

## City of the Lost God

### Part 16 – The Kveld

**“Maya knew that Podd and his cart were like the sewers and genital warts. Everyone knew they existed, but they didn’t want to see them or be reminded of their existence.”**



“You need to scrub everywhere,” said Aeony, “if she smells me on you, you’re a dead man.”

Aeony had a mirror in her room, but unlike Silsk she rarely used it. A servant combed her hair and Aeony merely checked she looked ‘respectable’ before leaving her rooms in the tower.

“That was a hint that you should be leaving !” She said.

Cloelia had finished her hair, so she pointed at Olvir and simply nodded, it was enough to convey her meaning, her servant wasn’t stupid. Aeony had no use for feeble human slaves and she never understood why Silsk put up with Ousha and her rudeness. Cloelia was pretty in her way, or at least pretty for a muscular hybrid female of uncertain parentage.

“The mistress wants you to wash and leave.” Said Cloelia.

Her servant gave Olvir a none too gently prod and he simply rolled over, burying himself in the sheets. The sex had been good, very good, Olvir was as good a lover as Silsk was always saying, but Aeony needed him out of her bed room.

“Wash him.”

Cloelia pulled back the sheets and easily lifted a startled Olvir up and away from the bed. By the time she had him in the bath he was beginning to splutter and object, but Cloelia was a very strong girl.

“Next time I’ll let her play with you first.”

Aeony was surprised she’d said next time, had the sex been that good ? He had stamina, but so had many other of her lovers. She put such thoughts to the back of mind and continued getting ready for the day.

“Please, tell her I can bathe myself.”

She ignored the pleading, after all Cloelia needed her fun and Aeony was sure her servant wasn’t finding it a chore to bathe Olvir, he did have a good body. Again she pulled her mind away from thoughts of sex and put a long blade on her belt. Today she was to see Muzzie. Silsk had decided that following him and hoping for a chance to kidnap him wasn’t working. Aeony had resisted the opportunity to point out that she’d said Muzzie was no fool, but she’d given Silsk a look that spoke volumes. Perhaps taking Olvir would be a good idea ? Years in the Guild of Thraan had taught him how to deal with characters like Muzzie and his presence would be useful. Of course Silsk might have already given him orders for the day.

“Alright you can let him get dressed now.”

Poor Olvir had been scrubbed, even bits of him not really designed to be scrubbed. He looked embarrassed and rather too pink in places and Aeony couldn’t help laughing.

“Are you free today ?” She asked

“I am to report on the surveillance of Muzzie.”

“Good, you can join me and watch him as I talk to him. Get dressed and wait in the alley next to his bar, I’ll meet you there.”

There was no acknowledgement, his feelings had been hurt. Aeony wasn’t even sure why Olvir had tried so hard to get into her bed. Spite because of the scar on his face, or gratitude to Aeony for healing him ? She had no idea, but she had decided there would be a next time.

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Podd rarely collected bodies during the day, unless it paid very well. Maya knew that Podd and his cart were like the sewers and genital warts. Everyone knew they existed, but they didn't want to see them or be reminded of their existence. Podd had his boilers up to full temperature, reducing the latest body collection to fat and bones. Most people would have been repelled by the smell, but the Kveld side of Maya actually liked the perfume of boiling body fat. Maya was on two legs now and dressed in the same clothes as most female slum dwellers. She fitted in and no one had given her a second glance as she'd approached the bone collector's yard. She pushed the gate open and a string pulled several large bones against a rusting shield. The loud clang made a reliable signal for when someone wanted to see Podd and almost instantly Ash was in front of her.

"What do you want?"

"I wish to see Podd."

"He's busy."

"There's gold in it for him, much gold."

The boy went, wandering off towards where the smoke and foul smelling steam was coming from. Maya looked around the yard and was appalled by the mess, how did Podd live like this? Bones in piles, often in front of doors he must have to use. Buckets full of something nasty and congealed, that seemed to have poisoned the pile of insects who'd attempted to feed on it. She'd hoped to get a whiff of Borlas, but his scent simply couldn't compete with the various stench around her.

"He'll see you, but make it quick."

She followed the boy to the back of the yard, where a door was open in the front of a large and rickety looking building. The smell of body parts was so strong that she had to fight the urge to change and feed.

"Go in if you want to see him. If not, you know where the gate is."

