

## City of the Lost God

### Part 11 – Plague!

**“They both knew the stories about the flooded cellars beneath the towers. Once used as dungeons, it was rumoured creatures now lived in the cellars, creatures even the dark angels avoided.”**



Nethra was spending most evenings helping Galla in the slums. The plague was spreading and a few of the worst affected were starting to die. The people in the slums didn't have much, but occasionally Nethra was given a small gift, or the odd piece of copper coinage. The problem of course was hygiene, or the lack of it. Once someone in a street caught the plague, the whole street went down with it within days. Nethra thought of herself as immune, surely chaos wouldn't mark her, curse her with prophecy and then let her die of the plague ?

“Thank you, there was no need.”

The eldest daughter of the house had given her a precious piece of fresh fruit. The sensible thing would have been to accept the fruit and throw it away later. But Nethra lived in the slums, it was her neighbourhood and she knew the value of such a small piece of fresh food to the family. She relied on her assumed immunity and ate the fruit, enjoying every mouthful. The eldest daughter smiled at her. She was a strong girl with no signs of the plague, nor had her two younger siblings. The eldest seemed quite capable of looking after the children, which was a good thing, because her mother wasn't likely to see another morning.

“Do you have a father ?” Asked Nethra.

“He's gone, left when I was small.”

Nethra should have known the family, she was after all a slum girl herself, but the slums had become so full, families cramming themselves into every corner they could build a slat and mud shack. She looked at the mother, the main breadwinner of the house and saw a hybrid barely out of being a child herself.

“She's going to die isn't she ?” Said the eldest.

“Yes she is, I don't think she'll live until morning.”

Nethra had long ago learned to be honest at such times. People appreciated the truth, it gave them time to prepare for the worst. She looked at the mother, still trying hard to breathe with clogged lungs, her eyes beginning to show signs of bleeding around the edges. Death from plague was never pretty or painless, but this time it seemed particularly unpleasant.

“When the times come,” she said, “send for Podd. He won't charge you anything to take the body.”

The eldest looked upset, they both knew Podd would put her mother in the fat boiler, but in the slums death was rarely dignified. Podd at least was a slightly better option than dumping loved ones in the river, especially when the river was your only water supply.

“If the children get ill, send for me.” Nethra said.

“I will.”

She left the small shack and noticed Podd's cart only a few yards away, he and Ash were busy tying down the cover. She hurried over to see if she could get any news on the progress of the disease around the slums.

“How many have you picked up tonight ?” She asked.

“Four,” said Podd, “two here and two further over, nearer the river.”

Nethra stopped Ash from tying the cover and pulled it back to get a good look at the bodies. There were four adults on the cart, fathers and mothers to children who'd now have to learn fast how to fend for themselves.

"Can I use your lamp?"

Podd muttered, but he pulled the lamp off the side of the cart and handed it to her. All four bodies had the familiar bleeding from the eyes and the rash that finally covered most of the body in raw and bleeding sores. Death though seemed to be from some kind of infection of the lungs and all the bodies had the same nasty discharge from mouth and nose.

"Have you picked up any children?" She asked.

Podd simply shook his head, while Ash put the lamp back and tied down the cover. Podd wasn't the liveliest of people in the City, but he had a job to do and Nethra realised it was a job best done under cover of darkness. She started to walk away, heading for home.

"If I pick up any kids, I'll send Ash to tell you." Called Podd.

"Thank you."

The last time the plague ravaged the City it had taken the young, but Nethra thought taking the adults was worse in many ways. Soon there'd be a great many children with no one to provide for them and they were likely to die of starvation, or be abducted and sold as slaves. Nethra was so busy in her own thoughts that she never heard, saw or sensed the robber approach. She did however feel his accomplice trying to get behind her unseen.

"Pretty clothes for the slums. Pretty lady, pretty clothes. Probably a full purse too."

Empathy, precognition. There were lots of words for the skill Galla possessed, but Nethra had it too. Not as refined as Galla's gift, but her recent times at the shrine had honed it. She could almost see the robber coming up behind her. The one in front, the one who'd spoken was wearing a rusty old breastplate. There were rumours of guards being laid off by the wealthy as they fled the City, probably some were turning to petty crime to fill their bellies.

"What do you want." She asked.

