

## The Last Emperor

### Chapter 37 – Forbidden Knowledge

**“One of the sorcerers created a swirling portal of purple light. Nethra stepped into it and the world seemed to fold in on itself. A quick and dirty portal, Nethra hated those. On a bad day, they could make you vomit and feel like shit for hours. Nethra was retching when she arrived on top of one of the city walls of Quron.”**



LLud Narren wondered why everything was so quiet. He only realised the noise from the wall cracking weapon had affected his ears, when Maya tried to speak to him. She quickly began to shout at him, quite loudly. He hadn't even heard the wailing of the child of the Ancient Ones, as she brought death to those defending the walls of Quron.

“Are you alright ?” Asked Maya. “Can you hear me, LLud ?”

“Yes, just about.....Too close to the gates and the explosion.” Said LLud. “It worked well, though I think the device will never fire again. It cracked when I tested it.....Now the outer metal shell is broken in two.”

“It did its job well.” Said Maya.

“That it did.” Said LLud.

Defenders falling from the wall, even the occasional arrow coming too close for comfort. LLud went back inside the armoured waggon, which had brought him there. Even lying on its side, it gave cover from enemy weapons and the heat of the day. Maya followed him inside.

“Let me look at your ears.” Said Maya.

“They'll be alright in a while.”

“Never put up with what can be easily healed.” Said Maya.

He hadn't forgotten she was a healer, one of the best according to Galla. His physiology wasn't like that of most hybrids and he didn't want a healer leaving him worse than when they'd started.

“No offence, but I'm not like most you heal.” Said LLud.

“Neither is Aeony, but she trusts me.....Keep still LLud, I know what I'm doing.”

First a little pain, as Maya pressed a finger into his ear. Then LLud could hear again, better than he could remember hearing in quite a while. The first things he heard properly, were the drums and large horns of the Ubari fighters. The army was there, rushing towards the gates he'd just destroyed.

“That is wonderful, Maya.” Said LLud. “I will never doubt you again. The army are almost here, Muzzie's warriors. I'm going with them, but Muzzie might not want to risk the child in battle.”

“LLud Narren.” Said Uula Podda.

“She spoke.....The child said my name.” Said LLud. “Can she speak properly ?”

“My child can say quite a lot and I believe, she often pretends not to understand.” Said Maya. “Then there is her way of protecting herself. I honestly feel she can now protect herself against just about anything. When she gets older and bigger, my child will become almost indestructible.”

“Your child ? Twice you've called Uula your child.” Said LLud.

“Mine by theft I'm afraid.” Said Maya. “I heard General Dhülen needed a little divine aid, to save the lives of his fighters. Uula is hardly divine, but she almost has the powers of a deity. Muzzie doesn't

know I brought her into the battle. I suspect he's angry and that anger might be aimed at those around me.....You may want to leave without me, LLud."

"I never leave a friend behind." Said LLud. "I have the feeling that travelling with you and Uula, might be the safest place in the war for Quron."

"Not that I intend running beside the army." Said Maya. "We'll wait for most of them to pass. My child and I will then walk into Quron. We may arrive after the imperial army, but I'm sure we'll have some adventures on the way."

"You sound just like Galla." Said LLud.

"That.....has been said by others."

The army were running past the armoured waggon. Everyone from Ubari hybrids, to Dredger warriors from the City of the Lost God. Over a hundred and thirty thousand in total, or so LLud had heard. All playing any musical instrument they could find, as they hurried to war. Those who saw Maya, cheered her and her strange child. LLud wanted to join the army, as they ran past the armoured waggon. Instead he turned two chairs the right way up and tried to make the waggon a little more habitable. Sadly the box he'd brought, which had been full of food and drink, was now full of broken bottles and ruined delicacies.

"The army will take a while to go past." Said LLud. "I can offer you a seat, Maya. Alas the supplies I brought with me, haven't survived my waggon being tumbled around."

"Part of the reason I'm not keen on running.....is having a heavy Uula around my shoulders, and a very heavy cloth bag to carry." Said Maya.

"I always wondered what healers kept in similar bags." Said LLud. "You all carry one, including Galla."

"Galla uses one to carry her powders and lotions." Said Maya. "Mine.....I've a few more practical items with me today."

No glassware of course; only a fool takes fancy glasses into a battle. Maya had a metal flask and two metal cups, which she placed on an upside down bucket. LLud thought she was offering him a cup of water, but the smell gave it away.

