

## The Last Emperor

### Chapter 32 – Dhali The Weapon

**“Strangely, Vella didn’t know the exact number of floors in the Towers. Hard to count from below, and some large windows crossed more than one floor. It had been a game when she was a child. Vella and most of her school friends had decided that there were sixteen floors, though some insisted there were eighteen. One thing was certain……At the top there was a long bridge going from the Towers, to the Dome and the Great Library.”**



General Dhūlen knew that he’d been a little careless with his words. He’d been overheard when talking to a friend, or the friend had repeated it back to the new emperor. There were also some in the army who had incredibly good hearing. For all he knew it might have been Galla’s pet. The damned bird still seemed to fly anywhere and everywhere it chose. In some way Muzzie had heard his general was no longer loyal. It was the only explanation for him not being included in the regular sessions with the eight advisers. Ridiculous really, that Runa now knew plans that the general leading the army, didn’t. Not that Dhūlen was worried; he was too valuable to face an executioner’s axe. He was determined to not only win the battle for the City of the Lost God; he was going to make sure he was seen as the victorious leader of the army. When Muzzie fell, Dhūlen was still confident that the army would proclaim him as the emperor they wanted……

“I hadn’t expected a huge amount of resistance……But none at all.” Said Faal. “Not that I’m complaining, but it is……Unexpected.”

“There are fires everywhere, including the upper floors of the Towers.” Said Runa. “It looks to me as though the militia guarding the road from the south, are now busy elsewhere.”

“I can see a few overturned waggons.” Said Dhūlen. “We’ll use the original plan with archers giving cover to the assault team.”

Dhūlen didn’t think he was being given an undefended part of the city by Muzzie, to rob him of a victory. As a plan it might well have backfired, and Muzzie wasn’t like that. Muzzie wanted one thing above all others, to take the city of his birth by conquest. He often sounded as though that meant more than taking Quron and being crowned emperor in Leng.

“Alright if I join your archers ?” Asked Runa.

“Of course……I’ve seen you use a bow.” Said Dhūlen.

Faal joined the assault team, as though it was all some kind of game. Just about the middle of the night, when even the ultraviolet wash wasn’t that bright. There was Runa ready to use her bow in the dark, while Faal had a short sword and no armour at all. If they both died Muzzie would blame him of course.

“Slow and steady.” Yelled Dhūlen. “Check every waggon and then torch it. Leave nothing to chance.”

The assault team had no problem with the gateways, they’d long since ceased to have any actually gates. The main road went past Winshin’s store and there was an empty waggon outside the store. No cover over the waggon, it looked harmless enough. Harmless until half a dozen archers inside it, began to attack the assault team. The fires in the city were giving them some light, but it was also helping Runa and Dhūlen’s archers.

“That girl, her father would be proud.” Said Belso. “Such skill with a bow. Faal said she wiped out a room full of guards in the demon city.”

“I’ll talk to Muzzie and see if we can keep her.....At least for a while.” Said Dhūlen.

There had probably been forty or fifty fighters left behind, to offer a little resistance. It was suicide really; the entire fight was over in a few minutes. Fifty against thousands, it had been criminal to sacrifice them in that way. They were all dead and Muzzie’s army had suffered one casualty, still alive, though he had a nasty neck wound. Any victory is a good victory, but it wasn’t what Dhūlen had hoped for. Past Winshin’s and it seemed Muzzie still had a few loyal friends in the city. Barus was reputed to be a crook, someone who bought and sold stolen valuables. Quite famous, or infamous, Dhūlen had heard of him. There was his bar, complete with a smouldering sign, saying it was his place. Had Barus a hand in burning Muzzie’s bar ? No one really knew, but a mob had obviously decided that Barus deserved to be punished.

“It’ll be a pile of ashes by morning.” Said Belso. “Good job too, Barus was famous for watering down his ale.”

The army headed north, towards the Sorcerers Guild. Dhūlen had been told to protect the building and any members of the guild who might be inside.

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The outer fabric of the old metal exchange building would last forever, as would everything in the city, which Tomma had created. The internal dividing walls though and the old decaying ceiling, were a different matter. Heavy plaster ceilings can kill, if you’re underneath them when they fall.

Centuries of neglect can turn dividing walls into dangerous traps, if they collapsed. No one was killed, as far as Muzzie was aware, but there had been injuries. Revenants were rare now in the city, though Muzzie had seen a few over the years. One had created a lair for itself on the third floor. It seemed even creatures with legendary strength, aren’t keen on facing a few thousand heavily armed imperial fighters. The revenant used a set of crumbling stairs, to make a hasty exit.....

