

The Last Emperor

Chapter 29 – Bredon's Edge

“Runa still had work to do in Tandalla. Tempting to accept everyone in the prison who looked able to fight, but she could hear her long dead father, saying how disappointed he was. Every potential recruit needed to be talked to. She'd already rejected several in the Tandalla city jail, for being slightly too crazy to fight for the new empire.”



Muzzie had borrowed three of the Hive Mother's tall Ubari females. They weren't so much intimidating, as being different to most hybrids in the stockade. Very tall and strong, with a slight blueish tinge to their skin. Their very presence demanded respect. They were the perfect people to request the presence of young Olvir on his own, without his parents. Vella and Caspian wouldn't like it of course, but weren't in a position to refuse. Both of them expected to be punished, for burning his bar down. There had to be a punishment, or whispers would start, about the emperor being weak. Or even worse, that he had one set of rules for the army and another for his friends. When Olvir arrived, he looked curious rather than nervous.....

“Olvir.....I thought we needed to have a talk.” Said Muzzie. “There's plenty to eat and drink. The food may be different to what you usually eat, but try a few things.”

They were in the room where Muzzie tended to eat his meals. There was a long table and Olvir sat about three seats from him. Did the boy remember him, his parent's friend ? He had to, it hadn't been that long since they'd all attended his parent's wedding anniversary. Their tenth and close to Olvir's ninth birthday. That would make him about twelve, or maybe thirteen now, but he looked older. All hybrids grew and aged differently and his father was a long way from being a standard hybrid. The boy took a bite out of a small cake and obviously liked it.

“Do you remember me ?” Asked Muzzie.

“Of course I do, Muzzie.” Said Olvir. “My mother used to work at your bar.”

“Does Vella talk about those times ?”

“Yes, she said they were some of the best times of her life.” Said Olvir. “She's really upset about the fire.....So is my father.”

Best times of her life.....Hearing that pleased Muzzie. She and Caspian had spent a lot of nights in her room; he'd often seen Caspian leaving just after first light. That was before Adamaz had allowed Caspian to move his wife to be, into the rooms he had in the Great Library.

“It must be weird for you.” Said Muzzie. “You arrive here and your parents are expecting to be punished. I'd love to forget about it all, but I can't. Everyone knows Caspian and Vella burned my bar down. I am the new emperor.....Some kind of punishment is expected.”

“It was Adamaz who did it.” Said Olvir.

“But Adamaz isn't here and your parents are. Not that you should be talking about Adamaz. If word gets back to the City of the Lost God, he might be executed for treason.”

“I won't.....My father thinks you might have them flogged. He was telling my mother that he could cope with a flogging, if it wasn't in public.”

Flogging.....At least five people had suggested that Vella and Caspian should be publicly flogged. Brutal and nasty, but the wounds would heal quickly. Fairly soon, everyone would forget about it

happening. Not that Muzzie had any intention of flogging his old friends. Not that he could tell Olvir. The boy would go straight back and tell his parents they wouldn't be flogged.

"It will be a tough decision, but I'm still thinking about it." Said Muzzie. "I just don't want you to feel guilty. I'm very happy you're here.....It was just the way they did it."

"They burned your home down." Said Olvir.

"Exactly.....The tavern had been my home for a very long time."

Muzzie wanted something he could do for the boy. He shouldn't feel awkward because his parents had done something stupid. Muzzie nodded at one of the Ubaris, who brought the weapon to the table. A long blade, which would be like a short sword, on the hip of a boy not yet finished with childhood. It had been expensive, the best blade to be found in the weapon smiths of Annill.

"Your mother mentioned you asking for a weapon." Said Muzzie. "I did ask her and she had agreed that you can carry a blade. I will arrange for you to receive training on how to defend yourself with it. Do you still wish to carry a blade?"

"Oh yes, more than anything in the world." Said Olvir.

Muzzie had felt the same, though his first sword had been quite old and worn. His brother had stolen it from somewhere, but that hadn't stopped that old blade from being wonderful. Muzzie showed Olvir how to fix the blade's sheath to his belt, so that it didn't get in his way.

"Learn, Olvir.....Learn quickly." Said Muzzie. "One day soon, I will have need of you beside me in battle."

