

The Last Emperor

Chapter 16 – The Necropolis

“They were on the side of a hill that went down into a wide valley. At the end of the valley and a good five miles away was a vast conglomeration of buildings made from a red stone of some kind. Hot dry buildings in a hot and dry world. Aeony could almost taste the dust in her mouth. It had to be the Necropolis and it was huge, a true City of the Dead.”



Nethra had assumed being one of the seven was a Muzzie thing, something he'd thought of. Now her wings showed no sign of losing their purple colour, she was beginning to take the whole 'One of the Seven,' more seriously. The mark of chaos on her left flank had changed too; the wheel now had seven clear spokes, with the horns much more pronounced.

“Yes.....Yours is exactly like mine.” Said Maya.

Galla was going to take a while to fully heal, even with the help of every skilled healer in Tandalla. Old bones didn't mend like young ones and the apothecary was likely to walk with a limp for the rest of her life. There was also a scar on Galla's neck, which was refusing to fully heal. It looked like poor Galla was going to have a few more aches and pains to complain about.

Maya had been fully healed almost overnight. A miracle some were calling it, though they hadn't seen the mark of chaos that had appeared on the girl's left hip. Maya had been fully healed, but she was likely to be sworn to serve chaos all her life, without ever agreeing to it. How do you tell a child that? So far, no one had been honest with her.

“What does it mean?” Asked Maya. “It looks beautiful and sometimes.....It tingles.”

“Mine used to tingle, which stops after a while.” Said Nethra. “I can explain why you have it, but the truth will upset you. Few have the same mark and even fewer know what it means. Knowing can wait until you're older and emotionally stronger.....It is your decision.”

“I'm strong enough now, Nethra.” Said Maya.

“Yes, I really do think you are.” Said Nethra. “The wheel of chaos is traditional; you'll see it above the door of just about every temple on the rifts.”

“And across it are the Horns of Nigon.” Said Maya.

“Oh no, my dear Maya.....The truth is far darker.” Said Maya. “Beyond Gateway lies the City of Leng....Though like many I'm not keen on naming it. Even further and deeper into the darkness beyond Gateway and there are the worlds that exist in almost eternal darkness. Some of those worlds contain demons, while others are the home of deities, dreadful deities who enjoy the darkness far too much. Even you aren't strong enough to hear of their evil acts.”

“You're scaring me, Nethra.....Just a little.”

“Shall I carry on?” Asked Nethra.

“Is this chaos symbol on my hip forever?” Asked Maya.

“Yes.....Only death will remove it.”

“Then tell me everything.....I need to know.” Said Maya.

“Beyond it all, far beyond the worlds of eternal darkness, it waits. I have no name for it, though I suspect it has name. Probably a name so evil that none will use it. The being sits and waits at the edge of everything, until the multiverse belongs to it once again. I have been told by those who have

knowledge and power, that the being has horns and that those are the horns we're both wearing across the wheel of chaos."

"There was a price for healing me, wasn't there?" Asked Maya. "I guessed there had to be.....Nothing is ever given for nothing on the rifts."

Nethra was glad she'd decided to tell Maya the truth, though the girl looked so upset. It was said that Dredger kids never cried, that they were incapable of crying. That was obviously nonsense, as Maya had a tiny river of tears coming from her sad eyes.

"You would have died if chaos hadn't healed you." Said Nethra. "There will be a price, though it may be years until you're asked to pay it."

"Is that why we have the same symbol?" Asked Maya. "Did you owe chaos a debt?"

"That is my story and it is very private." Said Nethra. "You just need to be aware and ready.....One day you will be asked to do something. It may be something you could never imagine doing. The debt must be paid, Maya. Refusing to pay what you owe is unthinkable."

"Would I be killed?"

"Worse than killed.....You might become one of the undead." Said Nethra. "As I said.....You must pay your debt to chaos."

Poor Maya, she had the look of someone who is just about old enough to realise that life can be unfair and often didn't make any sense at all. At least she was alive though and only the living could complain about the unfairness of life. They were in the cart Galla had bought to save her legs from miles of trudging across the rifts. Nethra hugged the Dredger kid; it seemed the right thing to do. "I'll be alright, Nethra." Said Maya. "It is the way of the rifts.....I understand now. Nothing is given for nothing."

