

City of the Lost God

Part 36 – Emperor Tarin

“A simple emperor’s crown had been found in the Upper Dome, perhaps the first crown of the first ruler of the City.”



The day had arrived and the City was ready to celebrate a new emperor and a new king. Not that many were that keen on Babaef, but they all loved Tarin. He went everywhere and had been tireless in organising the rebuilding. Not just the prestige buildings, Tarin had commissioned a study to have fresh water brought in from the North.

“Huge aqueducts and canals.” Podd told Ash. “To bring crystal clear water from the mountain rivers far to the north.”

It had been a dream of every ruler, to free the City from drinking polluted water from the great river. “Enough water to bath every day.” Added Podd.

“Not healthy,” replied Ash, “you need a layer of dirt to keep the plague out, everyone knows that.” Podd thought that a supply of fresh water was a good thing, it had been promised by just about every ruler the City had ever known. Tarin seemed a rarity, a ruler who did appear likely to honour his promises. There was the cost of course, but the main thing was devising a plan and keeping to it. “You should have been born a Dredger boy,” he teased Ash, “they love being covered in dirt.” The boy made a face, but he wasn’t the only one to hold absurd beliefs about washing and disease. The brewers of ale weren’t happy either; people might start drinking water instead of mild ale.

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They were up before first light at Muzzie’s, some of the regulars never seemed to go home. Muzzie had a theory that a few of them didn’t have a proper home and just snoozed in their chairs until drinking their breakfast ale.

“I should charge them rent.” He told Sara. “A good dozen of them only seem to leave here on festival days or to steal something.”

She gave him one of her infuriating smug smiles.

“The longer they’re here, the more money they’ll spend Muzzie.” She said. “You don’t want them all buying Barus’ ale do you?”

That was an unkind blow, she knew that a few his regulars had been seen coming out of the flea ridden shit hole, that Barus called a bar.

“They’re a good bunch.” Added Gesse. “Some of them have done more work on the extension, than the labourers you hired from Winshin’s. And for no payment apart from a few beers and the odd bowl of stew.”

“Hey, there’s nothing odd about my stew.” Said Sara.

They laughed together and Muzzie realised that he might lose Sara to Gesse. He was a little jealous, but better that than have her leave to set up her own place. Not that he had any right to complain. Lilleth was back in the City and he hadn’t been slow to jump into her bed.

“Come on you two,” he said, “a once if a lifetime opportunity to sell every drop of ale in the house. Get the barrels out of the cellar and.....er..... give the place a bit of a clean-up.”

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Caspian was working; the City was full of visitors from the rifts, all wanting a spell to remove warts or a curse. A few were educated people, seeking a genuine piece of arcane knowledge, but mainly the queue was comprised of farmers and their labourers.

"It'll be curse removal and love spells all day." Said Torfi.

"And beauty spells for their wives." Another librarian added.

"Some respect for our customers." Said Caspian. "Their gold puts food on our plates."

They quietened down; most of the librarians now obeyed Caspian as readily as they obeyed Adamaz. It might be millennia until Caspian took over the library, but he had Adamaz's ear and he was friends with Tarin. Caspian took three silvers pieces from a farmer's wife, in exchange for a spell to improve her fertility.

"Thank you my lady." He said.

All the librarians were polite to customers; it was a sacking offence not to be. Caspian did overdo it though, he freely admitted it. Every farmer's wife was a lady, every farmer a 'My Lord.' They seemed to love it all; a few even tipped him a few coppers.

"You only get one cast of the spell." He added. "We recommend that you find a place of peace and solitude to use it."

The spell needed fresh Netric oil to be rubbed over her private area; he doubted if she'd make it a family event. It was what he always said though, with a few minor variations to keep himself from going crazy. The farmer's wife smiled and took away her spell. Behind her the queue seemed to reach to eternity and beyond.

"Yes my Lord, what is your magical requirement today?"

He asked the farmer who smelt slightly of mildew and was obviously dressed in his best festival clothing. The man had a huge wart on his nose, so Caspian was already reaching for a wart removal spell. They worked of course, every spell they sold. If ever Caspian had doubts about his chosen career, he consoled himself with the knowledge the farmer's wife would, in all probability conceive a child and the man's wart would shrink to nothing in three days. Not many physicians or famed apothecaries could say that.

"Will Vella be joining us?" Asked Torfi.

