

## City of the Lost God

### Part 39 – So Many Memories

**“The easiest way to get to the City of the Lost God would be through the rift gate near the abandoned village, but of course no one ever really wants to go there. The creatures that inhabit the City seldom want to live there long, but they’re simply not wanted anywhere else. Half breed demons with too much human blood to be tolerated on the lower rifts, the last few living Dark Angels, low level demons who can only survive by using their skills in theft and assassination. These make up the population of the City and many others, oh yes many other strange creatures that simply don’t fit in anywhere else.”**



Every truly civilised city needs some kind of bone collector. They may give it a fancy name and gloss over the true nature of the job, but someone has to remove the dead from the streets. The City of the Lost God had Podd and his bone yard. People tended not to bother Podd; 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.

“I’m sorry Galla.” He said. “Ash got the message wrong, there’s no real emergency.”

Podd glared at Ash, but it wasn’t really the lad’s fault. Ash had many good qualities, but a decent memory wasn’t one of them. Plus his apprentice seemed to feel the need to embellish. One night Muzzie had turned up with a dozen of his regulars, all armed and ready for battle. He’d only sent Ash to buy a few bottles of ale and they never really had worked out why Ash had been scared of an attack from over the river. Things became garbled and the lad had previous form. Podd should have gone himself.

“Well, I’m here now.” Said Galla. “What can I do for you?”

Podd waved his arm about, indicating the various huts that contained bodies going through the process of being converted into fat for soap and ground bone fertiliser. It was a messy and smelly process, which suited Podd. It discouraged casual visitors.

“We came out of the recent trouble fairly unscathed.” He said. “Nothing collapsed and neither of the fat boilers was damaged.”

In truth, there wasn’t a lot to collapse in his bone yard. Most of the huts were quite old and many had begun to fall over of their own accord.

“It’s just that there seems to be a lot of night creatures trying to enter the yard after dark.” He added.

“We can hear them snuffling against the fence.” Said Ash.

Galla walked over to the fence and sniffed, pulling a face as she did so.

“Dredgers.” She said. “All the smells of boiling fat and decaying flesh attract the pure bloods. All the reasons that your bone yard is down wind of the slums, are reasons for the Dredgers to snuffle against your fence.”

“So they’ll keep coming back?” Asked Podd.

“Oh yes, until they work out a way to get past my powders.” Answered Galla. “Most of them are as dumb as a dead Nesh bug, but some are smart, really smart. Eventually they’ll get in and eat everything.”

Podd looked at his stock of fat from the recent troubles. Some of it was the cleanest he’d ever seen. There was no way he going to let it become Dredger food.

"Can you do anything to stop them?" He asked. "I have money to pay you."

Galla smiled and briefly touched his arm.

"My dear Podd, you are one of the few I would trust to settle the bill later. There is a way, but it will mean killing one of them."

"Won't that upset the rest?" Asked Ash.

"We've all got a little Dredger in us." Said Podd. "Some more than others. I'm not comfortable with the idea Galla, not at all comfortable."

Galla began to dig around in the large bag that she'd made Ash carry for her. Ash was small for a hybrid, actually he was small for just about anything. The boy was strong though.

"I don't have enough of the right powder." She said. "I can come back later and treat your entire fence again. That'll cost you three silver and will last for a year or so. Eventually the Dredgers will be snuffling at your gates again."

"Supposing I agree to kill one?" Asked Podd.

"Like many creatures, they are wary of anywhere that one of their own kind has died." Said Galla.

"We'd need the blood from a freshly killed Dredger. There will be enough blood to mark your fence and leave plenty to paint your gate."

"How long will that keep them away for?" Asked Ash.

"Forever!" She replied. "The blood will sink into the wood and Dredgers are famous for their sense of smell. As long as the fence lasts, they'll keep well clear of it."

Podd liked his sleep to be undisturbed and he'd been woken three times in the last week, by Dredgers bashing against his fence.

"Ash." He said. "Make sure Galla has a drink. I'm going out to get her a fresh Dredger demon."

He picked up a large cleaver that he used to cut bodies into boiler sized pieces. It would double nicely as a weapon to kill a Dredger.

"We need all its blood." Said Galla. "Use a blunt weapon of some kind and bring it back here to be drained of blood."

Podd nodded at her and picked up a hammer instead.

"How much will all this cost me?" He asked, as he put on his jacket.

"Four silver, but the effect will last forever."

"Fine. I'll be back soon with a dead Dredger."

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"King Haakon Raag." She said. "Your name is still known and revered. Wake up now."

Nothing happened immediately after Vella had spoken the words. She thought that the King had been turned to stone for too long, or she'd simply spoken his name wrong. The language of the humans wasn't hers, she had no idea how he was supposed to understand her. Another hundred doubts tried to crowd into her mind.

"Try again." Said Caspian.

"He has been asleep for a very long time." Said Lilleth.

"Try it one more time." Said Muzzie. "Shout it as a command that you intend to be obeyed."

Vella looked up into the stone face of the last King of Gorshan.

"King Haakon Raag!" She shouted

"Your name is still known and revered!"

"Wake! I command you to wake!"

The stone King was still just sat there. Vella hadn't quite known what to expect, but she was certain that something would happen.

