

## City of the Lost God

### Part 5 – Walls & Bugs

**“The Dome is built to last forever,” he said, “there shouldn’t be gaps.”**



Caspian had never woken at dawn in his old room, there never seemed to be much point. The window had looked out over the most grey and dreary part of the rift and worst of all, getting up meant going to work. Now though he had windows in all of his five new rooms, and most of them looked out over the City.

He looked out at the City shrouded by a faint morning mist and realised he was happy, because best of all he had Vella in his bed every night. Caspian turned to look at her and all of her except her left calf and foot was hidden under the blankets. He realised he loved that calf and foot with all the fervour that he gave to loving her breasts and her wonderful genitals, that linked with his to give so much pleasure. Sara had given him a bit of wise advice on not falling too hard for his first serious lover, but he wasn’t stupid. For a start he realised that his position, money and the comforts of the Dome probably had an effect on Vella’s feelings for him. He did love her of course! He wanted her with him constantly, ached when she wasn’t there, would give his life to protect her. But with a wisdom sadly granted to very few he knew the feelings were a part of now. He loved her now, couldn’t live without her now. Caspian knew that he wouldn’t always feel the way he currently did about the wonderful creature he shared his bed with and that one day he’d feel the same way about other lovers.

“Ooohhhh.”

Something had run over his foot, something small that had tickled. He looked down and a small black bug was entering a gap between the stones to the left of the window and he just caught sight of the tips of two of its legs as it vanished.

“What are you doing ?” Asked Vella.

He’d woken her! Caspian cursed his stupidity and watched as Vella climbed naked out of his bed. There was a slight sheen on her right thigh where his seed had dried on her skin. As she approached there was still the smell of sex about her and he forgot about the bug and wanted her again.

“Was it another bug ?” She asked.

Another bug! His ardour vanished and he realised the morning was cold and Vella was naked. He pulled a blanket from the bed and gently wrapped it around her.

“I’ll get you a gown,” he said, “and slippers.”

They both laughed and Vella kissed his cheek.

“When you were working yesterday,” she said, “I saw two of the bugs go into the gap in the stones.”

A gap in the stones. It was unthinkable, the Dome was enchanted, mortar never cracked, even the tiles in the bathroom never succumbed to mould. Caspian got down on his knees and bent to look through the gap. Vella chuckled at his nakedness and returned the favour of getting him a blanket from the bed, wrapping it over him as best she could.

“Can you see anything ?” She asked.

“The Dome is built to last forever,” he said, “there shouldn’t be gaps.”

The gap was a good half an inch wide and disappeared into blackness. Caspian stood up and adjusted the blanket around himself, before opening the window. There was a fresh but chill early morning breeze and Caspian remembered them having snow on the roof of the Dome, while the City

below sweated and stank in humid high temperatures. The early morning mist was beginning to lift and Caspian could look down on the whole City, seeing the glint where the small river acted as a natural border between the slums and creatures of the rift.

"There's a ledge that goes quite some distance." He said.

Leaning out of the window he could see the Dome curving around to where it met the solid rock of the mountain and he was tempted to climb out onto the narrow ledge that ran under his window. Vella seemed to read his thoughts.

"Don't go out there, you'll fall." She said.

He had to admit that his body wasn't really designed for exploring high, narrow ledges and he closed the window and started to tap the rear wall of his bedroom, checking for any hollow areas.

"Who had these rooms in the past?" Asked Vella.

A good question, but one that worried him. He'd hoped not to have to tell her about the reputation the room had built up. He quite liked the rooms, but he knew that she might well refuse to sleep there again. Caspian decided to be honest with her.

"No one has used these rooms for quite some time." He said.

She looked at him so openly that it took his breathe away, how could he have thought about keeping the truth away from her. A look that open and direct deserved to know everything.

"I've never felt it," he continued," but some of the librarians have felt an atmosphere in here, a kind of charge in the air. Some in the past have had trouble sleeping in here."

