

## City of the Lost God

### Part 1 – Silsk

**“That was the way of the City. Nothing was ever given for nothing.”**



The easiest way to get to the City of the Lost God would be through the rift gate near the abandoned village, but of course no one ever really wants to go there. The creatures that inhabit the City seldom want to live there long, but they're simply not wanted anywhere else. Half breed demons with too much human blood to be tolerated on the lower rifts, the last few living Dark Angels, low level demons who can only survive by using their skills in theft and assassination. These make up the population of the City and many others, oh yes many other strange creatures that simply don't fit in anywhere else.

The abandoned village has been empty for so long that many in the City talk of it as myth, hint that there never were people there, but they're wrong. When humans were in control of the City they lived in the village and worked the land, but they're all now long dead.

On past the village and up a small hill are the main gates to the City. They'd still open if anyone was unwise enough to give them a good hard push. Only the very powerful are likely to be able to enter the gates without being robbed or killed or both and the very powerful have other ways of entry to the City. For the most part people enter the City unwillingly, or at best hesitantly, via the back way through the slums, usually at dead of night.

Ignoring the slums, which anyone with a sense of smell would do, the way in from the main gate, if you were foolish enough to take it, leads past the various traders' stores and boarding houses that are left in the City. Not that the entire City is crumbling! The great and powerful God Tomma-Goran enchanted the stone fabric of the City, granting the structures virtual immortality, but like a much loved and over worn winter coat, the City looks threadbare and grubby.

Ignoring the stores, boarding houses and bordellos, which is by far the wisest thing to do, will bring you to the junction where the right hand path leads to the Shrine of the Dark Angels. Even the ludicrously powerful fear to tread there, so ignoring that path brings you eventually to the entrance to the Great Towers.

You wanted to enter the main doors to the towers ? Oh no, that would bring about almost certain death at the hands, claws, talons or worse of one of the thousands of creatures who have set up temporary quarters in the towers. Temporary you query ? I'm sure it's been mentioned that no one really wants to live a second longer than is absolutely necessary in the City, but sadly for many there is no alternative.

Flying up the tower, which believe me is the only sane way to get to the top, you'll find the last few surviving Dark Angels left in the multiverse. In particular you'll find Silsk just risen from her bed and getting ready for the day. Going in her window, which of course no human would dare to do, unless they were suicidal.....

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“Damn, where is that girl? Ousha !! Get in here Ousha !!” She screams.

Unusually for a Dark Angel Silsk is vain, probably from too much association with humans and she is studying her reflection in a mirror. The lines in the leathery skin of her face seem to displease her.

“Yes mistress?”

A small woman enters and seems to be bowing, until you realise she's badly deformed and her body is permanently twisted. Silsk has often suspected Ousha of being a pure blood human and not the demon hybrid she claims to be, but good help is hard to come by and Ousha is very polite. Silsk turns from the mirror and looks at the sheets on her bed.

"Red dots Ousha, I see red dots." She says.

Very clearly on the sheets can be made out the remains of blood stains. Silsk was a little too energetic with her playmate of a few nights before and he'd lost some blood. Ok, he'd bled quite a bit, but a few extra gold pieces and he went away happy. Now Silsk was looking at the poorly laundered sheets and she wasn't happy.

"If there is a mark on them tonight," she hissed, "you will suffer!"

Ousha shuffled off and started pulling the sheets off the bed, while her mistress watched her in the mirror, fuming. Oh how Silsk would have loved to beat her, bite her, hear those twisted bones crack, but good help was very hard to find. If there was one mark on those sheets though! Then she'd make the fool pay!

"Get out, Get out!" Shouted Silsk as Ousha limped from the room with the sheets.

The dark angel mutters and finishes off adjusting her appearance before reaching into a drawer in her dresser for a small bag. It wouldn't be worth going to see Merrick without his payment. Threats never seemed to work on the hybrid, either the demon side was too strong or the human side didn't care about dying. Silsk had once hung him up by his ankles and cut him so bad he nearly died. In the end, when he'd recovered, he charged her double for her precious ointments.

"To cover the incidentals." Merrick had said.

He had a way with words did Merrick. One day she'd make him pay, just like the lazy slut Ousha, but not today. She pulled herself through the window and let herself drop half the height of the tower before straightening her flight and turning towards the slums. No secret visit this, let the scum who inhabited the slums near the river know who really ran the City.

