

City of the Lost God

Part 15 – The Flooded Cellars

“It almost fell against him, the body looked like a fusion of an external shell and something disturbingly unnatural.”



“It won’t be cheap,” said Merrick, “I’ll need to hire muscle, two at least, preferably three tough fighters.”

Meeting Merrick had been easy. He was a regular at Muzzie’s and responded eagerly to Vella’s suggestion of a well-paid adventure. As Merrick was watched by Silsk, the problem had been where to meet. That was why all three of them were in a filthy disused sewer in old town.

“We have the money,” said Caspian, “but I won’t be able to get away from the library for a few weeks, I need to arrange an absence with Adamaz.”

Merrick was prodding at the rotting sewer brickwork and causing lumps to fall off, Caspian wasn’t sure if that was a good idea, but decided not to mention it.

“No problem,” Said Merrick, “that’ll give me time to find the right people to go with us. But I will need some of the cash up front.”

“How much ?” Asked Vella.

“There are retainers to keep the muscle happy, my time.....”

Merrick continued to look at the sewer ceiling as he went through his calculation. Caspian knew they had enough money, but also knew they had to negotiate, it was expected.

“Then there is the fact that I’ve never worked for you before,” continued Merrick, “I’ll have to ask you for fifteen gold on the day, but I’ll want ten gold today.”

“You mean Tandalla gold pieces ?” Asked Vella.

“No I don’t, they mix in lead and tin. I want twenty five Quron gold pieces for my services.”

They had no Quron, or Tandalla and for that matter no imperial, but Vella brought two of the gold coins they’d found in the upper dome out of her pocket. She handed them to Merrick, enjoying the shocked look on his face.

“What are these, they look almost pure gold ?” He Asked.

“Purest coins you’re ever likely to see.” Said Caspian.

Merrick picked up his lamp and gave it a good shake, it was risky but the oil burned a little brighter and allowed him to examine the coins better.

“No lead, no tin, just pure gold,” said Vella, “and twice the size of a Quron piece. We’ll give you five now and another ten on the day.”

“I don’t know. I might need to melt these down.....”

“No more haggling,” said Caspian, “you have our offer. If you don’t want our gold we’ll find someone else to go with us.”

“Do I get a share of whatever it is you’re looking for ?”

“No, just the fifteen gold pieces.”

Merrick examined the gold again, but then he smiled and nodded at them.

“You’ve just hired the best guide on the rifts.” He said.

Vella handed over another three of the gold coins and Merrick put them in his purse.

“Will you join me in a drink, it is traditional at times like this ?” Asked Merrick.

He brought out a flask and took a large mouthful of the drink it contained, before offering it to Caspian. The librarian spluttered a little on the strong liquor, but it helped take away the stench of the old sewer from his throat.

"I didn't know if you two were genuine." Said Merrick, "there is a house in the lanes where we can meet next time."

Vella took the flask from Caspian and took a long drink from it, then gave it back to Merrick.

"I'll be in Muzzie's every few days," he said, "let me know when you want a planning meeting."

Merrick began to climb the stairs and pull the sewer grating open. As he came back for his lamp Caspian still had a question for him.

"Do you know a way into the old cellars?"

"No I assumed you did."

"We just thought," added Vella, "that you seem to know everywhere in the City."

Merrick put the lamp back on the floor.

"I'm not silly enough to wander about in the towers," he said, "but you two are under the protection of Silsk. Find us a way in and I'll be there."

~ ~

"It won't open." Said Norrex

Norrex was one of the junior members of the guild, with an un-pronounceable name, so everyone had called him Norrex, after the minor Demon deity with a fifty seven letter second name. Babaef could have used paid Dredger hybrids to clear the old staircase more quickly, but the acolytes recommended by Chillan were more discrete and less likely to pilfer anything they might find.

"Let me see the door." Said Babaef.

The small group of acolytes moved to the side of the stairs. Norrex seemed to have made himself the leader and he was keeping them well back and out of the way. No one was sure what the old ruined building in old town had been, but rumours were that it had been a prison during the human occupation of the City. The door in front of Babaef looked solid, made of wood with a silver metal handle, but solid. It was of course impossible, wood simply didn't survive for that number of years, but there it was in front of him. He put his hands on the door and felt for traps or any kind of magical barrier.