Nethra already had the handle of the demon dagger in her hand, she'd taken to fondling it as she walked, it seemed to comfort her. She may have looked small and defenceless, but she had a blade that could bite and she'd been trained by her tribe out on the rifts.

"Your purse, then you can be on your way."

Her tail wasn't as long or powerful as that of a dark angel and some didn't even realise she had a tail at all. She normally kept it tucked right up against her leg and usually only used it for sexual foreplay with Merrick. She tensed her tail and then hit the robber behind her with it, hard, right in his face.

"Bitch!" She heard him shout.

The robber in front of her was just a shape in the dark, but she sensed his hand reaching for a sword. Nethra quickly punched her demon dagger right through his metal breast plate and into his chest.

The blade went through the metal so easily that she repeated the thrust another three times in quick succession. He went down, collapsed onto his back without uttering a word. As she spun around to face the other bandit, she saw that Podd already had his massive arm around his neck. Nethra was pleased that even in the dark she could see she'd broken his nose with her tail.

"Do you need this one alive?" Asked Podd.

"No."

Podd squeezed his neck until his body went limp and then let the bandit fall to the floor. Ash appeared out of the darkness and started to go through his pockets, while Podd searched the robber she'd killed.

"The slums have always been bad," said Podd, "but they're far worse now. You should stay alert, no day dreaming."

Nethra needed no telling, she was going to move through the slums like a shadow in future. That she, an empath, was so easily ambushed ! She just hoped Podd wouldn't spread the story around the City. Podd was holding out a purse he'd found, offering it to her.

"No, it's yours." She said.

He smiled at her, a crooked but warm smile and then he easily picked up the dead robber with one hand.

"Can this be our secret ?" She asked.

Podd just nodded at her and carried off the body towards his cart.

"Don't worry miss, six skulls, eight skulls, all the same to us and we never tell." Said Ash.

She had no idea what the boy meant, but she trusted them not to tell the whole City of her stupidity. She left Ash trudging after Podd, while she moved through the alleys like a wraith, heading for her home and Merrick.

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Muzzie was up well before morning light came to the 1<sup>st</sup> rift. Like all rift dwellers he never thought of it as dawn, just the time when you could see with more clarity, anything that might be thinking of having you for a meal. He'd left Lilleth sleeping and made his way to where they'd stored the belongings of the dead waggon handlers and the dead raiders. There were a few decent weapons and Muzzie quickly had a dagger down each boot, one strapped to his left arm and another that he was fixing to his belt.

"Did you leave anything ?"

Lilleth had surprised him, but then she often did and not just by creeping up on him.

"There are some good blades," he said, "and a set of shin pads that are two narrow for me. Fancy a back stabber from the slums having shin pads !"

Lilleth held the shin pads to her leg and they fitted perfectly.

"These are good workmanship, probably made by Tarin."

She strapped on the pads and found another two daggers, while Muzzie carried on checking his equipment. When they were both ready they walked towards the main waggon, where one of the handlers was preparing breakfast.

"I never thought I'd say this," said Muzzie, "but I'm getting fed up with dried meat and bread for breakfast."

"Me too. If we come out of the hole I think we should go hunting for a few rock croppers."

Despite his reservations the rather repetitive breakfast was delicious and Muzzie went back for more of the dried meat. As the light started to improve they made their way to the hole in the ground.

"What are your plans ?" Asked Annun.

They'd talked it over the night before and decided on a plan of sorts.

"Nothing fancy," said Lilleth, "we go down together on separate ropes and jump the last three or four feet."

"We'll sort out anything that attacks us and then you can lower a lamp down to us." Added Muzzie.

Annun started tying a lamp to a thinner rope and their bag with food, water and few medical supplies, just in case.

"Is Sajaha coming to watch ?" Asked Muzzie.

"The master is busy with his studies."

Muzzie shrugged, it was probably best not to have the boss watching, that always made him a little nervous in these situations. They both looked down the hole and there was nothing to be seen, just the outline of a passageway leading out under the rift. Together they started to climb down and about four feet from the bottom they stopped.

“Ready ?” Asked Muzzie.

Lilleth nodded at him and they jumped, both drawing swords the instant they landed on the floor of the hole. Nothing, nothing attacked them, nothing appeared, there was just a dark passage leading off into the distance.

“I’m almost disappointed.” Said Muzzie.