"He's there." Said Torfi. "Has been since you first spoke to him. It's only very faint and I've only smelt it once before. Ousha has it, Silsk's servant, the scent of a human."

Vella moved towards the stone King, only stopping when her face was an inch away from his. The eyes, yes the eyes were moving, looking at her.

"Why won't you talk to me?" She asked.

He smiled at her; the human King moved his mouth and smiled. The transformation to a creature of flesh and blood was fast then. His skin took on the usual pinkish blush that most of the statues in the hidden rooms displayed. You could see the blood of humans through their skin. That revolted Vella and excited her in about equal measure. A being that looked so like her, but was obviously so different. His robes turned from stone to cloth of the best quality and eventually the King stood on his own two feet. No one readied a weapon; it was obvious that the smiling King was no threat.

"I loved her Vella, that's the most crazy thing about all this. And she loved me, but we were both powerful then and our ambitions ruled our actions." He said.

"Are you talking about Inanna?" Asked Vella.

"Yes of course, who else would I be talking about?" He answered. "Come along we need to hurry. Time will catch up with me."

He was off at a fast walk, crossing his council chamber and pressing his hands against the wall.

"How is it that I understand you?" Asked Vella.

Haakon Raag obviously found the right combination of stones to press and a door opened, revealing a long and dusty passage.

"Don't question Vella, there isn't time." He replied. "We can understand each other and that is enough. We humans aren't as long lived as demons; I can already feel the first signs of old age."

They followed him along the corridor and he began to stoop as he walked and Vella could see wrinkles grow on his face. The King managed one set of stairs, but Muzzie had to help him up the next set.

"Ahh Muzzie the tavern keeper." He said. "Thank you and don't worry, you'll soon be going home."

Caspian went ahead and opened the next door. The wood was rotten and the door fell apart as he opened it. Haakon Raag was now an old man, who had to be helped to walk at all. His voice broke as he spoke, as though he'd aged fifty years in a few minutes.

"My sleeping quarters." He said. "Once very grand, but now alas....."

A few metal objects remained, but a window had been left open and even metal eventually corrodes away to nothing. No furniture, just a few metal fittings left to remind them that it had once been the bed chamber of the last King of Gorshan.

"There, help me get there."

Not quite everything had been taken away by the ravages of time. A single perfect chair was in front of a set of stone cubes, piled up on the floor.

"They're like the puzzle cubes." Said Torfi.

"Yes, yes." Said Haakon Raag. "My court sorcerer made it all. He was the most powerful magic user in all the human worlds. Alas he must have returned to dust a long time ago."

The King was helped into the chair and he placed his hand on one of the cubes and then another, as though entering a code of some kind.

"A different time and Inanna and I could have ruled side by side." He said. "But the Genova banished her for being my lover. Even then if I'd acted sooner....."

He touched one of the larger cubes and it turned blue for a few seconds and they heard a sound like lightning, but in the distance. Haakon Raag removed his ring of office and handed it to Vella.

"It is done Vella and thank you for coming to Gorshan." He said. "Your way home is at the top of the stairs."

The King started coughing and a slight trickle of blood appeared from his left eye.

"To age a thousand millennia in a few minutes.... Is unpleasant." He said. "You know where she'll be Vella, keep it secret. Give her this ring and tell her I still loved her, right to the end."

He died and Vella expected him to crumble to dust, but he didn't. Once time had inflicted death on him there was nothing more that could be done to him. He looked like a very old man, sat back in his favourite chair to take a morning nap.

"We should bury him." Said Lilleth.

"No. Leave him here." Said Vella.

The ring was too big to wear, so Vella carefully pushed it to the bottom of a pocket. She turned and smiled at Caspian.

"We can go home now."

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Podd had no idea where the pure blood Dredgers were spending their daylight hours, but it had to be somewhere close. They liked holes in the ground of course, it was their natural habitat. He trudged over the broken ground between his bone yard and the hills and spotted four of them, resting in the cutting for the City's sewage outfall. The stench was making his eyes water and it must have been far worse for the Dredgers.

"Oh, surely there are better places." He muttered.

Four was too many anyway, especially if they weren't all mindless creatures. Somewhere back in time, something had happened to the Dredgers. They all looked about the same, but some had become smarter than others, much smarter. Podd had even heard of Dredgers running stores out on the 3<sup>rd</sup> rift. Talking, reading and writing, while their dumb fellow Dredgers were little more than mindless insects. Podd decided to move on and find one on its own, or two at the most.

There was no quiet sneaking up, the ground was too broken, too loose. He almost fell into one crack in the soil, sending a small avalanche over the snoozing Dredger. It didn't attack him, just made an odd chirruping noise and went back to sleep. Podd smelt like a demon, the Dredger considered him to be kin and therefore, not a threat.

"Hell of a day." He said out loud.

No answer, the creature silently trying to get back to sleep, wasn't smart. That didn't mean it was going to be easy to kill. Dredgers were famed for never giving up. Once Podd attacked it, the fight would be to the death. No giving up, no running away, if you lost a fight to a Dredger, you became its next meal. Podd pulled the large hammer out of his belt and looked at the creature's head. Two or three points where the skull was thick enough to take a hefty blow, without breaking. A hole would lose a lot of the precious blood. Podd was aiming to render it unconscious.

"Sorry." He said. "I'm not having you and your friends eating my stock."

