

The Last Emperor

Chapter 38 - Changes

“Sat against a wall and surrounded by the bodies of those who’d tried to kill them. Nethra had a few small wounds, but nothing bad enough to slow her down. Dhali’s clothing was wet with her own strange yellow and red blood. Nothing seemed to stop Dhali though, even losing quite a bit of blood.”



Like lost orphans, LLud and Maya had walked the streets of Quron. Actually they’d avoided the wide streets with their lack of cover and the potential to meet the fighters defending Quron. Maya had enjoyed the back alleys of the city, though she wasn’t keen on constantly finding the dead warriors of both sides.

“War is a messy business, Maya.”

LLud had told her, quite a few times, as she’d stopped to see if there were any wounded who needed the aid of a healer. Galla believed there was a deity who looked after the luck of healers. Maybe Galla was right; the noise of battle always seemed to be somewhere else. So far, the three of them had avoided any fights with enemy fighters. Maya had found around a dozen people who could be healed by Galla’s powders and a few spells. They’d all chosen to follow Maya and the child of the Ancient Ones. A mixed bunch, mostly members of Muzzie’s army who were now a long way from whoever had been leading them. They recognised LLud and Uula and Maya had just healed them. In a way it seemed natural, that they followed her along back alleys and the quieter streets of the city. Strangely, three of those healed and following her were citizens of Quron. Why were they following a healer from Muzzie’s army ?

“Nowhere else to go, I expect.” LLud had said. “And remember, the child you hold is sacred to their Gods.”

It felt nice to have a few armed warriors with them; even though they had wounds that were still healing. Using Uula’s wail against robbers and ruffians seemed a little over the top. Muzzie fighters might be wounded, but they were quite capable of seeing off a few street robbers. Not that they’d been attacked by anyone, or even seen anyone likely to cause trouble.

“Have you noticed where avoiding the noise of battle is leading us ?” Asked LLud.

“No, I wasn’t aware we were being lead.” Said Maya.

“That.....Is the clever thing about it.” Said LLud. “Push us a bit left, shove us a tiny bit right; even send us back the way we came, then send us to the left. I’ve noticed it is deliberate and we are being taken to somewhere specific.”

“You’re saying the fighting noises are fake ?” Asked Maya.

“No, just moved around to make us end up at the Temple of the Old Gods.” Said LLud. “We’re being taken somewhere, Maya. I just hope whoever is leading us, has no bad intentions towards us.”

“Can we go somewhere else ?” Asked Maya.

“We could, but ignoring the battle noises could be dangerous.” Said LLud. “Besides, I’m now curious to see why someone is so keen on us entering the oldest temple on the rifts, that is still in use. Of course, if you’d prefer to change direction.....”

“No.....I’m now curious too.” Said Maya. “And I’ve heard so much about the temples of Quron.”

“Our temples vary.” Said Da-Ashh. “Some are of the dark, while others are of the light. The Temple of the Old Gods is a rare thing. A place where both light and dark are worshipped.”

Da-Ashh claimed to be an apothecary with his own shop in Quron. He spoke the common tongue of the rifts, with a pronounced accent of the outer second rift. Maya had done her best, but she suspected her translation of his name to Da-Ashh wasn't that accurate. He answered to it, which was the main thing. Maya had treated and healed a nasty stab wound in his left shoulder. As with all three of the citizen of Quron, he'd been searched and anything that could be used as a weapon, had been taken from him. Da-Ashh had been bowing to Uula on a regular basis and treating the child with deep reverence.

“Who, or what do you think is leading our steps to that temple ?” Asked LLud.

“I can't be certain, but.....If a God wanted you dead, you'd be dead by now.” Said Da-Ashh. “As you're still in the world of the living, I'd say you'll come to no harm by going to the temple. Of course.....I might be totally wrong.”

“You can't fault his logic, Maya.” Said LLud. “As guardian of the sacred child.....The decision has to be yours. Are we going to let ourselves be lead to the temple ?”

“Guardian....Sacred child; that's all a bit over the top for little Uula.” Said Maya. “Yes.....I say we go wherever we're being taken.”

As for the dozen or so who followed them ? They were neither invited to join them, or told to leave. All of them simply carried on following Maya, as she carried the child of the Ancient Ones. Not far from the temple and at the end of a grubby looking alley, they came to wide and very open space.