“One day you must tell me about your brother.” Said Aeony. “I have heard a little about him..... Gessereth was his name, I believe. A revenant for a brother, it must have been hard ?”

“I knew him as Gesse and he was turned by a magic user.” Said Muzzie. “I used the chaos magic of the Hand of Arcadis to cure most of the curse. He was still strong though. There was the odour of corruption too, that never went away completely. Some knew he was once a revenant, but most didn’t.”

“It sounds as though he had a lonely existence, even after being cured.” Said Aeony.

“You might think that, but the Silver Lady used a glamour spell on him.” Said Muzzie. “If you ignored the smell, he looked quite handsome. He ended up moving in with my Sara. Not that I can complain, I was sharing a bed with Lilleth in those days.”

“What became of Gesse ?” Asked Aeony.

“There are rumours of his dying in a battle at Ingar Sans.” Said Muzzie. “Worse than me for loving a cause to fight for, was Gesse. A cause, any cause.....Was almost a family motto. I still think he’s alive and will turn up one day.”

Nethra was yelling about finding a small hole on in the roof of the metal exchange. Estrin was telling everyone to keep back, while building up a spell in her hands. There was a flash of light and the small hole became large enough for half a dozen warriors to clamber through.

“Crap.....It’s still raining.” Shouted Nethra.

“It’s what the city is famous for.....Rain and the stink of Podd’s boneyard.” Muttered Muzzie.

Muzzie's personal guard got between him and the enemy, who were clustering on the roof of the militia headquarters. The militia fighters didn't look keen on fighting a large number of Muzzie's warriors. That all changed when about five dark angels flew over the rooftops and landed.

"Do you want a chance to talk to them?" Muzzie asked Aeony.

"No, that opportunity has long passed." Said Aeony. "We'll keep their bodies though. There is a chance that new sisters can be created from their remains."

For several millennia, the dark angels had been the real leaders of the city. To fight them was unthinkable, yet it had to be done. If some could be given a kind of resurrection, that was fine. The main thing though, was to either get them to submit to rule by the new empire, or destroy them entirely. There was no middle ground; dark angels weren't middle ground creatures.

"What are you waiting for?" Yelled Muzzie. "Attack.....Destroy everything and kill them all."

Not just militia fighters and dark angels, Dredgers loyal to the city were up on the roof too. Muzzie dodged round his guards, determined not to be kept away from the fighting. Aeony was fighting one of her sister dark angel, while Muzzie was left facing a large and very muscular, Dredger.

"I'd be happy to kill many that walk the rifts this day." Said Muzzie. "But not a Dredger.....Join me, I'll pay you well."

"I wish things were different. But I swore an oath to serve this city." Said the Dredger. "So, things are as they are.....Defend yourself, Muzzie."

Podd had always said that you should never underestimate a Dredger. He should have known, one had nearly killed him out near the sewage outfall. Muzzie began to build a few spells in his mind, as he swung his sword.

"No.....He's too big, Muzzie." Yelled Nethra. "Let the army deal with him."

"Enough from you.....Today I fight who I choose to fight." Shouted Muzzie.

His sword stroke missed, so Muzzie tried to barge the Dredger with his shield, the legendary shield of the emperor. It worked, though not that well. The Dredger was large and heavy. His enemy looked a bit stunned by the shield strike, but so was Muzzie. It felt as though every bone in his body had been badly jarred. His opponent was giving him a wicked smirk.

"Never underestimate a fucking Dredger." Said Muzzie. "You're not an ordinary kind of Dredger, are you?"

"Personal guard to the last leader of the city militia.....May the nine cherish his soul forever."

"Did you kill him?" Asked Muzzie

"No, but I didn't stop the dark angel who did."

Muzzie was done with combat by the rules, against a worthy opponent. The Dredger was no better than any other cutthroat from the city slums. No words or gestures, the minor immolation spell was ready to release. As Muzzie pretended to stab with his blade, the spell covered the Dredger in a yellow cloud of gas. A nasty shade of yellow too, the colour of diseased vomit.

"You should have accepted my offer of a job." Said Muzzie.