He hit the Dredger hard and in the right spot and it simply shook itself and went for him. You don't try to strangle a Dredger, Podd knew that one by heart. They had pores in their skin that allowed them to breathe, even if you blocked their airway. They had four arms and sharp teeth and Podd was fighting one that he'd just seriously annoyed. He ignored the four arms and their powerful claws and just hoped the creature didn't pierce anything vital in his insides. Podd hit it another three times, ignoring the claws digging into his sides and back. Three more hits and the Dredger collapsed, but Podd was badly wounded.

"I think Galla should be paying me." He muttered.

His blood was everywhere, but the Dredger was unconscious and in one piece. Podd grabbed the creature by its legs and began pulling it towards his bone yard.

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Merrick had lost everything, or at least he had if he paid those who'd accepted his odds of six to one, or even twelve to one at one point. Babaef had tried to open the door, so had Aeony. It had seemed such a safe bet.

"What have you done now ?" Asked Nethra. "Are we poor again ?"

Merrick had known poverty for most of his life. Actually he's only been relatively poor, but he'd seen the real thing all around them, in the slums. There was no dignity in being poor but honest. That was just a glib piece of nonsense invented by the rich. They had money, enough to last several lifetimes and he wasn't about to give it to the angry mob.

"I should have won Nethra. Enough to buy you a lot of new things." He said. "The door shouldn't have opened."

"But we already have money !" She said. "What door ? Tell me about it."

It seemed crazy to him now, over five thousand imperial he owed and all on someone being able to open a door.

"There was a door in the Upper Dome that Aeony hadn't been able to open." He said. "Then Babaef tried and got nowhere. I offered odds on Tarin not being able to open it, but the crowd wouldn't listen, called me a crook."

She was giving him her most sad look of disappointment. It seemed to cut into his body and stab icy fingers into his very soul.

"So you bet everything we have on a door not opening ?" She asked.

"If you put it like that, yes." He answered. "But I won, it was Gesse who opened it, but they still want their money."

She sighed at him and Merrick wanted to run away and hide. He'd done it again and he didn't know why he had a self-destructive urge. He liked being rich and hated being poor, so why was he always finding ways to be poor again ?

"How much do we owe ?" She asked.

"Don't talk like that, were not giving everything we have to a drunken rabble."

"How much Merrick ?"

She only used his name when she was really angry.

"Just a little over five thousand imperial." He answered.

Nethra was crying and he didn't know what to do. There'd been the sound of arguments coming up from the bar for a quite a while, then Runa walked into their rooms, without even knocking.

"I can't have Muzzie coming back to find his tavern wrecked." She said.

"Why are you talking to us ?" Asked Nethra. "The noise isn't our fault."

Runa was angry now, her fists clenched and glaring at him. Merrick knew he disappointed everyone, but especially women. He just didn't know how to break the cycle.

"It is your fault !" She shouted. "Barus picked up a lot of the bets and his men are downstairs. At the moment it's a standoff with the regulars. Not that they like you that much, they just hate Barus."

Nethra was still crying and looking at him.

"You bet with Barus ?"

"No ! He just seems to have bought other people's bets."

It wasn't his fault, life seemed to be against him.

"You need to get down there and talk to them before it becomes a serious fight." Said Runa.

Runa went to walk out, but turned and smiled at them.

"Would you like to know a secret about this place?" She asked.

"Yes, ok." Said Merrick.

"The stairs at the far end of the building seem to go down to a basement." Said Runa. "But they don't. They lead to a door, so that the girls can come and go without being bothered by the customers."

She turned and left, giving the door an angry slam as she left.

"Come on." Said Merrick. "Pack a few things and we'll get out of here."

"Where will we go?"

"We're going to the towers."

If anything, Nethra looked even more upset.

"Why are we going to that awful place?" She asked.

"We're going to see Ousha. I have a plan to get out of the City and keep all our money."

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Muzzie led the way up the stairs and it was a lot further than he'd expected. As Lilleth had put it; "I think we're going to come out on the highest point of Gorshan Castle."

There were no towers or keeps left from the original buildings and Caspian had pointed to a raised hill on the old drawings.

"It was right inside the strongest part of the castle." Caspian had said. "Obviously King Haakon Raag thought that was the best place for the portal, the part of the castle most likely to survive."

"I hope he was right." Lilleth had said.

At least Caspian and Vella seemed to be getting on better now, he'd even heard them whispering about loving one another. Muzzie wasn't into that kind of heavy romance, but he was looking forward to some intimate time with Lilleth. They just had to get through the portal home, a portal that had been created over a thousand millennia before.

"We need to rest Muzzie." Said Lilleth.

He felt like saying 'Again!', but he could see the others struggling, especially Vella. Everyone had a wound or bruise that was still livid. The slightest scratch from a Vargouille left a purple scar on the skin and a feeling of nausea. They needed to get home and see Galla or another healer.

"It is further than we'd hoped." He said. "Eat what you have, we'll move on in half an hour."

Food was another problem. They all had just a few pieces of dried fruit and a mouthful of water. It held body and soul together, but it wasn't enough to give them the strength they needed. Muzzie couldn't face more dried berries, so he sat next to Vella and offered her some of his food.

"Thank you." She said. "Are you sure?"