"There is an enchantment on this door." He said.

Involuntarily his small team moved back, even Chillan who was at the top of the stairs. Babaef had power now; he didn't even feel nervous about being in old town anymore. He pressed his palms onto the door and pushed, not with his muscles, but with his mind. The door began to bow, then bend until the wood began to crack and finally the door burst off its hinges and crashed against a wall somewhere far inside the room.

"We'll need lamps," said Babaef, "it's dark inside."

"I have some." Called Chillan.

Babaef stepped into the darkened room and said a few words, instantly his hand held a ball of white light, which gave him light enough to move around.

"This is no prison." He said.

Behind him they were lighting lamps and exploring the room. Babaef moved forward, noticing the ruined drapes and realising someone else had been exploring the room and recently. He noticed two wooden floor blocks that had been pulled up.

"Done recently," said Chillan, "I still smell the perfume of a female."

"We must assume someone is ahead of us," said Babaef, "we go deeper still into this building, much deeper."

Babaef had no idea of who might be treading the same route as him, but he wasn't picking up any traces of real power.

"Have your weapons ready." He said.

He moved to an old fireplace at the far end of the room, one of his men pulling old furniture out of his way. Babaef noticed the tapestry had been pulled from the panelling and wondered if Nigon had sent someone else on the quest. For a moment his old self doubt held him frozen, but then he counted the panels across from the fireplace and pressed a metal stud at the top of the fifth panel. It clicked and dust fell from behind the panel, but the wood panel didn't move.

"It's jammed," he said, "get these panels removed."

Norrex borrowed a small fighting axe from one of the acolytes and used it to quickly remove five or six of the rotting panels from the wall. Behind them was just dust and a plain stone wall. Babaef felt the wall and his fingers began to tingle as he felt one particular spot. He moved his fingers to the edge of the stone block and pushed.

"I need help here."

Several willing hands pushed next to his and the stone block moved back, then the whole section of wall fell back, revealing a web filled room and a staircase leading down.

"The damned things must have their nest in there." Said Norrex.

Two dozen large insect type creatures had been in the room and they were coming out to attack Babaef and his followers. A few fire ball spells from Babaef cleared the hidden room out and his men finished of the rest with their weapons.

"Foul brutes," said Chillan, "one bit me."

The bite didn't look bad, but Chillan pressed the edges of the bite until it bled and then sucked out a mouthful of blood and spat it onto the grubby floor.

"Whoever was here didn't leave by these stairs." Said Babaef.

"Where did they go then ?" Asked Chillan.

Babaef had no idea, so he ignored the question.

"Get them moving down the stairs," he said, "I'll follow you down."

The staircase was a spiral around a centre stone pillar and Babaef wondered if the building really had been a prison and they were heading down into the dungeons. As they descended the walls started to be visibly damp and covered in black mould. The musty atmosphere got worse the deeper they went and eventually they arrived in a room where fungae covered the walls. His followers grouped together at the bottom of the stairs, waiting for his orders.

"We go deeper yet." Said Babaef.

The floor was covered in a slippery green slime, but Babaef managed to keep his feet as he led his men to the other side of the room.

"Keep up," he said, "once I activate it there won't be long."

Norrex fell over and had to be helped up, but they all arrived at what had been a large cupboard.

Decay and millennia of damp had destroyed the wooden doors, but the stone shelves still remained. Babaef crouched under the bottom shelf.

"When I go, you must all follow me. And be quick about it !"

He made the correct sign with his hand and nothing happened. Behind him he heard he ominous sound of collapsing stonework. Tens of thousands of years of decay and their presence was having its effect on the ancient structure.

“The wall near the stairs just collapsed.” Said Chillan.

Babaef knew the sign was right, he’d practiced it for hours. Perhaps he needed to be right under the bottom shelf ? He pushed himself tight under the shelf and repeated the sign. Nothing, no click, no hum, nothing. Behind him it sounded like the world was coming to an end and he felt Chillan pushing and trying to get into the cupboard with him.