Lilleth waved at Annun and he lowered the lamp and bag down to them. Lilleth lit the lamp and handed the bag to Muzzie to carry.

“There’s an odd smell coming out of the passage.” Said Muzzie.

It smelt of damp and rotting vegetation and neither of them found it a pleasant odour. Lilleth started off in the lead and they entered the passage. The sides were lined with plain stones, so it looked like they might be in the entrance passage for some kind of underground structure. Just before they were out of earshot of the surface they heard Sajaha shouting at Annun.

“About time they went down there. Lazy bastards !”

Lilleth and Muzzie exchanged a look and a shrug and continued walking along the passage. Muzzie had been trying his new Genova power out while Lilleth was asleep. He’d been concentrating and aiming his finger at several dry bushes near the camp. The best result had been a slight smouldering of a few leaves after about ten minutes of intense concentration. He needed some kind of emotional trigger and without it the skill was useless. He doubted any enemy was going to stand still for ten minutes while he tried to set them alight.

“We’re going downhill.” Said Lilleth.

Sure enough the passage began to descend at a gentle rate and quite quickly they’d lost sight of the entrance to the passage, the only light now was the yellow glow from their solitary lamp. There were no side passages and the stone interior of the passage looked as good as the day it had been built.

“Did you see that ?” Asked Muzzie.

“Yes.”

A dark arm had appeared, looking as though it was protruding from the solid wall and then it was gone. As they looked a leg appeared and was gone again in the blink of an eye.

“They don’t seem hostile. Whatever they are.” Said Lilleth.

The passage soon levelled out and there were niches cut in the stones, places to stand large oil lamps. The lamps looked very old and when Muzzie shook one it was completely empty. About this time the heads started appearing out of the wall, large heads with powerful jaws and dark eyes.

They too vanished back into the wall without attacking them or making a sound.

“How much do you think the bonus will be ?” Asked Muzzie.

“Isn’t the pleasure of my company reward enough ?”

They grinned at one another and carried on walking, they were now a good two hundred feet down and a quarter of a mile from the entrance. They still hadn’t seen a complete creature, but arms, heads, legs and hands were regularly appearing out of the wall and vanishing in a few seconds.

Lilleth was the first to spot the door in the distance and she pointed it out to Muzzie.

“Must be metal to reflect the light like that.” He said.

The door was metal and to their surprise it was unlocked and slightly ajar. Muzzie pushed it and the door easily opened to its full extent. Beyond was a room about forty feet square and at its centre

was a large marble sarcophagus. The rest of the room was bare, not so much as a single picture on the walls or any kind of furniture.

"No prizes for guessing where the map is." Said Muzzie.

"Maybe we should report back to Sajaha."

"He'll just tell us to fuck off and get the map ! Besides the ten day clock is ticking."

The sarcophagus was plain white marble with no carvings or ornamentation, but Muzzie could see a slight line where the cover met the base. He pushed hard, but the cover wouldn't move.

"Put the lamp down and give me a hand."

Lilleth put the lamp safely in a corner and together they pushed the cover and it moved, just a few inches, but it had moved. Muzzie felt something behind him, then sharp teeth bit into his shoulder.

"What the..... ?"

He spun and drew his blade, but there was nothing there.

"Let me look at that." Said Lilleth.

She pulled back his jacket and there was a red mark on his shoulder, but the bite hadn't broken the skin. His jacket though would need repairing.

"I think we've been given a warning." He said.

"Let's give it a really hard push this time." Said Lilleth.

Together they gave the cover a huge push and it fell off the sarcophagus and hit the ground, breaking into two pieces, the noise was deafening. Muzzie jumped back and began scanning the room, but there was no attack and nothing coming out of the walls. Lilleth picked up the lamp and they both looked into the now open sarcophagus.

"He's been dead a very long time." Said Lilleth.

At the bottom was a body so old that the bones had begun to turn to powder. Bits of the skull looked intact and a few of the finger bones, but much of the skeleton was now a fine white powder. In the centre, about where the chest would have been was a metal chain and attached to the chain were three metal pages, identical in shape and size to the ones Sajaha had in his book.

"You climb over," said Muzzie, "you're lighter than me."

Lilleth gave him a look that would have made a chaos creature shudder.

"What the hell has being lighter got to do with it ?"

