

The Last Emperor

Chapter 39 – Xelang The Mighty

“Trust me; I’ve seen the inside of the tower of restricted items.” Said Pinthrad. “There is room, more than enough room for the entire Quron archive. Caspian will soon be head librarian, which makes it another good choice. Never one to keep such things to himself, not Caspian.”



Nethra was resistant to hostile magic, which didn't mean she was totally immune. Xelang's users of dark magic, were placing traps everywhere, most designed to kill anyone, friend, or foe. An act of desperation really, their descent through the highest of the high towers, must have worried Xelang the Mighty. Nethra had seen many of the tower guards, ripped apart by the traps of their own dark sorcerers. No one on Muzzie's side had an exact floorplan for Xelang's chambers; Nethra doubted if his own guards knew what every room contained. It was a question of moving quickly and trying not to leave a living enemy behind them. Both Nethra and Dhali had walked into traps, with massively different results.....

“Are you alright ?” Asked Dhali. “I felt that one.....Seemed to bite into my soul. We could detect traps, if we took things more slowly.”

“That one hurt and made me angry, which made me stronger.” Said Nethra. “I’ve never felt as strong as I feel now. I’d like to avoid the ones that hurt, but we’re working to Muzzie’s timetable. There simply isn’t enough time to detect traps.”

“So.....Mild pain and a little nausea it is then.” Said Dhali. “Oh great.....More guards. Lots of them this time.”

The closer they got to where Xelang had his personal bed chamber, the more guards there were. Not particularly difficult to deal with, but one might get in a lucky blow. The enemy only had to get lucky once, but they had to get lucky all the time.

“Crap, there must be twenty of them.” Said Nethra.

It had become almost routine; a door opened in front of them and out they came. Guards screeching something in the language of Quron, while waving their weapons at them. Usually they were armed with a shield and longsword, though a few held small axes. One huge guard had been swinging a war hammer, but that was rare. So far, every enemy they'd faced was now dead, or dying.

“I knew I should have learned their language.” Said Nethra.

“Same battle cry as all the others.” Said Dhali. “Death to the enemies of Xelang the Mighty.”

“Go on, Dhali.....Surprise me with something different.” Said Nethra.

Dhali Pril seemed to have a huge menagerie of remembered animals. Every living thing she'd seen, was remembered. Its internal organs might not end up as nature intended, but everything she turned her flesh into, was fast, mean and deadly.

“Vargouille this time....Still many of them in Gorshan I believe.” Said Dhali. “Quick, dangerous and rarely known to leave a fight until their enemy is dead, or they are.”

“I saw them in Gorshan.” Said Nethra. “Nasty brutes.....But at least these will be on our side.”

Dhali seemed to discard three pieces of flesh from her left leg, without leaving a bloody hole in her muscles. Not only that, she still seemed to be able to move around quite quickly. Each piece of flesh became a blob that wriggled about, which became something with wings, which became a

Vargouille. The famous flying wolves of Gorshan, hunted in packs and their bite was toxic to most living beings. The guards seemed much less keen on running towards them, after they'd seen the flying wolves.

"Go on.....Fly my lovelies.....Kill them all." Yelled Dhali.

Vargouille were Nethra's enemies in Gorshan and time moved differently on that strange round world. The Vargouille there had become less aggressive and their fangs no longer injected venom into their prey. Nethra knew the creatures Dhali had created were Vargouille at their best, or worst, depending on how you looked at it. Their cry was loud, their claws sharp.....And the first guard one bit, died in agony.

"We could.....Let my creations kill them all." Said Dhali.

"But.....Where's the fun in that ?" Asked Nethra.

Every encounter with a guard was a roll of a dice. There was something about battle though, especially when her anger kept being increased by so many traps and enemy guards. Nethra used her own teeth and claws, to rip apart the guard in the best armour. Probably the leader of some of Xelang's personal guard.....His ripped apart flesh, smelled so good. Dhali wasn't the sort to object, or get upset by Nethra's needs. Once all the guards were dead, she ate the liver of their leader. He'd eaten well, so his liver tasted wonderful. The Vargouille left her to her meal and feasted on the other dead guards.