“It’s all coming down !”

“The room is collapsing !”

He heard his followers panicking but felt strangely calm. Of course he realised what he needed to do. He pressed his finger against the floor of the cupboard and made the sign again. A swirling portal appeared and he fell into it, closely followed by Chillan and the rest of his followers.

“Help me ! Please, please help me !”

A lamp had broken and one of the younger acolytes had been sprayed with burning oil. Babaef and Norrex got to him at the same time and tore off his burning robes, stamping the flames out of existence.

“Stop shouting and let me look at that arm.” Said Chillan.

Babaef counted and they were all there. One of his followers was burned and another seemed to have a limp, but they’d escaped the collapsing building.

“Tidy yourselves up,” he said, “check your lamps are safe.”

Chillan had finished with the young lad and seemed to be smiling and nodding at him. There was no sign of a dressing on the arm, so Babaef assumed the burn was minor. The room was deeper than where they’d been, Babaef knew it was over five hundred feet lower, but it felt dry and comfortable. He noticed a globe of glass on the wall and remembered reading about the lighting globes used in the older parts of the City. At first the chain resisted his pull, but then it moved and the light globe came on, quickly followed by another four or five around the room. Babaef blinked and covered his eyes gradually allowing his eyes to get used to the light.

“It’s as bright as day.” Said Norrex.

The room was perfect, looked exactly as it must have done the last time the ancient rulers of the City had walked across its tiled floor. The colours of the drapes and tapestries were still vibrant, the scenes depicted still clear.

“They were human.” Said Chillan.

“No mention to anyone of what you see here,” said Babaef to them all, “not even to your lovers.” There were no obvious exits from the room, but large cupboards filled the walls and Babaef knew that even acolytes needed the occasional treats.

“Search the room,” he said, “any gold is yours, but bring anything else to me.”

He saw their smiles, bruises were now ignored, twisted ankles were now bearable.

“Only what you can carry,” he continued, “when we leave, we’ll be running.”

~

~

“Very ingenious.” Said Lilleth.

Muzzie had taken off what looked like a thick weight lifters belt and was showing her the side of it that touched his skin. In one of about six hidden slots in the belt was the fake finger. Muzzie put the belt back on and tightened it.

“An old smugglers belt,” he said, “works perfectly and I won’t lose it in a fight.”

They were in the back room of Muzzie’s and Sara was sat within earshot. Allowing them to go away together was one thing, but the bar was her territory and she was obviously determined to hear what went on.

"Is it safe Lilleth?" Asked Sara.

"Louelle knew all about it," said Lilleth, "its name is the Hand of Arcardis and it's one of several ancient artefacts that he hid in various places before he died. As to being dangerous, Louelle doesn't think it will harm Muzzie, but there are a lot of people who would happily kill to get hold of it."

Muzzie just smiled at her.

"So I keep it secret and only use the power as a last resort." He said.

Sara stood and walked in front of Muzzie, putting herself where she couldn't be ignored.

"The dark angels have already been asking people about your trip with Sajaha and what became of the sorcerer. If you weren't so well known you'd probably be hanging from a hook in the towers by now."

Muzzie took hold of her hands.

"So I'll be careful."

"You need to be more than careful," said Lilleth, "You need to stay in the City for a while, stay where you know people."

A head came through the curtain from the bar area and Sara was called away to deal with a client who was asking about the Tavern's more adult comforts.

"Seriously Muzzie, I know Sara can make a fuss, but you need to be very careful until this thing blows over." Said Lilleth.

"I will, I will, the tavern needs a bit of maintenance in places and a few of the regulars are talking about setting up a patrol of the local alleys, I can help with that."

Lilleth rose and Muzzie walked with her to the front entrance.

"Why the patrol?"

Instead of leaving her at the door, Muzzie walked up the street with her, standing for a while on the street corner.

"We've had a few robberies and one of my customers was stripped, robbed and killed while I was out of town."

"People will always be killed in the City, it's just a fact of life."

