

## The Last Emperor

### Chapter 17 – Faal The Lucky

**“There were legends of holy relics hidden in the Necropolis and one or two valuable artefacts. Mostly nonsense of course, but one item in particular had been known to exist and the priest wearing it had vanished into the City of the Dead.”**



Maya was having the occasional whispered conversation with Galla’s pet, but there was no doubt about it. They were being led through the Necropolis by Bird. Runa understood the relationship between Bird and the Silver Lady; she knew it was a powerful deity who was leading them deep into the depths of the Necropolis.

According to Caspian’s book there was only one lower level to the Terak City of the Dead, but they were about to use the third set of steps leading down. Galla’s crystal too, had scanned the entire Necropolis without seeing the lower levels. It was alarming, to be taken into parts of the City of the Dead, which shouldn’t have been there. They might encounter anything including a few dozen of the undead. The stairs were of the same stone as the rest of the building and were a bit too widely spaced for Runa’s usual pace. She slowed down and took longer, but slower steps. Nearly at the bottom and there was light coming from the room beyond. It was the first artificial light they’d seen. Maya grabbed her arm.

“Turn off your lamp.....Or they will see it.” Whispered the girl. “These two are injured, but still very dangerous.”

“How do you know ?” Asked Runa.

“Bird knows.....She tells him.”

A large hall beyond the stairs, again in the ubiquitous red stone. Red everywhere, even the glowing light orbs were giving off red light. The Terak of old, Dhūlen’s ancestors, must have had eyes originally evolved for a very different kind of world. They came out onto a wide and well-lit balcony, which had another entrance of the other side of the hall. The light didn’t suit Runa’s eyes, but she could still see reasonably well. In the hall and about forty feet below the balcony, were two of the undead. Not moving, they both looked to have been involved in a battle, or maybe many battles. Twisted legs, burned arms, deep chest wounds. It had probably all happened long ago. Did the undead fully heal ? It definitely seemed unlikely. Bird was on Maya’s shoulder, whispering into her ear.

“He says you need to use your silver arrows.” Muttered Maya. “Kill them both, before they notice us.”

Of course the two undead had their backs to her. Was it all part of a test to see how well aligned with chaos she was ? Out of all the possibilities the Necropolis had in terms of dangers and risks, it had to be two badly injured undead, with their backs towards her. Runa strung her bow, took a silver arrow from her quiver and.....Hesitated. Bird became agitated and there was more whispering to Maya. Runa was beginning to dislike their strange double act. Maya had to stretch up to place her mouth against Runa’s ear.

“You need to do it, Runa.” Whispered Maya. “Kill them, or they will.....Most assuredly, kill us.”

No wind and the likely drop was in her favour. Down forty feet and about thirty feet away, a pretty perfect bit of target practise. A head shot again, she knew that would kill the undead, eventually. Runa hated doing it; though she was pleased when the arrow hit the back of the brute's head. The least injured of the two, it made sense to kill him first. Him ? For all she knew, all undead might have once been female, or even androgynous. They didn't mate, everyone knew that. Creatures created by chaos, out of those who'd lived in the dark places, often for many millennia. It screeched as her arrow melted away most of its head. No eyes left, yet it spun around and seemed to know where its enemy was located.

"The other.....Don't forget the other one." Said Maya.

Runa pulled another silver arrow from her quiver, but the undead creature she'd just left almost headless, was grabbing her attention. Its voice came from its throat and it could still shriek. It yelled and ran at a wall, bouncing off it. It ran again and once again, bounced back off the wall, to land in a heap on the red stone floor. After about its fourth attempt to run through the wall, Runa realised it was trying to get at her, the enemy firing lethal arrows. The wall was about the right direction and of course, the brute now had no eyes. Silence now seemed unimportant and Maya was yelling at her.

"The other one.....You need to kill the other one." Shouted Maya.

Bird was all about self-preservation, something Runa could identify with. He's flown back to the stairs and was squawking at her from about the fifth step.

"Stupid Runa.....Kill the other one." Bird screeched.

Runa grabbed Maya hard by the shoulder, deliberately hurting the girl a little. Pain would make her listen and it might just save her life.

"Go to Bird.....Stay with Bird." Yelled Runa. "If I die.....Run. Do you understand ?"

"Yes.....I understand."

