

The Last Emperor

Chapter 11 – LLud Narren

“There were a few places where gaps in the walls showed her the castle grounds, bathed in moonlight. Not much of that light entered the treasury tower, but it was just about enough for a young Dredger kid, with good eyes, to see. Well, she could see enough to avoid bumping into things.”



Maya could hear the sound of claws moving quickly over the stone floor. Someone was following her, probably Nethra. She was the smallest and probably less bothered by dark, confined spaces than the others. There was something of the darkness about Nethra, which Maya found oddly comforting. She heard the bird squawk a couple of times.

“Oh, is everyone coming after me ?” She muttered.

Of course they weren’t, Maya knew that. The passageway was low, barely three feet high, less in one or two places. It was amazing that Nethra was managing to follow her, but every day seemed to bring another surprise from Nethra. Eating the flesh of the ambush predator....

“Ewwwww.” She mumbled.

There were areas of light, which seemed to come through windows in the sides of the passage. When she slowed down enough to look, Maya realised they weren’t windows. She stopped and couldn’t quite believe it; the light was coming in through huge cracks in the outer wall of Castle Gorshan. The weather and winds of thousands upon thousands of year, had a gradual but inexorable effect on even the toughest stones and mortar. Large areas of the outer wall had fallen away, allowing daylight to enter some of the once hidden, dark places.

“It’s all crumbling, falling apart.” She muttered.

The place of evil was probably another fifty thousand years away from losing its castle, but one day it would definitely happen. Like the famous high tower at Seren’s Edge, it would come crashing down.

“Maya.....Stop.” Yelled Nethra.

Damn, she shouldn’t have stopped, but at least she was now sure who was following her. Maya speeded up, which was easy for her, running low to the ground on six legs. Nethra obviously found it harder and by the time Maya reached the old canals, she could barely hear Nethra’s claws running on the stone floor. Vella had mentioned the canals a few times, when talking about Gorshan. There they were, dried up and full of debris from what had once probably been lush gardens.

“I was right; everything in this place is dead.” She muttered.

The passage ran above and to the rear of the old canals, allowing her to run past them, though there was the occasional mound of rubble to avoid. How long did it take for a castle to fall down ? Ten thousand years, a hundred thousand, a million imperial years ? The more Maya saw of it, the older it seemed.

“Just.....So long as we’re not here when it happens.” She mumbled.

“Maya.....Stop.....Please Stop.”

“Go away Nethra, leave me alone.”

Further along the pathway an entire section of roof had collapsed and fallen into the canal below. There had to still be flowing water somewhere, the blockage has caused a pond to form. A nasty green scum covered pond that was giving off the smell of mould, but if there was bad water, there had to be good, fresh water somewhere. Through the gaping hole in the roof, Maya could see the sky.

"It really is blue." She muttered.

"Maya.....I won't hurt you.....Slow down."

Shouting used air and effort, so Maya decided to put all her efforts into running. She ignored Nethra and entered a section of the passage that had no light at all. There is was in front of her, a long stretch of total darkness. That darkness seemed to be challenging her to prove how brave she was. Ignoring the possibility of a bottomless pit, or something hungry waiting in the darkness; Maya hurtled into the dark.

"Maya.....Stop."

"Oh, shut up.....You annoyance." Maya mumbled.

Nethra was obviously more cautious, she quickly sounded further away and had to have slowed down. On Maya went, never worrying about what might be waiting for her in the darkness. After quite some time, an area of grey appeared in front of her. It grew as she ran, becoming the entrance to another large chamber. There was the smell of water coming from in front of her, good water, fresh water. Maya ran into the chamber at speed, but quickly came to a halt. Vargouille obviously now weren't harmed by daylight, they were basking in it. Thousands of them, gripping the worn stone walls with their claws, while they sunbathed. They looked so happy, so content, as they stretched and enjoyed the warm daylight on their skin. A few of them were basking on the banks of the canal, while some of them drank the clean looking water. It looked like Vargouille heaven down there and Maya had stumbled into it.

"Maya.....I'm so glad you stopped." Shouted Nethra. "I mean you no....."

Nethra noticed the Vargouille at about the same time they heard her shouting. There seemed to be a quick mutual realisation, that something needed to be done. The Vargouille probably needed a meal, while Maya and Nethra just wanted to get out of the chamber without being eaten. There was a door at the end of the pathway, an open door. Getting to it though.....It had to be three hundred feet away, maybe four hundred. Bird had to choose that moment to arrive, of course he did.

"Stupid.....Stupid Maya." He squawked, loudly.

