

## The Last Emperor

### Chapter 31 – Old Town

**“Caspian had been on his way to the house with the portal, which would take him up to the entrance to the Great Library. A really easy journey, most of it under cover. Running into the moody new queen of the dark angels.....That had been pure bad luck.”**



Whatever Faal’s beast was, Mikan was strong. The part Shuud and part something huge and weird, easily carried both of them. Runa had resisted Faal’s offer of riding behind him on the brute, but it was a long way from Bredon’s Edge to the City of the Lost God. They travelled a little off to the right of the road, with Mikan handling the rough ground with ease. They’d left Bredon’s Edge at dawn, leaving thousands of Dredgers still building homes and strengthening defences. Dredgers were tough when they needed to be and could easily defend the village against attackers. Not that any were expected, the city militia were going to be kept busy with a three pronged attack.

“Slow down under this tree in front.” Said Runa. “I can grab some fresh fruit.”

Stopping to cook up a proper meal would have been nice, but an army on the move rarely stopped for anything other than to fight. Runa grabbed a large armful of the fruit, including the branch it was growing on. The fruit was sweet and perfect. She thrust some at Faal.

“You must try this.....Food of the Gods.” Said Runa.

The magician nodded his appreciation at her, as he chewed. Runa hated the emergency dried rations, the leaves, roots and twigs. Fresh fruit off the tree though.....It was a wonderful treat.

“You’re the local expert.” Said Faal. “How long until we reach the city?”

General Dhūlen was at the front of the army, setting a good pace. No army could keep that pace up all day, not if they expected to win a battle when they got there. Muzzie’s three days from the Ring of Volkin to the city was famous, but Bredon’s Edge was much closer. Less than half the distance.

“I think Dhūlen will carry on after dark, it’s what I’d do.” Said Runa. “Tiring for the fighters, but we’ll reach the outer walls of the city about halfway through the night. The defenders will be sleepy then and many will have been used to reinforce the north side and the Towers. Caspian and Vella will have been attacking the city for hours by now.”

“You’re as good as saying we should have left Bredon’s Edge much earlier.” Said Faal.

“It might look that way, but I trust Muzzie.” Said Runa. “There will be a good reason for us being the last part of the attack.”

Runa had her own ideas, a few intelligent guesses. Belso was there somewhere, now leading a section of archers. Runa kept seeing other faces she knew, mainly the prisoners she’d arranged to have released from Tandalla jail. Warriors released from jail early were likely to be pleased. Add on the money they were being paid, and they’d fight hard for their new emperor. Runa thought General Dhūlen was leading the wave. Once the defenders of the City of the Lost God, thought they were doing alright and, just might, repulse the attack. Dhūlen would arrive with wave after wave of battle hardened fighters. With Faal and her among them, of course.

Mikan found loose rubble to stumble over, which was becoming a rare thing. Faal needed to get him in a straight line again. Runa seemed to need a lot of her attention centred on not falling off Faal’s strange beast. The road from the Ring of Volkin to the city, was shown as a straight line on most

maps. Probably easier to draw for a cartographer, than the meandering of the road through umpteen orchards and tiny settlements. The meandering road had become a straight line, leading right into the city.

“No matter how often I see the city.....I still have to catch my breath.” Said Runa.

“It is.....Beautiful.” Said Faal. “I really hope we don’t destroy too much of it in the battle.”

“No one can destroy what a God has built.” Said Runa. “The walls are his, as are most of the original grand buildings. Just about all of Old Town, the Dome and the Towers. Built by Tomma-Goran and the first Dredgers. The living deity blessed his city and used powerful magic to ensure its survival. Their furnishings can be burned and those who inhabit them killed.....The buildings though...The City of the Lost God will stand as long as the first rift survives.”

It was all there in front of them, though still some way off. The mountain with the Dome on it, which had a slight gold tint to it in the full light. The Towers seemed to defy gravity and all the rules of construction. Ridiculously tall and narrow, the Towers looked likely to collapse at any moment. They had stood there though, since the living God had created them. Close to, and Runa hated to think it, but the city often looked filthy and very old. From a distance though, it looked incredible. The city had created so many legends and so much history and there it was.....For the taking.

