

The Last Emperor

Chapter 20 – The Hive Mother

“Runa touched his arm and looked up. Aeony the dark angel was about to fly over the city walls, with Nethra flying behind her. In a fairly minor way, the new empire was about to strike the first blow in the siege of Segin-Unadaris.”



Most cities on the rifts had been built near rivers, or on the shores of large lakes. Not just as a source of fresh water for those who lived in the cities, the rivers acted as arteries of trade and the movement of the hybrids who made up the bulk of the population. Some towns and cities had sprung up and flourished along the ancient roads and trackways that had been there for countless millennia. The Pilgrim Trail had towns within no more than a three day journey from one another, from its start to its finish at Quron. Segin-Unadaris was different, a large city with no major roads passing its gates, or surface waterways of any kind. It had been created because of its strategic position. Whoever held the town, effectively controlled safe access to the sixth rift. Once that meant wealth from trade and tariffs, but trade with the sixth rift had ended a long time ago. Leng now financed their garrison in Segin-Unadaris and provided food for the population. Some said they did it out of nothing but nostalgia.....

“A good place to view the city, but you are a little exposed here.” Said Aeony.

Muzzie had decided a low hill not that far from the city gates, made the ideal place to watch the battle unfold. Caspian had informed him that the hill was probably a burial mound for some long dead demon warlord, or Ezzagory as they were called. There were several such mounds, all with no markings or standing stones to identify who was buried there. Not all the eight were with him; Caspian and Vella were to enter the city with Dhūlen, at the head of the army. Faal and Runa would be close to Segin-Unadaris by now, trying to merge into the growing tide of refugees.

“I’m where a confident emperor should be.” Said Muzzie. “I also have the Hand of Arcadis inside my jacket, so I’m not exactly harmless and defenceless.”

“You should be wearing armour.” Said Galla. “Leng didn’t just leave a garrison of their elite fighters in the city. There are rumours of potent sorcerers here, even a necromancer or two.”

“She’s right, Muzzie.” Said Nethra. “Pure blood demon sorcerers are skilled wielders of chaos energy. You really should be wearing your armour and carrying the shield of the emperor.”

“Yes, but later.....I will.....First let me get a good look at this demon city.” Said Muzzie.

The crimson orb wasn’t a surprise when it rose above Segin-Unadaris, though Muzzie hadn’t expected it to be so large. It rose up to about twice the height of the highest building in the city, before hovering there, like a giant crimson ball.

“The eyes and ears of the magic users of the city.” Said Galla. “With luck.....They’ll be content with watching us, for a while. According to Faal, the orb can emit fireballs and probably a few other surprises.”

“Leng will know we’re here.....Have no doubt about it. They will be watching.” Said Aeony.

Muzzie had dispensed with highly detailed battle plans and luckily, General Dhūlen was of the same mind. Spend hours putting together a move by move plan and it would fall apart after the first arrow was fired, or the first fireball launched. Much better to have a loose plan that could be modified as

required. At its most basic level, the plan was to keep the defenders of the city busy and looking the other way, while Faal and Runa opened the outer gates of Segin-Unadaris. Once the army was inside and causing carnage, the city would surrender. If they didn't; the carnage would continue until they did.

"Someone else is watching, waiting." Said Nethra. "I can feel her, though I don't understand her.....Not yet. The Hive Mother is watching us, I know it."

"Oh, that old tale." Said Galla. "A queen according to the travellers' tales told around the fire at Muzzie's bar. The stuff of thrilling yarns, by drunken traders and over excited librarians. All complete and utter nonsense."

"I see more than you.....Apothecary." Snarled Nethra.

Muzzie had heard the tales and wasn't sure if he believed any of it. One thing he was sure of.....The rising tension between Galla and Nethra had to end, immediately.

"Enough." He shouted. "Save your anger for the elite garrison who defend the city. You all know what you have to do.....So go now and do it. Oh, and remember I want the city intact, so don't overdo it."

"Yes, my emperor." Said Galla.

Nethra simply gave him a slight bow, without saying a word.