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Muzzie had been given a palace by the good people of Aarabash. A government building really, with several floors and a walled off area at the rear. It had the potential to be a palace, after a little work had been done. Similarly, the walled town needed better walls, stronger walls. Housing had been found for the permanent garrison, though the buildings were in urgent need of repair. Ideally, Aarabash needed the services of several hundred skilled and eager Dredgers. As luck would have it, that was a need Muzzie could satisfy.

"You'll have my palace for a while, Bizzi." Said Muzzie. "Use my name if you have to and don't be afraid to threaten the local town council."

Bizzi was perched on top of several cushions that had been placed on a long and elegant looking sofa. Add on the opulent looking blankets that covered most of him and Bizzi looked like a high level Dredger chieftain, which of course, he was.

"No trying to do any physical work." Added Muzzie. "Shout at whoever you like and.....I'm sure I mentioned threats being useful. I'm leaving you every Dredger family. Maya alone will be coming to the Necropolis with me. Galla is still far from well and she feels the girl may be useful."

"I will make sure the walls and barracks are fully repaired and strengthened." Said Bizzi. "You won't recognise the town when you return. Belso is useful.....I'll put him to work."

Belso, the fighter in Tandalla who'd survived the fall from the city walls. The man seemed to be lucky and Muzzie was as superstitious as any warrior in his army. Luck rubbed off on others, everyone knew that.

"Yes, Aeony knows him and thinks highly of him." Said Muzzie. "Don't forget to get this place decorated.....It will be your palace until you're well enough to travel."

"I will.....The local workers seem eager to get away from farming for a while and many of them make good building labourers. Keen too, very keen and hard working." Said Bizzi.

"We're probably paying better than farming.....Don't be too generous with the imperial purse. As I said.....Shouting and yelling can achieve just as much as a few extra gold pieces."

"I will.....I'll also remember the usefulness of threats." Said Bizzi.

Muzzie looked at Bizzi and knew that he was a babe in arms, when it came to dealing with tradespeople in a town like Aarabash. They'd persuade him to pay gold for every minor service, until the chest being left with Bizzi, was empty. Belso wasn't exactly known to be honest and he'd skim a little, but Aeony said he was as tough as old boots.....Army boots at that.

"Good.....I knew I could rely on you, Bizzi." Said Muzzie. "Use Belso to run around the local suppliers. No tiring yourself out old friend....Make good use of Belso."

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Vella refusing to sleep with him wasn't new, though mercifully quite rare. Caspian wiped the damp hair away from his wife's eyes and felt content. There had been sex, pretty good sex and Vella had initiated it. It was highly likely there would be more sex before they settled down and slept. Not that he had any intention of asking her what had changed. His wife was a force of nature and he'd no more question her about such a thing, than he'd ask the wind why it blew harder on some days, or not at all on others. Vella was his ultimate validation after all. If she slept with him, he couldn't be that bad, or as repulsive as some girls had called him. On the other hand, if Vella was sleeping in another room.....It had been a tough few days and Caspian was pleased that it was over.

"I feel so guilty, Casp.....We should be packing what we'll need on the sixth rift." Said Vella.

"The servants can do it." Said Caspian.

Aarabash had been good to them. Treated like royalty everywhere they went, plenty of food straight from the farms and best of all, a house all to themselves. Maybe not as clean and tidy as they were used to in the City of the Lost God, but they had space and privacy. No one was going to hear them enjoying energetic marital relations. The sixth rift wasn't going to be nice; it probably wasn't even going to be pleasant.

"Did Muzzie tell you who we're going to rescue?" Asked Vella.

"Just a whispered name from legend....I did wonder if Muzzie heard it right. Faal, the great and mighty. Not rescuing, though even Muzzie isn't sure if we'll need to have to put chains on him to bring him with us."

"It can't be Faal, Casp." Said Vella. "He's just a legend, something from the history of the humans that even they don't believe in. A magician in the old stories, who ate naughty children. My mother used to threaten me with Faal, if I refused to go to bed."

Faalírh Hařadask, known to the population as Faal the great and mighty. Caspian had read fictional tales of Faal and his predilection for eating infants. Strangely, parents seemed to love scaring the crap out of their kids with such nonsense. The most powerful magician on the rifts, until the tales talked of a hero who'd killed Faal's body and trapped his essence somewhere. There always seemed to be a convenient hero in such tales.