"No, we're invited to Tarin's coronation party." He replied. "She'll be bathing and preparing all day. She was trying the dress on at first light."

Caspian shared a chuckle with Torfi and passed the wart removal spell to the customer.

"You only get one cast of the spell." He Said. "We recommend that you find a place of peace and solitude to use it."

It was going to be a long day.

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Vella wasn't preparing for the party, she was preparing for battle. Armour was out of the question, even the lightest would render her incapable of walking. In their store of found objects was a very light chain mail shirt. Vella seemed to remembering it coming from the flooded cellars, but she couldn't be certain. Nothing was guaranteed to stop the claws of a Vargouille from ripping her flesh, but just wearing the mail gave her more confidence. It was heavy, but she'd been able to run round their rooms in it and she could swing a sword.

"You killed a Roruss, now kill Vargouille for me." She muttered at the sword.

She held the sharp tooth of Arcardis, the sword guaranteed to kill any living thing. Caspian had used it to kill the legendary Roruss, killed what was known to be inviolable and immortal. Surely such a weapon would kill a Vargouille, even a whole pack of them? The weapon didn't look much, but it

was light and felt comfortable on her belt. There was a knock on the door, which surprised her. Everyone was either working or preparing to attend the coronation.

“Excuse me miss, thought I heard you call out.”

One of the cleaning staff, eyeing up Vella’s ill-fitting warrior attire.

“Oh, I’m getting ready for the party. It’s a costume party, how do you like mine ?”

“Very nice miss.”

She shut the door and giggled, once the cleaner was out of earshot. Vella had been hiding her obsession with Gorshan and hiding it well, but she’d also been following Caspian at every opportunity. He and Torfi left the books in their rooms, so she’d read as much on Gorshan as they had and she was fairly certain where Caspian had hidden the puzzle.

“The last place anyone would ever look.” She muttered, quietly.

Shoes next, converted from a found item and altered to fit her feet. Metal strips had been hammered into the soles, to make them harder wearing. They also had metal strips over the toes, to make them another weapon at her disposal. A pair of Caspian’s trousers, altered and pulled in and she was ready. Her own underwear of course, she wasn’t going anywhere in male pants. In her mind she pictured her dead body being found and then stripped for burial..... No ! Her underwear was going to be her finest silk knickers.

Vella had already prepared a back pack, mainly filling it with water and dried foods. That morning she’d been to the kitchens and brought back a few fresh items. She was ready to go, but there was the note of course, it was essential that Caspian followed her, hopefully bringing a few others.

Merrick and Waide would join him of course and maybe Muzzie, if he wasn’t too busy bedding Lilleth. The note she folded and placed on his pillow, he’d see it as soon as he came looking for her.

‘My beloved, I am now in Gorshan.’ It began.

No preamble, no talking about the pain that fighting the draw of Gorshan was causing her. He understood the terrible obsession she’d been cursed with, it was why he’d hidden the puzzle.

‘I will wait at the stairs, please join me soon.’

The puzzle would put her at the start of the stairs, which led up the mountain to Castle Gorshan. She’d read so much about the place, she knew its layout as well as any scholar. The last line she’d nearly crossed through, but decided to leave it as it was. It might cause him to hurry.

‘I believe myself to be with child, Make haste to join me.’

Of course he’d hurry, she was his wife and waiting in a place full of hideous dangers. She felt hot for a second as another anxiety attack made her tremble and want to forget ever hearing of Gorshan.

She couldn’t though, she had to go, to save her own sanity. She picked up her pack and ran from their bedroom, knowing she might never see it again.

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In the towers, Aeony was helping a group of her sisters to claim another three floors of the ancient building. Some of the creatures who had set up home in the towers were dangerous and unpleasant, two of the hired guards had already been killed.

“Our men are brave.” Aishar had told her. “But these monsters are beyond their experience and ability to destroy.”

“I’ll bring enough of our sisters to clear more space.” Aeony had replied. “I think three floors should be enough for now.”

Controlling the new dark angels had proved easier than Aeony had anticipated. They were like unruly children, but they viewed Aeony as an elder, someone to be obeyed. And of course they all wanted rooms near the top of the tower. Height above the ground equated to status to her sisters

and they all wanted to inhabit the higher floors. Aeony had rounded up nine of her new sisters, a number large enough to win most battles. Most of the creatures that needed clearing out weren't that dangerous, but there was the occasional 7th rift monster among them.