“That.....Looks to have been one hell of a fight.” Said Da-Ashh.

The dead beast was huge, probably something altered by the famed bio-viziers of Quron. A Jangar Beast maybe, or a humble Shuud. Those names were often used for a variety of different creatures. Someone had changed the beast into a machine of war. Armour had been strapped to it and a huge spike had been fixed into its skull. It had died after being cut to pieces. Not that had it died alone. The huge war beast was surrounded by those it had killed. All of them had once been warrior's in Muzzie's army.

“It may have friends and the square in front of the temple.....Is very open.” Said LLud. “I can't help thinking that.....We should find a way around the square.”

“We've been brought here for a reason.” Said Maya. “I feel.....We should cross the square.”

“Now.....In the full light of day ?” Asked Da-Ashh.

“Yes.....Though you don't get a say in what we do.” Said Maya.

The first few steps were the hardest. Once Maya had walked about twenty feet, without being attacked, the next twenty were easy. Looking back it was good to see the others, following her. Sat right up on her shoulders, Uula was looking around, as if ready for trouble.

“Keep close to me.....Everyone, stay close.” Shouted Maya.

The straightest route was past the huge dead battle beast. Not dead that long, its green blood was still forming a pool beneath it and its flesh didn't stink of decay. The beast's eyes were open and Maya felt nervous that it might suddenly come back to life. Nonsense of course, there were at least a dozen deep wounds in its body.

“Keep watching, Uula.” Muttered Maya.

The child made her happy clicking sounds at the back of her throat. Maybe luck, or perhaps the Gods were looking after them. Maya reached the steps in front of the temple, without seeing a living enemy. Plenty of dead fighters though, the square was full of them.

“Inside, Maya.....We need to get inside.” Said LLud.

The fight outside had spilled over into the temple. There were three dead clerics just inside the doors. Again, their spilled blood was still fresh and hadn't congealed.

"This was recent.....We need to be careful." Said Da-Ashh.

"The whole war is recent." Said Maya. "We arrived with the imperial army and that wasn't long ago."

"At least it's well-lit in here." Said LLud. "You can always rely on temples to have plenty of light."

Oil lamps hung from the walls on chains and the occasional magical light orb, gave out light, right up against the ceiling. The amount of light was good, but Maya thought it could have been better. Uula was calm though, as she chuntered her happy sounds.

"There are dark places and shadows, LLud." Said Maya. "Do you sense the presence of others?"

The temple was huge and had to cover the same space as several large mansions. So many statues and gilded tombs, that Maya would have loved to leisurely stroll around and examine everything. A strange temple though, in an enemy city. Maybe it was just anxiety, but she felt they weren't alone. There definitely wouldn't be any leisurely strolling around.

"Difficult.....Temples are always difficult." Said LLud. "So many visiting worshippers, leaving a trace of their presence here. There are others here.....How many though and if they're hostile? We just need to be very careful."

Maya had expected someone to be there to greet them; they had been brought there. Maybe the dead clerics had been there to welcome them? It seemed strange and a little unnerving; to know there were others in the building, probably hiding in the shadows.

"Be our eyes and ears, Uula." Said Maya. "There may be enemies in the temple."

"Maya." Said Uula.

Uula stretched out her long neck and pointed with her head. Others might have interpreted it differently, but they didn't know the child as well as Maya. As far as Maya was concerned, Uula was pointing the way they needed to go.

"This way.....Uula knows the way." Said Maya.

"You're letting the child lead us now." Said Da-Ashh.

"Leave if you want to." Said LLud. "Take your chances out there.....Or shut up."

Uula kept making clicking noises and pointing. The temple was larger than Maya had thought. It took them a while to reach a large open floor, covered in red tiles. In the centre of the floor was a statue of an Ancient One. Not life size of course, but it had been created by an artist capable of making the statue look real.

"We're no longer in the temple; Maya.....We're somewhere else." Said LLud.

"Where are we?" Asked Maya.

"I've no idea, but don't step on the red tiles.....I have a bad feeling about them."

Not just him, none of their dozen or so followers, seemed keen on walking over the floor, which surrounded the statue. Uula began to struggle in her arms, desperately pointing her head at the statue of an adult Ancient One.

