

City of the Lost God

Part 38 – So Many Vargouille

“One instant the Vargouille was screaming, the next it exploded into tiny fragments of flesh and bone.”



Hervör waited for Galla to unlock the front door to her store. Despite being her best friend in the City, she knew very little about the elderly apothecary. She smiled at her husband who barely knew Galla at all, but had come to help, purely because Galla had helped them out in the past.

“The lock sticks.” Said Galla. “I keep meaning to get it looked at.”

The smell hit her first, as Hervör entered the downstairs area, which Galla used as her store. There were the usual rows of bottles and packets of powders. Usually the store had smelt of herbs and the perfume had been comforting. Now it smelt like an abattoir, the smell she knew from helping her father butcher Shuud, when she’d been young.

“What weapon could do that ?” Asked Wēland.

There was no way of telling if the body had been male or female, it was just a mess of blood, ripped tissue and cracked bones. Hervör had never seen anything like it and she’d seen a lot of violent deaths. The people of the north weren’t strangers to war and the ways it could kill people. Galla was looking embarrassed.

“It was one of my powders.” She answered. “Unfortunate, but he had intended to kill us both.”

By both of them, she was obviously talking about the woman sat on the stairs that led upstairs. Galla had talked of her friend Ousha, the servant from the towers. Ousha had a cut on her cheek and was quietly crying, but didn’t seem seriously hurt.

“Are you hurt ?” Hervör asked her.

“She’s fine.” Answered Galla. “Ousha just gets over emotional.”

Ousha just smiled at her. Galla had mentioned her friend being crippled, but not how bad it was. Ousha looked shrivelled, as though her bones were collapsing. The next things Hervör noticed were the four bags of gold coins. It was hard not to notice them, the cloth had been ripped on two of the bags and imperial pieces had cascaded out onto the floor. Hervör tried to ignore the gold, but her mind did a quick calculation based on what she could see. About two hundred and fifty imperial per bag, that meant close on a thousand imperial, spread over Galla’s floor. Galla saw her looking.

“Gold he brought to buy Ousha’s statues.” She said. “Though I don’t think he had any intention of buying them.”

“So you think this was attempted theft ?” Asked Wēland.

Galla looked at Ousha, who had still said nothing and was still crying.

“They’re friends Ousha, they deserve the truth.”

Ousha said nothing, just nodded at her friend.

Galla picked up four golden statuettes that were lying on the ground. They were all of hideous reptilian creatures, with pot bellies and elongated jaws.

“These are the old gods, the ancient gods of the rifts.” Said Galla. “Some still worship these deities and are jealous of them. I think the priest was from a cult that still worships these gods and he intended to silence us, permanently.”

Wēland took one of the statues from Galla, turning it in his hands, one artisan evaluating the work of another.

“They’re very well made, is there a market for these ?” He asked.

Galla was again looking at Ousha before answering, but Ousha answered for her.

“Those statues are older than time.” She said. “To the right person they’re priceless, but the wrong person will kill you, your family and everyone you know. My mistress found these, the now dead Silsk. She spoke of finding them in an unspeakable place that scared her, scared the most monstrous of all the dark angels.”

Ousha started crying again and Wēland handed the statue back to Galla.

“I was only thinking of making a few copies.” He said.

“Don’t ! If you love your children, forget you ever saw them !” Shouted Ousha.

“Shush old friend.” Said Galla. “They’re new to the City and don’t understand our ways.”

“We’re learning Galla.” Said Hervör.

“Don’t worry, I’ll stick to making trinkets and the occasional set of chainmail.” Said Wēland.

Galla was pulling back a blanket, to reveal the body of the man’s servant. He was wearing a thick leather jerkin, with metal caps to protect his elbows. He also had metal shin pads, a sure sign that his duties included being a guard for his master.

“We should start with this one.” Said Galla. “I’ll go into the basement and open the grill over the entrance to the sewers.”

She opened the trap door in the floor behind the counter and vanished from sight. Wēland grabbed the legs of the dead servant and began pulling him across the floor, leaving a trail of green blood with the odd trace of red.

“At least he’s short and light.” Said Wēland.

He dragged the body to the trap door and dropped it through. They both heard the crunch as it hit the stone floor of the basement. Hervör couldn’t help flinching and Ousha seemed to cry a little louder.

“He is dead.” Said Wēland. “He won’t have felt it.”

He climbed down the steps and they could hear him cursing, as he dragged the body towards the sewer grill. Hervör stood beside the ruined body of the priest, not quite knowing where to begin. Shovels and buckets Galla had mentioned, it seemed as good an idea as any.

