

City of the Lost God

Part 21 – Lair of the Revenant

“There were rumours that he shared a bed with Silsk, that he made her fill the towers with screams of pleasure.”



It was quite dark and for a few seconds Caspian wondered if the portal he'd chosen had dumped them somewhere in the ruined cellars. They stood in a group, all with wounds and all carrying packs full of looted gold.

“We're home.” Said Vella.

They were in the square next to the portal room, the portal that would take Caspian and Vella back to the Dome. It was quite unreal to be suddenly out of the danger they seemed to have been in for so long.

“There were times when I never thought I'd see these streets again.” Said Merrick.

“Not everyone came home.” Said Vella

The only living thing to be seen was Podd, pushing his heavy cart, doing his nightly rounds of the City. Waide dropped her pack and went over to see the taciturn bone collector.

“I should go back to the tavern,” said Vella, “if I still have a job to go back to ?”

“Adamaz has probably been looking for me. At least come with me and get cleaned up.”

“Alright, but I can't stay long.”

“Nethra probably thinks I'm dead in a ditch somewhere.” Said Merrick.

Waide was limping back to them, waving her arms and looking quite excited. No one felt inclined to go to her, so they waited for her to approach.

“We made it back in time.” She said.

“What do you mean ?” Asked Caspian.

Waide was actually laughing too hard to tell him, he had to wait for her to calm down.

“It's just before light on the day you're due back at the Library Caspian.”

“You must have made a mistake.” Said Merrick.

“No, Podd never makes silly errors and he confirmed the day, twice.”

They all just looked at each other, almost disbelieving Podd, although they knew him to be reliable.

“All that in just three days.” Said Vella.

“At least you don't have to rush back to Muzzie's now.” Said Caspian.

They didn't even notice that Podd was now stood very near them, for such a huge creature he could move with surprising stealth.

“You should know something.” He said.

They all just stared at him, it needed to Vella to ask the obvious question.

“What do we need to know Podd ?”

“I'm not asking where you've been, but you're not the first I've seen appearing here, appearing out of nowhere.”

He turned, looking at them each in turn.

“You should know that some in the City felt the disturbance of the creature in the cellar and they felt it die. Something never intended to die has died.”

He scratched his head, as though trying to work out what they could have done in the cellars.

“She heard its call, the one at the top of the tower. You can expect there to be consequences, bad consequences.”

He started to walk away from them, heading back to his cart. But they heard him call.

“You can’t kill the un-killable and expect no consequences.”

Ash joined him and the bone collector pushed his cart down the street, in the direction of old town.

“That’s the most I’ve ever heard him say. I think I need to get home and hide everything that’s in my pack.” Said Merrick.

Waide simply went. She walked between two old buildings and disappeared into the darkness.

Merrick picked up his pack and he too vanished into the surrounding streets. Caspian made the correct sign on the wall of the building and he and Vella entered the portal room.

“Are we in trouble ?” Asked Vella.

“No. Silsk would never dare to upset Adamaz. The dark angels are powerful, but they need the library.”

“But poor Merrick, she’d enjoy an excuse to kill him.”

Caspian didn’t want to answer, he already suspected that Merrick would be hanging from chains in the tower fairly soon.

“We have to hide everything and get ready to deny ever being in the cellars.” He said.

“She’ll torture him, won’t she Casp ?”

“He needs to hide, he knows that.”

~ ~

At first Muzzie was careful about movement in the tunnel, but then he realised it had been there for many years and was unlikely to collapse.

“It smells of death and shit.” Said Lilleth.

Muzzie still took the lead, wondering how quickly he could select and use a spell from the Hand of Arcadis, if he had to.

“Have you any idea where it might lead to ?” He asked.

“No, Louelle and the rest of the underground avoid this area.”

“That’s comforting.”

Another twenty yards and the tunnel broke through into what looked like a basement. There were pipes everywhere, which were unusual in the City, where even the rich relied on wells for water.

Lilleth slapped one of the pipes with her hand and it sounded hollow.

“Looks like they had clean water coming in and the sewage piped out.”

Muzzie grinned at her.

“So we’re talking real old City wealth. We’re talking about some good loot.”

