

The Last Emperor

Chapter 13 – Leaving Annill

“The city council of Annill had agreed to publicly accept Mussaneth Osranetherer as their emperor. There was even going to be a statue of Muzzie just inside the main gates to the city. How much it would look like Muzzie was interesting everyone, especially Muzzie.”



Muzzie pulled his bloody blade out of the dead ambush hunter. Maybe it was clever and knew they'd be heading for the doorway to Annill, or maybe it was all nothing but coincidence. No magic had been used and the fighters with him had barely got into their stride. They were learning, the fight had been an easy victory. Gorshan had done something to everyone, mainly because they'd survived to go home. Muzzie could see it in their eyes, the toughness of true warriors.

“I really do hate this place.....I hope it falls down after we leave.” Said Maya.

“One day someone else may need the wisdom of Wēland Raag.” Said Galla.

“They won't find him here.” Said Muzzie. “Wēland the cleric has moved on, to wherever humans move onto once their time is over.”

There was a storm arriving, the dark clouds still in the distance, though they'd soon bring a terrible storm to the castle. Wēland had mentioned the storms and their connection to the rubble which covered everything. He'd called the storms the Ruin of Gorshan. No wonder only monsters, the dead and foolish visitors now walked through the halls of Castle Gorshan.

“Will you ever tell us what Wēland Raag told you ?” Asked Aeony.

“Maybe, some of it.....Though not until we're well away from this dreadful place. We must trap the door from the other side. Nothing from Gorshan can be allowed to infest Annill.”

“Supposing good people use the door.” Said Maya.

“There are no good people in Gorshan, Honey.” Said Runa.

“Just monsters.” Added Vella.

Wēland the cleric had told Muzzie many things about Gorshan and Tomma-Goran's curse of prophecy. The long dead cleric hadn't been worried that a hybrid had turned up to ask about a destiny intended for a human hero.

“You're of this time and place, Muzzie.” Wēland had told him. “You'd be surprised how many deities are watching you. The rifts are drifting towards longer and longer periods of inactivity. It's been millennia since a leader came along to unite all the creatures of the rifts. You may well be that leader, the one to rid the rifts of creeping apathy. An emperor is required and a banner to bring purpose to the billions who call the rifts home.”

It seemed not just deities were watching Muzzie's progress. The lords of chaos had their agents following Muzzie and not all of them wanted the rifts united under a single banner. The ancient cleric hadn't suggested a course of action, or hinted at where to go next. Wēland had told him, almost ordered Muzzie what to do next. No mention of finding his own path, Wēland had been of the Raag dynasty and he expected to be obeyed.

“First you must be declared Emperor by the ruling council of Annill.” Wēland had said. “Should be quiet easy as your army are mostly from Annill. I foresee very little bloodshed, though you may have to execute the fool who runs the library.”

Muzzie had no idea what Chenad had done to earn the wrath of Wēland, but he had no intention of getting the official executioner to take his head off his shoulders. Not that Muzzie had an imperial executioner, not yet. As to where to take his army after leaving Annill.....

“Make sure all the small towns on the road out of Annill; swear allegiance to you as their lawful emperor.” Wēland had said. “Don’t be afraid to execute any awkward local officials. Then take your army to Tandalla, that awful little bazaar town on the fifth rift. You can’t leave Tandalla behind you without getting them to name you as their lawful emperor. Hopefully you won’t need to attack the town, but don’t hesitate if it’s necessary. You have to take Tandalla, Muzzie.”

“The fifth rift after leaving Annill.....That is at least a two years journey.” Said Muzzie.

“No, I can tell you about places where you can cross the rifts in an instant.....Old human places.”

The ancient cleric went on to detail a campaign covering many years and Muzzie still remembered it all. One of the most surprising things shouldn’t have surprised him. It was after all, inevitable....

“.....and from Mount Erran, the holy mountain on the Pilgrim Trail.....It’s only a short march to the City of the Lost God. It may feel like home, Muzzie. But you will have to take the city by force. Don’t expect them want you as emperor, it will be a tough fight.”

Tough wasn’t a strong enough word. Aeony would have to fight her sister dark angels. Caspian would have to turn on his mentor and send Adamaz to a true death. It was home to them all and the thought of fighting and killing the people he knew.....That was a long way off though. First he had to use his new army to make himself the accepted emperor of Annill.