After that Galla's pet saw the Vargouille and his squawking became louder but less understandable. The Vargouille began their wolf like howl, as the entire pack came away from the walls and headed in their direction.

"The door.....We have to get through the door." Yelled Maya.

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"They've been gone for some time." Said Vella. "We should be doing something."

"The girl is far from helpless." Said Aeony. "I've given Maya training in the use of her blade."

"We need to be heading in the right direction." Said Caspian. "No use running about like headless nesh bugs."

Caspian had brought a few copies of the drawings and maps in the Annill library. Good copies, expensive copies drawn and then checked by the library's scholars. There was also a book he'd picked up and accidentally never returned. Theft, but theft in a good cause. As it was, there didn't seem to be much in the way of information spread over a cleaned area of the floor. Muzzie seemed impressed with the maps, which was something.

“The maps are years out of date, but a castle is a castle.” Said Caspian. “Internal rooms can be torn down and rebuilt. Partition walls can be moved and the position of doors can be changed. But....The outer walls and load bearing internal walls, are fixed. The main structure of Gorshan Castle is the same as it ever was.”

“Ahh, I understand.....We ignore the new construction and follow the old maps.” Said Muzzie.

“Yes, that makes sense.” Said Runa. “Though finding our way with maps that are tens of thousands of years old.....It’s going to be fun.”

“Fun.....Fun !” Snapped Vella. “They’ve been gone for over three hours and we’re talking about fun.”

Caspian knew his wife very well and the anger was partly out of guilt. Rightly or wrongly, the mother of his child was blaming herself for everything. A missing bird, a missing Maya and the consequences of Nethra being dead when they found her. Galla didn’t help by picking that moment to be brutally honest.

“Three hours.....It will take days to find them.” Said Galla. “They’re effectively on their own. If I’m understanding the lines on the map, we’re going up to the King’s throne room, then across the castle to the top of the Treasury Tower. That is a journey likely to take two full days, maybe three if there are a lot of walls to blast apart.”

“Hey, no one mentioned blowing up walls.” Said Aeony.

“Caspian mentioned it to me.” Said Muzzie. “The castle is very old, but still basically solid. I can blast a few partition walls without bringing the whole place crashing down. Or at least that’s the theory.”

“If only I hadn’t gone to that wedding anniversary.” Muttered Sensan. “I’d be in the City of the Lost God right now in the best room at Muzzie’s tavern.”

The seemingly endless day on Gorshan had ended, to be replaced by the darkness of night. One of the many moons could be seen through the shattered windows. They were still where Caspian and Vella had bedded down for the night, not far from the long spiral stairs.

“It’s not a perfect plan, I know that.” Said Muzzie. “But we have to do something. Plus.....It will take us in the right direction to talk to the dead king. That is after all.....Why we came here.”

“Oh, Muzzie.” Said Vella.

“Don’t oh Muzzie me.” Said Muzzie. “We’re here on a mission and that must come first. I’m sure we can rescue Maya while we’re wandering around the Treasury Tower.”

Sensan was like a vulture, his eyes actually widening as anyone mentioned the treasury. There’d be trouble with him eventually, Caspian was certain of it.

“Oh.....And we really need to look for fresh water.” Said Galla. “No panicking, but we will need to top up our flasks and bottles, fairly soon.”

“Pick up your bedding and backpacks; we’ll be leaving.....Now.” Said Muzzie. “Don’t leave anything behind; we may not be coming back this way.”

“Oh, all those stairs.....My poor old bones.” Muttered Galla.

There was a noise, like something trapped in the ceiling above them. Almost a fluttering sound and being an empath, Galla was the first to understand what was going on.

“My bird is up there.....Give him some noise, let him know where we are.” Said Galla.

Caspian felt a little ridiculous, but like all the others, he began to yell out to Galla’s pet.

“Bird ! We’re here, near the stairs.” Shouted Caspian.

“I could blast a hole in the ceiling.” Said Muzzie.

“No.....You might kill him.” Yelled Galla.

There was a hole in the ceiling, though it was some distance away. Judging by the noise and dust falling to the floor, Bird had found where it was. Soon he was there, falling and flapping about in the centre of a large ball of dust. Did birds cough? Some of the noises sounded a lot like coughing. He could definitely swear, the profanities were coming thick and fast.

“Fucking.....Stupid.....Gorshan.” Yelled Bird.

He hit the floor and seemed stunned for a moment. Galla’s pet flapped about until there was far less dust covering his wings. The bird flew towards them and perched on Galla’s shoulder. It looked bigger than it had, quite a lot bigger, Caspian was sure of it.