The Dredger became a huge torch, a mass of burning and flames. Muzzie allowed himself to relax a little, while his opponent died. Aeony had just ripped apart one of her sister dark angels and was moving towards another. Muzzie turned back and the Dredger was a pile of red hot ashes. Over the top of the ashes she was hurtling at him. The largest dark angel Muzzie had ever seen.

"Fuck!" Shouted Muzzie.

"You're a joke, Muzzie.....This emperor nonsense ends today, it ends now." Said the dark angel.

He knew them all; he'd even slept with a few of the dark angels. The largest of them all, yet Aeony had become their queen. Who was the dark angel in front of him? It had been a while since he'd

seen any of them apart from Aeony. A memory came into his mind, of a dark angel who was very large and not too bright.

“Cloelia.....I’d recognise your stench anywhere.” Said Muzzie.

“No more of your pointless words.” Said Cloelia.

She came at him, close to four hundred pounds of heavy and muscular dark angel. Muzzie lifted his shield and thrust it, two handed, at Cloelia’s nose. Her face met his shield at speed and the shield won. It had been enchanted by the best sorcerers of Leng; it would have been a surprise if the dark angel hadn’t been dazed by the encounter. Not that Muzzie had escaped without a wound, Cloelia’s blade had left a deep gash across his left upper forearm. Not a disaster, the wound wasn’t that serious and he did have three other arms.

“Never underestimate a Muzzie.” Shouted Aeony.

Aeony killed the sister she faced and moved towards a group of militia fighters. Cloelia looked badly stunned, while Muzzie felt the buzz he’d usually felt while chucking drunks out of his bar after a busy night. Only on this occasion he might end up dead, rather than just bruised. As Cloelia shook her head, Muzzie dropped onto his back. He kicked at the dark angel with both of his powerful legs. Back she went, to end up sprawling across filthy roof tiles.

“Stop playing.....Finish her.” Yelled Aeony.

Playing ! Cloelia was larger than him and she had clawed hands and feet. Then there were the sexual pheromones, which were messing up his mind and filling him with conflicting emotions. He was Muzzie though, the new emperor and the shield he held was amazing.

“You will respect me.” Yelled Muzzie. “Submit to the empire, or die where you lay.”

“I submit to the new empire.” Said Cloelia. “I offer you my service for as long as I live.”

When he’d kicked her, his foot has caught her blade. Muzzie hadn’t been aware of the wound and it wasn’t likely to kill the dark angel, but it was probably painful. It might well have been enough to make her submit. There had been five dark angels and three of them were now dead. Muzzie was amazed to hear the words of the other surviving sister of Aeony.

“I too submit and offer my service to the new emperor.”

Aeony looked at him, as if to ask what was happening. Muzzie had no idea why the dark angels, who never submit to anyone, had offered themselves to him. Aeony was their rightful queen of course, which might have had something to do with it.

“I accept the offer of service from both of you.” Said Muzzie.

Not that he could name the second dark angel, though her name would come to him, probably when he was just about to fall asleep.

“You and your sister can join us, Cloelia.” Said Muzzie. “We’re going to destroy the militia base and kill everyone in the building. Come with us.....Unless your wound is too painful.”

“My wound is painful, but doesn’t stop me fighting.” Said Cloelia. “Myself and Vintet will be honoured to stand by your side.”

Vintet, of course it was Vintet, she’d shared his bed a few times at the bar. Muzzie had no idea why he seemed to be the emperor of choice for the dark angels, but it was great news. His fighters were cheering and obviously thought it was wonderful.

“I’m glad you’re all pleased, but cheering comes later.” Yelled Muzzie. “Right now.....We are here to destroy the headquarters of the city militia.”

Another cheer and a few whoops and his army were through the hole in the militia building’s roof. Instantly there were the sounds of war and brutal death. Muzzie went to follow his warriors, but Aeony grabbed his arm. His personal guards surrounded him, stopping him from going anywhere.

“You’ve proven it.....Whatever you had to prove.” Said Aeony. “No more, you are the emperor. Please leave the fighting to your warriors.”

“Fair enough.....I am happy now.” Said Muzzie.

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Strangely, Vella didn’t know the exact number of floors in the Towers. Hard to count from below, and some large windows crossed more than one floor. It had been a game when she was a child. Vella and most of her school friends had decided that there were sixteen floors, though some insisted there were eighteen. One thing was certain.....At the top there was a long bridge going from the Towers, to the Dome and the Great Library.

“This place is all stairs and enemies.” Said Dhali Pril. “How many floors are there ?”