“You look troubled old friend.” Said Nethra.

“I am, we’re leaving Sensan in this evil place.” Said Muzzie. “Will you replace him, Nethra ? Please join us and make up the seven.”

“Of course I will.”

“How about me ?” Asked Maya.

“I’ll keep you busy.” Said Galla. “You’ll need to know how to recognise every useful plant, bulb or root on the rifts.”

Muzzie stepped through the door back to Annill and the others followed him.

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A comfortable bed and decent food, Aeony was happy to be back in their room at the Annill Defender tavern. Not back there for too long, Muzzie had already sent a message to Chenad, asking him to arrange a meeting with Dhūlen.

“I’ve heard good things about him.” Muzzie had said. “Part Terak or not, if I look the look of him, I’ll offer him the job straight away.”

Muzzie had fire in his belly since seeing Wēland Raag and knowing where to take his new and untested army. Dhūlen was to be the general of that army and Runa was hiring unemployed soldiers based purely on their reputation. Again it was Muzzie pushing everything forward. He wanted an army of two thousand, equipped and ready to march out of Annill by the Feast of Nigon. That feast was only twenty one days away.

“He’s asked me to recommend officers for his army.” Merrick had told her. “One minute I’m to keep out of his affairs, now I’m recommending fighters to be his field commanders. Are you sure it’s the same Muzzie you brought back from Gorshan ?”

Not just Wēland, Muzzie had told her about his deal with LLud Narren and the dead human sorcerer seemed to have affected their would be emperor. Despite banning camp followers as the cause of drunkenness and disease, Muzzie was now encouraging them.

“Any army needs a little fun and recreation.” He’d told a confused looking Runa.

Camp followers were originally comprised of the women who couldn't, or wouldn't be parted from their lovers and husbands in the army. Retailers followed the women, suppliers of food, clothing and other essentials. In time the camp followers started to become a tent city, with a population that outnumbered the fighters. The last time Xanash, the thirty fourth emperor had led an army into battle; he'd taken thirty thousand warriors into battle. The camp followers had been like a small city under canvas and had numbered at least a hundred thousand. Yes, the services on offer had kept his men happy, but the inevitable bars and brothels had spread drunkenness and disease. After banning them, their emperor was all in favour of everything the camp followers might offer. On the whole, it was a decision Aeony agreed with.

Yes, Muzzie had changed in many ways while in Gorshan. Aeony shared his bed though; she knew he was basically the same bar owner from the City of the Lost God. He now had a purpose, a direction of travel and most of all.....Muzzie now thought he really might become Emperor of all seven rifts. It had been a busy day and they were still enjoying having a clean bed and a little privacy. Their coupling had gone on into the night, until they'd fallen asleep. As was her habit, she'd wrapped her wings around them both. Their bodies still wrapped around one another, Muzzie getting out of bed had woken her.

"You kept your word, so I will keep mine." Said LLud.

The second time LLud Narren had visited their room in the Defender, though he looked much more solid this time. Still the slight glow of a ghost, but it was easy to see he had the tall, thin body of a pure blood human. Purple robes this time and his long beard looked freshly trimmed. All in all, the sorcerer looked far better than the ghost who'd previously interrupted their sleep. Aeony folded her wings and sat on the edge of their bed.

"It can't be.....I recognise it, but that's impossible....." Aeony muttered.

"Agents working for the Raag family found it." Said LLud. "Carry it with pride, Muzzie.....Though I wouldn't tell anyone how you acquired it. Let them think you fought every Vargouille in Gorshan."

It was leaning against the table in the window and glowing slightly. A blue glow, a few legends mentioned the blue glow. Xanash the thirty fourth had carried the shield into battle. It had been lost in battle somewhere near Nara-Odil on the first rift. Its origin was lost in prehistory, though the dragon's head etched into the metal, hinted at the oldest of the old gods. It had become known as the Emperor's Shield. Just carrying it into battle would make Muzzie the true emperor to many. Another legend claimed that whoever carried the shield into battle, was invisible.

"Such a gift, LLud." Said Muzzie. "Thank you, I never expected anything like this."

"A favour for a favour, you could have thrown my soul into the abyss." Said LLud. "There are other artefacts I intend to look for, now I'm able to pick them up. Anything I think might be of use to you; I will leave where you sleep."

"Do you know who created the shield?" Asked Aeony. "I've always wondered."