"Wine....Good wine at that." He said, while sipping the red liquid.

"And I have a bag with.....Yes, here they are." Said Maya. "Nothing fancy I'm afraid.....Fresh bread rolls, cooked in an army camp kitchen. They're still warm."

LLud bit into one and it was wonderful. He could have magically produced food. After all, he had been the right hand of the God Tomma-Goran. Before dying spoiled his career, LLud had been the most powerful magician on the rifts. There was something about proper food though.....

"I'll tell you something, Maya." Said LLud. "Don't repeat this....Though if you do, I'll deny ever saying it. I could use chaos magic to produce a feast for us....But this bread roll tastes better, because it's real. There is something about the effort of the cook, even the care taken by the farmer who grew the grain. You might think I'm crazy.....But that all adds to the taste."

"I don't think you're crazy, I agree.....Oh, that said, I think the cheese is still in my yurt. Could you produce some decent Shuud cheese for us?" Asked Maya.

LLud spoke a two line spell and a cheese appeared, complete with a plate and a knife to cut it. While they breakfasted on wine, with bread and Shuud cheese; Maya fed Uula from a tin full of wriggling Nesh bugs. There was something about the child; the face was beginning the long slow change into the face of an adult.

"I've actually seen the Ancient Ones." Said LLud. "They came to the City of the Lost God, though that was a very long time ago. They came to see Tomma-Goran, which gives you an idea of how long ago

it was. They really were as huge as you've heard. Legs long enough to stride over the city walls of the City of the Lost God."

"What were they like?" Asked Maya.

"Huge.....Too huge for this world." Said LLud. "They'd come from somewhere else you see.....Probably a world where every living thing was huge. Clever of course, very clever. Powers too, almost divine powers. Some say they all died out, but that can't be true. Someone had to lay that huge egg and give it to The Hive mother."

"Why do you think we never see them?" Asked Maya.

"Oh, you're mistaking me for an expert on them." Said LLud. "I talked to a few of them and that is guaranteed to give you a headache. They're clever, too clever.....A mind too huge for this world. If I had to guess, I'd say they're waiting and watching."

"Waiting for what?" Asked Maya.

"Maybe to see if Muzzie can unite the rifts under one banner." Said LLud. "I just saw a Dredger run past carrying a spade as a weapon. Everyone wants a chance to fight against Quron. If you're ready? I think it's time for us to leave."

"I'm ready."

LLud hadn't forgotten the dead healer in his waggon. He covered her with her own cloak, before they left. Eventually someone from Muzzie's army would find her and give the poor girl a proper burial.

"My wall breaker did indeed.....Do a very good job." Said LLud.

"Can it be repaired?"

"Ah.....I can see this being a day for giving away secrets." Said LLud. "I've had the weapon in my collection since the rifts were young; still a playground for the oldest of the Old Gods. I have no idea who made the weapon, or how it works."

The main army were now in the city of Quron, though there were a few stragglers running past them. The first set of gates looked to have been partially vaporised. A few pieces of metal and wood, still hung from the massive metal hinges. The dead were everywhere, fighters from both sides. Muzzie had lost a lot of men beneath the walls of Quron, though not as many as it could have been. Maya and her strange child, had saved the lives of thousands.

"The second gate did no better than the first." Said Maya.

"We're the first enemy army to ever enter the City of Quron." Said LLud.

The walls either side had survived quite well, but the second gate had been reduced to nothing but burnt wood and crumpled metal supports. LLud really hadn't been an expert on the wall cracking weapon. For all he knew it was designed to hunt huge creatures on a distant world. It had certainly done a very good job of destroying the main gates of Quron. Not that far away, the third and final gate, had done no better than the first two. More burned wood, ruined metal and shattered stones from the supporting walls.

"I'm glad you're on our side, LLud Narren." Said Maya.

"Muzzie could have thrown me into the wastes of eternity, when he was in Gorshan." Said LLud. "He didn't though and I owe him.....Everything. I will serve him for as long as I live and he has need of me."

There were still a few surviving Quron fighters on the walls near the third gate. Probably having hidden from the massed army of the new emperor, they'd decided to target stragglers. LLud saw a Dredger fall with an arrow in the back of his neck.

"Careful, Maya.....Not all of our enemies are dead." Said LLud.

“Uula can deal with them.”