She just looked at him and shrugged her shoulders.

"Well I sleep just fine. How about in the past, before the Librarians moved in?"

He was relieved, he'd have hated to move rooms, but he wasn't going to lose Vella.

"No one knows. The rulers of the City were at the top of the Dome, but there are no records about who used these lower level rooms."

Vella got on her knees and started to examine the crack, rubbing the edges with her finger.

"Ouch."

"What's wrong?"

He knelt beside her, enjoying the feel of her warm thigh against his. She'd cut her finger and one or two drops of blood had stained the floor.

"It's nothing." She said.

She rubbed her finger on the wall to remove the last drop of blood and they both heard a grinding sound. Nothing could be seen to move but.....

"I felt it," said Vella, "I felt the wall move."

"I have an idea." He replied.

He got to his feet and headed out of the bedroom and along the hall to his kitchen area. Not that he'd cooked anything to eat there, the refectory served better food than he could make and one of the kitchen staff even brought treats for Vella when they knew she was in the Dome.

'This will do,' he muttered to himself as he found a clean copper coloured metal cup in a cupboard. It wasn't his, so he could only assume it had been there for centuries. Caspian picked up a sharp knife from a drawer where he kept useful objects and headed back to the bedroom.

"It's the blood," he said, "I remember now, Borlas had an accident when he carried the bed in. Just a tiny cut, but he got a few specs of blood on the wall. That was the first time I noticed a gap in the stones."

He sat crossed legged on the floor and put the cup in front of him. The knife cut through the side of his hand with frightening ease and he watched the drops of grey blood drip into the cup. Not completely grey, there were streaks of green and red, quite a bit of red.

'Shows there's a good chunk of human in you.'

A physician had once told him when he needed to be bled to relieve a fever. He looked down at the blood in the cup and despite squeezing out another few drops from his hand it looked such a small amount.

"Give me the knife." Said Vella.

He tried to stop her, but she was stronger than he thought and managed to get the knife away from him. He watched as she cut her own hand, far deeper than he had cut his own, her blood spurting into the cup. There was slightly more human in her than him, if the large amount of red mixed with the grey meant anything. As she squeezed out the last drop there still seemed to be very little blood in the cup, but he hoped it was enough.

"Are you sure you want to do this, open a door to something that requires blood as a key?" She asked.

Caspian nodded at her and took the cup over to the wall. Did it matter where it went? He held the edge of the cup against the wall at his head height and allowed the contents to run down, moving the cup from side to side to spread it around.

"It's working." He said.

There was a grinding sound and the wall started to move. The original gap in the stone at the bottom of the wall opened up to a good three inches and the stones above pulled apart along the joints in the stones of the wall, but nowhere was the gap more than an inch before the wall stopped moving. Caspian couldn't see where the wall was going to, one side was opening up, but the other side of his bedroom wall looked perfectly normal.

"There's a light." Said Vella.

They both looked through the gap in the wall and there was light, but it looked very pale and diffuse. Caspian had no curtains on his windows, who would be out there to look in? He and Vella got their faces as close as they could to the gap in the stones and let their eyes adjust to the light.

"I can see a chair." He said.

"A table leg," said Vella, "and a bookcase I think, at the other side of the room."

Caspian moved his head slightly and saw the bookcase, old and solid, loaded with the kind of skin bound paper books that humans seemed so fond of.

"You know what this mean?" He asked.

Vella leant towards him and kissed his cheek.

"Yes," she said, "we need more blood, lots more blood."

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Nethra was glad she'd put on tight lace up boots that day. Aeony was holding her firmly as she flew over the rift, but Nethra hated the way her legs dangled.

"Just relax, I won't let you fall." Aeony had said to her.

Easy to stay relaxed in the relatively familiar surroundings of Podd's yard, but now Aeony was flying at height and flying fast and Nethra knew how a mouse must feel when an eagle has captured it.