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Runa still had work to do in Tandalla. Tempting to accept everyone in the prison who looked able to fight, but she could hear her long dead father, saying how disappointed he was. Every potential recruit needed to be talked to. She'd already rejected several in the Tandalla city jail, for being slightly too crazy to fight for the new empire.

"This is the third major expansion of the stockade." Said Bizzi. "My Dredgers will work hard and achieve the impossible, it's what Dredgers do. But Muzzie will need earthworks for a long siege on the City of the Lost God. One guess as to who will be building those earthworks? Our children work, our expectant mothers work, but there are limits."

For Bizzi, such angry talk was almost a revolt. Dredgers were usually polite; it was another one of their things. So far, Bizzi had never criticised the orders he'd been given. Runa suspected the earthworks wouldn't be needed. She'd been told a few secrets though and none of them were for Bizzi's ears. Muzzie had reset the Void Gate himself and sent a runner to fetch her. Runa's orders from her emperor were simple.....Keep the Dredgers happy and working. A seed of an idea was forming in her mind.....

"Is there anywhere I can go to recruit more Dredgers?" Asked Runa.

"I doubt it.....I was once headman over a few hundred Dredgers." Said Bizzi. "They've been coming to join us from everywhere. I now command over seven thousand Dredgers and empire cities are beginning to complain. Their civic projects aren't being completed. Encouraging more Dredgers to come will cause problems and.....I suspect it wouldn't work. Muzzie already employs more of my people, than many thought existed on this rift. I can get my people to achieve the impossible, but now he asks more than the impossible."

Bizzi was giving her a lopsided grin, which indicated an improvement in his mood. Runa had suspected every Dredger who could find the stockade, was already there. She'd had to ask the question, before suggesting an unusual solution.

“The demon city, Segin-Unadaris.” Said Runa. “They had no Dredgers, yet their city walls were impressive. I’m told they’ve rebuilt and repaired all the damaged caused by the imperial army. Who builds for the Hive Mother ?”

“The same people who built the City of Leng, or so I’m told.” Said Bizzi. “Demons of course, thousands of pure blood demons.”

“Are they good builders ?” Asked Runa.

“Well.....My people are more skilled, but the demons have amazing strength. Under the right supervision, I’ve heard they’re quite good.”

Saying they were quite good, was praise indeed from Bizzi. There was no other realistic option, but it would be nice if Bizzi was happy with her plan. It meant telling Bizzi a very minor secret. Runa doubted if Muzzie would have her head removed though, he just wanted the Dredgers happy and working hard.

“Ginnda, the Hive Mother.....Is bringing eight thousand pure blood demons, to join the army. I could easily have them working for you. Not forever, they will be needed once the army attacks Quron. For a while though.....They’d be yours to command.” Said Runa.

“Aren’t they needed to attack the City of the Lost God ?” Asked Bizzi.

There were a few Dredger families lurking around and another Dredger thing was very good hearing. Runa leant in close to Bizzi, to mutter in his ear.

“Pure bloods attacking a city of hybrids.” Said Runa. “That could be a problem.....The defenders might decide to fight until the last one of them is still standing. Ginnda is an ally of course, but her fighters are better suited to the attack on Quron.”

“So.....You can guarantee the pure bloods will work for me ?” Asked Bizzi.

Runa couldn’t, but Ginnda could. She was the Hive mother with her link to all those who usually inhabited the demon city, her hive. A mental link, or chemicals....No one understood how it worked. Ginnda had total control though. She could get pure bloods to shovel Jangar shit all day, while thinking it was an honour.

“Yes, Bizzi.....I can guarantee that.” Said Runa.

“When will they arrive ?” Asked Bizzi.

“Ginnda is arriving with them later today.” Said Runa. “With luck, they’ll be ready to get digging and building by tomorrow morning. They’ll be bringing yurts to live in, so they won’t be adding to the housing problems. Is that acceptable to you, Bizzi ?”

The healers had done wonders, but Bizzi was still limping from where a bandit’s sword had sliced into his hip. He had a stick to help him walk, but was still managing to do an excited walk, close to being a dance.

“Yes.....Yes Runa. That is very acceptable.”