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The library was still as good as when Tomma-Goran walked the streets of his City, the librarians saw to that. Not that anyone paid them directly for keeping the worms out of the bindings, or the mildew off the human skin some of the books were written on. But knowledge is power and simply knowing where 'the page with the spell of something or other' is had made Adamaz wealthy, very wealthy in fact. He walked slowly through the Deducer section of the library, though after countless millions of years as head librarian he still hated organising the tomes by chaos minor categories.

"Change it if you want. Just so long as you can find my invocations when I need them." Silsk had once said to him.

Adamaz had looked at the thousands of shelves on the fourteen floors of the library tower and of course the two basement levels. He'd worked out that the library had no more than a million books and his team of librarians would take barely five millions years, six million at most, to re-index and move every item in the library. As he was about to issue the order to begin he considered the likely reaction of the dark angels to any delay in obtaining a book they needed.

"The reorganisation can wait for a more suitable time." He'd told his librarians.

His conversion from being a chaos creature to a Diviner had been at the hands of a dark angel and he still had dreams about the pain. Some converts claimed to remember being created, of coalescing out of the mists at the edges of the wastes of eternity, but he just remembered the pain, the hours of constant pain.

Adamaz felt the two healed over holes on the side of his disfigured head and prayed the dreams would stop, but he knew they never would. He arrived at the dusty window in time to see Silsk hurtle in the direction of the slums. Many wanted the dark angels gone, extinct, but he didn't. They brought stability and leadership and without their rule the City would descend into anarchy and anarchy wasn't good for business. He looked about him and realised he'd forgotten why he's walked all the way to the Invoker section.

"A Dredger is at the rear door. A dredger with gold." Caspian told him.

Caspian was a good lad, for a trainee. Most of them just wanted a way to get a free education, learn to read the common tongue and head out of the rifts. But Caspian was different, he showed respect. Adamaz had already decided to teach the boy some real power, give him a good chance of surviving into his twenties.

"Thank you Caspian." He answered.

His legs hurt so badly these days, but he'd probably been dead in any sensible definition of the word for millions of years. Chaos creatures, even converted ones like him seemed to be immune to the dying part of death. Their bodies stopped functioning in the normal manner, but they still remained sentient and active. Some did seem to get a degree of decay, but Adamaz was pleased that so far his flesh remained firm and had the slightly grey sheen it had always had. There were rumours that eventually he'd have an instinctive urge to join the other undead in the catacombs, but perhaps that was all just a silly rumour ?

"You took your time!" Said the Dredger.

Dredger demons were normally the colour of wet mud, but this one was almost pure white. Adamaz frowned and felt things were getting bad when even Dredgers weren't pure bloods.

"Most won't deal with your kind!" Snapped Adamaz.

The Dredger gave him a slight bow and handed him a slip of paper. The head librarian knew most of the requested spells by heart, but he'd still get his assistants to spend hours looking for the original books. The customers expected a bit of fuss, made them consider they'd got their money's worth.

"The raising of Chizzan!?" Said Adamaz looking at the last item.

"Yes. The guy is an out of townner, just give me an invocation of the Marran and he'll never know the difference."

"Eighty gold." Said Adamaz.

The Dredger demon used one of its four arms to search a pouch for the gold, removing a handful of coins which it handed to the librarian.

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Muzzie's wasn't busy, it never was until what passed for daylight on the 1<sup>st</sup> rift had completely turned to darkness. Not that the clientele were heliophobic, well maybe a few were. It was just that most of the regulars tended to think darkness suited their appearance.

"Can I pay in Imperial ?" Asked the stranger.

The few heads turned and examined the stranger, even mentioning the empire could lead to an unpleasant death in the City. Sara didn't want to let Muzzie down, she owed the old heap of bones a lot and the stranger didn't look like anyone the empire would enlist.

"I'll give you the best room we have," she said, "and all meals for ten days and I'll throw in all you can drink, but I'll want twenty imperial."

It was a huge sum ! If the whatever it was the other side of the bar accepted Muzzie would be proud of her. Twenty imperial was enough to buy the whole bar, all one long bar and four tatty rooms of it, but someone had to go into the Holy City to exchange the credits for gold.