“I’m very pleased you’re safe, Bird.....But where is Maya?” Asked Galla.

“Safe.....Nethra guards her.....In the treasury.”

“Good.....Come on, we’re leaving.” Yelled Muzzie.

If any of the Vargouille still had poison glands behind their claws, Nethra knew she was as good as dead. Her own claws were covered in the blood of her enemies, as were her teeth. Even her tail had a tip covered in Vargouille blood. So many of the brutes had fallen from the wounds she’d given them, yet there still seemed to be thousands of the damn things. It made her respect Muzzie more. He had been to Gorshan before, accompanied by Caspian and Vella. They’d survived an onslaught by Vargouille who still had a lethal set of poison glands.....The slightest scratch and you were finished. “More are coming through the hole in the roof.” Shouted Maya. “We have to risk running for the door.”

“You go first.....Be ready to slam the door behind me, as I come through.” Yelled Nethra.

Everything had to be shouted, the brutes kept up a constantly wolf like howl. The noise had a purpose, Nethra could see that now. The howling meant the Vargouille were fighting an enemy and needed help. Fairly soon, every brute in the castle would arrive.

“Bird.....Look after Nethra.” Shouted Maya.

Maya had fought well, though the girl had her own share of Vargouille bites and claw marks. It was amazing what the Dredger child had managed to learn so quickly, her sword skills were incredible. The bodies of the brutes she’d killed, surrounded Maya. Bird shrieked something and Maya was running for the open door.

“Please let there be bolts on the other side of that door.” Nethra muttered.

The bird probably saved Nethra, though whether he did it consciously wasn’t obvious. Galla’s pet had been keeping away from the fighting, but seemed to develop a sudden hatred for the Vargouille. He was small, scrawny Muzzie often called him. Galla’s annoying scrawny bird seemed to have a charmed life. He nipped at the brutes with his beak, before screeching at them and hurtling away. One well aimed claw and Bird would have been a dead bundle of feathers. He kept at them, becoming a constant source of annoyance. Eventually the Vargouille were going after Galla’s pet, more than her. Nethra took the opportunity and ran for the door. She prayed as she ran, asking the old Gods for a solid door, with a few nice metal bolts on the other side.

“Luck.....Today, let my luck be good.” Nethra muttered. “And.....Keep the scrawny bird safe.”

Two large Vargouille went through the door behind her. Nethra still had extra strength from her demon rage when angry with Merrick. One good solid thump with her tail, sent one of them over the edge of the pathway. It would live; the brute had wings and didn’t look that badly damaged. The other one was closer, it needed killing or it would pose a danger until it was killed. Nethra ignored the sharp teeth digging into her claws, as she grabbed its jaws. It was surprisingly easy to rip its jaws apart and pull them away from its head.

"I must get angry with Merrick more often." She mumbled.

The Vargouille wasn't quite dead, but it soon would be.....As Nethra kicked it back beyond the door. Maya was doing as she'd been told, her hands pressing against the door.

"No !.....Wait for the bird." Yelled Nethra.

Bird came through the door shouting something about stupid Vargouille, of course he was. The instant he was safely in the chamber beyond the door, Maya slammed the door closed. A solid metal door, with extra metal banding. There were also no less than three large bolts on the inside of the door, which Nethra pushed home. Thinking about it, the strength of the door shouldn't have been a surprise. It was one of the doors that gave access to the Royal Treasury.

She could still hear them though, the Vargouille who were clawing and biting at the door, hoping to force it open. Nethra sat on the floor and rested her back against the door. There was a little light in the chamber, coming through several narrow slits in the wall. A bit narrow for archers defending the treasury, but that was their only obvious purpose.

"Oh, first thing.....I need to look at these wounds." Said Nethra. "Some of them feel a bit deep. Yours too Maya, we need to look you over for bites. How are you, Bird ?"

"Stupid.....Vargoole."

The bird was perched on an old light fitting, preening himself. Nethra assumed he had no serious injuries, though she would look him over after Maya's wounds had been cleaned. There was something about Galla's scrawny bird.....He looked a lot less scrawny than she remembered.

"Hey, Bird.....Are you fully grown ? You look bigger than you did." Said Nethra.

"Stupid.....Nethra."

"Can they get through the door ?" Asked Maya.

"How easily are Vargouille bored ?" Asked Nethra. "Get enough of them who are willing to spend a lot of their time bashing against that door.....Yes, eventually they might get in here. It would take a long time, so.....If I was asked to bet on it, I'd say we're reasonably safe for a while."

"Only a while ?"