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Muzzie hated setting the Void Gate and tried to always get someone else to do it for him. He hadn’t even taken away Vella’s ability to set the gate. She might be on his list of people to watch for a while, but it was still useful to have another of his eight, who could set the gate’s destination. It was just him and Aeony using the gate though and their destination would cause concern to some. He’d even managed to shake off his guards for a while. Officially he and Aeony were enjoying daytime sex for a few hours.

“This can’t take too long. Ginnda is arriving later, with eight thousand of her pure bloods.” Said Muzzie.

Originally he'd been promised five thousand of the hard to kill fighters. That had increased to six when he'd agreed to look after the egg of the Ancient Ones. Ginnda was now promising that eight thousand of her toughest fighters, would soon be joining the imperial army.

"I always liked Podd.....Every city needs a good bone collector." Said Aeony.

She was right, though some places called the job by another name. No matter how it was put, every civilised society needs a bone collector, someone to remove the dead. Be it from the street or their deathbed in a loving home, eventually everyone ended up on Podd's cart. When Muzzie pictured Podd's yard for the Void Gate, he primarily thought of the smell. There were fat boilers in Podd's yard, which boiled down fat to make mainly candles and soap. There were other uses, but Podd kept food on the table by turning good clean bodies, into soap. The bones were crushed for fertiliser, but there wasn't much money in crushed bones. Muzzie pictured the bone yard next to the Great River and remembered the smell of the fat boilers. The Void Gate began to glow.

"I'm actually nervous about going back.....Podd might hate me." Said Muzzie.

"No, you two were like brothers." Said Aeony. "Strange and moody brothers maybe, but you were the only person he really spoke to. There is Ash of course.....But he was stranger than Podd."

"I'm hoping nothing has changed.....Still the stench I remember." Said Muzzie.

They walked through the gate and the smell told Muzzie that the bone yard was still there, still stinking out the northern edge of the area the poor lived in. Those without enough money to move somewhere else. To Muzzie the stink of boiling hybrid body fat, brought back so many great memories.

"By the nine.....This place stinks worse than it did." Said Aeony.

They were the wrong side of a small stream and crossing it meant wet boots and legs. Aeony could have flown across, but waded through the water beside him. Muzzie didn't want to use Podd's front gate. There was a secret gate at the back of the yard, hidden behind a healthy looking line of bushes. More memories, as Muzzie remembered going through the gate with contraband booze.

"No matter what.....Podd's yard mustn't be damaged in the attack." Said Muzzie.

"You said that about the Great Library and the Sorcerers Guild." Said Aeony. "The Towers too and the Dome. You had said it about your bar, but Caspian and Vella burned that to the ground...Then you wanted no harm to befall the....."

"Alright.....I know you can't have a war without causing destruction." Said Muzzie. "I just hope we can keep it to a minimum."

"Actually.....So do I.....I love this city." Said Aeony.

Through the overgrown bushes and into the yard, while making sure they'd gained no unwanted pests from the bushes. Another problem near the Great River, besides the stench of the bone yard and the occasional pack of growlers.....Were venomous bugs in the bushes. There was Podd, feeding one of his boilers with wood to burn.

No one ever bothered Podd the bone collector. It wasn't just that every truly civilised city needs a bone collector of some kind; it was also because he didn't look the sort of person you'd want to bother. Even he wasn't sure of his parentage but there was a lot of mean demon in there, large and angry mean demon.

"Podd.....Does your new emperor get a greeting?" Shouted Muzzie.

"I've got an arm bone from Xanash the twelfth." Shouted Podd. "Found it in the mud and it's all the emperor I need."

By the time Muzzie was hugging Podd, Ash was there, with a nasty looking blade ready. Just in case the argument had been serious. Podd had taken Ash in when the boy had been orphaned by one of

the regular plagues that hit the city. There was no one else to give the lad a home and anyway, as Podd told everyone, he'd been looking for an apprentice. He'd called him Ash because his skin was the colour of last night's ashes in the grate. The kid had a slightly withered arm and he was undersize for... well for anything. But Podd seemed quite proud of him. Hybrids developed differently, but Ash never seemed to grow.

"Get some food cooking boy." Said Podd. "Can't you see we have guests."

"Best food?" Asked Ash.