"Yes, we should be home soon and then some proper food."

He almost asked about her and Caspian, but decided to leave the subject alone. They were getting on well now, that was all that mattered.

"Do you think the portal will be there?" He asked.

"Oh yes, I felt it open."

"And the angel.... You can find her?"

He could see her face, the reticence about giving away any information about the angel.

"Fine Vella, keep your secret." He said. "But be careful to keep it away from the ears of Aeony. She may seem friendly these days, but she'll kill anyone who befriends a Genova."

"I will, thank you."

"Would you like me to tell the others to keep their mouths shut?"

She just nodded her head at him and then kissed his cheek, much to his surprise. He gave them closer to an hour and then rose to his feet.

"Before we move on." He said. "We need to agree on a story for when we get back."

"I agree." Said Lilleth. "Something simple, so that we don't end up strung up by our heels in the towers."

Caspian stood and put his remaining food back in his pack.

"I've been thinking it over too." He said. "We came to Gorshan and rescued Vella. That's it, no treasures here, no talk about angels or stone kings."

Muzzie increased his daylight spell and started up the stairs.

"That's it, the simplest stories are the easiest to keep to." He said. "We rescued Vella and after that we were constantly attacked by Vargouille and Waide was killed. All that we found on Gorshan was ruins and hundreds of Vargouille."

"Perfect." Said Torfi.

"Practise it in your heads." Said Lilleth.

In a way it was true of course. They were going home with empty pockets. Muzzie got into a rhythm on the seemingly never ending stairs. So much so, that when he emerged into the open air, it took him a few seconds to realise it.

"It's dark again." Said Vella.

The building they were in had been built well and all the walls were intact. The doors had gone though and they could see the moons of Gorshan, hanging in the night sky. There was a little rubble on the floor, but they were soon outside and looking at a wonderful sight, little more than a hundred feet away.

"The portal." Said Vella.

To Muzzie it meant home, good food and no more strange rat creatures with eight legs. He smiled at the huge rotating portal, which looked like a blue gem, standing in the ruins. The problem was that he could smell the rank odour of Vargouille and it was a strong smell.

"Lots of them." Said Torfi, sniffing the air.

They all knew what he meant and readied their weapons. Muzzie felt tired, too tired to fight Vargouille again. They had no option though, so he began to build a large fireball spell.

"I'd do anything for a good bow and fifty arrows." Said Lilleth.

Vella was slightly in front now, her sword held up and ready to kill one of the monsters by inflicting the slightest scratch.

"Keep together." Said Caspian. "Don't let them grab anyone."

He didn't need to say 'again,' they all knew he was talking about Waide being killed on the bank of the underground river. There was no sound apart from the beating of their wings, as hundreds of the flying wolves took to the air. They flew round in a vast circle, whirling around each other like acrobats of the air. Then they dived towards the adventurers from the rifts.

"Here they come." Said Torfi.

Thousands, not hundreds, Muzzie decided as the vast cloud of Vargouille headed for them. He released a fireball spell and it killed a dozen or so, but that made little impact of the huge pack. It appeared to be a pass to gauge their strengths and weaknesses, the creatures made no attempt to attack. Vella killed three with her sword, as they passed over her head. That too the vast cloud of monsters, just ignored.

"They'll attack on the next pass." Said Caspian.

He was right and Muzzie knew there was no defence against the sheer number of flying wolves. A few minutes and the monsters would be picking at their bones. Again the vast pack circled and then Lilleth was pointing at something else.

“They came !” She shouted. “The angels have come to save us !”

Dark angels, he recognised their shape, even if it was too dark to recognise individuals. There were rumours of lone dark angels on other worlds, but not a group of thirty or more. It had to be Aeony and her sisters from the City, flying together in the skies of Gorshan.

“I never thought I’d be so glad to see Aeony and her sisters.” He said

“The Vargouille aren’t pleased to see them.” Said Caspian.

He was right, they were breaking their cloud apart and making a strange whimpering sound. The dark angels simply flew among them and began killing. It looked so easy, almost effortless. Every swing of a tail killed half a dozen, a blow from an arm sending two or three crashing onto the ruins below. The dark angels seemed unconcerned about the claws and teeth of the Vargouille, as if they were impervious to them. Muzzie knew that their skin was famously tough, he just hadn’t realised how tough. Hundreds of the flying wolves died, before they broke and ran and even then Aeony and her sisters pursued them. The ground near the portal was covered in their dead, with Vella giving a quick end to any wounded she found. The Vargouille had been the top predator on Gorshan, the pinnacle of the food chain. Now another form of flying creature had arrived on Gorshan. A tougher predator, stronger, faster and completely without mercy. The Vargouille were being wiped out and Muzzie felt no sympathy for them.

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Maya Orresa had taken her time to travel the pilgrim trail. She had no religious reasons to travel the ancient route that went from the City, through Quron on the 2<sup>nd</sup> rift and ended up at Tandalla on the 5<sup>th</sup> rift. It was a long and tough journey at the best of times and these weren’t the best of times.