“Unless someone already took it all.”

They found the first body jammed under a wide sewage pipe. It was just a skeleton and a few rags, but it looked to have been there for years.

“A hybrid,” said Lilleth, “she might have died two years ago, or a hundred. Once the scavengers get to work on the flesh..... All you get left is bones and teeth.”

Stone steps went up from the cellar and they were made from good quality stone. Only the very wealthy could afford such steps from a cellar that only the servants ever saw.

“Another one.” Said Muzzie.

The yellow glow from their lamps picked up the body at the side of the steps. A male this times and once again, just a skeleton of cracked bones remained.

“We should go back and come back better prepared.” Said Lilleth.

Muzzie just kept moving forward up the steps, until they found the heavy metal door that gave access to the rest of the building.

“Muzzie ! We have no food or water and our lamps are half empty.”

“But you know what I’m looking for. My brother Gesse might be here, I feel that he is. His body probably waits to be found in the rooms above..... I owe him a decent burial.”

There was no visible lock, so he pushed the door, but it wouldn’t budge. Muzzie leant on it and Lilleth reluctantly helped. No matter how hard they pushed the door it refused to move.

“Now we have to go back. We’ll need tools and a few extra strong backs.”

Muzzie lifted his arm and felt in his mind for suitable spells. He was getting better at selecting the right areas of his memory and quickly found a force spell.

“Step back a bit.”

The door didn’t just open, it came off its strong hinges and flew into the room beyond. Muzzie gave Lilleth one of his best grins.

“I can also do a decent light spell once the lamps run out.”

“Fine, you’re obviously determined to go on. But you’ll owe me for this Mussaneth, you’ll owe me a huge favour one day.”

They stepped through the wrecked doorway and into the room beyond.

~ ~

The large marquee in his back garden had cost quite a lot of money, but Babaef decided it was money well spent. Lagertha had found the seller in old town, she was becoming far more useful than he’d anticipated.

“It’s perfect my dear,” he told her, “everyone can assemble away from the weather and the gaze of inquisitive neighbours.”

Over forty people were in the huge tent, but that included his servants and quite a few women who’d come to see their men set out. Babaef had thought of banning the guards from inviting loved ones, but as Lagertha had pointed out;

“It’s going to be a circus anyway and it’ll improve their morale.”

Everywhere he looked there were men fitting weapons onto belts, or packing rations into the carts. Babaef had wanted them to just carry packs, but it was obvious they’d never be able to carry all the excavating tools. Lagertha had managed to buy two lights carts, but that had meant hiring men to pull them. His small expedition now numbered twenty one.

“They can’t put perishable food in the carts Norrex !” He shouted.

Norrex was now proving to be of more use than Chillan. The elderly wizard was extremely knowledgeable on arcane subjects, but Norrex could get a roomful of men to follow his orders. Norrex barked at the man and the offending rations were removed from the cart. Babaef noticed two young children hugging their father. Children indeed ! It had become a circus. He picked up a shovel and banged it with his sword to get attention.

“We have a job to do. All those not going with us should leave now as we need to do the final checks.”

There were no final checks, he wanted to avoid a crowd of family members following them through the City.

“You heard,” said Chillan, “this is no place for wives and children....even other peoples wives.”

The joke was aimed at Pontus, who seemed to have at least three women who considered themselves to be his wife. Pontus was the one genuine military trained soldier they had, so Babaef

had made him commander of the guard. Babaef had things to do, he wanted to say goodbye to his daughters and get Shadow into her travelling case.

"We leave in thirty minutes" he told Norrex, "make sure they're ready."

"Yes master."

Babaef found his daughters dressed in their best outdoor clothes, complete with very cute but impractical back packs.

"We're going with you father." Said Kapes.

As usual his youngest daughter was doing the talking, while the eldest, Itet just glared defiance at him. Telling them it was too dangerous wouldn't work, he'd already tried that.

"There aren't enough supplies to feed another two." He said.

"You always say we don't eat enough to feed a bird father."

"I have a bag of berries." Added Itet.

He could understand, he was even proud of their courage. Their father was going and many of the guards they'd begun to know. They didn't get on too well with Lagertha, but it was another familiar face that would be missing from the family home.