"Muzzie said the Silver Lady gave him the name." Said Caspian. "Faalírh Hařadask, who is currently residing in the Necropolis on the awful sixth rift. He's not sure if he'll see us as rescuers or enemies. Giving him to the Lady fulfils a debt of some kind. Muzzie wasn't too clear on that either."

"I've never been to the sixth rift." Said Vella. "I'm worried I might have a lot of human in my ancestry."

“None of us know, I’ve not been there either.” Said Caspian. “We’re all Dredger hybrids, or at least most of us are. No one likes to mention the tiny bit of human some have in their blood. Makes all the difference between a headache and breathing difficulties and.....Muzzie made it sound really unpleasant.”

“Has anyone ever died ?” Asked Vella. “We should ask Galla, she’ll know.”

“Galla is to be left in peace for a while.” Said Caspian. “Nethra knows the sixth rift and no pure blood human can survive there for long. If we’ve got a lot of human in us, it could be nasty, but we will live.”

“Fuck !” Said Vella. “I hope I don’t vomit.....I hate vomiting in front of people.”

“Think of poor Muzzie.” Said Caspian. “He has a tiny bit of Genova in him. He might actually get bleeding from his eyes and ears.”

“Fuck !” Said Vella.

“Come on.....Two fucks in a row.” Said Caspian. “That has to be an invitation.”

“Oh, Casp.....You’re insatiable.”

Tempting to mention being refused for a few days, but there was the whole force of nature thing with Vella. Much safer to enjoy himself and forget about the recent sexual starvation. His sex parts didn’t so much penetrate hers; they sort of merged with them in a highly pleasurable and repetitive way. After a few minutes, Caspian didn’t care how dangerous Faalfh Ha’adask might turn out to be. Or whether he might soon be struggling to breathe on the sixth rift.

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Muzzie had set the Void Gate for the Necropolis, though he wasn’t sure if they’d be close to it, or a couple of miles away. He’d concentrated on the name, the sixth rift and a description the Silver Lady had given him of the area. The Void Gate had managed to make some kind of sense of it all. The rippling energy gate was now locked onto the sixth rift. Aeony was sure her body would be fine there, able to breathe with ease and function normally.

“You should be near the front of my army.” Muzzie told her.

“Not until I’m sure the rift isn’t trying to kill you.....And succeeding.” She replied.

There was the angel blood in him and how the sixth rift might react was unknown. Everyone would be coughing and spluttering for a while, a few might haemorrhage from small blood vessels in their skin. Muzzie though.....There was a chance he might die. Someone else could fetch Faal, but no one else could fulfil the prophecy. Muzzie looked at her and simply nodded. If she had to, Aeony would grab her lover and fly back through the Void Gate, with him in her arms. Her mind seemed to have accepted Muzzie as a kind of honorary Dark Angel. She could love him without feeling tainted.

“Look after those who need it.” Yelled Muzzie.

General Dhūlen would be issuing the same order from the front of the army. He’d be fine, there wasn’t the slightest human ancestry among the Terak. Nethra might well be stronger on the sixth rift, as her darker side became prominent. The warriors though, the bulk of Muzzie’s army.....Most would need to rest a while, some might need some healing and a tiny number, might need to be returned through the Void Gate. The army began to move.....

“Here we go.....Pray to your Gods and breathe slowly !” Shouted Nethra.

Aeony moved closer to Muzzie, ignoring his disapproving frown. Fuck how it looked, she wasn’t going to let a tiny bit of Genova blood in his veins, kill the idiot. The army were brave though and well disciplined. Many had to be worried about tales of how the sixth rift treated even miniscule amounts of human ancestry. They marched towards and through the gate like fighters though. Backs

straight, heads back and a defiant cheer in the throats. She heard Muzzie coughing, but he was alert and sitting upright in the throne his grey guard were carrying.

“You look well, my emperor.” She shouted.

“I am.....Assist those less fortunate, Aeony.”

Many weren't doing well and several needed the aid of healers. The air stank; it even had a bad smell to Aeony. She could breathe easily, while most complained that it was like trying to breathe foul smelling smoke. The light was less than on other rifts too, which would take some getting used to. If one word had to do to describe the sixth rift, Aeony would have chosen 'Dry.' Everything looked and felt dry and dusty and there were no plants, none at all. After several hours getting used to the conditions, just three fighters had to be taken back through the Void Gate.