They were heading directly away from the City and flying at speed, all Nethra could see in front of her was miles of scrub that covered much of the 1<sup>st</sup> rift. Her eyes were watering and the wind took away any sounds coming up from below, so she squinted her eyes ahead and saw that they seemed to be headed for a valley just the other side of the great river.

They seemed to be travelling even faster as Aeony swooped down and followed the small stream that ran down the valley. The wind was less once they were below the valley sides and Nethra could just make out a ruined building of some kind and that it seemed to be their destination. Aeony circled the building, spiralling down, lower and lower until Nethra's feet were just touching the ground. She felt the grip around her loosen and the weight was once again back on her feet.

"There is a seat of sorts, over there." Said Aeony.

She followed the dark angel across and area of broken tiled floor and there was a fallen column that could be used as a seat. Nethra noticed the surface was polished, as though many had used it as a seat, or perhaps just Aeony over an unimaginable period of time.

"Do you come here a lot?" She asked.

Nethra recognised the building as being some kind of ruined human temple, there were many of them scattered across the rifts, though like this one, most were just a pile of stones and pillars.

"Yes," said Aeony, "this was a temple to one of their deities, a human deity and no one comes here. We can talk without any fear of being disturbed."

Nethra told Aeony everything, the trip to the shrine, the plot to kill her, the plan the Guild had to take over the City and the ultimate ruin of the City of the Lost God that the shrine had foreseen. It all sounded so crazy, so paranoid that Nethra wondered if Aeony would believe anything other than the fact that Silsk wanted her dead.

"I saw the creature," said Aeony, "the one no mother gave birth to."

On the side of the valley a few rock croppers were eating the sparse scrub and making their plaintive mewing sound.

"Do you think it was sent to kill me?" She asked.

"No. There was a lot of power at the shrine that night," said Aeony, "more than you realised and I think it was there to protect you. It had served its purpose and was no longer needed."

Nethra was thirsty and the nearby stream looked to be crystal clear. She got up and dipped both her hands into the icy water, bringing a reasonable drink to her mouth. Aeony followed her and stood watching as she eased her thirst.

"Alright if you don't mind rock croppers peeing in it." Aeony said.

Nethra could see Aeony was smiling and the water was clean and delicious. Far better than any water in the City, apart from perhaps in the Dome.

"What are you going to do," she asked, "kill Silsk?"

Aeony looked tired and dipped her own hands into the water, taking a huge drink of the cool, clear water.

"No," she said, "my problem is staying alive, taking care of the guild and making sure that not one dark angel dies and that includes Silsk. I just have to think of how to accomplish that."

"Can I help?" Asked Nethra.

The dark angel put both of her talons on her shoulders, which was rather unsettling.

"Perhaps you can. But I'd better take you back to the City."

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Silsk had nearly killed Ousha for breaking one of her favourite ornaments and she was still in a bad mood. The small cup wasn't worth much, but it had come from the palace in the Holy City and that made it special to her. Ousha had a cracked rib and a new scar on her back, but Silsk was annoyed at herself for not killing the old fool. No one would miss the human cripple, many would be glad to see her go, but for some reason Silsk had feelings for her, of a kind. True Ousha had been her servant for

many years and she was quite cheap to employ, but caring for her! Silsk cursed the eight demon gods for allowing 'caring' emotions into the world.

"Go inside, there's a cold wind." Said Gjurd.

Silsk knew his name and that his wife was called Ingjard and that they had a noisy baby who seemed to cry all night. She'd been sat quietly and perfectly still in the tree for over an hour watching, just as she'd done for many mornings over the last few months.

"I'll get my coat." Said Ingjard.

The woman was pretty, but the man was the real reason Silsk came to their farmhouse so often, he was almost perfect. Merrick excited her sexual desires and often she thought about him as she allowed one of her male playthings to pleasure her, but this male, the farmer, was too good for sexual pleasure. Gjurd was going to be a perfect meal !