Someone walked past them, a hand waving slightly and voice muttering a greeting as they headed for the bar.

"It's how he was killed," said Muzzie, "he was drained of blood, the body dumped only yards from my side gate."

"That is bad!"

"I have to do something, it's bad for business."

Lilleth was about to walk away, but he held her arm and then kissed her, definitely not the sort of kiss to do in front of Sara.

"Will you do me a favour?" He asked.

"It depends."

"Find out about the other artefacts Arcardis hid."

"Muzzie! What was I saying about lying low for a while!"

He kissed her again and waited until she nodded at him. Then he let go of her arm and watched her walk off into the darkness.

~

~

Babaef was surprised by how much gold had been in the cupboards and it was all the extremely pure gold the humans minted into large coins.

"I kept a few bags back," said Chillan, "for funding future enterprises."

"A wise move," said Babaef, "we don't want to make the team too rich, they might stray from our cause."

Babaef went to a section of wall and moved his finger over the stones, tracing out a complex pattern he'd memorised by many practise session in his home workroom. A large black and green portal opened up and Babaef counted quietly and slowly until it vanished. About thirty seconds, not long, but long enough as long as they reacted quickly. He made the sign again and counted the seconds again. Thirty one he made it the second time, he put the difference down to his own error. He didn't need to explain the portal to his team, or the significance of the thirty seconds. They weren't stupid, if they had been stupid, Chillan wouldn't have chosen them.

"Move around the circle, space yourselves evenly." Said Babaef.

In the centre of the room was a simple circle, red as blood and looking like someone had painted it the day before. The red seemed wet, as though a bleeding body had been dragged around the room, but the colour was burned deep into the tiles, fired there in the kiln when they were made. The circle was a circle of power, the first used to apply a lock on Nigon, the first used by the humans to trap him. Once there would have been battle hardened troops guarding the circle, but now Babaef could walk into the centre of the circle unmolested.

"Evenly I said, you can't all be near the portal !"

They were all carrying bags of gold, too much really. He thought of telling them to leave some behind, but then they might stop trusting him. Norrex had one more bag than the others, but he seemed quicker on his feet. Grudgingly they moved around the outside of the circle, with Chillan furthest from their point of escape. Babaef had left Shadow at home, but in the same pocket inside his cloak, he'd placed an item wrapped in many layers of protective cloth. He unwrapped a jar and placed it at is feet. He saw Chillan staring at the jar, which contained the heart of a child, a pure blood dredger child.

"You must all make a sacrifice," said Babaef, "a drop of your blood will suffice."

He watched as they all put down their bags and used knives on various parts of their bodies. One cut his thumb, another his palm, one even cut deeply into his leg. Eventually Babaef was satisfied that each had spilled some of their blood onto the tiled floor. He didn't need a parchment, this particular spell he'd learnt by heart. The first section removed the curse on anyone entering the room, which his acolytes didn't even realise had been placed on them. Babaef spoke the five lines perfectly and felt relieved in some way, as though a shadow had been removed from his life.

"Thank you master." Said Chillan.

The second part would remove the first lock holding Nigon in his prison and then the third part would transfer the power released to Babaef. The problem was that the lock also preserved the room in its current pristine state and they were well below the water table. Babaef needed the power, he was determined to get it, even if it did put his team at risk.

"Concentrate on me," he said, "give me your trust, give me your obedience."

"Yes master." They answered together.

There were just four lines to the second part and Babaef knew he'd pronounced them perfectly as water started to flow through gaps in the stone walls.

"Keep your positions !" He shouted.

Dirty green water was starting to wash around his feet, but Babaef put his foot on the jar and calmed his mind. The third part had six lines and he concentrated on them and delivered them with perfect diction and rhythm. The jar under his foot burst, the heart inside falling apart and joining the water now flowing around his feet.

“Master, we should go now.” Said Chillan.

Something was happening to Babaef and it wasn't what he expected. Yes he felt immense power entering his body, but it was accompanied by pain, lots of pain. His hands felt as though they were on fire and he could feel something push at his body. He became aware of his surroundings again and realised Chillan and Norrex were gently pushing him towards the wall.