Maya muttered something quietly into the ear of the child. Uula Podda wailed in a way that was beginning to affect LLud. The sound was so forlorn, so.....It made him think of dark places on evil worlds. As Uula wailed, several enemy fighters fell from the walls.

“As we’re not in a hurry.....I’d like to see how she’s doing that.” Said LLud.

He knelt next to the body of an archer and everything was wrong. The archer’s face had been twisted about, until his own mother wouldn’t have recognised him. LLud pulled aside the man’s clothing, to reveal a body that looked part reptile and part something else.....Something grotesque. Nothing looked even a little normal for the population of Quron.

“Is Uula using disruption spells ?” Asked Maya.

“No.....Your strange child is touching them with chaos. I knew there was something about that wailing sound of hers.” Said LLud. “You’ve probably been told this before, but I’ll tell you again. Ancient Ones are incredibly dangerous. Be a mother to Uula; get her to think of you very fondly. If you can.....Get the child to love you. One day, that might save your life.”

“I will, LLud.....Nethra said something very similar.”

Past where the third gate had stood for several millennia and the City of Quron was in front of them. Everything looked to be on fire, apart from the Shinning Towers. LLud had been studying maps of the enemy city. He knew what was where. The market place looked well ablaze. First rule of attacking a city, leave the population with nothing to eat. The temple district was alight, as was the mighty barracks, where thousands of soldiers waited for.....An event like the one currently unfolding. From the lowest slums to the highest mansions, the residential areas were burning.

“So much fire.....It looks like the war is over.” Said Maya.

“It looks like that, but you can’t burn marble buildings.” Said LLud. “Trust me, I’ve seen many wars.....Far too many. The warriors have to get into the buildings and dig out the enemy. It might look like it’s all over but really; the war has only just begun.

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Nethra had been expecting them, though no one was sure when the moment would arrive. Just sitting down to a quick lunch with Merrick, when two guild sorcerers arrived in the Defender. Not through the door of course, they simply appeared. Not just her being summoned, though not many would be given their own private portal to Quron. Winged creatures were rare on the rifts. When you were invading the Shinning Towers of Quron, there really was no better way than flying to the upper levels of the towers.

“So soon.....Can we at least finish our meal ?” Asked Merrick.

“We have a long way to travel and many portals to create.” Said a sorcerer.

He looked tired, using that much chaos energy could be draining.

“We knew I’d be leaving today, Merrick.” Said Nethra. “I left my bag behind the counter.”

“I’ll get it.” Said Merrick.

They kissed goodbye, right in the centre of the Defender, with most of the regulars watching. No rude comments, but one or two did cheer.

“Don’t get killed.” Said Merrick.

“I’ll try hard not to.” She said.

One of the sorcerers created a swirling portal of purple light. Nethra stepped into it and the world seemed to fold in on itself. A quick and dirty portal, Nethra hated those. On a bad day, they could make you vomit and feel like shit for hours. Nethra was retching when she arrived on top of one of the city walls of Quron.

“You won’t need the bag.” Said Faal. “I’ll get someone to take it to your quarters in the army’s tent city.”

Nethra concentrated hard and managed not to vomit up the food she’d just eaten. The wall was covered in dead Quron warriors, with a few of Muzzie’s fighters too. Nethra still felt a little giddy, but her mind knew the small number of their own dead, was a very good thing.

“The Chinnura ....I wasn’t expecting her.” Said Dhali Pril. “Someone mentioned a dark angel.....This is much better.”

“Plans change during a war.” Said Faal.

Dhali Pril, the now famous super weapon. Nethra ignored her conversation with Faal, and looked at the burning City of Quron. When Muzzie went to war, he didn’t mess about. The new emperor was getting a reputation for using fairly simple plans, which were very effective. Nethra didn’t let the number of fires get her too excited. Quron had been built out of stone and various major and minor deities, had added a lot of enchantments to those stone buildings. Faal seemed annoyed that she was ignoring him.

“I was saying, Nethra.” Said Faal. “I am here to cast one spell on you. A spell of anger, perhaps even rage. You will easily be able to carry Dhali to the top of the Shinning Towers.”

“More towers.....Muzzie has obviously decided towers are my thing.” Said Dhali.

“You did very well in the City of the Lost God.” Muttered Faal. “I’m assuming Nethra knows the rest of the plan ?”

Did she ? Yes, the memory of talking it over with Muzzie, came back into her still slightly foggy mind. There had been mention of powerful magic users in the towers, but Nethra and Dhali both had massive resistance to magical damage. Muzzie had also made it clear that Nethra’s most important objective, was to keep Dhali alive.

