

The Last Emperor

Chapter 36 – Towers Of Quron

“The Defender had morning regulars. Not drunks who’d been there all night, though occasionally there were a few of those. A small number of those on their way to gainful employment, had taken to ordering herbal tea and bread of some kind. The Defender had become respectable.”



Galla could have kept well away from the attack. In the original plan, one of the guild sorcerers was to create a small, short lasting portal to take her to safety. Where was the fun in that though ? Youth seemed to bring foolhardy behaviour, as an unexpected addition to the youthful looks. Galla felt wonderful and she also felt quite brave.

“I’m staying Itet.” Said Galla. “When your sisters go to the top of the hill.....I want you to take me with you.”

“The hill is really a small mountain.” Said Itet. “You’ll be exposed up there and an easy target for enemy magic users. I really recommend that you use a portal to somewhere safe.”

“Recommend all you want.....I want to go with you.” Said Galla.

Aeony would have sent her away, with force if necessary. Itet was a little different to most of the dark angels. She was definitely the most adventurous and curious out of all her sisters. Itet smiled at her.

“Fine, I’ll take you myself.” Said Itet. “Just don’t get killed, Galla.....Muzzie will never forgive me.”

There were a lot of explosive devices, to be taken to several different places on the side of the small mountain. There was a certainty that the defenders of the city would use their own magic users. It was assumed that not everyone involved in the attack, would survive. Itet picked Galla up in her talons and took her high into the air. From that height the famous shining towers of Quron could easily be seen. It also meant the more alert of the enemy’s watchers, would have seen them.

“We’ll be at the highest point on the mountain.” Shouted Itet. “Also the most dangerous, because we’ll be easy to spot.”

There was little evening twilight on the rifts and not much in the way of a dawn either. The idea was for the dark angels to drop their explosive devices, just before first light arrived on the rift. Hopefully there’d then be panic, confusion and fear in the city of Quron. The guild sorcerers needed a little light to aim the larger devices. There was a real hope that serious damage could be done to the heart of the enemy city.

“There are trees; Galla.....Use them for cover. No standing out in the open.” Said Itet.

Itet was given a bag of the bombs Galla had created. Then Galla was effectively on her own, on a fairly exposed mountain top. She ran towards several trees, only to find that she was right in the centre of where the bags of bombs were being stored. Galla ran again and found a ledge with pretty good cover, provided by lots of well grown bushes. It wasn’t a great spot, but it would do. She could even see everything inside the walls of Quron, if she leant over to her left.

“I did put them together pretty quickly.....I hope the bombs work.” She muttered.

Belso was somewhere helping the guild sorcerers and all the dark angels were preparing for their attack. For the first time in a while, Galla was completely alone. It did at least give her a chance to watch Muzzie’s revenge for the attempt on his life.

“Who is that.....Standing around and gawping ?” Someone yelled.

“It’s me; Galla.....I just want to see my bombs in action.”

“Sorry.” Someone yelled back.

It was the way she looked of course. For a while there’d be those who had no idea who she was. Her older self would have found that worrying. Her new younger self, found the idea exciting.

“I must look up a few of my old boyfriends.” She muttered.

If they were alive.....Her lifespan had been truly extraordinary and it had probably just been extended even further. A few dark sorcerers would be alive, they were just about immortal. There were one or two of those, who’d remember her embraces.

“Damn, I’d forgotten how thoughts about sex can ruin your focus.” She mumbled.

The first of the dark angels had to be passing over the city walls, but there was no reaction from the defenders. There had been a hope, that for a while, the military of Quron would be focusing on their failed attempt to assassinate the emperor. They’d taken an enormous gamble and it had failed. The last thing on their minds, would be a piece of quick retaliation by the imperial fighters. Right over the centre of the city, the dark angels began to drop their bombs.

“Oh yes, they work very well.....Very well indeed.” Muttered Galla.

