

City of the Lost God

Part 7 – Treasure & Bones

Muzzie suddenly understood and gave a sigh.

“He’s another nutter who thinks he can find the treasure isn’t he ?”



“Looks like a few things for us.” Said Ash

“Stay with the cart lad.” Replied Podd

Aeony had come to his yard, almost in a panic, if a dark angel could ever really panic. It seemed there were a few bodies in the shrine needing his services, not the usual fly blown carcasses, but fresh bodies. The losers in a battle of some kind, though Aeony wasn’t giving much away.

“Who are they ?” Podd had asked.

“You’ll see when you get there, six bodies, all fresh. They need clearing before people lose their fear and start poking about.”

She’d given him a decent bonus in gold and paid him in advance, plus there was the hint of a camp site with personal possessions. Podd liked bodies with personal possessions, it put up the profit for the trip.

“I’m not entering the shrine grounds before dawn.” He’d said.

“Just make sure you’re there at dawn !”

Podd had cleared the bones of a pauper he’d found in the old town out of his cart and left his yard well before first light. Everyone knew there’d been something extreme happening at the shrine, Aeony was actually talking in hushed tones when she left him. Podd had seen a slight glow in the sky, but his eye for such things wasn’t as well developed as it was for others. Getting his cart into the shrine had meant getting far too close to the entrance to the catacombs for his liking and by the time his cart was alongside the makeshift camp, he was feeling nervous.

“I said stay with the cart boy, I won’t tell you again !”

Ash had started to follow him, probably out of concern, but Podd wanted to get a good look at what it was Aeony wanted cleared so fast. Then if he thought it was safe, he’d get Ash to give him a hand. The tents looked empty, but someone had been through everything and left the bedding and clothing in a mess. The camp fire had long gone out, but there were still signs of blood and skin tissue around the embers, something nasty had happened there.

“Come on Ash, get these tents down, folded and on the cart.”

Blankets brought in a good price, especially properly woven military blankets, Podd folded them carefully and put them in a neat pile on the least evil smelling part of the cart. There was still quite a bit of decent clothing too and as he shook and folded a particularly nice jacket he noticed a structure of some kind near the stairs to the shrine.

“Who would have done such a thing ?” Whispered Ash.

The light was getting brighter as the rift moved from dawn to the dull glow that served as full daylight. Both Podd and the boy could now see the structure made of bones, lots of bones.

“Fetch the tool box boy, we’ll need to take this apart.”

It was a chaos symbol, over ten feet high and made of bones, stitched together with chewed sinews and bits of skin. Podd counted the skulls and there were seven of them, all put together in a pile beneath the symbol. Aeony had said six, but six or seven mattered little to Podd, he knew the dark angel would never talk about the subject again.

“Bound to be those guild warriors.” Said Ash.

Podd agreed, but he just ignored the comment and took the tool box from Ash. Podd had survived a long time in the City and with more secrets to tell than most. He’d survived by knowing when to turn a deaf ear and pretend to be a little stupid.

“Get the bones on the cart as I cut them free.”

Using an old surgical saw and a hammer, Podd cut and broke the bones free of each other and handed them to Ash. Most of the bones appeared to have had all the ligaments and meat torn from them, by sharp teeth, teeth that had left long grooves and cracks in the bones themselves. By the time all the bones were on the cart, Podd was sweating and looking forward to a cool beer at Muzzie’s later in the day. He was so preoccupied with his thoughts that he almost missed the figure walking towards them.

“Identify yourself ?” He called.

“Rodmar, Guild of Thraan.”

The voice of the approaching warrior was far from commanding and as he walked up to them, Podd noticed that he seemed scared of something and was constantly looking over his shoulder.

“My colleagues had a camp here,” said Rodmar, “we sent someone to investigate why we hadn’t heard from them and he didn’t return. Have you seen anyone ?”

Ash was trying to cover the contents of the cart with the old cover Podd used, but it was too late, Rodmar gasped as he saw the pile of bones and started to draw his sword.

“What have you got there ?” He screamed.

“Just cleaning up, same I as I always do.” Replied Podd.

“Cleaning up ! That’s evidence ! Leave that cart where it is.”

