

## City of the Lost God

### Part 3 – The Bone Collector

**“A real connoisseur was Aeony and she never failed to tell him about any bloated bodies she’d noticed around the City.”**



No one ever bothered Podd the bone collector. It wasn’t just that every truly civilised city needs a bone collector of some kind; it was also because he didn’t look the sort of person you’d want to bother. Even he wasn’t sure of his parentage but there was a lot of mean demon in there, large and angry mean demon.

“Are you calling me a liar ?” He asked.

The two members of the guild in his yard looked uncomfortable which was a surprise, as was the fact that they hadn’t threatened him or given him a beating. Podd may have been big and ugly, but he was no fool and he knew that for some reason the Guild of Thraan didn’t want to ruffle any feathers in the City.

“We know you collect bodies from the old town,” said the one in charge, “we just want a little information. We can pay in gold if the information is worth it.”

The guild offering good money for information they could just beat out of people ! Podd knew that something big was happening, huge in fact. Yes he’d picked up the body, but by then it was naked and getting very smelly. Plus it was missing a head, which wasn’t that unusual in the part of old town where he’d found it. No one really cared who killed who in the City, unless it was someone who mattered and it was beginning to look like the dead Shelzak demon mattered.

“He told you ! He doesn’t know anything about it.” Shouted Ash.

Podd had often wondered if taking the kid in off the streets had been a good idea. He seemed to eat enough for a dozen kids and he wasn’t the brightest knife on the shelf, but the kid was a good apprentice and fiercely loyal. Best of all the kid had a loud voice and his visitors were looking around like startled wurtle bugs at every noise. Not that there were any neighbours to hear anything. The fat boilers at the bottom of the yard put out a smell that most found unpleasant, so he’d moved his yard across the river, a good half mile from the rest of the slums. It stopped complaints and usually gave him complete privacy.

“Perhaps we could see your special collection while we’re here ?” They asked him.

In one long shed Podd had a few shelves of unusual items he’d either collected or found on bodies before they went in the boiler. Most people shunned his yard, but a few enjoyed a visit to his private museum and he’d even been given gold by some in appreciation of the items he kept. Aeony in particular was a regular visitor, always very polite for a dark angel and always keen to see the new exhibits. Not just see either, he remembered her running her tongue over the heart of an Arcadian he’d removed from its jar of pickling fluid.

“Thank you Podd, this is exquisite.” She’d said.

A real connoisseur was Aeony and she never failed to tell him about any bloated bodies she’d noticed around the City.

“No,” he said, “my collection is for invited guests only.”

People just didn’t say no to the guild, it just wasn’t done, yet they showed no signs of drawing weapons. He saw Ash looking at him in amazement and hoped the kid didn’t try anything stupid. It wasn’t that they’d find any Shelzak parts in the collection. As soon as he’d seen the guild brand,

Podd had put the entire body into the boiler and it was now reduced to fat for the soap makers and powdered bone for the fertiliser seller. The problem was that they might ask to look in other places and there were a lot of things in various trunks, hidden in various places that he didn't want anyone to see.

"We could pay."

The one who seemed to be in charge pulled out a purse and let it fall onto the table, while his colleague began to play with his sword hilt in a meaningful way. The gold was tempting, it seemed a few words about taking Muzzie home on his cart that night could make him very rich, but Podd had few friends in the City and he wasn't going to sell out the few he had.

"I know nothing about any Shelzak body. Please leave."

The quiet one who looked to be mostly medium level demon started to draw his sword, but the one in charge stopped him. Neither of them were pure bloods though, very few in the City were.

"You heard the guvnor, fuck off !" Shouted Ash.

He'd called him Ash because his skin was the colour of last night's ashes in the grate. The kid had a slightly withered arm and he was undersize for... well for anything. But Podd was quite proud of him and surprised that either of them was still alive. No one, ever insulted the guild. Yet they had and they still lived.

"Easy boy," he said, "I think our guests are leaving."

The leader picked up his purse and glared at Ash.

"I'll remember you boy !" He said.