"Uula wants me to go to the statue." Said Maya.

"Not a good idea..... Put her down and let her crawl there." Said LLud.

"No, it's too far and Uula doesn't crawl well.....Her legs are too long and awkward."

Maya took a step onto the red floor and.....Nothing happened. No sense of danger, no feelings of impending doom. Maya took two more steps and one of the wounded fighters, followed her. A female archer, there were quite a few of those serving Muzzie. Maya didn't know her name and never would. One step onto a red tile and the archer became a small pile of red dust. No screams, no signs of pain, just flesh turned instantly to dust.

“Stay where you are.....None of you should follow me.” Yelled Maya.

It probably hadn't needed saying; they all looked shocked and horrified.

“The red death.....I've heard of it, but never seen it happen.” Said LLud.

That needed more explanation, but that could wait for another day. Maya was obviously immune to the red death, probably because she was carrying Uula. The child she was beginning to think of as her own, was making a few unhappy noises and using her head to point at the statue.

“Maya.” Said Uula. “There.....Take me.”

Obviously the child was agitated, but there was no biting this time. Uula was obviously learning a few social skills. Maya reached the statue and as Uula was reaching out with her arms, Maya placed her on the floor in front of the statue.

“Is this where you want to be ?” Asked Maya.

No answer, just a lot of the sounds the child made when she was happy. Uula really wasn't good at crawling. Her arms got in the way of her legs and her neck appeared to get in the way of every movement she attempted to make. Uula reached out and touched the statue.

“What's happening ?” Shouted LLud.

“I'm not sure.....She just touched the statue.”

It was as if Uula's skin had been burned to a crisp. The child wriggled about and the burnt skin fell away, to reveal skin with the colour of pure gold.

“I think.....She's changing her skin.” Yelled Maya.

“I've heard they can do that.” Shouted Da-Ashh.”

Not just a change of skin, Uula began to stand up on those long and awkward legs of hers. Not a very steady rise up to her full height, but she made it without any help from Maya. So long were her legs that Uula's eyes were now looking straight into Maya's.

“Gold skin.....Standing at her age.....It's all impossible.” Shouted LLud.

A very long arm reached out and Maya held the clawed hand at the end of it. Uula staggered and Maya held onto her. The young Ancient One, curled up her limbs. Once again, Maya was carrying the child on her shoulders.

“Need help standing.....Will get better.” Said Uula.

“I'm sure you will.” Said Maya.

Two people had told Maya to get the child to depend on her, to love her like its mother, if she could. That sounded far too cynical for Maya, but something was growing between them. Maya felt genuine affection for the weird looking child.....And she felt that warmth and affection was being returned.

“Have you finished here ?” Asked Maya.

“No.....Put me on the statue, Maya.”

Up Uula went, her arms and legs seemed almost designed for climbing. The statue was large, but Uula was soon at the top and looking at the face of one of her ancestors. When Uula bit into the throat of the statue, Maya was as shocked as the others. LLud was yelling something, while Da-Ashh was actually crying, wailing like a baby hybrid. The statue was making a creaking noise.

“What have you done, Uula ?” Yelled Maya.

No answer and the bite was bleeding, with bright red blood. It was splashing against the red tiled floor, as Uula looked to be drinking as much of the blood as she could swallow.

“A line that began at the beginning of time.” Shouted Da-Ashh. “It is now dead.....The great legacy with the Ancient Ones has now died.”

All gobbledegook to Maya, who thought the statue was about to collapse. It didn't, though the stone it was made of cracked and seemed to shrink in on itself. Eventually a bloody Uula clambered down and onto Maya's shoulders.

"What did you do?" Asked Maya.

"I claimed my heritage."

A strange answer, but it would have to do for now.

"Now.....Are you finished here?"

"Yes Maya, we need to leave this place." Said Uula.

The red tiles felt more threatening on the return trip and Maya was glad when she was back on a quite ordinary looking marble floor. There was Da-Ashh, still crawling on the floor and weeping like an upset child.

"What's wrong with him?" Asked Maya.

"The end.....I've lived too long." Said Da-Ashh. "I've lived to see the end of my Gods."