“So, we’ve indestructible walls to get past ?” Asked Faal.

“No.....You can thank the Merchants Guild for that.” Said Belso.

Runa hadn’t noticed Belso getting close to them, staying upright on Faal’s beast had been her main concern. Belso was growing on her, the way one admires an uncle who’s the main cause of gossip in the family. Plus, he’d escaped death twice, which had to mean something. Even young Maya thought he’d been marked by the Gods, even if there was no clue as to why.

“Of course, Runa here will know all about that.” Said Belso.

“You tell the story, Belso.” Said Runa. “Always nice to hear things from another viewpoint, and a different angle.”

Plus, it gave her a chance to quietly look at the city, which had always been her home. Until they’d been hurtled across the rifts by a weird prophecy and manipulated into helping Muzzie achieve the impossible. She could see a glint of light on the windows of the Great Library.

“Come on Belso.” Said Faal. “Tell me all about the Merchants Guild and the city walls ?”

Poor Belso, he didn’t look happy. His almost throw away comment looked likely to take a while to explain.

“The walls are there from when Tomma-Goran built them.” Said Belso. “Not exactly untarnished, but the original walls still stand. Walls need gates of course, huge wooden gates, reinforced with strong metal bands. The gates had stood since the city was built. The largest set of gates were near Winshin’s Store, but now there are just holes in the walls where those mighty gates once stood.”

“What happened to the gates ?” Asked Faal.

“Honestly, you never heard the story ?” Asked Runa.

“Humour me.....I was imprisoned in the Necropolis for a truly huge number of years.” Said Faal.

“Well.....The gates kept the trouble out of the city, but they slowed down trade.” Said Belso. “The Merchants Guild were more powerful then and the taxes they paid kept the city going. If they said trade needed to be move quicker, it was going to move quicker. The wonderful gates were taken down.”

“They weren’t burned of destroyed.” Added Runa. “Just about every door you can see in the city today, was constructed with wood from Tomma-Goran’s gates.”

“So.....Are you telling the tale now ?” Asked Belso.

"No, sorry.....Carry on." Muttered Runa.

"I've heard some of the chairs in the Sorcerers Guild, are made from the wood of those wonderful gates." Said Belso. "Once gone though, they'll never be put up again. It was mentioned after the damage caused by Yam Kermul and his horde. There simply isn't the money now, to build such gates. We'll be entering the city near Winshin's and we should have a clear road right into the city of the Lost God. A few old carts might be used as barricades, but the army will soon move those out of the way."

"It sounds like Muzzie needs to spend some of the imperial purse on new gates." Said Faal.

"When making rock cropper stew.....First catch a nice plump rock cropper." Said Belso.

"Exactly.....First we need to make the city ours." Said Runa.

~ ~

The outfall from the main sewers went straight into the Great River, not far from Podd's yard. The stench of excrement fought the noxious odour of boiling body fat, with neither stink really coming out on top. Aeony sat on the ground and knew that once they entered the sewers, the stench would get far worse. First light wasn't far off; they'd arrived in the dark, to remain unseen. Muzzie was talking to his personal guard and giving commands to the officers of the three hundred fighters who would be entering the sewers with them. A dozen in the sewers was a crowd. There'd be problems taking such a large number down there. Aeony didn't expect every warrior to come out of the sewers unscathed.....

"To think.....I could have been with Caspian." Said Nethra. "Out in the open air, fighting in the wide streets of the city."

"And in the dangerous narrow alleys." Said Aeony. "Once we get to the old sewers it'll be better. Almost no stink and nice wide tunnels."

"I have wings Aeony.....Like you; I'm not designed to crawl around in tunnels." Said Nethra.

Aeony wasn't looking forward to using the sewers either, but it was a really good idea. Muzzie knew the way of course; it was how he'd smuggled contraband into the city. Merrick had used the smugglers' route too, though obviously Nethra had never been with him. Nethra was a sewer tunnel virgin. Aeony patted Nethra on the shoulder.

"There'll be some good eating today." Said Aeony. "As long as we do it carefully and don't get seen. None of our own dead of course, just the enemy."

"Yes.....There is that."