Then they opened the gate to his yard and started walking towards the river, which was always difficult to cross with dignity. Podd himself had arrived home sodden after a few too many at Muzzie's. He watched as both the members of the guild went up to their knees in the mud and gave them a cheery wave as they glared back at him. Silly he knew, they would indeed remember him, but he couldn't resist.

"Ash. Can you remember a message for Sara ?" He asked.

He saw the kids face crumple a little, a good memory wasn't one of his blessings.

"Give them." He gestured with his hand at the guild members still wading across the river. "A while to get clear, then go to Sara and tell her the guild were here asking about the Shelzak."

"Is that it ?" Asked Ash.

Podd wanted to add a few words to the message, but he knew from past experience that it was likely to get garbled.

"That's it. Just don't forget."

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Nethra found herself waiting across the alley from Tarin's yard and still wondering if she was doing the right thing. Luckily Merrick had been out of the house when she arrived home from the shrine, out picking up the family who he'd missed a few nights earlier. At the time she was just glad of the time to calm down and get her story straight. She'd shown him her arm and told him part of the truth.

"There was a chaos creature there, so I hid in the shrine until morning and when I left there was the mark on my arm."

Then she'd told him about the dead creature outside in the square and he'd looked concerned and held her while she cried.

"You have to see Galla," He said, "she'll know what the sign means."

Nethra knew what the sign meant and Galla was the last person she wanted to see, the empath was certain to pick everything about the visit to the shrine out of her head.

"I will go to her." She'd said.

It was a lie, but what could she tell him, the truth? If Merrick had known what the shrine had told her he might have told Silsk, or he might have sold the information to anyone of the major factions in the City and that would cause so much trouble. The City thrived on internal strife, it was almost rejuvenated by it, but what she knew could cause civil war. Then how long would Merrick survive as the source of the information, or her?

"I'll visit the shrine another night." She'd told him.

"No!" He'd said. "I'll find another way to keep Silsk happy."

He was a good man and Nethra didn't like lying to him, but she remembered the shrine mentioning his many and varied flaws and worst of them all was greed. So she found herself in the alley waiting for Tarin to open the rear doors to his yard. Not that she had any feelings for Tarin, it was just that he knew things, had given her precise instructions on how to activate the shrine. It was interesting that he never talked about the wars he'd fought in, but Merrick and Muzzie did nothing but boast about their deeds after a few drinks. Muzzie had definitely seen action against the forces from the holy city, but Merrick? She suspected lying about his war exploits was another of his flaws.

The smoke from the fire that heated his forge had been rising from the chimney for nearly thirty minutes when she saw the gate open. He always opened it to help the smoke and heat escape from the yard. Of course thieves could try to use the open gate to rob him, but Nethra felt sorry for any that might try. She walked slowly to the gates and quietly entered the yard. Tarin had his back to her and seemed to be concentrating on putting some decorative touches into a sword hilt. He turned towards her and gave her a friendly smile.

"I need to finish this, then we can go inside."

She knew he'd be a while, so she threw a rag over a pile of charcoal and settled herself as comfortably as she could. Tarin was hitting the hilt with a small ball hammer, planishing she'd heard it called, decorating the hilt with small circular blows. His bare arms rippled with muscles, but the skin bore the marks of terrible battles, barely an inch of it was without scars. Tarin was part human and a lot of Moullay demon, a very rare mix. The Moullay part gave him regenerative powers, as long as his heart beat, his body would mend. But the scars remained and she could see why many crossed the street when he approached. Eventually he finished the area he was working on and closed the yard gate before beckoning her into the room where he usually did business.

"Please have a seat," he said, "can I get you a drink, there's also some fresh bread?"

"That would be nice." She replied.

He went to another room and there was the sound of water being pumped and then he was back looking much cleaner and carrying a drink for her and a small plate with some bread and berries on it. As he went to get his own drink she greedily devoured the bread, remembering that she'd only picked at her food for days. Tarin put his own bread on her plate and waved away her objections.

"So you were involved in events at the shrine a few nights back?" He asked.

"How do you know, does everyone know?"

He sat back in his chair and drank some of his beer.

"Relax Nethra. Something left a mark on the shrine and you still have a faint glow around you. Few can see it and it will be gone completely in a few more days."