“That.....Depends on who you ask.” Said Vella. “This place is infamous; the people of the city avoid the Towers. As a child I’d have said sixteen floors, but I’ve seen old drawings of Tomma’s city in the restricted section of the library. There is still no certainty, but I’d say there are seventeen floors.”

“This city.....The people are crazy and even the buildings are crazy.” Muttered Dhali.

Dhali was now focused and useful in a fight, very useful. Still no sign of her being a massive weapon of some kind, but Dhali was strong. So strong, she could probably take Muzzie in a fist fight. The fighting had been intense, with some chaos creatures on about the eleventh floor, which Vella had never seen before. Many imperial fighters had died, but they were winning. Vella was gradually leading Muzzie’s army to the top of the Towers. She was dreading the next question from Dhali though. She could see the conversation going only one way.

“Which floor are we on ?” Asked Dhali.

They’d been too close to one of their own flash-bang devices. As it had gone off, it had peppered Dhali’s face with dirt and a few tiny pieces of shrapnel. Vella was worried that her own face looked the same.

“Not much further to go.” Said Vella. “We’re on the fourteenth, or maybe the fifteenth. Too much smoke and fighting to be sure. Think of it as only two or three more floors to go.”

Dhali had that look again, as though she was about to deliver a lecture on how crazy were the buildings of the City of the Lost God, and the people who inhabited the city. Vella decided to fight awkward questions, with an awkward question of her own. A question Dhali had already avoided, several times.

“Why are you here, Dhali ? Time to tell me.....Who sent you to us ?” Asked Vella.

The question seemed to take the cleric by surprise. There was a lot of smoke; something on that floor had been set ablaze. Dhali pulled her into the thick smoke and leant towards her.

“Not one of your nine, Vella.” Said Dhali. “I was sent by a far darker power. A deity from beyond Leng sent me to the Ring of Volkin. I am merely their servant and don’t know why.....But even the dark powers want Muzzie to win. No more now, I’ll answer no more questions.”

A shape came out of the smoke, a militia fighter, a senior officer judging by his expensive armour and boots. Belso had taught her that one.

‘In the army, true wealth is having several pairs of comfortable, waterproof boots.’

Vella had confidence now and she knew her skills with a blade were second to none. She thrust her blade into the throat of the fighter. Dhali then twisted the neck of the dying warrior, until he was no longer among the living. It was a trick they’d been using a lot on the way up the Towers. Not without risks, some fought back. Vella had a few cuts on her arms, that would leave her with some new scars.

“And.....Don’t ask me how many we’ve killed today.” Said Vella. “I honestly have no idea.”

Dhali grabbed her arm and her words showed she now regretted admitting to being an agent of the darkness beyond Leng.

“Please.....Keep my secret, Vella.” Said Dhali. “If it was heard by some.....I am relying on you to never speak about it, to anyone.”

The whole thing was making some kind of sense. If an existing King, or leader of a city had been chosen as the new emperor. They might not appreciate being prodded one way, or shoved along another path by this, or that deity. A ruffian who owned a bar though.....Muzzie would take all the advice and help sent his way. And there was that little piece of Genova in him, to keep him on the straight and narrow. Yes, she could see why so many wanted Muzzie as Emperor of all the Rifts.

“You have my word, Dhali.” Said Vella. “I will repeat your secret to no one. Apart perhaps from my husband. Don’t worry though, in all the years I’ve known Caspian. He has never betrayed me by repeating something I told him was a secret.”

“A husband who doesn’t betray you.....You’re truly a fortunate woman.” Muttered Dhali.

Vella suspected Dhali might be a good source for gossip about LLud, but that was for another day. There were a lot of the army on their floor, but all of them seemed to be lost in the smoke. Dhali seemed to like her secrets, so it was worth asking.

“Alright, as we’re now friends.....Can you cast spells ?”

“Yes, simple ones.....I was taught a few by LLud Narren.” Said Dhali.

“Why didn’t you tell me ?” Asked Vella.

“You didn’t ask.”

And Dhali had lectured her on the crazy people who lived in the city. Often up to their necks in unpleasant creatures and the militia, yet Dhali had never once used magic.

“In future.....Tell me about useful things you can do.” Said Vella. “Can you create a wind to blow away the smoke ? Nothing too powerful.....Leave us stood on our feet.”

“I can do that.”

“Then please do it.”