Rodmar was just getting his sword tip clear of its scabbard when Podd hit him. Podd didn’t have much fighting style, but he had enormous strength and when he hit people, they tended to stay hit. He caught the guild member across his neck and heard it snap, the body still twitching as it hit the floor, but quickly becoming still.

“Go through his pockets while I have a last look around.” Said Podd.

Podd didn’t want to spend another moment in the vicinity of the shrine, but he wanted to make sure they hadn’t missed anything important; Aeony had paid him quite a bit of gold after all. The remains of the fire were surrounded by bloodstains and there were bits of gristle in amongst the embers, but nothing to identify the deceased. He kicked a few small pieces of rib bones into a pile and put them in his pocket. Satisfied that he’d removed as much as could be expected he returned to Ash, who was bouncing a full purse on the palm of his right hand.

“This one had money,” he said, “must be a two dozen coins, mostly gold.”

“I think Rodmar must have bought their food and essentials.” Said Podd.

He let Ash carry the purse; he knew the boy would never take anything for himself. With the contents of the purse and the gold from Aeony, they were going to be eating well for quite some time. Podd lifted the body of Rodmar onto the cart; he’d strip the clothing off it before it went into the boiler. He covered the contents of the cart with an old and worn out cover, there were holes in it, but few ever seemed curious about what the bone collector had on his cart.

“Don’t mention today to anyone Ash, not even Sara or Muzzie.”

Ash nodded and they pulled the cart past the entrance to the catacombs and out of the shrine precincts. Six skulls, seven skulls, now eight skulls! Podd didn’t care, just so long as no one came looking for him to explain it.

“Meat tonight boy, best you can find for sale in the City.”

Ash smiled and held the full purse close to his chest.

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“But we’re always busy on the Feast of Nigon, Sara might have trouble.” Said Muzzie.

He wasn’t in a good mood, he could sense something had happened in the City, but like most of the population he wasn’t sure what. Lilleth sat opposite him looking far too keen on him joining her on a trip outside the City.

“I can handle things,” said Sara, “and I can always ask Podd to recommend someone if I need to hire some muscle.”

“Just what you need to replace Muzzie,” said Lilleth, “someone not too bright, but with plenty of muscle.”

They were ganging up on him again, but a trip with Lilleth did have its advantages. He didn’t officially have a relationship with Sara, but everyone knew she regarded him as hers. Not that he thought Sara would leave if she caught him with Lilleth, but she could make his life very unpleasant for quite some time.

“How much are they paying ?” He asked.

There were a few regulars in the bar, mostly those too drunk to go home from the night before.

Lilleth leaned close to Muzzie and whispered a figure in his ear.

“That much ! Just to take them to the Ring of Volkin and back ?”

“Him,” said Lilleth, “the client is a travelling cleric. He has a servant who will be going with us, but there will only be the four of us.”

It was sounding better and better to him. Large groups of strangers could be more trouble than the fiercest creatures met on the route, a party of four suited him perfectly. The Ring did have a bad reputation, but it was only fifteen miles or so outside the City.

“Why does he want to go there ?” He asked.

“He’s getting old and wants to see the ring before he dies.”

Muzzie suddenly understood and gave a sigh.

“He’s another nutter who thinks he can find the treasure isn’t he ?”

Volkin had been a very unremarkable sorcerer of little renown. He hadn’t even built the circle, which had been there for even longer than the City itself. The only thing that made Volkin famous was his wealth and the fact that none of it was found after he died. He’d been seen walking around the various barrows and stone circles that made up the ring and the inevitable rumours had started. Many people had spent a lot of time digging around the ring and using all sorts of magical means to discover the treasure of Volkin. Despite the rumours the ring might still not have been named after him if it hadn’t been for the deaths. People who spent too long digging around the ring seemed to attract the attention of something, something that came in the night and killed by pulling its victims literally apart.

“Does that matter,” said Lilleth, “he’s offering a lot of gold to have his last wish granted. Would it hurt to humour him a little ?”

Muzzie knew the ring well. It wasn’t the sort of place to take children for a picnic, but as long as you didn’t stay there for more than twelve nights or so, there were only a few carrion creatures to worry about and he was sure he and Lilleth could handle those.