She felt relieved and sipped the beer he'd given her. It was good, very sweet and hardly alcoholic at all.

“There is one thing though,” he said, “try to stay off the streets for a few days. The dark angels might see the glow and become curious.”

He looked at her and held her gaze.

“And no one wants to be the object of their curiosity.”

It was easier to show him than describe it, so she loosened her outer cloak and pulled it away from her arm to reveal the mark of chaos. It looked like a brand she’d had on her arm for years, the edges had lost their raw look almost overnight. The weapon smith looked at it and then stood up and went to a large cabinet at the back of the room.

“I normally keep this for client’s who’ve given me a large commission, but I think you need a drop,” he said, “and I need a drop too.”

He brought back two glasses and a bottle with a label written in the tongue of the empire. He poured her a large measure and then one for himself before sitting down again. He sipped at the golden fluid.

“Brewed by humans and forbidden of course, but so many of the best things are.” He said.

She drank some of the liquid and felt herself relax, her problems seemed less immediate.

“So what did the shrine tell you ? Tarin asked.

Nethra held up the mark on her arm and pointed at it.

“This.... This wasn’t because of the shrine. I offered my services to chaos..... my lifelong service.”

Tarin took another mouthful of the drink before answering her.

“Dear Nethra, if offering service worked everyone in the City would have arms covered in that symbol and I’d be in the Dome and ruling the entire rift. You were told something, something important and someone knows that and the mark is to gain control over you.”

“So it’s not the Lords of Chaos ?”

There was a noise from the yard of someone knocking on the gate and Tarin walked outside. She heard him talking and then annoyance crept into his voice as he shouted at someone. He came back into the room and pulled his chair closer to her before sitting down again.

“I hope I’m not losing you business ?” She asked.

He took hold of her hand, something he’d never done before.

“I’m the only weapon smith left in the City, he’ll be back. Now tell me what the shrine said to you ?”

Nethra had known she was going to tell him, it was the real reason she’d come. Someone else had to know, it was just too big to keep to herself.

“Does the shrine ever get it wrong,” she asked, “or lie ?”

“Never. Whatever the shrine told you is the truth.”

“That’s what I thought,” she continued, “the shrine told me we’d be seeing a lot more of the guild in the City. They’d be polite and on their best behaviour as they’re arranging with Silsk to move their headquarters here from Quron on the 2<sup>nd</sup> rift. They won’t be moving into the tower, but rebuilding part of the old town.”

She paused and looked at Tarin, still undecided about telling him everything.

“If that was the full story I could have told Merrick and he could have told Silsk what she knew anyway, probably even wanted broadcasting, but that wasn’t the full story.”

“Go on.” He prompted.

Nethra decided she had to tell him everything.

“Silsk also paid the guild a huge sum of money to kill Aeony and another three of the dark angels who she feels aren’t as loyal to her as they should be. The shrine kept calling me chosen and adding ridiculous snippets of gossip, but I know the time, date and method the guild will use to kill Aeony.”

"I can see why you didn't want to tell Merrick."

She just nodded at him. They both knew that at the very least Merrick would be killed for trying to cause trouble and at the very worst the City would be plunged into civil war.

"I haven't told you everything." She said.

She moved her hand out of Tarin's grip and took a long drink of the golden fluid. There had been a lot of gossip the shrine had mentioned to her, some of it Tarin might think was worth knowing, but she decided to keep to the main problem, the matter that could destroy them all. There was no resistance movement in the City, no underground rebellion. The whole idea was absurd ! There was no government or official leadership of any kind to rebel against. Yet if there could be said to be an underground movement, then she and Tarin were its most important members.

"The guild have their own agenda," she told him, "and once Aeony is killed they will take control of the City and install their leader Sensan as the new King of the City."

She saw him about to speak and held up her hand.

"The shrine then told me that after removing just about everything of value from the City, including the great library, they will return to Quron, leaving the City to fall into a final decline."

There, she'd told him. She'd left out a very strange story about Adamaz and Aeony, but that might give her an edge if she needed one in the future. Tarin sat back in his chair and looked stunned.