Maya took no offense at the lad's words, he was just being loyal to his master. She entered the poorly lit shed and Podd was at the far end, fiddling with dials on a huge boiler. The heat inside the building was overpowering, but she walked towards Podd.

"I need to talk to you."

The grumbling of the boiler shredded her words, but Podd heard her voice and turned around. He smelt worse than the buckets of congealed body fluid, but she ignored that.

"You mentioned gold to Ash?"

She moved closer, fully aware that violence would be needed to obtain the information she sought.

"I'm here about Borlas. You collected his body from the slums a few nights ago."

She saw Podd look behind her and give a slight nod, it was a signal that many would have missed and ended up being in the next batch for the boiler. Ash came for her from behind, a heavy pipe in his hand and a murderous look in his eyes. She moved towards him and stepped under the descending pipe. She turned her hand over and hit him hard on the forehead with her knuckles, sending him to the floor in an unconscious heap. Podd was reaching for his own blade, but she was quick even in her two legged form. She had her dagger at his throat and easily held the powerful bone collector against the wall.

"You're Kveld too," said Podd, "I've never been an enemy of your kind."

"I know, that's why I'm willing to pay for the information and leave you both alive."

She let go of Podd and pulled Ash up and sat him against a wall.

"He'll be out for some time." She said.

Podd used another pile of wood and refuse to fuel the boiler and sat himself down.

"I can't tell you much," he said, "Ash paid a woman in the slums for the body of a strange creature, I collect such things."

"He was dead and still had four legs?"

"Yes, there was a silver spear point lodged in his spine. He turned back into Borlas after I removed it."

It made sense, she could even appreciate Podd's reluctance to inform anyone of the death of Borlas.

"Do you still have the spear point?" She asked.

"No, I melted it down and sold the metal."

Maya checked on Ash again, making sure he was breathing freely and evenly.

"Have you seen hunters in the slums," she asked, "hunters looking for Kveld?"

"No, never. I think it must have been someone hunting him, hunting Borlas."

She gave Podd a small gold coin and put her blade back under her coat.

"I'll stay in the City for a few days, is there a tavern?"

"There's Muzzie's, it's clean and Muzzie won't bother you as long as you don't cause any trouble."

Podd gave her directions and she left the bone yard. Back to old town first to pick her things up from her hiding place and then she'd find a room at Muzzie's. Nowhere quite like a tavern to hear gossip.

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"Quite a weight." Said Bailig.

Nethra had cut the spear point into sections and flattened the edges to disguise its origins. To her it still screamed that it was a weapon, but the metal merchant didn't seem worried. The spear point had been solid silver and it looked fairly pure, a rare thing on the rifts.

"It looks pure too." She said.

"Looks can be deceptive."

Nethra liked the lanes; it was one area of the City that still seemed to have some vitality. The streets were grubby and many of the houses were disused or ruins, but the metal merchants had money, it was rumoured that they wielded the real power in the City. Bailig cut a minute piece off her silver and put it on a tiny tray, before adding a speck of yellow powers and a few drops of acid from a dropper bottle. A white cloud of vapour rose from the silver and Bailig looked impressed.

"Pure, yes very pure." He said.

"How much will you give me for it?"

Bailig sat himself on a stool, but there was no chair on her side of the counter, it was all part of the procedure for getting a good price.

"Oh Nethra," he said, "if only it was last year. Last year the market was very good, but this year.....no one is buying silver. I may have to sit on it for a year and my stock is already high. I can give you fifteen, but no more."

Nethra was instantly angry, fifteen coppers wouldn't buy their food for a month and she knew it was worth far more.

"You forget I'm from the rifts," she said, "I know traders tricks, fifteen is an insult. It is pure and weighs over five oguns."

The metal merchant threw his hands up and looked genuinely contrite.

"No insult was intended Nethra, please, please, come and sit with me."

No servant was sent to open the gate between customers and merchant. Bailig himself opened the gate and held her arm as she walked through. He took her to a table at the back of his establishment and they both sat down.

"Wine, the best," he said, "I still have contacts. Only the best and once again I apologise."

Bailig clapped his hands and a servant appeared, a pretty girl who would have passed for pure human if it hadn't been for the pointed ears and extra fingers. She put wine on the table, with two glasses and a plate of crystallised fruit, Nethra had a passion for crystallised fruit. Bailig allowed her time for a few sips of her wine and two pieces of fruit, before continuing with the haggling.

"Of course fifteen gold was an insult," he said, "and there is gold and then there is gold. I only ever pay in pure imperial coinage."