The cleric muttered a few words that sounded like the human tongue. Vella had heard human language before, several times on her first time in Gorshan. One hand gesture and a breeze began, a persistent but gentle breeze. The upper floors of the Towers, had no glass in their windows. The smoke quickly dispersed, just in time for the arrival of at least twenty dark angels. According to rumour the dark angels mainly inhabited the top floor, but rumours are often wrong. Still twenty dark angels wasn’t that much of a problem with several thousand of Muzzie’s fighters there too.

“There are more of them.....They’re locking doors to the stairwell.” Said Dhali.

Caspian had once mentioned the Dark Angels numbering around two hundred, at the very most.

Casp had probably been lied to. It made sense really, for the dark angels to deliberately state there were less of them. Make a potential enemy over confident.....

“Crap.....There must be several hundred of them.” Said Vella. “They’re flying in through the windows.”

At a quick look around, and it really was only a guess. Vella and Dhali only had around five hundred fighters on that floor, to defeat about the same number of dark angels. There was no positive side to look at, they were going to lose the battle and die. Knowing dark angel eating habits, their livers would soon be dark angel food.

“I can use feather fall on both of us.” Said Dhali. “Then we can jump out of the window and float down to the ground.”

“No, I’ve seen Aeony fight while flying.” Said Vella. “They’ll hack us to pieces.....And even if it was likely to work....No. I’m not deserting our warriors. You have some ability to be a weapon. Now is the time to fucking use it.”

“This isn’t an appropriate time.” Said Dhali. “I can cloak us with a shield spell.....We will survive dropping from the Towers.”

Vella wasn’t the same doting mother and even more doting wife she had been. Yes, she’d been able to handle a blade, but she’d been nice. Nice in a way that made her soft and sometimes....Easy to manipulate. That Vella was gone, hopefully forever. She was now a lot less nice, but quite liked the change. She still loved Casp and Olvir of course, but she also demanded their respect. Vella carried several blades all the time, with two more added if she was going into a fight. The knife up her sleeve was one of her favourites. An Ushong assassin’s blade. It had a forever enchantment, that left a wound full of quick acting venom. She held the tip of the blade close to Dhali’s throat.

“Yes, I’m sure you’ve seen one before.” Said Vella. “An Ushong blade.....And yes, there is no antidote to the venom. I’m sure you agree now.....We can’t abandon our warriors.”

“I die and you die.....Aeony’s sisters will rip you apart.” Said Dhali.

“Then we both die.”

Dhali even began a count down from ten, as the dark angels came closer. They weren’t having it all their own way; Muzzie’s fighters were sending a lot of dark angels to oblivion. No real essence, nothing most would call a soul. When a dark angel died, they ceased to exist. You’d think that would make them cautious, but it didn’t. As Dhali reached two on her countdown, Vella pulled out the plugs on the devices she still had in a bag. She threw the devices into the cluster of dark angels. As they exploded, she aimed her Ushong blade at Dhali’s left eye.

“The eye.....Yes, the eye will cause you immense pain as the venom works.” Said Vella.

“If you want this so bad.....I’ll become the weapon, but we might all die.” Said Dhali.

The cleric knelt down on the floor and a sound began, like the ringing of a bell. It was as if a bell was getting louder the longer it rang. Vella was just at the point when her ears were hurting. As a dark angel raised a blade to strike Dhali.....She became the weapon.

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Caspian had crossed the bridge to the Great Library with Mozzrik’s blade in his hand. Yes, he had been on his own and he had killed several of the militia who were guarding the bridge. It was also true that Caspian had been lucky in killing Aishar, self-appointed queen of the dark angels. On another day, with slightly different luck for both of them, and Caspian might have been the one lying dead in the square. It was how his life had always been; he’d always had more than his fair share of good luck.

Even meeting Vella had seemed preordained in some way. Too good for him, as many said, though many also called her a gold digger. To Caspian she was a lovely young hybrid female, who seemed happy to share his bed. Their bits fitted wonderfully, their sexual parts. That alone had felt like a miracle. She was also his first lover who hadn’t expected paying for her services.

Caspian sat and listened as Adamaz quietly gave his orders. Caspian knew history would call them his orders and forget all about the small army of Kvelds, who’d be fighting with him. The bards in the taverns would write songs about Caspian the Great and how on his own.....He’d taken the Towers. His fame had become self-perpetuating and on the whole, Caspian thought that was a wonderful thing.....