Maya was going to take several years over the journey and hoped that she’d regain some focus during the trip. Chaos had touched everyone the night Tarin had slain the Lord of Chaos, but she’d felt it more than the others. Bailig’s arm had been transformed into a hideous tentacle, but she felt as though her soul had been twisted. For a few seconds she’d wanted to protect Yam Kermul, to kill for him, to kill Bailig and all the others. The feeling had passed, but there was still more than the usual darkness inside her, she felt it. From her point of view, Bailig had been the lucky one. A cursed arm was visible at least, her wound wasn’t.

“They’re getting closer every day Maya.”

Maya had joined a few groups and so far there had been no serious attack on any of the parties she’d joined. They’d passed dead bodies in various stages of becoming bone and dust. None of them looked fresh though, so she hoped to at least get to Quron without using a sword. No one knew she was a Kveld of course, she was just a female warrior, making the once in a lifetime trip to Tandalla. Hrafn had spoken to her, the leader of the group she’d been with for the past month or so.

“Three days they’ve been following us.” She answered. “If they were bandits they’d have attacked by now.”

She’d visited their camp as the beast on four legs, the night before. She’d managed to remain unseen and hear a great number of private conversations, most of it about mundane matters. It appeared they were waiting for someone, someone they were more than a little scared of. Maya felt there was no reason to pass that information onto Hrafn.

“We’re only two days away from Aarabash.” Said Hrafn. “Their fighters there are known to be fierce, we’ll be safe there.”



Maya hoped he was right. Their party was mostly made up of families with children and few of the adults carried weapons. She could return to the strangers' camp that night, kill them all while they slept. There was something about them though, they didn't feel like bandits.

"They may not mean us any harm." She said.

"I hope you're right, but I intend to get to Aarabash as quickly as possible."

Everyone took turns to push their single large waggon. It held the group's food, cooking gear and anything else too heavy or precious for one person to carry. The children had to take a turn too, everyone pushed the heavy waggon and that meant they weren't going anywhere in a hurry.

"Speed up ! Push harder !" Shouted Hrafn. "We need to arrive in Aarabash tomorrow."

He could fume at them all he wanted, Maya knew the party only had one pace, slow. It was one of the reasons she'd joined them, she was in no hurry to get anywhere. If necessary she would become the beast and kill all of the strangers, but not yet. She was too curious about who they feared and why he was so keen on finding her. It was her of course, she wasn't being self-obsessed. No one sent a party of warriors along the pilgrim trail, to track a party of hybrid farmers and their children.

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Podd owned a bone yard, he had all the right equipment to hoist up a body and drain it of blood. Ash helped him fix chains to the Dredger's legs and pull the creature up and over a fairly clean metal pan. That had been the hardest bit, cleaning years of dried and noxious bodily fluids from the pan. Galla had insisted that the blood had to be as untainted as possible.

"She's just being fussy over nothing." Ash had whispered.

Maybe, but Podd had been through a lot to get the Dredger and scrubbing a pan didn't seem unreasonable. It had a dark patina, but there was no way to get that out.

"We must hurry." Said Galla. "The creature begins to wake."

The apothecary used her own knife, a dagger made of metal that was as dark as night. As the Dredger moved about and started to make a barking sound, she ran the blade over its throat. Not satisfied with that, she dug the knife into its head. The head wound created the quickest flow, the blood hit the pan and bounced, creating a froth on top of the green liquid. No trace of red in the blood, the Dredger had been a pure blood.

"It needs to drain for a while." Said Galla. "Every drop is precious."

Ash brought some ale and Galla insisted on drinking hers straight from the bottle. They gave it about fifteen minutes; no blood had dripped into the pan for at least a minute. Galla poured several packets of powder into the blood and then stirred it with her dagger. No words, Podd noticed that Galla rarely said any invocation or spells while preparing her remedies.

"You never use words." He said.

She glared at him and then smiled.

"Word magic is for children and incompetent sorcerers."

Podd and Ash swung the dead Dredger away from where Galla stirred the pan. The Dredger was no use to him, there was no fat to boil and their bones made poor fertiliser.

"He can go in the creek later." Said Podd.

It might be later that day or a week from now, or never. The body might hang there until the chains were needed for something else. Clutter and filth didn't worry Podd at all, which was just as well, the bone yard was full of it.

"I need a brush." Said Galla. "Or whatever you use to get paint onto your sheds."

Podd had a brush made out of Shuud bristle. It was six inches wide and had cost someone quite a lot of money. Not Podd, he'd found it among the possessions of plague victim. Galla took one look at the filthy bristles.

"Clean it !" She commanded.

Ash looked about to say something, so Podd grabbed the boy and told him to rub the worst of the dirty off and then take it to the creek for a good scrub. The preparations had seemed to take an age, but eventually Podd was carrying the pan full of blood, while Galla was going to paint a section of each fence panel. Ash carried a cloth bag which contained bottles of ale, in case anyone was thirsty. A gallon of blood is heavy and Podd knew it was going to seem like a long distance round his yard. "The gate is always the weak point." Said Galla.

She painted several horizontal bars across the gate, dull green bars that dripped and ran. It didn't smell of much though. Most potions Podd had come across had smelt really awful. They carried on, with Galla giving most panels a quick brush in a few places, but giving others a more thorough paint. "She's painting better where there are most Dredger prints in the dirt." Said Ash.

Podd nodded, trying to give the impression that he'd already known that. By the time they were near the great river, they could hear the anxious chirruping of several Dredger demons. Galla sat on a cleaner bit of the ground and accepted a bottle of ale from Ash.