Nethra was always amused that the only reliable currency in the City was the coinage of their enemy, but the empire did mint the best gold coins. Fifteen imperial was a vast sum, a ludicrous sum for five oguns of silver. She had no idea why her silver was worth that sum, but she was determined to play the game.

"There are other merchants on the lanes." She said.

"If I could, I would double the offer, but I have my overheads. I can go to twenty five imperial, but I'll be making no profit on the deal."

The world had gone crazy, it was the only answer. He was offering her twenty five imperial for a few pieces of silver scrap. She'd just hoped to cover their food bill for a few months.

"Still too low," she said, "make it thirty and the silver is yours."

Bailig pulled a bulging cloth bag from a drawer and began to slowly count out gold coins onto the desk. It was another old trick, but a very effective one. By the time he stopped at twenty five, there was an impressive heap of gold on the desk.

"It'll buy a lot of pretty dresses Nethra, it'll keep Merrick home at nights !"

He was right of course, but she knew that for some reason he'd pay more.

"Thirty, or I'll see if Jumban will pay more."

Bailig hated Jumban, an old feud about a woman, the kind of feud that leaves wounds that never heal.

"I can't have you dealing with that crook, he'll pay you in Quron. To save you I'll pay you thirty and I'll throw in a bracelet, I know you like my bracelets."

He counted out the extra five coins and put them all in a cloth bag for her. It was an absurd amount of money. They weren't poor these days, but an extra thirty imperial would buy her a few new dresses and mean Merrick could refuse the more risky jobs.

"This one, it's beautiful." She said.

He'd placed several bracelets on the table. All cheap metal and glass gems of course, but she already had several like them on both arms. She rolled up her sleeve to put on her new bracelet and Bailig saw the mark of chaos on her arm. She looked for a reaction and he smiled at her and touched her arm.

"If you have any more Kveld silver," he said, "give me first chance to make an offer for it. People make fun of old traditions these days, but we know, don't we Nethra ?"

"Yes we know." She said.

She had no idea what Kveld silver was, but a positive answer seemed best. Bailig made small talk while she finished her drink and emptied the plate of crystallised fruit. He even took her personally to the door and held her hand as she left.

"Promise me I'll get a first chance to make an offer."

"I promise."

She strode out of the lanes and headed for Muzzie's. Her first stop would be to see Sara and buy a freshly killed bird for dinner, then after dinner she'd slip out to see Podd. If anyone knew what Kveld silver was, he would. With luck the bone collector might know where she could obtain more of it.

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“We heard something on the stairs behind us,” said Caspian, “but we never saw anything on the journey back.”

Caspian was glad to tell someone the truth about the large scar mark on his face. It still didn't hurt, but in the mirror it looked like someone had burned his face. Vella had suggested telling everyone he'd been attacked in the streets, but he didn't want Adamaz inflicting a night time curfew on him. In the end he simply told everyone he'd woken up with the mark on his face. The City being what it was and their own experiences meant most people tended to believe him.

“I can get you cosmetics to cover it,” said Merrick, “no one will see the scar.”

“There doesn't seem much point, everyone has seen it now.”

“If you change your mind, let me know.”

Caspian didn't want to cover the mark. He'd always been the young librarian, the young hybrid who dated the girl from Muzzie's. The scar had given him something, it have given him instant respect among the crowd at the tavern. One regular had even stood aside to let him through the front door. None of the crowd at Muzzie's believed he'd simply woken up with it; their imaginations had worked out many reasons for the mark. Caspian smiled when he thought that all their imaginings were probably much less horrific than the real cause.

“My people are reliable,” said Merrick, “they'll cope with that hallway.”

They'd met in an old apothecary in old town, though it had been hundreds of years since anyone had used the building as a place of business. The roof was still there and the walls gave a little privacy, but something had used a corner of the room as a latrine and there were animal dropping everywhere. It was an unpleasant place to meet, but still far nice than the old sewers.

“The easiest way,” said Caspian, “is for you and your team to come in through the front doors during business hours. I can let you into the restricted floors and you can hide there until night.”

“I wasn't looking forward to sneaking through the Dome,” said Merrick, “Adamaz has a dangerous reputation. Have you got a definite day fixed yet ?”

“Vella and I have four days off starting this weekend. I'm hoping we can get everything done in four days.”