“We can’t stay there long.” He said.

“I’ve already told him ten nights there and then we leave.”

Muzzie turned to Sara.

“Are you sure you’ll be alright without me here ?”

“I’ll be fine. I’ll hire a couple of extra helpers and the regulars won’t stand for any trouble makers. Go on your trip and have some fun.”

There was something about the way she said fun that he noted. Of course Sara knew he was screwing Lilleth, she wasn’t stupid. But it was obvious that Sara would rather he did it out on the road, on the way to the Ring of Volkin.

“When do we need to leave ?” He asked

“Tomorrow morning.”

He smiled at Lilleth and was certain he was doing the right thing.

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Silsk flew low over the old town and landed behind the ruined building where the guild had set up their base. Once, in the long distant past, her sisters had been able to move their bodies through gateways in the dimensions, but that had been a very long time ago. Silsk had once managed to open a gateway, but the casting of the spell had nearly killed her.

There was no watch on the back door, which surprised her and no challenge as she opened the door. She walked inside and noticed an injured man wrapped in a blanket, the one her sisters had punished for his bad manners no doubt. There were no other members of the guild in the room, or their personal belongings. Two half-filled bags of clothing were in the middle of the room and looked to have been left behind by people leaving in a hurry.

“They’ve gone mistress.”

Silsk turned in the direction of the voice and the injured man was sitting himself up and looking at her. She could sense that he desired her, polite and ready and eager to service her, if only Merrick was so obliging.

“What do you mean by gone ?”

The light was provided by a single flickering yellow light, so Silsk bent down and pulled his covers back. The wounds were nasty, his arm would always be twisted and he’d walk with a limp, but he’d survive and be able to walk in a few days. Whether he survived her visit was yet to be seen.

“Sensan received a note from you, telling him to stop Tarin leaving the shrine. I was sent with the note to the towers to make sure it was from you, but as you can see, I never managed to find out.”

“Do you have the note ?”

“No mistress, Sensan took it with him to the shrine.”

As Silsk had never sent any such note, she knew Sensan had walked into a trap and was almost certainly dead by now.

“What is your name ?”

“Olvir Mistress, Olvir of Tandalla.”

So a Dredger hybrid, as if there weren’t enough of them already in the City. Silsk leant forward and gripped his neck, ready to give it the twist that would send the hybrid to join his ancestors. He looked at her with hunger as she touched him and she hadn’t had a truly adoring plaything for a long time.

“Will you serve me ?” She asked.

“Yes mistress.”

Silsk moved her hand to his leg and ignored his screams as she mumbled a crude healing spell. The spell would work well enough to get him on his feet, but he obviously wasn’t enjoying the pain that accompanied the healing.

“Stop that noise ! Collect whatever you need, you won’t be coming back here.”

Olvir got slowly to his feet and limped about picking up items to put in a pack. Silsk was even quite pleased that he went into what had obviously been Sensan's quarters and returned with a full purse of coins and several expensive looking items of clothing.

"There will be no going home," she said, "once you come with me, you'll serve me for the rest of your life. Are you ready to do that?"

If he'd changed his mind Silsk would have killed him in an instant, but Olvir simply nodded at her and added the last few items to his pack.

"Wait for me outside the back door."

Once Olvir had left, Silsk ran an experienced eye over the contents of Sensan's quarters, looking for anything that might be useful. There was an empty document pouch and it looked like the leader of the guild had been carrying anything that might have mentioned his deal with her. Silsk walked towards the back door and started to mumble the spell of incineration. Aemony was much better at spells than her, but Silsk was confident she could reduce the contents of the room to ash. She threw the spell into the room and enjoyed the feel of intense heat on her face. There were rumours of the dark angels being created out of fire and she could believe that, it wasn't until her hair started to singe that she walked out of the back door and held Olvir firmly in her talons.

"Keep still until we get to the tower."

"Yes mistress."

She circled once to make sure the building was fully ablaze, before turning in a long wide curve over the city, climbing gradually to the height of the top of the tower.

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"What if someone sees it?" Asked Vella.