"The oldest of the ancient reptile gods would be my guess." Said LLud. "That is only a guess though, no one is really certain.....Not after so many millennia."

Muzzie picked up the shield and without saying another word, LLud vanished.

"This.....Could make all the difference." Said Muzzie. "Between having to attack Tandalla and being accepted as their emperor without a fight."

"Somewhere.....Sooner or later, Muzzie. You will need to leave a burned city behind you, its population slaughtered. Otherwise some will never take you seriously."

"I know.....But I would prefer to pick where and when that happens." Said Muzzie.

"Come back to bed, it's a cold night."

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Three days until the Feast of Nigon, though Muzzie wanted them all on the road before the feast began. Runa had never been so busy, with hiring soldiers, buying equipment and dealing with suppliers wanting to join the camp followers. Insanely busy, though Caspian had performed wonders, working on his own. The city council of Annill had agreed to publicly accept Mussaneth Osranetherer as their emperor. There was even going to be a statue of Muzzie just inside the main gates to the city. How much it would look like Muzzie was interesting everyone, especially Muzzie. Just having the statue there though, with his name on it, that was the important thing. The statue would probably be on its plinth about the same time Muzzie was giving an ultimatum to the rulers of Tandalla.

“Runa.....We weren’t expecting you.” Said Maya. “My mum is panicking a little, there’s so many things to get packed and on the back of a cart.”

“I just wanted to make sure you’re alright.” Said Runa. “Gorshan was tough on the adults. I can’t even imagine how you must have felt.”

“I’m fine, mostly.....Though I do sometimes think about leaving Sensan there.” Said Maya.

“There was no other option.”

“I know.....Still, it felt bad coming home without him.” Said Maya.

“His sword went to his family.” Said Runa. “A reliable messenger service, though they might not deliver it for over a year.....It will get to them.”

“I’m glad his sword went to his people.” Said Maya.

“If you need anything.....Let me know, I’m working in the council building.” Said Runa. “If I don’t hear from you, we’ll expect Galla’s new apprentice to join us when we leave Annill.”

“I’ll be there.....There is something.” Said Maya. “I want to tell you something, but only you must know about it. It’s a secret that’s eating at me.....Someone has to know.”

“You can tell me.”

“Do you promise to tell no one else ?” Asked Maya.

“Yes....I promise. Now tell me or I’ll go crazy.”

“There was gold in Gorshan.” Said Maya. “Two bars of the purist Gorshan gold. I found it and carried it home to give to my mum. I’ve never seen her so happy. Please don’t tell Muzzie.....Don’t tell anyone.”

Runa knew the girl was tough and resourceful, yet it was still a shock. That much gold was heavy to carry and they’d all lived and changed their clothes together. There could be no privacy when so many enemies were around.

“Wow, how did you carry it home ?” Asked Runa.

“My mum makes strong clothes, with tough pockets.” Said Maya. “Bird was a pest, always flapping about when I washed. I threw stones at him a couple of times. It was tough, but I kept it a secret....Please don’t tell Muzzie.”

“I won’t.....Would you like my opinion on the gold ?”

“Do you think I’m a thief ?” Asked Maya.

“Do you want to hear my opinion ?” Asked Runa.

“Yes, I suppose so.”

“All the adults in the seven, me included; will do very well if Muzzie becomes emperor. Huge amounts of money will come our way; Caspian may well be the King of the City of the Lost God. You’re young, so no one thinks about rewarding you. The risks were the same for you, though you were a brat for running off.”

“Sorry.” Said Maya.

“I’m really saying you were due a reward and the gold sounds about right, Maya.” Said Runa. “I hope your mum can buy food and clothes, without counting every bronze piece. No, you aren’t a thief....You earned that gold.”

Maya hugged her and despite thinking Dredger kids were fairly ugly as a whole, Runa hugged her back.

“So you won’t tell Muzzie ?” Asked Maya.

“No ! Ask that again and I will get your mum to beat you.”

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~ The Feast of Nigon ~

Caspian and Vella walked with General Dhūlen, as he took the army through the main gates of Annill and out onto the third rift. There were a few animals pulling carts that could have been ridden, but it was a military tradition that a general marched in front of his warriors. Caspian thought that Dhūlen made an impressive leader, with his red armour and the extra bit of height that must have come from his Terak ancestry. His tiny residual wings were just about noticeable, where his armour had been altered to cover them. All in all, Caspian was pleased that Muzzie had appointed Dhūlen to lead the army into battle.