“Help fight the enemy, but mainly.....Keep the super weapon safe and get her where she needs to be.” Muzzie had told her.

In fairness, Nethra might need a while to feel at her best. But looking up at the huge towers full of powerful magic users, and then looking at herself and Dhali.....She was wondering if Muzzie might have overdone the whole simple plan business.

“Yes, the plan.....I fly us both to the top of the highest tower.” Said Nethra. “From there we fight our way down, with Dhali becoming the weapon, when she thinks it’s the right moment. Oh, and on the way down, I’m supposed to kill Xelang the Mighty; fifty second leader of the High Council of Quron. Called leader of the council, but he’s really the King of Quron.”

“Everyone has confidence in you, Nethra.” Said Faal.

Tempting to be rude, but Faal probably had his own set of seemingly impossible orders. Maybe that had always been Muzzie’s true skill; knowing who could accomplish the almost impossible.

“Zap me with the rage spell, Faal.” Said Nethra.

It hurt, which wasn’t that much of a surprise. It had been a fairly grim day, so why should it suddenly take mercy on her now. Her head fog went though, once the pain made her feel wonderfully angry.

“Wonderful, Faal.....If only you could bottle it for me.” Said Nethra.

“Actually, Galla has offered to work on a powder to accomplish the same result.”

“Good luck in the archives, Faal.” Said Nethra. “See you when it’s all over.”

Originally Nethra had been paired with Faal, but the Shinning Towers were much more to her liking. Up in the air and plenty of light, while the archives were very deep underground, and much of it was rumoured to be in perpetual darkness.

“Hold on very tight, Dhali.” Said Nethra.

Nethra held on to her too and with so much anger in her, she could hold Dhali very tightly. Faal waved at them, as Nethra climbed in a spiral, mainly to avoid the arrows of enemy archers. Nethra's small wings weren't normally that good, but now she could climb at quite a rate.

"This is.....Wonderful." Yelled Dhali. "I can see for miles."

"I'm glad heights don't bother you." Yelled Nethra. "I've had battle hardened warriors screaming to be put back on the ground."

"I love it.....Go as high as you like." Shouted Dhali.

Hard to be heard once the wind began to rush past. Nethra was glad that Dhali seemed happy to enjoy the view, quietly. The highest of the Shinning Towers was close to three thousand feet high, according to Caspian and his books. Too high really, only enchantments kept the whole things from tumbling down.

"Not far now." Shouted Nethra.

Nethra took them right up to the roof, where according to Caspian, there was a doorway leading to a central spiral staircase. How many stairs was that to the ground ? Not a question of purely academic interest; she and Dhali would be using the staircase all the way, from roof to the ground.

"Wow, it's cold up here." Said Dhali.

"We'll soon be inside."

Nethra knew the door wasn't that strong; that too had been in one of Caspian's books at the Great Library. Nethra sometimes wondered what wasn't in one of Caspian's book, scrolls, or parchments. Two hefty kicks and the door flew inwards.

"Wow, Nethra.....You're stronger than you look." Said Dhali.

"I get told that a lot.....Though Faal's anger spell helps."

Through the door and they descended the stairs for no more than thirty feet. No landings, no doors leading to other floors, yet two guards seemed to be waiting for them. Nethra had brought a long blade, given to her by Merrick as a parting gift. Supposedly it was enchanted and the blade would never be notched, or broken. Dhali on the other hand, had brought just herself. That seemed to be more than enough. LLud's ex-wife pointed the palm of her hand at the guards and made a kind of grunting noise.

"Yes.....Vella said there was more to you than meets the eye." Said Nethra.

"LLud taught me a few spells; most of them you'd call battle magic." Said Dhali.

The guards had been thrown back against the wall, with a lot of force. Despite wearing helmets, they'd died once their heads had hit the wall. A lot of blood and ripped tissues, considering Dhali hadn't used a weapon. Death must have arrived in an instant for the two guards.

"Grab one of their words; you can't fight everyone in the tower, with your bare hands." Said Nethra.

"You might be surprised what I can accomplish with just my bare hands."

"Then show me.....I'm not Vella." Said Nethra. "You can do your own thing, I don't mind. Use bare hands, spells....Whatever gets it done. I promise not to interfere. The first priority though, is dealing with Xelang the Mighty. He needs to die, or our mission will be a failure."