She'd found the family by accident on one of her feeding trips. The various creatures that inhabited the City lived in fear of Silsk making them her breakfast, but in reality she travelled many miles to feed, often hundreds of miles. She may have needed blood and viscera at body temperature to live, but she was astute enough to realise killing near the City was bad for trade. She sometimes left a few body parts scattered near the city, keeping the rabble scared of her. The child had first attracted her, nothing like the liver of a new born, and she'd sat on the branch and waited for the perfect opportunity. Then she'd seen Gjurd and all thought of the child had left her mind, she simply had to have him, devour him, bury her head deep into his body. Today was going to be that day, the day it actually happened. The woman came back outside, her coat of animal skin protecting her from the cold winds in that part of the rift. She seemed to almost look straight at Silsk as she hurtled towards her.

"Gjurd !!" Shouted the woman.

It was too late and Ingjard died instantly as Silsk pushed her head back and pulled the sharp edge of her talon across her throat, almost severing her head from her still moving body. He just watched as his wife's body jerked about before falling to the ground in a pool of her own blood. Too shocked to make a sound or move, Gjurd just stared at the dark angel who had appeared from nowhere.

"Undress for me and I'll spare the child." Silsk said.

He blinked a few times and looked towards the small farmhouse, but then he took off his shirt and trousers. His fingers seemed to be shaking, so he had trouble getting his shoes off. Eventually he was stood naked in front of her and Silsk was happy, he would take away the anger she felt for Ousha and provide her best kill in many years.

"We have neighbours," said Gjurd, "not far away in the direction of the high peak. Will you leave my son where they can find him ?"

Silsk had seen the other family, all grown old and inedible from the hard life of a farmer on the rifts. What did they find to grow anyway ?

"I will." She answered.

Silsk had hoped he'd be a pure blood human, there were rumours of a few living high up in the mountains, but the yellow sheen on his skin told her there was a lot of something else in him. Hardly surprising really, it had been two hundred or more years since she'd found a pure blood family to satisfy her hunger. She held his throat to stop him screaming, she wanted this moment to be perfect. Her right talon pierced the skin of his chest, pushed through his breastbone and then with all her strength she pulled everything out and to her right. Gjurd was still alive, just, which was good but the internal organs in the chest were wrong, all wrong!

"What are you ?" She screamed.

He'd gone, shock or blood loss had given him the release of death. His organs were a mismatch of bits of human with a lot of demon. The blood was red, but tasted bitter and nasty as she tried some from deep inside his chest. There wasn't even an organ she recognised as a liver. All that beauty had lied to her, the muscles, the fair face, the perfect little family, all a lie !

'The woman.' She muttered to herself.

The body was cooling fast, the blood would already be far too cold for her tastes, but she tore at the abdomen and was rewarded by seeing a perfect liver. No deformity, no partial amalgamation with a demon organ, but there in front of her was a hot and bloody perfect liver.

'Calm, make it perfect.' She said to herself.

She looked at the body of the man and spat at it, the woman would now be her main prize. Silsk gently pulled any skin and fatty tissue away from the liver. Carefully she snipped off a tiny piece with her talon and put it between her lips before slowly chewing it.

'Perfect !'

She sat back on her haunches and spent the next hour slowly devouring the liver. Her senses felt sharper, her muscles stronger and Silsk knew this was no illusion. For several years the meal she'd just had would make her a far stronger, faster and more agile killer. There was also the advantage that the killing lust had faded from her brain, not completely gone, it never would be, but under control again. Silsk could see a few carrion creatures waiting in the trees for their chance to enjoy her left overs.

"Patience, I'll be gone soon." She called to them.

No flying carrion beasts yet she noticed, but they couldn't be far away, the odour of a freshly opened carcass was strong and would carry on the wind for miles. She stood up and walked to the house, opening the door with her tail. How quaint it was! Numerous talismans and herbs were hung up in the hallway to ward off evil, yet none of it had any effect on her. Somewhere for visitors to leave their coats, there would be quite a few visitors soon, all wondering what had brought death to their brethren.