“Can you arrange a little company for me ?”

The hood went back to reveal a face of dark skin and wrinkles. The nose was flattened and one ear had a good chunk of it missing, but she'd seen worse. In fact in her days as a courtesan she'd spent the night with far worse, but that was in the past, before Muzzie had rescued her. True Muzzie expected her to share his bed most nights, but that was the way of the City. Nothing was ever given for nothing.

“I can do that, have you anything particular in mind ?”

His eyes looked up at her glowing as red as hot coals. At least she assumed it was a he from the voice, but she still had no idea what he really was. Anyway he was obviously a bit upset by the question.

“A girl of course ! A pretty one.”

So the he was a bit sensitive about certain things, she'd have to be careful of that.

“I know someone, but no rough stuff, she's strictly sucking and fucking only.”

Another glare from the eyes and his hood dropped away from his neck as he rummaged in his clothing, probably for a purse. Sara noticed the scales on his neck that stopped just short of the dark leathery skin on his face. A lot of human in there, but also a lot of something else. Mind you as she caught sight of her profile in one of the bar mirrors she saw her tail swishing about, so who was she to judge. Sara had no idea of her own parentage, but luckily there were those who enjoyed being entertained by a pretty young girl with a tail and unnatural appetites, so she'd never known real hunger.

“This is on account.” He said.

He let a full purse clatter onto the counter and pulled out a large octagonal coin, no doubt the bulging purse held many more. An imperial gold thousand credit coin, not the usual printed note. Rare these, very rare and most of the current occupants of the bar would cut his throat for it. A thousand no less, for that she'd share his bed for the ten days.

“I will want a variety of entertainment and I'll want all my meals brought to my room.”

She leant towards him, his physical appearance now much improved by a purse full of gold. Muzzie would be very pleased with her and there could be more to come. She whispered quite close to his left ear.

“You should be careful about showing a full purse to the people in the City.”

Then she saw the brand. Not a tattoo for the Guild of Thraan as some thought, but a brand burnt deep into the skin. No wonder he wasn't worried about thieves in the night. He caught her reaction and realised what she'd seen.

“For the money I expect my business to remain private.”

“Of course sir.” She replied.

A lie of course, she'd tell Muzzie and within an hour or so the whole City would know a Thraan assassin was staying at Muzzie's. But he must know that ? The Thraan were known for not training up fools.

“Is there a name ? In case visitors ask for you ?” She asked.

There was no register, or any door keys, just a few solid bolts on the inside of the room doors. Not that he looked the sort to leave his valuables lying around.

“Sensan.” He replied.

He pushed the coin across the bar to her and picked up one very battered bag before moving to the stairs on the right of the bar. Everyone had heard the name even though he'd said it softly and

they'd all marked him down as too difficult a target. Sara picked up the coin and entered the back to put it in Muzzie's lock box.

"Sensan himself, head of the guild, we are honoured."

She turned to see Mussaneth Osranetherer, or Muzzie as everyone called because very few could remember his full name and even fewer could pronounce it. He had been staying in the shadows to observe their new paying guest.

"You're back early. I wasn't expecting you until well after dark."

Muzzie or the bag of bones as she affectionately called him was almost a full blood high level demon, with four arms, two very muscular legs and a very feline looking face. Coupled with the red skin and the eight foot height, the bag of bones looked like someone you wouldn't want to pick a fight with. Unfortunately Muzzie was about an eighth Genova and that was enough to warrant instant death on the lower rifts, so like other hybrids he made a home in the City.

"They weren't there ! No sign of a fight, no blood." He answered her.

"Could she have taken them ?" Sara moved her eyes up in the direction of the towers.

"No Silsk always leaves a mess, seems to enjoy everyone seeing her unfinished meal. This family paid well to be brought safely into the City and then didn't show up. Mind you I still have their money."

Muzzie grinned at her and put a huge hand on her left buttock. The Genova part of him had given him some fairly normal sex organs, well normal for a human. Sara smiled back and started to undo her top. Yes it was part of the price for his protection, but she had to admit to a certain affection for the old pile of bones. Later when the opportunity arose she'd get into Sensan's room and try to find out why he was in the City. The information had to be of value to someone.