"I do understand that." Said Dhali.

"And.....My last moan for the day, honest." Said Nethra. "But Vella mentioned you sleeping during battles. No more naps....There is just the two of us. Until you become the weapon."

"That was then, this is now, Nethra." Said Dhali. "You have my word; no more naps."

"Good."

Nethra had to insist several times, before Dhali pushed one of the guard's swords down behind her belt. It was a decent sword too, obviously only the best for the city guard of Quron. Dhali was likely

to be hard to understand, but there'd be plenty of time to get to know her. All three thousand feet of the tower, or roughly.....A hell of a lot of steps.

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Aeony had come for Faal, almost the instant Nethra had carried Dhali up and away, to the highest of the Shinning Towers. The towers really did shine; Faal had noticed that while he'd been briefly waiting for Aeony and a few of her sisters. The highest tower now shone of silver, but the colour could, and did, frequently change. One of the towers was now rubble, from where one of Galla's devices had brought it crashing down.

"Faal.....I'm told we're delving into archives." Said Aeony.

"Books and records Caspian would kill for.....If you believe the legends." Said Faal.

"Do you believe the archives exist?" Asked Aeony.

The archives of Quron were one of those stories. Some believed the magic users of the city had found and hidden book and scrolls from all over the rifts. Some said they'd managed to acquire forbidden knowledge from the Menderan Empire. Priceless secrets etched into metal pages that never corroded. Others of course, considered the legend to be nonsense.

"Yes, I do believe the archive exists." Said Faal. "Imagine it Aeony, knowledge not only of the worlds that exist now, but the secrets of past worlds. The Menderans called that forbidden knowledge. Muzzie believes it exists and he wants it in our hands, just in case the Quron high council decides to destroy the archive."

"And what Muzzie wants.....He seems to get." Said Aeony. "I have enough sisters with me to deal with a few library guards. So, where are we going, Faal?"

"The Hive Mother gave Muzzie the location and, don't underestimate the guards." Said Faal. "Take me into the air and I'll point out where we're going."

From the air, Faal could see a large part of the army being led by Caspian and Vella. The army loved them both and would probably march into hell, if Caspian the Great, ordered it. Somewhere down there were six thousand warriors, all shouting for Muzzie, their emperor. Some were banging drums and playing large rams horns, as though they were musical instruments. Caspian and Vella were leading them on an attack on the Quron army barracks. Probably outnumbered, but Faal felt sorry for the army of Quron. They had no idea how hard six thousand motivated and dedicated warriors, could fight. Aeony swooped down, but Faal still couldn't see the army well enough to pick out Caspian, or Vella.

"We'll win.....Caspian always wins." Said Aeony.

One of the nine was down there too, though Estrin insisted she was simply observing the battle. More use than it sounded, as the fighters seemed to like seeing her walking among them. They believed her presence shielded them in some way, though there was no evidence of that.

"There, well beyond the City Library." Said Faal, pointing. "Not as far as the grain market.....Can you see a yellow building?"

"I see it." Said Aeony.

"We need to get into that building and find the stairs going down." Said Faal.

The general population were behaving as they did in just about every war. The streets were deserted and they were obviously in their homes, hoping that chaos would go past their door without entering their home. There was a lot of noise at street level, the explosions and noises of battle. Somewhere quite close, a squad of Ubaris were blowing their famous rams horn bugles. Aeony and one of her dark angels, battered against a door until the lock broke. Everyone entered the two floor, yellow building.

"We need some light in here." Said Aeony.

Two of her sisters knew enough magic to create light globes and send them up to the fairly low ceiling. The building looked filthy and deserted. It reminded Faal of the slums in the City of the Lost God.

"Are you sure we're in the right place?" Asked Aeony.

"Yes.....The Hive Mother said the building would look.....Disappointing." Said Faal.

"It looks.....Ready to collapse." Said Itet.

"Spread out everyone.....We're looking for stairs leading down." Shouted Aeony.

It wasn't going to be quick; the building covered a large area. Locked doors needed to be broken down and a few sheltering citizens of Quron, needed to be convinced to seek shelter somewhere else. In the end it was Itet who'd shouted out. When they found her, she was looking very pleased with herself, while pointing at wooden steps going down.

"As stairs go.....These look disappointing." Said Aeony.