"Once I'd have joined you." Said Dhali. "I made a promise to LLud though, a very long time ago. No more feeding on the flesh of my enemies."

"The Vargouille fight well, can we keep them with us ?" Asked Nethra.

"Unless I constantly control them, they are likely to become feral." Said Dhali. "They'll revert to wild things that might attack us. Best if I reabsorb them and produce new ones, if we have need of them."

A touch from Dhali and her Vargouille shrank down to the size of wattle bugs. Dhali waved her hand over them and they became her flesh again. It took less than half a minute from being powerful flying wolves, to being absorbed back into Dhali's leg.

"That is one hell of a trick." Said Nethra.

"There can be pain involved.....Even if you could learn how, I wouldn't recommend it." Said Dhali.

There were several more hallways and a few more doors with enemies behind them. Dhali obviously enjoyed using different creatures to do the bulk of the fighting. She'd even used a huge Jangar beast, who'd stomped on several guards and eaten one or two. Eventually there was only one door left, if her instructions had been correct; and they'd been going the right way.

"That, is the sort of door a King would be behind." Said Dhali.

"Xelang is waiting.....I can feel him now." Said Nethra. "So much hate in his mind and so much power.....We need to be very careful."

"We did just kill most of his elite guard." Said Dhali. "A little hatred is to be expected."

The door was white, the kind of white usually seen on bones, the shells of sea creatures and the flesh of the undead. Not a good white, Nethra really didn't want to go anywhere near the immense door. There was also a warning sounding, somewhere deep in her mind.

"I feel a trap.....One we might not simply shrug off." Said Nethra.

"Yes, something corrosive.....I feel it too." Said Dhali. "I have a spell.....A little of the darkness to use against this awful door. May I use the spell ?"

"The clock is ticking, Dhali.....Use any spells you think will work."

It was hard to think of Dhali as being altered by the darkness beyond Leng. She was a friend now, once the wife of LLud Narren and still his lover. Mind you, LLud was hardly a creature of the light. Dhali changed, her features becoming sharper, harsher under the light globes near the dreadful white door. When Dhali spoke, Nethra actually shuddered. Was her friend using a spell of the dark worlds ? It sounded like it. As Dhali raised her hand and yelled the true name of the crawling chaos, Nethra moved away from her friend. Not that far away, just a few paces.

“I’m not even going to ask were you learned that.” Said Nethra.

“Sevril-Narge taught me, in a place of almost perpetual darkness.” Said Dhali. “Come.....It is now safe to enter Xelang’s personal bedchamber.”

The trap had gone, as had that awful white door, which gave off such dreadful feelings of darkness. Not just the door, much of the wall either side had gone too. With Dhali next to her, Nethra strode into the large and battle damaged bedchamber of Xelang the Mighty – Fifty second leader of the High Council of Quron.

“Actually.....I really would like to learn that spell.” Said Nethra.

For a bedchamber the room was really big, huge. Maybe all Kings slept in such rooms, but Nethra had seen where Muzzie and Aeony slept. Their bedroom was a decent size and comfortable. Xelang slept in somewhere so large, that it had probably never felt warm and cosy. Dhali’s spell hadn’t helped of course; it had turned most of the furniture into fast moving shrapnel. The windows had been blown out, allowing a strong wind to enter the bedchamber. It looked a ruin and at the far end, in front of the shattered windows, was Xelang the Mighty. It had to be him, he was wearing the most expensive looking armour and carrying an impressive battle axe. He’d been accompanied by around fifty of his guards, but a few had been killed by the shrapnel from Dhali’s spell. Xelang still had that look though, of an important person who was angry and looking for someone to hurt.

“Shall I become the super weapon ?” Asked Dhali.

“Just two or three Vargouille, I like the Vargouille.” Said Nethra. “They’ll keep his guards busy.....Remember that Xelang is mine.”

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Faal had noticed that most dark angels were fairly taciturn. Itet was better than most, but even her descriptions of events tended to keep to the salient points. The details, just the details was the dark angel way. Muzzie appeared to have long conversations with Aeony, but that had to be because they’d been sharing a bed for quite a while. When Itet returned with Pinthrad, Faal would have liked a few details. Had she flown to the link to the Void Gate and then used a portal created by a guild sorcerer ? How had she managed to return so quickly ? Was Pinthrad a volunteer, or had she simply grabbed him, willing or not ?