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Merrick had been a weapon smith, a good one, but like so much in his life that was good he'd just woken up one morning bored with it. His skin had the slight blueish tint of a Moullay demon and most assumed that was where the tail had come from too. But Merrick wasn't sure, in fact if Merrick had one skill that he was truly expert at, it was not being sure about things. There was human in him, quite a lot of human, but he'd never really known either of his parents.

"The bitch is on her way." Said Nethra.

The female was never wrong about these things, so Merrick started getting out the ointments the dark angel had ordered.

"Be careful !"

"Hide Nethra. I don't want her hurting you."

He'd never really been in to having a permanent female companion, but Nethra was even more of a mixture than him. A three foot barbed tail, tiny buds where wings had started to grow but had obviously thought better of it. As he watched her climb into the cellar he got a good look at her curves and realised he could have done a lot worse. Besides the blue tint to her skin was like the steely blue tint on well-made weapons, so how could he resist ?

He pulled the various jars out from the box under the bed and started polishing them. Silsk liked her things to be clean and shiny, the bitch. Why buy from him ? She hated him, had done ever since he moved into the City. The sound of wing beats brought him to the window of the small house just in time to see the dark angel make a smooth and soundless landing.

"Keep hidden." He shouted.

He hadn't needed to look to know Nethra would still be peering through a gap in the cellar trap door and he was rewarded by hearing it thud as it closed. As females went she was the best he could

remember having and he didn't want the dark angel killing her just to add one more regret to his life. There was a gentle knock at the door. So polite for a monster !

"Come in."

He opened the door and as Silsk pulled her wings against her back she almost looked like an attractive female, almost, the talons and the pain they'd caused him killed any lust her nakedness might have invoked. Why naked ? Every other creature in the City covered the essentials, but the dark angels went everywhere showing the world their breasts and the luxuriant dark fur between their legs. They did wear some clothing, but usually it was limited to belts for swords or armour of some kind.

"Thank you Merrick."

Again the politeness. She slowly walked into his home, sniffing the air, showing she knew the female was there. Her long tail entered the house, all six feet of it, then she used the barbed end of it to close the door. Always a neat trick he thought.

"I see you have my ointments."

Everyone in the City knew he sold the best drugs. Fungus from the 3<sup>rd</sup> rift, Pills from Oufan, Unguents from Phlot. All of it designed to give a high, a low or make the libido erupt like a volcano. But only Silsk came to him for human cosmetics and she got through them in huge quantities. He had his contacts, not just in the Holy City as she thought, but among the off world traders who could obtain the best cosmetics ever seen in the City. The contacts were the problem, Silsk wanted to know who they were and he wouldn't tell her.

"Something special from Phlot." He said. "Perfect for your complexion."

"Really !"

He could see the dark angel was genuinely thrilled and started to turn the small, but elegant jar around in her talons. Perhaps the talons had been his undoing ? She'd wanted him and no one ever said to no to being her sexual playmate, not if they wanted to have a reasonable life expectancy. Even now as she came close to him there was no mistaking the tang of roused female in her aroma. The face was leathery but pleasant, the breasts were superb and the legs just kept on going, but he could never get past the talons, even with his eyes closed he imagined hearing them scratching at something. So he'd turned down her advances and now she hated him ! Tell her his contacts and he'd be just another half-eaten carcass on the rifts by morning.

"I brought a little extra gold, in case you had anything else to offer ?" She said.

A talon easily clipped the button off his shirt and started to gently rub the skin on his chest. It would be so easy to give her a couple of hours of rough sex to no longer have to be continually looking over his shoulder, but now on top of the talons there was Nethra. The female who pleased him so much had told him straight.

'Anyone else in your bed and I'll go back to the 3<sup>rd</sup> rift.'

But he had to be careful. The last time he'd been brusque with Silsk she'd left him bloody and hanging by one ankle from his own roof beams.

"I have some gossip. A contact saw someone important enter the City through the lower gate early this morning."

Her tail twitched, never a good sign, but she started to put the various jars into a leather bag she had over her shoulder.

'Made from the skin of the last male to reject me.' She'd once spat at him.

"You mean Sensan ? My people saw him before he reached Muzzie's."