She smelt the baby and heard it chuckle. The crib was in the same bedroom as its parents, their bed tidy and freshly made. Ingjard had been a good wife as well as a good meal. Silsk approached the crib and looked down at the small child.

"You're so ugly." She said.

All babies looked ugly to her and she'd never understood the way women fussed over them, even some men. The fuss they made when she ate one, crying for days, sometimes ending their own lives. It was all illogical to her.

"So what are we going to do with you ?" She said.

The child was ugly, even for a demon hybrid, but it chuckled and looked up at her with the same innocence that babies everywhere displayed. Silsk didn't feel bound by her promise to the father, after all he'd lied to her with his beauty. Silsk spat and clawed a deep four fingered hole in the wall near the crib, that would get the neighbours guessing. But the mother had been such a good meal, might even have stopped her killing Ousha and good servants were hard to find.

"How do you taste little one ?"

Silsk would let taste decide. If the child's blood was sweet and pleasant it would make a good final course for her meal, if not she'd leave it outside the neighbour's house. She realised her talons were covered in congealed blood, so she licked them clean and dried them on the handmade nursery curtains. Ingjard had embroidered them with small images of various birds and creatures and Silsk once gain pictured the rescue party trying to explain the blood stains. She reached forward a now

nearly clean talon and ran it over the child's cheek. There was now a thin line of blood, but so gentle had she been that the infant merely looked at her without crying. Bitter, the blood was bitter, worse it tasted earthy, like farmyard mud.

"Being foul has saved you little man."

Silsk would leave the child outside the neighbour's door, but she was no nursemaid. She pulled all the bedding loose from the crib and used it to wrap up the child as though it was in a sack. The child started to cry, but Silsk ignored the sounds as she left the house by the back door.

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"Evening." Said one of the regulars.

Muzzie was never keen on sitting in the public area of his bar, in fact he hated it, but it was occasionally expected.

"There'll be rumours that you're dead again." Sara had told him.

He lifted his drink and looked around and yes the bar did do better business when it was known he was holding court in the corner. The working girls seemed to feel safer and somehow the story of his fight with the Shelzak had travelled, oh how it had travelled. Lilleth had a second cousin in Quron who knew every detail. In the City it wasn't just people that talked, there were the seers, mystics and a great number of shrines and oracles to worry about.

"Have an epic fight here and soon everyone will know." Sara had said.

He still had two swords with him, one on the stool to his right and another leaning against the wall to his left, but he now felt far calmer. A few of the guild had come into the bar and none of them had attacked him, or even said a word to him. One had eyeballed him for a while, but that was as far as it had gone. Lilleth said the Guild were trying to be on their best behaviour and that suited him fine.

"Sara said we should ask you?" Said Vella.

Muzzie looked up and saw that Caspian was with Vella, the two of them seemed inseparable lately.

He thought about ignoring them, but Caspian had brought in a few nice things when he was ill.

"Make yourself useful girl," he said, "get a fresh jug of ale from Sara and then both of you come and sit with me."

Caspian was awkward, the lad always was, just sat down and looked at his feet until Vella came back with the ale. Then it was as though someone had given him permission to speak and he became animated again. Like most people Muzzie thought Caspian was completely in love with Vella.

"So, what do you want to ask me?" Muzzie asked.

They looked shifty, but everybody young looked shifty to him. They always had far too much energy than was good for them and far too much money, now in his day.....

"You keep live animals, for food, Sara said." Said Vella.

What was wrong with the girl? She'd helped bring some of the birds from the store.

"You know we do Vella, mostly birds. They're easy to keep and the customers that can afford them know they're fresh."

He looked at her and grabbed her arm.

"Has someone been complaining? Tell me who they are and I'll sort it out."

"No," she answered, "no one has complained, it's Caspian, he had an idea about food for the Dome."

He turned towards the lad who now looked even more shifty, avoiding eye contacts and not even drinking his ale.