“This weekend it is then,” said Merrick, “I'll bring everyone into the library before close of business. They will be carrying quite a few bags, is that a problem ?”

“No, people bring all sorts of things into the library.”

Vella hadn't said much, but it was obvious something was troubling her.

“The water,” she said, “if the cellars are flooded, how do we get through the water ?”

Merrick laughed and Caspian joined in.

“Vella isn't from the City,” said Caspian, “she's never seen how the water tanks and wells are cleaned out.”

“That is why my people will be carrying bags,” said Merrick, “getting under the water requires some special apparatus, and a little magic. You'll see once we get to the flooded stairs.”

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Babaef was gaining a certain notoriety, some might even say fame. There were lots of whispers in the City about the new leader of the Guild of Sorcerers. Nothing about his determination to release Nigon, but it seemed his effectiveness as a leader was being noticed.

“I'm sorry; my time seems to be taken up by the guild these days.” He said.

Lagertha lay on his bed next to him and like him she was naked and wet with perspiration. The sex had been fantastic; the widow often seemed so passionate that he worried about keeping up with her.

"I could move in," she said, "your daughters need a woman's advice at their age and I'd be waiting for you to get home every night."

Why not ? His girls were in need of a mother figure and it wasn't as if she was suggesting marriage. They were both too old and too wise for romantic gestures like marriage, but Lagertha in his bed every night had its attractions. He suddenly realised he knew very little about her home life, apart from her being a widow.

"Do you have children of your own ?" He asked.

She leant over him, her perfect breasts brushing the skin on his chest. He had no idea how he'd managed to get such a woman into his bed, but having her move in did sound a very good idea.

"Don't worry," she said, "I won't fill your house with children and servants. I have no children and I will only bring one servant with me, a young girl who looks after my hair and helps me dress in the morning. As to undressing.... I'm sure you can help me with that."

He ran his fingers through her hair as he kissed her. In many ways she was perfect. A fellow sorcerer and member of the guild, widow of another sorcerer of some fame. Having her as a live in lover would give his home that female touch and she might be able to help him with guild business.

"Move in when you like," he said, "and I'm sure we can fit your servant in too."

Her head was now moving down his body and parts of him he thought were spent began to react. She did things with her tongue that no woman had ever done to him before. From nowhere he had the thought that perhaps Lagertha could help him with his work for Nigon.

"Lagertha, can I ask you something ?"

He looked down and her eyes were looking at him, but her tongue was still busy on his most intimate body parts.

"What do you feel about the age old quest of the guild to release Nigon ?"

He felt her stop pleasuring him, which was bad, but he had caused it.

"I believe it is the sacred duty of the guild to break the seals that close the catacombs to us and hold Nigon prisoner."

"Not just as a concept, but you believe in actually doing it ?" He asked.

"Yes."

"Then we need to talk," he said, "but later, much later."

She moved up his body and their genitals linked in the way that gave so much pleasure. Her breasts were now right in front of him, so it would have seemed rude not to fondle them.

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Muzzie knew he was being followed, most of them were awful at their job and he spotted them quickly. What had really annoyed him was two of them turning up in his bar and volunteering to join the alley patrol, or Muzzie's irregulars as the bar knew them.

"Have you all got the route memorised ?" He asked. "Tonight you'll be doing it for real."

Nodding heads, about a dozen nodding heads. They'd been through the alleys several times during the day and Muzzie thought it was time to let them loose at night. They weren't a joke now, he thought they stood a good chance of discouraging a great deal of the murders and thefts on the streets. It was just the two strangers ! Everyone in the patrol knew they were up to no good, no one had ever seen them before and they refused the free beer. To regulars of the bar, refusing free beer was as good as a confession to being trouble, serious trouble.

"Is it too early for free beer?"

There was general laughter.

"Alright, back to the bar, but everyone has to be ready for the first patrol an hour after dark." Said Muzzie.

Ten regulars followed him and the two strangers wandered off. They'd be back and on time, they always were. Muzzie left the patrol to be served with beer while he went into his room at the back of the bar. Sara wasn't around, so he sat at the table where they ate their meals and prodded a chunk of bread. It was a bit hard, but once he'd broken it up into pieces, it was edible.

"Everyone is asking about the two strangers."

Sara had come in from the back, she was carrying a large edible bird, which was trying to bite her arm.

"That bread is from breakfast," she said, "I can make you something fresh?"

Muzzie shook his head and watched as Sara expertly wrung the bird's neck and began to clean and gut it for the pot.