Caspian and Vella were in the city, causing mayhem. There were several fires burning and the occasional sound was reaching them. Loud noises, like explosions caused by the fires, or spells being used by sorcerers, theirs and the enemy's. No collapsing buildings, Tomma-Goran had built his city well. There were rumours that Tomma might take revenge for the damage caused to his beloved city. Estrin had told them that was nonsense. From what Aeony had heard, Tomma was definitely dead, he'd boiled away into the wastes. As light arrived on the first rift, the warriors around them began to move.

"Looks like we're on the move." Said Aeony.

It looked like Muzzie was going to be right at the front, which made sense. He was likely to know the route best out of everyone there. Estrin was with Muzzie, which was a surprise. She'd been out on the Pilgrim Trail recently, keeping the ancient route safe for those using it.

"One of the nine divines, down in the sewers." Said Aeony. "Life is full of surprises."

"I like her being here.....Our odds of surviving today just doubled." Said Nethra.

The fighters had a lot of experience now, of moving as one. There had also been tunnels to negotiate during the battle for Segin-Unadaris, the demon city on the fifth rift. It didn't take long for everyone to be in the sewer tunnel. It was then that Estrin showed them one of the advantages of being underground with a living deity. The tunnel was lit from end to end, by glowing spheres that followed them. Nothing too bright, nothing to dazzle anyone's vision. Bright enough though, to make sure no one stumbled over anything, or stepped into the flowing stream of sewage. The wild fauna of the sewers were unsettled by the light, or maybe the presence of a deity. There were a lot of alarmed denizens of the sewers, judging by the sounds. Most appeared to run away, while some leapt into the fast moving water.

"Estrin came to light the way.....I can't see that upsetting the balance." Said Aeony.

Muzzie shouted the command to follow him, from somewhere quite some distance in front. Aeony wasn't ready to confront her sister dark angels yet, so coming in through the sewers was the best way to enter the city. It felt bad though, like sneaking in through a backdoor.

"Merrick always talked about the dreadful beasts in these sewers." Said Nethra. "Growlers and huge lizards. He mentioned one of his best people being devoured by something that had the aura of pure chaos around it. So far.....I sense nothing."

"The advantage of travelling with Estrin and having plenty of light." Said Aeony. "Personally.....I won't be disappointed if we see no sewer beasts at all."

There was an attack somewhere closer to Muzzie than them. No hurtling through tunnels to the scene of the fight, there were hundreds of fighters between Aeony and the attack. Quite quickly everyone was moving again. A few minutes later they both saw the body of a large Sewer Growler being shoved into the excreta filled water.

"Anyone hurt?" Asked Nethra.

"One of the new fighters, a grey from Annill." Someone said. "Lost a hand, but he'll live."

The grey was a long way from home to fight for Muzzie and it had cost him a hand. Still, according to soldiers' legends, losing a hand, a foot, or a limb was enough to satisfy the deities. The man should survive the coming battle with the militia, if you believed such things.

"Be careful.....The next fighter attacked might lose worse than a hand." Said Aeony.

Both the fighters disposing of the growler, looked like greys. They nodded at her, as they gave the Growler a final shove. It floated for a second or two, before vanishing into the water. Aeony had a scribbled map, a very rough copy of the one Muzzie was using. What it lost in detail it gained by fitting into her closed hand. It also had large X's scrawled over key points they had to pass through.

"We're a few minutes from the main storm drain channels." Said Aeony. "Soon after that, we'll head west and into the old sewers."

"Merrick hated those old sewers." Said Nethra. "He was always stumbling over something unpleasant; usually a decaying corpse. Podd has always refused to go down there.....Claims the city won't pay him enough."

"The undead take care of the dead." Said Aeony. "Rare to see a body that hasn't been part eaten. Given time, the dead are devoured by.....The undead. There are revenants in the old sewers too, though less than there once were."

"How far do we have to go through the old sewers." Asked Nethra.

"To the cellars of the derelict metal exchange building." Said Aeony. "We go up there, through five floors of a crumbling old building. With luck and a little faith in Tomma-Goran's building skills, we'll reach the roof in one piece. From there we cross over onto the headquarters of the City Militia."