“It would have been nice to remain in Annill until after the feast.” Said Vella.

“Muzzie wants to reach the Quella Traps before the rainy season begins.” Said Caspian.

The Quella Traps were deep pits in the ground, which had once been full of a noxious tar like substance. A huge number of rift creatures had fallen into the traps, never to escape. Occasionally a massive set of bones was discovered, as the traps dried out and became reasonably safe ground. Not totally safe, they were going to have to treat the ancient natural traps with respect.

There was a massive human portal near the traps, which Muzzie had told them, would take the army to within a day’s march of Tandalla. The information had come from Wēland Raag and although Caspian didn’t like to doubt the long dead cleric, none of the books in the Great Library mentioned a massive human portal that close to Annill. If they had, he’d have remembered it.

“I can see how the traps would be more dangerous when the rains arrive.” Said Vella. “Where is Muzzie ? I thought he’d be right at the front of his army.”

“He might have, until Chenad gave him a talk on the tactics of Xanash the twenty third. He was an emperor who liked to be at the front of every fight and skirmish. He only ruled for two years and died in battle. If Muzzie wants to ever see the canals of Leng, he needs to keep at the back most of the time.”

“And he probably didn’t want to overshadow Dhūlen.” Said Vella. “Muzzie’s new armour looks so impressive and that shield. Where do you think he got it ?”

“Officially we helped him fight hundreds of Vargouille for it.” Said Caspian. “We both know that is nonsense. He acquired it somewhere in Annill, not Gorshan. My guess.....We’ll never know the truth.”

“Aeony will know.” Said Vella.

“As if that helps, she’ll never tell us.”

Camp followers had a negative connotation, a term used as an insult. Once it had been mainly families following loved ones. Over time it had come to mean those offering intimacy for a few coins. Not just women, a surprising number on tent brothels offered a large variety of sexual partners, at a price. Ever fancied sex while wrapped in the wings of a Ushong hybrid ? Then you’d have enjoyed a visit to the tent city of the camp followers.

“And here comes the band of the camp followers.” Said Caspian. “Muzzie should have told the musicians to stay at home in Annill.”

“The music is rather cheerful.” Said Vella.

It had to have been close to two hours since Dhūlen had been cheered as the army had begun to leave the city. The camp followers had been told to leave it a while, after Muzzie and his guards had left Annill. Caspian knew they had to be some way from the city gate, yet there it was, the sound of the band. Largely amateurs, old soldiers who’d learned to get a few notes out of an instrument. Mainly the sound was the deep beat of large drums, the kind often carried into battle. Mostly, Caspian thought of the band as extra mouths to be fed. Vella was right though, it was a cheerful sound. As he looked over his shoulder he could see the army, over two thousand fighters, marching side by side.

“That is an impressive sight.” Said Caspian. “All of them have taken an oath to serve Muzzie until he becomes emperor.”

“Hopefully, they’ll scare the crap out of the town mayor of Medenar.” Said Vella.

“I doubt if any blood will be spilt.” Said Caspian.

Never take anything for granted of course, but both small towns on the road out of Annill, would have heard about Muzzie being announced as the Emperor of Annill. Medenar, which was only a day away, had a mayor, while Dessine had a kind of feudal Lord. Muzzie needed their agreement to being their emperor. Neither of them was likely to say no to a new emperor leading a large army.

“Maybe we’ll get all the way to Leng, without fighting anyone.” Said Vella.

“Tandalla might accept Muzzie, but they’ll want something in return, probably a lot of things. But Quron.....Muzzie will probably need to burn the city and salt the ground afterwards. Heretics, Vella.....The whole fucking city is full of them.”

Quron, the unofficial capital of the second rift. Still on the Pilgrim Trail, though they were getting quite fussy over who was allowed through their city gates. Caspian had heard alarming rumours about chaos creatures roaming the streets at night. Probably the wild tales of traveller’s, but he wasn’t looking forward to arriving outside Quron.

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Galla had kept some of the money from selling Dhali Drahl her enchanted dagger. Not a lot, nearly all of it had gone into Muzzie’s war chest. She’d kept enough to be able to splash out on a cart to save her old bones and joints from having the long walk to Leng. Not just a cart, she’d hired a few strong Dredgers to steer it from the front and push it from the back. Nethra and Maya were going to travel with her, though the child seemed completely unfocused by the excitement of the day.