"Do you know the two strangers?" She asked.

"No, I think they're two of Olvir's helpers. He's been recruiting the worst of the scum from the slums."

Sara put a lot of energy into cutting the bird's head off, Muzzie winced.

"And you're letting them serve in the night patrol?!"

"I can keep an eye on them and if they become a nuisance..... they'll become just two more victims of the murderers in the alleys."

Sara scooped the innards out of the bird and put its body in a bucket of water to rinse. A head came through the curtain and one of the serving girls said a woman was at the counter asking about a room.

"Does she look like she can pay?" Asked Sara.

"Yes, she's got luggage and everything."

Sara dried her hands and went to see the woman. Women travelling alone weren't that rare in the City, but Muzzie decided to peer through the curtains. Sara was pointing to the stairs that led to the rooms and the woman was counting coins out of a purse. Sara must have liked the look of her, there was none of the usual ten minute grilling of those wanting accommodation. Sara even got one of the girls to carry the woman's bags, that was unheard of. As the customer turned to walk up the stairs, Muzzie got a good look at her and she looked quite ordinary. Her clothes were tidy but cheap, her hair looked clean but not recently cut. It was her bearing though, she walked as though she owned the place. Sara picked up the coins and headed back towards the back room, so Muzzie started picking at the stale bread and trying to look as though he'd never moved.

"What did you think of her?" Asked Sara.

"Who?"

"Come on, woman on her own, you can't fool me. I'd bet our day's taking you were looking through the curtain."

Muzzie hated being that predictable, but decided not to argue the point.

"She carries herself like royalty." He said.

"You'd like her eyes, bright green."

Sara counted the coins into the money drawer, she'd managed to get the top rate for the room. No wonder she'd had her bags carried up for her.

"Did she try to haggle?" He asked.

“No, paid what I asked.”

“Not good when they don’t haggle, we’ll need to watch this one. Did you get a name ?”

Sara passed him the book used to record details of those staying at the tavern. Filling in all the details wasn’t compulsory, especially for those paying the full rate. The home town and reason for visiting the City had been left blank, but her names were entered as Maya Orresa.

“Said she might be here some time,” said Sara, “and she’ll pay the day rate every morning.”

“More money than sense Sara, we’ll need to watch this one.”

There was silence in the bar; the usual constant drone of voices had died. Muzzie didn’t like that, bar customers were like children, silence meant trouble. He looked through the curtain and saw Aeony walking into his tavern, Olvir following a few paces behind her.

“Is there anyone in the bar the dark angels are looking for ?” He asked Sara.

“Only you !”

Muzzie stepped through the curtain and into the bar, hoping Aeony wasn’t about to arrest any of his best customers. Of course there were was no official militia in the City, but that didn’t stop the dark angels from arresting anyone they didn’t like the look of.

“This is a nice surprise,” said Muzzie, “can I find you a table, or are you here to meet someone ?”

The dark angel ignored him and glared at the customers, her long tail moving about, seemingly searching. Muzzie didn’t like this kind of thing, it was bad for business. He dreaded to think of how much his taking would drop for a few days.

“I need to talk to you in private.” She said.

He couldn’t take her into his back room, he wasn’t sure if everything in there was legal in the City.

“There’s an empty room upstairs,” he said, “we can talk in private up there.”

Muzzie led them towards the stairs, getting the attention of a serving girl on the way.

“Bring a bottle and three glasses upstairs. Icheen, get it from Sara, say I want the best.”

He knew Aeony had a taste for the strong wines the humans made, wines strictly illegal in the City. Icheen was the best and he’d paid a small fortune for a very small supply. Muzzie opened the door to the empty room and it smelt clean and fresh. There were only two chairs and a small table, so he arranged them near the bed and used the edge of the bed as a chair. He was pleased that Aeony was looking over the room and seemed impressed.

“Nice better than I imagined.” She said.

“Sara makes sure all the rooms are clean and tidy.”

Olvir pulled his chair right back against the wall before sitting down, it appeared his role was purely to watch and listen. Vella brought the expensive wine into the room, and he was glad to see her on duty, she’d been late for a few recent shifts. Muzzie took the bottle and shooed her out of the room, pouring just two glasses of the clear yellow liquid.

“Someone has told you of my weakness.” Said Aeony.