"I can see why you kept this to yourself." He said.

"Can we do anything, should we do anything ?" She asked.

"When is Aeony to be killed ?"

"22 day's time on the eve of the feast of Nigon. She'll be killed as she picks up the shield of Nigon." Nigon was a poorly thought of ancient demon God, but his feast was one of the few high spots in the year for the population of the City and Nethra knew Aeony wouldn't miss it.

"Then we have time to do something about it." Said Tarin.

"But should I, now I have this mark ?"

She moved her arm near to him and Tarin rubbed the brand, as if it might rub off if he tried hard enough.

"Supposing," he said, "just supposing chaos really has marked you as one of its servants. Would chaos want the City destroyed ? I don't think so and I think you were allowed to see the shrine for a reason. You can change what the shrine saw, but you need to act fast."

"What do I need to do ?"

"We could go to see the shrine again ?"

"NO !" She shouted.

She remembered the dead thing and the fear, above all the fear and she wasn't going there again.

"I will go alone then," he said, "probably for the best, but you need to begin cultivating a friendship with Podd the bone collector."

She'd seen Podd at Muzzie's and remembered the smell of decaying flesh that seemed to ooze out of the pores of his skin.

"Why ?"

"Because you need to get close enough to Aeony to have a private conversation with her. No one simply knocks on the tower doors and asks for the dark angels ! She is particularly friendly with Adamaz, but people talk of her flying away from his rooms late at night and you have no way of getting into the Dome. That leaves us with Podd and his fairly unpleasant collection of dried or bottled body parts."

"I still don't understand." She said.

"I have friends in some odd places and one told me that Aeony likes to visit Podd's strange museum at least two or three times a week, usually in the early morning. No other dark angels with her, usually when Podd is asleep. So my dear Nethra, I think you need to start showing an interest in Podd and his collection."

She nodded. Podd was unpleasant, but anything was better than another trip to the shrine.

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"But I haven't stolen anything." Said Ghot.

Adamaz had often thought about holding disciplinary meetings in the main dining area, invite all the trainees to watch, instil a bit of deterrence. But he wanted them to learn and he'd noticed over the millennia that fear is a good way to gain control, but a bad way to teach. So he'd brought Ghot to his rooms and asked him about stealing enchanted parchment.

"The evidence is in front of you." He said.

On the table was the hastily folded and quite crumpled parchment and the gold coins from Tandalla, five hundred Kaperi. Adamaz looked at the coins and thought they seemed so little for the boy to throw his life away for. Then there was a faint but unmistakable knock on the door.

"Think boy," said Adamaz, "look at the evidence and think about your next words very carefully while I see who is at the door."

As he walked to the door Adamaz tried to remember where Ghot had come from. Yes he remembered, his family were quite well thought of, Farrag breeders of some repute in Quron. The family were pure Dredger for centuries, but then a favoured daughter had met a stranger at the bazar. It was a familiar tale and now the issue of that union was sat in his room and looking very uncomfortable.

"You sent for me sir?" Asked Caspian.

The boy looked pale, probably worried about being implicated in the theft in some way, but Adamaz wasn't in the mood to reassure him. It was time for Caspian to grow up a bit if he really wanted to run the library one day.

"Yes, I'd like you to see the evidence against Ghot."

His protégé looked a little confused, but he sat himself on the chair he was guided to and sat quietly as Adamaz returned to his own chair in front of the thief.

"The paper is there," he began, "the money you were paid and the dealer you sold it to confessed before succumbing to his wounds."

Ghot looked shocked, it was the first time he'd heard of the confession, or that his contact in the Tandalla underworld had been killed.

"Do you have anything you'd like to tell me boy?" He asked him.

Ghot looked at Caspian who steadily met his gaze and then he looked at the paper and the few gold coins.

"I know nothing about this sir," he said, "and I'd like to see my father."

So he was going to try and use the position of his family to get away with it. Adamaz stood up and walked behind the boy's chair.

"Your last chance to stay in the Dome boy, is there anything you'd like to tell me?"

"No! I demand to see my father."