“Make the sign master.” Said Norrex.

He put his finger to the wall and it looked to be on fire, flames pulsing across the back of his hand and flaring up as he moved his fingers. Babaef almost put it down to an illusion, but Chillan gasped and no longer held onto him. The water was now up to his waste and through the flames that seemed to be engulfing him, he saw the pleading faces of his acolytes.

“Now, we must go now.” He said.

He put his finger on the wall and made the sign. The portal opened and he fell through it, his acolytes and thousands of gallons of filthy water following him.

“We're in the cellar of the guild building.” Chillan said.

Babaef pulled himself against a wall and noticed he was no longer surrounded by flames and the pain had stopped. His acolytes were in a bedraggled heap in front of him, but they were all there and looking happy, despite the drenching. They had their gold, they were all rich and he'd brought them all safely home. He knew they would now follow him anywhere.

~ ~

“You look great,” said Caspian, “I told you Borlas' clothes would fit you.”

Vella had pulled her hair back and pinned it under the hood of a cloak. She'd strapped her breasts up as tight as she could bear and they'd found a nice loose shirt and jacket. They'd completed her clothing from the assortment they'd found in the missing librarians room and Vella now looked like any other male librarian.

“Where did Borlas go ?” She asked.

“It looks like he ran away. It happens and Adamaz has already taken on two new apprentices.”

Caspian pulled the edges of her hair from under the hood.

“You look too tidy and remember to slouch a bit as you walk, all the new apprentices slouch.”

He gave her a last sniff to make sure they'd washed all the perfume off her and then they walked out of his room and headed towards the bridge to the library. It was very late and there was no one around in any of the corridors.

“Are there guards ?” Asked Vella.

“Why would there be ? The only way to get here is by coming up through the towers or our private portal.”

They reached the end of the bridge and there was the smell of food still coming from the apprentice's refectory. There were no lights on the bridge, but the dark of night was never absolute on the rift and they could see where they were going. About halfway across the winds built up and the small wall either side of the bridge did nothing to stop it pushing them around. Caspian held onto Vella and they carried on walking.

“You do this walk every day ?” Asked Vella.

“We all do, usually four times a day.”

Far below them lay the City, most of it in darkness, but the slums were lit up by a sprinkling of lights and lamps of varying colours. Caspian stopped and leant on the bridge wall.

“Look he said, you can see the whole City from here. The slums are always lit up like that, the colours of the lights mean something if you know the code.”

“Really ? I always thought they were just lighting the alleys.”

Caspian pointed to a group of yellow lights near the river.

“Yellow is a working girl and she’ll put in a red filter in if she’s entertaining. Over there, the green light is a seller of illicit drugs and the blue light is healer, though most of those are crooks.”

“How do you know all this Casp ?”

Caspian remembered and hesitated. There had been a wonderful girl Sara had introduced him to. She’d given him a wonderful evening of sex without restraint and had taken him on a tour of the slums in the hour before daylight. He’d been petrified and excited by the trip and she’d told him why the slums were always brightly lit. Caspian bypassed the question.

“There,” he said, “that glow not far away is from the back rooms of Muzzie’s. Then further away the yellow glow there is coming from lights around the private cloisters behind the guild building.”

He pointed out more landmarks to her before walking towards the doors at the end of the bridge. They were slightly ajar and moving a little in the wind. While Caspian pulled one of the doors fully open, Vella stepped inside the small hallway.

“No, not that door,” said Caspian, “that is the tower, we never go that way.”

Vella almost had her hand on the large metal door handle but pulled it away.

“We go this way.”

There was only one dim lighting orb near the top of the small spiral staircase and it would have been easy to miss the stairs in the dark.

“Fifty four steps,” he said, “this is my route to work.”

Down they went, Caspian in front, the stone steps worn and bowed by the years of wear from the footsteps of librarians. At the bottom they came to a door that was wedged open and once through it Caspian turned towards Vella.

“The great library,” he said, “no one comes here at night, not even Adamaz.”