She was smiling and sat herself sideways on the chair, allowing her tail to stretch out behind her. She was quite close to him now and Muzzie picked up the sexual aroma that made dark angels almost irresistible to males. Aeony sipped her drink and simply smiled at him while he tried to keep his reactions to her under control.

“Did you kill Sajaha ?” She asked.

“No, he spent eleven days looking around the Ring of Volkin and went home.”

The dark angel refilled her own glass and Muzzie’s. Her talon glinted in the light from the window as she poured and Muzzie hoped she wasn’t about to use her talons on him.



“There were a lot of dead bodies at the ring,” she said, “a lot of bodies for an archaeological expedition.”

“We were attacked and defended ourselves. I was hired as a body guard.”

Olvir shifted on his chair and gave a derisory snort.

“Did you kill Annun ?”

“No, I told you, they went home after eleven days, both of them.”

“Leaving their waggon and all their possessions behind !?” Added Olvir.

Aeony spun quickly around, making Olvir jump slightly out of his chair.

“Wait for me downstairs,” she said, “get yourself a drink and wait.”

Olvir stood up and left the room without comment. Muzzie noticed the scar on his face as he left and wondered if Aeony had needed to teach him manners on a previous occasion. The dark angel finished her drink before relaxing back in the chair.

“I don’t really care if you and Lilleth killed Sajaha and the entire team of waggon handlers,” she said, “though I somehow doubt that you did.”

Muzzie moved closer to her and refilled their glasses. He was beginning to find her aroma both intoxicating and highly pleasurable.

“You can guess who sent me,” she continued, “I need something to give her, anything within reason will do.”

“We found nothing.” He said.

For a large creature she moved incredibly quickly and she was next to him on the bed, her sexuality hitting him like a hammer in his mind. Her talon went to his throat and then moved down his body, stopping perilously close to the item of his anatomy that he prized the most.

“Your tavern is important to the City,” she said, “everyone knows you, but don’t think I won’t kill you if I need to.”

She looked down at his erection making a tent out of his trousers and smiled before gripping it tightly, too tightly. He felt her talons pierce the material of his trousers and dig into his flesh. For some reason Muzzie found it both terrifying and pleasurable.

“I need something for her Muzzie. It doesn’t have to be from the ring, you might have had it for years, but I need something and I need it soon. Do you understand ?”

“Yes.”

“Good, I’ll tell her I have things under control, but you have only a few days to find something for me. Can you find something for me ?”

“Yes.”

Her grip relaxed and she was moving onto his lap, her talons undoing his trousers. Then she stopped and climbed off him.

“Another time,” she said, “I’ll be back three nights from now, on my own and I’ll wait where you store the animals.”

Muzzie was still feeling light headed, but he stood up and opened the door. Her arm went around his neck and she kissed him, she kissed open mouthed and without restraint.

“Don’t let me down Muzzie.”

“I won’t.”

She’d gone, leaving him with an enormous erection and feeling giddy. He thought he’d handled the meeting well, right up to the point where he’d said yes to finding her an object of power for Silsk.

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“Can I come in ?” Asked Nethra.

Tarin looked his old self, but a musty smell had greeted her as he'd opened the door. Nethra had been on her way to see Podd, but decided Tarin might know about Kveld silver, after all he had worked with metals most of his life.

"It's not really convenient."

"Please, I really need your advice about something."

He sighed deeply, but Tarin opened the door and let her in. Everything seemed tidy, there was nothing about the house that looked out of place. But Nethra was a good empath and she sensed something very bad had happened in the house and quite recently.

"You can have your usual seat, it'll be like old times." Said Tarin.

She relaxed as her old friend sat in the chair opposite, just as he'd done many times when she'd nursed him through his terrible injuries. There was no offer of refreshments though and he seemed ill at ease.

"Are you feeling well now?" She asked.

"Yes, I can work a full day now. But you didn't come to ask about my health."

No she hadn't but maybe she should have? She and Merrick had made a point of looking in to see Tarin almost every day, but as he grew stronger there had seemed to be no need. The musty smell caught the back of her throat and there was a trace of another odour, one far more pungent and unpleasant.

"I came to ask if you know anything about Kveld silver?"

Tarin was the old Tarin, alert and erect in his chair.

"Who has been talking to you about that?" He asked

"I found some. It was some kind of weapon and I sold it for a lot of money, a ridiculous amount of money."

Tarin went to a cupboard and poured two glasses of the decent hard liquor that he kept for clients who paid him on time. He gave Nethra her drink and sat down again.