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Faal was actually enjoying himself. Not only had he given Runa and himself the odour of high level demon hybrids, he'd also used a spell to change their features a little. Not their real features, purely the way others saw them. He'd added a touch of Shelzak, who were infamous for being tough and bad tempered. No one liked to bother Shelzaks, even hybrid Shelzaks. It all helped their chances of entering the city without being stopped or bothered in other ways.

"How long until it wears off?" Runa had asked.

"Just a few days.....No more than four days."

"Wonderful." She'd muttered at him.

There were times when he felt Runa wasn't enjoying it all as much as he was. Luck was with them, though it hadn't been good luck for the dead merchant and his family. It seemed looters were already at work.

"They put up a fight." Said Runa. "This looks like the body of one of the looters."

"Took the good stuff, but left the cart.....Perfect." Said Faal.

They'd been prepared to kill to obtain a cart and a few bags of clothing. Anyone arriving in the city empty handed, would instantly be treated as suspicious. Despite the signs of a fight, the merchant's cart was undamaged and the thieves had left several bags of personal possessions. Blood on one of the bags, though that wouldn't be a rare sight that day. Faal began to push the cart in the direction of the demon city.

"Wait.....Just a moment." Said Runa.

She removed the cloak from the body of the merchant's wife and put it around her own shoulders. Ragged and bloody from the fight with the looters, but it had probably been made locally. Faal did the same, wearing the blood stained cloak of the merchant.

"A really good idea, Runa." He said.

Those were the last words Faal said, as they joined a long stream of carts and refugees, heading towards the gates of Segin-Unadaris. Both he and Runa could speak a little of the pure blood language, though not well enough to fool anyone. They looked like Shelzak hybrids who'd been in a fight. The occasional angry grunt was all anyone expected to hear from them.

Runa touched his arm and looked up. Aeony the dark angel was about to fly over the city walls, with Nethra flying behind her. In a fairly minor way, the new empire was about to strike the first blow in the siege of Segin-Unadaris.

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“Well, what have we here ?” Asked Aeony. “Has Maya become an imperial runner ?”

“Galla still thinks the damn Dredger kid is her apprentice.” Said Nethra.

“Stop it, stop teasing me.” Said Maya.

It was irresistible; Aeony had to ruffle the girl’s hair in a playful way. Dredger girls don’t get a head of soft long hair, until well after puberty. Running her hand across Maya’s head felt like fondling a scrubbing brush. Maya was currently wearing the arm band of a military runner.

“Muzzie.....The emperor sent me with a message.” Said Maya.

“Out with it then, what is the message ?” Asked Nethra.

“You’re to get the attention of the defenders, without damaging the.....” Said Maya.

“Damaging what ?” Asked Aeony.

Maya looked around, as though she was about to share a huge military secret.

“Without damaging the fucking city too much.” Said Maya.

“Yes, he’s already told us that.” Said Nethra.

Poor Maya, her mother would have been so upset to hear her use such a profanity. She’d taken the role of runner seriously though and delivered the emperor’s message in full, without any changes.

“Are you a runner all the time now ?” Asked Aeony.

“No, just this one time.”

“Good, Galla will need your help today.” Said Nethra.

“Yes, there will be the wounded to heal and the dead to be anointed.” Said Aeony. “Take off that armband and go to Galla.”

“I will, right away.” Said Maya.

No more going onto six legs, though the Dredger girl managed a good speed running on just two.

“Bright that one.....A good apothecary one day.” Muttered Nethra.

Aeony turned her attention back to a large cloth bag and the soldiers who looked more than a little nervous. The soldiers had brought flasks from Galla. Obviously Galla had warned them about the explosive contents of the flasks in the back of their cart. Knowing Galla she’d exaggerated a little to make them careful and cautious. Still....Dropping a flask would probably turn them into a screaming ball of fire, as they died. There was a second bag for Nethra, which had already been filled.

“Just one or two more.” Said Aeony. “When we leave, begin filling another two bags. Carefully of course.....Always be careful.”

“Yes, Galla explained the need to be careful.” Said the officer in charge of the soldiers.

Good old Galla, she’d probably put the fear of hell into them. If it kept them alive though.....A little fear and anxiety was probably good for them. Aeony put the bag over her left shoulder, so that she could grab the flasks with her right hand.

“Ready ?” Aeony asked Nethra.