At the bottom of the stairs was a door that someone had meant to be taken seriously. A wooden door reinforced by metal bands. Locked of course and the lock looked as serious as the door. Aeony thumped it a few times, without even causing it to rattle.

"Move back, everyone.....I'll use a little fire magic." Said Faal.

He liked fire magic; it had always seemed to come to him naturally. Faal touched the door and created a tiny area of flames. The area grew, until the whole door was nothing but red hot metal bands and burning wood. When the wood collapsed, the door fell apart. No need to wait for everything to cool, dark angels were born out of darkness and flames. The light globes followed them into the room beyond the still smouldering pile of wood and warped metal.

"Be careful.....This looks more like what I was expecting." Said Aeony.

Faal sent another light orb, to bounce along the ceiling to the far end of the underground chamber. A large chamber, with a sinister feel, though it was hard to define that feeling. Nothing of comfort, not even a chair for anyone to sit on. No pictures on walls, no vases or ornaments of any kind. There were two statues though, one on either side of a grand staircase, leading down.

"Two statues of the Old Gods." Said Aeony. "One looks like Sevril-Narge, known to most as the goddess of bugs."

"Not a good sign of what may lie below." Said a dark angel.

"The other statue is Sumahn-Neris." Said Faal. "The deity who first built a city where Annil is today. A good God by all accounts, though they all had their own quirks and foibles. I take a statue of Sumahn as being a good sign."

"Good or bad, we have our orders." Said Aeony. "Down we go, until we reach the bottom, or find the archives of Quron."

It was irresistible not to touch at least one of the statues. Not gold, but the metal had a look of gold about it and Faal picked up an immense age. He touched the statue of Sevril-Narge and there was a slight tingle in his fingers.

"Very old, but this place still has power in its stones." Said Faal. "Be very careful, as we go deeper."

Again, the light globes went with them and spread out over the ceiling of the chamber. There was no mistaking the layout, or the use for an altar with a flame in its centre. It was a temple, a place to worship the great crawling chaos and the eternal flame.

"I'm more tolerant of heresy than I once was." Said Aeony. "This place though.....It reeks of the oldest of evils. It has to be destroyed."



“When the city is ours and it can be done properly.” Said Faal. “I feel the presence of the same evils. There may be a tiny piece of the crawling chaos in here with us. The clerics would encase it in the stones making up the altar. If it was to be let out.....Every living thing on the rift could be tainted by those evils. Wait Aeony and I will help in the destruction. You have my word.”

Would Aeony wait ? Destroying the dark altar came with risks, but he could feel the desire to smash every single thing in the chamber. It was said there had been a Temple of the Flame in Mendera City and that the citizens actually worshipped the crawling chaos. No wonder the Menderan Empire had eventually fallen.

“Very well.....We touch nothing in this temple of darkness.” Said Aeony. “Nothing damaged, not a single finger placed on anything. We’ll go straight through and down the stairs again. We shall return though, I now give my word on that. This temple has to be destroyed.”

The stairs down were to their left and quite close to the altar with the flame. All the dark angels kept as far away from the dark altar, as was possible. Had someone touched something ? It seemed strange to Faal, that as soon as they were at the bottom of the stairs, enemy guards were there....As if waiting for them.

“Guards.....And lots of them.” Shouted Itet.

Tall and muscular, the fighters of Quron were famed for being part Shelzak demon. Most hybrids on the rifts had about a third Dredger in their ancestry. The warriors of Quron were around a quarter Shelzak. It gave them a definite edge, though not when fighting dark angels. Faal saw Aeony use her blade to separate a guard’s head from his neck. Faal produced several more light orbs. The dark angels might like dancing around enemies in the dark, but he wanted to see his foes.

“More of them coming up from below.” Yelled Aeony.

Faal was never cruel for the sake of it. Sometimes though, the situation demanded a massive response. Not fire, though it had been tempting to send a wall of fire to incinerate large numbers of the guards. Instead he used huge amounts of force, to send the guards hurtling into walls and whatever else there might be in the, as yet, unexplored chamber.

“Behind you, Faal.” Shouted a dark angel.

No use in storing a few pre-prepared fire spells, if he wasn’t going to use them. Faal turned and saw a huge guard, about to cleave his skull in two, with a very large double sided axe. Faal pointed his right palm at the guard and released a spell. The guard became a ball of flames, which quickly became a pile of hot dust on the floor.

“Even those a large part Shelzak.....Will burn.” Said Aeony.