The cleric ran onto the red tiled floor and instantly became another small pile of red dust. The death looked quick and painless. Maya hadn't known him for long, but she was pleased that Da-Ashh hadn't appeared to suffer any pain.

"No arguments now.....Just about everyone needs the services of a healer." Said Maya. "We need to leave Quron and find our way to the Void Gate. It will still be aimed at the army's tent city."

"Your child has changed." Said LLud. "Gold skin now, which if you believe the oldest of the old scrolls, means Uula now has new powers. No need to trudge along the streets of Quron, she can take us all to the imperial stockade. I must admit.....My wounds feel infected. I could do with a healer."

"Then a healer you shall have." Said Maya. "I believe Galla will be at the healers section of the stockade today. Uula, can you take us all to Galla."

"Yes Maya, I can."

There were still two citizens of Quron with them, who actually said they'd rather stay with Maya. LLud made them swear an oath of loyalty to the new emperor and that was it. Genuine converts to the empire, or just scared by the war in their city? Either way, they were unarmed and unlikely to hurt anyone.

"I think we're ready." Said Maya. "Do it now, Uula.....Take us all to Galla."

Maya had never really enjoyed using quick and dirty portals. Like most people, they tended to make her feel nauseous and give her short term mind fog. Uula was different though; her ancestors had been creating portals since before there's been hybrids on the rift. The purple vortex of the portal was quick and painless. To Maya, it felt as though she'd instantly found herself in one of the healer's cabins.

"Ahhhh.....I was just wondering if you were safe." Said Galla.

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"I was always taught that becoming the weapon is an act of desperation." Said Dhali Pril. "Once I've split myself into those creatures, I can no longer use spells, or chaos magic. Until I can become me again, I feel like a large number of mindless brutes."

They'd fought together on several levels of the largest of the Shinning Towers. Never once had Dhali become the super weapon by becoming an army of deadly beasts. At first it had been annoying, but Nethra was beginning to understand why Dhali was reluctant to become the weapon.

"Fight as you wish to fight." Said Nethra. "Use becoming the weapon as a last resort. You fight well as yourself and I think you might be stronger than me. Below us are the quarters of Xelang the

Mighty and all of his elite guards. Even as a child out on the rifts, I heard stories of Xelang and his dark magics. It is said he's protected by sorcerers from the darkness beyond Leng."

"Are you trying to scare me?" Asked Dhali.

"No.....I'm just warning you that we don't know what we may find on the next floor down. If you need to become the weapon, please don't hesitate for too long." Said Nethra.

"As I told Vella, you don't know everything I can use against an enemy." Said Dhali.

Sat against a wall and surrounded by the bodies of those who'd tried to kill them. Nethra had a few small wounds, but nothing bad enough to slow her down. Dhali's clothing was wet with her own strange yellow and red blood. Nothing seemed to stop Dhali though, even losing quite a bit of blood. Someone observing them would think they were finished; merely surviving until the next sword thrust. In truth, they were both as dangerous as ever.

"Tell me, Dhali." Said Nethra. "If you have more surprises.....Now is the time to tell me."

"Easier to show you. I can change all of me, or just part of me." Said Dhali. "My ancestors were shape changers, though you'll find no record of that in any library. If I've merely seen a creature for a few seconds, I can use it in battle."

Dhali seemed to lose a piece of flesh from the underside of her left arm. Not lost as dead flesh, the bloody piece of her body moved around. It changed from Dhali flesh to something else; green looking flesh. That changed again to resemble a lizard about two feet long. The lizard changed, gaining sharp teeth and wicked looking claws. The creature ran around, without making a sound. All Nethra could hear, was the quiet scratching of its claws against the floor.

"Imagine a few of those.....Or a single creature, thirty feet long." Said Dhali.

Dhali reached out, touching the lizard. It was drawn back into her body and once again, became Dhali flesh.

"Alright.....I'm impressed." Said Nethra. "Are you ready? We should be heading down the stairs and finding Xelang the Mighty, fifty second leader of the High Council of Quron."

"I saw him once.....The name is the most impressive thing about him." Said Dhali.

"Can I ask.....Were you really once married to LLud Narren?"

"Yes.....Though everyone seems surprised." Said Dhali. "All I can say is that none of you have seen him at his best. He has been killed several times.....That tends to have an effect."