She carefully placed all the jars in her bag and he was prepared for regular but painful ritual. She'd go to leave without paying, he'd grab the bag and then the dark angel would put some more of his blood on the floor. Eventually she'd pay and if she made him miss a few days of work, he'd charge her double. Today though her mind seemed elsewhere as she threw the purse of gold onto his unmade bed.

"If you hear why Sensan is here, let me know. There will be more gold for you." She said.

The creature left, her tail reaching to close the door as he heard her say.

"Thank you."

Always polite was Silsk, probably said thank you after ripping your head from your body. Nethra slowly pulled herself out of the cellar as they heard the steady wing beat of the dark angel heading away. Not towards her tower, but heading deeper into the rift, probably to feed.

"You could have sex with her." Said Nethra.

"Would you forgive me?"

"No. I'd leave you, but you might live to see a few more mornings."

She was right, but then another good thing would be gone from his life to be replaced by yet another regret and he already had a huge collection of regrets. Merrick sat on the bed and poured the gold out onto it. Too much, about twice the amount he was due. Obviously Silsk was hoping for much more than just ointments. Nethra knelt in front of him and put her hands around his face.

"I could go to the Shrine. Get the information she wants?"

He just nodded. The Shrine was a dangerous place, but Nethra had made offerings there before and the information obtained had always been correct.

"I'll need gold for the offerings." She said.

He waved his hand at the many and assorted gold coins on the bed and she took just three of the smallest. So like her to take so little when he'd gladly have given her half of what was there.

"I'll go tonight."

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Muzzie hated leaving his bar at the busy period, but Sara was a good girl, she'd look after the place. He walked confidently down the almost pitch black streets of the old town, relying on his demon sight to find the way. Not that he could be too confident, it was important not to show fear, but there were always wandering creatures in the old town who didn't give a fuck about his hard as nails reputation.

He noticed a warm body shine out like a beacon a bit further down the street and then a cry, a female cry. Damn ! The family didn't show up earlier and now one of his regular contacts looked to have been attacked. Muzzie crossed the street in silence, a silence that had surprised many for such a large creature. In front of him was a cold demon body that gave out no heat, with a human female over its shoulder.

"What have you got there friend?" He asked.

The creature looked straight at him and pulled open its hood. A Shelzak, it had to be a fucking Shelzak ! Hard everywhere, even their dicks had a hard outer shell. Muzzie was no coward, but mixing it with a Shelzak, on his own wasn't his idea of a fun night.

"Let me see her face and you can be on your way."

No reply, nothing, not one word. The demon opened its cloak to reveal the handle of an axe, a handle that it began to fondle meaningfully. Muzzie couldn't help noticing the glint from its tough outer shell in the small amount of light from the glow of the slums. Was the woman that important to him ? Muzzie had other contacts and he'd always said that no woman was worth dying for.

Perhaps it was the damned Genova side giving him a conscience again. Of all the things to be in the City, being part Genova or Angel as some called them was probably the worst.

“Out of my way bar tender.”

He had taken out a Shelzak on his own once, but that one had been smaller and he'd been well armed and he had to admit far younger at the time. A very powerful leg took a step in his direction.

“Just let me see her. Just one quick look and we can avoid this.”

The creature put the woman on the ground and Muzzie was certain it was Lilleth. The curve of the legs, the way her back curved once you looked past the exquisite rear. Not that he'd ever known her in that way, but he still had hopes.

“Last chance half breed. Out of my way !”

Even for a Shelzak he looked tough. An external hard shell that they had to periodically shed to grow, spines everywhere even in places that looked inconvenient and then there were the muscles.

Muzzie had seen one of these guys knock down a solid stone pillar that got in its way. Muzzie took off his own cloak and threw it up against a wall.

“Sorry. Looks like we're going to have to fight this out.” He said.

The old town was mostly made up of ruined temples and other buildings from the legendary golden age of the City. Muzzie ran into the ruined temple to his left and ducked behind a solitary surviving stone pillar. Which was just as well, as the demon's double bladed axe hit the pillar instead of his neck.

“You're pathetic.” Shouted the demon, “Stand and fight me.”

Someone had paid the Shelzak to grab Lilleth, that's what they did. Not much brain, but pay a Shelzak enough and they didn't stop until they'd completed the job. This one was now angry and all thought of the woman and its boss was gone from its head. As Muzzie saw the wicked yellow glow of rage in its eyes he knew the creature wasn't going to stop until it had stomped his body into bloody mush.