"Let them come dear, I'll watch over them."

He hadn't heard Lagertha come into his daughters study room.

"They can stay at the camp site with me. I have no intention of doing any digging." She added.

Normally he wouldn't have discussed the dangers in front of the girls, but on his occasion, it seemed necessary.

"But there are forces at these old temples Lagertha, the humans left guardians."

"I can't see these guardians bothering two little girls my dear."

"We're not little girls !" Shouted Kapes.

Babaef laughed and as he laughed he changed his mind. It would be nice to have his daughters with him and the distance to be walked wasn't great. They could always sit on top of the carts if they became tired.

"You'll have to wade across the great river and sleep in a tent. And there will be nowhere to wash properly." He said.

He might as well have told them they were going to see Dragons. To young girls it was all an adventure, especially the non-washing part.

"Then we can go father ?" Asked Kapes.

"Yes you can."

~ ~

"Well yes, it is a reasonable question Caspian. It's just not one I was expecting."

Caspian had asked Adamaz for a private word and the head librarian had chosen a quiet corner of the deserted refectory. It was an odd place to discuss private matters, surrounded by empty dinner tables and the smell of that morning's breakfast.

"I've known Vella quite some time now and it..... just seems right."

"Yes, but marriage Caspian ! Have you asked her yet ?"

A librarian entered the refectory and smiled at Caspian, but then noticed Adamaz and left.

"No. I thought it best to find out if it was allowed first. I don't wish to leave the library."

"Do you have reason to think she'll accept ?"

"Yes, I'm certain she will."

After all they'd been through he had no doubt that Vella was his soul mate and he knew she felt the same way. Adamaz looked deep in thought, so he waited patiently.

“You were thinking of her living in the Dome with you..... as a married couple ?”

“Yes. I wouldn’t want my wife living at Muzzie’s. It has a bit of a reputation.”

“Quite, yes you couldn’t have her living there.”

Adamaz stared out of the window and nodded his head. Caspian heard him muttering, but children was the only word he could make out. Caspian had planned to ask Vella to marry him, but the conversation with Podd had caused him to advance his plans. All the time Vella lived at the tavern she was vulnerable to Silsk and who knew what other dangers. If she accepted his proposal, he’d move her into the Dome the same day.

“Would she still work at Muzzie’s ?” Asked Adamaz.

“No. I have enough money, she won’t need to work.”

Adamaz slowly rocked back and forward on the hard refectory chair and there was more muttering.

“There have been families in the Dome before Caspian. It’s rare, usually apprentices leave and then start a family. The older librarians tend to take up.....other interests. But you have your rooms in a secluded part of the Dome, with spare room for children.”

“We er..... children have never been discussed.”

Adamaz actually laughed out loud.

“My boy, trust me. Marry a pretty girl like Vella, bed her every night and there will be children.”

“Vella is careful, she has creams and herbs to prevent unwanted children.”

Adamaz actually held his arm.

“I’ve never been married Caspian, but I’ve watched how people live for a very long time. There are few, if any unwanted or accidental children. When Vella thinks the time is right, she will have children and don’t expect her to ask you first.”

“So it’s alright for me to marry Vella and bring her here ?”

Again Adamaz chuckled, which wasn’t an agreeable sound.

“Yes you may, the girl seems to live here most of the time anyway. But there will be children and you must keep them under control.”

“Thank you.”

“In a few years I will announce that you are to take over the library Caspian. Then you will be soaked in the old magic and live to an immense age. Vella won’t live to an immense age.... You must prepare for that pain.”

Adamaz was holding his arm very firmly and obviously expected a reply.

“I love Vella, but I do realise there will be other loves, perhaps other marriages. I’m not like you, sometimes I wish I was. I need the companionship of a female.”

“I was right to select you as my successor. Sometimes your wisdom surprises me boy. Now you can resume your duties.”

Caspian had only gone a few feet when he heard the slight cough that meant Adamaz had something further to say. He turned, expecting another question about Vella.

“Before you go. I won’t ask you about the mark on your cheek, or why you were in the cellars with Merrick. But others are showing an interest, others that it’s unwise to upset. My advice is to avoid Merrick in future and restrict your activities to within the walls of the Dome for a while.”