"There are no other windows in this part of the Dome, and it'll be gone in no time." Replied Caspian. They hadn't so much forgotten the dead Shuud, as decided they didn't want to go back to the room in the middle of the night to throw it out of the window. Caspian was actually quite relieved to see that nothing had taken a bite out of it during the night, his quiet peaceful old bedroom now felt much less cosy.

"I'll open the window nice and wide."

Caspian pushed at the old and corroded catches and managed to get the windows to go almost flat against the wall. Even empty of blood the dead Shuud was still very heavy and they were both breathing very heavily as they let it drop down and away from the window.

"Let me look." Said Vella.

She pushed herself so far out of the window that Caspian was worried she might fall, but she was quickly back inside and closing the window against the cold morning wind.

"It's on the ledge, where you said it would land."

Caspian couldn't spend all day exploring the rooms today. Adamaz had given him a lot of freedom about his hours, but Caspian knew he had to be seen working hard today. They'd got out of bed before the dawn and with luck Caspian had two hours before he needed to be at his post in the library. He held Vella's hand and walked back into the room with the skeleton.

"It's still there." Vella said.

After being dead for countless millennia, the dead human was hardly likely to have walked away in the night, but Caspian knew what she meant. Until they'd explored all the hidden rooms, he shared her anxiety.

"So, the rooms on this floor, or up the stairs?" He asked.

“The rooms on this floor, I’m not going up the stairs until I know there’s nothing unpleasant in them.”

He agreed and walked down the corridor to the closed blinds opposite the two unexplored rooms. After a fair amount of pulling on the chain and grinding noises, the blinds opened to reveal another view of the far side of the mountains.

“How did they build this place ?” Asked Vella.

She looked out of the window at the desolate mountains, the constant high winds scouring every living thing from the rocks.

“A deity built it,” said Caspian, “the famed Tomma-Goran. According to some of the oldest books in the library he built it for humans, but Adamaz keeps those books in a private area.”

Caspian approached the first of the two unexplored rooms and with the light from the windows, he could see it was mostly empty. Just inside the door was a lighting device, but the globe had been shattered and lay in pieces on the floor.

“Just a few old crates, must have been a store of some kind.” He said.

There was nothing in the crates, the wood of one crumbling to dust as Vella removed the lid. They quickly decided the room had nothing worth looking at and walked to the entrance of the other unexplored room.

“I think the light will work.” Said Caspian.

He pulled at the chain until the room was lit by the bright white light of the globe on the wall. Both of them gasped when they saw the contents of the room.

“They look so real,” said Vella, “that for a second I thought..... that they were alive.”

The room was full of statues, ranging in height from about four feet tall, to a huge statue that had been wedged at an angle to fit under the ceiling and must have been twenty feet tall.

“I think they were in a hurry,” said Caspian, “they’ve chipped some and a few at the back look completely crushed.”

The room was large and the back wall was curved, where the rear wall of the Dome reached the edge of the mountains. The statues were all of people, humans and all of them were brightly painted as they would have looked in life.

“I’ve never seen painted statues before.” Said Vella.

Caspian had noticed a five foot tall statue in a corner, which he then started pulling and tugging into the light. Vella rushed over to help him as the statue started to wobble alarmingly.

“There’s a painted statue in Adamaz’s room,” said Caspian, “but the colours are faded. Once all the statues in the City were painted, but over the millennia the paint has worn away.”

They finally managed to get the statue Caspian was so interested to see, near enough to the light globe to see all its details.

“It’s almost like a dark angel,” said Vella, “but with red hair.”

“It’s a Genova, an angel as the humans called them.”

“Did they all have red hair ?”

Caspian walked behind Vella as she admired the statue and put his arms around her shoulders.

“I don’t know,” he said, “but I think these statues are from the very first days of the City, they must be millions of years old.”

The statue of the Genova looked like it had been painted recently, the detail was still clear and the smile on the face looked like she was about to speak. The bright blue eyes were a little unsettling, especially to hybrid demons, but Caspian had to admit he found the Genova very attractive.

“It must be worth a fortune.” Said Vella.