"Do you keep anything bigger?" Caspian asked.

"Bigger!?" Replied Muzzie.

“Yes bigger. I was thinking of perhaps having live fresh food in the Dome. Something small enough to keep for a while, but more substantial than edible birds.”

Muzzie didn't believe a word of it, they both looked far too guilty and he knew when he was being lied to. Caspian was proving to be useful though, so he decided to carry on with the conversation.

“We do keep the odd Rock Cropper, and I think Sara has one or two Shuud in the outhouses, for people who can afford fresh red meat. They're feisty though and you need an experienced hand to butcher them properly.” He said.

“Four.” Said Vella.

He turned towards her.

“What do you mean four?”

“You have four Shuud, Sara told us.” Said Caspian.

Four did seem a little high. Most of their clientele were happy with bread and vegetables, it took money to afford any meat. Four Shuud must be eating a lot of animal feed and Muzzie hated wasting money.

“Can I buy one?” Asked Caspian. “I can pay!”

The boy was putting a huge amount of money onto the table. He always seemed to have plenty of money these days and he wasn't careful about who saw it. If he wasn't known to be in favour with the dark angels he'd probably have had his throat slit long ago. But he seemed to have money and Muzzie seemed to have an overabundance of Shuud.

“I'm sure we can come to an arrangement,” said Muzzie, “do you want Sara to butcher it for you?”

Now Vella was avoiding his gaze, what were they up to?

“We need it alive.” Said Vella.

“To make sure it will fit where we want to keep it.” Added Caspian.

“Alive?! How do you intend to get it into the Dome?” Asked Muzzie.

Muzzie took a long drink from his glass and looked at the money on the table. There must have been a good three, maybe four thousand imperial there and a few hundred Quron. If the lad really wanted a Shuud he might offer to carry it up there for him.

“Could we carry it?” Asked Caspian.

Muzzie laughed. The sort of laugh that had a few of the regulars checking their weapons and looking around nervously.

“Have either of you seen a fully grown live Shuud?” He asked.

They both shook their heads and looked blankly at him.

“Come this way.”

Muzzie stood up and exchanged a warm smile with one of the new girls Sara was breaking in, a smile that spoke of pleasures to come, if he was careful. He went through the door into the back room and then along a dingy corridor where the staff who lived on the premises had their rooms and then out into the yard.

“This was all a school of some kind once. When the bar started to make money I bought it with the idea of putting a few more rooms out here, one day.”

Across the yard was a semi ruin, but the windows had been sealed up and the holes in the walls repaired. Muzzie stopped in front of a heavy wooden door and pulled back a bolt. Inside were rows of cages, containing at least two dozen edible birds. Some large, one almost as big as a woman's thigh, others too small to look worth eating.

“The pen is over the back.”



The smell was quite bad, but not overpowering. Shuud eat grasses and low hanging leaves in the wild, but Sara was obviously fattening them up with table scraps. Muzzie recognised some of the leftovers in the pen and thought a chat with Sara on animal care was well overdue. He picked up a few bits of meat with small bones in and threw them away, Shuud were too valuable to risk them choking on bits of bone.

“They’re huge.” Said Vella.

“I thought you’d been out here,” said Muzzie, “though maybe not. Sara has been fattening them and they weigh about half as much as you do. I can lift one, but you’ll need a crate and a barrow. I get the horns cut off at the farm, and they can’t bite you that hard. They do have a foul temper though.” The Shuud had four legs and the usual two yellow eyes of a rift herbivore. Standing three feet high, their stature gave no true indication of their bad temper, as one ran at Muzzie as he attempted to remove the bits of old bone from the pen.

“Can you get it into a crate for me ?” Asked Caspian

Muzzie kicked the Shuud that was trying to bite his arm and gave a long sigh.

“Look kids,” he began, “I know the whole food for the Dome thing is a lie and I don’t care.”

They both looked at the ground and made no attempt to say he was wrong, so he carried on.