“Come on then.” He said.

His short sword looked like a toy compared to the demon's axe, but he'd learned how to use it in numerous wars and he'd killed a Shelzak before. As the creature came in to attack him he stepped inside the blow and aimed at a soft spot he knew about. Just under the upper arms of the demon was an area where the outer carapace didn't quite meet the shell of the arm.

Muzzie expertly stabbed into the gap and his razor sharp sword skidded off armour. As the demon turned and the axe hit his back Muzzie knew he was in trouble. He'd committed the mortal sin of underestimating his opponent. The axe bit deep into his back and Muzzie fell into a heap on the floor. The expected blow to the back of his head never came and as he dragged himself to his feet his opponent was quietly waiting for him to get up, the bastard was actually grinning.

“You're going to die slow.” It said.

Muzzie decided on one last try and did a pretty good job of aiming the sword for the gap in the shell of the Shelzak at its neck. Again the blade just found armour to skid off and the demon followed up with his axe. This time it really hurt ! Muzzie felt the axe go through the flesh of his hip and hit bone. Luckily he fell against one of the few remaining walls of the temple and pure will power stopped him falling over. The Shelzak had dropped the axe and was pulling a knife from its belt and seemed to be undecided about which bit of him to cut off first. Without saying a word the creature moved closer and aimed the blade at his chest.

“Who's there ?”



A voice from the corner of the room, from a body under a pile of rags. The old town was the home to thousands of wretched creatures, most too disfigured by their strange genetic makeup to be tolerated even in the City.

“Shut up rag bag ! Nothing to do with you.” Shouted the Shelzak

Muzzie tried to move forward, but the floor seemed very slippery, then he realised the floor was covered in yellow blood, his blood.

“Stay put !”

The creature grabbed him by the throat and aimed the knife at his eye, his left eye. Then from the street there came the sound of a woman sobbing. The demon seemed to remember his captive and turned to get a good look at the street. The woman was indeed showing signs of life and beginning to get up onto her knees.

Muzzie wasn't feeling good, in fact he knew he was close to death. So why not give it a try ? His Genova side had been nothing but a fucking handicap all his life, but surely it was worth a try. In his current light headed condition it seemed quite sensible to raise his right hand and point his index finger at the creatures head. He concentrated and tried to pull strength from the awkward side, the side that kept saddling him with a conscience.

“Fuck me !”

Was all he could think of saying when the creatures head exploded. True he'd have been more impressed its entire body had crumbled to dust, but he'd settle for an exploded head.

“Muzzie !”

The pile of rags was calling to him and a face was appearing. Muzzie fell to his knees and noticed the pool of yellow blood was now covering a very large area.

“Muzzie stay awake !”

The rags had walked over to him and were now a beautiful woman, who he recognised. For some reason all he could think of was his nice new cloak he'd left outside and he wondered if anyone would steal it when he died.

“Muzzie it's Lilleth, don't go to sleep. Stay awake.”

If the rags were Lilleth, who was the woman in the street ? He looked to his right and the woman was on her knees and smiling at him. A gorgeous red head, he'd always had a thing about a huge mop of red hair. Pity he was dying. The last thing he remembered was the sticky feeling of his own blood against his face as he passed out.

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Nethra had the required spell, it had been in a box under the bed for over a year, since the last time Merrick had needed help. Despite sharing his bed Nethra had no illusions about his character and she'd known that sooner or later she'd need the spell.

“Two copies ?!” Adamaz had asked her.

No one was sure why spells only worked on the parchment Adamaz wrote them on, but it was just another fact of life in the City. The spell was expensive and dangerous as it involved visiting the shrine at night and no one did that lightly. She felt the crumpled parchment in her pocket and it felt a little damp. She tried to keep the anxiety out of her mind that after a year in damp box it might not work. Just the ingredients from Galla to buy now and as she approached her premises in the southern end of the old town she realised she was looking forward to seeing her.

She thumped her fist on the hard black wooden door and realised that of course everyone liked Galla. That's what empaths do, they make you like them.