Caspian almost fainted, how much did the head librarian know ?

“I will, I promise.”

He turned and wanted to run, but didn’t. That was it ! He’d bring Vella into the Dome and they’d both remain there until Merrick either fled the City or died. Caspian calmed down by the time he reached his desk in the library. He had hired Merrick, he was responsible for him and the death of

two of his helpers. He'd take one last trip into the slums that night, he owed it to Merrick to warn him that he was in serious trouble.

~ ~

Bailig had awoken and transformed into the beast without realising what he was doing. He was injured and needed to eat, it was an unconscious act. The transformation had been quick, but incredibly painful, the beast was howling in agony by the time he walked on four legs. He'd fed on the body without registering that it was one of his guards. He was Bailig on some level, but he was also the beast and it had far simpler motivations. In many ways its motives were purer. If it was hungry it ate, if it was threatened it killed, if it was none of those it found somewhere to sleep. He'd eaten several pounds of meat from the body of the guard and simply curled up and slept. He was himself again, transformed in his sleep, when he felt someone pulling at his arm.

"Sir, sir !"

He found Deni pulling at his arm and holding a jug of ale. Behind her several of his guard were wrapping the body in sheets.

"What is it girl ?"

He drank the ale, though it couldn't take the taste of raw flesh from his mouth.

"She said to leave you until you called for me, but the body can't be left here, it has to be taken away and buried."

The fog was lifting from his mind, he remembered Galla and the pain of whatever she was doing to his face. His face, of course his ruined face. He put his fingers to where the terrible wound had been and his face felt healed.

"Fetch a mirror Deni."

There already was one on the table where Galla had mixed her concoction. He looked into the polished metal and his face was actually better than he remembered. The scars left from a skin infection when he was a child had gone, as had a hunting scar on his neck.

"You look younger sir." Said Deni.

"What else did Galla say ?"

"Nothing. She just left the note and went home."

The note, he'd seen a note in amongst the blankets he'd pulled off himself. He read it and understood it only too well. He knew that without some help from Maya, he was unlikely to survive long as a Kveld. The hunters he'd travelled with would now hunt him. If he was lucky he'd become an outcast, feeding on hill farmers and living in caves. Maya lived in cities, her life seemed almost normal.

"The room will need cleaning Deni and there are repairs that need to be done."

"I'll make sure it's done sir."

He realised he was naked apart from the blanket around him and sent Deni for clean clothes. He felt no embarrassment dressing in front of her, she'd been his lover, on and off, for over three years.

"Did any of the staff run away ?" He asked.

"No sir. You pay well and jobs aren't easy to come by. And if I may say so sir, you're not as strange as many in the City."

He laughed and hugged her, kissing her on the cheek.

"Deni, promise me you'll always be honest with me."

"I will sir."

He did up his boot laces and he was ready to leave.

"I may be gone for a day or so. Don't let silly rumours start among the staff."

Deni was looking hurt and turning away from him.

“You’re going after her, the one who hurt you, aren’t you ?”

“Yes, but only because she has knowledge that I need.”

He didn’t say anymore. Bailig left by the back door and found where Maya had killed and eaten part of one of his guards. The body had been taken away, but her scent was still there, it seemed to cover everything. He didn’t just want knowledge, even in human form he wanted her. The memory of her was driving him crazy, her scent in the bushes was driving him insane with lust. Bailing yelled from the pain and he was back as the beast. He silently left the lanes and went in search of Maya, the Kveld he intended to take as his mate.

~ ~

The room seemed to be a servant’s area, with cheap floor tiles and walls left as plain unpainted plaster. There had been furniture and cupboards, but everything had been destroyed. There were also at least a dozen bodies in the room in various stages of decomposition.

“I don’t think many looters leave here alive.” Said Muzzie.

“Someone jammed the door shut from this side.”

Muzzie checked every body for the size and physiology that would indicate his brother, but they were all quite ordinary hybrids. The stairs in front of them were blocked with fallen masonry, so they headed through an open door and into the kitchens.

“This must have been quite a mansion once.” Said Lilleth.