Even in semi darkness the library was impressive. Row upon row of shelves, all made of a hardwood from a tree that was long extinct. The books themselves varied in colour, size and texture, which seemed to add to the grandeur of the rooms.

“Have you noticed the ceilings ?” Asked Caspian.

They were walking and each section of the ceiling was painted with flying demons of all shapes and sizes. Some Vella knew from old tales, but some were so horrific that she didn’t want to look at them.

“Who painted them Casp ?”

“No one knows, but they were painted in the early days of the City.”

Down a flight of wide stairs they went, the bannister rail carved into the shape of a long serpent.

“This place is amazing Casp.”

“Yes. I’ve worked here for years, yet it still excites me.”

Another room full of book cases and then more stairs, which brought them to an even bigger room.

“This is the main floor,” said Caspian, “this is where people come to buy spells and invocations.”

“How man floors are there ?”

“Fourteen and Adamaz says there are just over a million books.”

Another floor, moving down the tower, the buildings outside the vast windows becoming clearer as they descended the tower.

“Damn it Caspian, can I get my lamp out of my pack ?”

Vella’s ankle had found the edge of a bookcase in the semi dark and she’d taken a tumble. The dim blue night lamps in the library were old world magic and they barely gave enough light to see by.

“Lighting a naked flame in the library means death if we’re caught Vella, even I would be killed. You’ll just have to walk more carefully.”

More floors, more books, until it felt like the whole world consisted of books on shelves. Then Caspian stopped in front of a very ordinary looking door.

“The two basement floors are restricted,” he said, “I haven’t had a key myself for very long.”

He brought a flat metal disc out of his pocket and placed it against a metal panel on the door. There was a click and the door opened about an inch.

“Walk slowly Vella, the steps are very steep.”

There were only about twenty steps and they were in another section of the library.

“It’s a bit squalid Casp.”

Gone were the ornate high ceilings, gone were the antique bookshelves. The books were on plain wooden shelving and everywhere looked dirty.

“No cleaning staff are allowed down here,” said Caspian, “in fact few people come here at all.”

They were underground now and the lack of windows accentuated the smell of ageing parchment.

As they passed one shelf there was the clear sign of small footprints and then the droppings of some kind of rodent.

“What books do you keep down here ?” Asked Vella.

Caspian pulled a huge volume from a shelf and opened it, pushing a worm away from where it had been eating one of the pages.

“This is an ancient codex,” he said, “if you knew the key it would teach you the secret of immortality.”

“But they’re rotting away !”

“Perhaps that is for the best Vella, perhaps it’s for the best.”

Another spiral staircase and another dark and dank basement level. Caspian ignored everything until he reached a heavily barred metal door.

“They call this the King’s Stair,” he said, “legend says it’s a last resort escape route from the top of the towers. I think we should light your lamp now.”

Caspian removed two large and heavy metal bars from their slots in the doors, causing centuries of dirt and dust to fall to the floor. He started to pull back the bolts, but one was sticky and he had to use all his strength to budge it.

“I have a hammer in my pack.” Said Vella.

“No. It might bring the attention of something from down there.”

Together they pulled back the bolts and the door opened.

“Have you been down there Casp ?”

“No, I don’t think any librarian ever has.”

Vella turned her lamp up and they started down the wide stone steps. There were no light globes and no ornamentation, just stone steps leading ever downward.

~ ~

The female creature had visited the slums often, but few had ever seen her and few of those that had still lived. It was silly of her to have sent the boy, but there should have been little risk. Maya could still smell him in the narrow gap between two shacks, though his scent was beginning to fade.

A small rodent creature was startled by her passing, but Maya had it in her jaws before it got far.

Useless as a meal, but the cries of the creature might have alerted others to her presence.

“Thank you, but next time the price will be five coppers.”

A herbalist was seeing a customer to the door and collecting their fee. Maya had been smelling his stock from hundreds of yards away and little of it smelled fresh. The customer though looked plump and there was no scent of sickness about him. For a moment Maya forgot all about searching for the boy and followed the plump creature through the alleys. Twice he looked behind him and never noticed the crouching shadow in the darkness; never saw the teeth waiting to tear him apart. He was so plump and she was so hungry. Not from the slums this one, but from the better part of town and here to buy a few narcotic herbs.