Caspian chuckled and kissed her neck, trust Vella to reduce the moment to one of monetary value. "Choose the right buyer and you'd get enough gold to return the City to its past splendour," he said, "but choose the wrong buyer and you'd get a slow and painful death."

Caspian turned down the light as they left the room. He knew the globes would burn for eternity, but he didn't want to take a chance on a passing dark angel becoming curious about the lighted windows.

"Next the stairs." Said Vella.

She picked up the lamp from where they'd left it the day before and started to climb the spiral staircase, Caspian only a few feet behind her. The door at the top of the stairs was open and they entered a dark hallway that led off to their left in a gently curve.

"I'll light the lamp." Said Vella.

The lamp flickered and gave off a smell of burning, but the light was bright enough to find their way as the passage led them up and around in an ever decreasing curve. There were no doors or other passages connecting with theirs and after about ten minutes of constant climbing they came to a heavy wooden door, reinforced with metal plates.

"I've never seen a door like this anywhere in the City." Said Caspian.

He put his hand on the large metal ring handle and pushed hard, the door didn't move. He pulled on the ring and although the door didn't budge, a large amount of dust fell from the top of the door.

"Help me !"

Vella put her hands on the large ring and they both pulled. The door move about an inch and dust and dirt fell from the top and sides as it made a grinding sound.

"Pull harder !"

Several times they had to pull with all their strength at the huge door and eventually, as they leaned against the wall, sweating and out of breath, the door was open enough for them both to get through.

"No one has been this way for a very long time." He said.

They went through the doorway and into a large chamber that echoed their footsteps as they moved around. Caspian spotted a light globe to their left and pulled the chains. After a few seconds, not one, but at least two dozen bright globes of light came on, right around the edges of the huge circular room they had entered. Vella stood still and looked around the room with a look of wonder on her face.

"How could no one else have discovered this place ?" She asked.

Caspian looked around the room, if room was the right word. Then he realised they were at the very top of the Dome itself. Eight corridors led off from the room they were in and down each of those he could see doorways to other rooms.

"They've never been able to find it," he said, "the dark angels looked, Adamaz looked, but no one could ever find a way into the top of the Dome."

There were no pictures or statues around the walls, but as he looked up a painting could be seen that covered the entire ceiling of the dome. It was of a huge horned serpent like creature, with two muscular arms and no less than four huge legs. The eyes were bright red and the creature in the painting was holding a wicked looking battle axe.

"What is it ?" Asked Vella.

"That," said Caspian, "is the great deity Tomma-Goran and I'm now certain we're the first people to stand in his rooms for.....well since forever."

Caspian looked down one of the connecting corridors and it seemed to go on for at least a hundred feet, with heavy doors off either side.

“Did you hear that ?” Asked Vella.

“Hear what ?”

“Footsteps.”

He listened and there were no sounds at all, not even a hint of the wind that constantly battered the top of the Dome.

“Maybe we’ve seen enough for today,” he said, “we can come back tomorrow, after we’ve had a chance to think about what we’ve found.”

Then he heard the sound too, like footsteps in the distance and as he and Vella looked a dark cloud seemed to form in the centre of the room, a cloud that gradually coalesced into the form of a human, a human in some sort of sorcerer’s robes.

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“In many ways it was the perfect solution.” Said Aeony.

“There will be plague and deformities,” replied Adamaz, “and perhaps much worse.”

Aeony touched his hand, her talon scratching his skin, but he understood it was meant to be affectionate. They were at their preferred meeting place, his rooms in the Dome and Adamaz had just poured her a very nice glass of forbidden human wine.

“But the City will survive.” She said.

Adamaz still didn’t know how Aeony knew about Tarin, or if she’d played a part in his plan, but it had dealt with the threat from the guild, without killing Silsk. Adamaz remembered that several millennia before there had been a plan to leave the City, evacuate everyone to a more fertile part of the 1st rift. There had been endless arguments over exactly where would be better than the City and who was to choose the site of the new city. The various factions had fought, there had been many deaths and in the end they’d remained in the City. Adamaz often wondered if the place was cursed.

“We have so few artisans left in the City,” he said, “perhaps you know someone who could help find a new weapon smith ?”