"Are you.....Are you sleeping with him?" Asked Nethra.

"What a weird term, when the best things happen while you're awake." Said Dhali. "Of course I am.....We know each other's bodies, Nethra. There are no surprises, which sometimes; can be a real blessing. Now.....Let's go and find Xelang."

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Muzzie had been attacked and several of his guards were dead, or dying. Muzzie himself had been wounded, but he'd been wounded many times, in a ridiculously large number of fights and battles. More than once during his escapades with Merrick, he hadn't expected to survive some deep wounds. One advantage of all that experience of pain and bleeding, was knowing he might be hurting in a great many places, but he wasn't going to die. His own fault really; standing on the city walls of Quron, to get a better view of the battle, was hardly keeping safe and out of the way.....

"No, you should be leading the dark angels." Said Muzzie. "I'll be fine.....I'll find somewhere less visible to watch the war develop."

Aeony had been on the other side of the city, but those with wings didn't need portals to quickly get from one place to another. She looked shocked, as she surveyed the carnage on top of the city wall.

"I'm going to look you over first." Said Aeony. "Then I'm carrying you to one of the healers....Whether you like it, or not. By the nine, Muzzie.....Have you left a single enemy fighter alive ? How many attacked you ?"

"I'm not sure.....I just kept using my sword, until there were none of them left standing." Said Muzzie.

It was the first time he'd properly looked around. Sadly there were dead members of his personal guard, but most of the bodies were dead Quron fighters. There were a lot of them, a truly massive number of dead Quron warriors. A few were moving a little and moaning. There was no way to collect or house prisoners of war. The enemy wounded would be pushed off the wall and gravity would deal with them. Brutal, but it was part of the way wars were fought on the rifts. Mainly though, the enemy fighters were already no longer in the world of the living.

"Crap, Muzzie.....Were you trying for some kind of record." Said Aeony.

"Oh....My shield is ruined." Said Muzzie.

He remembered doing the standard sword and shield moves, the way he'd been taught when he'd been young. In his youth, Muzzie had briefly been in the city militia of the City of the Lost God. In fact, just about everyone he knew, had once been in the militia. They'd taught him how to fight properly and Merrick had taught him all the tricks of fighting with a little less style and a lot less morality. Muzzie's sword was still in his hand, but his shield of the emperor.....It was bent and buckled. There it was on the ground, almost bent in two.

"You haven't even got your battle armour on." Said Aeony. "Let me have a look at you."

His guard reformed as if by magic, the new arrivals taking over from those who'd fallen in battle. By the time Aeony had his shirt pulled up at the back, most of the enemy dead, had been pushed from the top of the wall.

"Oh, this is bad, but I have some powders Galla gave me." Said Aeony. "You should have had some of your own.....Did Galla give them to you ?"

"Yes.....But I left them somewhere. In our bedroom.....I think."

She wasn't being gentle and it felt deliberate. Galla's healing powders hurt anyway; the army said some hell dust was in the mix. His lover was deliberately causing him pain, to show him she loved him.....And to tell him he'd been an idiot to lose his healing powders.

"Alright.....I promise to get some powders from Galla." Said Muzzie. "Just.....Please stop jabbing one of your claws into me."

"Once the bleeding stop, I'm taking you to the healers." Said Aeony.

Tempting to be carried off to the healers in the tent city of the army. Looking round him though, at the fighters waiting to defend him, if it was necessary.....There was no way he could be carried off to safety. It would feel too much like running away.

"Like a hero of old." Shouted a fighter. "Muzzie kept swinging his sword until none of the enemy were left."

"Long live Muzzie.....Long live the emperor." Someone yelled.

The shout became a chant, repeated by a hundred or more tongues. Muzzie looked at Aeony and knew he couldn't leave the top of the wall.

"I'm here now.....For better or worse, I'll be standing here until the battle is over." Said Muzzie.

"How will you command the army from here ?" Asked Aeony.

"Some orders might need changing, but my commanders know what they're doing. There are the runners, who can deliver orders in the worst of battles." Said Muzzie.

"If you're staying, I'll stay and stand with you." Said Aeony.

“But who will lead the dark angels ?” Asked Muzzie.