There was light on the rift now, almost good enough to see by. The bombs still looked bright though, as they exploded with red and yellow fire. The dark angels had spread out across Quron and were dropping explosives everywhere. A fire in the market area, explosions somewhere near the Temple of the old Gods. Fire, smoke and destruction everywhere, but the defenders were fighting back.

“We knew some would die.....Some have hardly tasted life.” Muttered Galla.

New sisters for Aeony, some of them just a few days old. Galla saw one of them become a ball of fire. It had to be magic; Quron had no weapons capable of knocking a dark angel out of the sky. Only one though, so far.....Galla gave a quick prayer to the nine, that not too many died. The next wave of Aeony’s sisters went over the top of the city wall in full light. They did a good job of setting fire to parts of the city, but at least five of them would never return home. Galla hated to watch, yet seemed unable to look away.

“Come on sorcerers.....Send the large devices.” Mumbled Galla. “Show them that we too, are good at surprise attacks.”

In many ways, the missiles sent by magic users, were worse than a hundred well trained archers. There was no warning, just an explosion, or a ball of fire, as the missiles found a target. The group of fighters further down the mountain must have been spotted by those on the city walls. Several explosions lit up the mountain and Galla wondered how many had died. Mostly fighters rather than dark angels, or sorcerers. They’d have people who’d miss them though. The one certainty of war was death and often the dead were on your side. The heat rising from the fire, caused a kind of shining haze in the sky.

“Where are the sorcerers.....Why aren’t they using the devices ?” Galla muttered.

More hits by enemy magicians, more fire on the side of the mountain. Soon there’d be no one left to attack the walls of Quron. The dark angels had done well, especially around the famous Quron markets. The inhabitants of the city would be feeling scared, the mission would have been a success.....But it could have achieved so much more.

“At last.....Finally.” Muttered Galla.

So much energy in the large devices, that they glowed a little, as they hurtled towards the city. A mixture of chemicals and raw chaos inside them, the devices were something new. The guild sorcerers too, had never thrown anything that large before. Force spells used on large and

unfamiliar objects. Hardly surprising that the first two landed a little short of their intended target. Not a disaster though, both struck the huge main entrance gates of the city.

"They work.....Thank the Nine that I didn't build duds." Galla mumbled.

The gates were strong and surrounded by walls and magical defences, which were even stronger. Galla's devices made the ground tremble though, as they exploded. There was now full daylight on the rift; enough light to see one wall to the side of the gates had cracked. There was an audible sound of something breaking, as the wall fell apart. A lot of work would be needed, before the main gates opened again. Galla could hear the sound of Muzzie's soldiers cheering, as the next device hit one of the famous shining towers.

"I suppose I was hoping for too much." Muttered Galla.

A jammed gate, with a city in panic.....It was wonderful. Muzzie was likely to hold some kind of celebration. Galla had been hoping though, that one of the towers might fall. There was an old legend, which Nethra had recently mentioned. It was said that if one of the towers was destroyed, the city would fall. Galla watched as several more devices hit the towers. Lots of flames and noise, but the towers looked undamaged.

"Maybe if every device had hit the same tower?" Galla mumbled.

It was their turn to take it. The air crackled with magical energy, as there were screams from those nearby. Enemy magic users had spotted Muzzie's warriors as the top of the mountain. Galla saw a fighter burned to ashes and thought her own life would soon be over. A pity really, she was looking forward to vigorous sex in her new body. Talons grabbed her and lifted her into the air.

"I've lost many sisters." Said Itet. "Quron will remember us though and the destruction we brought with us."

Just in time, the ledge where Galla had been standing, seemed to be bathed in flames. Galla held onto Itet and watched the fires taking hold in some parts of Quron. Just as Itet began to fly lower, Galla saw it happen. Only one of the smaller shining towers, but it crashed to the ground. Galla was so happy, she found herself crying with joy.

"If a tower falls, the city shall fall."

"What was that?" Asked Itet.

"An old saying that I hope.....Turns out to be true."