Faal thought of himself as being more good than bad, but of course, everyone does. As more guards came up the stairs, he began to use more and more fire against them. He was willing to admit to himself, that when the situation called for the violent death of enemies.....He was rather good at it.

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Runa had been slashed, stabbed and left for dead, by the assassins looking for Muzzie. Some now said Quron had sent the assassins to kill Maya and the child of the Ancient Ones. Whatever the truth, Runa had seen her blood forming a pool on the ground and assumed her days among the living, were over. No miracle had saved her, it had been two young healers sent by a guard who’d noticed she was alive, when all around her were dead.....

“No arguments, Runa.” Said General Dhūlen. “You’re going to battle in the cart, or you’re not going.”

“I just feel guilty.....Taking up the time of the fighters pushing me.” Said Runa.

“You came back from the dead.” Said Dhūlen.

“Not really, just close to death.” Said Runa.

“You know fighters and their superstitions.” Said Dhūlen. “You were reborn, or something like that. You’re considered to be lucky. I could easily find a thousand happy to push you into battle. I think the army can spare a dozen or so. Anyway, you’re in the cart, or back in the stockade.”

Runa had seen Belso being pushed about in a cart and the warriors treating him like some kind of mascot. Runa wanted to avoid that, but the cart was perfect for an archer. An almost inexhaustible supply of arrows were in a barrel behind her and she even had a choice of three excellent bows.

“Sorry General, forgive my whining.” Said Runa. “If your fighters are willing to push me to war, I’d be very happy and proud to be pushed.”

Caspian and Vella were going to take a section of Muzzie’s army and attack the barracks of the Quron army. The bulk of the army would still be with Dhūlen. The general obviously had orders, but was keeping them to himself. Once LLud Narren had broken through the walls, the army was to charge into the great and ancient City of Quron. Muzzie had often talked about reducing the city to rubble, which was a shame. All that history.....Would be gone forever.

Runa could feel it, even while sat in the cart. The ground trembled a little, as an enormous explosion filled the air with sound.

“Is that it.....I can’t see.....Has LLud cracked the walls ?” Asked Runa.

There was a lot of dust swirling about in the distance and Dhūlen refused to speculate. Then one of the scouts using a magnifier, gave the good news.

“Better than a hole in the wall.....LLud has destroyed the main gates.” Shouted the scouts.

Not a charge, not yet. The walls of Quron were some distance away and Dhūlen obviously needed his fighters able to fight once they entered the city. The army left at a fast walk, with General Dhūlen leading them. Runa had expected to be at the rear of the hundred thousand warriors, but her pushers had other ideas. He was there grinning at her, the fighter imprisoned in Tandalla, the one having sex against the wall with a courtesan. Runa couldn’t remember his name, but he remembered her. She’d insisted that he was signed up for Muzzie’s army. As she’d said at the time. “He has plenty of stamina.....That’ll be useful when we attack Quron.”

He was grinning at her, as her pushers kept up with Dhūlen and his field officers. When the pace increased, her pushers seemed to have no problem with keeping up. Albas, that was his name, the man known for eating bugs to survive in Tandalla prison. Remembering his name, made Runa feel comfortable with grinning back at him.

“If I need to use my bow, can you keep my cart nice and steady, Albas ?”

“Yes, no problem.” Said Albas. “Anything for the princess who got me out of Tandalla jail.”

“I’m no princess.”

“You are to us.....Runa, who died and returned from the wastes.” Said Albas.

No use telling him she hadn’t really died. She understood army superstitions far too well to argue the point. Besides, her pushers would try harder if they believed she was some kind of good luck token. At one point, Runa was sure she’d seen LLud by the side of the road. Maya was with him .....That definitely wasn’t supposed to happen. No use wanting to stop, the army was running now....Charging into the city. Her cart was bouncing from side to side, making it impossible to use her bow.

“Don’t worry princess.....We’ll make sure you don’t fall out.” Said Albas.

As they passed through the second wrecked gate, two arrows hit the wooden side of her cart. Not that Albas and her other cart pushers were likely to stop. They were part of it, the wave of Muzzie’s fighters, who were pouring into the City of Quron.

“We’re there, the third and final gate.” Shouted Albas.

Through the destroyed gate and in front of them was the once most beautiful city of the second rift. Now it seemed covered in flames and sooty smoke. Still the army didn't slow down. Albas and her pushers were actually cheering, as her cart trundled along the cobbled main street of Quron.

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