"Of course the best food.....Muzzie is a best food friend." Said Podd.

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General Dhūlen walked through the Void Gate to find himself in the farmlands of the first rift. Very green and very pleasant, it was where most of the food for the City of the Lost God originated. A thousand of his best warriors behind him, the toughest and the best of the best. By taking over the food supply of the City of the Lost God, the siege had effectively begun. It also gave the imperial army a little more variety in their diet.

"Welcome to Bredon's Edge." Said Caspian.

Dhūlen had heard of Bredon's Edge, but he'd never actually been there. A tiny village in the centre of the farmlands. For better or worse, the village would be written about by many historians in a large number of books. The sleepy village was going to be where it all started.....The attack on the City of the Lost God.

"Oh, the food here.....You can eat it straight from the trees." Said Vella.

Caspian and Vella were with him in the role of local experts, they knew a few of the inhabitants of the village. Bredon's Edge, named after a famous hero, who was now long dead and long forgotten. Faal was with them too, though Dhūlen had no idea why he'd decided to join them. At least he was on foot and not riding the brute he insisted was a Shuud.

"Get the tents up." Dhūlen yelled. "We need a quick thicket fence too. It needs to surround our camp before full darkness."

His officers became busy, but they knew the plan. A thousand of the best, could hold the village against just about anything. After that it would be a thousand a day arriving through the Void Gate. Nothing between them and the Tomma's city, but farmland. There was even a decent road to march along, that went all the way to the Ring of Volkin in the other direction.

"I came here once." Said Faal. "Maybe more than once.....I remember a pleasant tavern where you could rent a decent room."

"The Maiden's Kiss, though most refer to it as the Maiden Tavern." Said Caspian. "Been here since there have been hybrids who enjoy beer. A very long time."

Having Vella and Caspian with him was useful, but also awkward. They were still being looked on with disfavour by the emperor and were due for a punishment of some kind. The general view was that a public flogging was about to be announced. They had burned down Muzzie's bar and deserved punishing, but a flogging.....They'd have the scars on their backs for the rest of their lives.

"You should have no trouble in Bredon's Edge." Said Vella. "We know just about everyone here.....They're friends."

Dhūlen wasn't taking that as fact; he'd heard the same kind of thing, during many very blood wars and revolts. Attacking someone's city tended to render long term friendships, null and void. There might be a few exceptions, but he'd told his officers to view everyone in the farmland with suspicion. As for Vella.....It was as if the Gods themselves had decided to prove she was wrong. A door opened

in a farmhouse not that far from them. Out came a man carrying a scythe, and it had to be assumed that he knew how to use it.

“Vella.....You fucking traitor.” The man yelled.

He was either very quick, or very lucky. The man managed to swerve and avoid an arrow one of Dhūlen’s alert archers had fired at him. Why he hated Vella and seemingly not Caspian was unknown, but on he came. Scythe held up as he ran, it looked as though Vella might not have to worry about a public flogging. They were a good team though, Vella and Caspian, who’d survived many battles in the past and two visits to Gorshan, the place of evil.

“Bitch !” Shouted the man.

Caspian slashed the man’s arm with his sword, causing him to notice Caspian. It was as if he’d only just noticed Caspian in his shiny official armour of office.

“You.....Another traitor.”

It had all been so fast, no one apart from the man, one very quick archer and Caspian had moved. Vella pulled a short sword from her belt and used it, all in one very fluid movement. Up under the man’s ribs she drove her sword. When he didn’t immediately go down, she did it again, giving her blade a few twists as it went in. The large scythe was still in his hands as the farmer twitched for a few seconds, before dying. Faal knelt down and pushed the man’s long hair away from his face.

“I know him.....He’s one of Winshin’s sons.” Said Vella.

“It’s Ghot, Winshin’s third eldest son.” Said Caspian. “He sent a small gift when Olvir was born.”

“Wars against those who were once friends.....They’re the most brutal.” Said Faal.

Dhūlen knew Muzzie had secretly travelled to the city of his birth. For a while Dhūlen had watched Muzzie lurch around, seemingly winning battles through massive amounts of luck and help from dubious deities. The Silver Lady was infamous, known to have slaughtered thousand who worshipped anything other than pure chaos.