“Do you know where Galla keeps things like shovels and buckets ?” She asked Ousha.

Ousha went into the rear of the shop and Hervör could hear a lot of cupboards being opened and closed and then the small crippled woman was back, carrying two shovels and a very large wooden bucket. She also had a meat cleaver, hung over her shoulder on a leather strap.

“Perfect.” Said Hervör, taking a shovel.

Ousha took hold of the cleaver and lifted it with surprising ease.

“We’d better cut it up a bit first.” She said.

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Muzzie woke to complete darkness. Not the usual darkness of the rift, with its constant wash of ultra-violet, this darkness was total. They were too far away from the sewer outfall to see any light from there. It had been several hundred yards before a side tunnel had opened up and Lilleth had demanded that they explored that for a safe place to sleep, or as safe as any place on Gorshan was likely to be.

Something had bitten his arm in the night and he’d been too tired to wake up. He felt the wound, made by tiny sharp teeth. There were lots of strange creatures on the human world and most of them seemed unpleasant. Muzzie felt for the daylight spell and tried to make it as dull as possible. The spell still hurt his eyes and caused groans from his companions.

"Is it morning?" Asked Lilleth.

"I have no idea, but I feel as though I've slept for a full night." Answered Muzzie.

"Crap! Something bit my leg." Said Waide.

"Me too." Said Muzzie.

He just hoped the creature wasn't carrying some sort of disease. He assumed that he'd be dead by now if the night predator had been venomous. Muzzie checked everyone was awake and had survived the night, he felt someone needed to do it. Torfi was still asleep, the light and general commotion didn't seem to have disturbed his sleep. Muzzie shook him and still the librarian slept on.

"That's not good Muzzie, let me look at him." Said Lilleth.

Lilleth wasn't gentle, she shook Torfi until his eyes opened.

"Ok, ok Celli." He said. "I'll go before your father wakes up."

That caused everyone to laugh and Torfi woke up completely and looked embarrassed.

"There's not much wrong with him." Said Lilleth.

Breakfast was tepid water and stale bread. Lilleth had promised them;

"You'll appreciate saving the dried food, after we've been here for a few days."

A few days! Muzzie munched at the hard bread and hoped it wouldn't be a few days. He'd had enough adventuring for a while, he wanted a few weeks, or maybe months, of sleeping in his own bed and having three cooked meals every day. He packed the few things he'd needed for breakfast and looked further along the tunnel.

"It's not that way." Said Vella. "I know the way. I saw it in a dream."

"Oh great." Said Lilleth. "Let's make the day fucking perfect."

Even Caspian wasn't supporting Vella, but Muzzie crouched down level with her face.

"Are you sure of the way Vella?" He asked.

"Yes I am."

He pointed at Caspian.

"Sure enough to risk our lives on it and his?"

"Yes."

The group was quieter now, no one could doubt her sincerity.

"I saw another stone statue." Vella continued. "It's important and I know I can find the way to it."

"What do we do when we find it?" Asked Caspian.

Vella shrugged and Muzzie looked at Lilleth, who was also shrugging.

"We might as well follow Vella." She said. "None of us has a clue about where to go."

"Not follow." Said Muzzie. "I'll be in front, with Vella behind to give directions and use her sword if needed."

He let the daylight spell rise in intensity and stood there, waiting for Vella to give him a direction to go in.

"Back the way we came." She said. "But only for a short distance."

About fifty yards later and Vella was pulling at him and pointing at the wall.

"Here."

"There's nothing Vella, just a wall."

"Hit it, press it, push it..... It's here! I know it!" She shouted.

Muzzie pushed and despite feeling a bit foolish, he felt something shift, just a little.

"Come on Torfi." He said. "Together we might just move this."

The young librarian looked skinny and weak, but Muzzie knew he had Kveld strength, even when walking on two legs. Together they pushed and a large stone, a good six feet square, moved backwards and eventually fell into another chamber.

“Keep back.” He said. “It was sealed from the other side. Let me look around first.”

He crawled through the hole and sat, with his legs dangling into space. His light spell illuminated a vast cavern, with a rough ceiling, but a tiled floor. The floor was a good ten feet below him, maybe twelve. The stone they’d pushed through was handy, it could be used as a step, but it was still a tough drop to the floor. Coming back up would be almost impossible.

“Are you sure this is the way Vella ?” He called.

“Yes. Across the balcony, down the stairs and then follow the river.”