“As with your fighters, my sisters know what they’re doing.” Said Aeony. “I will remain here.....Fighting by your side.”

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Muzzie had sent new orders, which meant splitting up the main bulk of the army. General Dhūlen made sure no one apart from him, could read Muzzie’s hastily written note. A scruffy spider scrawl of a note, the plan seemed ludicrously simple. It was the kind of plan a boy might come up with, to impress his friends. Dhūlen read the note three times and on the third time, he saw the brilliance of yet another simple plan from the emperor. The general actually patted the runner on the shoulder, as if thanking him for the orders.

“Tell the emperor.....It shall be as he commands.” Said Dhūlen.

The runner nodded and actually ran to get the confirmation to Muzzie. Not a youngster, Muzzie had entrusted the orders to one of the greys from Tandalla.

“You seem pleased with the orders.” Said Runa. “Not that I’m asking you to divulge the contents of the note.”

“Good that would be treason.” Said Dhūlen. “Muzzie has given me a little bitter medicine, then a little of something sweet. We’re to wait for someone....They might not be here for a while.”

Runa was still in her cart, which had travelled a fair distance with her inside it. Her barrel of arrows was now only half full and the rest of her arrows now pierced the bodies of dead enemy soldiers.

Two of those enemy soldiers had come perilously close to Dhūlen, so he was feeling very well disposed towards Runa. He filled two cups from a bottle in his backpack. Not that he ever carried his backpack. He had no less than four backpacks, all carried by members of his own personal guard.

“Here.....Not Ushong, Runa.” Said Dhūlen. “A good wine though, it’ll hit the right spot.”

“It might not mix well with the healing potions I’m taking.”

“Nonsense.....I insist you join me.....It is just a little wine.” Said Dhūlen.

“You really are very pleased with those orders.”

He leant in towards Runa and saw her smile. No, he was the emperor’s general. Leader of the army that followed emperor Osranetherer the first, or Muzzie as he was known to most. He wasn’t going to gossip about the orders, even if the tide of battle was about to drastically change. He pulled away from Runa and saw her smile turn into a frown.

“No, you’ll just have to be patient, Runa.” He said. “She’ll be here soon.”

“So.....We’re waiting for a woman ?” Asked Runa.

Dhūlen simply smiled and began writing an order of his own. Three field officers were about to curse him and think the orders were madness. They’d obey him though....There was a reason behind removing the heads of deserters and those who disobeyed orders. Dhūlen hadn’t sent many to the executioner and his axe, but he’d sent enough for the message to be clear. He never had to worry about his orders not being obeyed.

“Runner....I need a runner.” Dhūlen yelled.

A woman ran towards him, one of the wounded archers. A wounded arm, but a runner really just needed agility, speed and of course.....Strong legs. He had no idea who she was; there were now over a hundred and fifty thousand who served the new emperor. Personally he liked female runners. Quick on their feet and able to clamber over obstructions easier than most males.

“Name archer.....I want your name.” Said Dhūlen.

“Meg.....They call me Meg, my general.”

“There are three names on these orders, Meg.” Said Dhūlen. “Make sure all three say they understand the orders. Then you are to return to me.”

And his runner was gone, running past all the others waiting with him. Not just several runners and his own personal guard. There were two healers, a team of Dredgers to deal with things like barricades and even a small group of guild sorcerers. It was like a small version of a holy day during the feast of Nigon. There were others too, who Dhūlen didn't recognise or have any idea why they were part of his entourage.

“And now we wait.” Said Runa.

“As you say.....Now we wait.” Said Dhūlen.

Dhūlen filled his own cup with wine and despite her protestations, he filled Runa's too. He noticed that after saying it might affect the pain killing potions she'd been given, she drank the wine in large mouthfuls. Dhūlen then sat on the floor, rather than on one of the chairs someone had been carrying, in case they were needed. He liked to be lower than those around him, if he was waiting in hostile territory. In his view, and it had been based on experience; generals who insisted on being seen, were asking for an arrow in the back of the neck. He must have taken an involuntary nap.....

“She's here.....General !” Yelled Runa. “She's here.”