“Yes.....You know what has to be done.”

Nethra had her own bag of flasks, which was quite heavy. On the sixth rift Nethra could fly as well as a dark angel, maybe even better. On the fifth rift there was little raw chaos infused in the air. Her tiny wings wouldn’t carry her far. Aeony slapped Nethra hard across the face. Deep within Nethra something stirred, the Chinnura was awakened. Aeony saw a tiny spark of fire in Nethra’s eyes.

“Again.” Said Nethra.

Another slap and Aeony could feel a wave of darkness emanating from Nethra. Her tiny wings beat furiously as Nethra rose easily into the air of the fifth rift.

“Race you.....Race you to the city walls.” Yelled Nethra.

Nethra now understood the darkness within her and how to harness it. Merrick would need to be very careful when his lover and business partner, returned to Annill. Nethra hurtled towards the demon city, with Aeony trying to catch up with her.

“She’s fast.....But I’m faster.” Muttered Aeony.

Somewhere below them were Faal and Runa, probably with a few things to embellish their cover by now. A cart had been discussed and maybe a few personal belongings. Nothing too heavy, but useful to add authenticity to them being refugees from the part of the city outside the walls. They’d be unrecognisable dots down there, just two among the sea of moving figures. Aeony passed Nethra and was first to pass over the top of the massive city walls.

“No one beats a dark angel in a race.” She mumbled.

Targets had been briefly discussed, but Muzzie insisted he wasn’t an emperor who had the desire to micromanage his team. Personally, Aeony liked the new Muzzie and hoped the attitude survived the first downturn in their fortunes. There would be disasters of course, no military campaign managed to avoid them entirely. Nethra was hovering now, pointing down at the barracks of the elite garrison. A great idea, Aeony nodded furiously, as Nethra began to drop a few flasks. Aeony flew on to the market area, which had the potential to create an impressive blaze, without damaging too many buildings.

“Wow, that was.....Unexpected.” Aeony mumbled.

Too high to be reached by archers, though the defenders might have sorcerers capable of using fireballs that could reach a flying dark angel. A huge metal arrow had gone past Aeony. So close that she’d felt the slight breeze as it had gone by. They had siege machines down there, which hadn’t been known about. The aim of the first arrow looked to have been a lucky shot; the next missed her by several yards. Aeony flew over the market area of the city and quickly dropped six of the flasks. There was already fire somewhere in the military barracks. Aeony’s flasks were creating an inferno among the market shops and stalls. Until the city merchants became organised for war, no one was going to be able to buy food for a while. A fireball soared past her, far too close for comfort. They were beginning to get their aim right.

“Time to change targets.” She muttered.

There were explosions near what Faal had called the main keep, effectively a castle within the city walls. Nethra had chosen a pretty good second target. Unlikely that their flasks would damage the thick solid stone walls, but the explosions would cause lots of fear and anxiety. Aeony loved fear and anxiety among the enemy. Personally she thought it was as effective as a thousand well trained soldiers. There was also a slight chance of Nethra’s flasks blocking access to the main wells, the only source of drinking water for the entire city. Until someone dug away the rubble.

“Where the.....Where is that siege machine ?” Aeony muttered.

Another metal arrow had come close to impaling her. Aeony flew lower, risking being a target for the traditional archers. She spotted the huge bows that could take six strong backs to pull back and fire. A whole row of them, most aimed in her direction. Aeony emptied her bag of flasks when she was right over the top of them. Too close really, the resulting explosion and flames, actually scorched her lower legs.

“Now.....Time to get another bag of those wonderful flasks.” She mumbled.

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The Hive Mother had a name, a full name given to her by the deity who'd created her. Sevril-Narge, who some ignorant fools once called the bug goddess. She had created her and given her the name of Ginnda-Aanash. Sevril had died, her essence boiled away in the wastes of eternity. Ginnda-Aanash still lived; one of Sevril's few surviving creations. Who had killed her creator and any thought of revenge, didn't concern her. She'd been alive for a very long time and had seen many deaths. Including the end of a few deities. Nothing lasted forever it seemed, even the gods. Ginnda believed it wasn't for her to exact revenge for anyone, even her creator.