Balcony, yes, he could just see a stone guardrail, about seventy feet away. Muzzie dropped onto the stone and then carefully lowered himself onto the tiles. Torfi had obviously decided that the wait command didn’t apply to him, he was quickly stood next to Muzzie.

“Nothing has been here for centuries.” Said Torfi. “No scents at all, not even really old ones.”

“Suits me Torfi. Personally I hope all our enemies are long dead, but I’m sure they’re not.”

There was a gap in the handrail and a long set of steps had been cut into the cliff. The sort of steps that are hard to create and had to lead somewhere important. Muzzie heard the river below them and pushed his ball of daylight towards the sound. He was getting quite good at directing the spell and it lit up a wide underground river, with a strong current.

“Scenting anything ?” Muzzie asked.

“Nothing. No one has used these stairs for years.”

“Always down.” Said Muzzie. “We’re always going down in these sorts of places.”

“And I guarantee that whoever we find will want to kill us.” Added Torfi.

For some reason they both started laughing and were still laughing as they helped the others climb down into the cavern.

“What’s so funny ?” Asked Lilleth.

“Nothing, we’re just being silly.” Said Torfi.

Muzzie in front, with Vella close behind him, they set off down the stairs.

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Aeony didn’t like finding locked doors; it was one of the few things to get her in a rage. The Upper Dome was supposed to benefit all the various groups and factions in the City, yet a room was locked. She’d seen Waide being called to follow Muzzie and her curiosity had caused her to follow them. Now she was angry.

Silsk would have battered the door in and threatened to flay the occupants alive, perhaps even crush a skull or two to emphasise the point. Aeony wasn’t Silsk though, she prided herself on being calm and logical. She banged hard on the door, three or four times.

“Muzzie ! Waide ! I saw you go in there.”

She waited and dark angels weren’t normally patient. Aeony wasn’t going to call again, ignoring her wasn’t just rude, it was stupid. She brought her fist back and struck the door. Nothing, no response at all from inside and the door had hurt her hand. She felt the door carefully with her fingertips and sensed a strong enchantment. Muzzie ! It had to be him.

“You can’t stay in there forever !” She shouted.

It crossed her mind that the enchantment might be blocking her voice. They might all be blissfully unaware that a seriously annoyed dark angel was shouting at them. Aeony braced her tail against the wall behind her and brought her foot up. She’d kicked in far stronger looking doors than the one

on front of her. The hinges she decided, always a weak point of any door. Her heel kicked hard between the hinges and the door didn't move, not even a shudder. Her foot hurt though and the noise had brought a few people into the corridor.

"I will not be defied like this !" She screamed.

Three times she used her tail to hammer the door, yet it still refused to move at all. Aishar was now in the corridor, watching her leader shouting threats through a door. It was demeaning ! Aeony now had to get through the door.

"Get our people." She said to Aishar.

"How many ?"

Aeony was close to a full rage, her eyes were now bright purple. She looked at Aishar and saw her second in command flinch.

"All of them of course." Replied Aeony. "And find Babaef. There is work here for a sorcerer."

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Muzzie walked along the river bank and increased his daylight spell until it lit the entire cavern. It was a fantastic scene, a river a hundred feet across, rushing through a wide underground valley. There were no plants, but some kind of grey growth covered the walls in places. There were fish though, he'd seen a few fins and the odd nose searching the surface for food. The river entered a tunnel in the distance and then there was no way of following it.

"We need to go that way." Said Vella, obstinately pointing at the tunnel.

It was no good, Hybrids from the City just weren't designed for swimming. High body density, coupled with being cold blooded, meant swimming was hard work and effectively controlled drowning.

"The river probably goes for miles." Said Torfi.

"It can't be that far." Said Waide. "If the way out is in Gorshan Castle, then it can't be far."

Everyone turned to look at Vella.

"No, it isn't far." She said. "There is another cavern and more stairs."

The stairs would be going down, Muzzie just knew it. The current problem was how to get six hybrids, who swam poorly, to the next cavern.

"Who swims well ?" He asked.

Only Waide had her hand up and Caspian was holding his hand halfway up.

"I swam the Great River once, when I was a kid." Said Caspian.

Waide walked up to the edge of the river and put her arm into the water, bringing a handful up to her mouth.

"It smells fresh." She said. "At least we can fill our water bottles."

"Waide !" Shouted Muzzie. "Your sleeve."

Two of the cave fish were hanging from her arm, their jaws clamped onto the material of her sleeve. Only about six inches long, but much of that seemed to be made up of jaws and teeth. Waide used her knife to cut them off her clothing and throw them onto the riverbank.