~ ~

"I was expecting you to arrive full of anger." Said Merrick.

"No, I'm too glad to see you." Said Nethra. "And I suppose stealing a few supplies seems almost trivial, after assassins trying to kill Muzzie."

Morning in her own bed, or more accurately, their bed. Nethra hadn't let Merrick see her do it, but she'd sniffed the bed very thoroughly. No scent of another woman sleeping there, though Merrick might have taken his conquests elsewhere. For the moment and still in the afterglow, Nethra was happy to give him the benefit of the doubt. It was nice watching Merrick, as he wandered around the room; while taking his time to get dressed.

"The purple wings.....Are they permanent now?" Asked Merrick.

"I honestly have no idea, but they might be." Said Nethra. "Not sure if I have the Sliver Lady to thank, or a very brief meeting with some pure blood Genova. Personally....I'd have preferred sharper claws and stronger wings."

The Defender had morning regulars. Not drunks who'd been there all night, though occasionally there were a few of those. A small number of those on their way to gainful employment, had taken to ordering herbal tea and bread of some kind. The Defender had become respectable. Merrick still

thought it was amusing, but Nethra saw it as a massive improvement. She could hear the noises of the doors being unbolted for the early morning trade.

"You're wrong you know.....They probably weren't trying to kill the new emperor." Said Merrick.

"Who wasn't ?" She asked.

"Don't get instantly angry, but I hear things." Said Merrick. "I know people, so I was asked if I knew anyone who might help them. Of course I said no. Don't look at me like that, I said no."

"You never told me.....You should have sent someone to tell me." Said Nethra.

It was what she'd been dreading, Merrick involved in the plot to kill Muzzie, or not kill Muzzie. It was beginning to become complicated.

"It all happened so fast.....Just a day or so. I never had time to let you know."

"Who were they intending to kill ?" She asked.

"Muzzie would have been the cream on the top of the pie." Said Merrick. "They were the bandits the cutthroats. All conspiring to cause confusion and anxiety, before they struck. The real target was the child of the Ancient Ones. Kill her and her kind would destroy Muzzie and those who served him. A simple act of retribution and the new empire is over."

"All of that to kill poor little Uula Podda." Said Nethra. "I suppose it makes some kind of sense, in a dreadful kind of way."

"Long legs.....Cute name." Said Merrick.

When she moved towards him, Merrick flinched. Nethra should have given him a new scar, a reminder not to do business with assassins. She was past all that though; they'd been down that road so many times before. No cut with her claws, instead she hugged him.

"I realise it now, I'm stuck with you." Said Nethra. "Actually we're stuck with each other. The chances of me being able to walk away and never see you again.....Are just about nil. So my dearest, as I said.....We're stuck with one another."

"I don't mind." Said Merrick.

"I'm sure you don't. I need names from you of course." Said Nethra. "Everyone involved in the conspiracy. Every local person in Annill who helped by providing introductions to bandits and rogues. I need them all, every single name."

Merrick was still only half dressed. He went over to a section of the bedroom wall and pressed at a wooden picture rail. Nethra knew the section of wall would open up. It was where they kept everything they needed for a fast getaway; just in case Merrick's past suddenly caught up with him. He removed a single piece of good quality paper, with a handwritten list on it.

"Every name.....I spent an entire night getting it right." Said Merrick.

"Thank you.....I need someone you trust to deliver it to Muzzie." Said Nethra.

He was giving her a certain look, as though she'd just stabbed his favourite niece.

"Don't worry; I'll put together a note to go with it." Said Nethra. "It'll make you sound like the most loyal imperial subject in Annill."

"I have someone.....He'll deliver the message, without looking at it." Said Merrick.

"A rogue who can be trusted.....A very rare thing." Muttered Nethra.

Muzzie and Uula Podda were safe and the assassins were all dead. That list though, was still worth its weight in imperial gold. Nethra knew a few names on the list, but they'd all be dead within a few days. Muzzie might look the other way about some things, but not treason.