“My curiosity about this ends when you pay me four times what one of these creatures is worth, you are going to pay me a ludicrous sum, aren’t you ?”

“I have about four thousand imperial, is that enough ?” Asked Caspian.

Muzzie gazed at the closest of the creatures and almost accepted the money, but the kid had been good to him when he’d been ill and there were those connections in the Dome.

“Five hundred will do lad, but I’ll take another hundred to cover my time, the crate, a barrow and what I’ll have to pay Podd.”

“You want to involve someone else ?” Said Vella.

They both looked distressed and Muzzie realised they hadn’t thought it through at all.

“I know about the back way into the Dome, so does Podd. You’re not the only Librarian to drink in my bar over the years and some get talkative after a few drinks. Take a crate down the road and everyone will be curious about your business, but Podd goes everywhere and people ignore him.”

Caspian and Vella exchanged looks before nodding at each other.

“I’ll sit on the cart with Podd,” said Muzzie, “and help you get it into the portal, but everyone needs the Library and I’m not going to upset Adamaz by entering the Dome. Will you two be alright to move it once you’re in the Dome ?”

They moved away and had a private whisper to each other, while Muzzie looked over the Shuud, trying to find the smallest to sell to them. Eventually Caspian approached him.

“We’ll be alright. There are two small steps, but we can manage that with a barrow. But there is one thing, how can we keep it quiet ?”

“No problem, I’ll get Sara to put something in its food to make it sleepy. Anything else ?”

“What if it wakes up in the Dome ?” Asked Vella.

Muzzie counted off six hundred credits from the money Caspian had offered him and gave the rest back.

“Then you’ll need a heavy stick.”

They both looked confused.

“Why ?” Asked Vella.

“To hit it over the head with of course.”

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“Will he live ?” Asked Sensan.

“His arm may be permanently twisted, but he’s a good man sir and he’ll heal”

He looked again at the note that has caused so much trouble.

‘Tarin will visit the shrine, he must not live to tell what was told to him. Go to the shrine immediately, this is vital to our plan – Silsk.’

Did go to mean go inside, that was the question ? Sensan realised he was prevaricating and he knew full well that if Tarin didn’t show himself soon, then he’d have to lead his men into the shrine. He needed the Shelzak for something like this, but the fucking thing had got itself killed and by a bar keeper of all people. Sensan would never have admitted to being afraid, but strange things had been happening in the City lately and the shrine seemed particularly active.

“Your orders sir ?” Asked Bodrin

“You’re sure you can’t find Silsk or Aeony ?”

Sensan trusted his second in command with his life almost every day, yet he had to be sure. The signature on the parchment looked genuine, but he wanted confirmation.

“No sir. The first man who was sent to the tower was told Silsk was away on business and that Aeony was last seen heading towards the mountains. You know what the dark angels are like sir and what they did to the second man we sent!”

Sensan didn’t want to send another one of his men, they might kill him this time. He had to assume the note was genuine, to just ignore it was unthinkable.

“How many available men do we have ?” He asked.

Bodrin looked around their makeshift headquarters in the old town and Sensan knew what he was thinking. Walls filled with boards, no proper doors, and it was in the worst part of the City.

“Nine sir, including me, but we’ll need to leave a guard here sir.”

A guard! The blood from the wounded man might well draw something that even nine good men couldn’t fight. But at least their headquarters, primitive as it was, was very close to the shrine, so the men watching there could report in regularly. So far no one had left the shrine all morning.

“Pick the best four,” he said, “and no one who’s skittish. We don’t know what we might see in there. Once we get to the shrine the two guards can come back here.”

“Yes sir.”

Skittish! Sensan wondered if that described him ? The shrine was just a few old statues and an abandoned temple of some kind, but he’d have given almost anything not to go. He’d been told by a famous seer that he’d die in bed, surrounded by adoring great grandchildren. But then again he had paid her a great sum of money to hear the prophecy.

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Next part will be posted the end of March.