Despite her obvious anger Lilleth did climb up on the sarcophagus and carefully leant over and reached for the chain. She just managed to get a finger through it and lifted the book pages out and brought them up to the lamp.

"Maps, all three are maps." She said.

Then there was a draft in the chamber, which turned into quite a gale and then the lamp was blown out.

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"If we had enough food, I could stay here forever." Said Vella.

Most of the rooms only had cold water, but in the best room, at the highest point of the Dome, they'd found a bath with hot water. The room it was attached too was large and sumptuous, with all its fabrics and fine furnishings intact.

"Do you think Tomma-Goran lived here ?" Vella had asked, as they explored.

"No, there were lots of human kings of the City, but most of their names have been wiped from the books in the library."

There were no cosmetics, but just having a long hot bath had made them feel so much better.

Caspian was still limping, but the hot water had eased the stiffness in his back. None of the five truly

gorgeous rooms seemed to have a portal to exit the Dome, so after looking in every cupboard they'd done what seemed sensible for their age and relative sexes, they taken off all their clothes, got into the huge and very comfortable bed and fucked each other senseless.

"I could stay here forever too," said Caspian, "but it won't take long for us to starve."

"How long will that take?"

Caspian knew that starving now wasn't a long term threat, but was a certainty. They'd looked everywhere for a way out and there was none.

"Once the food runs out, we'll be alright for about ten days or so," he said, "but then we'll start getting weaker. I'm not sure how long we'll take to die, but I don't think our deaths will be pleasant." He thought Vella would cry, but she just got up and started putting her least dirty set of clothes on.

"Then we should look everywhere again, while we've the strength." She said.

Caspian could see the sense of her suggestion and got up and put on his clothes. He didn't want to ask her how much food there was, but he picked up their food bag and it weighed almost nothing.

"We'll start here and work our way down to the kitchen." He said.

Common sense told him the King who'd lived in the Dome must have had a portal to the outside world, but in the end it was pure luck that he found it. They'd gone right around the bedroom, rubbing their hands on walls and checking all the skirting boards for secret switches. Caspian had then gone into the dressing room of the King, even some of the ancient clothes were still hung on long rails.

"There's even a crown here." He called to Vella.

On a table at one end of the room, right below a shuttered window was a battered crown. Obviously the room had been cleared of everything of value, but for some reason the old, plain metal crown had been left behind.

"Careful, it might be trapped." Said Vella.

Caspian reached for the crown and centuries of stored static electricity stung his fingers. In shock and pain he threw the crown from him and it struck the wall, leaving a long thin scar in the paintwork.

"Damn." Said Caspian.

As he picked up the crown he rubbed the mark he'd just made on the wall and a portal opened up, not three feet from where he stood. For over a minute the purple and blue vortex swirled in front of them, before turning itself off.

"We're not going to starve!" Said Vella.

Caspian put the crown on the table and examined where the portal had been. There was no raised area that signified an often used portal, no indentation in the wall from centuries of hands rubbing the same spot.

"I think this was a back door way out Vella, it may come out anywhere, perhaps somewhere now blocked, perhaps even into the flooded cellars of the towers."

They both knew the stories about the flooded cellars beneath the towers. Once used as dungeons, it was rumoured creatures now lived in the cellars, creatures even the dark angels avoided.

"We could go one at a time and come back if it's safe." Suggested Vella.

Caspian's expertise on portals was based on the two that he used in the Dome, but he had read a bit about them.

"This may be a one way portal," he said, "obviously we must use the portal or starve, but we go together."

Vella just nodded at him.

"We should collect whatever we wish to take with us." She said.

Suddenly their world had changed and instead of desperation they now found themselves in possession of enough gold to change their lives forever and a way out. Caspian led the way to LLud's workroom and the box of gold coins.

"We should be able to carry a bag each and our packs," Said Caspian.

"Not full of gold."

"Not full Vella, put gold in your back pack until you think you could still carry it for a few hours."

"A few hours?"

Caspian held her hand.

"We may come out in the cellars."

Vella put layers of gold coins in her pack and then put their meagre food rations on top. Into her bag she put her water flask and then she added two of the expensive looking daggers from the weapons cupboard. Caspian ignored everything else and brought the treatise on producing a dark angel out of a drawer, then he began going through the spells written on parchment, putting a few in a pile on the floor.

"You're taking those?" Asked Vella.