Poor kid, she looks so upset.....Back on six legs, Maya ran towards Bird like the wind. There was a lot of noise, so many shrieks and yells, but Runa heard when the headless undead creature stopped yelling. It had to be a time thing, something that ran out, or simply stopped once it had no brain linking everything together. It was lying on the floor, its legs still twitching slightly.

"Who would create such monsters.....It's madness." Runa muttered.

There was a handrail along the side of the balcony. Runa leant against it, to steady her aim at the second of the undead. So far it hadn't moved, or made a sound. It was on its feet though and assumed to be alive. It was the one with two deep wounds in the back of its upper body. No blood, but its exposed organs seemed to shine slightly under the red lights.

"Personally.....I think I'm doing you a favour." Muttered Runa.

It knew, she'd have sworn to it on the Chaos Nagoria, the great holy book. Like the first one to die, it turned to look straight at its enemy, her. This one had eyes though, the darkest of black eyes she'd ever seen. Magic had created the undead, probably chaos magic from a time long past. There was a tiny bit of magic still in the brute's dark eyes, as it began to shriek at her. Runa saw the tiniest glint of red in those eyes, just as she fired one of her precious silver arrows. Nerves perhaps, her aim was off. The arrow took off the brute's left ear, before burying itself in the wall.

"Fuck." Muttered Runa.

It ran under the balcony and into the wall behind her, she heard the noise of its body hitting a stone wall. Runa had nothing to aim an arrow at, as she heard the undead brute hit the wall for a second time. Her brain wanted to give in to panic, but her military upbringing had its uses. She wasn't going to give up and run for the stairs. Bird wanted to go the way they were heading, which meant it was

important to the Silver Lady. That implied it was important to Muzzie's destiny as emperor. Maya was edging away from the stairs and back towards her.

"Back.....Back towards Bird." Yelled Runa.

The brute bellowed her hit the wall again and the noise was different, like pushing something across a gritty floor. Hidden doors, of course there were hidden doors. The undead she'd blinded stood no chance of finding one, but the one still alive had eyes. It had found what it was looking for and had to be hurtling through unlit passageways to reach her. How many had already perished from meeting the creature, their bones long since turned to nothing but dust? Hundreds maybe, or thousands.....Runa was determined not to be just another victim of the undead.

"There are hidden doors, Maya." She shouted. "Get back up the stairs.....Hide if you can."

It was a childish trick really, something Runa had used a few times as a teenager. A quick spoken cantrip, with a finger movement and you'd fall like a feather for a minute or two. Runa had used it on her first adult birthday. She'd floated down the stairs of her family home and everyone had agreed.....She'd made an impressive entrance to the party.

"Please work." She mumbled.

No time to test it, Runa spoke the words, made the gesture and jumped off the balcony. Forty feet onto a solid stone floor, it was a good job the cantrip worked. Runa had a little forward movement from the jump and landed close to where her silver arrow was jammed into the wall. A wobble and it came loose.....Hardened silver, it looks as good as new. A little dry dead tissue from the ear of the undead, but otherwise it looked perfect. Its magical destructive capabilities were triggered by something to do with the life force of the undead.....Galla knew it all, but to Runa most of it was gobbledegook. She trusted Galla though and prepared to use the precious arrow for a second time. There was the sound of another door being barged open. It was on its way. Runa knew Nigon was gone, boiled away into the void. It didn't stop her offering a quick prayer for his protection.

"As my mother used to say.....It can't hurt, Runa.....It can't hurt."

The undead brute came from an entrance on the far left of the balcony. Difficult to tell if it was surprised not to find her, but it began to shriek very loudly. It came to the rail on the balcony and when it saw her, the shrieking became deafening. It was going to jump, clambering up onto the rail and leaning forward. As it jumped, Runa fired the silver arrow. Too quick to aim at the head, especially on a moving target. As it jumped, Runa went for a body shot, aiming at where most hybrids had a beating heart. Dead tissue on an undead of course, but could it exist without a chest? "Wow.....Time for Caspian to update the ancient records." She muttered.

Its chest had instantly festered, melted and turned in a revolting looking liquid. There was the stench of decay too, as though the flesh had been rotting for a very long time. Its arms moved, its teeth impotently gnashed at her. The legs too, looked to be trying to reach her. With no upper torso though, the brute was going nowhere. She heard Maya, as the Dredger child looked over the rail.