“Where is that child ?” Muttered Galla.

“Travelling with the emperor.....It was bound to excite her.” Said Nethra.

“If she gets lost, I’m not looking for her.....Not with my poor old joints.” Said Galla.

Merrick had already upset Galla’s timetable, by wanting to spend ages saying goodbye to Nethra. No arguments, just a face on him like someone who’s heard their favourite child has been possessed by wraiths. It had been a relief when Merrick had trudged away and back into Annill.

“I see her.” Said Nethra. “Over here.....Maya ! We’re over here.”

One cart among many, though no one had dared suggest that they should join the carts and waggons of the camp followers. At least they were moving with the carts containing all the provisions needed by a huge army. Some dry goods suppliers in Annill, had been completely emptied of their stock.

“Oh, more twigs and leaves.” Nethra had muttered a few times.

Galla knew that if it came to it, everyone would be grateful of those sacks of berries, leaves and dried fruit.

"Maya, we're here !" Yelled Galla. "Oh, wretched child.....Go to her Bird, or she'll never find us." Her bird had taken to chuntering at her and being grumpy, rather than the old instant insults. On the whole, Galla had preferred Bird when he called her stupid or silly, about fifty times a day.

"I see her." Said Bird. In a tone that told the world the job was beneath him.

Her pet moved quickly though, twisting and turning as he flew away, to get past dozens of other carts and groups of marching warriors.

"Ahhh, good.....He's found her." Muttered Galla.

Bird was circling around Maya, while the girl waved at them and began to run towards the cart. Galla just hoped it wasn't a portent of the child's future behaviour. Maya wasn't stupid, or Galla would never have agreed to having the Dredger kid as an apprentice. The worrying thing was if Maya turned out to be one of those young people who appeared to love being trouble.

"We'll have to watch that one." Muttered Galla.

"I thought of tying her up when we were in Gorshan." Said Nethra. "A lot of natural exuberance, maybe too much. But the girl means well."

"Hmmmmm." Mumbled Galla.

Bird arrived back with Maya, sat on her shoulder. They appeared to be having a conversation, which was strange. Her Bird wasn't taciturn; he just didn't seem to like people enough to talk to them.

"So.....Dredger child.....Explain your late arrival ?" Asked Galla.

"I bought you these, as a thank you for taking me." Said Maya.

They came out of the girl's pocket, wrapped in a piece of clean cloth. Ashunt blooms were expensive, usually only bought for special holidays and birthdays of loved ones. Ashunt oil was used by priests, to anoint the faithful. Both were expensive, but nowhere near the price of Ashunt fruit. Maya had two perfectly ripened Ashunt fruits in her hands. She handed one to Nethra and Galla was given the other. They must have cost Maya gold, no one sells Ashunt fruit for bronze coins. An eighth of an imperial piece probably, a fortune for a Dredger child. Where had Maya obtained that kind of money ? Galla wasn't too concerned. The girl had her faults, but Galla was certain she was no thief.

"Thank you, Maya." Said Galla. "These are one of my weaknesses, my favourite indulgence."

"I know.....Bird told me."

"Delicious.....Maybe we won't tie you up every night after all." Said Nethra.

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Medenar had welcomed their new emperor with enthusiasm. The Feast of Nigon effectively became the feast of Muzzie for a day. There was an impromptu parade and the town mayor was officially confirmed in that role. Caspian had drawn up the necessary document, which was signed by Muzzie. It had been a wonderful start to what would probably become a hard fought, bloody campaign.

Around fifty experienced fighters joined the emperor's army, with a few of their loved ones joining the camp followers. Supply lines had the potential to become a problem as his army grew. Again, Chenad had told him about the military campaigns of Xanash the fifth and how he'd solved the problem. Hopefully, supply lines wouldn't be a problem once Tandalla was his.

Dessine had been less easy, though there had been a happy group of people there to meet him at the town gates. The local feudal lord was corrupt, greedy and asking for far too many favours, to proclaim Muzzie as the town's emperor. Dhūlen knew one of the new recruits was particularly good at using a double sided war axe.

“Best I’ve seen……She could peel fruit with that axe of hers, or remove someone’s head from their shoulders with just as much skill.” Dhūlen had said.