No one had lit the massive ovens for hundreds of years, perhaps thousands. Everything looked ruined by looters and the natural ravages of time. No metal plate was undented; no pan had a straight handle. It was almost as though someone had taken delight in wrecking the enormous kitchens.

“You could have cooked a meal for hundreds in here.” Said Muzzie.

He took a sniff of the air and walked towards the door at the far end of the kitchen.

“The smell of revenant is getting stronger,” he said, “we just need to keep following it.”

They were in a corridor with wrecked store rooms on either side. In front of them a set of narrow stairs led up to another solid metal door.

“At least this one is open.” Said Lilleth.

There were no clues to the use of the room above, but it was once again full of wrecked cupboards and furniture.

“Still no windows,” said Muzzie, “I’m beginning to think nothing above ground is still standing.”

“You might be right. I know most of the hidden parts of old town, but I’ve never heard of this place.”

Without warning a metal pot flew through the air, narrowly missing Lilleth, before hitting a wall and crashing to the ground. After the quiet since they’d entered the building, the noise was shocking.

Before they could react, the door leading from the room slammed and they heard it being bolted from the other side.

“We seem to have upset someone.” Said Muzzie.

“Do you smell that ?”

“Yes, I think we’ve found the revenant.”

“Why didn’t it just try to kill us ?”

As they approached the door, the smell of corruption was overpowering. The door wasn’t metal, just an ordinary wooden door that was cracking and showing signs of its immense age. Muzzie lifted his hand and aimed his palm at the door.

“Are you ready ?” He asked.

Lilleth held her sword with both hands.

“You are really going to owe me for this, but go on.”

The door crumbled rather than hurtling inward, but the effect was the same, they now had an open doorway. They cautiously stepped through and there was no crazed revenant waiting to ambush them. It was just another corridor, but the stairs up were completely blocked by heavy blocks of stone. Muzzie pointed at the set of double door at the far end of the corridor.

“He has to be in there.”

“Might be a she.”

Muzzie nodded, she might be right. There were two more bodies in the corridor, but neither was Muzzie’s brother. He tried a handle of the double doors and it moved, just a little, but they weren’t locked or bolted.

“I’ll get a spell ready, you open the doors.”

“What sort of spell ?”

Muzzie gave her a huge grin.

“Something massive !”

Lilleth pushed the doors and the room beyond seemed to be the remains of a family temple. Most of the chairs had been destroyed, but the large metal candle sticks were still there and the altar at the far end.

“Get behind me Lilleth.”

She didn’t need much encouragement, the creature stood in front of the altar would have tested the courage of a regiment of Shelzak demons. Revenants tend to be what they were in life but bigger. A child will come back the height and weight of an adult. The creature in front of them was at least twelve feet tall and broad with it. Muscles rippled in places where most creatures didn’t have places. Muzzie almost released the spell, but the monster decided to speak. Its mouth was a mass of rotting flesh, but the words were quite clear.

“Why did you come here Muzzie ? I never wanted you to see me like this.”

Muzzie let the spell dissipate and approached the creature, Lilleth following close behind.

“It can’t be you.” He said.

“I heard you coming in the tunnels, could have killed you both ten times over. Why did you have to unblock the door ?”

Muzzie hugged the revenant, even though he gagged on the rank smell of corruption that hung over the creature. He turned towards a very confused looking Lilleth.

“Lilleth, this is my brother, Gesse.”

~ ~

He’d wanted to avoid a scene like the circus leaving town, but that was what he’d ended up with. His daughters were at the front giggling, then came two heavy carts, then the guards in various different uniforms and finally there was Lagertha and her servant at the rear. Norrex and Chillan were stood by his front door and had yet to join the group.

“They look like a band of strolling minstrels.” Babaef muttered to no one in particular.

All the expense and hassle of buying in different store, so as not to cause undue attention was a waste of time. Babaef realised he might as well have hired a town crier to announce their departure on an expedition.

“It might be for the best,” said Chillan, “people will think it’s just a family excursion.”

Babaef looked into the front bars of Shadow’s carry case and she made her familiar purring sound at him.

“You will be free to wander once we arrive at the ancient temple.”