"They may find another way in.....We can't assume we're safe here until the others arrive." Said Nethra.

The bird was sure to be able to get back to Galla; he could get through the smallest gaps. No use calling to him, he'd probably delight in ignoring her. Nethra forgot all about her wounds and walked over to Galla's pet. She rubbed his tummy feathers, in the way she'd seen Galla do it. No trying to peck her, he seemed to enjoy being petted.

"Are you alright, Bird ? Were you hurt by the flying wolves ?"

"No.....Bird fine."

"I need you to go and tell Galla where we are." Said Nethra.

"Bird.....Guards Maya."

"This will help Maya, Bird. They need to know where we are."

"Bird.....Looks after Maya."

It was infuriating, like trying to have a conversation with a growler. Nethra knew that, she'd tried to converse with one after a particularly boozy night, in the alley behind Muzzie's bar. That.....Had been a very long time ago.

"I know you're clever Bird, you can work things out." Said Nethra. "If they don't know where we are, Maya might be killed. Please.....You need to go and talk to Galla."

One moment she was looking into the eyes of a bird, the next.....Nethra had no idea what was perched in front of her, though it no longer felt like a bird. A few seconds later and Bird was back, looking at her and enjoying having his tummy rubbed.

“Bird.....Will fetch Galla.”

He was up and gone, straight through a tiny gap in one of the walls. Nethra felt content in the fact that for the time being, she’d done all she could to keep the Dredger kid safe.

“Come on Maya, we need to clean each other’s wounds.” Said Nethra.

It was warm in Castle Gorshan, undressing wasn’t a problem. Nethra used a tiny amount of precious water, to clean the bites and scratches the brutes had left in Maya. Then they swapped over and Maya cleaned her, though she did use far too much water.

“Oh, this bite looks nasty.” Said Maya.

“Is it still bleeding?”

“No.”

“Then it will be fine.....Just clean it up.”

Maya wasn’t clumsy, probably just nervous. It hurt when she rubbed water into the deep wound, but it was in a place Nethra could never have reached.

“Sorry, did I hurt you?”

“Not much.....Did you notice the bird change?” Asked Nethra. “Not sure how to describe it, but for a moment, he wasn’t Bird anymore.”

“Yes, something is hiding in him, something powerful.” Said Maya. “I hear Galla talking to it when she doesn’t know I’m there. Galla sounds scared of it.”

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Vella felt safe again, as they all walked up the long spiral staircase. Muzzie was at the front, with Aeony behind him. If anything could get past them, it had Galla to deal with. Sensan and Runa were at the rear, which needed to be watched. There could be no clearing out rooms and corridors behind them, there simply wasn’t time. Not that Vella didn’t appreciate having Caspian by her side. His weapon skills were largely self-taught, but he could be ferocious in battle. Well, sometimes he could be ferocious. They were back as the original group again, the anniversary crowd who’d been swept up and deposited with the Silver Lady in Ingar Sans. The two surviving archers were in the centre of the group but seemed to be deliberately keeping to themselves.

“We’ve been at this for hours, Muzzie.” Said Galla. “Can we please have a break? Do I need to tell you again about my poor old bones?”

Muzzie gazed up the stairs, as if trying to work out where they were. It had been a long trudge, with no stops since they’d had a frugal breakfast of what Runa called berries, leaves and twigs. They all had a bag of the dried food, which would probably last them for weeks, as everyone seemed to hate it. Water was the real problem, if they didn’t find fresh water fairly soon.

“I think.....We’re only two or three floors from the top.” Said Muzzie. “We’ll stop here for a quick break.....Galla; can you get your pet to see if I’m right?”

Stopping on the stairs wasn’t fun; stone steps weren’t designed for comfort. They’d slept on the stairs the previous night, as entering any of the rooms might bring an attack by Vargouille. Not just the flying wolves, they’d been hearing some very strange noises, snarls and roars. So far at least, nothing had entered the staircase to attack them.

“See, Bird.....See if we’re near the top.” Galla muttered at her bird.

No rude reply, the bird seemed quite subdued after the dust incident in the ceiling. He could still fly well though, he shot up the stairs.

"I hate saying this.....But please pass over the bag of twigs." Caspian said to her.

"Tastes like crap and scratches your mouth.....But better than starving." Muttered Runa.

"I almost envy Nethra and her bag of bad meat." Said Sensan.

"Ewwwww, no.....No matter how hungry I get." Said Vella.

The bird returned, screeching about three more floors to the top. He sat on Galla's shoulder while they all didn't enjoy the dried food and rationed water. Galla's pet was whispering to its owner, which Vella had never seen before.