As for Muzzie, their emperor.....Something was wrong, he was coping far too well. He'd been altered in some way, perhaps by the Silver Lady. There were others watching him though, many with a vested interest in his success. The Muzzie strutting between his fighters, offering support and encouragement.....Wasn't the humble tavern owner who'd left the City of the Lost God all that time ago.

“Have you seen ? Did you see it ?” Asked Muzzie.

“See what ?” She asked

“Here.....Come and look.”

They were on the side of a hill that went down into a wide valley. At the end of the valley and a good five miles away was a vast conglomeration of buildings made from a red stone of some kind. Hot dry buildings in a hot and dry world. Aeony could almost taste the dust in her mouth. It had to be the Necropolis and it was huge, a true City of the Dead.

“Now we're here.....I wonder if we have enough fighters.” Said Aeony. “That is a large place, easily ten square miles and we have no idea who might call it home.”

“Weland told me to come here just before we attacked Quron.” Said Muzzie. “I know it will be tough.....But the Lady was owed a favour and she wasn't prepared to be patient. We'll make camp here and let everyone have a night to acclimatise to the conditions. In the morning we'll travel to the Necropolis.”

“I can't believe I'm saying this. I am a creature of fire and smoke after all.” Said Aeony. “It is so damned hot here.”

“Yes, I've already told Dhūlen to send a few people back for more water.”

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“This air.....Choking to breathe.” Said Runa. “Smells like a Farrag beast broke wind.....Right in my face.”

“We're here though, Runa.” Said Maya. “I can tell my mum that I've seen the sixth rift.”

“Just be careful, so you survive to tell her.”

The air was foul and the light was far too yellow. Maya was right though, they were standing in front of the Necropolis on the sixth rift. Powerful sorcerers had tried to get where they were. Many had tried and died in the attempt. The sixth rift wasn't an easy place to get to, if you didn't have a working Void Gate. There were a few entrances from the fifth rift, though few of those were marked on maps. The best known was called 'the tumble,' because it tended to drop those using it, as though they'd tumbled down a steep hill. The tumble had claimed the lives of quite a few adventurers and the beasts that pulled their carts. The sixth rift was uninviting to put it mildly, which gave it a feel of being a forbidden rift.....Which attracted some adventurers more than gold.

“Oh.....Why does everything take so long ?” Asked Maya. “We should be exploring inside the Necropolis by now.”

“Scrying for life tends not to work with the undead.” Said Runa. “Galla has other ways of sensing movement though, which are slow but reliable. Aeony and Nethra are inside the Necropolis, flying at speed and trying to spot trouble, without it spotting them. Another slow process if they’re being thorough. Patience, Maya.....Not that you’re going inside anyway. I promised Bizzi that I’d make sure you remained outside with the wagon handlers.”

“Really ? That’s so unfair.” Said Maya.

Her poor face had crumpled up and Runa almost felt guilty for teasing the Dredger kid. Bizzi had given her orders to keep Maya out of trouble, but as far as Runa was concerned, she didn’t work for Bizzi.

“A fighter like you, Maya.” Said Runa. “The speed you can get reach when you’re down on six legs. I could never catch you and drag you back.....Could I ?”

The kid wasn’t slow on the uptake; the smile said she understood Runa, very well.

“Thank you.” Said Maya.

“Don’t worry, when I go in there, you’ll be by my side.” Said Runa. “No running off ahead of me though and.....If you see something worth investigating, tell me.....Agreed ?”

“Alright.....I promise.” Said Maya.

The rifts weren’t good places to grow up. Often it seemed that the biggest step to being an adult, was surviving long enough to be one. Maya had survive Gorshan though and being beaten by a chaos enforcer. With luck, the damned kid might well live long enough to reach puberty. Then of course, she’d be insufferable.

“I can see movement.....Yes, Dhūlen is leading the search team into the City of the Dead.” Said Runa. “Not long now and we’ll be in there.”

Watching at a distance was annoying and frustrating, but Runa wasn’t about to disobey Muzzie. She’d been ordered to keep back until the search party returned. If they didn’t return.....Muzzie had a different plan, which he was keeping to himself.

“Where do the undead come from ?” Asked Maya.