"It all needs to be done while the blood is fresh." She said. "Another half an hour."

As they rested, a good four or maybe five Dredger demons could be seen running away, following the river north.

"Thank you Galla," said Podd, "it worked."

Even Ash was grinning at the elderly apothecary.

"I've been selling remedies in the City for a great many years." Said Galla. "As far as I know, they've all worked. Yet my clients always seem surprised when I'm successful. I ought to take it as an insult, but most of the time, it amuses me."

"I'm sorry Galla." Said Podd.

He took five silver from his purse and gave it to her, hoping to make amends. It took them almost an hour to treat the rest of his fence and there was just a smear of blood left in the pan. Galla collected her bag and accepted Podd's offer to walk her home.

"Thank you Podd, the streets were never safe, but lately....."

Podd walked her home and waited while she checked that her store was still secure. He noticed the remains of a half-eaten meal on her table.

"Thank you Galla, I'm sorry if you were in the middle of a meal when Ash called."

"Not a problem..... But next time, write a note for him to bring."

~

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Vella put her sword away the instant she saw the dark angels. There had been rumours about the flooded levels of the towers being looted, but no one knew for certain who had taken the sword. She sat on a piece of stone rubble and enjoyed seeing the slaughter the dark angels were inflicting on the Vargouille.

One of Aeony's sisters was carrying someone in her talons and Vella recognised Adamaz. The head of the great library, being carried about Gorshan like a child's toy. It was bizarre yet Vella was glad to see him. She ran to be where he was being gently placed among the castle ruins.

"I never expected to see you here." She said. "Are there others with you ?"

"Besides Aeony and her sisters you mean ? Babaef decided the king of the City couldn't put himself at risk by coming to Gorshan. Tarin had been called away on official business, so that just left me."

The air of Gorshan seemed to suit the librarian. He looked stronger in some way, more alive. Vella knew he'd been dead for a long time, but he looked far more vital than she'd ever seen him look before.

"Did you do it?" He asked. "Did you wake up the angel?"

They were alone, but Vella still looked around and felt afraid. If he knew about Inanna, what else did he know about. She looked at him and said nothing.

"I know about the sleeping Angel Vella, known about her for longer than you could even comprehend. I just never knew where the humans had hidden her."

He was smiling at her and he rarely seemed to do anything but scowl at people.

"I don't want to know where she is." He continued. "It is important though. Is the Genova awake?"

"Yes." She answered.

"Good, good. And you have her somewhere safe?"

He held her hand and his felt cool and scratchy, but not unpleasant.

"Yes."

"Wonderful! It's all about the balance you see child. We've seen what too much chaos can do to the City. A single angel can..... though you wouldn't understand. You've been remarkably useful and I've decided not to kill you."

Vella didn't know what to make of that comment; she even wondered if she'd misheard his words.

Adamaz was still smiling at her in a friendly fashion.

"Kill me?"

"Let's be honest with each other Vella." Said Adamaz. "You have been an incredibly bad influence on Caspian."

She was instantly angry and pulled away from the librarian. At last she could tell him what she thought of him.

"Me a bad influence!" She yelled. "You act like you own him, that you have a right to dictate his life. He's doesn't belong to you!"

He was still smiling at her, which was surprising.

"I know Vella, you own him and that is perfect. A family at the top of the library is what I always dreamed of. An heir for the heir..... Perfect."

Suddenly she remembered that Celli had found her note and Celli was a gossip.

"You know about my child?"

"Yes and it changes everything. We are going to become the best of friends."

Vella's head was spinning, thinking of the consequences of everyone now knowing she was carrying Caspian's child. Luckily Aeony was walking towards them, though the stench wasn't pleasant. It seemed that Vargouille smelt as bad on the inside as they did on the outside. Aeony was covered in their blood and viscera and the smell was overpowering.

"I think a few got away, but that was very enjoyable." Said Aeony.

She shook herself and ran her fingers through her hair, getting rid of the worst of the Vargouille bodily fluids, which had covered her from head to toe.

"Not good eating though." She said. "The flesh of carrion feeders always has a bitter aftertaste."

Aeony had been talking to Adamaz and she seemed to notice Vella for the first time.

"Ahh, the mother we've all come to save." She said. "Did they find anything of value?"

"No." Adamaz answered. "Vella is unharmed, but all they found on Gorshan was ruins and thousands of Vargouille. Gorshan is a dead world, as we had guessed."

Vella waited, but Aeony seemed to still be scanning the sky for fresh enemies to eviscerate.

“Waide was killed.” She said.

In a way, Vella admired the unapologetic honesty of Aeony. There was no pretending that she cared at all about Waide dying.

“We should be going then.” Said Aeony. “I don’t quite trust a portal that’s been around that long.” That was it. No interrogation about why she’d used a portal to get to Gorshan, no going through their belongings. Aeony just seemed bored, now there were no longer any Vargouille to kill. They entered the portal in small groups, until they were all stood in LLud Narren’s old workroom. The puzzle pieces were now just blackened lumps of metal and the portal from that end had gone. It had all served its purpose, though none of them commented on it while Aeony was around.