"I was born first, so I claim the first set of rooms." Said Itzel.

Itzel was the first of the reborn, the one with most of Silsk in her. Itzel meant first born in at least a dozen old languages and she seemed to like her given name. Luckily the dark angel had picked up Silsk's intelligence and strength, but without the madness and sadistic tendencies. Not that Aeony didn't enjoy using torture on a prisoner when it was required, but only when there something to be achieved by it.

"Fine, you'll be just under my apartments." Replied Aeony.

Just under meant subservient to her and Aeony was pleased that Itzel bowed her head ever so slightly.

"Of course mistress Aeony."

A strange creature who looked to be made of mist was using the apartment, but its only weapon appeared to be a wailing sound that made the guards cringe in fear. Aeony had no idea what it was, many of the entities inhabiting the towers were left over from past ages of the rifts. Despite looking like mist, the creature was corporeal and strong. It took Aeony and two of her sisters, to hold onto it and eject it from the window. It wailed at them, as it dropped towards the ground.

"We should have killed it." Said Aishar. "If it lives, it may cause trouble in the City."

Aishar was right, the City was full of strangers and they might panic at the slightest wail from the unknown wraith.

"Yes, you're right." Said Aeony. "Anything else we find must be killed and disposed of less..... publicly."

They could all still hear the faint sound of a wail; the creature wasn't going without a protest. Seren crouched on the window frame, her wings folded behind her. She looked towards Aeony.

"I could find it and silence the monster?" She asked.

"Yes, but take another with you. We have no real idea of the powers of anything we may find today."

Seren was gone, one of the new sisters following her down the towers. Aeony moved on, taking the group of dark angels with her. There was a certain amount of excitement now, wondering what they might find next. The next set of apartments was full of broken furniture and piles of scattered dust. The obvious question was what had reduced the furniture to dust and wood fibre? Nothing approached them as they went from room to room, opening windows and letting fresh air into the apartment.

"Something is in here." Said Itzel. "I keep hearing footsteps."

"I hear them too," said Aeony, "light footsteps, like a child following us around."

They looked in corners and behind the few solid doors they found, but there was never a sign of their elusive follower. Sometimes, as Aeony looked where they had been, a swirl of air would briefly disturb a pile of dust.

"A day of this is going to be incredibly frustrating." Said Itzel. "How do we catch this thing?"

"It seems harmless," someone added, "couldn't we just leave it?"

"Nothing in the towers is ever harmless!" Said Aeony. "If it was, it wouldn't have survived here for thousands of years. It'll have some nasty little trick, trust me. One of Silsk's guards was found with half his brain eaten and we never did catch the creature who did that."

They were more alert now, her new sisters no longer asked if the creature could simply be ignored. Another time she'd tell them of the guard who come back in one piece, but screaming. Not a mark on him, just a terrified look on his face and a constant need to scream. Silsk had cut his throat after a few hours of it and that really had been an act of mercy.

"It's in here, we cover every inch of this apartment again !" Shouted Aeony.

Seren chose that moment to reappear, pulling the creature of mist behind her. She crashed through the open window, throwing the monster to the ground, while still stabbing it with a long thin blade. The dark angel who'd gone with her, entered the apartment shortly after and they both began stabbing and beating the wailing creature.

"How do we kill it ?!" Shouted Seren. "Our blows seem to have weakened it, but it refuses to die."

"We have stabbed it hundreds of times." Her sister added.

It looked less distinct now, or at least Aeony thought it looked less clearly defined. It obviously didn't enjoy being stabbed and each thrust of a blade caused it to wail anew. Suddenly it turned, seeming to see something they didn't. It let out a particularly long and mournful wail and something responded.

Aeony didn't believe that any of the creatures shared any kind of allegiance to each other, it was probably the effect of the wailing. Her own hybrid guards were finding it impossible to even enter the apartment. Something was either pulling itself out of another world, or simply letting an invisibility skill wear off. She doubted if they'd ever know the truth, all that really mattered was the huge creature, gradually appearing in the room.

"Get everyone !" Shouted Aeony. "And stop messing about and kill the wailing..... thing."

Seren was looking at her and shrugging. It was ridiculous ! A good seven or eight dark angels and yet they were unable to kill a creature made of mist. She'd been taught a few things by Galla and a few pieces of dark magic by Adamaz.