Estrin knew how to make an entrance. Easy for her to have appeared next to him, but she'd appeared quite some way from where he'd been waiting. By the time the living Goddess had reached him, there was a crowd around her, all cheering her arrival. Dhūlen wiped his face, to remove any signs that he'd been asleep. Drool was the worst; he seemed to drool more now he was older. One of the nine, was definitely worth smartening up for. Dhūlen straightened his armour and made sure his long sword was hanging correctly from his belt.

“Estrin.....Thank you for coming to help us.” Said Dhūlen.

“Muzzie mentioned that I could be of use.” Said Estrin. “Of course, I'm always pleased to help.” Why she'd suddenly decided to take an active part in the war ? Why the nine had obviously decided Muzzie had to become emperor of all the rifts ? It was a mystery, but Dhūlen knew better than to ask for, or even expect, an explanation. Some said the Genova moved in mysterious ways and they were nothing compared to the eccentricity of the nine.

“We're having trouble entering the ground entrance to the Shinning Towers.” Said Dhūlen. “The doors are strong, covered in protective magic.....And defended by powerful magic users. I was hoping you might be able to clear the way for my fighters.”

“Yes, General.....I'm sure I can clear a path for you.” Said Estrin. “Walk beside me, General.....Show me the problem.”

Was he covered by some kind of shield, if he walked next to Estrin ? Many in the army thought so and there was a lot of verbal evidence to back up the idea. There really did seem to be far fewer deaths among the warriors who were near her. Unsurprisingly, Estrin had a crowd around her, wherever she went. After a few minutes of walking through the ruined street of Quron, Estrin obviously noticed Runa being dragged over the rubble in a cart.

“Runa.....Forgive me, I just noticed.” Said Estrin. “Do you wish to be in this cart, or are your wounds still causing you problems ?”

Was it all an act ? To Dhūlen it seemed unlikely that one of the nine, who understood the workings of the multiverse; didn't realise Runa was still suffering from being wounded by the Quron assassins.

“The cart allows me to carry more arrows.” Said Runa. “On the whole though.....I would prefer to be healed and walking on my own two feet.”

“Then you shall be healed.” Said Estrin.

Estrin held Runa's hand, as Runa easily stepped out of the cart. It was all so subtle and low key, that the crowd didn't react. It was only when Runa was walking around quite normally, that a cheer went up. A healing that would become a miracle, by the time the story reached the stockade.

"For the nine.....for Muzzie." A warrior called out.

The call was taken up by many, as Dhūlen led Estrin to the lookout bunker, where scouts were watching the ground floor entrance to the famous Shinning Towers.

"There is a gap between the stones.....You can see the doors." Said Dhūlen. "The doors have been a choke point for our invasion of the city. The army has lost a lot of fighters trying to get inside the towers from below."

Really little more than a grubby hole in the ground. It seemed an insult to expect Estrin to even put up with conditions in the lookout bunker. She looked through the gap in the stones though, even tutting at things she saw and didn't like.

"Are there any of our people between here and the doors?" Asked Estrin.

Our people, Dhūlen liked her referring to his fighters as our people.

"Nethra and Dhali are in the high chambers in the largest tower." Said Dhūlen. "None of our people should be injured by destroying the doors."

"Stay here in the bunker, General." Said Estrin. "I will deal with the doors."

Not just the doors, there were armoured areas where dark magic users wove their spells. There were also groups of archers and although Quron archers were famous for not being that good, there were a lot of them. Add on the defenders further up the tower, dropping mists of fire on those below.....And Estrin had just walked out into hell. She was one of the nine though, she'd survive.

"Do we go with her?" Someone asked.

"No.....Estrin knows what she's doing." Said Dhūlen.

He could see her through the gap in the stones. There was Estrin, standing out in the open, completely alone. The arrows came at her, like a flock of birds. A mist of fire swept over her and actually caused the dry ground to melt and bubble. There'd be other spells too, invisible disruption spells and chaos magic strong enough to twist any living being into something unnatural. Estrin wasn't an ordinary living being though.

"They're just going to make her angry." Said General Dhūlen.

Estrin-Okanan greatest of all the nine Gods generally worshipped by the hybrids of the rifts, didn't even use hand gestures. Dhūlen watched her look up and then straight ahead. He was sure he saw her lips move, but he wasn't certain. There was nothing gradual about the sandstorm, that seemed to begin at the feet of the Goddess. By the time the billions of grains of sand hit the towers, they had to be travelling at an impossible speed. Not that anything was impossible for Estrin-Okanan.