"I serve Leng, Casto." Said Ginnda. "Wonderful if their wishes coincide with yours, though that isn't my main concern. Leng are happy with your history as the Ezzagory of Segin-Unadaris, so I'm happy. They wish me to keep the population calm and under control, so I will do that."

Casto Ganaan was the current warlord and leader of the city, it's Ezzagory. One of the best, he rarely made a decision Leng weren't happy with. Ginnda had needed to kill one particularly bad warlord, his incompetence was simply unacceptable. His death had had been a long time ago...So long ago that it had passed into legend, which was perfect. Legendary events had a huge effect on the citizens of the demon city, something akin to religious fervour. Not that most of the general population had ever seen her. They knew she existed though.....Oh yes, they knew she was there. Below them and in her chamber was Ginnda-Aanash, their Hive Mother. There were even observances for her in the temples and an annual two day festival.

"We're facing a large army, who've had quite a lot of success in battle." Said Casto. "Some help from Leng would be appreciated. I have to ask.....Could you help if the city is attacked ? Help directly I mean ? If the people of Segin-Unadaris saw you on the walls.....It could make the difference between defeat and victory."

Not an unreasonable request, she was incredibly tough and some would say intimidating to look at. The hard carapace made her almost invulnerable to most weapons used on the rifts. Add on the nine legs, each ending in a clawed foot. Ginnda had four arms and a hand on the end of each of them. She could do delicate and fiddly work with those hands, but they were really designed for tearing and ripping. Six eyes at the front of her armoured head and yes, she could understand why so many thought her to be intimidating. Sevril had given her jaws that definitely indicated she wasn't a herbivore.

There were jails in the city, though few were ever kept there. Ginnda fed on the thieves, crooks and habitually criminal. There had been a year when the population had been surprisingly law abiding. The Ezzagory at that time had given her tax avoiders to feed on. That had been a good year for Ginnda. Tax cheats were plumper than most criminals and their flesh tasted sweeter.

"As you know, I contact Leng most nights." Said Ginnda. "Easier to hear and receive thoughts when the rifts are in darkness. I've been told to keep out of the war with the upstart emperor.....At least for the time being."

She'd been told a lot more besides, by the high priest himself. None of that was for Casto's ears. If things went badly in the coming battle, she had been informed that she might be asked to kill Casto. A pity really, to her he'd always seemed a good warlord. Leng had long term plans though, plans even she was never told. If the order came to kill Casto, his personal guard of two hundred warriors would need to die too. There'd be good eating to look forward to, for quite some time.

"I'm assuming you will keep the citizens of the city under control ?" Asked Casto.

"I will keep them meek if required, I will keep them angry if it is the will of Leng. I can make them confident with a thought, or have them hiding in their cellars. If it is needed I can send them running through the city gates to fight the upstart's army. Adults and their children, armed with whatever

they can pick up. All willing to die fighting, if I put the thought into their minds.....Such is my purpose, for I am the Hive Mother.”

“Thank you.” Said Casto.

Ginnda moved slowly, but Casto still flinched. He knew, he understood what would be his reward for failure. She’d known many warlords, some who’d lived to a staggering age. Casto was by far the best. The perfect warlord to face the upstart, Mussaneth Osranetherer. She touched him gently on the shoulder, with the hand she used for delicate and detailed work.

“Win my friend.....Or die valiantly in defeat.” Said Ginnda. “Leng will respect that.”

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Runa was the child of a military father, who’d descended from one of the oldest families in the City of the Lost God. Everyone she could think of among her ancestors, had been in the army, usually as a high ranking officer. Looking around didn’t suit their cover as refugees, but she couldn’t resist examining every building they walked past. People too, she looked at everyone who seemed to be part of the war effort. Such information could be useful to General Dhülen, when the army entered the demon city.

“Refugees to the parade ground.” Someone yelled. “Food and shelter will be provided.....Refugees to the parade ground.”

Life in a grubby tent, while relying on the local garrison to feed you, when they remembered. Not a fun time ahead for the refugees, but hopefully she and Faal would be elsewhere when the long line of refugees reached the parade ground. Faal gave her arm a none too gentle, Shelzak demon style thump. He was pointing somewhere to their left.

“There.” He hissed in her ear.