“Looking for company ?”

“Not tonight.”

The girl went back into her shack and Maya continued following the plump creature. She wanted to taste his flesh, the desire, the hunger. It was pulling her mind apart, taking her over. No, she had to find traces of the boy and besides, another half-eaten body and the slum dwellers might start to organise patrols and that could make life difficult. She still followed the plump creature as he skirted to the side of a shack and walked beside the river. In a way it was his own decision that led to his death. If he'd stayed among the shacks Maya would have gone hungry, but he took a short cut through a small area of scrub and larger bushes.

Maya had him on the ground before he could say a word and her powerful jaws clamped hard onto his throat. He managed a few gurgling sounds, but for Maya it was all in the eyes, she liked the terror in them as they saw her and knew their fate. Some of her kind killed quickly, but Maya held his windpipe closed and watched as his eyes took it all in and realised death was very close. As she felt his pulse slow down, Maya ripped out his throat and began to bite at his flesh. Any meat from his body would do, she had no preference as long as it was clean and free of the diseases the slums seemed so full of. She ripped his clothes off his body and he was plump, really plump. Good, the fat was best part, it would provide enough energy to keep her going for days.

“I'm not going into the bushes. If you want it, you can pay the extra to use my bed.”

The girl talked her customer into the extra copper and saved both their lives, Maya wasn't in the mood to let anyone disturb her meal. She bit into the belly fat and pushed her nose right into his body, eating the thick nutritious layer of fat. It tasted so good, so perfect, it was like a drug to her. It meant staying in the form of the four legged beast until the meal was digested, but Maya had no pressing need to walk on two feet again. There was an instinct to sleep off the heavy meal, but Maya needed to find traces of the boy before his scent was lost in the general stench of the slums. She pushed the remains of the body under a bush and used her paws to wipe the blood from her snout. Then a few mouthfuls of brackish water from the river and she was ready.

Back at the herbalists Maya found the scent of Borlas in his four legged form and it took her across several alleys and behind a simple one room shack. There had been a short fight, there was a trace of blood on the ground, the blood of her kind. It had only been a routine job, following the librarian Adamaz and reporting his actions to their client. But Maya blamed herself, Borlas was still a trainee and she'd probably sent him to his death. Maya followed the scent to where it stopped and then there was a scent she knew very well, a stench she seemed to come across all over the slums. She smelt the sickly sweet, rarely washed body of Podd the bone collector.

~

~

“What's behind the doors ?” Whispered Vella.

They'd descended for hundreds of stairs, with numerous small landings, but now they'd reached the bottom of the stairs and a long dark corridor was in front of them. They could see several open doors and there looked to be more, further along the corridor.

“There are rumours Vella, but we need to get to the stairs at the other end.”

Caspian began to slowly walk along the corridor, but Vella pointed at the floor, there were marks in the thick layer of dust. It looked like something had been dragged across the floor and quite recently.

“What rumours Caspian ? Tell me !”

He put his finger to his lips and half dragged her about twenty steps back up the way they’d come.

“There are rumours of creatures who wouldn’t be tolerated in the City, creatures too deformed, too touched by chaos. We need to be very quiet !”

Vella looked shocked and started to tremble.

“I’ll be quiet.” She said.

Down the stairs once more and they quietly crept past an open door, the one where something had been dragged into or out of. Nothing came out to look at them, so they moved slowly on. They were nearly at the last set of doors when one opened and a long tentacle came through the gap. Caspian looked at Vella and prayed she didn’t scream.

“Casp.” She whispered.

He put his finger to his lips and looked at her, hoping she would just keep still and quiet. The tentacle came out of the room behind the door, about eight feet of tentacle. Caspian pushed himself as far back as he could against the wall and hoped it was some sort of animal in the room, after all some animals had tentacles. Four more tentacles came through the door, all of them looked green and slightly gelatinous. The light flickered and Caspian noticed Vella had put the lamp on the ground and now had her eyes tightly shut. As he was thinking of animals with lots of tentacles the body came out of the door and he was pleased that Vella had her eyes closed.