"Is it dead?" Asked Maya.

"Not sure if these things are ever truly dead." Said Runa. "I'd say it's harmless now, unless you get too close to its teeth. Stay there, Maya.....I'll come to you."

Through the door the creature had barged open and Runa used another simple cantrip she'd learned from.....Galla of course, now she thought about it, Galla had taught her quite a few simple spells. Things useful and perhaps Galla had intended to make Runa's teens a little more fun. A glamour to turn her hair a different colour and the ability to open most things that were locked. Oh dear, that one had got her into trouble. Runa used a simple light cantrip and a yellow light appeared a little in front of her. Not that bright, but it would do to see her way through the narrow passage.

“Galla.....Your simple spells might have saved my life today.” She mumbled.

There was a certain smell in the passageway. It reminded her of when the city council had decided to clear out the sewers in the Old Section of the City of the Lost God. One of the engineers in charge had mentioned that ‘even after a thousand year, the shit of the dead still stinks.’

“Gorshan was bad enough, but this.....Next time, I hope Muzzie chooses somewhere nice.” She muttered.

Several rooms crossed the passageway and it was easy to see where the undead creature had crashed through at least two heavy doors. Eventually Runa found herself on the other side of the balcony, with Maya still looking over the rail. Bird was with her of course whispering into the child’s ear. That worried Runa, even if the Silver Lady did seem to be on their side.

“Maya.....I’m over here.” Yelled Runa.

Like children caught being naughty, Bird sprang away from Maya. Runa was going to have a quiet word with Galla. There was something going on that made her uncomfortable.

“Yes, this is the way.” Said Maya. “Not far now, just one more floor down and we’ll be there.”

“Talk to me, Maya....Where are we risking our lives to go ?”

Again, the girl looked at Bird, as if asking permission.

“Faal is waiting for us.....You’ll see.” Said Maya.

“Faal the lucky.....Some call him.” Said Bird.

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Muzzie was the one being given directions in his mind, even though he had no idea where from. The Silver Lady had been his first thought, though there was something about the way the directions were being given. Too frantic, with definite undertones of mild panic. Then there was the coarseness of some of the comments when he and his guards went the wrong way. Nothing to get anyone executed by an angry emperor, just coarse. As Muzzie watched his warriors lift Galla’s cart over a pile of rubble, he’d decided the voice in his head was either the onset of madness, or him, the magician Faalrh Ha’adask. Supposedly dead, but Muzzie had begun to realise that death for a magician, didn’t necessarily impair their career or usefulness.

‘Leave the dreadful creature.....She’s useless.’ Said the voice.

No use replying, the conversation seemed to be one way only. Muzzie hadn’t totally ruled out insanity, but the directions seemed too good to be coming from his own booze addled subconscious. Galla was in a fairly small cart, the kind used by builders and tradespeople. Not hard for his guard to push or carry. To the disembodied voice in his head though, Galla and her cart were slowing things down. There was a lot of moaning in his head, but no directions being given. He stopped and had a good look around.

“Everything is red.....The Terak seemed to have no imagination.” Said Muzzie.

“Their eyes, Muzzie” Said Galla. “Like some desert creatures, the Terak could only see the colour red.”

“So General Dhūlen can only see in red light ?” Asked Aeony.

“No, of course not.....He’s a hybrid, Aeony.” Said Galla.

Galla used a tone of voice that indicated she was a little fed up with stupid questions. Sad really, as the day was still a long way from being over. Definitely Faal in his head, yet again cursing Galla for delaying his rescue. It seemed Faalrh Ha’adask was happy to be taken away from the Necropolis and the sixth rift. A bit of a relief, as Muzzie had never enjoyed fighting powerful magicians. He’d nearly been killed on a few such occasions and invariably had a new scar or two.

'Forward, straight across the courtyard.' Muttered Faal in his head. 'Careful.....There is one of them there, one of the undead. A tough one, I sense it has killed many.'

"This way.....Through the doorway and into the courtyard." Yelled Muzzie. "Watch out for the undead, they seem to favour being outside."

They'd already fought two of the undead and Muzzie had lost one of his guards and two others had deep wounds. They didn't seem to feed, but the brutes could inflict nasty, grubby wounds with their teeth. The favouring the outside detail, was one of the most useful tips he'd received from Faal.