A door in a tower next to the main gates of the city. Just a small metal door, that probably gave access to the various defence systems that protected the entry point for Segin-Unadaris. It looked so unimportant. There wasn’t even a guard standing by the door. Tempting to ask Faal if he was sure. No, she was beginning to trust his judgement. Sad to abandon the cart though. It was grubby and full of blood stained clothes that weren’t theirs, but she’d grown attached to it.

“Ready?” Whispered Faal.

“Yes.”

No running and Runa was improvising as they moved. Her Shelzak was bad, as was her spoken language of the full blood demons. There was one word her father had used a few times, when yelling at prisoners caught trying to steal from the holy men on the Pilgrim Trail.

“Yanta.” She yelled at Faal.

Some faces turned their way, though others were trying not to look at them. Angry Shelzak hybrids were known to be best left well alone. She’d just called Faal a kind of cross between a male who interfered with his sisters and also enjoyed sexual relations with the wild creatures of the rifts. Yanta was one of those words, which served as a good, solid insult for all occasions. Faal pretended to try and strike her, while moving closer to the metal door. Runa used her fingers to make the obscene gesture she’d seen her father use when he was drunk. Faal actually gasped.

“Yanta.” She shouted again.

A pretend tussle and they had the door open and we’re just about inside. Not fast enough, someone had seen them. Several voices were shouting at them in a language Runa had never heard before.

“We need to bolt the door.....There’s a metal bar too.” Said Faal.

Runa was strong for a fairly standard hybrid with no enchanted artefacts or bodily augmentations. She liked to think she was much stronger than she looked. While Faal closed and bolted the metal

door, she picked up the metal bar from the floor and dropped it into hangers on either side of the door. Nothing short of a charging Jangar beast was going to knock the door down.

"Wow, you're strong." Muttered Faal. "Stronger than you look."

"I get told that a lot." She said.

Faal had mentioned them a few times to Muzzie, the mysterious battle skills he claimed to possess. Never anything specific, though Muzzie seemed to have believed it. There were stairs going up, the only direction you could go from the now bolted and barred door. As what sounded like a crowd were hammering on the door, Faal ran up the stairs. Runa followed, just as two tough looking elite demon warriors, came around a corner in the stairs. Crap ! Runa knew she should have risked bringing a bow and a few arrows, hidden under her cloak.

"These two are mine." Yelled Faal.

The magician didn't use words of power, just hand gestures. Galla always ridiculed gesture magic, though she'd have been impressed with the result of Faal's simple finger movements. The two members of the elite garrison were flung at the far wall of the stairs. Their bodies were clad in armour, but their heads connected hard with the wall. So much force....Runa was sure she'd heard their skulls crack open.

"I am impressed, Faal." She said. "You have to teach me how to do that."

"Gladly.....Once we're somewhere safe."

She knew what death looked like; she'd seen far too much of it when bad times had come to the City of the Lost God. The two warriors crumpled against the wall, were never going to see another new day in the demon city. Through another door and then another, with Faal leading them constantly up. Finally a straight short corridor with a slightly ajar door at the other end. Faal stopped and put his finger to his lips.

"I sense guards in there.....Two of them." He whispered.

If the guards had been more alert, if they'd slammed the door against her and Faal. A closed and bolted door could have changed so much. Runa might well have not been around to see a new day on the fifth rift. The door wasn't closed though, or bolted. Runa knew such seemingly minor nonsense, could make the difference between life and death. Faal went silently through the open door, with her close behind him.

"Drop your weapons." Yelled Faal.

It seemed Faal could be Faal the merciful, if there was time. Not that it worked, the guards still went for their swords. Faal did his trick of sending one of them hurtling against the wall. Runa used her sword on the other, running him through, before slashing him across the throat. The dead guard fell, rolled and then dropped.....Runa looked and they were on a walkway above the massive city doors of Segin-Unadaris. She helped Faal drag his dead guard to the edge of the walkway, before pushing him over the edge. An arrow flew past Runa's head.

"We'll need to be careful; the door chamber below will be full of guards." Said Faal. "First though.....We'll close and bolt the door we came in by."