"I know it sounds strange. I can't read them, but I know some of them are important."

Vella put a few layers of gold coins in Caspian's pack and then she began carefully folding the spell parchments, before putting them on top of the gold. Into his bag, Caspian put a few of the smaller items of weaponry that Vella had missed and then he too was ready to leave the upper dome. As they left the workroom Caspian picked up the terrible weapon and put it over his shoulder.

"Are you certain we should take that?" Vella asked.

"No. But one day we may need its protection."

The upper dome was now like home to them and very quickly they were back in the King's room and then in the dressing room. Vella picked up the crown and tucked it into the top of Caspian's already heavy back pack.

"It's only plain metal," he said, "are you sure it's worth taking."

"Yes."

"Why?"

He felt bad about asking her, she'd trusted his instincts about the spells, but the crown was very heavy.

"I searched the rooms while you were still unconscious." She said.

He looked at her, not really seeing her point.

"The crown wasn't there then."

"You're certain?"

"Yes."

He no longer argued, but walked over to the mark on the wall.

"Ready?" He asked.

Vella nodded and he ran his hand over the mark. As the portal came to life they walked forward and into its swirling body of purple light.

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Babaef was suddenly popular and it was a revelation to him. Women were actually vying for his attention and fellow sorcerers were joining his faction, though of course he strenuously denied it was a faction.

"Of course I always had my suspicions about Thrand." Said Lagertha.

Lagertha was one of the key council members of the guild of sorcerers, immensely rich, attractive for a hybrid, a widow and it was the first time she'd ever visited his house. Now he was beginning to wonder if the elegant creature sat in his work room would ever go home. Babaef realised the tainting on his opponents reputation was the work of Nigon, but he felt his own rise in popularity was mostly his own doing.

"The act itself is bad enough," continued Lagertha, "but to perform it on a Shelzak !"

Babaef merely nodded, he thought it best to show disapproval, but without admitting to any personal knowledge of the type of act performed. It was after all very easy for rumours to start.

"You will of course be receiving my support for your selection and that of my friends." She said.

"My friend." He said holding her hand. "You are too kind. I promise never to disappoint you if I am selected to lead the guild."

She leant closer to him, her perfume filling his head and stirring up desires long left unsated. Her skin looked smoother and softer than he'd imagined and her breasts were very pleasing to his eyes.

"Where are your daughters, I can't remember hearing them since I've been here ?"

"Their tutor has taken them for a special lesson today, so we could talk without interruption."

There was the briefest of looks on her face, a pleased look, a look that made him lean closer to her and kiss her cheek. She turned her head and kissed him on his mouth, with some passion. He was tempted to put a hand on those perfect breasts, the breasts that had held him almost hypnotised for some time. Babaef didn't have a huge amount of sexual experience, but he had enough to get the timing right. Go for those breasts too soon and he might never find out how good they looked unwrapped. Then Lagertha put her hand on his thigh, very high up his thigh.

"Such firm flesh," she said, "you must exercise regularly."

"I've..... been walking quite a lot."

"Yes, I heard about your walk into old town. How very brave."

Then she was undoing his trousers while they kissed and his hand went to her left breast and it felt fabulous, firm but not too firm.... Perfect. Lagertha ripped the last button off his trousers in her enthusiasm and then she was on her knees in front of him. Always a worrying moment for any hybrid, she'd either be pleased, or they'd have a few minutes of polite apologies all round and she'd leave. Not everything fitted right with hybrids, but often passion overtook common sense and sometimes there were injuries from genital incompatibility.

"Oh Babaef," she said gazing at his erect dick, "you could never disappoint me."

First he relaxed, happy that they seemed to be compatible, then he tensed as her lips expertly went down the entire length of his dick and then came slowly up again.

"That feels so good, thank you." He said.

Lagertha didn't reply, she carried on giving him the best oral sex he had ever had. She seemed to actually enjoy the task that his wife had treated as a chore.

"Your birthday and our anniversary only !" She had told him very early on in their marriage.

He looked at Shadow in her usual place, in her basket and even his pet seemed pleased that he was having so much sexual pleasure, even if it had been totally unexpected.

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"We've killed dozens of them," said Lilleth, "how many more can there be ?"