"Do you get a reward, or a punishment ?" Said Nethra.

"A reward, definitely a reward."

It took Nethra a few seconds to remove the two items of clothing; Merrick had spent so long putting on. She pushed him onto the bed and straddled him.

“You’re smiling, but I could be about to cut holes in you.” Said Nethra. “Or remove a body part that’s precious to you.”

“Nethra, you’re not angry.....You smell different when you’re angry.” Said Merrick.

She wasn’t angry; her thoughts were about sex, rather than violence. She placed her hands on his shoulders and Merrick’s hand went up between her legs. Quite quickly every piece of tension had left her body.

~ ~

“Yes, I think bringing down one of the shining towers of Quron; can be called the first step to making that city part of the empire.” Shouted Muzzie.

Vella had received the news from an excited and slightly scorched Galla, when she’d returned from the act of revenge on Quron. Galla had told her that Muzzie would hold some kind of celebration and she’d been right. Muzzie had recently invited all of the eight and their partners, to a private celebration in his rooms at the Void Gate.

“I know many of you were worried about Belso.” Yelled Muzzie. “He was hit by a fireball, while attacking the city of Quron.”

He had to yell, there was a strong wind across the Void Gate square and a great many had arrived to listen to their emperor.

“I’m pleased to say that Belso was injured, but is healing fast.” Shouted Muzzie. “Belso the indestructible is still unstoppable, indestructible and as incorrigible as ever.”

General laughter, as Belso had become almost a mascot to the army. If Belso could survive everything the war threw at him; there was a chance they all might live to return home.

“Someone is watching over him.” Said Aeony. “I thought he was dead when I threw him off the city walls of Tandalla.”

“There must be a deity who looks after rogues like Belso.” Said Caspian.

Most of the eight had duties to perform; the army was being positioned for the attack on Quron.

Caspian was stood next to her, as was Aeony. Faal was with Muzzie, to provide protection from any magical attacks. There’d been no official mention of Runa, but Vella knew she was recovering after being wounded by enemy assassins.

“We will never again be caught unawares.” Yelled Muzzie.

Poor Muzzie, he’d been doing a lot of public speaking, which invariably ended up as public yelling. Vella was sure his voice sounded strained and a little broken.

“The sorcerers guild from the City of the Lost God, have provided us with some of their best magic users.” Shouted Muzzie. “Specialists in sensing and locating the use of magic. Any portals activated near the Void Gate will be seen and dealt with. We will not be caught off guard a second time.”

The magic user stood next to Muzzie, was really to blame. Faal should have seen the potential for an attack using portals from Quron. Cities tended to have permanent defences against such things, but the Void Gate wasn’t a city. Faal had done well though, in his part in creating new dark angels.

Muzzie had obviously decided to forgive Faal.

“Oh my poor voice....Too much shouting.” Shouted Muzzie. “I have one last announcement and I’m sure you all want to see Maya and Uula Podda.”

Get warriors in the right mood and they’ll cheer anything. There was a genuine affection for the child of the Ancient Ones. The baby was unique, a one off.....And she was theirs. Muzzie had to wait for the cheering to stop, as Maya held Uula in her arms.

“That child gets bigger every day.” Said Aeony.

“I heard they take decades to become adults.” Said Caspian. “But Uula.....Soon Maya won’t be able to carry her.”

“Then she’ll push her about in a cart.....Or so I was told.” Said Vella.

Maya took a bow with the child around her neck and Uula made a few noises. Again, the assembled fighters went crazy. One of the towers of Quron had fallen and they had an Ancient One on their side.....It had to be impossible to lose. Vella hopped that was right, but the losses fighting for Quron, were going to be high.

“Please.....A little quiet for our emperor.” Yelled Faal.

“Maya will still be a healer.” Yelled Muzzie. “She did so well in looking after Uula, that for a while. She will be a nanny to the child of the Ancient Ones. So, be nice to Maya.....She’ll soon have a very large and powerful guardian.”