If the boy had been polite he would have simply expelled him from the Dome, he'd had to do that a few times. A short but necessary expulsion event in front of the other occupants of the Dome to show that no one stole from the library with impunity. But the rudeness couldn't be tolerated, even

the dark angels were polite. Adamaz put his right hand around Ghot's throat and gave it a very gentle squeeze.

"Consider yourself expelled." He said.

There was barely a sound from the trainee as he drew the life force from him and felt the warmth enter his body. He knew the boys joked about his need for flesh, but this was the first time he'd killed in many years and he felt the need to make an example of the boy. He saw Caspian fidget, but he didn't get up or try to leave the room.

"Watch Caspian," he said, "watch so that you can tell what you've seen."

Another minute and Ghot had been reduced to lifeless husk, so light that he could easily pick it up and take it to the window with one hand. He opened the window and threw the body out, seeing the wind already pulling it apart. He knew that by the time the body reached the ground it would be just a shower of dry dust. He picked up a glass and the expensive bottle of drink from the holy city and went back to his seat.

"I know you drink Caspian and this is good, the best."

A shaking hand reached for the drink, the boy would need to toughen up a bit, but there was still a lot of time for him to learn, Adamaz had no intention of leaving the library for many millennia.

"Do you understand why I did that?" He asked.

"Yes sir. He deserved it."

The right answer and given without a long pause to think it through. Adamaz decided to give Caspian a little reward for his loyalty.

"What about his family?" Asked Caspian.

Adamaz rarely smiled and almost never laughed, but he allowed himself a half chuckle.

"Oh, I'm sure they will make some sort of official complaint."

He sat quietly while Caspian sipped at the excellent honey coloured drink.

"I believe you've been seeing the girl who works at Muzzie's?" He asked.

"Yes sir, Vella. We...er like each other very much."

Good no lies, no prevarication.

"I'd like you to take the paper and return it to the store. Not that it's any use on its own as only a librarian can write spells on it, or rather spells that work. The gold you can put in your pocket."

Caspian was picking up the paper and looking at him for confirmation of some kind.

"Go on boy, before I change my mind. The gold you can use as you wish, perhaps a few treats for this Vella you seem so sweet on."

The gold easily fitted into one of his pockets and Adamaz reflected on the fact that it had cost two lives. As Caspian stood up to leave he followed him to the door.

"I believe Vella has spent a few nights in the Dome?"

"Yes sir."

He saw fear in the boy's eyes and put his hand on his shoulder, feeling pleased that Caspian didn't flinch or pull away.

"I do understand your needs Caspian. One day when you're as old as me all you'll need the memories of Vella and others to sustain you. I think you need to move to rooms nearer the bridge, so that visitors can enter your rooms with more discretion. Would you like that?"

Caspian was grinning from ear to ear. Of course he'd like that, the rooms near the bridge were for senior members of the library and far better and larger than the rooms he currently occupied.

"Yes, thank you sir."

Caspian turned as he got into the corridor.

“You want me tell everyone what happened to Ghot ?”

“Yes everyone, including Vella. We don’t want any misunderstanding.”

Caspian nodded at him and walked away.

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Muzzie never had used the story of his death and revivification as a crowd puller. Once he was on his feet he realised the Shelzak wasn’t just a street punk and could well have friends who might, just might want vengeance on his killer.

“How did you kill it ?” Sara had asked him at least a dozen times.

“I guess my Genova side kicked in.”

He wasn’t convinced, so he didn’t blame Sara for giving him odd looks. He remembered the wars around Quron when the League of Forty Thousand had tried to take over the 2<sup>nd</sup> rift. Two heavily armed high level demon veterans had him against a wall. He was dead for certain, no hope of rescue, yet he hadn’t suddenly developed any Genova powers then. He still had a huge scar down his back and a limp in cold weather to show for that encounter and only the arrival of reinforcements had saved his life. But had he tried to use the power ? Has he ever tried to use it, ever before ? No, he knew that in his entire life it had never occurred to him that he might have the power of the angels. So why try it then ?

“Are you sure you’re well enough ?” Asked Lilleth.