Estrin too, was far from pure. No matter what she might say, there was evidence that she’d killed and eaten the flesh of their enemies. Dealing with the creatures who preyed on pilgrims was one thing, but eating them! It was like being an animal. A secret watch was being kept on the Void Gate, with all who came and went noted, plus their destination. Eventually Muzzie would go too far and Dhūlen would offer himself as the rightful emperor. The army would probably carry him through the streets on their shoulders.

“Should we bury him ?” Asked Dhūlen. “I’m not sure of local customs.”

“Leave his body outside his house.....His family will bury him.” Said Caspian.

“He was once a friend.” Muttered Vella.

With luck, Muzzie would learn things from his old friends that were priceless. Who commanded the fighters of the City of the lost God ? How many powerful magicians had returned to defend the city ? How many fighters were likely to stand against the new emperor ? And more, it had been a good idea for Muzzie to go. He’d learn though, that many would now hate him. He’d realise the cost of turning on those he’d once called friends. Many would now be deadly enemies.

“Anyone else runs at us.....I want two arrows in their chest.” Shouted Dhūlen.

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Galla hated being saddled with an awkward situation. If it was of her own doing fair enough, but Muzzie had caused the problem. The Hive Mother had arrived from Segin-Unadaris, bringing eight thousand pure blood demon warriors with her. It was a huge event, there had been people arranging for a military band to be present. Special food laid on too, as some hybrid foods didn’t suit pure bloods. It should have been the event of the month, if Muzzie had been on time. Nethra had

approached her, looking nervous. There was Maya of course, travelling everywhere with Nethra lately.

“Muzzie has gone somewhere.” Said Nethra. “I have no idea where, or why he’s late in returning. I have no idea what to tell Ginnda and his other guests. Please help me Galla.....You’re good at that kind of thing.”

“Aeony must have gone with him.....We can’t find her either.” Said Maya.

So, they’d gone to find Aeony, before asking her to save them from extreme awkwardness. Galla was tempted to say it wasn’t her problem. In the end it came down to vanity though and the effect praise can have, even if you know it’s just flattery. Galla knew she was good at that kind of thing. It was nice when others realised it too. She’d have denied being addicted to external validation, but of course, everyone is.

“Give me a number ?” Asked Galla. “How long until Muzzie turns up ?”

“We have no idea, that’s the problem.” Said Nethra.

“You’re not listening.....Give me a number ?” Asked Galla, again. “It doesn’t have to be accurate. I can claim I was told the number, without lying.”

“Two thirds.....Muzzie will be here in two thirds of an hour.” Said Maya.

“Excellent.....I already believe it.” Said Galla.

General Dhūlen had arranged for an outside kitchen, an army field kitchen made to look a bit less military with the addition of a few floral decorations. There were representatives of the eight thousand, though most of them would be enjoying a meal in their yurts. Dignitaries had arrived from other empire towns and cities. It was massive, it was wonderful, and it was a bit rubbish without the emperor there in person. Luckily, Ginnda was being kept busy, by an endless stream of people wanting to meet the famous Hive Queen of Segin-Unadaris. Eventually though, Ginnda would expect to hear some well-chosen words from Muzzie. Galla inserted herself at the front of the queue to meet and greet Ginnda. She ignored the mutterings of a high council member from Annill.

“I’m sorry Ginnda, but Muzzie has been delayed.” Said Galla. “The war effort is keeping him busy all day and much of the night, I’m sure you understand. I’m told he’ll be here in about two thirds of an hour.”

“I do understand, Galla.” Said Ginnda. “I’m being thoroughly spoiled with great food, wonderful drinks and excellent company. I’m sure Muzzie will soon be with us.”

Despite talking to a bird for years, it still felt strange talking to what appeared to be, a giant spider. Ginnda had a good speaking voice though, far better than the average Dredger. Was Ginnda a little intoxicated ? Maybe, but if she was, that was perfect.

“Can I get you anything ?” Asked Galla.

“No.....I already have three plates of delicious food in front of me.” Said Ginnda.

Galla mingled, she mixed, she tried to engage with anyone looking even slightly bored. As a side benefit, she heard all about Runa emptying the Tandalla city prison, into the army. Personally, she could see the benefits of having them. It all really depended on how crazy some of them were. The apothecary from Tandalla had used the term, a gang of villains to describe them.