"Who did you sell it to?"

"Bailig, it was him who told me it was called Kveld silver. He seemed to think I knew what he was talking about, but I didn't."

"Oh Nethra, Bailig is the biggest gossip in the City, of all the people you could have sold it to. Why didn't you come to me?"

Nethra had considered seeing Tarin about the spear point, but then she'd just thought it was a few coppers worth of silver. Besides Tarin was different these days, for some reason he made her a little uncomfortable.

"I didn't think." She said.

"It's called Kveld silver because it's one of the few things that can kill the Kveld."

Her head was spinning, but it all suddenly made sense to her. The dead four legged creature that had turned into a librarian of all things.

"The Kveld are the changers," she said, "the spies on four legs who keep in the shadows."

It was all coming back to her, the stories she'd heard by the camp fires when she was a child.

"Exactly," said Tarin, "most think them a myth, but I've seen them and they're no myth."

"Do you think I'm in danger?"

Tarin was giving her a definite look of concern.

"How did you come by the silver?"

"It was a spear point, used to kill a strange creature, who became a young boy, a librarian."

“Then the Kveld are likely to look for whoever killed him. You should invest a little of your new found wealth on a talisman from Galla. I’ve heard she has various charms to repel the Kveld.”

Tarin stood up and went to the stairs.

“Wait here,” he said, “I may have something that will help until you see Galla.”

He’d gone up the stairs and then Nethra heard the sound of boxes being pulled about above her head. The smell now had her full attention and it seemed to be coming from the kitchen at the back of the house. She approached the door and realised she was intruding on his privacy, but the smell concerned her, it was the smell of death.

“Oh Tarin, what have you done?” She muttered.

Once Nethra would have run, probably vomiting as she ran, but she was much tougher these days, she’d seen so many things. On the kitchen floor was part of the body of a young woman and it was decomposing. An arm had gone and a leg and a few of her internal organs appeared to have been cut out, but Nethra wasn’t sure which ones. The head looked to be intact, but the eyes were covered in a yellow growth of some kind. The kitchen table had bones on it, the large bones of the arm and leg, though Nethra didn’t know what they were called. The bones had been hammered and cracked to get at the marrow. She never heard Tarin come into the kitchen, but he had a talisman in his hand.

“Thank you.” She said.

She took the talisman from him and put the chain over her neck. Everything felt so normal, a friend giving her a necklace. But there was the dead decomposing body that refused to go away, no matter how often Nethra blinked.

“Who is she?” She asked.

“A girl who sold her body in the slums, she had diseases, no one will miss her.”

Nethra found herself wondering how quickly she could pull her chaos dagger from her belt. Tarin was part Moullay, but she doubted if he’d survive three or four hard stabs into his heart.

“I’m from the Slums Tarin, everyone is missed by someone.”

The weapon smith leaned against the wall and fell into a sitting position on the hard floor of the kitchen.

“Something happened in the shrine,” he muttered, “there was a price for calling on chaos, a price I never understood.”

“What happened to you Tarin?”

“I don’t know, but I need to feed.... you can see what I need to eat. I’ve tried to fight it, but it’s impossible, it’s like trying not to breathe. One kill can last me for weeks; the putrid flesh satisfies me almost as much as fresh.”

Ghūl was a name Nethra knew from her childhood, the foul creatures who lurked in ancient graveyards and fed on the rotting flesh of the long dead. Tarin didn’t have the grey skin tone she remembered from the tales, but it was obvious that chaos had imbued him with a need to eat dead flesh, a need that sounded irresistible.

“Someone will come to investigate the smell eventually Tarin, you can’t live like this.”

He was looking around the kitchen as though seeing the dead flesh for the first time.

“You helped me,” she said, “so I’ll help you. This body is too far gone, it needs putting in a sack a dumping, a long way from here and it needs doing today. There are ways of preserving flesh, like salting or curing with herbs and spices. There’s even pickling if you feel adventurous. I’ll show you how.”

Tarin got to his feet and went into the yard, quickly returning with a sack.

“You’ve an old shed,” she continued, “get some animals in there and slaughter a few for meat, it’ll give you an excuse for any smells and traces of blood.”

He was putting the body parts into the sack and then the bones, though he seemed reluctant to throw away the long bones.

“Thank you for helping me Nethra.”

She hugged him, she had no idea why, but monster or not he’d helped her when she’d needed it most.

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Part 17 will be posted at the end of February