At first he’d been quite pleased at her concern over his health, but now it was getting to be annoying. He just grunted at her and followed her through the worst bits of the old town. It was the early hours of the morning and although many of the buildings were empty, many of them were full of people sleeping on the ground, some with children and their elderly relatives. The City could be a brutal place to live unless you had money, but no one begged as they went past. They quickly learned that saying you had one eye or one arm to gain money often left beggars blind or with no arms and sometimes dead. Muzzie had learned to ignore the poverty and to just focus on where he was going and what he needed to do. Even so he wondered why Lilleth was taking him through so many squalid slums.

“Do we need to go this way ?” He asked.

She stopped and looked at him and waved her arm at the people huddled under whatever rags they’d managed to get hold of.

“No tracker will ever be able to follow us through all this.” She said.

She was right of course and he followed her through room after room, building after building full of the underclass of the City. Most were too mutated to be tolerated even in the City, so they kept to the old town and only ventured onto the streets in the night to look for scraps of food or rags amongst the refuse of the City. They walked into a side alley to find a girl servicing her client. He wasn’t that sexually compatible with her and judging by her whimpering she was in pain. But money is money in the City and she’d obviously decided the few coins were worth the pain and the stitches.

“Not far now.” Said Lilleth.

“Good !”

He couldn’t complain, she was doing him a huge favour. Very few liked to visit the old town at night and even fewer dared to enter the worst areas. Disease was rife and there was always the danger that one of the bundles of rags might try to put a blade into your back.

“Those are my shoes.”

A voice from a doorway to his right and then he noticed that another two men are now in front of Lilleth.



“You stole our friend’s shoes.”

It was all nonsense, but he knew the four men surrounding them would use it as excuse to kill them and strip their bodies before leaving them for Podd to collect once they smelt enough to be a health hazard.

“Fuck off if you know what’s good for you.” Said Muzzie.

He’d been through too many wars to let himself be intimidated by a few thugs from the bad part of town. He noticed Lilleth had drawn her short sword and was moving to get her back towards him.

“It’s Muzzie.” One of them said.

They seemed to be confused, so he used the opportunity to pull his own sword from under his coat, but the pain the movement caused to his back wasn’t encouraging.

“Just leave your money. Both of you, just put your purses on the floor and you can go.”

Muzzie was angry, the sort of anger that gets deep into your soul and screams at you to rip and tear. On the outside he calmly put the sword away and it looked like he was giving in, about to hand over his money. Instead he moved at surprising speed towards the nearest thug. Before the man could react he’d grabbed his head and rammed it hard into the alley wall, green blood and ichor drenched his jacket and that only served to increase his anger.

“Bastards ! You’re all going to die.” He shouted.

Had he been calm he’d have noticed Lilleth skewering another of the men with her blade, but the demon fury had him and he just leapt at the man nearest to him. His quarry pointed a rusty sword at him, but Muzzie just grabbed it and pulled it out of the man’s hands. Then he snapped it in two and rammed what was left of the hilt end of the blade into his opponent’s eye, before using his own sword to open up his belly. As the man lay dying he noticed the final street robber trying to make a run for it, but he was no longer in a mood to show mercy. Muzzie grabbed him and lifted him above his head, then down the man came over his knee and Muzzie heard his back snap. Still too angry to leave the man to die in peace he stamped on his chest until all signs of life had gone. Then he realised how bad the pain in his back was and he leant against the wall to take huge breathes of air as he tried to calm his anger.

“Happy now ?”

He turned to see Lilleth cutting open the clothing of one of the men to search him for a money purse.

“If we don’t take it someone else will. Search the guy you just killed.” She said.

The thugs must have had quite a good night and when they put all the gold in one purse it was a surprisingly large sum.

“It’ll more than pay for the services of the person we’re visiting.” Said Lilleth.

Muzzie pulled a jacket off one of the bodies and tried to wipe the blood off his clothes and face as best he could, but he could smell the blood and feel its stickiness down the front of his shirt. They only seemed to walk another hundred yards before Lilleth stopped in front of what looked like just another half ruined building.

“Here ?” He asked.

“Here.” She replied.