“Maya.” Said Uula, quite loudly.

There were rumours about the child talking, but actually hearing it was entirely different. After a few moments of quiet, the warriors began to cheer again. They carried on cheering, long after Maya and Uula had gone.

“And one last thing.” Shouted Muzzie. “The guards at the entry points to the stockade, are being doubled.”

Had anyone heard him above the cheering ? It was actually important and Vella thought she’d now sleep a little more soundly.

~ ~

No more being just one part of a three part attack. No more wondering if he was being kept out of the information loop. General Dhūlen had been given the entire army to equip and position within a day’s march from the city walls of Quron. He felt like an imperial general again. No more doubts, no more wondering how quickly he could pack his belongings and run for his life. He’d had to arrange for the disappearance of several trusted friends, simply because they’d known he’d intended to run. At his age, it became quite hard to make new friends; especially ones he could trust. Once the army turned on Muzzie, Dhūlen would put himself forward. Until then, he was going to keep his head down and do his job.....

“Sorry to drag you out of your sick bed, Runa.” Said Dhūlen. “You know most of the recruits from Tandalla. I seem to remember you picking which to release from the local prison. They not only know you, they seem consider you to be a friend.”

Runa had arrived in a cart, propped up with plenty of blankets. She’d had a few warriors pull her out of the cart and placed in the most comfortable chair they could find. She looked unwell, but Dhūlen knew Runa was as tough as boot leather. She’d be fine and he needed her to handle any problems with the warriors from Tandalla.

“I was glad to get away from Galla’s healers.” Said Runa. “Fuss, fuss and more fuss.....I wasn’t even allowed a medicinal glass of ale.”

“There’s plenty of ale here...All you can drink.” Said Dhūlen.

They were still in his headquarters at the Void Gate, though not for long. The emperor’s orders were for the army to be on the move, very quickly. Muzzie wanted the entire army to be in position, in just two days. It was impossible of course, but Dhūlen was confident it could be done.

“To be honest, I need more than your knowledge of the recruits.” Said Dhūlen. “Some, who will talk to you, won’t talk to me. With some it’s my Terak ancestry, while others.....I’ve never learned how to be nice for the sake of being nice.”

“My father used to say much the same thing.” Said Runa. “I’ll talk to whoever you need me to.....Though first. Please give me a brief idea of what the army will be doing when it reaches Quron ?”

“Easy.....What I like about Muzzie, is the simplicity of his plans.” Said Dhūlen. “The fact that he’s yet to lose a major battle, proves his plans are simple, yet work rather well. The entire army will sit in front of Quron, just out of range of any weapons they have. There is a chance they’ll send their army out to engage ours, but I doubt it.”

“I tend to agree.....They’ll sit behind their very strong walls and wait for us to arrive.” Said Runa. “My moment to order the army to advance, is when LLud Narren arrives with all his enchanted weapons.” Said Dhūlen. “Pinthrad will be creating a portal for LLud. The enemy must not get LLud’s toys, that would be a disaster. The army has to move quickly and get LLud in a position to use his wall buster. It needs to be said that standing around close to the walls of Quron, will be suicide. Don’t worry, the army will give their lives to protect LLud Narren, but we could lose half the army doing it.”

“Fuck.” Said Runa. “How large is the army now ? No one could give me a number.”

Dhūlen hadn’t intended to laugh, but it just came out.

“A good question, Runa.” He said. “I once heard that Xanash the thirty forth, had taken an army into battle, yet had no idea how large it was. Now I’m in the same position. We’ve been efficient at getting every man to sign the recruitment papers. They’ve all been paid, but as to counting them.....It could be anywhere from a hundred thousand, to a hundred and thirty thousand. Then the Hive Mother had promised another ten thousand of her pure blood demon warriors. They are due to arrive tonight. We have an army so large, that it really shouldn’t lose.”

“But you really think half of them might be killed ?” Asked Runa.