By chance, Maya had come up with a reasonably accurate number. Muzzie and Aeony appeared just before two thirds of an hours had passed. Despite attempts to conceal the bruises, their emperor looked to have been involved in a fight. Galla would have considered her running days were over.

She ran to Muzzie though, even though her old bones and joints would make her pay for it.

“Are you alright ? Where have you been ?” She asked him.

Hard to have a private whispered conversation, with the whole room looking at Muzzie. They managed it though.

“Podd challenged me to a wrestle and being a fool.....I accepted.” Said Muzzie.

“So you went to.....”

“Shush.....quiet Galla, don’t even think the name of where I’ve been.” Said Muzzie.

“I won’t.....No one will hear it from me.”

“Worth a few bruises and a little humiliation.....Podd won of course.” Said Muzzie. “I learned a lot from him and Ash. The boy isn’t bright, but he hears a lot. The city militia still haven’t appointed someone to lead the city’s defences. A real falling out, one of those wanting the job was killed. I’ll tell you everything later. For now.....I must make a huge fuss of Ginnda.”

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A decent morning on the first rift, a nice bright sky with not a hint of rain. Faal was going with him, he was essential. Caspian knew how to shut the whole thing down, but he wasn’t a powerful magic user. Faal was, he was just about the only living person on the rifts, with enough raw magic to do it. It didn’t require chaos magic, any discipline would do. Faal was a fire magic adept, which would do nicely. Caspian could set the Ring of Volkin to shut off its portals and then Faal could provide the magical power to accomplish the massive shut down. A permanent shut down. The Ring had been there before Tomma-Goran had built his city. With luck, it would soon be several concentric circles of standing stones, with no residual power at all.

“I hate setting the Void Gate.” Said Vella. “Every time it makes my arm hurt and the lump on my hand itches all day.”

N’Fady was looking after their son, who was safely back at the stockade. When Caspian had seen the way Vella cared about looking after Olvir, he’d suggested that she remained with their son. One rethink and several apologies later, and Vella was going with him. As she’d said.....

“Whatever we have obviously works. We fight well as a couple. The proof is the number of battles we’ve walked away from.”

She was right of course. There had been one occasion when they’d been the only uninjured people to walk away from fighting a Roruss. Merrick had lived, but Vella and him had needed to carry a wounded Merrick to safety.

“It’s been a while since I was there.” Said Vella. “The gate is glowing though.....So with luck, I set it right.”

It was an official mission to the Ring of Volkin, approved by Muzzie. There had been hints that a good outcome, might mean no punishment for turning the emperor’s bar into a pile of smoking rubble. Dhūlen had let them have Belso and two hundred of the greys. There was a chance that the City of the Lost God, would have sent fighters to guard the Ring.

“I’ll test it.” Said Belso. “Can’t have two of the eight being sent to somewhere nasty.”

Belso walked into the gate and returned a few seconds later.

“It’s the right place.....The Ring of Volkin.” He said. “Looking from the north, no more than fifty yards away.”

“Here we go.....Be alert and be prepared.” Said Caspian. “We may well arrive to find a hostile reception.....And they’ll have had time to get dug in.”

Caspian had enjoyed the occasional trip to the Ring, especially after it had been largely cleansed of the guardian creatures put in place by Volkin. Now it was harmless rings of standing stones. Who had built them ? No one knew, though the Gods might. It certainly hadn’t been Volkin. He’d been yet another powerful magician, who’d craved power, gold and immortality. When immortality seemed

beyond his grasp, he'd buried just about all his valuables among the standing stones of the Ring. It seemed that if Volkin couldn't enjoy his wealth for eternity, no one else was going to enjoy it.

"I wouldn't want to be here at full dark." Said Belso. "Now though.....This place feels so calm and tranquil."

"Be careful.....As Muzzie always says, you never know with the Ring." Said Vella.

Ahh Muzzie, Caspian thought that if anyone would know about the Ring, it was Muzzie. Volkin had placed traps over his gold and magical artefacts. Not playful spells that might cut off a tomb robber's foot, turn their hair into an inferno, or blind them in one eye. Volkin had used traps Leng would have been proud of. Acid traps to turn bandits into a pile of glistening goo, or fire traps that left nothing but a tiny mound of cinders.