“There is a lot of Moullay demon in Tarin, he should survive. As to carrying on his trade....If he can’t I’ll investigate obtaining a new smith from the far north.”

When Adamaz had heard of the dreadful self-inflicted wounds, he’d never imagined Tarin would recover.

“Even if he regains his full strength,” said Aeony, “he may be changed in other ways.”

“There are always consequences from invoking a servant of chaos.”

The two old friends nodded at each other, while Aeony sipped at her very expensive drink.

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Nethra felt in the pack for the next pile of skin. She carefully unrolled the bloody strips and placed them on his chest, knowing they’d soon be absorbed into his body, just as the others had.

“You can go now,” she said, “I know you’ve things to do and I can look after him.”

“Supposing he starts screaming again ?” Asked Merrick.

Tarin has started screaming as soon as he woke up, lying on his own bed, with Nethra and Merrick trying to carefully remove the clothes they’d put on him. The City had no militia, but sooner or later someone would come to investigate the sound of a grown man screaming. Nethra had found his store of expensive strong spirits and had forced him to drink it until he’d passed out.

“There are plenty of bottles,” she said, “enough to keep him intoxicated for days.”

“Is that good for him ?”

She simply waved at the body, still oozing blood and other bodily fluids.

"If he can survive this, a little hard liquor won't harm him."

Merrick left and she waited for the skin to be completely absorbed before she unrolled more skin across his chest. They'd worked out by trial and error that the flesh could be put back anywhere. At first they'd tried to fit the lumps of muscle back against his leg bones, like a huge child's puzzle. It quickly became obvious that no matter where they put the flesh, it was absorbed by the body and other parts of Tarin started to regain substance. His lips were one of the first features to return and then his genital region, much to Merrick's amusement.

"Most essential part of any male." He'd said with a smirk.

There was just so much dirt among the flesh. Some of it from the inside of the pack and there had been soil in with the Ashunt flowers. Nethra was certain they were adding some kind of awful disease to Tarin's body, but what else could they do? She'd once seen the bloated, puss filled arm of a warrior who hadn't kept a wound clean; he'd died in agony after only a few days.

"Take them, take them all!" Screamed Tarin.

Nethra quickly pushed open his jaws and poured more of the spirit down his throat. Tarin seemed to recognise her, but then his eyes looked away and he was once more unconscious. During one screaming session he'd called her 'Chosen,' time after time. She had no idea what it meant, but she cringed every time he said it, almost as though he was beating her. She looked in the pack and there was just one more roll of skin. There was a bloody sludge about an inch deep in the bottom of the pack and she almost threw it away, but something made her pour it over his chest.

"The last bit of your skin." She said to him.

She unrolled all the skin onto his left arm, there still seemed to be a lot of holes in his left arm. As she looked, Nethra notices holes all over his body, deep ones, of all sizes. She desperately hoped they'd fill up in some way as Tarin healed himself. In her mind she heard the shrine telling her Ashunt blooms were good for preservation, so she broke every petal off every bloom and laid them across the parts of his body that looked the most raw. Still dissatisfied with her efforts, she fetched a nice clean sheet from his linen cupboard and covered him up with it, leaving just his head showing above the sheet. The sheet quickly discoloured with blood and worse, but Nethra felt she'd done all she could and she felt very tired. Pouring herself a good measure of the expensive spirit, she quickly emptied the glass and settled herself in the chair near Tarin's bed. Almost instantly she fell into a deep sleep.

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"Today is the day I've been dreading all my life!" Babaef said to his pet.

His wife, Hemetre, liked him having a pet. In a City where only the rich ate meat regularly, keeping a carnivore pet was the ultimate status symbol. Babaef though, actually had affection for the creature he called Shadow. His daughters had wanted to call the creature Fluff, but as soon as he'd seen the injured bundle of fur, he'd thought of her as Shadow.

Babaef had been hunting with his men when they'd found the injured creature, all fur and claws it was totally impractical as a pet and had even sunk its needle sharp teeth into his hand as he picked it up. But he felt an instant bond with the small creature and since then had shared his workroom at the top of the house with it. Babaef stroked Shadow and looked out of his windows at the view past the City, the mountain rising on one side and the great river on the other. Most people he knew, including his own wife, hated the view, but he found a certain bleak grandeur in the greys and browns of the mountains.