'Your guards are a bit slow.' Muttered Faal.

Muzzie really wanted to thank Faal for his help, before punching him hard, right in the face. The Silver Lady wanted the magician, but she probably wouldn't mind him turning up a little bruised and bloody. Faal was so damned irritating and there seemed to be no way to silence the yappy, whining voice in his head.

"Undead.....Undead." Yelled one of his personal guard.

Still some way off, the undead was pulling itself out of a mound of red dust. Of course it was red dust; everything on the sixth rift was red. They were learning a lot about the undead. Galla was constantly scribbling notes into her journal. Why they preferred to be outside though and why they buried themselves in the dust dunes? Both of those were likely to remain a mystery. His guard were between him and the enemy, which looked less tatty and battle damaged than the last one they'd fought. Muzzie was unlikely to get a chance to use sword and shield against the brute. That was the job of his guards, almost their reason to exist.

"I'll help them." Said Aeony.

Muzzie had spells granted by the bone in his belt and Galla had her lethal powders. It was accepted though, that they should both let his personal guard deal with the occasional undead they came across. Aeony was different though, his fighters treated her as one of them.....A brutal and skilled warrior.

'Runa and the child have arrived.' Faal put into his mind.

That wasn't good news; Muzzie had promised Maya's mother that he'd look after her daughter. Runa was tough and Bird was there to watch everything. It wasn't a total disaster, but no one really knew what Faal was like. He might well be a homicidal crazy guy. The Silver Lady wasn't famous for mixing with the stable and sane.

"Get it done !" Shouted Muzzie. "Hack it to pieces, we need to hurry."

Pressure them a little and his warriors achieved wonders. There had to be a lesson there somewhere. Aeony stabbed the undead creature a few times, but it was his guard who really did, hack it into small pieces. It seemed a good method, though two of his guard had fresh and nasty looking bites. The top half of the brute's head was intact, the eyes following Aeony, as she walked past.

"These things are the work of a madman." Said Muzzie.

"You'll get no argument from me about that." Said Galla.

Dhūlen and the army were elsewhere, accompanied by Caspian and Vella. Officially they were systematically clearing the Necropolis of the undead. Not that anyone before had been able to kill them all. Some would survive and others would arrive from the various catacombs and places of darkness. Unofficially, Caspian and Vella hoped to find one or two of the enchanted artefacts that were supposed to have been hidden somewhere in the City of the Dead. There was something irresistible about treasure hunting and no doubt, Dhūlen was more than happy to help them.

'Straight on.....Straight on.' Said Faal.

Straight on meant more steps down to yet another deep level of the Necropolis. Galla had mentioned several times that just about all the lower levels had been hidden by powerful magic. Incredibly powerful wards, put in place by someone with almost unimaginable power.

".....someone powerful placed these wards." She'd told him. "Someone dangerous.....Bound to be, some of the Gods themselves, couldn't hide such a huge area."

Which should have made Muzzie nervous, but it didn't. Win or lose now and his name would become a legend. Muzzie the bar keeper would be the subject of hundreds of songs, written by dozens of bards. He wasn't as young as he once was and death had come close to claiming him, on numerous occasions. He didn't want to die, no one does. If it came he'd meet it with a drawn sword, but he was ready if things ended badly. They'd come to the balcony and the two undead Runa's arrows had killed. Could the undead be permanently killed? Was it even sensible to talk about killing something that was undead? The two partly destroyed bodies meant they probably could.

"Leave them!" Yelled Muzzie. "We'll collect their bodies on the way out. Knowing what killed them may be useful knowledge."

"I'd guess Runa passed this way." Said Galla. "I can smell the unguent I used to fill her silver arrows." The next steps were steep and even the strongest of his warriors, had trouble getting Galla and her cart down to the bottom. At one point it looked as though Galla might fall from her cart, but Aeony plucked the apothecary out and carried her to the bottom of the stone steps. The cart arrived safely quite some time later.

"I'll walk while I can.....It might be safer." Muttered Galla.

Some of the guard looked embarrassed, but they had been very steep and narrow stairs.

'Straight on.....Always straight on. You're not far from where I've waited since.....It feels like I've been waiting since the rifts were young.' From Faal.

A long dark passage that required extra lights to be lit. The floor was covered in rubble that reminded Muzzie of Gorshan. Not just rubble, there were the still recognisable bones of quite a few hybrid warriors.