"It looks like we're not swimming." Said Lilleth.

"Is there any other way we can go Vella ?" Asked Caspian.

Vella just shook her head and Muzzie was close to accepting defeat. He'd lived in some very strange and dangerous places; perhaps they could make some kind of home on Gorshan. Then he looked up the river bank and noticed something glinting through the grey growth, that seemed to coat the walls.

"Where are you going Muzzie ?" Called Lilleth.

"I just thought I saw something."

It was metal, a yellow metal shaped by someone in Gorshan, probably a long dead human. He cut at the growth and saw more metal fixings, but it was what the metal ornamented, that really excited him.

"Boats !" He shouted. "There are boats here !"

A cave had been cut into the wall and it took them a while to remove the growth that covered it. There was room for a dozen boats, but six were there, crammed into one end and covered in a cloth that had largely fallen apart with age.

"Been a long time since these were in the water." Said Waide.

"Let's pull them all out." Said Caspian. "We might find one that's still intact."

Eager now that there was a chance of following the path Vella wanted them to travel. They pulled out the first boat, only to find that a root from above had smashed through the wooden hull of the boat.

"The wood is well preserved though." Said Muzzie. "Pull out the rest of them."

They pulled them all out and put them next to each other on the riverbank. Each boat was large enough to take them all and their baggage. Some had two oars lying in the bottom, one had four. A creature of some kind had made a home behind the last boat. It screeched at them and ran away on six legs. Muzzie just noticed it had brown fur before it ran into the water and was devoured by the hungry fish. He shuddered.

"Whatever that was, the fish are welcome to it." Said Torfi.

They decided on two boats, just in case one of them decided to fall apart. Vella still travelled with Muzzie, she was the only one who knew where they were going. The river didn't move as fast as they thought and the tunnel seemed to go on forever.

"We could never have swum this far." Said Vella. "Sorry, the distances get mixed up in my head."

"You've brought us this far." Replied Muzzie.

There was light ahead, not much of it, but it looked like the genuine article, sunlight. They emerged into another large cavern, but this one had a fissure in the ceiling, which allowed sunlight to enter the cavern. The result was spectacular, a narrow band of lush vegetation filled the far river bank.

"You must smell them ?!" Said Torfi.

Muzzie did, the disgusting smell of Vargouille seemed to be all around them. Muzzie began building a fire spell as the boats hit the riverbank and they all jumped ashore.

"There !" Shouted Waide, readying her bow.

Vargouille, oh so many Vargouille ! They obviously entered through the fissure in the ceiling and the cavern had become their daytime place to roost. They were waking and calling to each other, hundreds of them. Every gap in the rocks seemed to hold at least three of them and they hung from the ceiling by their claws.

"We could run for the stairs." Said Caspian.

Muzzie let loose a fireball that hit the ceiling, turning at least a dozen Vargouille to ash.

"No !" He said. "Run and they'll kill pick us off, one by one. We fight here and kill them all, every last one of them."

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Babaef had tried everything he knew on the door, every spell to wipe out or reduce the effect of enchantments. It was no good, nothing worked. The walls had been built by a God, Tomma-Goran, so there was no question of breaking down a wall. The only way in was the door and that was resisting everything he did.

“You’re tired after the party master.” Said Chillan. “Let me try something.”

“Gladly Chillan.”

Babaef moved back and watched as Chillan used fire, ice and disintegration spells on what looked like a perfectly ordinary door. Nothing touched, or even marked the wood. It still looked as good as the day it had been put there and that was probably many millennia ago. At least Aeony had calmed down and seemed to be treating getting into the room as a puzzle, rather than a chance to punish whoever was in there.

“Who is in there ?” He’d asked her.

“Muzzie, Lilleth, Caspian and Waide.” She’d told him. “And that young librarian Maya turned, I think he’s called Torfi. There are probably others in there too.”

After his spells began to fail, Aeony and a few of her sisters had flown off to fetch Tarin. That had been quite a while ago though.

“Nothing works.” Said Chillan. “We need Muzzie, but he’s in there.....”

There was a commotion in the corridor and Tarin was there, carrying the famous hammer of Valsec. The hammer had been at the entrance to the library for as long as anyone could remember, even its name had been an invention of Adamaz. Such hammers had been common place once, propped up in front of a great ruler, or on the wall behind him. They were meant to give the impression that the ruler had godlike strength, but in reality, it was all nonsense. Tarin was carrying the huge hammer though and carrying it in one hand.