“I am and many would think it a huge success.” Said Dhūlen. “Half the army still alive....Quron added to the empire and Muzzie crowned as emperor in Leng. Everything sounds wonderful.”

“But sixty thousand dead.....My father would never have treated his warriors as expendable.”

“A different time, Runa....A different time.” Said Dhūlen. “I guarantee that if Muzzie told his army that half of them would die; they’d still cheer him. Another fact about warriors is that they believe it’ll be the other man who dies. They will always be among those left alive.”

He could almost see Runa’s mind thinking things over. Dhūlen really wanted her to ask the question. It really was true that one volunteer was worth ten conscripts. Ideally.....The offer had to come from Runa.

“Alright.....Why do you need my contacts ?” Asked Runa.

“Muzzie has a lot of powerful allies.” Said Dhūlen. “The Silver Lady looks favourably on him becoming emperor. Not one warrior in his army doesn’t know that. The nine are here too, or at least Estrin is often seen in the stockade. Then there are rumours of the Genova helping Muzzie a few times. After all that, he’s now been entrusted with a child of the Ancient Ones.”

“I know general, I know all that.” Said Runa. “All wonderful, but I still don’t know where I fit in to it all.”

“When we march towards Quron, none of them will be with the army.” Said Dhūlen. “As far as I can tell, Estrin is worried about the precious balance of all things. Ask dead soldiers their feelings on the damned balance. The Silver Lady doesn’t want a war with other factions of chaos. As for the angels, the Genova.....According to the clerics, they move in mysterious ways. Even the famous Hive Mother has been given other duties. We need some kind of divine help, Runa. Otherwise half the army really will die at the walls of Quron.”

She might just say that none of it was her problem. If the situation had been reversed, Dhūlen thought he'd keep well away from upsetting Muzzie. Then there was the likelihood of annoying some of the most powerful beings on the rifts. Runa had been an army brat though; her father was still revered, years after his death. She looked at him for a while, as if considering walking away from the problem.

"Alright general, I'll help." Said Runa. "You may not think it, but the solution is a small child with lots of very long arms and legs. Uula Podda is the key to getting a little divine intervention where the army needs it."

~ ~

"I thought we might get a few more days together." Said Merrick.

He knew Nethra would be called for, once the attack began on Quron. There was no secret about the attack; it was the talk of Annill. It was also likely to be the hot topic in all the other major rift cities. Muzzie had a large enough army to attack the second most powerful city on the rifts. The most powerful was Leng and no one was stupid enough to attack Leng. Come to think of it, no one had ever laid siege to Quron before.

"I'm being spoiled really, the sorcerers guild are creating a portal for me." Said Nethra. "No waiting for the Void Gate to be aimed at Annill. We've two more nights before I'll be needed."

"Take me with you." Said Merrick. "You know I'm a good fighter. If the portal is large, we could take a few of my rogues with us."

"No.....I'm fairly sure I'm not fated to die at the walls of Quron." Said Nethra. "I'm not sure about your destiny."

"A smashed body among the rubble." Said Merrick. "Many would say I deserve worse."

"I'd never say that.....I won't take you with me, Merrick."

They hugged and kissed, but getting back into a bed they'd only just got out of.....It was time to get dressed and get the bar properly opened up. Two more nights wasn't much, but it was better than nothing.

"When Muzzie is emperor and there are no more enemies to fight." Said Merrick. "Can we go back to being the two rather boring people who run the Defender Tavern?"

"You forgot to mention your small army of rogues."

"We've always needed the extra gold they bring in." Said Merrick. "Anyway, they're more like family now, than hired ruffians."

"Yes.....I would like things to back to as they were." Said Nethra. "If Muzzie wins, there will always be other enemies. There will always be other enemies for me to fight. In the middle of the night a portal will appear and I'll have to go. Can you cope with that?"

Could he? He'd put her through worse and mostly because of causes far less noble. To hell with it, someone else would have to get the bar ready for another busy day. He did pay his staff well. Nethra was only wearing a pair of knickers, which he removed.