"Once there, we kill everyone without mercy." Said Nethra.

"A simple plan, but I like it." Said Aeony.

The buildings for healers had started off as just another part of the stockade. It had grown though, as Galla had recruited skilled healers from each new empire town and village. Her Healers Guild was in Aarabash, but the real work was going to be done in the healing centre. It was a stockade within the stockade now, over a dozen large buildings, all dedicated to one thing. Healing the wounded and diseased where possible and easing their final moments, if healing wasn't possible. Everything was spotlessly clean and ready for the arrival of wounded from the battle to take the City of the Lost God.....

"Nowhere near as many as I'd feared." Said Galla. "Not yet anyway.....General Dhūlen has only just entered the southern part of the city."

It wasn't an ideal system, but it was better than anything that had gone before. When the Void Gate wasn't needed to move troops and supplies, it brought the injured to the healers at the stockade. Some wounded were left too long without help, but they were getting better at it. Given the small numbers of seriously wounded so far, Galla was treating it as almost a learning experience. When the truly unpleasant fighting began at the walls of Quron, her healers would be ready.

"I'd hoped to keep records of who we'd helped. Just a handwritten journal." Said Maya. "Now I've realised there won't be time to do that."

"We heal them, Maya." Said Galla. "With luck we send them back to their comrades to fight another day. Keep records of those who die, that is all we need. Everyone who arrives breathing, should leave here fully healed. If we lose anyone.....Put notes in your journal and we'll discuss it after the battle."

"I'll keep my journal for just those we lose.....I already have a few ideas." Said Maya.

She would have and they'd be good ideas. Maya was too young really, to see the horrors of battle at close hand. Galla felt a little guilty. The young should be allowed to keep their innocence for a while, but Maya was needed. The Dredger girl was a natural healer, one of the best Galla had ever taught.

"Just remember.....If they arrive alive, they should leave here alive." Said Galla. "There will be the occasional death, but if there are more than a tiny number.....We will need your journal."

Patterns were the key, look for patterns in the numbers. Find out why you were losing wounded warriors and make sure it didn't happen next time.....Next time was going to be Quron. That battle was already worrying Galla. That ancient city had reputedly impregnable walls and a standing army of thousands. They were already sending out messages, calling up the reserves and volunteers. There was a very real chance that Muzzie's army might be outnumbered.

"If ever there was a time for Tomma-Goran to return from the dead." Galla muttered.

She walked from building to building and there were a lot of wounded with dreadful injuries. There were a lot less than had been expected though. If the Great Library and the Sorcerers Guild had swapped sides? There seemed to be half a dozen versions of the truth about that. Until the battle was over, no one would really know. Something was reducing the numbers of dead and wounded from what had been predicted and whatever it was, it was marvellous.

"No.....Stop the bleeding, then heal the blood vessels, Trayi." Said Galla.

A girl from a third rift tribe of hybrids, not much older than Maya. Trayi was keen though, as were all the volunteers from other rifts and even other worlds.

"Sorry, Galla.....There are so many to examine and heal." Said Trayi.

"And next time there will be even more.....I'll help you." Said Galla.

The leg wound was bad; the young fighter could have easily died from losing too much blood. Galla used pressure from her fingers and a simple cantrip to stop the flow of blood. Trayi was good and had the wound healed very quickly. She was extremely good, another natural healer. Galla would work with the trainers before the wounded arrived from the battle for Quron.

"There.....Just stay calm, Trayi." Said Galla. "Do things in the right order and try to ignore what's going on around you. Keep focused and you can do it."

"Thank you, Galla."

They needed more experienced healers and Estrin could heal with just a touch. If the living God didn't want to smite their enemies with fireballs, or turn them all into something unnatural.....Maybe Muzzie could ask her to heal the injured. That shouldn't affect Estrin's much loved balance.

~

~

At some point in the past, right at the beginning of it all. Aeony had hoped not to have to fight her sisters, the dark angels who effectively ruled the city. They were the queens of the City of the Lost God, the ones with real power and strength. Muzzie could never be said to have the city as part of his empire, if the dark angels didn't submit to his rule. Dark angels submitting.....Even the most optimistic of Muzzie's eight advisers, didn't think that would ever happen. Aeony's sisters needed to be beaten in battle.....Everyone now accepted that.