“Where magic fails.” He said. “Brute force may triumph. Mind if I try ?”

“Not at all.” Said Babaef. “Whoever put the enchantment on this door was a sorcerer of immense power.”

Babaef moved out of the way, allowing Tarin to have the area near the door to himself. Flax was nearby of course, the girl seemed to always be near their new emperor. Tarin took the hammer back until it touched the far wall and then he used both hands to slam it into the door.

“It moved.” Said Chillan.

It had, but not by much and it still looked solid. The door had rattled in its frame though and some dust had come out the tiny gap between the door and frame. Tarin smiled and took off his jacket and then his shirt revealing a torso covered in scars.

“Can someone get me some ale ?” He asked. “Lots of ale, this could be a long job.”

Again he took the hammer right back and slammed it into the door and this time Babaef heard something crack.

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Vella pulled the sword out of her belt; the instant Muzzie fired his first fireball. The sword that could kill anything, even a mighty Roruss. Could it kill creatures on other worlds though ? Vella held it up in front of her and hoped for an opportunity to find out.

“Get behind us.” Caspian told her. “Try and hide.”

“No ! I won’t hide !”

She’d solved the puzzle, found armour and weapons for herself and survived a night alone on Gorshan. Vella wasn’t going to be told to hide, even by Caspian. A Vargouille came close enough for her to cut it with the sword. Just a slight cut, barely a scratch on its leg. It screamed though a scream of agony that made everyone look. It kept screaming and the Vargouille backed away, obviously wondering what has caused so much pain to one of their pack.

Vella watched, mesmerised by the way the wounded creature was screaming and rubbing the tiny wound. The end came quickly. One instant the Vargouille was screaming, the next it exploded into tiny fragments of flesh and bone. Vella found herself cheering and waving the sword about.

“Well done.” Said Muzzie. “Do that another hundred times and we might get out of here.”

The monsters were keeping away from them now. Vella had no idea how intelligent the Vargouille were, but they seemed clever enough to be wary of her and her blade. Muzzie was moaning at Waide.

“I have a dozen arrows left and no way of getting them back.” She was saying. “I can use them all now if you want ?!”

“No, sorry.” Replied Muzzie.

The flying wolf pack learned, they now waited for Muzzie to release a spell and then moved out of the way. They were too far away to use swords on them and Waide was down to twelve arrows. Lilleth was muttering about not bringing a bow herself.

“We can’t just stand here.” Said Caspian.

Muzzie beckoned Lilleth to step away from the others and they talked quietly for a minute or so. Muzzie was then pointing at the stairs, which led up to a room above them.

“At least they’re going up.” She heard him mutter.

“We’ll take the stairs slowly.” Said Muzzie. “Keep together and stay alert.”

They might be clever, but the Vargouille were incautious. One flew just a little too close to Vella and she stabbed it in the chest with her sword. This one screamed and flew backwards, before exploding into a ball of fur and blood. It wasn’t how the Roruss had died, but Vella was just happy they were dying.

“Now, while they’re keeping away.” Said Muzzie.

He went first and Vella followed, with Caspian just behind her. She heard the twang of a precious arrow being fired, as Waide was the last to begin climbing the stairs. Human legs must have been a different shape to hers, Vella found the spacing tiring. The Vargouille were avoiding her sword, but they kept trying to bite the others, constantly trying to find a weak spot. A few were too brave and Muzzie reduced a good six or seven to ash. That made them fly away again and group over the centre of the river.

“Come on.” Said Lilleth. “We’re almost at the top.”

The pack had obviously decided that Waide was either too dangerous with her arrows, or small enough to carry away. Whatever the reason, they descended on her in force, over a dozen Vargouille, grabbing at her and pulling her off the stairs. Lilleth killed one with a sword thrust to its neck and Caspian wounded another and sent it spiralling into the river.

It didn’t stop the others, they had Waide in their claws and carried her over the river and into the foliage beyond. They could hear Waide screaming and everyone was looking at Muzzie.

“I know, I know.” He said. “Let the spell build.”

They weren’t killing Waide; they were playing with her, causing just enough pain to make her scream.

“I’ve seen this.” Said Vella. “Before you all arrived. They’ll torture her for quite a while, before eating her.”

There had to be nearly fifty of the flying monsters, crowded round Waide and taking it in turns to bite and claw at her. Never killing her though, they were obviously experts at keeping their victims alive and in agony.

“Muzzie, now Muzzie.” Said Lilleth.

“A little longer.”