Runa saw it after closing the door. There it was, wedged into a corner. Not a particularly high quality bow, but she could hit targets with it that its original owner could have only have dreamt about. Next to the bow was a quiver full of poor quality arrows. To Runa the bow and the quiver were like finding a precious object, or a purse full of gold.

"A bow.....At last I have a bow." She said.

"Good.....Stop the guards putting an arrow in me, while I do what needs to be done." Said Faal.

Time still mattered, there was the sound of someone bashing against the door they'd just closed. Runa took a moment to look though, at the complex mechanisms that operated the huge city gates. Clockwork devices driven by springs in metal boxes, covered part of the ceiling. There were a few clockwork powered artefacts in museums in the City of the Lost God, though none of them worked. Long and very thick cables were wound round bobbins twice the size of a hybrid like Muzzie. Looking down risked an arrow heading her way, but she briefly looked down into the chamber that held the doors in place. It was a mass of levers, cables, ropes and yet more clockwork to do.....Whatever it was all doing. It was amazing, yet she had no idea what any of it did.

"Just releasing the various magical wards will have an effect." Said Faal.

Runa aimed an arrow at a guard armed with a bow. He'd been ducking behind cable drums and obviously intended to become a nuisance. Her arrow hit him just above his breastplate, probably in his throat. The splash of blood told her he wasn't going to succeed in being an annoyance.

"Now I feel better." She said. "Are you about to bring this chamber down on top of us, Faal?"

"Hmmm, I hope not." Said Faal. "The wards were probably put in place by a magician or sorcerer of some fame. Not cheap and once in place, you never really want to fiddle with powerful wards. So.....Little if any maintenance will have been done to this tower since it was built. Once I take away the supporting effect of the wards.....But we should be alright."

Down was the only direction they had to go and down might mean leaping into a collapsing door chamber. Runa risked a look to find a feasible way out and nearly got an arrow in her right eye. The guard became her second kill with the bow she'd found.

"Grab hold of something solid." Yelled Faal.

There was a wooden rail around part of the walkway, which didn't feel that solid. It was all there was, so Runa grabbed hold of it and hoped Faal wasn't about to kill them both. He waved his arms about and shouted several lines in a language that sounded like a Jangar Beast gargling. Whatever he was saying seemed to be working, the walls briefly flashed a bright yellow colour.

Vibrations began that seemed to move up from below. The guards were holding onto whatever they could find. Runa notes their positions for when she was able to use her bow again. The vibrations increased and several cracks appeared in the walls. One metal box with a spring inside it, fell from the wall. That was it though, the total effect of removing the wards. Runa quickly took care of three guards; bringing her total up to five.

"What now?" She asked Faal.

"Now, I am going to turn this entire tower into a pile of rubble."

"What about us?" She asked.

"Below us is a platform." Said Faal. "Not an easy jump to land on it, but it can be done. Can you see where I mean?"

Runa put her kills with bow up to seven, before putting her head far enough over the edge of the walkway, to see the wooden platform.

"I see it.....There's an open door at the back of the platform." She said.

"I saw you use feather fall when you were trying to find me in the Necropolis."

"I knew it.....I knew you were acting stupid." Said Runa.

"No, some of it was genuine." Said Faal. "Anyway.....When I say, use feather fall and leap onto the platform. Run through the open door and take the first corridor or steps leading down. Don't be worried about me; I'll be close behind you."

"We're heading down?" She asked.

"Yes, safest to stay in the underground parts of the city for a while." Said Faal.

“Alright, I’m ready.” Said Runa.

Nothing strange or esoteric, no loud words in languages Runa didn’t know. Faal moved his hands backwards and forwards and it was as though he was hammering the far wall with Delmuninager’s axe, the legendary hero’s famous war axe. Every invisible blow was removing whole areas of plaster and the underlying brickwork. When Runa saw the first huge cable twist and break, she knew the order to run wasn’t far away. Faal waited until the entire tower began to shake.

“Now……Quickly, Runa……Time to leave.” Shouted Faal.

The feather fall cantrip was easy and she’d used it recently. Runa made the gesture and said the words, before leaping. No need to worry about the guards. The few she could see were doing the same as her, running for their lives. Runa landed on her feet and ran for the door.