"Oh, Vella will say she told me so.....Forever." Muttered Caspian.

The two warriors with him were either dead, or in the process of dying. Vella had told him to take at least six fighters with him, but Caspian wasn't sure if a dozen would have been enough. A single dark angel had attacked them and it had all been over in seconds. He had probably only survived because the armour he wore had many added enchantments. As for the dark angel.....She was stood glaring at him, as if wondering which limb to rip off first. A runner had arrived with the note that resulted in getting in the current situation, though it was still unclear how the runner had acquired the message. Caspian knew the handwriting though, the message was genuine.

'Caspian; Come to the library, we still hold the bridge. Come quickly. – Adamaz.'

Some of their forces were going to continue up the Towers the hard way. Vella was going to lead them now, hacking and slashing their way through each floor. There were strange creatures in some of those floors, things from when humans had ruled the rifts. Chaos creatures had moved into a few of those floors and made a home there. Unwary guards, who sometimes wandered into unsafe parts of the Towers, were often found as nothing but gnawed bones and chewed up soft tissues. The dark angels inhabited several floor of the towers and no matter what it took, they had to be killed, or driven from the city.

"I'm Caspian.....Do you have a name?"

"Of course I have a name.....I am Aishar, queen of this city."

"Aeony might argue about that."

Dark angels had fairly expressive faces and mention of Aeony had definitely hit a nerve.

"She is here?" Asked Aishar.

"Oh yes.....Your true queen is definitely here."

Not all of the warriors Caspian had taken into battle were going to, hopefully, take control of the towers. Close to a thousand were going with LLud Narren of all people. An old enemy leading a not insignificant part of the new emperor's army. Muzzie had approved it though and if LLud could capture the Dome and retrieve his collection of powerful arcane artefacts.....The battle for the city would be as good as over.

"I always intended to meet Aeony in fair combat." Said Aishar. "She'd vanished though and someone has to rule. Left to their own devices, my sisters would fight each other until none were left alive. Someone had to take the title of queen."

"Aeony is going to cut you up into very small pieces." Yelled Caspian.

Caspian had been on his way to the house with the portal, which would take him up to the entrance to the Great Library. A really easy journey, most of it under cover. Running into the moody new queen of the dark angels.....That had been pure bad luck.

"Enough from you, Caspian the Great.....More than enough." Said Aishar.

Her posture had changed; she was going to kill him. Caspian had seen Aeony change her posture in the same way, before eviscerating an enemy. Aishar seemed to pull a blade from nowhere and there was an increase in the smell of her sexual pheromones. It was very effective against hybrid males, Caspian wasn't sure if he wanted to fight the dark angel, or have sex with her. He grabbed his sword, pulling it from the scabbard on his belt. At that moment, the world changed.

"Once I've killed you.....I intend to eat your liver." Said Aishar.

"You talk a good fight.....I might be harder to kill than you think." Said Caspian.

His left arm had been hurt in the same attack which had killed the two guards. He'd been in pain, but holding his sword had taken the pain away. The sword of Mozzrik the Usurper made him stronger and faster, but it also affected his mind. Caspian now hated the dark angel, with a hate that was totally mindless and primal. Aishar's mere existence was an insult to all his ancestors, going back further than he could remember. How could the Gods tolerate her presence? The hate gave birth to rage, but a controllable rage, for a while. Caspian could keep the rage ready, to be released when needed, like an explosion of brutal power. He couldn't know how touching the blade effected his wife's sexual needs, but he appreciated the results, which were truly amazing.

The dark angel came at him with a long thin blade and her claws. Much stronger than him and probably faster, but Mozzrik's blade had another trick. It lessened his instinct for self-survival. Certain that she'd soon be eating the best bits of his viscera, Aisha's attack was crude and unfocused. Caspian sidestepped out of her way and swung his blade as she went past.

"That must be a rare thing." Said Caspian. "To see a dark angel bleed."