“Wow, you didn’t take long.” Said Faal.

“You said get Pinthrad.....Here he is.” Said Itet.

“Did you have any trouble ?” Asked Faal.

“No.”

“Any problems getting Sökkolf to agree ?” Asked Faal.

“You wanted Pinthrad.....You have Pinthrad.” Muttered Itet.

Something had happened that she obviously didn’t want to talk about and being honest, Faal really didn’t care about it. Sökkolf had probably needed putting in his place. One day Faal would hear the whole story, probably when he’d forgotten why it was important.

“Oh, you should have heard her deal with Sökkolf.” Said Pinthrad. “Wonderful to hear.....I just wish I had the nerve to talk to him like that.”

If Pinthrad had been grabbed against his will, he certainly wasn't showing it. Faal decided to get on with the task at hand, before more enemy warriors turned up.

"Thank you for coming, Pinthrad." Said Faal. "Do you know what we need you to do?"

"Itet mentioned a huge archive you want removed to a place of safety."

"Here we are.....Everything in here is priceless." Said Faal. "Muzzie wants the entire archive of Quron. I was hoping you could create a large and long lasting portal, which we can use to take the archive somewhere safe."

"You mean somewhere Quron fighters can't get to." Said Pinthrad.

"Precisely."

Pinthrad looked around, muttering about books on metal pages and how rare they were. He took a notebook from a pocket and began using a pencil to write down rough numbers. Faal hadn't intended Pinthrad to do a stock take, but it might make his assessment of the situation, more accurate. It would take a lot of effort to move thousands of ancient books.

"It can be done and quite quickly." Said Pinthrad. "Access is a question though and where to take this rather.....Unique library? I'd suggest the Great Library in the City of the Lost God. The librarians will defend this treasure of knowledge with their lives."

"I was thinking of there, but do they have enough space to house these treasures?" Asked Faal.

"Trust me; I've seen the inside of the tower of restricted items." Said Pinthrad. "There is room, more than enough room for the entire Quron archive. Caspian will soon be head librarian, which makes it another good choice. Never one to keep such things to himself, not Caspian."

Pinthrad was no fool, he was steering the conversation back to access. Who was going to be able to dig through the thousands of books of ancient and forbidden knowledge. Faal would gladly share everything with the sorcerers guild, but he couldn't speak for Muzzie.

"I can speak only for myself." Said Faal. "I am one of the eight imperial advisers; head magician to our new emperor. I can see no reason why the guild shouldn't have access to this archive."

"Good enough for me." Said Pinthrad. "Your problem can be solved by two things and the first of them is Dredgers. You need a lot of them. Great multipurpose builders, diggers and carriers, are Dredgers; they'll even make good guards; just in case the enemy arrive. I can create a portal to bring the Dredgers here.....And another portal to take them to the Great Library."

"We'll need to ask permission first of course." Said Faal. "Bizzi will have to let us borrow enough Dredgers. Then we need to ask Adamaz before we cover a dusty floor somewhere, with thousands of books."

"No.....Ask and you give them the chance to refuse." Said Itet.

"She has a point, a very good point." Said Pinthrad. "Bizzi and I have a kind of understanding. He wants a lot of guild rebuilding work. He won't object if I borrow some of his people. And as for the library.....The apprentice librarians will be fighting each other to get a look at these books."

"So.....You ask no one." Said Itet.

"Fine.....Create a portal to the Dredger yurts in the City of the Lost God." Said Faal. "We'll grab a couple of hundred Dredgers and bring them back here."

"I'd say four hundred.....There is a time factor." Said Pinthrad.

"Don't mess around.....Five hundred will soon get the job done." Said Itet.

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The guards of Xelang the Mighty, were tougher than they initially looked. Dhali had to constantly create new Vargouille to replace the ones they killed. Xelang seemed to be just about immune to

magic, of course he was. If the task of killing him had been easy; Muzzie wouldn't have sent Nethra, the multiverse's super being and Dhali, the Weapon.

"Keep the damn guards off me !" Yelled Nethra.

"I'm doing my best; they know how to fight Vargouille." Said Dhali.