"Yes.....I can cope with that." Said Merrick.

Her knickers became caught on one of her clawed toes. As he knelt to untangle them, it was there in front of him. Her wonderful fur covered genitals, her bits that fitted his so well. It was no good; he had to use his lips and tongue.

"We've so much to do." Said Nethra.

He pushed her back onto the bed and carried on using his tongue to explore her most intimate place. A place he knew very well, but he never tired of tasting.

~ ~

Muzzie had long ago decided to accept the advice of the Silver Lady. General Dhūlen was destined to have a brutal and painful death, but not until after Muzzie had been crowned as emperor in Leng. Muzzie had been playing with Dhūlen a little, blowing hot and cold. Then there had been a rumour that Dhūlen was so scared, that he was going to run away. A fleeing general definitely wasn't good for morale and if the news reached Quron, which it would; they'd probably declare an annual holiday in his honour. Dhūlen day maybe.....No, that could never be allowed to happen. Muzzie pretended to think Dhūlen was his loyal friend. One day soon though, Aeony would strip the skin from his body and feast on the soft parts. Most of that would be done while Dhūlen was still alive. "They do look impressive." Said Aeony. "Thousands of them, all marching together."

"Most have spent their lives, fighting in one war or another." Said Muzzie. "Marching in formation must be second nature by now. I agree though, they look magnificent and I'm very proud of them." "Look.....They've got Belso in a cart and they're pushing him." Said Aeony.

"Belso the unstoppable.....I'll make him an officer if he survives Quron." Said Muzzie.

The army were going to war, or at least going to an assembly point for war. There'd be a temporary camp in tents for two or three days. Then the army would march on Quron. It was hoped that LLud Narren's wall destroying weapon, would get them past the walls and into the city.

"These look like cooks and camp followers." Said Aeony. "Are you taking everyone to war, Muzzie?" "Numbers matter and I guarantee someone is watching and counting. At a distance, the cooks will look like any other hybrid fighter." Said Muzzie.

If your city had a sorcerer or magician of reasonable skill, they could talk to other cities. From crystal spheres to talking through an unconscious host, there were many ways of conversing over large distances. It was certain Quron would know what was happening in the stockade and tracing such methods of communication, was just about impossible. If he could make Quron think he had many more warriors than he really did, Muzzie thought a little misinformation was justified. Genuinely, Muzzie thought he had about a hundred and thirty thousand trained fighters ready to fight for his new empire.

"Hey.....There's an effigy of me." Said Aeony. "They can't do that.....Did you know about this?" He had known and remembered giving his blessing on the idea. Muzzie had meant to tell Aeony, but it had been a busy day. More lovingly created statues than effigies, but he could see why Aeony might be upset.

"Made from plaster and painted by the Dredger children." Said Muzzie. "I was asked and forgot all about it.....If it helps, there's one of me too....Really grotesque."

"That does help and now I know it's something from the Dredger kids.....I'm fine with it." Said Aeony.

"Wait until you see what they made Dhūlen look like.....Ours are perfect."

Muzzie waved and even Aeony gave a wave back at a few of the greys from Tandalla. It wasn't just an army marching to war; it was a show, a parade. It was showing all who cared to watch, that Muzzie had a hundred and thirty thousand warriors, ready to fight for him, to die for him if it came to it. Strangely, he nearly missed Maya walking past, as she was almost hidden behind a group of Ubari warriors.

"I'm sure.....Yes, it is her.....Maya is down there, carrying Uula." Said Muzzie.

"Sorry, my turn to forget something." Said Aeony. "Runa is going to show her around the tent city the army will be living in for a few nights. Plus Runa thought the child of the Ancient Ones being there, would be good for morale.....Sorry, I should have told you."

"Yes, I can see that.....I'm sure she'll be back here before the attack begins." Said Muzzie.