Aisha wasn't wearing much; dark angels rarely wore much at all. A belt to hold weapons and a coin purse. Sometimes a bag on a webbing strap over the shoulder. Clothing was really rare and never seemed to include underwear. Aisha was pretty much as naked as she'd been on the day of her creation. Apart from the two inch long cut on her upper left arm. That was new and it was dripping blood right down her arm.

"For this.....You will die slowly." Said Aisha.

The rage was approaching a point where he wouldn't be able to control it. He actually waved Mozzrik's blade at the dark angel. He still didn't want to die, but once the rage had control of him, he really wouldn't care one way or the other.

"I don't care, when I hold this sword." Said Caspian. "If you are eating my liver today. I guarantee it will be your last meal. Aeony will find you soon.....Then you'll die slowly."

Waiting for her to run at him was the wise thing to do, but the rage had him. Those who thought him too timid, wouldn't have recognised him. Caspian ran at the dark angel, lifting his blade in a position to stab down with it. Aisha roared at him, in the way only a dark angel can roar. Seeming to forget she had a sword, she used her claws on him. As Caspian stretched upwards, there was a gap between his armour and trousers. She ran her claws over his stomach, from one side to the other. It

hurt, but Aisha's claws hadn't gone in that deep. Once he stopped holding Mozzrik's sword he'd be in agony, but Caspian didn't care about anything beyond that moment.

"You should have used your blade." Said Caspian.

She was taller than him, but had crouched a little to use her claws on him. The angle was perfect and Caspian thrust his sword into Aisha's face. Between her eyes and just above her nose. He'd heard of dark angels surviving several sword thrusts into their bodies, but never any major wound to their head. As the end of his sword came out of the back of Aisha's head, he knew the fight was over. Some luck maybe and a very good blade, but Aisha really hadn't been that good. As her body fell to the ground, Caspian stood over her for a minute, or so.

"You were too ambitious and not really queen material." Caspian muttered.

Mozzik's blade was cleaned of blood on his trousers. The clothing of an enemy was traditional, but Aisha was naked. Blade back in its scabbard and as Caspian knelt next to the dead dark angel, the pain began. Blood was oozing from claw marks across his middle, but it wasn't that bad.

"Damn.....Every time I stretch, it's going to be hell."

He looked in Aisha's purse and found a few gold coins, which he left in there. He wasn't about to loot the dead for the equivalent of about five imperial. The ring on her finger was too small for Aisha's finger, it had been jammed on. The ring of the Dark Angel Queen, he'd give it to Aeony when he saw her. Caspian pulled and tugged at the heavy gold ring, but it wouldn't budge.

"Fuck.....Mutilating the dead." He muttered. "Now I'm certain to be cursed."

He used a small blade Vella had given him. Caspian cut through the bone and removed Aisha's finger. There was a lot of blood and bits of finger on the ring, as he dropped it into a pocket. Grubby or not, he knew Aeony would be very pleased to have it on her finger. The wound was painful rather than dangerous, but he yelled out in pain as he stood up.

"No more.....Once Muzzie is proclaimed emperor in Leng, I'm retiring." Caspian Muttered.

~ ~

Vella had noticed it, after Maya of all people, had said it. A young Dredger girl with no personal experience of relationships, had noticed it, before Vella was aware of it.

"When you're separated from Caspian.....You go a little crazy." Maya had said.

They'd been alone in Nethra's yurt, waiting for Nethra to get back from somewhere. Initially Vella had felt angry, but Maya was right. The damn Dredger kid understood her feelings far better than she did.

"We have been together a very long time." Vella had replied. "And the number of times we've survived when others haven't. Hardly surprising that.....We deeply love one another, Maya."

"Please don't be angry, but can I offer you a small piece of advice?"

"Yes, I'd be interested to hear it." Vella had said.

"You and Casp are now so bonded, you're like one person. Explain that to him and avoid being separated from him, especially at times of danger."

That conversation had been some time ago and Vella had agreed it with Casp. Whenever possible they'd always be together for battles, and other times when they might be in serious danger. When they were apart it was true.....She did sort of go to pieces, just a little. He'd admitted to being no better than her; revealing that he hated being parted from her. Casp was now on his way to see Adamaz, while she was on about the fifth floor of the Towers, trying to stay alive.....