Numbers were on their side. Dhali could keep creating new Vargouille, for days if necessary, but once they were killed, the guards stayed dead. Dhali herself could use her strength to deal with the guards, in several horrific and nasty ways. She wanted to keep out of the battle though, to keep an eye on Nethra and Xelang. She'd been told by Muzzie that the most important thing, was the death of Xelang, the King of Quron. Xelang was bleeding from several wounds, but showed no sign of dying, or even slowing down. Dhali used a disruption spell on Xelang, which like every other spell, failed to do anything to him.

"Why does nothing hurt him ?" Yelled Nethra. "You must have other spells, Dhali."

"You're near a wrecked window." Shouted Dhali, as she throttled yet another guard.

"How does that help ?" Asked Nethra.

"Xelang doesn't appear to have wings."

Nethra wasn't stupid; she got the idea straight away. She was still using her blade and claws to combat Xelang's obvious skill with a battle axe. Every time he swung at her, she blocked it and she was doing a great job of blocking his blows. Her long and muscular tail was coming into its own. It had a barb on the end and had to be painful if you were hit by it. Nethra was thrusting her tail at Xelang and he was in pain. Xelang the Mighty was backing away from her. Her tail was quick, too quick to be caught by a counter attack by Xelang's heavy axe.

"A few more pushes, Nethra.....Just a few more good hard shoves." Yelled Dhali.

His living guards numbered around six and two of those were limping. Dhali and four Vargouille could easily keep them from interfering with Nethra. Xelang winced, every time the barbed and heavy end of Nethra's tail, hit him. Never straight at his armour of course, Nethra was good at hitting the tops of his legs, the gaps between armour plates and even his ankles.

"I have a message from Muzzie." Shouted Nethra. "He's going to reduce your city to rubble."

When a really good hard blow sent Xelang hurtling through the smashed window, Dhali was expecting to see him instantly grow wings, or use some kind of spell to fall very slowly. He didn't.....The King of Quron fell like a stone. Nethra didn't say anything, as she unfurled her purple wings and went after him.

"That's alright.....Don't worry about me." Muttered Dhali.

The Vargouille would fight to the death for her, but using them to carry her to the ground was a different matter. They weren't that bright and were quite likely to drop her. Dhali absorbed the creatures back into her body and went to the edge of the broken window. Feather fall from three thousand feet was crazy, she'd be a target to every archer; in every window she went past.

"You can do it, Dhali.....You can do it." She muttered.

It would take perfect timing, but there were other spells she'd learned from Sevril-Narge, while in the places of darkness. It was possible to stop the effect of gravity, but only for a short while. Get it right, at the correct distance from the ground.....The problem was that she'd seen it done, but had never done it herself. LLud had once used the spell and he'd dropped to the ground like a huge, very dignified bird of prey. Dhali jumped out of the window.

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General Dhūlen wanted to be with the army, though not necessarily leading them from the front. He was keen on being seen as their leader, but without taking unnecessary risks. He'd fought a lot of

battles for several of the old emperors and he knew that being part of an army's vanguard, had killed a lot of brave generals. Now victory seemed so close, Dhūlen saw the wisdom in letting the younger, less experienced officers be at the front. Dhūlen had set up a temporary command post, in the now enemy free, ground floor of the Shinning Towers.....

"I need a status report from the third floor." Yelled Dhūlen.

"Yes my General." Said a field officer. "I'll send a runner immediately."

Success made people very polite and eager to please. If the battle wasn't going their way, the response would have been less eager and keen. All his officers would be working on schemes to get on his good side. If they'd been losing, they'd be working out how to distance themselves from the failure.

"By the nine.....What was that ?" Someone shouted.

No windows left on the ground floor, at least none with glass in them. Dhūlen had heard the loud crash, as something heavy had hit the ground. Not that far away, he could still see a plume of dust rising from whatever had fallen from the towers. Curiosity had him, and a feeling that something important had just happened. Terak weren't famed as Seers, but Dhūlen often had minor premonitions. A few of them had even turned out to be right.

"Archers.....I need my personal guard and a dozen archers." Yelled Dhūlen.