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Maya knew who had arrived; she could smell his scent while he was still half a mile away. He must have changed into the beast and run most of the way. Speed was one of their big advantages over the rifts, which were often tens of thousands of miles from edge to edge. It was why the Kveld had often been the messengers of past emperors and kings.

“You’re leaving us ?” Asked Hrafn.

She was taking her weapons out of the back of the waggon, and her back pack. She’d brought food and water, but she wasn’t taking any. They were both precious commodities on the pilgrim trail, especially when you moved at a slow pace.

“I know the warriors following us, or at least I know their leader.” She said. “I will be joining them.” Hrafn removed a string necklace from his neck. It had a cloth bag attached to it, which contained many dried herbs and other ingredients. It was a totem bag and was likely to have been passed down through generations of his family.

“I can’t take this.”

“It will help you find us, if you’re ever in need.”

She slipped it over her head and hugged him quickly, before taking her things and vanishing into the night. They weren’t far away, the group of warriors and he was with them and waiting for her. Right on the edge of the dunes she found their camp, just a few bedrolls in a circle with a fire in the centre. Not the usual vagabonds who hire their sword arm out, these warriors had shields with the same crest and the bearing of true warriors. Times were hard out on the rifts and he must have found guards who no longer had a master to serve.

“She’s come to see me.” He said.

None of them had readied a weapon, though they had been examining the strange woman who’d walked into their camp. Bailig, she knew it was him, had to be him.

“I knew you’d come.” She said.

He held her and his arm no longer looked touched by chaos. There was an odd translucence to the skin, but his arm seemed almost normal. He favoured the other when he hugged her, but he no longer looked like a monster.

“Your arm.....”

“We need to talk in private.”

He led her over the dunes and well away from his men. Eventually they found a rock large enough for them both to sit on.

“I like your guards.” She said. “Where did you find them ?”

“They were hired by Babaef to be his honour guard. They worked for wealthy landowner out in the farmlands until he was killed by the slithering things.”

“So how did you end up with them ?”

"I ran into them on the road, just outside of the City. To cut a very long and involved story short..... I offered them more pay than Babaef."

They were both chuckling. Maya had never liked Babaef and she could just imagine his pompous face when he'd heard the news.

"Babaef must hate you." She said.

"He might..... When he eventually finds out where his honour guard went."

They laughed and kissed and then laughed again. She rolled up his sleeve and examined his arm in the ultra-violet wash.

"Almost perfect, who cured you?"

"It was a joint effort between Galla and Muzzie, though I think I have Muzzie to thank for most of it. You made him help me, but then you left....."

"I needed time..... To think things over."

They sat there for so long that one of his guards brought them water and a little food. There were no stars on the rifts, but the ultra-violet wash filled the sky with colour.

"We could go anywhere." Said Bailig. "Get my money from the City and go anywhere we want."

"The City." She answered. "It's where we belong, where everyone is an outsider, all are strangers yet all are family."

"You won't run away again?"

"No, that has passed. At first light we'll set off and travel back to the City, back home."

~ ~

While Maya was calling the City home and preparing to return, Merrick was heading away as fast as he could. The waggon handlers were the problem, they did everything at a very slow pace. If only the inhabitants of the City hadn't eaten all the beasts that had once pulled carts and waggons.

They'd have been miles away, rather than still being able to see the top of the towers.

"I feel safe at last." Said Ousha. "So many guards and the famous Merrick as my protector."

A little hero worship was fairly harmless, but he knew that Nethra would tease him for weeks.

They'd done quite well in the end. Ousha was more than happy to leave the City at short notice, as were the porters they'd brought with them from Avald.

"A slight difference of opinion about wages owed."

Was the only explanation the leader of the waggon handlers would give, but their eagerness to leave suited Merrick. They'd lost some money, which had been in their rooms at Muzzie's. Runa had done her best, but eventually most of their clothes and a little gold, had been taken by the mob. It could have been worse though, they were on their way to Quron, which is where Nethra had really wanted to settle down.

"The 2<sup>nd</sup> rift is wetter than the 1<sup>st</sup>." Said Nethra. "Lusher and greener, more like where I grew up."

Merrick didn't really care where they ended up, as long as they had enough gold to live comfortably and a home to call their own. Ousha had already bought a fair sized house and they were to be her guests. Until they found a place of their own.

"It must be close now." He said.

"Not far, another quarter of a mile." Answered Nethra.

Ousha ignored most of their chatter, she just seemed content that they were heading away from the City. Ousha had her own gold, quite a bit judging by how long it had taken to get several heavy chests onto the waggon.

"I remember that tree." He said.

She glared at him, even in the dark he could see her expression, or at least imagine it. Nethra could find anything anywhere, he just needed to keep quiet and trust her. She didn't need markers on the ground or notches in nearby trees. There was something in her mind that could find anywhere, once she'd been there once.

"Stop here !" Nethra called.

The waggon handlers needed no encouragement to take a rest, but Ousha was looking concerned.

"We left something here." Said Nethra. "We won't be stopped for long."

Had they buried most of their gold that close to the City ? Merrick could still just about see the very top of the towers. He and Nethra had buried the gold on their own and the ground was heavy and full of stones. It had taken them a full night and then an hour after daybreak to remove any signs of digging.

"A bonus of two silver to the first digger to find a box." Called Nethra.

"Where do we dig ?"