"There's something on the stairs between us and the top." Said Galla.

"Something big.....Something nasty." Squawked the bird.

"Large and furry, my pet has never seen anything like it before." Continued Galla. "Probably safest to assume it isn't friendly."

"Nothing here ever is." Said Sensan.

They had an extended break, as Muzzie talked quietly to Galla. Aeony joined in at one point, though Vella heard nothing she couldn't have guessed. They were preparing for battle against something big; something nasty.....As Galla's bird had described it. Something also unknown, which always added a lot of extra risk. Caspian had a brief talk with Galla, which didn't seem to please him.

"Are you alright?" Asked Vella. "More bad news?"

"According to her bird, the creature fills the stairs, right up to the ceiling." Said Caspian. "Huge claws too and the obligatory jaws full of huge sharp teeth."

"I'm sure Muzzie can deal with it.....And Galla did kill the lake monster."

"True.....Very true."

Muzzie didn't give the order to move. He simply stood up and began to climb the steep stairs.

Probably intended for emergencies, Vella didn't imagine many had chosen to use the stairs to get to the highest point in the castle.

"Here we go." Said Aeony. "I'm at the rear this time."

Muzzie was in front, with the full hand of Arcadis tucked inside his shirt. Galla was slightly back, holding one of her powders in a thick strong envelope. Vella dreaded to think what the powder might do if Galla needed to throw it at the beast. Runa was behind Caspian and her, with an arrow ready to use.

"We'll take it slowly." Said Muzzie. "No use coming across the monster when we're out of breath."

Up they went, their footsteps seeming to loudly announce their presence. Vella had several nice weapons, but chose to pull a long thin assassin's blade out of her clothing. Sensan had once admired how deep it would penetrate an enemy, which she chose to accept as high praise.

"It's near.....I can feel its rage." Said Galla. "Go bird, irritate it.....Annoy it until you drive it insane.....But don't get killed."

"Silly Galla.....Yes Galla."

Useful was the word. Vella had recently heard several people use the word several times, to describe Galla's pet. It had only been gone for less than a minute, when the sound of roaring reached them.

"It seems Bird has found our monster." Said Caspian.

"Bird's descriptions sound like the creature is an artificial chimera, a monster created by a powerful sorcerer." Said Galla. "A very dangerous creature.....We must be careful."

Two more tiring flights of stairs, after a long tiring climb. It might well be past their bedtime, but it was impossible to tell. The seemingly endless day, followed by an endless night, had ruined everyone's internal clocks. There it was, the brute that really did fill the landing at the top of the

stairs. Furry, like a huge Farrag beast, yet there was something about its head. It looked like the head of a pure blood Dredger and there was intelligence in its eyes.

“Hide Bird.....Time To Hide.” Yelled Galla.

Luck really, the creature turned as Bird flew further up the stairs. Runa had no problem with shooting it in the back. She put four arrows into its neck and back, before it had time to turn back towards them.

“That face.....It feels pain.” Said Caspian.

“Don’t feel pity.....That’ll get you killed.” Said Muzzie.

As if to prove Muzzie right, the creature leapt at them, knocking Galla over as it landed. Vella felt a claw in her arm, before Sensan was there, jabbing at the brute with his sword. Muzzie.....The hybrid, who wanted to be emperor, said words and moved his hands, but nothing happened.

“It’s immune to magic.....Let me through.....Stand aside you fools.” Yelled Aeony.

Easier said than done, the creature was so huge. It had everyone pushed down on the floor, or flattened against a wall. Aeony pushing with all her strength, wasn’t helping the situation. Vella risked using her assassin’s blade.

“I can hardly make things worse.” She muttered.

The blade went in a good eight inches, before the creature reacted. It yelled out a dreadful roar and took a swipe at Vella with a paw larger than her head. Luckily Vella ducked in time and the blow hit the wall, dislodging pieces of what may once have been, colourful tiles.

“For fuck sake.....Move.” Shouted Aeony.

It would have been easier to yell for night to become day, or mystical help from the old gods. The creature shoved at Sensan with its shoulder, knocking him down. It then proceeded to stomp on Sensan’s head, twice. He had to be dead, surely no one could have survived that....The beast had to weigh at least five times as much as Muzzie.

“Aeony.....Stop pushing.” Shouted Muzzie.

It had to be said, the two surviving archers had kept themselves to themselves in the centre of the group.

“That pair.....Pointless use of a water ration.” Muzzie had remarked, more than once.