“Read half a dozen books in the forbidden section of the great library and you’ll get two dozen answers to that question.” Said Runa.

“Tell me, Runa. Ignore the ancient books and tell me what you think ?” Asked Maya.

“Ignore the ancient books !” Said Runa. “Alright, but my opinion might well be rubbish. Yes, you’ll hear Yam Kermul created an army of undead. He was known as the Lord of Death, so you can’t ignore that idea. Personally, I think he created a few undead, but not the vast number who once inhabited the Necropolis.”

“So where did the rest come from ?” Asked Maya.

“To answer that, we need to be a little creative in our thinking.” Said Runa. “We all know that after a huge lifetime, converted chaos creatures enter the catacombs beneath the City of the Lost God. Once there, they become the undead and survive indefinitely with no food or water. I know, because my great-great-great grandfather monitored the numbers. The population of the undead has been about the same since the humans ruled the city.”

“Such talk is heresy.” Muttered Maya.

“Indeed it is, Maya.” Said Runa. “Talk about humans ruling the rifts and Aeony gets into a genuine rage, but that doesn’t mean it isn’t true. Between you and I, we have the Menderan Empire to thank for clearing the undead out of the Necropolis, though some probably survived. Anyway.....New

undead enter the catacombs and yet the numbers down there, never increase. What do you make of that young Maya ?”

“Some left the catacombs and came here.....To the Necropolis.” Said Maya.

“Yes, or at least that’s what I think.” Said Runa. “The problem is how many have come here since the Menderans cleared the place out. There might be just a few here, or.....We could have a tough fight ahead of us.”

Bird came to them, despite still having a few scorched feathers. Strangely, Galla’s ever complaining pet, seemed to have no problem with the air and light on the sixth rift. He flapped around them, before settling on Maya’s shoulder. He appeared to quietly mutter into her ear.

“We can enter the Necropolis now.” Said Maya. “Galla seems happy that there are no huge numbers of undead in there.....We need to be careful though and Bird will stay with us.”

Given Bird as a kid of watchdog. Was that encouraging or worrying ? Being honest, Runa wasn’t sure. Galla’s pet could be useful, everyone agreed on that.

“Come on then, let’s take a look inside the infamous Necropolis.” Said Runa.

They’d barely gone twenty paces, before Maya had another question. It was what kids did after all; it was how they learned about the world and drove adult nuts in the process.

“Who built the Necropolis, Runa ?”

“The Terak, the People as they refer to themselves.” Said Runa. “That is something agreed on by all the ancient books and scrolls. Their religion required the dead to be housed and venerated. So, they build their City of the Dead. Millions upon millions of them were placed on stone shelves, or inside family crypts. Don’t worry though; their remains will have decayed away to nothing by now. Even their bones will be nothing but dry dust.”

“Poor Dhūlen.....Being here must make him feel sad.” Said Maya.

“Yes.....It must.” Said Runa.

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Galla was actually feeling far better than she was being honest about. There was a lot of human in her, maybe as much as a third. Luckily there was some Shelzak in her ancestry, which meant she wasn’t having any problems with breathing sixth rift air. Her old joints and bones did cause her problems, so why not get a little extra concern and help from those around her ? Plus, doesn’t everyone like a little fuss and attention ? As long as it didn’t go too far, she wasn’t an invalid and Nigon help anyone who dared to treat her like one.

She had a small, clear rock crystal sphere in her hands. The artisan with the secret of cutting such spheres had died, taking the secret with him to the grave. Galla had been offered a lot of money for the sphere, though she’d never sell it. Its value and the likelihood of attempted theft, had caused her to drop it in her bag on that fateful day. The day of Caspian and Vella’s tenth wedding anniversary, when they’d all been abducted on a mad scheme to have Muzzie proclaimed emperor of all the rifts. Muzzie of all people.....Muzzie the barkeeper, who was driven crazy by having a little angel blood mixed in with the dominant demon side of his ancestry.

“Do you know the crazy thing, Muzzie ? I really do think you’ll become emperor.” She said.

Muzzie laughed and hugged her, almost crushing her in his four demon arms.

“I appreciate your confidence in me.” Said Muzzie. “Now Galla, are there too many undead to fight ? Are we going back through the rift gate and finding easier targets ?”

Galla looked at the crystal and was surprised at what it was showing. She knew how to use it and the crystal had never been wrong in the past, ever.