They could only kill the creatures when they took on solid form, but the creatures could only bite them when they were solid. Not that the bites were particularly hard or deep, but they'd been bitten a lot and the blood loss was beginning to leave a trail behind them, they were gradually bleeding to death.



"A head. Behind you !" Lilleth shouted.

In the eerie green light from the chain on the maps, Muzzie saw the creature well enough to cut off its head, leaving yet another dead body on the floor as they progressed slowly back up the passage and towards the entrance. Lilleth had been holding the map when the lamp went out and she'd realised the chain gave off quite a powerful luminescence. At first it had been like fighting in a dull glow, but as their eyes became used to the light, it became easier to fight by it.

"Lilleth, by your foot." Muzzie called out.

She dug her sword deep into that creature, but another bit deep into her ankle, causing her to scream and fall on her knees. Muzzie leant over her and wildly struck out with his blade, hitting a few of the creatures, but harmless going straight through the ones who hadn't taken on solid form. He knew that if he didn't get Lilleth on her feet, they were both finished.

"Up ! On your feet ?" He shouted.

A pair of jaws clamped down on his wrist causing him to drop his blade, it all seemed to be over, but he held hard onto Lilleth and pulled her onto her feet. At that moment an arm appeared over them and the passage was filled with flame. Muzzie cursed and covered Lilleth with his body as the flames burnt his arms, but the creatures were the real target. The arm above them flexed and yet more white hot flames filled the passage and incinerated the hordes of creatures.

"Quick," Annun said, "get her to the entrance, I'll stay behind you."

Unbearably slowly Muzzie coaxed the injured Lilleth into walking back up the passage, the slight gradient feeling like climbing a mountain on the return trip. Behind them they could see flashes of fire and then they'd pick up the smell of burning flesh. Not the smell of natural flesh on the spit, but the rank stench of something unnatural being put to the flame.

"Run ! There are thousands of them." Shouted Annun.

Muzzie pushed Lilleth, even jabbed his knuckles into her ribs to give her some encouragement. She cursed him in several dead languages and a few live ones, but she moved quicker and eventually they were back at the entrance.

"Climb," he said, "climb as though a lord of chaos is biting at your backside."

They were on the ropes and climbing fast, below them the passage was lit by another flash of flame and then Annun was running for the ropes. Muzzie was first to reach the top and he picked up the bow Lilleth had left behind, after deciding it was ridiculous for an underground fight. He wasn't very good with the weapon, but as Lilleth appeared over the top of the hole, he crouched next to her and fired an arrow at the creature a few feet behind her. He looked at Lilleth and she was moving fairly slowly, but her eyes looked alert.

"Cut the rope," he said, "I'll help Annun."

He strung another arrow and sent it into the mass of creatures trying to climb after Annun. He noticed Lilleth drop the maps and then use her dagger to cut the rope they'd climbed up, sending several of the creatures crashing down onto others below. As Muzzie saw an arm come over the top, he grabbed it and pulled Annun onto the surface. While Muzzie cut the last rope, Annun sent a torrent of flame into the hole and the unnatural stench filled the air.

"So you found the maps." Said Sajaha picking them up, "good. Now heal yourselves up, we haven't got all day, we need to be moving on."

Muzzie looked at Annun and started laughing. Lilleth simply gave the manservant a hug.

"What the hell are you ?" She asked.

"A friend I hope." He replied.

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The portal was obviously for use in an emergency, for escape and only used to go in one direction, to get out of the Dome ! Caspian and Vella felt very exposed, but it was a seldom visited part of the City, everyone tended to avoid the towers, and the small square was empty. This was just as well, as the couple had just appeared there, stepping out of a bright purple portal.

"I never thought I'd be so pleased to see the towers again." Said Vella.

"We should get under cover." Said Caspian.

In front of them was the grubby looking door into the secret room. The room that held the portal that would take them into Caspian's part of the dome, take them to where they both now thought of as home. Caspian opened the door and let Vella enter first, then after checking that no one was watching them, he entered the room.

"There will be no going back that way." He said.

They both knew that barring some kind of miracle, the upper Dome was now lost to them.

"We're alive Casp, and we're probably the richest people in the City."

Caspian wanted to feel happier, but he could tell from her posture that Vella was feeling as dejected as him. There were great secrets held in those room and real power, but now they'd never be able to explore them again. They both stepped into the portal and appeared near the bridge to the library, in the corridor they'd had to push a sleeping Shuud down, in its crate. They moved quietly and came to Caspian's old room, the door was ajar.