The feudal lord was executed and one of his cousins was given the job of running Dessine. It was amazing how few concessions were asked for by the new feudal lord. Muzzie was proclaimed town emperor and the army was heading towards the Quella Traps the following morning. There had been a feast in his honour of course, another day subverted from the Feast of Nigon.

“Just as well Nigon boiled away into the void, or you might be in trouble.” Galla had said.

Muzzie had told Dhūlen the army needed to be at the traps on the last day of the famous annual feast. His new general had managed to get the army there, without being too nose-y about why the date was so important. Muzzie could see Dhūlen becoming a friend.

“Well, we’re there.” Said Dhūlen. “All I can see though……Are miles of dunes and the traps.”

“A very old, very wise and very dead cleric, told me to be at this place on this date.” Said Muzzie. “He didn’t seem the type to lie to me or play jokes.”

They were well away from the traps and Muzzie hoped the army didn’t need to go any closer.

Morale was high and losing a few carts into the traps was the last thing Muzzie needed. Looking across the sands, all he could see was an endless sea of constantly shifting dunes. There was something though, like heat haze rippling across the top of a dune.

“Do you see that ?” Asked Muzzie, pointing.

“I see a heat shimmer, but nothing else.” Said Dhūlen.

“A heat shimmer on cool sand……Come with me, just you and I.”

Muzzie didn’t believe Wēland Raag would mislead him; there was no point in that. Things changed though and the traps were surrounded by miles of shifting sands. Muzzie walked to where the shimmer was dancing along the top of a dune. Dhūlen was with him, though he still didn’t seem convinced they’d found anything other than a heat shimmer.

“There……Nothing and you’re away from your guards.” Said Dhūlen.

Caspian had drawn up rules for the safety of the emperor, which Muzzie had been nagged into agreeing to. Unless he was in his tent for the night, his personal guard would never leave his side. It was rule one and the guard would still be outside his tent. Aeony had been granted a dispensation, to enter his quarters.

“Whenever I damned well please.” As she’d put it.

Which was only fair, as his quarter were also hers. Muzzie walked up to the shimmer and thrust his hand into it. The shimmer froze, waiting for the words that hadn’t been spoken for well over a hundred thousand years. Muzzie hoped his memory and pronunciation were both good enough.

Human words and his mouth didn’t feel the right shape.

“Zackim……Nimenesh……Ommanil.”

Muzzie knew it wouldn’t look like a temple, though Wēland hadn’t described it that well. There were ruined gateways said to allow access to and through the abyss, though Muzzie had never seen any of them. Some said they used the abyss to travel anywhere, while others said such places cut right through the endless void. Muzzie hadn’t been expecting the massive stone structure to suddenly appear, as if it had always been there, though hidden.

“By the nine divines……I will never doubt your words again, my emperor.” Said Dhūlen.

Muzzie was as surprised as his general, though he was going to keep that to himself. There were pictures on the wall of the rooms used by Adamaz, in the Great Library back home in the City of the Lost God. Incredibly old drawings of Sentinel Temples, as used by the first great empire to rule the rifts. Not quite human, yet not wholly demon. Clerics mostly and unless Muzzie was remembering

wrongly, whoever had built the Sentinels, had built the enormous stone structure he and Dhūlen were gazing at. The similarity was too close to be a coincidence.

“Once activated, this Void Gate will take us anywhere, the entire army.” Said Muzzie. “And it will bring us back again.....We’ll need a permanent camp here, for the army and the camp followers.” Actually, Muzzie needed to have been somewhere, or have the correct name for a destination and a good idea of what it looked like. Tandalla would be easy to visualise, but other places.....The seventh rift was a living hell and Wēland had told him he’d have to find his own route to Gateway. That, like so much else, was a problem for another day.

“We brought timber and tools.....I’ll get the army setting up camp and building a stockade.” Said Dhūlen.

Muzzie had to do it, it was irresistible. He walked right up to the closest wall of what looked like white marble. He touched it and then rubbed his hand over the cool, smooth surface. It was real.....It really existed, though he never said those words.

“Beautiful and we’re probably the first to see the Void Gate since.....As good as forever.” Said Muzzie.

A building with three sides and several floors. Muzzie would have the rooms and hallways thoroughly searched. If it looked safe and defensible, he’d use the rooms as his quarters and base of operations. The open space enclosed by the walls resembled a huge parade ground. The army could assemble there and pass quickly through the gate to Tandalla, once it was opened.