Caspian had never seen a creature from the 7th rift, he doubted that anyone in the City had, but he’d seen picture in books in the restricted section of the library. Part insect, part mollusc, he found himself wondering how many others there might be in the deep cellars. At least he now knew what had caused the drag marks on the floor, it seemed to move by pushing one large foot along the floor and then moving the mass of its body over the foot. It glistened, that was the part that scared him most, the way it glistened in the yellow light of the lamp. It almost fell against him, the body looked like a fusion of an external shell and something disturbingly unnatural. A tentacle moved towards his face and he nearly passed out, only concern for Vella kept him from screaming and running for the stairs. There was nothing that even vaguely resembled a head or eyes, yet the creature managed to gently rub its tentacle around his face. Caspian felt a movement on his leg and realised another tentacle was curling around his ankle. Still Vella stood like a statue, her eyes closed, her breathing slow and shallow.

It seemed to lose interest in him, the tentacle on his cheek drew back and the creature moved slowly back into the room it had come from, its huge body rocking slightly as it went. Finally the tentacle around his ankle uncoiled and disappeared through the door. Caspian felt himself getting hot, his breathing was becoming erratic and his heart was pounding. He knew it was shock, but he’d heard that people had died from shock. There was Vella, poor Vella. He pushed the back of his head against the wall and concentrated on getting his breathing under control, slow and deep he kept telling himself. Then he noticed his heart had stopped hammering and his face felt cooler. He moved beside Vella and held her hand.

“We’re going now,” he whispered, “keep your eyes down and follow me.”

Caspian picked up the lamp in his other hand and gently pulled Vella along behind him. She moved with him and together they walked past the last set of doors and down the stairs at the far end of the corridor. When they came to the first small landing, Caspian hugged Vella and kissed her.

“What was it like ? I only smelt it and that was bad enough.” She said.

Caspian found he was trembling again and he hung onto Vella as though his life depended on it.

“Don’t ask me to remember it,” he said, “never ask me to remember it.”

The trembling stopped and Caspian gave Vella an encouraging smile.

“Your face Casp !”

“What ?”

He felt his face and the creature seemed to have left a residue on his skin, it felt like slime. It brushed off when he wiped it with his hand, but Vella was examining his face and began prodding with her fingers.

“Does that hurt ?” She asked.

“Why ? What does it look like ?”

She took the lamp off him and held it close to his face. He saw her trying to hide her concern, but he felt no pain or discomfort from where the creature had touched him.

“It’s like a burn mark,” said Vella, “but the skin is still soft.”

He rolled up his trouser leg and around his ankle was a circle of what looked like dead burnt skin.

Again there was no pain, but now he had a good idea how his face would look in the light of day.

“It might be temporary Casp. Hopefully it will heal.”

“I hope so. We must be back in the Dome before morning Vella, so we must get moving again.”

There were a lot more stairs going down and a lot more small landings, but much to their relief there were no more corridors or doors. Something had happened on the stairs though, something a long time ago. In one place a huge piece of stone looked like it had been blown out of the stairs. On one small landing there were bones, large bones, but millennia of decay had rendered them unrecognisable. Eventually the stairs came to a flooded section and they could go no further.

“We’ve found it Vella,” said Caspian, “we’ve found a way into the flooded cellars.”

They sat on the stairs and looked at the water gently lapping at the stairs in front of them. Vella began examining his face again and tutting to herself.

“Any better ?” He asked.

“No. You’ll have to think of something to explain it.”

“Love bite perhaps.”

They both laughed and even in that place Caspian felt his body react as he held Vella and kissed her.

He pulled away and brushed her hair out of her eyes.

“In our own bed when we get back.” He said.

Then the awful truth occurred to both of them at the same time.

“Casp... We have to go back along that corridor.”

“It moves slowly Vella, this time we run !”

~

~

© Ed Cowling – December 2014

Part 16 will be posted at the end of January