"Let's go outside." He said.

He picked up his pet, enjoying the odd noise it made when it was happy. Babaef walked out of his study and down the stairs to the floor where the family bedrooms were, the sound of small hands learning to play the Clavimull coming from one of the rooms. His two daughters had been wanting to learn how to play the classical musical instrument for some time and he'd eventually hired a teacher. A teacher who was charging him a fortune and yet to him everything they played sounded like a Jangar on heat. He walked to the door of their classroom and the teacher seemed to have left for today, leaving them to practise.

"We learned another chord today." Said Kapes.

Kapes was his youngest daughter, still not quite at puberty, but already the dominant sister. Itet his oldest daughter usually allowed Kapes to speak for her, even though she was two years older.

"Would you like to come into the garden with me?" He asked.

They exchanged looks and giggled.

"The prophecy daddy?" said Kapes, "we can watch from the window."

Even his daughters weren't taking the prophecy seriously, but he was. When he was very young a servant of chaos, a Punisher no less, had attacked and killed the nanny his parents had hired. They'd been quite a distance from the City, the nanny had decided a trip to the great river would be good his health. If his daughters had seen the nanny being torn apart and devoured they might take it more seriously. The Punisher was grey skinned, grey scally skin. Not much bigger than the adults of the City, it came towards him on its eight spindly legs and grabbed his head in one of its four muscular hands. Babaef felt the scales on the hand tear the skin of his neck, but he was too terrified to cry out.

"Not yet," the Punisher hissed, "you don't die yet."

Babaef remembered soiling himself, though he didn't really care at the time. The pain in his neck was getting worse and he could see the remains of the nanny over the creature's shoulder.

"Please let me go." He said.

"Not yet boy, first I have to make sure you remember the prophecy. Have you a good memory child?"

He'd nodded and the creature had held his head and moved it about, as though trying to see how he worked.

"I will ask you to repeat it," it said, "if you get it wrong there will be pain, much pain."

As if to emphasise the point, the punisher clawed at his arm, leaving a deep wound, the scar of which Babaef still had on his arm.

"Yes I will remember, I promise!"

"Good. Do you know what time of day twixt is boy?"

"Yes sir, it's the middle of the afternoon, when nanny makes my drink."

The Punisher smiled, if a mouth full of hundreds of razor sharp teeth could ever be said to really smile.

"Good," it said, "he might have chosen wisely. Do you know your numbers?"

"Yes sir."

"Do you understand the number 427 child?"

"Yes sir, I know all my numbers up to a thousand."

The creature seemed to relax and the pressure on his neck lessened.

"Remember this prophecy boy. At twixt on your 427th birthday you will receive a visitation. Now repeat that."

"At twixt on my 427th birthday I will receive a visitation."

“Good, good, now I’ll carry you some of the way home.”

The Punisher had picked him up and carried him to a small wood still some distance from his home. It was getting dark and Babaef remembered being scared that his parents would be angry at him for being late.

“One more time, repeat the prophecy.”

He’d repeated the prophecy perfectly, but as the creature turned to go he had ask.

“What is a visitation ?”

The Punisher seemed to think about the question for a few seconds.

“Nothing you’ll like !”

It had gone, leaving him to walk home and tell his parents about the fate of the nanny.

That day had been a very long time ago and today was his 427th birthday and the time was rapidly approaching twixt. Babaef had long ago decided that rather than put his family at risk, he’d go into the garden for the big event. Not that they really took the prophecy seriously. The problem was that in the City everyone claimed to be cursed by some sort of prophecy, the damn place seemed overloaded with prophecy. Very few of them ever came to anything and child hood prophecies were especially dubious. It hadn’t helped that a search party sent by his parents had found no trace of the dead nurse and there were rumours of her running off with the gardener of a neighbour.

“You believe me don’t you Shadow ?”