"We're not the first to come looking for Faal the great and mighty." Said Aeony.

"I hope we succeed and our bones don't join these poor dead fools." Said Galla.

No one had ever accused Galla of sugar coating her words. She was right though.....Something had killed those who'd come looking for Faal the magician. That something might have gone away, or it might be waiting for them. Muzzie held up his hand and everyone came to a halt.

'No.....So close, Muzzie.....Don't stop.'

"Use your crystal, Galla." Said Muzzie. "I need a little reassurance.....Tell me we're not walking into a trap."

"There are powerful wards here." Said Galla. "Any result is likely to be flawed."

"Do your best old friend.....Do your best."

Muzzie could ignore the advice if he wanted to, like Galla's warning about overdoing his use of pure chaos. All the spells granted by the Hand of Arcadis were heavy on using chaos energy. He'd learned how to generate the spells slowly, while keeping them hidden from prying eyes, mainly Galla's prying eyes. Sometimes the most annoying people you knew, were those trying to control you.....For your own good. Muzzie started to build three enormously powerful destructive spells, as Galla looked into her flawless crystal sphere.

"I think you're right. Muzzie." Said Galla. "There is one extra hidden level, inside this hidden level. Something is in there, keeping itself in a shadow of darkness. Sentient, I can feel a mind. Imagine

being hidden away for thousands upon thousands of year.....And still being aware. It might have been driven insane by the experience.”

“Can you break the wards that hide it ?” Asked Aeony.

“No need.....Walk forward a few more feet and a trap will open the wards.” Said Galla. “I’m assuming that whatever is being hidden, will try to kill us.....All of us.”

“It can try.” Muttered Aeony.

His guard prepared for battle, it really was what they lived for. Muzzie carried on letting the destructive spells build. In his mind he saw a vague image of something huge, a creature the size of a town. It was burning, as its multiple legs thrashed wildly. Only a guide to what the spell could do, but Muzzie liked it, a lot. He carried on waiting, until his fighters looked ready for battle.

“Aeony.....Please walk forward and set off the trap.” He said.

“My pleasure.”

Galla had a packet in her hand and Muzzie guessed it contained the powder that could kill anything, even if it wasn’t considered to be mortal. It was reassuring to know that if death claimed him, Galla’s famous powder would probably throw his killer into the wastes of eternity. There was no wondering about when Aeony had walked across the trap.

“Bones, as far as I can see.” Said Aeony. “Thousands have died here, Muzzie. I can even see the bones of one of my sisters. A dark angel came here to search this dreadful place. She died here and I am duty bound to avenge her.”

“You probably won’t have long to wait.” Said Muzzie.

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It had been a while since Vella had fought beside fighters she didn’t know. Even when she and Caspian had explored the flooded cellars deep below the library in the City of the lost God, she’d always know something about those they travelled with. Merrick’s friends usually, or people he knew would use their fighting skills for a fee. Mercenaries really, though Vella didn’t think of that term as an insult. Everyone on the rifts sold what skills they possessed.....Whatever it took to get a little food on the table. Now though, she’d fought beside one of Muzzie’s army, who’d had his throat bitten out by one of the undead. He was dead and she hadn’t even known his name. The bloody remains would go on a cart and be buried in the more wholesome ground near their camp at the Void Gate. Would there be a wife waiting for him among the camp followers ? A girlfriend perhaps, maybe children ? To Vella it seemed terrible that she didn’t know.

“Mohr was his name; I knew you’d want to know.” Said Caspian. “I asked his line officer and there’s a wife to grieve him, but no children.”

“Thank you, that helps.” Said Vella. “The sad thing is.....By the time we’re outside the walls of Quron, it’ll have all become so much easier to deal with.”

“We’re in the empire building business.” Said Caspian. “Yes, many will die.....Most of the army will live though and be far more wealthy than they ever imagined. They’ll die of old age, surrounded by happy, plump grandchildren.”

“Hopefully lots of plump grandchildren.” Said Vella. “Thank you, Casp.....I needed to hear that.”