Leather jerkin redeemed himself a little, by burying his short sword in the brute’s back. Were they winning ? Was the brute winning ? It did seem to have killed Sensan, leader of the Guild of Assassins.

“Hold your breath.....Or die !” Shouted Galla.

A powder.....Galla was about to use one of her dangerous powders. Vella held her breath and for good measure, placed her hand over her mouth. No, not Galla.....Bird was going to use the powder. He could fly over the pile of pushing and shoving bodies and get above the monster. Vella kept her mouth closed, but not her eyes. Something bashed her, or might have bashed Caspian, who fell against her. It was pure chaos on the stairs, in the modern, horrible meaning of the word. As sometimes happens, falling over a little was good, it gave Vella a perfect view as Bird shook the packet of powder, sending it over the beast’s head.

“It’s.....By Nigon.....The monster is melting.” Yelled Vella.

Its fur bubbled and gave off a terrible stench, like a piece of meat that’s been hung for far too long. It was either melting or rotting, right there in front of her.

“Oh.....I can move and breathe again.” Said Caspian.

It wasn’t that fast, but the creature was no longer moving, as its flesh decayed away. By the time just a few pieces of its fur were all that remained of the beast, everyone was up on their feet, stretching and groaning.

“Oh.....I hate to mention my old bones again.” Said Galla. “But can we please never do that again ?”

“You’ll get no argument from me.” Said Muzzie.

“We learned a valuable lesson.” Said Runa. “Not every monster goes away when Muzzie hurls chaos magic at it.”

Not quite everyone was stretching and cursing their stiff bones and joints. They were all stood looking down at Sensan. His head seemed pushed round too far and his left eye was destroyed. He looked like someone who, if he was alive, should be screaming in agony. He was dead; one of the original seven wasn’t going home.

“He’s dead.....I kind of assumed all of us seven couldn’t die.” Said Vella. “I know that’s silly.....Of course it is.....Any of us could die.”

“Be honest.....No one really liked him.” Said Muzzie.

There was a cough, a quiet but definite cough. Sensan wasn’t screaming out loud, but his one good eye was emoting huge amounts of pain. Runa began to lift him.

“No.....Leave him there until I’ve looked at him.” Shouted Galla. “Move him about with a broken back and he might never walk again.”

Had Sensan heard Muzzie ? He was definitely giving him a long hard stare.

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Maya knew she should get some sleep, but she couldn’t. She remembered Caspian saying it was important to get a regular sleep pattern going, or the very long periods of light and dark might drive her crazy, literally. Nethra was asleep on the stone floor and she was snoring. No matter how much Maya tried to empty her mind and drift off, sleep eluded her. Nethra had told her to stay close and Maya knew that made sense. No sleep though, with nothing to occupy her mind and she was beyond restless. Eventually, the sound of dripping water sent her down an almost totally dark passage.

“We could do with moons on the rifts.” Maya muttered.

There were a few places where gaps in the walls showed her the castle grounds, bathed in moonlight. Not much of that light entered the treasury tower, but it was just about enough for a young Dredger kid, with good eyes, to see. Well, she could see enough to avoid bumping into things. “Sorry Nethra.....But we do need water.” Maya mumbled.

The passage was low, which meant going onto six feet again. Maya was beginning to hate that, it felt like putting on baby clothes. She was big now, more than able to get about on two legs. Reluctantly, she entered the passage on six feet and moved carefully and slowly towards a smell she knew.....Fresh water.

“Yes.....Clean fresh water.” She muttered.

Dredgers could smell water over large distances and deep in the ground. It was one of their special abilities. Some people wanted them to find water, while others wanted them to avoid digging into underground lakes and rivers. To Maya, her mother’s words had equal weight to those of the cleric in their local temple. Her mother had told her the Dredgers had been mindless creatures of the rifts, similar to the growlers. Then Tomma-Goran had been so impressed with their ability to dig, that he’d granted them intelligence. Not just intelligence, a few special skills had come with the intelligence. “I’ll just have a quick look.....Nethra won’t even know I’ve gone.” She mumbled.

Maya came to the steep down ramp in a particularly dark section of the passage. Probably not a ramp and not a passage, not really. It was all most likely part of a huge ventilation system for the once mighty Gorshan Castle. Her front feet found some rubble to fall over and Maya was tumbling. Down the steep ramp and through a hole in the far wall, she couldn’t avoid it. Picking up dirt as she tumbled and hitting a few things in the dark she didn’t want to think about. Maya ended up sat on

the floor of what looked like one of the areas of the treasury where treasure had been stored, probably gold. There was no avoiding letting the information into her consciousness. A nasty looking, but small creature with about a dozen legs, had attached itself to her shoulder.