"Just in case you find yourself in a life or death situation."

Adamaz had told her, as he'd made her practise the words and use the spell on a drunk from the slums. The wailing thing hardly counted as a life or death situation, but the monster it was agitating definitely did. One monster left to kill would help their odds, especially without all the annoying wailing.

"Stand back !"

Seren let go of the thing of mist and Aeony pushed her right palm against what passed for its chest. She spoke just four words, but it was the inflection and intent that made them so dangerous.

Instantly there was silence and nothing under her hand. The wailing thing had been thrown into the wastes of eternity and even the gods didn't survive there for long.

"It is gone, but I am weakened." She said.

It was growing still, its muscular body gradually being unveiled by its own doing or the lingering effects of the wailing. Large muscular and naked, yet when it moved they heard the familiar sound of gentle footsteps. The monster looked like a hybrid of some kind, but of a type long dead as a species. It roared at them and thumped a wall with a massive fist. Aeony found herself grinning at Seren, who was grinning back at her.

"I knew this was going to be fun." Said Aeony, as she threw herself at the monster.

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Celli wasn't a bad girl, in fact a lot of her energy went into remaining good. Her father was head cook, a position of some importance in The Dome. Not that Celli had consciously done anything to cause her father any lack of respect, she'd just bloomed. One moment Celli was just another junior

cleaner and the next..... every apprentice in the library was seeking her affections. Her mother had never talked to her about the attentions of young men and she had no sisters. Her friends had given her lots of contradictory and sometimes scary advice. She was the only cleaner with a key to Caspian and Vella's bedroom, the only person they trusted to clean their sanctuary.

Celli unlocked the door and carried a large box into the room, placing it on the bed, covering the letter Vella had left for Caspian. Cleaning could wait, Celli had her dress to try on, the first adult style dress she'd ever owned. She opened the top and parted the layers of tissue paper, to reveal the wonderful cream coloured fabric.

"Torfi will love it." She muttered.

Torfi, there was the cause of her father's perceived lack of good name. Her father had wanted her to be friends with the young librarian, he was Caspian's friend. A friend worthy of marriage was one thing, but sex was obviously quite another. Everyone knew they were lovers and her father had given her the 'disappointed in you,' speech. She wasn't giving up sex, the wonderfully pleasurable experience that made lights pop in her head. She'd just be more discreet and far more careful.

"How beautiful."

As she moved the box around to remove the dress, Vella's letter stuck to a blob of gum the dressmaker had used to seal the bottom of the box. Celli tried on her dress and examined herself in Vella's full length mirror. The dress hugged the bits it should and hung loose where it needed to hint and the body beneath. Celli moved the box slightly, fixing the letter even further into the glue. The dressmaker had a mirror, but the antique Vella owned, gave everything a slight blueish tone.

"I..... I..... look beautiful." She muttered.

Celli wasn't a vain girl, she was just telling the truth of what she saw in the mirror. There were rooms to be cleaned though, so she put her dress back in the box and carefully folded it in its tissue. She couldn't wait for Torfi to see her in it and she was looking forward to him removing it later that night. Her head was full of pleasure and plans and she failed to spot the letter on the bottom of the box. Celli cleaned the bedroom thoroughly and then left, carrying her precious dress and Vella's note to Caspian.

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Tarin read the growing pile of messages, written on fine parchment. Most of the towns on the rifts had sent him glowing congratulations, accepting him as their lawful emperor. They were all moaning about the short notice of his coronation. They were being polite about it, but even Quron had mentioned how the time wouldn't allow them to send a full group of town councillors. Quron was just a little way along the pilgrim trail, almost local for the rifts. Other towns on the 5th and 6th rifts might not even hear about their new emperor, until long after his coronation. There was a small pile of letters from unhappy towns and Flax read the message from Tandalla.

"We are pleased that the City has a new emperor, but we have no need of one." She read. "Our emperors always come from the Xanash family, who Tarin once served....."

Flax was looking at him, expecting anger, but finding none.

"They're calling you an upstart." She said.

He wanted to laugh, but her annoyance on his behalf was strangely endearing.

"Avald have cautiously accepted me." He said. "Which was a nice surprise, they've even sent a full delegation of town dignitaries."