She kissed his cheek and wondered if she looked as filthy and caked in blood that wasn’t hers. It wasn’t that there were huge numbers of the undead, but they were incredibly fast, strong and difficult to kill. Not that losing the occasional comrade was affecting morale. If anything it seemed to spur the army on to take vengeance on the creatures. General Dhūlen came out of a small chamber, barely a hole in a stone wall. He didn’t look happy, but he rarely did. There were legends of holy relics hidden in the Necropolis and one or two valuable artefacts. Mostly nonsense of course, but

one item in particular had been known to exist and the priest wearing it had vanished into the City of the Dead.

“Oh, that face again.....I hope he finds the Misery of Mosca.” Said Casp. “It might cheer him up a little.”

“He just wants to sell it.....Worth a fortune according to Galla.” Said Vella.

The Misery of Mosca was a ring, a ring made of twisted gold and hardened silver. Reasonably valuable when made, though just an ordinary ring with no enchantments. At some point in time a holy woman had died while wearing the ring. No one remembers her name and for a while, no one realised that something of the holy woman, had become part of the ring. The ring might have ended up in a drawer, or in a display case, never to be worn again. A visiting priest had seen the ring almost by accident; the exact details are lost in time. Many artefacts have lost memories associated with them, or the famous ‘no one really knows.’ Such vagueness can help increase the price of the vast majority of fake, or dubious artefacts. Very difficult to authenticate something with a long and confusing provenance. Not that there was anything fake about the ring, which the priest decided to slip on his finger that day.....Though no one is now sure of the date.

Mosca was the name of the priest, though he probably had a full name and some kind of title. Everyone seems to agree that he was an ordinary hybrid, the usual high level of Dredger in his ancestry. If Mosca had ever shown any sign of being special in any way, no one could later remember it. He’d been a quite unassuming priest at a tiny wooden temple in Avald, a thriving community at the northern edge of the first rift. Being ordinary, quiet and unassuming didn’t last long, once Mosca had begun to wear the ring.

The ring later to be known as the Misery of Mosca, granted the wearer empathy, almost total empathy with anyone under their gaze. Not just an insight into their moods, or their anxieties. Mosca was to tell a friend that it felt like stripping everything away, so that he could see their soul. Once Mosca had made a few insightful comments about the regulars in his temple, the numbers coming to see him grew. After he’d identified a murderer and taken the Avald militia to the grave of his victim, the crowds had become too large to fit into the simple wooden temple. Not that Mosca was a happy priest, he’d told a few senior members of his temple, that looking into so many evil souls was torture.

It was Mosca the priest who began calling the ring his misery. By then the town council of Avald had built him a large temple out of the best imported stone. By the time Mosca was telling friends he wished he’d never put on the ring, it was too late. His fame had spread, some of it no doubt was nonsense, but his empathy skills really were well authenticated and genuine. Ten years after first using the ring, Mosca announced that his misery had been stolen. Later it became obvious that the priest had buried the ring somewhere, but couldn’t stand being parted from it. No one understood the turmoil in Mosca’s head, not even his closest friends. One day he was wearing the ring again and it was assumed he’d dug up the ring, his personal misery.

Many years later and the temple at Avald had become the finest and wealthiest temple on the first rift. Tens of thousands came to simply see Mosca recite the holy words at full light and the arrival of full darkness, each day. Some say Avald still hasn’t recovered from their famous priest vanishing. He’d scrawled a strange and crazy note on the wall of his home, saying that there was only one way to escape his misery. The journey to the sixth rift took Mosca several years; many remembered the priest as he’d crossed the rifts. He’d joined a party of adventurers and survived ‘the tumble’ to get to the sixth rift. Many of the adventurers remembered the priest saying he was going to enter the



Necropolis and had no intention of leaving it. As far as anyone knew, he's taken the ring with him, his misery.

"Nothing else for it." Said Dhūlen. "We'll wait for the advance scouts to return. Then we'll go to the centre of the Necropolis. If I was Mosca that's where I'd have taken the ring.....Into the central nexus."

"The most dangerous part of the entire City of the Dead." Said Vella.

"Even Galla's crystal couldn't penetrate the darkness there." Said Caspian.