He was sure his pet understood, she pushed her nose through the bars and he rubbed her cheek with his finger. Better than all the guards, more ferocious than a wounded Jangar. He'd tell Shadow to keep a special watch over his beloved daughters.

“We may as well get started.” He called to the assembled group.

As Babaef walked to the front and joined his daughters, the cart handlers pushed the heavily laden carts and the whole expedition began the two or three day journey to the ancient temple built by the humans.

“Don't shout to the other children girls.”

It was no use, they ignored him and waved to and shouted at every child in every garden they passed. He'd often threatened to beat some obedience into his children, but they'd realised they were just empty threats at a very young age. By the time they were on the main road into the City they had a good twenty children and the same number of bored servants following them.

“If any are still following when we get to bone yard, I expect you to discourage them.” He said to Norrex.

“Yes master.”

By the time they passed the guild building, merchants trying to sell the group produce had added to the circus and Babaef had given up all pretence of a quiet exit from the City.

~ ~

Merrick wasn't sure if Nethra would be at home, her day rarely seemed to coincide with his. When Merrick was spending a night bringing migrants into the City, Nethra was at home in bed. While he slept during the day, she was helping Galla treat the poor in the slums.

“Where have you been ?” Asked Nethra.

She flung her arms around him as though she hadn't seen him in years, but it had been almost ten days since they'd shared a bed. He kissed her and threw his two heavy packs onto the ground.

“Look in these.” He said.

He watched as she opened one pack and then the other. Nethra was obviously amazed by the ornaments of pure gold, even if they were bent and buckled. She picked up a heavy statue of a two headed creature, made from the purest of soft yellow gold.

“It's so heavy,” she said, “this alone could sell for enough so that we could move out of the slums forever.”

“Or take that trip to Quron we've always been wanting to take.”

She was picking the gold from amongst the items in his packs and found a shirt covered in blood. He cursed himself for not going through his packs first and throwing it away.

“We could start at Quron and do the whole of the pilgrim's trail,” he said, “spend two years, maybe three years over the trip to Tandalla.”

The underwear wasn't his, it was Sólí's, he must have used the bloody garment to pack out the gold. At the time everything seemed bloody, but back in his home it seemed horrific in the hands of the woman he loved.

“What happened Merrick ?” Nethra asked.

“I was going to tell you. There was a problem with the job..... it would be a good idea if we left the City for a while.”

More dirty clothing came out of his packs and more gold, until the inside of their humble home looked like the tomb of a long dead King. Even Merrick hadn't seen the amount of gold in his packs, everything in the cellars had been so hurried.

“We could stay in Tandalla Nethra. Never come back, just like we’ve often talked about.”

Nethra was crying now, her whole body shaking with each sob.

“It was you wasn’t it ? You caused the disturbances beneath the tower that had the dark angels so agitated.”

He wanted her to be happy, but she obviously wasn’t. He just nodded at her, unable to understand why she was crying.

“Of course we have to go to Tandalla my love,” she said, “we have to leave now. Pick up what we treasure most and run, or we shall certainly be dead by tomorrow.”

Merrick had many and varied faults and one of them was an inability to see the reality of situations. As he held a sobbing Nethra it began to dawn on him that having so much gold that he couldn’t explain might be a bad thing.

“Perhaps you’re right Nethra, we’ll pack and leave the City.”

She slapped him hard across the face.

“You fool Merrick. It’s not just the dark angels looking for whoever raided the towers, but every creature in the City who felt the disturbance. Sorcerers, priests of dark gods, chaos creatures, even that damn librarian. They’re all looking for whoever it was and you bring home more gold than Nigon himself probably owned.”

Nethra started to pack her clothes into various bags.

“I’ll buy a cart,” she said, “do it quietly. Old Miggs has one for sale.”

“Not all the gold is ours Nethra. I’ll need to take some of it to the family of Sóli, the repairer of cisterns and some to the wife of Amlethus.”

She looked at him enquiringly, though her eyes said she already knew why.

“Not everyone made it out of the cellars Nethra. I nearly didn’t !”

She was sobbing and holding onto him so hard that she was hurting his arm.

“You fool Merrick; you might still have killed us both.”