As he was going outside, he wanted plenty of guards around him. It was a short jump down from the window to the ground, just a couple of feet. It was a body that had fallen; Dhūlen could see that from fifty feet away. A body in expensive armour, with a golden tinge to it. An aristocrat perhaps, or one of Xelang's many bastard sons. He was right on top of the body, before he recognised the emblem on the armour. The body was unrecognisable after such a fall, right from the very top of the towers. General Dhūlen recognised the personal insignia of Xelang the Mighty. The King of Quron was dead.

"Xelang the Mighty – Fifty second leader of the High Council of Quron.....Lies dead at our feet."

Shouted Dhūlen. "The battle for Quron has been won. Praise the nine for our victory and praise the new emperor."

"How did he fall ?" Someone asked.

"I don't care.....Just be thankful he's dead." Said Dhūlen. "Send runners.....Everyone must know the King of Quron has gone to join his ancestors."

They'd need to remove the armour from the bloody and mangled corpse. It would need to be displayed somewhere, or there'd be those claiming Xelang was still alive. The last thing the rifts needed was a Cult of Xelang, causing trouble and stirring up the masses. As Dhūlen lifted the helmet to see the face of the Last King of Quron, Nethra arrived.

"I should have known." Said Dhūlen. "I'm assuming you threw him from the top of the tower ?"

"The deed was mine, but the suggestion was from Dhali." Said Nethra. "Xelang was proving to be very hard to kill. Pushing him out of window was crude, but it got the job done."

"Where is Dhali Pril ?" Asked Dhūlen.

"She's still up there.....I must go back for her." Said Nethra.

Dhali arrived from above, travelling at speed. By the time Dhūlen was aware of her being there; she was sending up a little dust and unbending her knees, after hitting the ground feet first. She'd hit the ground at some speed, but seemed to have suffered no harm from it.

"I'm impressed.....Did you jump from the tower ?" Asked Dhūlen.

"Yes.....I used a little dark magic to avoid the same fate as poor Xelang." Said Dhali.

"I was going to come back for you, I promise." Said Nethra.

“No harm done.....I enjoyed leaping from the highest of the Shinning Towers.”

Had Muzzie given Nethra orders about disposing of Xelang’s body ? It didn’t seem so, but the body of a mighty enemy was normally treated with respect.

“I’ll get the armour taken off the body.” Said Dhūlen. “Then I’m assuming Muzzie will want to give Xelang a funeral fit for a King.”

“You assume wrong, General.” Said Nethra. “It was agreed between Muzzie and I; kill Xelang and his remains are mine, to do with as I please.”

There were rumours, lots of rumours. Not just the dark angels enjoyed the taste of fresh flesh. As long as the enemy dead were satisfying Nethra’s appetite, he had no problem with whatever she chose to eat.

“I need help here.” Shouted Dhūlen. “The armour has to be removed from this body.”

Quron didn’t so much have a garrison, as a standing army. The barracks was one of the oldest buildings in Quron; used for many civic purposes, before being converted into a large, solid looking army barracks. Built with a darker stone than most of the city; Caspian could remember looking at the outside of the barracks and wishing he’d been given a different part of Quron to attack. Dark and foreboding was how he’d have described the home of the Quron army. Inside wasn’t so bad, the warriors had created a home from home, as warriors do. Plenty of light on the inside, but Caspian still had a bad feel about the place. Muzzie had wanted the barracks taken in a day, but the fighting had been hard and brutal. For the first time, Caspian the Great wasn’t having an easy victory. Being honest, he wasn’t even sure if he was winning.....

“We should have insisted on having another thousand fighters.” Said Vella.

Having Vella with him was wonderful, they fought better together. It added extra stress though, when things weren’t going to plan. The mother of his child had several deep scratches in her armour; reminders of how tough the fighting had been.

“I’m not a thousand battle hardened greys.” Said LLud Narren. “I did bring the Staff of Volkin with me.....It will definitely help to balance things out.”

LLud had turned up looking dishevelled, with fresh dressings on a few wounds. He’d arrived with a large wooden staff in his hands and a belief that he owed them a little help. Why that should be, when he and Vella had once killed LLud, was a mystery. Not that Caspian was going to ask too many questions, they needed all the help they could get. LLud had arrived with Galla’s pet fluttering around him, which was another mystery. Bird now seemed to choose who to follow, on an almost daily basis.