The bundle of fur curled up deeper into the crook of his left arm and made the sound it made when it was happy. He walked past the bedroom he shared with his wife and didn’t even bother to call her, he knew she’d gone out to see a friend. Married for over two hundred years, the mother of his children and even she giggled if he mentioned his 427th birthday. If he’d been a pure blood high level demon he’d have been in the city beyond gateway now, married to someone far better looking than Hemetre. But that little bit of human in his blood had ruined any real chances of progress and he’d married another hybrid. He had no real love for her, but she’d given him two daughters who he did love and she made sure the household ran perfectly. Now on his 427th birthday he was second in line to run the sorcerers guild in the City and the 28th richest person on the 1st rift. Though he’d often wondered who kept track and took the 28th ranking he’d been given with a huge pinch of doubt.

“Anyone else here ?” He shouted.

He’d reached the doors leading from the rear lounge into the garden and there was no response. He had a male servant, two maids and a cook, yet the house seemed deserted. Not for the first time Babaef regretted being such a kind employer and vowed to be much tougher if he survived the visitation. The gardens were beautiful and he walked across the perfectly manicured lawn towards what his wife called his summer house. He’d had the structure built for the big day and it reality it was just a large comfortable wooden bench with a shelter over the top, just in case prophecy day was a rare wet day in the City. As twixt wasn’t really an exact time, he sat down and fondled his pet while he waited for a sign that the prophecy was about to begin. For over two hundred years he’d decided that whoever or whatever came, he stay seated. But recently he’d decided that anyone who gave over four hundred years notice, deserved to be respected.

“I think this is it Shadow.”

As the sky over his house began to darken, Babaef got to his feet. He went to put his pet onto the bench, but the creature held firmly onto his robe with its claws.

“Come with me then.”

He stroked Shadow as the first drops of rain fell and lightning hit the roof of the house next door. A retired excise collector from Quron and his awful family, fuck them he thought. A small whirling wind

seemed to form from nowhere and suck most of his prized hedge up into the air and away. Babaef was wondering if he was going to actually survive to see the prophesied visitation. There was a minor shuddering of the ground and he saw the faces of his daughters staring down at him from their classroom window. Perhaps they were scared, all he could see was two young faces and their hands pointing behind him. He walked out of the summer house and nearly lost his feet in the high wind. He walked behind the shelter and saw the ever growing portal of purple light, at least he assumed it was a portal. It would have been nice to tell his wife that he was right, even his daughters, but they still banging on the window and pointing. By the time an arm came through the portal most of his garden was destroyed, years of careful tending, by numerous under paid gardeners, reduced to rubbish pushed up against the boundary wall. At least he still had a house though ! One neighbour's house, the one hit by lightning, was in flames and the house of the other side appeared to have collapsed in on itself for some reason.

"Next time they'll believe a neighbour with a prophecy Shadow."

His pet was still showing no concern about events around it and was still asleep on his arm.

Another arm appeared through the portal and then a head. Nothing frightening, none of the claws and teeth Babaef had seen in nightmares since childhood. The figure pulling itself through looked quite ordinary, just like any other demon hybrid in the City of the Lost God.

"Babaef the time has come." The figure said.

The figure shorter than him and dressed in a simple cloak was obviously only a messenger and as Babaef walked towards the portal, the purple swirling seemed to increase in hue.

"Step through, he is waiting for you."

The figure vanished back into the portal and Babaef carried on walking towards it. There was a slight temptation to run away, but after over four hundred years he was more than a little curious to meet whoever wanted to see him. Besides if by some miracle he survived refusing to enter the portal, he had a suspicion his wife would be giggling at him again within a year. He stepped into the portal and felt his body melt away.

"Perhaps this is what dying feels like Shadow ?"

He wasn't dying, his body regained form and as he found himself leaning against a stone wall, he felt fine. Shadow was still fast asleep and that awful wind and lightning was gone. He was against the wall of a large room with stone walls, old stone walls, with what looked like tree roots growing through gaps in the stones. There were no doors and no windows, just a few flickering lamps fixed to the wall and a well illuminated table in the centre of the stone chamber. The table seemed to have food and drink on it and in one chair was a man, apparently asleep. There was a second empty chair and Babaef assumed that was for him. He walked towards the chair thinking that if this was some kind of afterlife, at least they seemed likely to feed him well.

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Part 8 will be posted at the end of May