Stopping an army wasn't a quick business and getting it moving again was an even more time consuming practise. By the time the scouts returned and the inevitable meal had been consumed.....An hour later Nethra arrived and they still weren't completely ready to take the army deeper into the Necropolis. There could be no doubt about it; Nethra was a creature of chaos, born out of the fire and darkness. The sixth rift loved her, giving her massive amounts of power and strength. Her tiny wings took her through the foul smelling air at speed and she'd mentioned being able to stay in the air all day, if she needed to. Vella felt envious of her friend, soaring over them with her purple wings. Vella was looking forward to leaving the sixth rift, but Nethra was going to miss her new strength. Nethra landed close to her and had the look.....The sad eyes and torn clothing of someone who'd seen battle that day.....

"I see the army is beginning to move." Said Nethra. "Where are you going?"

"General Dhūlen thinks the Misery of Mosca will be in the central nexus." Said Caspian.

"All you'll find there is death.....I had to fight five of the undead for these." Said Nethra. "Three of them I left as nothing but piles of dry dust. The other two I burned with fire and their limbs still twitch. This isn't a place where you go deeper into its dark and evil heart."

Nethra had two rings in her hand, both of them covered in millennia of dirt and grime. Gold doesn't tarnish, but silver does. Both rings obviously contained quite a lot of silver, which had badly corroded. She held her hand out, as though giving them a choice.

"I travelled fast and looked in the kind of places I'd have used to hide my personal misery.....There may be other rings in the Necropolis, but one of these is Mosca's ring, I can feel its energy. Which would you choose?"

"I have no idea, they both look worthless." Said Casp.

"Worthless he says." Said Nethra. "One of these is worth a few copper coins. The other.....That is worth as much gold as ten strong men could carry. Your choice Vella, can you feel which of these rings brings misery to its owner?"

"I can, I felt it the instant you opened your hand." Said Vella. "It's the really filthy looking one near your thumb. It looks worthless, but holds.....So much power."

"Ahh, you're right dear Vella, there must be an empath among your female ancestors." Said Nethra.

"Dhūlen will be unhappy." Said Casp. "I get the distinct idea that he's already planned how he'd spend the gold it would fetch from the right buyer."

"Muzzie's general isn't a poor man, he'll survive." Said Nethra. "Merrick and I have known better years; the gold will be very useful. I might even give Galla first choice at buying the ring."

"Are you sure?" Asked Vella. "I hate to think Galla might be hurt by it, like the priest."

"You must have noticed, Galla is misery on legs most days." Said Nethra. "She's tough and has lived long enough to amass sufficient wisdom to use the ring. If she can afford it, she'll be fine."

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Galla had no idea she was the subject of Nethra's comments, though she was aware of her reputation of being a bit of a misery, on a bad day. She was looking at the many and varied bones of

the dead in the long and wide hallway. Some of the dead didn't look to have been there for that long. Mainly bones, with no festering tissues left.....It was their clothing, what survived looked fairly contemporary.

"I knew adventurers still came here in search of treasure." Said Galla. "The numbers though.....I suppose it proves that there are still fools who believe fame and fortune awaits them on the sixth rift."

"Isn't that why we're here?" Asked Aeony. "Personally, I can't see anything wrong with a little fame and fortune. Life would be pretty dull without it."

Strangely, no one saw the creature guarding the hallway, until it made a loud gurgling sound and spat a thick stream of phlegm in their direction. Too far away for its phlegm to reach them, but it felt as though war had been declared. A giant slime covered monster with red skin, which was why it had to move before anyone noticed it. It reminded Galla of the small amphibian creatures who inhabited ponds in the farmland areas of the first rift. Larger than them though, much, much larger.

Squat.....Yes, that best described the way it looked. Squat, with tiny arms and huge rear legs. A brute designed for swimming and jumping, had been altered to be the guardian of the passage. Someone, probably a magician, had given it teeth and claws that looked out of place. It kept spitting phlegm, which was hitting the floor closer to them. The phlegm bubbled and hissed as it landed on the stone floor.

"I've seen a few created chimeras." Said Aeony. "This one though.....Wins first prize for being ugly." "I'm wondering if Runa and Maya survived.....They were heading this way." Said Muzzie.

"They could have passed this way unmolested." Said Galla. "Like fishing nets, some traps have holes to let the tiddlers pass through. Bird is alive; I'd know it he'd died in this dreadful place."

Galla felt a little sorry for Muzzie, though he did deserve it. Set yourself up as some kind of infallible emperor and people will expect you to be.....Infallible. Every face was turned his way, though Aeony asked the question.

"So, Muzzie.....Any ideas on getting rid of this thing?"