She showed them and left them to get on with it. Half an hour later one of them hit a box with the end of his spade. It took another hour to find and load the six boxes onto the waggon, which was now very heavy and hard to push.

"Push lads." Said Merrick. "We'll make it up to you when we reach Quron."

"Bonuses all round." Added Nethra.

Merrick wasn't too worried about being generous, the fee he'd charged Ousha would easily cover the waggon handler's wages and any bonus. Nethra wouldn't like him making money out of an old friend, but business is business. They were well away from the pilgrim trail and the wrong side of the river, but there were plenty of bridges further upstream. Merrick felt safe, or would do once they'd put a few more miles between them and the City. He'd once heard a saying about making it look like a procession, if you were being run out of town. Merrick now understood what the saying meant. Half the night was gone, before Merrick let the weary waggon handlers rest and sleep. Ousha was given the comfortable bed in the waggon, while Merrick and Nethra made do with a blanket on the ground.

"I'll miss the City." Said Nethra. "So many memories of good times there. Some bad of course, but most were good."

"We'll make new memories." He answered. "Lots of them....."

~ ~

Caspian had wanted to go with her, but once she'd bathed and had her wounds tended to, Vella wanted to meet the angel on her own. She opened their old bedroom and then locked the door from the inside. Her hand was trembling as she pulled aside the tapestry that hid the doorway into the hidden rooms. She was there, in their small secret library, reading one of the tomes written in a long dead human language.

"I knew you'd come, eventually." Said Inanna.

"I'm sorry, it just took a long time to get to the portal and....."

The Genova had walked towards her and Vella had instinctively stepped back. She'd expected a slightly more human form of Aeony, but Inanna was just so..... Different.

"You don't have to fear me Vella." Said Inanna. "You saved me from an eternity of being a statue. For all those thousands of years, I was still aware, though it often felt like a dream."

"He said the same thing."

The angel extended her wings, brushing several books off a nearby shelf. Large leathery wings, like those of a dark angel, but longer and more slender. Inanna seemed agitated at the mere mention of

the last King of Gorshan. It was the humanness of the angel that discomfited Vella; she looked like the monsters her mother had told her about, to get her to behave.

“He is dead now of course.” Said the angel. “I am free, so Haakon must be dead.”

Vella deliberately moved to put the old desk between her and the angel. Inanna actually laughed in a friendly way and folded her wings against her back. She had hands with five fingers, rather than the usual four and the skin on them was a pinkish colour. She moved forward and touched Vella’s hands with one of hers. The hand was warm, but the feeling wasn’t unpleasant.

“I don’t blame you for being wary of me.” Said Inanna. “I read some of the books here; saw what was written about me. They say I was a renegade angel, who did some terrible things and that I was eventually cast out by my own kind.”

“Did you ?” Asked Vella. “Do terrible things ?”

“Yes, though that too now seems like a dream.” Answered the Angel. “It was love you see. Love that strong can turn into a hatred that burns your soul. I hope you never learn that Vella, especially as I can see you’ll soon be a mother.”

Vella had cleaned the King’s ring of office in strong spirits and then polished it until it looked like new. She took it from her pocket and held it towards the angel.

“He wanted you to have this. And I was to give you a message.”

Inanna took the ring and turned it around in her fingers, smiling at it.

“What was the message ?”

“That he still loved you.”

The Genova cried and each tear was like acid, burning the floor tiles they fell on. Her eyes looked at Vella and made her shrink back.

“Now you can see why I need to leave your world.” Said the angel. “What is good in my world is bad for yours. Just being here hurts me, makes my skin burn and itch. I affect your world too, change it without meaning to. It’s all about the balance.”

“Adamaz talked about the balance.” Said Vella.

Inanna’s mood changed quicker than the wind and she was laughing again.

“Your librarian is a wise man. To put it simply..... I am bad for your world and your world is bad for me. I must leave the rifts forever.”

“Where will you go ?”

“Worlds and places you couldn’t imagine. There are more worlds than there are grains of sand in the great desert around Tandalla.”

The angel moved towards her and hugged her, a long gentle hug. Inanna was warm, her whole body gave off warmth and Vella felt happy and content, but didn’t know why.

“I did you one favour.” Said Inanna. “I made Aeony far less interested in you and Gorshan than she would normally have been. I can offer you one last gift..... Knowledge about the child you carry. It is your choice though. Do you wish me to tell you ?”

“Yes, of course I do.”

The angel stepped back and then felt her stomach, though it was far too soon for there to be any physical sign of her pregnancy.

“A boy Vella, you carry a son. Luckily his looks will come from your side of the family and not Caspian’s.”

They both chuckled at that. Caspian had many good qualities, but good looks definitely weren’t one of them.

“He’ll be healthy and he will be the head librarian after Caspian.”

Inanna stepped into the centre of the room and began to glow.

“That is all I can tell you. Now I must leave.....Goodbye Vella.”

“Goodbye.”

The angel vanished and Vella sat at the desk and cried for a while. She knew it was the way an angel affected the rifts and that her sadness would pass. Soon she’d go and tell Caspian that he was going to have a son, an heir. The great library would carry on and so would the City of the Lost God.

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~ The End ~

That is the final part, I hope you’ve enjoyed the journey. There will be a book about Muzzie, but it will be a couple of years until I get to it.

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