"I think we should wait for Aeony and Nethra to finish their quick reconnaissance, but.....The crystal is showing me a few movements not associated with living beings. The undead, Muzzie....And there are only a few of them. Fast creatures though and tough.....Incredibly tough. You will lose a few fighters in the Necropolis, but not too many."

"So, it sounds like the Lady will be getting her magician." Said Muzzie.

"Was there ever any doubt?" Asked Galla. "I've never heard of her being over patient."

"I'd have gone back to Tandalla and recruited another three thousand fighters." Said Muzzie. "The Lady would have got her magician, just a few days later than she'd hoped.....Look, I can see Dhūlen coming out of the Necropolis."

The huge doors to the City of the Dead, had buckled and were jammed open. Dhūlen had only taken a few scouts with him, yet they'd all returned unharmed. Galla had good eyes, just about the only part of her that time hadn't affected. They came through the gap in the doors and they were waving at the other warriors. Their arrow quivers were full, another good sign.

"They haven't seen any action." Said Muzzie.

"And I do believe.....Yes, here comes Aeony." Said Galla.

Aeony always made an entrance. The dark angel flew around the army and landed right in front of Muzzie. They kissed and Galla knew by the look on Aeony's face that it was good news.

"I saw a few undead, so did Nethra." Said Aeony. "I'd forgotten how fast they can move. There can be no outrunning them; the army will need to meet them head on. In total, we saw only about twenty of them, though there may be a few more in the lower levels."

"My crystal shows about the same number." Said Galla. "It sees no huge number waiting in the underground parts of the Necropolis."

Muzzie called over a runner, another addition to the army after Tandalla. The runner would take the message to General Dhūlen, telling him to move the army into the Necropolis. Galla had no doubt the army would win a famous victory and Muzzie's reputation would grow again. The emperor who'd finally cleared the undead from the sixth rift. The next city to see the army at its gates, would probably surrender without a fight.

"And where are we going?" Asked Galla. "If we're going with the army, I'll need a cart to sit in."

"You will get your cart; it's already on the way." Said Muzzie. "Then we will go and see what Bird is up to. I take it you can find your own pet?"

"Of course I can.....What are you up to Mussaneth Osranetherer?" Asked Galla.

"You will see in due course, old friend." Said Muzzie.

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It had occurred to Runa that they should have waited for some of the army to be closer, but Maya was so excited about exploring the Necropolis. Rumours were circulating that there were almost no undead in the ancient Terak Necropolis, their City of the Dead. Of course almost no undead didn't mean there were none and just about every ancient text spoke of them being tough, fast and just about unstoppable. According to some historians, even the Menderan Imperial Guard, The Damned, had suffered significant losses when clearing the undead from the sixth rift.

"We really should wait for the warriors to catch up with us." Said Runa.

"My ears are good.....There's no one else but us here." Said Maya.

The Necropolis wasn't an inviting place, graveyards and mausoleums never are. Building after building of orange and red stone, with nothing inside by empty shelves and the occasional sarcophagus.....Again all carved out of the same dark red and orange stone. There was dust

everywhere; it filled some corners of buildings in dunes of the stuff. Runa knew it was all that remained of millions of long dead Terak.

“This place.....It’s more depressing than Gorshan.” Said Runa. “Air that stinks of shit and nothing but dry dust everywhere.”

“Come on.....We’ve a long way to go.” Said Maya.

“Where are you taking us ?” Asked Runa.

No good, Maya was down on six legs again and almost floating over the dust. Runa had to trudge through it, which felt a little like wading through sugary Ashunt syrup. Bird chose that moment to fly past her and of course, there was an insult. It wouldn’t be Bird without a silly or a stupid added to every short conversation.

“Silly Runa.....Keep Up.” Squawked Bird.

“Where are we going, Bird ?”

No answer, as Galla’s pet followed Maya out of a door on the far side of the building. Not really a door anymore, just the hole in the wall where there had once been a door. There wasn’t even the remains of a frame where it had once been.

“Gorshan and now this.” Muttered Runa. “Muzzie seems to love the most ancient of ancient ruins.”

Outside looked much the same as inside, apart from the red-ish sky over the sixth rift. No plants, which probably explained the rank, foul smelling air. One day even demons might find it hard to survive the sixth rift. Opposite Runa was another building, with no less than four possible points of entry.