Muzzie had a sinking feeling though, an idea that something wasn't quite how it seemed. He was about to send a few of his personal guards to bring back Maya and the child. As always though, things got a little busy. A member of the high council of Tandalla arrived to watch the army march out to war and as Muzzie needed the continued support of.....Maya and Uula were gone from his mind. When he did remember, it was far easier to leave them where they were. After all, Runa was there and she'd look after them.

~ ~

It was his fault of course; he should have kept a little more distance between him and the city walls. LLud Narren was dazed and there was a green liquid all over his left arm; a green liquid with spirals of red mixed in with it. Blood, his blood and he seemed to have several wounds. That was alright, there was a healer with him, inside the specially armoured war waggon. But the waggon was on its side and he couldn't see the healer. He looked around and moving his head made him dizzy.

"Oh, she wasn't much older than Maya." LLud muttered.

The angle of her head told him she was dead, but LLud still put his hand on her brow. Nothing, he'd have sensed any sign of life in the girl. Another casualty to add to the hundreds he could see in front of the mighty main gates of Quron. Most of the dead were from Muzzie's army, though not all of them. A great number of defenders had been killed by archers and brought down from the walls. A long drop, there was no question of any surviving. LLud looked for his wall cracking device and found it, several yards away from the war waggon.

"Damn, I should have been happy to fire it from a quarter of a mile away." He muttered.

There had been enemy fire there, mainly fire wall spells and force spells. The defenders had all sorts of nasty ways to kill, once an enemy was directly under the mighty walls. LLud had seen warriors so badly disrupted, that they were no longer recognisable as hybrids. The clouds of descending fire had killed hundreds, but his waggon was armoured against all but the hottest flames. As LLud looked at the weapon capable of cracking open the most solid of walls, another cloud of fire descended. It turned many of the bodies of the fallen into nothing but hot, dry dust. His weapon would be fine; it had been enchanted by a deity. No one was sure which deity, but it been around for many millennia and still shone like new. A fairly heavy hollow tube of silver metal, he had to lift it onto his shoulder to fire it. There it was, not that far away.....It seemed to be calling out to him.

"Why not.....I might make it." LLud mumbled. "I can fire it directly at the gates. That'll definitely make a massive hole for the army to pour through."

If he survived to blow apart the massive gates, one of the defenders was sure to put an arrow in his back, or disrupt him out of existence. The gates though, he'd never intended to end up in front of the gates. Three gates in a row really, one behind the other. But one shot from the weapon would destroy them all. The weapon was so close.....

"You have to protect LLud Narren, Uula." Said Maya. "Do you understand?"

"I understand."

For a moment, LLud wondered about his sanity. Out there, amid all the death and carnage, was Maya. She looked perfect, not even any dirt on her cloak. Wrapped around her upper body, was the child of the Ancient Ones. The child looked up at the walls of Quron and a loud wailing sound came from its throat. It took a minute or two, before defenders dropped from above. Already dead by some means, their bodies began to litter the ground.

"Go now, LLud Narren." Said Maya. "Use your wall cracking weapon.....Don't worry, Uula will keep you safe."

"Keep safe." Said Uula Podda.

His left arm was a little numb, one of many small wounds, must have damaged something. LLud still managed to pick up the weapon and place it in his shoulder. A cloud of fire descended, but he felt no heat from it. He had no idea how, but the child of the Ancient Ones was protecting him.

“You might want to duck.” Shouted LLud.

“We’ll be fine.” Said Maya.

His arm hurt, everything seemed to have decided to hurt. LLud aimed the wall cracker at the centre of the mighty gates of Quron. Some would say he was about to commit a mortal sin against the Old Gods. He held his breath and put his finger inside a hole in the weapon.

“Please work, or I’ll look so damned stupid.” LLud mumbled.

Inside the hole was a small lever, which required quite a lot of strength to pull back. There was an audible click and then a noise so loud, that it could probably be heard right across the second rift.....

~

~

© Ed Cowling ~ October 2024