“The plan of battle has changed a little.” Said Adamaz. “Messages are still getting through....It seems LLud Narren and a thousand fighters, have removed the militia threat to the Sorcerers Guild. I doubt if Sökkolf will be of much help to us, but it’s nice to know the guild members are safe.”

Adamaz was a converted chaos creature, reportedly just about indestructible. There had been a short fight to free him though and Adamaz had been on the wrong end of a fireball. The burns on his face and neck would heal, but he’d look terrible for a while. To Caspian, the dreadful burns gave Adamaz a certain something, a new credibility as a leader of warriors.

“I hate to hurry things, but messengers have also mentioned the Towers.” Said Caspian. “My Vella, the mother of my son, is leading a large part of the army up through each floor. I’ll admit it.....We fight best when together and now we’re apart. I have concerns about her.”

“The messengers say your wife travels with Dhali, the great weapon.” Said a Kveld.

The first library apprentice to be turned, had been Borlas and that had been a very long time ago. Torfi had also been bitten by an elder Kveld and turned into a Kveld. Creatures who could hunt on two legs, or become a huge wolf-like creature, who hunted on four legs. Caspian had been friends with Torfi and still grieved for him. Maya Orresa had been the elder Kveld, who’d turned the two apprentices. She’d done it for her own ends and had later killed Torfi.

Adamaz had considered the turning of his apprentices as a curse, until he’d seen the true potential of having many of them in the library. He’d begun to encourage apprentices to think of the bite as a gift, rather than a curse. Not that the population of the city knew much about what went on in the Great Library. To them, the apprentices were harmless; usually the sons of the nobility, who would receive a good education while under apprenticeship to Adamaz. Always male when Caspian had become an apprentice, though now there were a few female apprentices.

“With respect to Adamaz, my friend and mentor.” Said Caspian. “We have enough trained Kveld to significantly help Muzzie’s army take over the towers. When are we going to actually do something ?”

Adamaz stood up and actually patted him on the shoulder.

“What am I going to do with you, Caspian the Great ?” Asked Adamaz. “I have decided that if we win today and if we both still live.....I will hand over control of the library to you. See how you like being expected to always have an answer to everything. First though.....I need to get properly dressed for battle.”

When had Adamaz stopped dressing himself and hired servants to do it ? Caspian realised a lot had changed, without him being aware of it. He’d been away for a few years with Muzzie, but things must have been changing before that. Adamaz had been doing less teaching and now.....It felt as though he must have been retiring, but doing it very gradually. His servants knew the right clothing and pieces of armour, but needed help when it came to weapons.

“Here, my old friend....Take this blade.” Said Caspian. “The sword of Mozzrik was never really mine and I’m sure you’ll find it useful.”

“Thank you.....I’ve heard it has some rather unique enchantments.” Said Adamaz.

As Adamaz held the blade, a huge smile filled his face. Vella would kill him for giving away the sword, but it might keep Adamaz alive. Was he worrying a bit too much about a converted chaos creature, who’d burned Muzzie’s bar to the ground ? Maybe, but Adamaz meant a lot to him.

“How does it make you feel ?” Asked Caspian.

“Unstoppable, Caspian.....I feel unstoppable.”

Olvir had been a child when Caspian had last seen the apprentices form up in lines for inspection. A lot had happened in those years and there seemed to be a lot more of them wearing the emblem of



the Kveld around their necks. Even the hybrid apprentices had regular training in traditional weapons and some training in what Adamaz referred to as non-traditional weapons. One day there'd be a saying on the rifts, about never underestimating a library apprentice with a heavy wooden club in their hands. Lined up in the refectory hall and some of the staff were weeping, for those who wouldn't be returning. War wasn't always inevitable, but sadly death did inevitably follow war.

"We're starting from the top floor of the Towers." Yelled Adamaz. "When we meet up with Vella and Muzzie's army, we help them. We kill anything and everything that doesn't belong in the city. We are going to reclaim the Towers, something we should have done a long time ago."

They ran yelling, which hadn't been expected. A fairly quiet and dignified battle cry, but librarians yelling.....It didn't seem right. Out of the refectory and past the corridor that would lead Caspian to where he'd lived with Vella for several happy years. No going that way now, the Kveld and ordinary librarians ran across the bridge, which would take them to the top floor of the Towers. The air was cold on the bridge; they were close to the top of the mountain.

"For Muzzie.....For the empire !" Shouted Caspian.

Would the librarians take up the call ? They had no particular loyalty for Muzzie, but they knew him well enough, Caspian the Great. It had happened quite slowly, but Caspian was beginning to acknowledge his own worth.