There was no door, just a flight of stairs leading down with two guards at the bottom. They looked to be typical rift travellers, both heavily armed and looking at them with distrust. Lilleth ignored them both and walked across the partly destroyed basement and down another set of stairs that took them to what looked to have been some sort of family mausoleum. It wasn’t unusual to bury your

family under your house in the City. It prevented grave robbers stealing funeral goods and most importantly it stopped necromancers adding the deceased to the ranks of the undead.

“Lilleth, my favourite child. So this is the part Genova?”

There were more guards, lots of them and most had bows with an arrow ready to fire. Lilleth ignored them all and took him to see the woman who had spoken.

“Yes Louelle this is Muzzie.”

He’d seen Seers from the rift before and they always seemed to have a tail like a serpent and Louelle was no exception. Her head was human, but the body was something else, something more reptile than demon. She was huge, must have been twice his weight, but she carried the weight regally as she sat on a huge wooden rocking chair.

“A fine specimen child, you must be proud of him.”

Muzzie enjoyed seeing Lilleth being confused by that and not knowing how to handle it. He took pity on her and rescued her.

“We’re just friends Louelle.” He said.

She smiled at him and the tail rattled, which seemed to be a sign that the Seer was happy. Her eyes were the deepest blue he’d ever seen and they were eyes he knew he could trust. It might have been an empath’s trick, but as Lilleth obviously trusted the Seer, he saw no reason not to.

“I going back on the rifts tonight,” the Seer said, “so we don’t have long. Come here descendant of the Genova and let me have a look at you.”

His back felt like it was on fire and as he walked towards the Seer he noticed a few drops of blood on the floor, his blood. Louelle saw the signs of pain on his face and rose from her chair and walked towards him.

“You have the smell of death on you child,” she said, “and not just from those whose blood is on your jacket.”

The Seer turned towards Lilleth.

“You know many with the power, why didn’t you fully heal him?”

“I wanted to, but he refused, said he’d heal naturally with time.”

The woman was stronger than she looked and she pulled his jacket and shirt up and started looking at his back and muttering.

“Oh he might, he might,” she said, “but not if you keep finding people to fight. I really don’t have time for this..... but..... oh well.”

Her hand was on his wound, almost felt like it was inside the wound and the pain was far worse than he could ever remember.

“Keep still !” She yelled at him.

As quickly as the pain had come, it had gone and his back felt better than even before the Shelzak had killed him. The old deep wound that had damaged the bones seemed to have finally healed and he felt wonderful. He beamed at the Seer, but she just turned her gaze onto Lilleth.

“How long was he dead for?”

“Not long, a few seconds.”

“Hmmm, well not too much damage was done, the essence remains, but make him rest for a while, even if you have to drug him.”

Muzzie was far too pleased with his back to complain about being talked about as though he wasn’t in the room. Drug him indeed !

“You’re too tall. Kneel down.” The Seer ordered.

He straightened his shirt and jacket and then knelt on the floor. Louelle moved very close to him and spent several minutes looking into his eyes, so long that he blinked quite a few times and each time he saw a look of annoyance on her face.

"Yes, yes," she said, "there is enough Genova in you to have killed the Shelzak. The big question is of course, do you want me to fully unlock those powers?"

"They're locked?" He asked.

A long thin finger reached out and tapped him on the forehead a few times.

"Oh yes and locked well before you were born. Someone locked the power so that any children could never use the Genova powers, or their children, or their children. It's a very powerful lock and I think only the lack of blood and the desperation enabled you to bypass it."

He went to stand up, but Louelle waved him back onto his knees.

"If I'm going to unlock these powers I need you where I can get at your head. Whoever put in the locks knew what they were doing, they're very complex and very deeply implanted."

"Are you saying it could be dangerous to unlock them?" Asked Lilleth.

The eyes were back on his again and he could see a definite grin forming on the very human face of the Seer. Eyes so human he trusted them, but eyes that had something else behind them, looking out at him.

"No," she chuckled, "just expensive. Haven't you two ever haggled with a trader before? Show me what you brought with you to offer as payment. All of it, or you'll make me angry."

He'd intended to haggle, but Louelle just didn't seem the sort of person to haggle with, so he pulled his own purse out and put it on the floor and the purse full of money they'd taken from the thugs. It was everything he had, including the contents of his lock box and he was hoping Sara wouldn't mind being paid late.