“Oh.....How I hate this place.” She muttered.

Hoping it wouldn't bite or sting, she took a swipe at the creature. It ended up some distance away, before scuttling under what remained of some shelving. Maya knew she'd been lucky, it hadn't bitten or stung her. Up on two legs now for a little look around, before returning to Nethra. The ramp behind her was steep, but far from unclimbable.

“I wonder.....Maybe someone missed a few gold coins.” She mumbled.

It had to have once been a gold store, though the shelves and cabinets had mostly fallen apart. It was still possible to work out that the place had been ransacked, the treasure removed in a hurry. Not just that room, other massive rooms went off in all directions.

“All the gold in the world must have once been here.” She muttered.

There had to be miles of shelving and drawers, in dozens of rooms and thousands of cabinets. To Maya, it seemed inconceivable that people in that much of a hurry, wouldn't have missed something. Even a little would please her mother.

“What the.....What have I sat on ?”

A nest, or at least it looked like a nest in the moonlight. Dirt and pieces of rotting wood, with many tiny bugs inside it. They looked exactly like the one she'd taken a swipe at. A few were stuck to the trousers her mother had made for her. Luckily, her mother made clothes to last and the material was thick. A quick wipe with her hands and the few surviving bugs were scuttling into the darkness.

“Crap.....I hope this place falls down.” She mumbled.

“It definitely will.....One day.”

A disembodied voice that didn't have the usual hybrid slightly nasal tone to it. It definitely wasn't one of the others trying to play a trick on her. A male voice at a guess, though Maya had learned never to assume anything. There was no one near her, though there were many areas hidden in the darkness.

“Who is that ?” Asked Maya. “Where are you ?”

No answer, though there was a noise coming from the treasury room to her left. Yes, definitely the sound of someone walking over the stone floor. A heavy person by the sound of it.

“Is that you, Muzzie ?”

Again, no answer. There was the sound of someone either bumping into a treasury cupboard, or pushing one over. The idea came into her head that it might be one of the others and that they were hurt. They might even need her help, the damn Dredger kid.

“I'm coming.” She yelled.

Maya ran into the room and there it was, a huge Vargouille, probably one of the top tier males. Vella had mentioned they were like wolves in their behaviour and pack structure, though Vargouille were far more dangerous than ordinary wolves.

“Keep.....Very still.” Said the disembodied voice.

Maya did as she was told, mainly because it didn't require her to do anything. The huge Vargouille growled at her and looked ready to pounce, until the human in lilac robes appeared behind it. Maya had never seen a living human and didn't know anyone who had, apart perhaps from Galla. She'd seen pictures though, hanging up in Pio's store in Seren's Edge. Badly stained and faded drawings, but the man standing behind the Vargouille was either human, or something staggeringly similar.

“Turn beast.....Face your doom.” Yelled the human.

As the Vargouille turned the human male leant towards it and appeared to whisper a few words. Whatever he'd said was enough, the brute instantly became a ball of flames, which within seconds, became a small pile of grey coloured ashes.

"Don't be alarmed, Maya." Said the human. "They rarely come here and there are no more of them this side of the treasury walls."

"You know my name."

"I do, your friend used it....and how rude I am.....I am LLud Narren, once head sorcerer to the living God, Tomma Goran. Once I was personal magician to Neosto, the usurper, King of Leng.....Before that.....Though I think you must get the idea."

"Yes, you're a human sorcerer." Said Maya. "What my mum would call an abomination."

If LLud Narren was angry, he didn't show it. The human magician laughed so much, Maya wondered if he was losing his mind. She noticed one thing which wasn't obvious in the dark. LLud was a creature made up of vapour of some kind, glowing lilac vapour. Like a ghost, he could walk through solid objects and did so, to get closer to her. Maya's mum said if you didn't hurt the living, you need have no fear of the dead. Maya wasn't scared of the ghost, though she wasn't happy when he stood close to her.

"Are you a ghost?" She asked.

"Not really, there is no word for what I am." Said LLud. "I died in strange circumstances and though I look nothing but a wraith, I can still use magic here in Gorshan. Sadly not on the rifts, where I am nothing but a harmless incorporeal wraith."

"That sounds very sad." Said Maya.

"I'm glad you think that, I can see us being friends." Said LLud. "I have an idea about us exchanging good deeds. I do something for you and then you do a good deed for me. Does that sound fair?"

"Maybe.....I was looking for fresh water." Said Maya.