“We’re very grateful you’re here, LLud.” Said Caspian. “We’ve lost two thousand fighters since we began the attack on the barracks. I’m sure you understand why we’re.....Realistic about our chances of a quick victory.”

“I brought the staff and being truthful, Bird brought me.” Said LLud. “You’re being watched by the Silver Lady, who may help if needed, though I can’t promise that. As for the staff.....It was dug up centuries ago, from below the second row of stones at the Ring of Volkin. It has immense power and best of all; it never seems to run out of chaos magic.”

“I’m feeling a little comforted by that news.....We desperately needed some good news.” Said Vella.

“Win here and you’ll be Vella and Caspian the Great.” Said LLud.

It was time; Caspian had to give his quick talk to his warriors, before the battle began again. Despite seeing so many of their comrades fall, his fighters still cheered. They were confident, so Caspian knew he had to be just as confident, for them.

“.....today we have to take the top floor.....I’m relying on you.....”

They cheered him and called him Caspian the Great. They really did have to take control of the barracks that day. Failure was likely to lead to a resurgence of activity in other areas; enemy fighters suddenly finding the will to fight again. There had to be a total victory that day.

“I’m going to lead the attack.” Caspian told his personal guards. “I’m relying on you all to make sure I see another morning.”

“And I’ll be fighting next to you.” Said Vella.

Caspian looked at her and really wanted to order her to keep to the rear of the advance. How could he though, after telling her how important she was to him. He only seemed to fight well when Vella was fighting beside him. LLud was there too, holding what looked like a piece of very old wood. The Staff of Volkin reminded him of the staff Pinthrad often used, to help him walk over rough ground.

As they began to walk towards the stairs to the top floor, Caspian whispered to LLud.

“I hope that staff is as good as you say.....Or we’re all likely to die in this dreadful place.”

“It is.....You’ll see, Caspian.” Muttered LLud.

“Silly LLud.....Brought a stick to a sword fight.” Said Bird.

Bird was as he always was, cheeky and seemingly fearless. LLud was the target of his sarcasm and put downs, which LLud seemed very good at ignoring.

“Keep in front of us, Bird.” Said Vella. “Make a lot of noise if you find any enemy fighters.”

“They’ll hear me in Leng.” Squawked Bird.

Bird had actually been the cause of a three line note on the last set of minutes, from a meeting of the eight imperial advisers. It was his size and that Bird was apparently still growing. Galla said it was all nonsense, a kind of optical illusion. She’d put a measure behind him and her pet was barely three inches taller than at the start of Muzzie’s campaign to be emperor. Three inches seemed a lot for a small pet bird, but Caspian had thought there were more important things to worry about. Bird started to make loud squawking noises, once he reached the stairs.

“They’ve retaken the stairs.....I guessed they would.” Said Vella.

“Good.....You’ll see me use the staff.” Said LLud.

Caspian just hoped the staff wasn’t a failure. LLud might be famous, but everything he’d hidden away in the Dome was old, very old, many millennia old. Even the wall breaker had fallen apart, after LLud had fired it, just once. Caspian held his word tight and put his reliance in cold steel. Bird appeared at the bottom of the stairs.

“Dozens of them.....They’ve retaken the floor above.” Said Bird. “There are barricades across the top of the stairs.”

“Time to show us what you can do, LLud.” Said Vella.

“We need to take the barracks, today.” Said Caspian. “Or Muzzie might get me to pay for the rebuilding of his bar.”

“Oh, things are getting desperate.” Said LLud, with a grin. “I won’t let you down.”

LLud placed the staff on his shoulder, despite it only being no more than three inches thick. The magician started muttering at it too, as if it was a proper conversation.

“I’m ready.....Everyone needs to keep behind me.” Shouted LLud.

“You’ll get no arguments from me about that.” Yelled one of the greys.

LLud turned the corner and started to go up the stairs. Caspian held Vella back, to make sure they were a good three feet behind the magician. There was a barricade, with two archers peering out from behind two heavy cupboards and a pile of nailed together timbers. LLud used his left hand to

aim the Staff of Volkin, which was still on his right shoulder. He muttered something, in what sounded like Old Imperial.