When he did release the spell, the ball of flame was so bright that she had to shield her eyes with her hand. He'd aimed it at Waide, who must have died instantly. She didn't die alone, fifty or more of the Vargouille died with her, turned to ash. Some near the river only had wings burned off or legs and they screamed piteously. Vella had no sympathy for them, none at all. It didn't stop there, the vegetation started to burn, more Vargouille being caught in the flames. Vella then heard what few have ever heard, the whimpering of Vargouille, cowering in fear.

“Come on !” Shouted Muzzie. “We may not get another chance.”

They were unmolested as they climbed the last few stairs, the flying monsters seemed to be still stunned by the damage fire had done to their roost. The stairs led to another tiled area and there was no climb up this time, an open door was at the other side of the cavern.

“Keep moving Vella.” Said Caspian.

She hadn't realised she'd slowed down, though her legs felt like lead weights had been attached to them. The door wasn't so much open, as hanging off its hinges at a dangerous angle. Muzzie pushed it, helping the rotting wood to come off the hinges altogether and fall to the ground. No side rooms off the corridor, but the start of a spiral staircase in the distance.

“I have to rest.” Said Vella.

They're at the bottom of the stairs and Vella decides to sit on the floor. Then the tears came for Waide and she's ignoring Muzzie telling her to get to her feet.

“The Vargouille don't go where they can't fly.” Said Torfi. “They won't enter the corridor, we're safe for now.”

Lilleth next, her face looking sympathetic.

“Fine Vella, we all need a short rest.” She said. “How far is it now ?”

Vella points up the stairs.

“Only about halfway up, but still a long way. There is a room with a statue. Not far now.”

Lilleth is nodding, but Muzzie is still fuming about moving on. Lilleth must have won, as the others are soon sat on the floor and eating whatever food they had. Torfi seemed to be right, the Vargouille weren't coming after them.

“What is it Vella ? What's wrong.”

Caspian had his arm round her and Vella realised she was crying.

“If I hadn't come here, Waide would be alive.” She said.

Lilleth smiled and they were all sympathetic, but no one argued with her. Waide, the warrior who'd lived to a truly staggering age, had died on Gorshan and it was her fault. Vella picked at some dried fruit and continued to sob.

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Gesse had heard the commotion, but it had been the first time that he'd slept with Sara and he wasn't keen on leaving the room they'd found. The bed was old and uncomfortable and the bedding smelt musty, but they'd both been too drunk to bother about such trivial things. There was no lock on the door either, but no one had walked in on them. He pulled his trousers on and noticed Sara beginning to wake.

“Can you hear that ?” He asked.

There was a sound he recognised, a sound of war. It sounded as though someone was using a battering ram. Every thirty seconds or so, the thump of heavy metal against stone.

“Yes, Ignore it.” Said Sara. “Come back to bed, they're always up to something odd in the Dome, Vella told me.”

She was naked and he was tempted, but he also needed to know who was trying to batter down a wall.

"I won't be long, promise."

She gave a sigh and rolled over. He almost told her the door didn't lock, but that might make her get dressed and he wanted to avoid that.

"Fine, wake me when you get back."

He followed the steady sound of something heavy thumping against something immovable. A girl carrying ale passed him as he walked through a rough hole in the walls and into the newly found Upper Dome.

"What's the cause of the commotion?" He asked.

"The emperor is using the hammer." She answered. "I am taking him more ale."

"What hammer?"

She was quick on her feet, for someone carrying a large jug of ale. He heard her reply though, before she opened a door and was gone.

"The Hammer of Valsec."

It was still a mystery. He knew of Valsec, but had never heard of him owning a hammer of any note. He remembered Sara's comment about them doing strange things in the Dome and wished he'd remained in bed. He followed the girl, using his revenant senses to follow her scent, which was mainly of cheap soap and ale. Eventually he came to the room where the main party had been held, the room with the painting of Tomma-Goran on the ceiling. Merrick was there and he appeared to be taking wagers.

"Gesse." He called. "I'm offering six to one against Tarin being able to open the door. Are you interested?"

Gesse just shook his head, though he was now getting an inkling of what was going on.

"I'll take those odds." Someone shouted.

Geese wondered if Nethra knew about Merrick running bets again. He just hoped nothing bad came of it. Not paying gambling debts was seen as a reasonable excuse for murder in the City. He entered the corridor and saw Tarin slam the hammer into the door.

There was a lot of dust and the unmistakable smell of a very sweaty hybrid. Tarin looked spent, his hair hung down his cheeks and he was readying the huge hammer for yet another blow.