"If your friends carry on going in the direction they're now heading; they'll come to one of the few working water cisterns." Said LLud. "There is more than enough water there, thousands of gallons of it. Nethra can even have the bath she's been wishing for."

"You've been following all of us?"

"Of course.....You're the first visitors to Gorshan in.....It has to be about a hundred and twenty thousand years. I knew you were coming here of course, I spoke to Muzzie at the Defender Tavern."

"Have you been guiding him, LLud?" Asked Maya. "Galla thinks someone has been showing him the way."

"Yes, I've been whispering into his mind, trying to make sure he finds the dead king. You know you can trust me, Maya. Can we swap good deeds? It is very important."

Her mother was just about the source of all knowledge worth knowing and strangers wanting to be friends, were one of the big things she'd been told to avoid. According to some, pet Dredger kids were genuinely a thing in some parts of the second rift.

"Maybe.....What do I have to do?" Asked Maya.

"First I will make you very wealthy.....Then I will ask for a favour in return. Does that sound fair?"

"Depends.....I'm not making any promises." Said Maya.

LLud was still smiling at her, which was good. If you were stood close to someone who could incinerate Vargouille, it was a good idea to keep them happy.

"Come with me.....We need to go into another room." Said LLud.

Maya followed him, mainly because of the mention of becoming wealthy, very wealthy. Maya's family had always struggled, especially in Seren's Edge. LLud stopped near a cabinet that hadn't quite collapsed.

"Here.....You'll need to get down on the floor and feel under the cabinet." Said LLud. "Don't worry about the bugs, they don't bite."

"What's under there?"

"Gold child, two bars of the purest Gorshan gold. A servant pushed them under there and never came back for them. Most of the castle servants died."

"What happened here, LLud?" She asked.

"Never.....Ask that.....Go on girl, get down and pull out the gold."

Ideally she'd have him move away a bit, but there was the recent incineration still in her mind. Maya got flat on the floor and put her right hand under the cabinet. She couldn't see the bugs in the dark, but she could feel them crawling over her hand.

"Both hands child.....Gold is heavy."

It was beginning to feel sinister, the kind of situation that might leave her parents talking about the day poor Maya vanished in Gorshan. Her mother would blame her of course, Maya not obeying what she'd been told, again.

"I can feel something." Said Maya.

"They've been under there since Tomma-Goran still walked the streets of the City of the Lost God. Pull them out child, pull out the gold." Said LLud.

The gold bars looked perfect, as good as the day someone had stamped words into them. Words Maya couldn't read, but she knew the look of gold when she saw it. It was rare, but sometimes her family had been paid an eighth-imperial coin for a particularly tough job.

"Ahhh, Gorshan gold bars." Said LLud. "Very pure and rare.....They fetch twenty times the price of their weight in Quron gold pieces. Yours child, to spend as you wish. Though I will give you my advice, if you want to hear it?"

It felt like a compliment to be offered the advice of someone so wise and knowledgeable. Maya nodded at LLud Narren.

"Gold, or rather the possession of it, can test any friendship." Said LLud. "Keep the gold hidden and tell no one you have it.....No one. Give it to your mother when you get back to Annill. She won't have to worry about the expense of food and clothing for a very, very, very....Long time."

"I'll do that.....My mum will get the gold."

Almost a reflex action when an adult had been kind, even a long dead adult. Maya went to touch LLud's arm but her hand went right through. Not that the sorcerer seemed worried. He was walking away from her, towards a door across the treasury room.

"Come.....Over here, Maya.....You promised a good deed for a good deed." Said LLud.

"I did and I'll do anything.....Well, almost anything."

Through several rooms and into a part of the castle that looked more intact than most. LLud stopped near to something that looked like a shattered glass ornament lying on the floor.

"The royal sceptre of Gorshan." Said LLud. "Crystallised from gold and shattered, during the event never mentioned. I've come and looked at it so often.....You need the tip, the very top section. Not heavy child.....Yes, that's it, put it in a pocket. Give it to Muzzie and only Muzzie. If he uses it as I hope, we may meet on the streets of Annill."

"I hope so." Said Maya.

“So do I.....Just remember to ignore half that is said about me. Come.....I’ll take you back to the hole in the wall where you arrived. Nethra will soon be awake.”

The gold bars felt weird in the pockets of her jacket. He mum made solid clothing though, the pockets wouldn’t let her down. Soon they were at the hole in the wall, with the pathway beyond it, that would take her back to a sleeping Nethra.

“Goodbye young Dredger.” Said LLud.

Maya turned to say goodbye, but the dead human sorcerer was gone.

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