"For Muzzie.....For the empire.....And the library." Yelled Adamaz.

Through a wide set of open double doors and down a ramp. No glass or shutters on the windows, it was too high to be plagued by burglars, though winter storms could be a nuisance. Caspian smelled the hot, fresh blood before he saw it. There were dark angels on the ground, a lot of dead dark angels. Some of Muzzie's warriors were dead too, though not that many. The Kveld came to a halt, just as Vella shouted at them.

"They need time to sense your allegiance." Yelled Vella. "Keep still for a few moments and they will then leave you unharmed. Move and they will kill you."

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After what sounded like a threat of impending doom, Dhali had literally split into a hundred tiny pieces, which in turn, spit into another hundred pieces. Each piece looked nothing like Dhali, though they were obviously alive and sentient. They looked like the harmless spiny creatures found in the farmlands. Only the farmers hated those, for nibbling at new shoots and devouring freshly planted bulbs. The pieces of Dhali swarmed and covered Vella's lower legs. After a little painful stinging, the bug sized creatures left her alone. Luckily for many, Vella wasn't born stupid. She quickly understood the connection between being stung and keeping still.

"Crap.....There's millions of them." Said a warrior. "And they're growing.....What in the name of the nine are these things ?"

"They're the weapon, I know it." Shouted Vella. "Keep still until they have a chance to know you. I think they know who is and isn't on the right side."

"How ?"

"I have no idea, but if you want to survive.....Keep still when they touch you." Yelled Vella.

The bits of Dhali grew, very quickly. Fairly soon they were each the size of a well grown Dredger. So many and so large, that Vella was beginning to feel suffocated by them. They did her no harm though, once a few of them had nuzzled at her a little. How were the spiny creatures a weapon? That was obvious when the dark angels obviously decide en-masse, to attack the creatures. Hardly

surprising really, there wasn't much that they were scared of. No dark angel was ever likely to be scared of overgrown spiny bugs.

"Oh, Dhali.....You really are a superb weapon." Muttered Vella.

Their spines vibrated and easily seemed to burrow their way into an enemy. The dark angels were now the enemy, but to see them die like that. The creatures leapt on them and used their spines to penetrate deep into the flesh of Aeony's sisters. The amount of blood, the ease with which they killed.....Vella had never seen anything quite like it. Bird had been keeping clear of the fighting, but there he was, fluttering about close to the ceiling.

"Galla sent me.....It's....." Said Bird.

No good, there was too much noise and Bird didn't have the clearest of voices. Vella put her arm out and Bird landed on it.

"It's hatching, Vella." Said Bird.

"What is ?"

"The Egg of course.....Galla sent me to tell you." Said Bird.

It was huge news.....News so big, Vella needed a while to get it inside her head and think about it. There was nothing more important, but there was a more immediate problem.

"Tell our fighters to be still until the creatures know them." Said Vella. "Tell them all it's important.....Be still or the bits of Dhali will kill them. Go on.....Do it and do it quickly."

"But the Egg." Said Bird.

"The Egg can wait a while.....It's already been waiting to hatch for many centuries."

Bird went away and she could hear him squawking at many warriors. Vella kept hacking away with her sword, against everything from dark angels, to a few of the undead. The bits of Dhali seemed to sense she was known to Dhali. When she was being attacked by several militia fighters, they surrounded her and easily slaughtered her enemies. The creatures were a superb weapon, but were they a use once only weapon ? Logic was telling Vella that wasn't likely, but it would worry her until Dhali was in one piece again. Her entire world seemed to consist of just blood and death, until she heard a familiar voice.

"Vella, I came to help you." Said Casp. "What are these weird spiny things ?"

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Maya had intended to get a few things from her yurt in the stockade, but she was young and events going on around her, took over. The war for the City of the Lost God was over, according to all the happy, laughing people. There would be many other battles, but the city of Muzzie's birth, was always going to be special.

"Maya.....Did you hear the news ? Caspian took the Dome and the Library, all on his own."

She knew the Dredger boy, who spoke to her, kissed her on the cheek and vanished into the crowd. Every piece of gossip was different, but they all agreed on one thing. The battle was over.....Muzzie had won.....They had won. Quron was still to come and it would be brutal and terrible. For now though, there had been a great victory.

"Muzzie killed the head of the city militia, in single combat." Someone shouted.

Nethra was there for a second, spinning her about and then flying away.