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Nethra still had half a bag full of flasks left and she was determined not to waste them. She’d started a lot of fires in the demon city and had no doubt, scared the hell out of a lot of the population. Really though, she’d been hoping to block access to the main wells. Yes, she was aware that digging them out would be a priority for the Ezzagory of Segin-Unadaris. For a few days though, the city would be short of drinking water. Not much of a victory, but it was better than setting fire to market stalls, while getting shot at by huge siege machines.

“Lower, I need to be lower.” Nethra muttered to herself.

Flying lower brought her in range of the ordinary archers and low level sorcerers with their fireball spells. A few arrows in her back might not overly bother Aeony, but her skin was a lot tougher than Nethra’s. To ensure a hit on the dome above the wells, Nethra needed to be low. Very low, low enough to be hit by a demon kid with a catapult. Nethra had dropped all her remaining flasks, when something hit her left wing.

“Crap……I knew I was pushing my luck.” She muttered.

Slowing down made her drop a little, right into the top of the explosion she’d just created. It was an arrow in her wing; Nethra saw it as she tumbled about. Down she went, only slowing her fall when she was less than twenty feet above the ruined well house dome. She tumbled again, coming to rest behind what had probably been supporting pillars for the dome.

“At least I’ve blocked up the entrance to the wells.” She mumbled.

A very minor and short lived victory, the rubble had only half filled the passageway up to the surface. A day and the garrison would have the debris carried away and the wells would be open again. Nethra had a wonderful view of the city through a gap in the stones. She sat down and looked over Segin-Unadaris, as she inspected her damaged wing.

“Oh, that looks nasty.” She muttered.

A ragged bloody wound, though nothing Galla wouldn’t be able to heal. Walking out of the city would be best, but the Chinnura with purple wings, had been seen by so many. Nethra was a good fighter, but with an entire city to fight……There had to be a better way to get back to Muzzie’s army.

“Wow……When Faal said he could open the gates……I never though he meant like that.” She muttered.

A loud crash and a rumble, rather than the bang of an explosion. At first she’d just seen a cloud of dust in the direction of the city gates. As the dust settled it revealed the gates had gone, or rather they were no longer being gates. The one on her left had toppled over, crushing a section of the city wall as it had fallen. The one on her right had twisted before falling and was halfway across the main

road into Segin-Unadaris. Between the two collapsed gates was a gap. Probably full of dust and debris, but a gap wide enough to for General Dhūlen to lead the army into the city.

“That’s it, the city is finished.” Muttered Nethra. “Might take a few days, but now the army can get inside..... Segin-Unadaris is now part of the new empire.”

Eventually the army would effectively come to her; Dhūlen had probably already ordered the entire army into the demon city. It was just a matter of waiting to be rescued, while letting her injured wing heal. In less than half an hour, Nethra saw Muzzie’s army pour through the gap where the huge gates had once stood. There’d be a valiant defence of the city of course.....

“But Segin-Unadaris now belongs to Muzzie.” She muttered.

‘For a while.....It will be looting and carnage.’

The voice was female and in her head. An old female by the sound of it, the tones reminded Nethra of her much loved grandmother.

“Who is that ?” Asked Nethra.

‘You know who I am.....Come to me Chinnura. Find me and I’ll answer your questions.’

Not really a needle in a haystack, Nethra felt the direction the thoughts were coming from. Deep, deep below the city, far deeper than the well room. Nethra clambered over the rubble she’d created. When there wasn’t enough light to see, she used a simple cantrip to produce a soft yellow light.

‘Left, Nethra.....You will see.’

A crack in the wall that looked old, very old. Through the gap and into a maze of narrow fissures in the rock. Never once did Nethra think she was being led to her doom. There was something about the voice, something benevolent and familiar.

“Who are you ?” Nethra shouted.

‘Find me and you’ll know, child.’

There was something about the word child, the way it had been pronounced, even in a projected thought. It had been a long time since Nethra had lived with the wild people of the rifts, almost a lifetime ago. She knew the voice though; it had once been part of her dreams.

“Is that you.....Hive Mother ?” Asked Nethra.

‘Ahhh...One of the clever ones, I knew you’d be clever. Yes, I am your Hive Mother. Come to me Nethra, come to me.’

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