"You need to get in there, that badly?" Asked Geese.

Tarin let the hammer rest on the ground. His eyes looked like those of a fanatic, who has long ago forgotten why he is doing something, or why it is important. Gesse had seen the look before, usually on the faces of warriors who've been left too long in battle.

"Yes." Answered Tarin.

"Why?"

The rhythm had been broken, Tarin sat on the floor and let the hammer fall next to him.

"Your bother is in there." Said Tarin. "Aeony saw them, him and Lilleth. Caspian is in there too and others, or so she thinks."

"Mind if I try?"

Tarin just nodded and picked up the jug of ale the girl had brought. Gesse ran his hands over the door and felt for the enchantment that had been placed on it.

"I have some odd revenant powers." Said Gesse. "Some are useful and some are just weird."

Tarin just drank the ale and watched him.

“One useful power is an affinity with most things magical.” Gesse continued. “No idea where it came from, maybe I ate a couple of sorcerers once.”

He’d used the line before and its reception depended on the audience. Tarin was giving him a huge grin. Gesse felt the enchantment and simply absorbed the power. No sound, no flash of power, he’d just be a little stronger for a while.

“Done.” He said.

Tarin was giving him the hard stare of the yet to be convinced. Gesse pushed the door quite hard, yet it refused to budge.

“Bolts on the inside, must be bolts.” He said.

He pushed much harder and a revenant can push incredibly hard. The bolts were strong, but didn’t stand a chance of resisting the strength of Gesse. The door flew inwards, various pieces of bolts flying off in all directions. Tarin was on his feet, stood beside Gesse and looking into the workshop of LLud Narren.

“Get Aeony.” Tarin was calling to someone.

“I think.” Said Gesse. “That I’ve just cost Merrick a lot of money.”

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Muzzie was finding the staircase a tough climb. He’d decided that humans had a slightly longer lower leg than hybrids. Not by much, but just enough to make their stairs really hard work.

“At least we’re going up this time.” He muttered at Vella.

She seemed much more cheerful since killing a few Vargouille and smiled back at him. He’d made her put the sword away though. He didn’t fancy the idea of it accidentally scratching his leg as they climbed the stairs. Was she having a problem with Caspian ? Muzzie wasn’t really a feelings person, they just tended to complicate the fun things in life. He had noticed that Vella hadn’t been saying much to her husband, she’d even rested and eaten on her own. They’d sort it out and anyway, it was none of his business.

Every two flights of stairs gave access to a room and every room might hold an enemy. Muzzie knew he had to stay alert, but he couldn’t help daydreaming a little. He pushed the light spell into a room and a whole stream of the eight legged furry creatures ran at him. They were small and seemed intent on running away, but they still shook him up.

“I hate those damn things.” He said.

They’d run through the others on the way down the stairs. Caspian had one on the end of his sword.

“I think it’s their version of a rat.” He said, dropping the creature on the ground.

Muzzie looked the room over and only moved on once he was certain they weren’t leaving enemies behind them. It was hard and monotonous work, but the Gorshan rats had shown him the need to stay alert.

“How much further ?” He asked Vella

“The next room Muzzie. I can feel something waiting there.”

The others were all prodding the eight legged rat creature, Torfi even sniffing the thing. Muzzie took his chance for a private word and crouched in front of Vella.

“Are you ok Vella ?”

“Fine, why ?”

“You seem to be ignoring Caspian.”

She looked angry rather than tearful, which pleased him. Sara had only cried twice during their years together and he’d had no clue how to handle it.

“He hasn’t once asked me about the child I’m carrying.” She said.

He hugged her. Only for a second and very carefully and gently.

"We're all different here." He said. "Get home and forget this terrible place. I'm sure he'll be his old self, once we get back to the City."

"If we get back." She said, smiling at him.

"Yes of course, we might all die here anyway."

They were laughing, which caused the others to stop playing with the dead rat thing and look at them.

"The next room is the one we're looking for." Said Vella.

"Stay alert." Added Muzzie.

Another dozen or so steps, but it seemed to take a long time to reach the door. It was open, as all the others they'd passed had been. The wood looked rotten, but the door was still just about clinging to its hinges.

"Wait here." He told the others. "And I mean you too Torfi."

The room was dome shaped and large, maybe two hundred feet in diameter and sixty feet high.

Muzzie took about five steps into the room and pushed daylight into every part of the room. Empty stone terracing looked down on a stone stage in the centre.

"It looks like a theatre." He called. "You can all come in now."

Muzzie walked between the rows of seats and stopped at the edge of the stage. He hadn't realised Vella was next to him, until she spoke.