“Oh, wonderful.....Where are you Maya ?” Mumbled Runa.

To her left was what looked like a dried up river, though that was impossible. There had never been rivers beyond the fifth rift; everyone with any type of education knew that. A little precipitation maybe and puddles after heavy precipitation, but never rivers.

“Maya !” Yelled Runa. “Where are you ?”

Damned Dredger kid, they should have left her with the farmers’ kids in Aarabash. Actually, her parents and siblings were still there, toughening walls and refurbishing the barracks for the garrison. “I will.....I’ll take her to Aarabash and her family can have all the aggravation.”

Runa had heard Nethra say something similar, as had Galla. Maya was one of those kids though, who worked their way into peoples’ hearts and became harder to get rid of than mud on a blanket, an army blanket.

“Maya ! Bird !” Shouted Runa.

Shouting probably hadn’t been a good idea. The dust dune was some way off, but she could see something pulling itself out of the dust. Roughly the size and shape of a common hybrid, though there weren’t hybrids on the sixth rift. There were the undead and there was Muzzie’s army and that was it. So, the odds were pretty good that it was one of the undead, who was looking at her. There might be a banished magician somewhere and a few adventurers passing through. But the creature pointing its finger in her direction was almost certainly one of the undead. It screeched at her.....A deep sound that didn’t seem right for how it looked. A sound that would carry though, if any other undead were around to hear it.

“Oh, by the nine divines.....Please let these silver arrows work.” Muttered Runa.

Annill had an almost unique way of hardening silver. Runa had bought the hardened silver ingots and paid an artisan to create a dozen heavy silver arrows. There had been a lot of time spent waiting for the right moment for the army to leave Annill. Galla had drilled and filled the arrows with a sticky substance, which should have made the arrows capable of killing a charging Jangar beast. Add on the

purging effect of silver and Runa knew she had a dozen formidable arrows in her quiver. One use only, the arrows were destroyed by the magic held within them. Galla had been pretty sure the arrows would kill the undead, though she never had said they were certain to kill anything. Runa strung one of the arrows to her bow, as the undead creature began to run at her.

“Estrin-Okanan.....Please don’t let me die in this place.” Runa Yelled.

The undead brute could move, that wasn’t a lie, or a mistake in the ancient books. It was covering the distance between them at a frightening rate, continuously shrieking as it ran. Runa knew she might die, though the prospect didn’t terrify her. There had been several times in the past when her death seemed certain. The Gods had chosen to save her and, if they felt she was worthy, they’d save her again. If she wasn’t worthy ?

“Then fuck it.....At least I’ll die standing on my feet.” She muttered.

The arrow was heavy, Runa had to fire it late and allow for the drop. She was a good archer, but with such strange arrows.....It was a huge relief when the silver arrowhead, pierced the face of the undead creature. Galla had said there’d be a flash of bright green light. Half its head fell away, as if instantly rotted away to nothing but dirty, foul slime. No time to congratulate herself, the brute was still coming at her, though it was now moving quite slowly. Half its head gone, yet it still moved.

“Maybe it doesn’t know it’s dead ?” Muttered Runa.

Caspian had talked of reports in old scrolls. Of the legendary hero Delmuninager and his fight with the undead. Delmus he’d been known as and his preferred method of killing the brutes, was to hack them into dozens of small pieces. Runa didn’t have the time, or an enchanted war axe. She strung a second silver arrow, not knowing quite where to aim it.

“Maybe a leg this time.” She mumbled.

It fell, after having only half a head for at least twenty long steady strides. It was undead though, no blood flowed through its veins and most of its organs no longer functioned. Maybe it truly had taken a while for it to realise it was dead. Not undead or a little dead, but permanently dead. Its legs still quivered, but Runa didn’t want to use another precious silver arrow.

“I don’t understand what you are, beast.....You look dead enough to me.” She said.

“Over here.....You must get inside.” Yelled Maya.

Maya at the far entrance to the building, probably the last one Runa would have tried. Maya beckoned her inside.

“They live outside, the undead.” Said Maya. “Never stop when you’re outside.”

“Silly Runa.....Run and get inside.” Said Bird.

“How do you know all this, Maya ?”

“You will see.....Come; we’re already a little late.” Said Maya.

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