“How is this.....Structure activated ?” Asked Dhūlen.

“It has been activated.....By me and only I can now instruct it where to send us.” Said Muzzie. “As for giving it a destination....Come, I will show you it all.”

The parade ground area was huge, large enough for an army of half a million to be assembled. It had been surfaced with large grey tiles, which showed no signs of ageing.

“It has to be said.” Said Dhūlen. “The humans knew how to create buildings to last forever.”

“Oh, my friend.....This place was built before humans walked the rifts.”

Either Wēland Raag was mistaken in calling it a human building, or he simply didn’t want to give long explanations. They were almost across the parade ground, when Maya was by his side. The Dredger kid always seemed to turn up where she wasn’t supposed to be. Nethra was with her, though no sign of Galla. She was probably sat in their cart, while moaning yet again about painful joints and old bones.

“This place is beautiful.....What does it do ?” Asked Maya.

“Wait.....Be patient and you will see.” Said Muzzie.

Luck too, that had to be a factor, another thing he was going to keep to himself. The building looked solid enough, but a working and above all safe, Void Gate.....It had to have been there since before the rifts had probably been called the rifts. In his experience over a fairly long and eventful lifetime, the older anything was, the less reliable.

“Can we use this to get to Tandalla ?” Asked Nethra.

“Blessed Nigon, save me from the impatient.” Said Muzzie.

Into the building and the pedestal was roughly where he’d been told it would be. Designed for someone or something about his height, his hands rested well on the surface. There was the outline of a hand, a right hand with seven fingers, though Wēland had told him his six fingers would work well enough.

Muzzie concentrated on the name of Tandalla and remembered the last time he’d visited the city. An old memory, but the essence of a city rarely changes that much. The smell of Ashunt blooms, the

stench of Farrag beasts kept as pullers of waggons, the cold wind from the north. As the outline of a hand glowed, Muzzie placed his right hand on it and pressed down hard. There was a loud bang and the building definitely shuddered.

“Muzzie.....Is it safe ?” Asked Nethra.

As if he knew.....Muzzie closed his eyes and ignored the shuddering and shaking, as something staggeringly old, turned itself on. The air crackled and even Dhūlen gasped. He felt Maya hold his left hand in hers, so he gave it a reassuring squeeze.

“It’ll be fine, Maya.....You wait, it will be fine.” Said Muzzie.

And if it wasn’t ? Muzzie thought that the Void Gate exploding and killing him, might just be the multiverse’s way of saying no hybrid should accept a destiny intended for a human. Humans were abominations; detested by the gods.....Everyone knew that. But he didn’t die and the building didn’t blow itself apart. He opened his eyes and there was a throbbing blue column of energy in the centre of the parade ground. A wide column, a hundred could have marched into it, marching side by side. There was a humming and still a little vibration, but nothing that felt too bad.

“Come on.....Let’s take a quick look at Tandalla.” Said Muzzie.

“But.....Respectfully, it needs to be tested.” Said Dhūlen.

“I agree.....And we shall be the ones to test it.”

Still holding Maya’s hand, Muzzie walked up to the column of pulsating blue energy. He waited, until Nethra and Dhūlen had each looked in his direction and nodded.

“Any use asking you to stay here, Dredger kid ?” Asked Muzzie.

“No.” Said Maya.

Almost as one, the four of them stepped into and through the Void Gate. Muzzie had used portals since being a kid, everyone had. Portals and the nausea that sometimes followed, were part of life in the City of the Lost God. The void was different though, it was where the different realities of the multiverse met, collided, overlapped and.....With luck, left you were you needed to be. After his eyes adjusted to the brighter light of the fifth rift, he could see the city in the distance. Over two miles away but there was no mistaking the city on the lake.

“Good, close but not too close.....Welcome to Tandalla.” Said Muzzie.

“It’s beautiful, so we have to attack them ?” Asked Maya.

“Probably, though not today.....We’ll come back with the army.” Said Muzzie.

The return gate was glowing blue, though not that brightly. Certainly no one in Tandalla was likely to have noticed their arrival, or their exit. Muzzie took them all back through the Void and back to the building on the dunes.

“It worked.” Said Dhūlen.

“Of course it did.” Said Muzzie.

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