"Someone is here.....I can see movement in the fifth circle." Said Faal.

"Yes, there's someone there.....Two or three, no more than three." Said Belso.

Caspian knew Muzzie viewed Vella and him as lucky. People who could achieve what seemed like wonders, with very few innate skills. It annoyed Caspian. If anyone could be said to have a knack for stumbling backward into success it was him, their emperor. Muzzie had been a bar owner with financial problems then, when a famous relic hunter had hired him and Lilleth as bodyguards.

"Useless archers.....They've wounded one, but the other two are running." Yelled Faal.

To cut a long and involved story short, only Muzzie and Lilleth had lived to leave the Ring of Volkin. They'd left with a cart full of gold, enchanted weapons and a few priceless artefacts. One of those artefacts was the finger bone which Muzzie always kept in contact with his skin.

"Crap ! How did they miss that one ?" Yelled Vella. "He's wearing bright red armour.....Bright red and he's still running."

That finger bone gave a humble bar owner the ability to use some very powerful chaos magic.

Caspian ran to where Belso was turning over a dead body. There was another body nearby, but one of the scouts had escaped. That was obviously what they were, scouts from the City of the Lost God. They'd been there to watch for anything untoward and finding it had killed two of them.

"The third one's gone.....Vanished into the trees." Said Belso. "He was wounded though, an arrow in the thigh."

It seemed that if you couldn't be sure, all enemy fighters were male. One of the bodies was a female hybrid. The gender of the scout who'd got away was unknown and likely to remain that way. Things had changed in the city where Caspian had been born. The scouts had been part of what remained of the army; they'd had their own uniform. The dead bodies were dressed in ordinary clothes, with just a scarf in the colours of the city militia.

"Looks like the militia are taking over, or trying to." Said Caspian.

"We need to work fast.....The one who got away will be heading back to their base." Said Belso.

Caspian didn't need to do the math; Muzzie and Lilleth had once run from the Ring, right back to the other side of the City of the Lost God.

"No real concerns, the scout was wounded." Said Caspian. "A fit runner would enter the city on the third day after leaving here. Not so fit and it would be the fifth day. A wounded man.....He might not make it at all. The best time he's likely to do it in, is seven to eight days. Then he has to find someone to tell. There's plenty of time to do what we came to do."

"He's right.....Anyway, the scout will probably bleed to death on the way." Said Faal.

They buried the dead enemy fighters; it was the right thing to do. Caspian had no doubt that if things had gone the other way, they'd have buried him. He'd been to so many interments that he knew the

standard prayer for the dead, by heart. Belso surprised him by going down on one knee. He scooped up a handful of loose soil and threw it into the open grave.

"May chaos always pass you in the night." Muttered Belso.

An old saying among some nomadic rift tribes. Nethra used the words sometimes, but their source seemed to be unknown.

"By the nine.....May you rest in peace." Said Caspian.

Belso was still looking anxious and Caspian was willing to accept that someone who'd nearly died several times, might have developed a preternatural sense of survival. If Belso wanted them to get the job done quickly, he wasn't going to argue about it.

"Alright.....Let's get this done." Said Caspian.

"There are a lot of standing stones.....How do we do this ?" Asked Faal.

"Everything interesting is done in the third circle out from the centre." Said Caspian. "We're lucky that Volkin's journal ended up in the forbidden section of the library. First.....I need to start counting stones."

Two marker stones in the centre of the Ring. Get those aligned and Caspian was looking straight north.

"Watch my back.....I'm going to be concentrating on other things." Shouted Caspian.

Active portals were always dangerous. Anything could suddenly appear, from half a dozen bandits, to thirty foot tall, pure blood, top level demon. Or a magician on their way to the City of the Lost God. A really good magician might well be able to vaporise them all in a heartbeat. Caspian walked to the third ring of stones and began counting, as he walked clockwise around the Ring of Volkin.

"I want the Tenth stone." Said Caspian. "Not supposed to look impressive, but it's the power stone."