Flax was glaring at the small pile of rude and insulting messages, some even openly talking of armed resistance. Most were from small towns that had never seen a dark angel, or felt the wrath of chaos. Most would come round to the idea of a new emperor, but Tandalla couldn't be ignored. Tarin

examined the dozen or more sets of robes that he'd been given for the coronation. None were new, there hadn't been enough time. Every surviving grand house of the City had dug through attics and vaults and then the fabric cleaners worked on what was found. He'd been tempted to wear his armour, but Adamaz had put him off the idea.

"Not for your coronation Tarin." Adamaz had said. "It looks as though you're preparing for war. Robes are what you need, the best you can find."

One set of robes kept catching his eye. Thrand had died in the recent troubles, half devoured by something that entered his house in the night. It had crossed Tarin's mind that Babaef might have been settling old scores, but nothing had been said. Thrand's family had found an impressive set of robes in a chest in the attic.

"The gold threads around the collar." Adamaz had told him. "They tend to indicate ceremonial robes from the first age of demons."

Nothing intact had ever been found from the first age; even enchanted fabrics fell apart after a few million years. Thrand's relatives had no idea of where the robes had originated, they'd simply been found, in an old chest of unknown antiquity. Tarin had his own ideas, as his fingertips tingled from touching the robes. A gift from the Lady of the Shrine, he was certain of it. He picked up the heavy robes and draped them over his shoulders.

"Well?" He asked. "What do you think?"

Flax came over to him and ran her hands over the material of the vast collar.

"Like they were made for you." She said. "You even look a bit taller with them on."

"I suspect they are a present from The Lady." He said.

He looked at the vast array of bone frames and hooks, which were supposed to carry the weight of the robes and make them comfortable to wear all day.

"I'm not having servants strap me into these things." He said. "Give me a hand Flax, I'm sure we can work out how it all fits together."

"Yes, fine, but you can't let Tandalla get away with their insults."

He stripped off, it would make fitting the various hoops easier.

"I'm not starting my reign with threats against the largest city on the pilgrim trail." He said. "I've served many emperors, I've seen how the good ones did it."

For some reason Flax decided to strip too and the next half an hour involved a lot of sex, but little fitting of the robes. He pushed the hair out of her eyes and kissed her forehead.

"I'll send Aeony to Tandalla, have her explain the current situation to the leaders of the city council." He said.

"Will they listen to her?"

Tarin chuckled and began fitting the bone ribs to his back. He could see how everything worked now, how it all supported the weight and made the wearer look physically formidable.

"Oh, very few people are unconvinced by half a dozen angry dark angels."

Another forty minutes and a lot of tugging and cursing and Tarin was looking at himself in the mirror.

"I must admit." He said. "To be very pleased with the way I look."

"You should." Said Flax. "You look the way an emperor should look."

He waited for her to dress and then held her hand and walked out of his front door and into the excited crowd.

"Stay near me." He told Flax.

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Babaef's house had been badly damaged during the night when chaos had walked the City. Despite the death of several of his servants and a few guards, his eldest daughter Itet had come through it all unscathed. Some kind of gift from The Lady perhaps, or a redressing of the balance after the death of his youngest daughter ? Babaef wasn't sure, but he saw more than plain good luck in his daughter's escape from the creatures of chaos that night.

"The monsters seemed afraid of something in our house Daddy." She'd told him.

She'd described a dark outline, almost a shadow that had sent several chaos creatures running off into the night.

"As though something terrified them." A surviving maid had told him.

It was all still fresh in everyone's minds, yet it was surprising how quickly the population of the City, were getting back into their routines. His house was now repaired enough to live in, provided the rains didn't set in too early.

"Look Daddy, look how pretty I am !"

Itet was prancing around his study, showing off the dress she'd been bought for the coronation party. Aeon had volunteered to look after her, which had worried him at first. Then he'd seen it for what it was, an offer of protection for his daughter. Everyone would see her being under the protection of the dark angels, her future would be safe from any threats.

"You look lovely." He said. "But it's early, you'll get your dress dirty."

"No I won't !"

She was gone again, to be replaced a minute later by an excited servant.

"Yes Meru, what is it ?" He asked.

Then he remembered that Meru was gone, killed during the excavation of the temple on the great river. So many had died, he began to wonder if it had all been worth it.

"Sorry lad, I'm day dreaming."