"I really do need some help, Dhali." Shouted Vella.

Not city militia or guards hired to protect the towers; Vella could have easily coped with those. On every floor they'd had to fight their way through waves of the undead. Some undead had been



expected, but not the huge numbers on every floor. Dhali Pril was strong and said to have the ability to be a powerful weapon, when the situation required it. So far, the super weapon hadn't been much use. No sign of her skills and she seemed half asleep a lot of the time.

"Sorry.....I feel so tired." Said Dhali.

Dhali Pril admitted to being a cleric, though she never would say which temple she'd served in. Old.....Almost unimaginably old. Again her own admission and she'd mentioned being briefly married to LLud Narren, when they'd both been young. As to whether she was human, hybrid, or something entirely different ? The consensus had money on something entirely different, though Dhali refused to say. The strength was useful.....Dhali used her bare hands to rip apart the two undead who were giving Vella quite a bit of trouble.

"Thank you for your help, even if it was a bit late." Said Vella.

"Sorry."

"This weapon you can become." Said Vella. "What is it ? Can you defeat an entire army, or something like that ?"

"When I feel it's an appropriate moment, you will see." Said Dhali.

It was infuriating, but Vella was getting used to it. Often it felt as though everyone they met was playing riddles, or taking pride in being confusing.

"Alright.....Keep your secrets. We're going up to the sixth floor." Said Vella. "Try to stay awake this time."

"Sorry."

There were warriors on the floor below, still trying to root out everything evil and nasty. Above them was a sixth floor, which might contain nothing, or a huge monster with unimaginable powers. It was the uncertainty that made Vella take the lead. She might not be a general, or the hero of Segin-Unadaris, but she could swing a sword as well as most. Casp had left her in charge, so she was going to lead Muzzie's fighters up the Towers. Vella banged the hilt of her sword against her shield.

"To me.....To me.....We're going up another floor." She yelled.

Vella had a quick flash of memory. It was a very long time ago, during her first time in Gorshan. Muzzie had just hammered his sword against a metal door and said almost the same thing. Then it had been a fight to the top of Gorshan Castle, while fighting a seemingly endless infestation of Vargouille.

"Ready ?" Shouted Vella.

Just about every warrior near her shouted yes back at her, but Dhali looked lost in a dream. Famous cleric or not, Vella grabbed her arm and she wasn't gentle about it.

"Dhali.....No daydreaming.....I need to be able to rely on you."

"You can Vella, I promise."

There was a system, which had been talked over before the attack on the city, then modified from experience. There were two bags of devices, being carried by nervous looking warriors. Similar to the bombs dropped by Aeony on the demon city, the devices were simple to use. Pull out the plug at the top, throw and then get well out of the way. Vella was the leader; it felt like she had a duty to throw the bombs. Plus of course, she enjoyed the excitement and the bangs. Vella chose two bombs and went almost to the top of the stairs.

"I have a feeling about the sixth floor." Vella whispered to Dhali. "It's not a good feeling."

"I'll stay close to you.....You have my word."

Vella pulled out the plugs and threw the devices out of the stairwell and onto the sixth floor. One to her left and the other to her right. They both exploded with a bright light, followed by a black stinking cloud of gas.

“For Muzzie.....For the empire.” Yelled Vella.

She charged out onto the sixth floor of the Towers. Behind her came the warriors, yelling for the new empire and the new emperor.

~ ~

Ezzel Pinthrad was determined to show he could be brave if it was required, perhaps be ruthless and merciless too. Sokkolf the younger, head of sorcerers guild had ordered him to keep the city militia out of the main reception area of the guild’s headquarters.

“It’s war now, Pinthrad.” Sokkolf had said. “Everyone needs to fight as best they can, even backroom clerks. Keep the militia out of our building.....No matter what it takes.”

There had been a hurtful comment about not standing about looking confused. Where was Sokkolf and the rest of the guild’s high council ? Barricaded into rooms on the top floor of course, trying to save their own skins. Pinthrad might be a backroom clerk, but he was also a damn good sorcerer. He’d killed many of the militia as they come through the entrance doors. He’d used fireballs mostly, with the occasional disruption spell in the mix. The militia bastards didn’t like having their internal organs disrupted. Some had screamed for a quite while, before dying.