"And you girl, what did you bring?"

Lilleth could have objected, said it wasn't her problem, but she brought out a purse of her own money and placed it on the floor with the others. The Seer opened all the purses and went through all the coins, and seemed very interested in the octagonal thousand imperial credit piece that Sensan had paid Sara with.

"Imperial gold in the City! Who gave you this?"

"Sensan the leader of the Guild used it to pay for his food and board." He answered.

She turned the coin over in her fingers.

"This coin Muzzie and half the bag that has the blood of those you killed on it. After all my guards need to be fed. Is that a price you're happy paying?"

He would have gladly given her everything, including Lilleth's money.

"Yes."

The Seer put the imperial coin in her pocket and then scooped a rough half of the coins in the purse out onto the floor before returning the rest of the money.

"This won't take long, just relax." She told him.

He felt her finger on his forehead and then a wonderful feeling of peace came over him as he closed his eyes and allowed the Seer to do whatever she needed to do. A few seconds later he opened his eyes and the Seer had gone. There was no sign of her, the rocking chair or any of the guards, just Lilleth sitting cross legged on the floor to his right.

"She said you'd be out for a while, it's almost dawn." Said Lilleth.

All he could think of was why those who lived on the rifts still thought of it as dawn, when it only meant a slight lightening of the sky.

“Do you feel different ?” She asked.

He stood up and his knees were stiff but his back felt better than he could remember for a very long time, almost as though he was a young warrior again.

“I don’t know,” he said, “did she say anything before she went ?”

Lilleth came over to him and put her hand on his arm.

“A few things. Point your finger at the rubble over there and get angry.”

The rubble looked to have been left by grave robbers. The foot of a marble statue, some pieces of tomb lid, quite a bit of tiling that had come off the walls. He pointed at it and tried to feel angry and all he could feel was a slight tingle behind his left ear. He shrugged at Lilleth and tried again, this time thinking about the Shelzak who had killed him. He thought of the pain in his back, the humiliation of the insults the demon had heaped on him.

“You’re glowing.” Said Lilleth.

The tingle became a roaring that filled his head and the rubble was dust. There had been no sound, no explosion, no bright lights. Where the rubble had been there was now a pile of fine dust, so fine that it looked like soot on his boot as he kicked it. He turned towards Lilleth.

“Did she say anything else ?” He asked.

“There was a lot of stuff about you being able to heal, but you’ll need to work that out for yourself.” He felt that he’d been given the most wonderful thing in the world, but no instructions on how to use it.

“Was that it ?” He asked.

Lilleth looked awkward and avoided his gaze.

“You won’t like it.”

“Tell me.”

“She asked if it had ever occurred to either of us that it was strange that Sensan had paid a lot of gold to stay at a bar with a dubious reputation when he could have asked for lodging at several homes in the better part of the City ?”

Dubious reputation !? Of course she was right, but Muzzie had never really thought about it before. He noticed Lilleth was making a bed in the tidiest corner from a few old blankets.

“The guards left them,” she said, “I need an hour or so before we head back, it’s been a long night.”

Of course, she must have stayed awake to watch over him and then there had been the fight with the thugs.

“You must be exhausted,” he said, “I’ll watch over you while you sleep.”

She took a firm hold of his arm and took him over to the pile of blankets.

“We can’t go back to your place, Sara would never forgive me.”

She removed her jacket and then the shirt underneath to reveal perfect breasts, breasts as beautiful as he’d always imagined. His hand went out to one as he kissed her. She moved backwards and lowered herself onto the makeshift bed. The floor beneath was hard tiles, but neither of them seemed to worry as he lay next to her and undid the fastenings on her skirt.

“Suppose I hurt you,” he asked, “I still don’t know how to control..... it.”

She leant over him and undid the lacing on the front of his trousers.

“I don’t intend to do anything that makes you angry.”

As her lips engulfed his dick he noticed his fingers were glowing, but he supposed he’d have to get used to things like that.

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Part 4 will be posted on 31<sup>st</sup> Jan 14