"Him, it's him." She said. "He's the one who led me here."

Right in the centre of the stage, the statue of a human male was sat on a large throne.

"This isn't a theatre." Said Lilleth. "That was the King and this was his council chamber."

Torfi was up on the stage and examining the statue. They all knew it wasn't a very clever statue in full colour, miraculously preserved, while Gorshan fell apart. It was a King of Gorshan, turned to stone and left where it had happened. His hand was pointing, his lips open.

"He was talking when it happened." Said Caspian.

The wooden steps had fallen apart, Muzzie had to help Vella onto the stage. She walked up to the petrified King and gently touched his cheek.

"Part of him is still in there." She said. "Trapped in there since this world was young."

"Who was he?" Asked Caspian.

"The last King of Gorshan." Said Vella. "Turned to stone by Inanna, the angel who was banished by her own kind."

Muzzie sat himself on the floor and let the others explore the room and prod at the petrified King. He'd had red hair and an honest smile. Muzzie had heard that some human's had a good temperament, but it was heresy to speak good about humans.

"What was his name?" He asked.

"You won't find it written anywhere." Said Vella. "Part of Inanna's curse was to remove him from the records of his age. Every carving was defaced, every scroll burned, his children and grandchildren slaughtered."

"What had he done to deserve that?" Asked Torfi.

"He built a temple to one of the ancient gods." Answered Vella.

"Is that all?" Asked Muzzie.

The City was full of ruined temples. At one time or another, there seemed to be at least two dozen versions of chaos to worship. No one got too upset by it all, or erased from the records.

"It was a big thing to them." Said Vella. "And that particular ancient god, demanded human sacrifice."

Muzzie saw the problem at about the same time as Lilleth. She managed to voice her worries quicker than him.

"So, we're here to wake up a King who worshipped a blood thirsty god." Said Lilleth. "So that we can wake up a crazy angel who might try to kill us all."

"Or turn us to stone." Added Torfi.

"She'll definitely consider us to be heretics." Said Caspian.

"If he doesn't kill us first." Said Muzzie, pointing at the stone King.

Vella carried on stroking the King's cheek.

"I can see the problem." She said. "But that was why the puzzle was designed to bring us here. The only way we can get home is by waking him."

"What then?" Asked Lilleth. "How does that wake the angel and get us home?"

"I have no idea." Answered Vella. "I just know it will. He had sorcerers, perhaps one reflected the curse onto Inanna."

She turned and looked at them.

"Or we could all stay here forever." She said. "His name is the key and he told it to me in a dream. Do I wake him?"

Muzzie just shrugged and nodded at her, there was no other way. They all agreed and Vella knelt in front of the stone King.

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

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Almost dark again and Galla found herself walking the streets of the City. They had two guards though, picked up along the way at Muzzie's, though Muzzie wasn't there, or Sara. The new girl, Runa, had managed to find two tolerably sober regulars she could vouch for.

"They look a bit rough." Runa had told her. "But they'll look after you and get you safely home."

Two silver she'd paid, Runa refused to haggle over prices. Galla enjoyed a celebration as much as the next person, but to leave the tavern in the hands of a young girl! It was Ousha's fault really, always making a drama out of any crisis.

"We're here, though I have no idea why you insisted that I came all this way." Said Galla.

They were near the towers, able to see the doors that had been recently nailed shut. Ousha had her own way of entering and getting to Aeony's quarters.

"There won't be just one priest." Said Ousha. "Religious types always travel in groups. More will be trying to kill me."

Galla liked her old friend, liked her a lot, but she found her various neurosis to be a little tiring at times.

"You live in the towers." Said Galla. "With floors full of dark angels to look after you and unspeakable things in the lower floors. You're the safest person in the City."

Ousha held her hand and the fingers were still trembling.

"I have to go out occasionally." She said.

"Then you need to leave for Quron sooner than you thought." Said Galla. "You have the extra thousand and I know buyers for just about everything."

Ousha was nodding at her.

"I'll see Merrick." She said.

Her friend hugged her and then walked towards the towers. Galla examined her two guards and decided they might turn out to be useful.

"I have ale and fresh meat pie." She said. "If you're both hungry."

They were and there was a definite improvement in their attitude. They'd need better weapons and clothing of course, but that was easily remedied.

"We can talk about making you my regular guards." She said.

"You'll need to smarten up a bit of course." She added.

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Part 39 The Christmas Special - will be posted at the end of December.

That will be the final part of the City of the Lost God