“How are you doing, Babaef ?” Asked Pinthrad. “Still alive I hope.....And with a few spells ready.”

Just him and Babaef left now, both of them in the gallery above the reception area. There was a stone wall in front of them to give protection from arrows. Poor dead Meru had used firewalls to take out the staircase, so they weren’t easy to get to. Even so, there was just the two of them left, out of the two dozen who’d been there when the attacks had begun. The militia didn’t have much in the way of magical skills, but they had numbers and some skilled archers.

“I’m here.....Is it just you and me now, Pinthrad ?” Asked Babaef.

Babaef had real power and he was descended from one of the best leaders the guild had ever had. Without him, the battle would have been over, almost as soon as it had started. Sadly, Pinthrad didn’t think his old friend was going to last much longer. Every hybrid body dies once it has lost enough blood.....And Babaef had been hit by a large number of militia arrows. The guild building taken by mindless fools with bows. It was truly a terrible day.

“Just us old friend.” Said Pinthrad. “Let more of them get inside this time.....Then we give them hellfire and agony.”

“Good idea.”

There were rumours, there were always rumours. One conspiracy theory after another, until Pinthrad had stopped believing in any of them. One rumour that just might be true, was that the dark angels had killed the leaders of the city militia and effectively now lead the militia. Be brave, or be dead seemed to be the order of the day. It felt true; as yet more militia archers crept through the shattered doors and into the guild building. How many of their number had died on the marble floor in the reception area ? Pinthrad had been too busy staying alive to count, but it had to be well over a hundred.

“I’ve tried to be a loyal worshipper.” Pinthrad muttered. “May the nine take charge of my soul if I’m destined to die today.”

There were still a lot of them prepared to fight and die for whoever now gave the orders. The floor below soon became full of militia fighters, looking for stairs, or a way up. All the rear stairs had been damaged, or trapped. Another hundred militia fighters were likely to die trying to use the stairs. The

platforms that gave quick access to every floor, had been taken apart and deactivated. It would take days to repair them, if anyone was still alive to do it.

“Now Babaef.....Now.....Give them everything.” Yelled Pinthrad.

The heat rising up from his own fireball spells, was scorching the skin on his face. There was a lot of noise below them, mainly the cries of the dead and dying. Better the enemy than them though and.....The militia had been warned to stay out of the guild building. Pinthrad put his cloak over his face and risked the heat. The floor below was covered in bodies, their blood staining the tiles red, or green and some cases, yellow.

“Do you see that, Babaef ?” Asked Pinthrad. “We got them.....Though I fear the next wave will get us.”

There was no answer. Babaef had been a good sorcerer, but even the best can't survive an arrow in the eye. Just him now and Pinthrad could hear sounds in the road outside.

“They mean business this time.” Pinthrad mumbled. “I was hoping they'd give me longer.”

The noise outside grew from what sounded like an argument, to the noise of fighting. There were several loud bangs, followed by a waft of hot air coming from the ruined doors. A lot more shouting and finally a voice Pinthrad vaguely recognised. LLud Narren of all people, came through the doors, accompanied by a lot of warrior wearing the colours of the new emperor.

“I'm here as a friend.” Shouted LLud. “Is there anyone alive in this place ?”

Pinthrad used a simple feather fall cantrip. He said the words, made the gesture and had faith in it working. He jumped off the gallery and floated down, coming to rest a few feet in front of LLud Narren.

“LLud, I heard you were dead.....Then heard you were alive again.” Said Pinthrad. “I am the last surviving defender, I believe. Sökkolf and the high council are hiding, barricaded into the offices on the top floor.”

“Pinthrad.....It is good to see you're alive.” Said LLud. “I'd picked up a few personal things from the Dome and Caspian asked me to come and see how the guild was doing. He'd just saved the Great Library from the dark angels. Saved them single handed, according to the apprentice librarians. I'm beginning to think I may have underestimated Caspian.”

“Does Adamaz still live ?” Asked Pinthrad.

“Scorched by a spell of some kind.....But yes, he's still among the living.”

~

~