Most of the standing stones looked fairly alike, though a few were connected by a top stone, a lintel that connected them. Some of those were portals and Caspian rushed past them. According to Volkin, one of the portals would take you into the universe of darkness, way out past Leng. Caspian had never been tempted to try that particular portal. The tenth stone had been affected by winter weather; its right side had begun to crumble.

"This one." Said Caspian, while pointing.

"Are you sure ?" Asked Belso. "It looks a bit.....Shit."

"Casp knows what he's doing." Said Vella. "Trust him.....That will be the power stone."

Volkin's instructions had always seemed deceptively simple. Caspian did wonder if it was all nonsense, or Volkin might have decided to set a trap for those wishing to disable the portals. Not an idea he wanted to share with the others. Anyway.....If he was about to die, Belso could hardly say 'I told you so.'

"You all need to keep well back.....Just in case." Said Caspian.

"In case of what ?" Asked an archer.

Caspian had no idea, so he ignored the question. He did notice that everyone was now stood well away from him and the weather corroded tenth stone. Caspian was about to make the first hand gesture.....

"The gap between these stones is glowing." Yelled one of the greys.

The portal was a good fifty feet away and it was glowing with a purple light. It was probably an enemy coming through, though there was a chance it might be a friend.

"Be ready !" Yelled Faal.

"Careful though.....It might be a friend." Shouted Caspian.

How would they know ? Luckily no one asked the question. The purple light faded away, though something was there, lying on the ground. It looked like a dead body, but the woman was wearing a cleric's robes. Caspian knew that it was unwise to assume anything about a senior cleric, even death. "Why send a dead body through the portal ?" Asked Belso.

"I know the face." Said Caspian. "I've seen that image printed onto an old scroll. I will remember.....Might take me a while, but I will get a name out of my memory, for that face."

"We killed LLud Narren.....Twice. Yet he still lives." Said Vella. "We should take the body back to the Void Gate. Never assume anyone who looks dead, is dead."

"Especially clerics." Added Caspian.

"She looks very dead." Muttered Belso.

"Just take her body somewhere safe." Said Caspian. "Turning the portals off is a little.....Well, it might be risky. Come with me Faal, I need your fire magic skills."

Faal didn't even ask how risky, which surprised Caspian. They were about to use prodigious amounts of power, to turn off something never intended to be turned off. At the very least there'd be some minor damage to the standing stones.

"Hand gestures here.....Then you're needed at the fifth portal after that." Said Caspian.

"I won't ask about the risks." Said Faal. "I could put a screen around us.....Will that help ?"

"If this goes badly wrong, nothing will help."

"Fair enough.....Let's get it done." Said Faal.

Caspian might forget the birthday of a much loved grandparent, but once seen, he'd never forgotten a useful hand gesture. He knew the gestures were right, as he finished the last one. There was a loud thump and the ground shook slightly.

"So far.....So good." Said Caspian.

The fifth portal clockwise now looked strange. Between the upright stones was what looked like a black disc on the ground. Caspian threw a rock at the disc and it vanished through it. It seemed to take a long time before they heard the sound of the rock hitting the bottom of the hole.

"There, Faal.....Pour enough fire magic into the hole and it'll destroy the deep workings of the portals.....They'll be gone and gone for good."

"I will use every bit of power I possess." Said Faal.

Muzzie's lucky number eight poured huge amounts of fire magic into the hole. So much heat that a few nearby bushes burst into flames. Down the fire went, for minute after minute, until it seemed impossible Faal had anything left to send. The magician looked spent when it happened, as though he was about to fall to the ground. The ground tremors began, just as the hole in the ground vanished. Tremors so severe, that several lintels fell from the tops of their standing stones. A few standing stones went over and several large trees that had been there for centuries, were snapped off as though by a massive wind. By the time it all stopped, the Ring of Volkin looked very different. Gone was the feeling of it being a quiet place, a tranquil historic site.

"It's done.....You did it Faal." Said Caspian. "I never did like the Ring of Volkin being active. It was like having a gateway to hell just a few miles away. Now.....It is no longer a threat."

"I'm spent.....Never felt so tired." Said Faal. "If you don't mind, I'd like to spend a day or so in Bredon's Edge ? I will probably sleep for most of the time."

"Yes, of course you can.....I'll make sure you're not disturbed."

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