~ ~

Maya’s sleep had been disturbed by the death of the Roruss, though like many, she had no idea what screamed into her head when she slept. Now it was something else disturbing her rest, something that excited her.

“Behave; I’m not as soft as Muzzie.”

She listened to Sara keeping order in the bar and everything seemed normal, but something was pricking at the edges of her mind. Now fully awake, she dressed and descended into the bar, returning the welcome of a few regulars. Maya had never really called anywhere home, but the informal gathering at Muzzie’s was beginning to feel like family.

“Has the patrol noticed anything strange ?” She asked Sara.

“Odd you should ask that. They finished early tonight, they said it felt like something was watching them. Didn’t stop them drinking plenty of ale though.”

Maya opened the door onto the street and the scent of a male of her kind was strong. No one else other than a Kveld could smell it, but for Maya, it made her senses swim. It had been so long since she’d been with one her own kind.

“It’s not safe out tonight lady.”

She looked down and saw Ash and then she noticed Podd’s cart further down the street. Maya found Podd pulling a dead body out an alley and helped him lift it onto his cart. She held out a small gold coin.

“I need a favour.” She said.

"I'm not sure, there are a lot of restless people in the City. I don't want any trouble."

She stripped off, noting the shocked but not disinterested look on his face. She handed her bundled up clothes to him.

"Take these back to your bone yard, I'll pick them up later. Will you do that?"

He nodded at her and put her clothes behind one of the less decayed bodies on his cart. By the time he looked back, Maya had transformed into the beast and vanished into the night.

"She is so beautiful." Said Ash.

"Be careful of her boy, she's bound to cause yet more trouble for the City."

Maya found the male only a few streets away. She knew it was Bailig, but as the beast she had no curiosity about his survival. His scent was like an aphrodisiac to her now and she followed as he ran through upper town and into the scrub beyond. Miles they covered, him never tiring while her body ached for what only he possessed. Eventually they came to a grove of trees sacred to their kind and the creature that was Bailig stopped and waited for her. Maya remembered the first time she'd mated on four legs, the pleasure far more intense than any demon hybrid could ever comprehend. Bailig nibbled her neck, but there was no need for foreplay, she was his for as long as he wanted her. Maya turned her back on him and brought her tail flat across her back. He entered her and their howls filled the night. Creatures hiding in the night trembled in fear and even in the City, those that could hear the sound, pulled the blankets a little tighter.

~ ~

Waide deliberately travelled in a spiral to get to her stash. Some thought she lied about being in the last blood war, but she really was several thousand years old. She had no idea why her lifespan was so long. It was like wondering about why most demons had four fingers and a tail. It just was, it was part of the inheritance from whoever had impregnated her mother. Age brought experience and she'd learned the hard way to be careful about being followed.

"I saw her head this way. Yes, I am certain it was her!"

There were only two of them and they were arguing. She'd heard them following her for some time, they sounded like a herd of Shuud trampling through the scrub. Why hide their approach? Waide looked barely the size of a Dredger child. They obviously didn't fear or respect her and she was going to punish that impudence. Besides, she hated being followed to her gold stash.

"Silsk will kill us if we don't bring her back alive."

Amateurs, they were giving the name of their employer to anyone who might be listening. They hadn't expected her to double back. Waide crouched less than twenty feet from them, but they had no idea she was there. Her first arrow went through the throat of the one doing all the whining. A second later the other hybrid following her spun and cried out as her arrow pierced his heart. She examined both bodies to see if they carried anything worth having and to retrieve her expensive arrows.

"Damn!"

She recognised the scar on the face of one. He worked for Silsk, or had worked for her, his body was now still and lifeless.

"Olvir." She muttered.

There were rumours that he shared a bed with Silsk, that he made her fill the towers with screams of pleasure. It was bad, if she'd known it was him, she'd have quietly vanished into the night to dig up her gold. Now though! She had to return to the City, tell Merrick and Nethra how serious things had become. Waide didn't retrace her steps, she was too old and wise for that. She chose another route

that would bring her to the slums just before the first light of dawn.... If the glow of morning ultraviolet that bathed the rifts could be called dawn.

~ ~

© Ed Cowling – June 2015

Part 22 will be posted at the end of July.