"Well done, LLud.....Just be careful of their archers." Said Vella.

Not so much an explosion, as an irresistible wind of fire. The barricade was now gone, thrown up the stairs and now a burning pile of wooden splinters. As for the warriors behind the barricade; they were now broken, charred bodies, who'd obviously ceased to be in the land of the living. It was horrifying in so many ways, but to Caspian, it meant they might take the barracks before Muzzie turned up to do the job himself.

"Keep behind me.....No one should be between me and the enemy." Yelled LLud.

"Archers.....He needs archers to protect him." Shouted Caspian.

They weren't exactly a well-oiled machine, as everyone followed LLud Narren up the stairs. They were getting better though; a dozen archers were now looking for enemy archers to deal with. By the time they reached the top floor, they might be unstoppable.

"I can see them.....Another barricade." Shouted LLud.

The twang of arrows first, then the scream of an enemy one of the arrows had hit. LLud muttered at the staff and it fired more hot wind, very hot and fast wind. The staff created air so hot, it left scorch marks on the stone stairs. The barricade vanished, as did the warriors who'd been behind it.

"Now we run at them.....But keep behind me." Yelled LLud.

A full charge which felt wonderful after slowly trudging along behind LLud for what seemed a long time. The floor at the top of the stairs had been theirs the day before. The Quron fighters had retaken it, but it was still bare and covered in debris from previous battles. It had become a war of attrition, but hopefully, LLud would change all that. If he wasn't killed by an enemy archer.

"Bird.....Bird." Yelled Vella. "I have need of you."

"You need these." Said LLud, handing her a tin full of Nesh bugs.

"Bird.....I have a treat for you." Yelled Vella.

No huge hurry, the warriors with Caspian were busy looking through whatever supplies and weapons the enemy had left behind. All armies did it, though no leader was ever proud of their warriors collecting dead fighter's swords and rations.

"Silly Vella.....What do you want?" Asked Bird.

Two wriggling Nesh bugs made him less awkward.

"Bird likes treats." Said Bird.

"See if you can get onto the top floor, Bird." Said Vella. "See where everyone is.....And how many fighters they have.....There'll be more treats for you."

If only human diplomacy could be done with Nesh bugs. Off Bird went, hurtling up the stairs that went up to the top floor. Caspian had floor plans for the ancient building, but plans didn't tell you who might be up there and how many fighters they had. LLud was looking at a mound of supplies the enemy had left behind.

"We cleared them out just in time." Said LLud. "They were obviously intending to bring a large number of fighters to defend the barracks."

"I think it's become important to them.....A symbolic line in the sand." Said Caspian. "Even with the death of Xelang, they're still trying to fight back."

"I almost admire them." Said Vella. "Only almost though."

Sounds began to penetrate the stone ceiling above them, which was the stone floor of the top floor. Sounds of people running, trampling over things. There were several obvious detonations, as though magic users were firing off battle magic. By the time Bird came back down the stairs, everyone was

looking at the stairs leading up. Surely all that noise meant dozens of enemy fighters would be chasing after Bird. The noise ceased, though Galla's pet did look a bit dishevelled.

"Did you cause all the noise, Bird?" Asked Vella.

"Tried to get me.....Too slow." Said Bird.

"How many of them are up there?" Asked Caspian.

"Many more than I can count." Said Bird. "Less warriors than you have. Magic users with them.....I was nearly set alight."

"Is anyone who looks important with them?" Asked LLud.

Bird had aimed his beak at things, but Caspian had never seen him point with his foot before. It looked strange, to see him standing on one foot, while pointing at where all the noise had been coming from.

"There.....Someone in expensive robes." Said Bird. "The fighters seem nervous of them."

"Man, woman? Can you describe them, Bird?" Asked Vella.

"Woman, I think." Said Bird. "They're wearing long blue robes.....Difficult to be sure."

There was a lot of chatter, with LLud suggesting it might be Xelang's eldest daughter. A nasty piece of work it seemed, the fighters being wary of her was the clincher. A few of Caspian's guards had heard things, as warriors seemed to do. Sometimes real things, but often nothing but nonsense. It seemed Xelang's eldest daughter tended to use disruption spells. His guards muttered about fighters transformed into dreadful abominations. Of course, it might have all have been nonsense.