"Someone has been looking for us," he said, "I left the door closed."

The room was empty and the wall had been sealed closed, obviously by LLud before he was killed. The room had the unpleasant smell of decaying blood, but at least no one had discovered the secret doorway.

"My clothes have been moved." Said Vella.

Back in their room it was obvious someone had been going through their things.

"Adamaz was probably worried, I'd better put on clean clothes and go and see him." Said Caspian.

They put their packs and bags in a cupboard without removing anything, apart from the plain metal crown, which Caspian put in a drawer.

"I'll see if there is anything about that in the library."

They were both hungry and tired, but they realised they needed to put people's minds at rest before they ate or slept.

"I'll go to see Sara," said Vella, "see if she wants me to work tonight."

They sat on the bed and looked at each other.

"What do we tell people ?" Asked Caspian.

"Something simple, something they'll believe even if it makes us look stupid."

Caspian put his arm around her.

"We'll tell them we're in love," he said, "that we went off to be alone and be together for a while. Just us, somewhere romantic that we can't discuss."

"That's sort of true." Said Vella.

"The best lies always are."

Vella changed and went to see Sara, hoping that her job hadn't been given to someone else. They may now be rich, but she needed the job for cover until they decided what to do with their new found wealth. Caspian made himself presentable and went to see Adamaz. On the way he looked into his old room and he opened the window slightly to clear the bad smell.

"I haven't given up on your secrets." He muttered.

The upper dome may be sealed, but the priceless human books were just the other side of the wall and the statues. All he needed was blood, lots of blood and not necessarily that of an animal this time.

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Adamaz was pleased. True he'd given Caspian a harsh reprimand and he'd forbidden him to leave the library for any reason for the next twenty one days, but he was relieved the lad was alive and well. When he'd left the tower that night Adamaz had intended to ask Aeony to kill Vella, take her off to somewhere on the rifts and leave her dead carcass for the carrion creatures. But now he was in the slums and his mind had stilled a little, he had decided to let the girl live. They'd gone off somewhere to fuck for a few days. It was outrageous and irresponsible, but it wasn't unforgivable. Adamaz knew Caspian would be a handful until his libido lessened with age, but he was patient and Vella would still be welcome in the Dome.

"Over this way," said the whore, "no one will disturb us."

Adamaz was leaning against the wooden frame of an old shed, he had been for quite some time. When he stood still and quiet for a long time, people stopped seeing him, assumed the dark shape was just part of the frame. Less than twenty feet from him a local whore removed her undergarments and allowed her client a few minutes of pleasure between her legs, even if it was up against a shed wall. Then after expertly wiping herself with her panties, she was off looking for another lonely man with a full purse, to lighten it a little and leave him feeling even lonelier. Adamaz didn't need to feed, but he wanted to. The whole business with the plague and then Caspian had left him feeling drained, he needed the feeling of being in control that feeding always gave him. "No, you're not getting a fucking freebie."

The whore was a street away, but his ears could still hear her, he could even hear her heart beating slightly fast because of the drugs she'd taken. She was no good for him to feed on, which was a pity as she was young and quite vigorous. But like so many of the population of the slums she was on drugs and she had a sexually passed disease. Nothing that would kill her, but it would spoil her flavour. Like a good wine left exposed to the air for too long, the woman would taste tainted and bitter.

"They're out, I know they are."

Just one street away he heard the voice and Adamaz quietly walked in the direction of the voices.

"Grab anything of value, I'll keep watch."

So they were burgling the slums, things must be getting desperate. The one who'd volunteered himself as guard was a middle aged dredger hybrid, but he was clean and Adamaz could sense he was healthy. As his friend entered the shack he moved towards the burglar and put his hands around his throat. He tried to struggle, they all did, but Adamaz drained him of his essence in seconds, letting the dead husk fall to the floor.

"Thank you." He whispered.

He moved his foot through the dead husk, spreading the dust over the ground until it became just another part of the muddy ground. His hunger satisfied, Adamaz moved silently away, heading in the direction of the library and a late night meeting with Aeony.

"They only had half an old loaf."

The burglar was holding the mouldy bread and looking for his friend, who appeared to have vanished.

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Part 12 will be posted at the end of September.