Said Runa. "Not much, but it definitely moved."

"Yes, nothing if I look straight at it." Said Aeony. "If I look out of the corner of my eye.....It's alive."

"Any idea what it is, Muzzie?" Asked Nethra.

"No idea.....I'm guessing a lot has changed since I was last here."

It looked like a statue, though it was too far away to give any clues as to gender. The standard two arms and two legs of a hybrid, with some kind of loose clothing. As Runa hurt her eyes by watching in such bright light, it moved again. Just the slightest hint of a movement towards them.

"Probably an ambush hunter, used to waiting a long time between meals." Said Galla. "There are reptilian ambush hunters on the sixth rift, who can go over a year between meals."

"The first life we've seen here and it wants to eat us." Said Maya.

"Probably.....It probably wants to eat us." Said Galla. "We can't be sure.....Not yet."

"When it tries to bite us, we'll be sure." Said Runa, while grinning at Maya.

The side of the mountain was on their right, which meant going closer to the creature than was probably a good idea. Runa had been meaning to get to know the archers, even though they'd probably never need them again. She'd begun to think of the three borrowed hybrids, by their armour. There was the tall one, Chain Mail. A short one with a dark beard, Breast Plate and a young one with a cheeky grin, Leather Jerkin. When they were just twenty feet from the ambush predator, it went for Chain Mail. Quick when it wanted to be, it ripped out the archer's throat in a matter of seconds. Leather Jerkin managed to put an arrow into its back, which didn't slow it down. The beast hurtled at Muzzie next, which Runa thought might be its downfall. She'd seen Muzzie fight; she knew how quickly he could move. The ambush hunter never did reach Muzzie....

"Foul beast!" Yelled Nethra.

It didn't look as though Nethra could win, the creature was larger than her and it had killed Chain Mail in a matter of seconds. Runa guessed she was underestimating Nethra, when Muzzie moved back from the fight.

"Leave it to Nethra." Shouted Muzzie. "It's hers now.....Keep back."

Which sounded suspiciously like leaving Nethra to kill her next meal. As Nethra's claws ripped into the creature, it seemed the ambush predator had become prey. Not that the creature didn't fight back. It gave Nethra wounds across her back, which would have killed most hybrids. Nethra became faster though, like an angry screeching whirlwind. Claws, teeth, tail.....All were used to injure the

creature and leave the ground covered in its viscous grey blood. Aeony was prowling around, but everyone left Nethra to her sport. Runa sat on the grubby soil and watched in comfort. Nethra was a strange creature herself. Terrible wounds healed in seconds and seemed to make her stronger, faster. Runa doubted if she could have killed the ambush predator. In honesty, only Muzzie with his spells or Aeony were likely to have been worthy adversaries for the beast.

“Enough Nethra.” Shouted Muzzie. “Finish it.....We need to be moving.”

Had Nethra been playing with the thing ? It only took her one massive hit with her tail, to leave the creature on its back and helpless. Claws into what was probably its chest and it was all over. Nethra kept going, digging in deep with her teeth. Her head came out covered in its blood, with a piece of flesh in her mouth. A few chews and the flesh was spat out.

“Didn’t taste nice, huh ?” Asked Sensan.

“Oh, this place.....It tasted like old dead meat.” Muttered Nethra.

That didn’t stop her cutting large pieces out of her kill, and putting them in her pack. No wrapping or trimming, the meat went in, blood and all. It seemed old dead meat was better than no meat at all. By the time Nethra was finished, every wound on her body, had just about healed.

“I envy your ability to heal, Nethra.” Said Runa.

“Yes, very useful.....Probably a gift from my father’s side, whoever he was.”

Chain Mail was finished and the other two archers said a few words over his body, before covering it in the ubiquitous Gorshan dirt and rubble.

“I’ll make sure his family get a little extra.” Said Muzzie.

Finding the door was almost an anti-climax, though finding it broken and shattered meant no huge amount of time and effort to break through it. Something had done the job, shattering hardwood panels and bending metal banding. The lock was still there, intact and hanging off the doorframe.

“Whatever did this.....I hope it was breaking out and not breaking in.” Muttered Galla.

Of course the pieces of door were blocking the entrance; annoyance seemed the normal state of affairs for everything in Gorshan. Heavy too, it had once been a massive, strong door. By the time they’d dragged the remnants of the door away, everyone was hinting at another quick break.

“There is an old Ubari saying about plenty of time to rest in hell.” Muzzie said. “We’ll go up a few floors and find somewhere safe to rest inside the castle walls. Caspian.....Vella...We’ll use your oil lamps and conserve the others.”

Horrid, grubby smelly, oil lamps. For some reason Runa got the job of helping Caspian and Vella, get the lamps out of their packs and fill them with oil. According to Muzzie, a simple light spell in Gorshan, might well blow your arm off, so it was oil lamps. If those ran out they’d be left with the bottles containing bioluminescent chemicals. Mind you, if they hadn’t left Gorshan by then, it probably meant they were all dead.

“Look.....Our first Vargouille.” Said Vella, pointing through a shattered window.

“Nonsense, Vargouille hate strong sunlight.” Said Muzzie. “They’re definitely creatures of the night, or the dusk.”

“Look.....I know Vargouille, even at a distance.” Said Vella. “I saw enough of them last time we were in this dreadful place.”

“She’s right.....I see two of them, now three.” Said Caspian.

Runa looked and near the ruined barracks was an intact tower, with several flying creatures circling around it. She’d never seen Vargouille before and to be honest, they didn’t look that terrifying. Muzzie seemed worried though, which meant she was worried.

“Vargouille out in the daylight.....Things have changed a lot since we were last here.” Said Muzzie.

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