The servant was smiling and eager to please. He might well begin calling him Meru, just for the sake of continuity.

"They're here sir ! The dark angels."

"Good, how many ?"

"Four sir."

Four, his personal guard until he returned home as King Babaef. There had been no question of him moving into The Dome, which was Adamaz's territory and belonged to the library. Tarin was going to live in the Upper Dome, but there was no natural home in the City for a King. Babaef had decided to remain in his house. It was familiar and comfortable, though he was going to add a wall round the outside and a guard house.

"Fetch my daughter, we'll leave now."

He felt immensely proud, as he walked from his house and into a carriage, guarded by no less than four dark angels. There was even a small cheering crowd to see him off as, Itet on his lap, he headed towards the towers. Something still lurked in Babaef, something that he didn't really understand. He hadn't had any further rages, but something sat by his soul and whispered ideas to it. Bad ideas, dark ideas, ideas of pain, death and evil.

"At the ball, will you dance with me Daddy ?"

"Of course I will my dear."

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Muzzie had seen the floor plan for the coronation; he knew he had a seat quite near to Tarin's throne. Seeing it on a plan is one thing, being part of the spectacle is quite another. Sara was by his

side, wearing an expensive orange dress that made her look like a giant cake. He didn't care, he was just happy that she was with him on such a momentous day. An emperor and a King, the City hadn't known such a thing since the Xanash dynasty. Fresh water was being promised and the return of a proper City Militia.

"Safe streets at last." Runa had mentioned.

It was all very well, but such things cost money and Muzzie was worried about an increase in taxation. Actually Muzzie had never paid any taxes, just a few silver pieces towards the fund to clear the streets of the dead. Taxes were like monsters from nightmares to him, strange, unknown and best left alone. He'd moaned about it to Sara and received no sympathy.

"So you'd rather live in a City with infected water, where cut throats rule the streets?" She'd asked.

"No, no of course not. But mark my words, they'll think of taxes next."

Muzzie watched the seats fill up and consoled himself with the knowledge that the business levy in Quron had worked well. The streets were safe and people spent more. And of course, he could always put his prices up to cover the taxes.

"They're doing Babaef first." Whispered Sara.

"Tarin is the main event." He muttered back.

Babaef was approaching his throne, his daughter skipping along at his side. A crown from the human occupation had been found in a cupboard in the library. Adamaz had remembered seeing an impressive looking crown and a few alterations had made it look more demon made than human. It was gaudy and ostentatious, but Babaef had fallen in love with it at first sight.

"Silence please!" Shouted Adamaz. "The coronation of the King is about to start."

The seating was spread out over the square in front of the towers. Some brave members of the guard had even closed and nailed shut the main doors. There was a new sense of optimism in the City and the doors, always seen as an ever present threat, were now firmly nailed shut. Covers and vast cloth shelters had been prepared, in case of rain. The weather was perfect though, the wind light and not too cold.

"Stand Babaef and take your oath of Kingship." Said Adamaz.

There was an interruption as Babaef stood. The late arrival of Aeony and over a dozen of her sister dark angels. They all looked happy and excited, but had obviously been through some kind of battle. Itzel, one of the new angels, seemed to have had part of her left ear bitten off. It didn't seem to worry her though, she was as animated as the others.

"Please, please." Said Adamaz. "Silence please."

Muzzie had heard a few tales during the day, of huge monsters being killed and removed from the apartments in the upper towers. Podd had been called in to take a few away, one so big that he'd needed to make a single journey with his cart to carry it. A few of the local kids had been saying that Podd was charging a few coppers to see it, as though it was an attraction at the spring fayre.

"Do you Babaef....."

It was a long and very boring ceremony, with Babaef simply agreeing to obey pages of rules of governance. At the end of it all, Adamaz fitted the crown to his head and the crowd went into a frenzy of cheering and applause. It was a good tactic in a way. As Sara whispered;

"I'd cheer Podd collecting a diseased arm, after listening to all that."

Then his daughter was proclaimed to be 'Princess Itet,' and given a few made up vows to agree to. It was all done very seriously and had been Galla's idea.

"The poor girl has lost her sister, mother and step mother, all in less than a year. She needs something." Galla had said.

The crowd loved it too, cheering the new princess, until Adamaz thumped his staff of office against the flagstones.

“People of Mariba.” He yelled. “Silence for the coronation of our Emperor.”