"I have a spell ready that will probably kill it." Said Muzzie. "The problem is that it's likely to bring the ceiling down on us and the rooms above us. Galla, how about one of your famous powders?"

"Yes, my powder will definitely kill it." Said Galla. "Delivery is the problem; I really need my pet bird. I'm not fast on my feet these days and the liquid the creature spits would appear to be highly corrosive. I hate to mention it, but only one of us has the ability to fly."

Galla hated pointing the finger at Aeony, especially as all dark angels were known to hold a grudge for a staggering number of years. It was the only way though, to deliver the powder to the chimera that spat acid.

"Fine.....Give me the powder and a few instructions on using it." Said Aeony.

"Here, just empty it over the brute and.....Don't get any on yourself." Said Galla.

Galla carefully removed the top of the envelope and gave it Aeony. Handling the most powerful of her lethal powders, even made Galla nervous. She knew that the tiniest speck of the powder, could kill.

"I'll be careful." Said Aeony.

Maybe the creature hadn't been really trying. Maybe it decided to give its phlegm an extra special hard squirt. It hit two of Muzzie's guard with the corrosive, sticky liquid. One was only hit a little and quickly removing his contaminated armour was enough to stop any real damage. Others were quick to wipe any spots from his skin. The other guard wasn't so fortunate; the acid covered him from

head to foot. Quickly, his armour melted with his flesh, leaving just his bones on the floor. The pool of acid around his bones was still covered in the bubbling, foul smelling phlegm.

“Kill it, Aeony.....Before it kills anyone else.” Yelled Muzzie.

Galla watched as Aeony flew straight at the acid spewing brute. Twice it spat phlegm at her and Aeony looked to have been hit by the awful stuff. But no, Aeony flew on, right over the top of the brute. Too far away to see her hands, but she had to have scattered the powder over the chimera.

“It’s melting, like ice on a hot day.” Said Muzzie.

“Some melt, some become dust.....They all die.” Said Galla.

Few had witnessed the effect of her most powerful powders. Galla instinctively knew that using them too often, was likely to draw the attention of those best left alone. Her most lethal powder was a last resort, for times when her own life was at risk, or the life of their new emperor. The guards would talk though and by the time they were back at the Void Gate, everyone would have fresh respect for her skills.

“Come.....It may take a while to melt away to nothing.” Said Muzzie. “I think we can safely say it won’t be hurting anyone else.”

Galla wasn’t sure if she agreed, but she was becoming concerned about Runa, Maya and her annoying pet bird. The dying chimera made the gurgling sound as they went past it, but didn’t move. There was a dreadful smell coming from its melting body, as though it was instantly decaying.

“Your powders are.....Impressive.” Said Aeony.

“Stay alert.....There might be more than one of them.” Said Muzzie.

If there was, they never came across it. The passage narrowed again and curved around to the right. Through several open holes in walls where there had probably once been doors.....And Galla found herself looking at a wall created by a skilful manipulator of pure chaos.

“It shimmers.....How do we get through it ?” Asked Aeony.

It was nice that Aeony was looking at her and not Muzzie, though Galla knew her few moments of fame wouldn’t last long. The army would win another battle and Muzzie would once again, be considered infallible. The wall was dark grey, though the shimmers were bright blue.

“This will be easy, I just have to.....” Said Galla.

Such walls were created to stop soldiers, those with no magical ability. Or it had been placed there to stop the undead from slaughtering those beyond the wall. Galla snapped her fingers and spoke a single line, the most basic dispelling cantrip. The wall vanished.

“Careful.....I sense much dark magic in this chamber.” Said Galla.

“It’s Maya.” Shouted Aeony.

A large and mostly dark chamber, with just two dull lamps which gave out a pale yellow light. There was a smell to the chamber, the odour of long unwashed bodies and excrement. Galla had visited a few prisoners in her many years on the rifts and the chamber had the stench of a prison. Runa came forward to meet them, almost pulling an elderly man with her.

“This is him.....We found him.” Said Runa. “This is Faal the great and mighty.”

“I am lucky.....Faal the lucky.” Said Faal. “I’m very lucky.....Extra lucky.”

“That’s all he keeps saying.” Said Runa. “I think he’s been here so long.....It’s had a bad effect on him.”

“He’s totally crazy.” Added Maya.

“Stupid Faal.” Said Bird.

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