“Come in child.” Said Galla

Nethra followed her, aware that liking the woman was falling for her tricks, but even though she knew the next client might be buying a slow acting poison for an unloved one, she still couldn't help liking her. Galla looked old, very old and people talked of her having the same premises for a very long time. The old empath looked human, but the small patches of green skin on her neck and the extra finger on each hand hinted at something else in her ancestry.

"How is the handsome Merrick?"

Normally Nethra would have settled into the very comfortable chair, accepted a drink and spent an hour or maybe two with Galla, but the shrine was an hour's walk, right at the other side of the old town, so she remained standing.

"He's doing fine Galla."

The old woman looked at her, really looked at her and Nethra realised Galla would know that Merrick wasn't fine and that she was about to do something very dangerous.

"So how can I help you child?" Asked the empath.

Nethra pulled the crumpled spell from her pocket and noticed mildew on a corner of it and once again she offered a silent prayer to the lords of chaos that the parchment would still work.

"I need the offerings to go with this spell."

She passed the parchment to the old woman, with its list of acceptable offering listed on the back.

"Again! It seems only yesterday you were here buying these."

"It was a year ago." She quietly replied.

She felt her face blush, it seemed almost an admission that Merrick was a failure, her being here again. The old empath reached for her hand and held it softly.

"You know you really should leave him and go back to the rifts."

"I know. If he fucks Silsk I will."

As Galla turned to her beloved shelves full of bottles, boxes and jars of all sizes and colours, Nethra saw the line of what looked like feather quills on the back of her head. Maybe there wasn't as much human in Galla as she'd once thought.

"The Telick root is no problem, but the blood of a newborn is expensive, much more expensive than last year."

Galla looked at her and Nethra was glad she'd added some gold of her own to her purse before leaving home. She pulled the full purse from inside her coat and put it on the table.

"I have enough gold."

The old woman smiled and reached for a bottle with a sealed top for the blood, then she filled various paper packets with an assortment of what looked like dried herbs.

"When will you visit the shrine?"

"Tonight."

Nethra noticed the old woman reach for a large chest on an upper shelf and remove something metallic.

"There is something out there, by the entrance to the catacombs." Said Galla.

The empath returned with two sealed bottles and a few paper packets which she placed on the table and then she added a metallic object to the items. One of the bottles was the blood of the newborn.

Newborn what? Nethra had never really wanted to ask, there can be a certain comfort in ignorance.

The other bottle was Netric oil, a standard ingredient in most rituals. She was going to trust Galla to have put the right herbs and fungae into the various packets, but the metallic object mystified her.

"For protection. Put it in your pocket." Said Galla.

Nethra picked up what looked like a large coin and realised it was a very rare and expensive metal icon of chaos.

“I could never afford.....” She started.

“Give it back to me when you next come, but take it child. The creature out there is a chaos inducer, have you any idea what a touch could do to you, just a single touch ?”

Nethra put the ingredients into her bag and then put the icon deep under her clothing and into the pouch against her skin that held the demon blade that few knew she carried. Nethra knew what a touch from a chaos creature could do.

When she was a child on the rifts, still with the group of nomadic half breeds that had taken her in. There had been a hunter who hadn't moved quickly enough when a chaos creature had passed by. A single finger had barely brushed his cheek, yet when they'd found him it was some time before even his own children would admit he was their father.

The face was still his, but that wasn't a blessing as he screamed to be killed and put out of his pain. The back of his head was now like that of an insect and his back now had two shiny black wings that vibrated all the time, as though expecting to be needed for a flight. Worst of all was the black fibrous tail that now extended from his lower back and seemed to have a stinger on the tip.

“Kill me, for pities sake kill me. I can't stand the pain.” He kept telling them.

The two impossibly different bodies couldn't coexist and blood, of a kind, though much of it was green, was seeping from wherever the insect body joined the human. Not that the hunter had ever been more than half human, but at least the other demon half had been reasonably compatible.

After a few hours of listening to the screams and watching infections begin in the grotesque perversion of a body, the tribe had agreed and the headman had killed him.

Galla felt the street in the way a really good empath can and once she was satisfied no one was out there waiting for Nethra to leave she opened the door for her.

“Good luck child.”

Nethra kept to the walls and quickly vanished into the shadows as she made her way towards the Shrine of the Dark Angels.

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Part 2 will be posted 30<sup>th</sup> November

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