Some still didn’t have a clue that their City had been named Mariba by the god who’d created it. They didn’t care, the coronation had been fun so far, they even had a new princess. Everyone cheered and it took Adamaz a lot of shouting to regain control.

“Quiet you rabble !”

Rabble ? Them ? The entire crowd looked up and saw Lilleth, an arrow ready and aimed at them. Waide was with her and several other warriors, clinging to the outer stonework of the tower. They’d been positioned there in case of trouble and Lilleth had obviously run out of patience.

“As the lady said !” Shouted Muzzie. “Let Adamaz say his words.”

The crowd like Muzzie and they gave him their silence. Not only was he the owner of the best tavern in town, he also seemed to be involved with a lot of good things happening in the City. No one really understood how, it was all word of mouth, but there was a general impression that Muzzie was a lot more than just a brewer of decent ale.

“Is there one here who claims the title of emperor ?” Asked Adamaz.

“I do !” Shouted Tarin.

He was at the back of the crowd and they had to part to let him through. Flax holding his hand, he strode towards Adamaz and the large emperor’s throne. Different from the rather cosy swearing in of Babaef, this ritual had more of the old days about it, the days when emperors won their title by conquest.

“Who dares ask to be called emperor ?”

“I do, Tarin, loyal servant of chaos !”

Those weren’t the agreed words, but no one cared, the crowd went wild. Muzzie thought about shouting for quiet, but realised Sara was cheering loudest of anyone.

“Tarin, Emperor !” The crowd chanted.

Adamaz gave the crowd half an hour to settle down and then he indicated that Tarin should sit on the throne.

“There is a time for ritual.” Said Adamaz. “And a time to simply get things done. I name you Emperor Tarin, a title you gained by right of conquest.”

A simple emperor’s crown had been found in the Upper Dome, perhaps the first crown of the first ruler of the City. No jewels or decorative swirls of precious metal, the crown was designed to be worn in battle, by a warrior emperor. Adamaz put it on Tarin’s head and the crowd cheered for another half an hour.

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Vella had found the puzzle pieces back where they’d been discovered. It was an obvious place, in a dish being held by a statue of LLud Narren, the mad sorcerer and onetime ruler of the planet Amorb. Or at least he’d claimed to be from Amorb; Vella had never really trusted much that the dead sorcerer had told them. LLud was dead twice, or maybe three times, she’d lost count. Even so she hated touching his statue, still wondering if he might have another trick in store. Nothing happened and Vella did as she’d said in her note to Caspian; she took the puzzle pieces back to the small hidden library, behind their old bedroom.

Solving the puzzle had been easy and a slowly turning image of Castle Gorshan appeared on the table. How grand it looked, how pretty in the sunlight. Vella understood all about suns now, the vast orbs of gas that orbited the worlds outside the rifts. Quite near the table a blue portal had opened,

not that different in colour and shape to the portals she used every day, to leave and enter The Dome.

“Come on Vella.” She’d muttered at herself. “Get it done.”

It had been daylight when the portal had deposited her at the foot of the stairs. Two broken statues of humans flanked the stairs, which wound their way up the mountain to the castle. She’d been able to see Gorshan high above her; see that it was now just a pile of overgrown stones. The sun was so bright that it had burnt her skin, so she found shade under a bush and waited.

It was now dark, had been dark for several hours. Where was Caspian ? He must have seen her note when he went to change into his party clothes.

“Please Caspian, I’m scared.” She muttered for at least the fiftieth time.

There was no ultra-violet wash on the planet, Vella was in the first real darkness she’d ever known. The sky was full of tiny pin pricks of light, but they didn’t give off any real light. Two moons orbited Gorshan, but they just added to her anxiety. Two large luminous worlds, which seemed to hover in the night sky. Surely they’d fall and crush her ? At least the night had hidden the distant horizon. On the rifts she’d been able to see the edge of the rift, often tens of thousands of miles away. Living on a ball of rock, which disappeared from view after a few miles, was terrifying to her.

“Where are you Casp ?”

Something was moving near the stairs, something small and on four legs. It made a squeaking noise and seemed to be foraging for something. Its body was warm, Vella could see it glowing in the dark. Probably no threat to her, but she tried to cry quietly.

Where was Caspian ? She waited, it was all she could do.

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Part 37 will be posted at the end of October.