"Aeony is queen of the surviving dark angels.....We won, Maya.....We won."

Yelled Nethra, as she vanished into the darkening sky of approaching night. Maya had heard many of Aeony's sisters had submitted to the empire. She'd also heard a rumour that most of the dark angels had died. It was going to be like that though, dozens of rumours and a lot of wishful thinking. There

might even still be a little fighting, but.....Muzzie had added the City of the Lost God, to his empire.

"I heard Podd killed many." Someone said. "Left the ground of his bone yard thick with the blood of the militia."

Another mentioned the bone yard being filled with the cracked open skulls of all those who'd tried to destroy Podd's yard. Quite often the rumours didn't mention if the dead were enemies, or Muzzie's army. It was all very confusing, but at least everyone agreed that Muzzie's army had won.

"Maya.....Have you seen Vella?" Asked N'Fady. "The Egg had opened...It has hatched out." Maya liked the tall Ubari servant, who looked after Caspian and Vella's compound within the stockade. N'Fady had been injured rescuing Olvir, which had impressed Maya.

"You mean, the Egg?" Asked Maya. "The egg of an ancient one?"

"Yes, of course I do.....Everyone is fighting or drinking." Said N'Fady. "This is important, the poor thing is so tiny and it will need feeding."

N'Fady might be tough in a fight, but she seemed close to hysteria over the famous Egg. Mind you, if whatever had hatched out died.....The ancient ones might slaughter everyone in Muzzie's army.

"Do you know what to feed it?" Asked Maya.

"Nethra mentioned Nesh bugs, but I can't find Nethra." Said N'Fady.

Was there really luck about such things? Maya still carried a few live Nesh bugs in a tin, just in case Bird came to her with gossip. Everything was fitting together too well to be plain good luck. Maya looked in the tin and most of the bugs still wriggled about. She had a flask of clean water and that seemed enough. Feed what had hatched out and offer it water. After that, with luck.....An expert might arrive to look after the.....Child. It was a child of the ancient ones. Maya decided thinking about it as a thing, or as something that had hatched out, was a little disrespectful.

"I have water and Nesh bugs.....Where is the child?" Asked Maya.

"Still in the bathroom used by Muzzie and Aeony.....I haven't moved it."

"All alone with no food.....I'll look after the child." Said Maya.

Maya found a broken shell, but there was no sign of the creature who had come out of the egg. She got down on the floor and there it was, hiding under a towel left on the floor. A green leg was protruding out and Maya could just about see two eyes. The child looked quite large, but of course, it had come out of a large egg.

"Please don't bite me.....I am a friend." Said Maya.

She carefully lifted the towel and there on the floor, was a tiny ancient one. Just like the drawings on temple walls, right down to the incredibly long legs. It was said a fully grown adult, could stride over the walls of any city on the rifts. The head still had some growing to look impressive, but the glowing eyes were there, and the rows of teeth. Maya pulled a live Nesh bug out of her tin and offered it to the child. Much to her relief, it ate that one and then another three of the wriggling bugs. The tiny ancient one also drank from the cap of her flask.

"Stage one.....You're not going to starve, or die of thirst." Muttered Maya.

It.....Oh, she had to stop thinking of the baby as an it. The child heard her voice and looked at her, with eyes that seemed to genuinely see her. Not baby eyes, definitely not the eyes of a child. The tiny ancient one made a chirruping noise, which sounded friendly.

"Alright.....Stage two.....Can I cuddle you without being wounded?" Muttered Maya.

There were always tiny babies travelling with the Dredgers, Maya was an aunt to several. She used the same method used to soothe a baby Dredger. Lots of, what she hoped, were soothing sounds. More chirruping from the child and.....Maya was holding the baby, actually cuddling, her, or him.

There was nothing in the genital area, just smooth skin everywhere. As egg layers, the ancient ones might have an unusual method of mating.

“Tired, little one ?” Asked Maya. “I know I am.”

Two more Nesh bugs and the child was asleep in her arms. Muzzie would probably have a fancy name planned for the baby, but Maya wanted a name that was hers, almost a secret name when talking to the child. Its legs were amazing, longer in proportion to its body than anything else Maya had ever seen.

“Long legs.....In the ancient tongue that would be Ula Poda, or Uula Podda.” Muttered Maya.

“Yes, I’m going to call you Uula Podda, last born child of the ancient ones.”

A few moments later, while still holding the baby.....Maya fell asleep.

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