"I knew it.....Now she's on our side, we can't lose." Said Dhūlen.

Just a sandstorm, but Dhūlen watched, as it stripped the flesh from the bodies of the dead. It hammered into the door and ripped them apart. No bunker was safe, no armour impervious to billions upon billions of grains of sand, moving at such incredible speed. When Estrin did point with her right hand, she pointed up. There were crashing sounds, as the sides of the towers buckled and fell apart. Hundreds of enemy defenders were pulled out of the towers, to be ripped apart by the sand storm. When it was over, the wind stopped in an instant. There was Estrin, looking straight at where Dhūlen crouched in his bunker. She was some distance away, but he heard her voice.

"You should be able to get inside the towers now, General." Said Estrin.

There would still be resistance and many defenders still left alive. Estrin had done all he'd asked though and the way into the towers was now open.

“You all know your orders.” Yelled Dhūlen. “I want everyone inside the towers, before the enemy have time to regroup. Everyone means everyone.....If they can walk and hold a sword, I want them with us.”

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Aeony had gone, after receiving what could best be called a whisper on the breeze. She and Muzzie had something meaningful going on. Faal wasn't surprised that she knew when he was in trouble. How the alarm call worked? Faal had no idea, but Aeony knew Muzzie was hurt and needed her. That meant Faal was left with Itet and about five dark angels, all wounded in some way.

“There is no way past the wall.....We have to leave here.” Said Itet.

Down to one or two spells, as long as they didn't require chaos magic. Faal knew the dark angels had less reserves of power than him. Things were desperate; they'd soon be unable to create lighting orbs. Being deep below the surface of Quron was bad enough, without being left in total darkness. How far down had they come? It had to be forty floors at least, maybe as many as fifty. Counting floors while fighting guards, had ruined his focus for such things.

“Let me have a last look at this damned wall.” Said Faal.

The floor was half the size of the one above and every other floor they'd fought their way through. Every piece of common sense and logic, said there was something beyond the wall. The wall itself looked to have been well constructed, out of black stone of some kind. Battering the wall had been tried and, of course, hadn't worked. It really did look like they'd have to give up and leave. Then the clerics of Quron, would no doubt move their legendary archive. Faal knew the door, in a very personal way. Only several millennia of time had stopped him recognising the style, the artistry of the magician who'd put the fake wall in place.

“Oh, he was good, but I can see the flaws in this fake wall.” Said Faal.

“Fake.....We tried to smash it with war axes.” Said Itet. “This wall is no more fake than I am.”

“Trust me.....The wall is my creation, though I don't remember creating it.” Said Faal. “I carried out the occasional commission for Quron. They paid well and although their gold isn't that pure, you can still spend it.”

“Really, Faal.....You created this wall?” Asked a dark angel.

“I did and I find your disbelief a little insulting.” Said Faal.

“No insult was intended.”

“Does that help us?” Asked Itet. “Can you remember any weaknesses in the fake wall?”

“Ahhh, I can do better than a flaw.” Said Faal. “I always put in.....Let's call it a backdoor. Just in case the client never paid their bill, or their gold turned out to be mostly an alloy of tin. The client always had their own verbal key to get past the door, but my backdoor will still be there.”

Faal leant his forehead against the door, roughly halfway along its length. The position wasn't that crucial, but it helped to get it right. Not a complex key phrase, Faal liked to keep things simple, if they were to be remembered for thousands of years. He'd used the same back door phrase for a great number of such fake doors.

“Yesakna Ownerd.” He muttered, which was good morning in the Ushong language.

“Wow.....I'll admit it, Faal.....I'm impressed.” Said Itet. “New problem though; how do we carry all of this out of here.”

“Hmmm.....Let me think about it.” Said Faal.

The wall had vanished, to reveal what had the look of an everyday library. Though most of the books laid on the shelves, were far from ordinary. Old and ancient knowledge from the current time and

worlds long gone. All of that forbidden knowledge had been etched onto metal plates, which would last forever. There were a lot of shelves and a huge number of metal books.

“Pinthrad.....Someone needs to find Pinthrad.” Said Faal.

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