"Time.....The day isn't getting any longer." Said Caspian. "We need to go up those stairs and deal with whatever we find."

"Muzzie always used to say that.....The first time we went to Gorshan." Said Vella.

"Muzzie was born wise.....Same as before, I'll go in front." Said LLud.

"Blue robes, is to the left as you go up the stairs." Said Bird.

Caspian was tempted to give another motivational speech; mostly about not holding back and how all the enemy fighters needed to be destroyed. Looking at his fighters, they didn't need it. There was a look on their faces.....They wanted vengeance for their dead friends.

"Are you all ready to fight?" Yelled Caspian.

"Yes, we are!" The warriors yelled back.

LLud in front with the Staff of Volkin up on his shoulder. Caspian and Vella behind him in their expensive armour and holding enchanted blades. If the enemy weren't a little worried by the horde coming up the stairs, Caspian would have been surprised. Behind Caspian were about four thousand of Muzzie's best warriors. All of them wanting to bury their sword, into the vitals of a Quron fighter.

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Muzzie knew he now effectively ruled Quron, when a runner told him Caspian and Vella, had cleared every enemy fighter out of the barracks. Not that he wanted to rule the city, he wanted to destroy it. To leave nothing but a pile of ruins where the city had once been. If he was feeling merciful, he might leave a few buildings; to offer shelter to those using the Pilgrim Trail. The nomadic tribes might appreciate that too; a few places to shelter from seasonal sand storms. If Quron was left standing, it would attract malcontents, the way rotting fruit attracted bugs. Destroying the city would also be a huge statement of intent. Even Leng wouldn't want him as an enemy. They'd definitely crown him as emperor of all the rifts.....

"Several different guilds will want access, Adamaz." Said Muzzie. "I'm assuming that won't be a problem?"

Muzzie and Aeony had gone to the Great Library, the moment victory was certain. To be precise, they were in the tower where restricted books and scrolls were housed. A lot of dusty tomes, which didn't seem to have been disturbed for centuries. There were now a few thousand new additions. Metal books from Quron's famed archive of forbidden knowledge. The new additions were already attracting interest and were unlikely to be left to gather dust. Itet and one of her sisters had carried Faal to the Great Library of the City of the Lost God. Faal had earned himself a special rewards for finding the archive. Muzzie wasn't sure what it would be yet, but it would be huge, conspicuous and unforgettable.

"Well.....I can't talk for Caspian." Said Adamaz. "I am now officially retired. That said, Caspian has always wanted wider access to the restricted volumes in the library. I'm sure the assorted guilds will get the access they seek."

"The eight advisers need unrestricted rights to use the Quron archive." Said Galla.

Galla had arrived in a swirl of a portal, without mentioning who'd created it for her. Muzzie was still finding it hard to equate the new younger looking Galla, with the apothecary he'd known for a great many years. The sudden feelings of physical attraction for Galla, were strange and unsettling. It didn't help that she kept undressing parts of him, to change the dressings on his wounds.

"That goes without question." Said Muzzie. "I'm sure Adamaz can guarantee that, without the need for an imperial order?"

"Yes.....Yes of course and I'm sure Caspian will agree." Said Adamaz. "Once he's finished in the barracks and had a long hot bath."

"The child Maya calls her own.....Now has gold skin." Said Galla. "I'm sure we all know what that means?"

Muzzie knew who Galla meant, they all did. Not an expert on the Ancient Ones, but Faal had given him the essentials.

"It'll grow into an egg bearer, a queen capable of breeding more of her kind." Said Faal. "When fully grown, Uula will be almost indestructible and maybe.....Just maybe; she'll be as powerful as Estrin."

"Then be thankful the child is on our side." Said Aeony.

"Uula Podda will be very useful to us in Leng." Said Muzzie.

Everyone was nodding at him, including Adamaz. A victorious emperor who'd arrived fresh from reducing Quron to a pile of smoking rubble. Arriving in Leng with a child of the Ancient Ones. They'd be fighting each other, to be the one who crowned him as Emperor of all the Rifts.

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