

City of the Lost God

Part 9 – Traps & Escapes

“He twisted his claw and pulled out much of the contents, letting the sorcerer contemplate his own viscera for the few seconds it took him to die.”



“I’m sure you’ll do better when you’re fully healed.” Said Silsk

Inside Silsk was purring, Olvir had turned out to be an experienced and attentive lover, but Silsk was pretending to be less than satisfied to keep her new toy on his toes.

“I will do my best to please you mistress.”

It was the Feast of Nigon and although the main activities weren’t until the evening, Silsk was wondering about where to show off her new minion. She was in such a good mood that she didn’t even give Ousha the usual abuse when she came in to take the dirty laundry away. Silsk sat at her dressing table and applied some of the expensive human cosmetics that Merrick sold her.

“Where shall we go today ?” She asked Olvir.

She looked across at him as he was dressing and noticed there wasn’t a single fresh bruise or cut on his back. Either he was doing a very good job of pleasing her, or she was getting soft. She smiled at herself in her mirror and decided that it was definitely because she was finally getting what she wanted in bed. Not that she’d tell Merrick, let the ungrateful bastard keep looking over his shoulder for the rest of his miserable life.

“There is a market today in upper town I heard.” Said Olvir.

A market why not ? She’d been planning on a visit to Adamaz to get the double delight of seeing him cringe as she ordered him about and then make him tell her what he knew about the sorcerer Sajaha, who’d arrived from the west and then quickly headed out to the Ring of Volkin. Adamaz would have a story about the stranger, the librarian always knew something about anyone. But the market sounded more fun, she might even buy Olvir some new clothing, his soldier’s rags were beginning to annoy her.

“Good idea,” she said, “we’ll go to the market and on the way back we’ll go into Winshin’s and have a chat to Jonas.”

Olvir looked up at her as he was fastening his boots.

“He wouldn’t sell anything to us, even threatened to set his dogs on Sensan.”

“Don’t worry he’ll treat me with respect.”

So Jonas had sent the head of the Guild of Thraan away, threatened him ! Silsk was annoyed, but also quite proud of anyone in the City who had some courage, so few seemed to have any at all these days.

“While I’m with Jonas,” she said, “you talk to his staff, see what they know about Sajaha and his man servant.”

“Yes mistress.”

She was ready to go out, but Olvir simply wouldn’t do. His clothing looked what it was, the cheap rags most soldiers called a uniform, with a few less than impressive weapons added to his belt.

“Is that your best clothing ?” She asked.

Olvir looked unhappy and awkward.

“Yes mistress. I only have one other pair of trousers and they’ve a hole in them.”

“That won’t do ! Follow me.”

Silsk hated walking, after all she had wings. Wings were rare, they made the dark angels unique in the City, gave them power, so Silsk resented having to walk anywhere. But she led Olvir out of her bedroom and along the main corridor of her apartments. The towers were huge and the dark angels few, so they all had far more space than they really needed. Silsk was so rarely in that part of her domain that she caught Ousha gossiping with a young girl from the cleaning staff.

“No work to do ?” She roared. “Get back to it or I’ll take the skin off your backs !”

Ousha and the girl vanished almost instantly and Silsk felt the warm glow a good roar at the staff always gave her. Good staff were hard to find, but that didn’t mean you had to treat the scum well. She opened the main door to her part of the towers and turned left, Olvir following her just far enough back to avoid being hit by her swinging tail.

“Not far,” she said, “then you’ll have something to wear. I’ll buy you something nice while we’re out, but you can’t be seen out with me like that.”

The towers were immense and no one really had claim to most of the rooms. There was a room she’d once found that contained a good assortment of weapons and clothing. Of course it didn’t belong to her, but then again it didn’t really belong to anyone. The floor began to get dirtier as they walked, pieces of debris made walking difficult at one point.

“Don’t they clean here ?” Asked Olvir.

“These parts of the towers can be dangerous,” said Silsk, “never come here alone. Strange creatures can sometimes be found in these rooms. I once sent a girl to get something from one of these rooms..... poor girl.”

“What happened to her ?”

They were at the room Silsk was looking for and she opened the door and looked inside, closely observing the room for some time before answering.

“I don’t know, we never found her.”

There were several large windows in the room, which made it easier to see the masses of armour, clothing and weapons that had been stored there. Some of it hung on long rails, some on hooks and much of the clothing was dumped on the floor. The weapons had been put on tables, but some of those had spilled onto the dusty floor.

“The clothes on the floor will have mildew,” said Silsk, “but the stuff on hangers will be fine and I’m sure you can find a better sword and dagger than you currently have.”

While he rummaged through the clothing, Silsk looked out of the windows. From this part of the towers there was a good view west, away from the City and along the trading route that led to Quron. In the distance Silsk could just make out a group of traders heading towards the City, there seemed to be at least a hundred of them. She became so engrossed in the view that Olvir had to cough and stand quite close to get her attention.

“I hope this pleases you ?” He said.

It did. He’d found some old guard armour from the days when the towers ran to full garrison of guards, before the City had fallen on hard times. Red leather with black studs, Silsk picked up a whiff of mildew, but he looked smart and the armour fitted perfectly. He’d found boots to go with the armour and now a long curved blade was on his belt. Yes Silsk was very pleased.

“Better, much better,” she said, “I’ll buy you some really nice shirts at the market.”

They left the room and Silsk felt that finally something was going her way. Olvir would be useful and hopefully they’d find out how to get their hands on whatever Sajaha had gone to the ring to recover.

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“But you said you couldn’t find anything in the books on LLud Narren.” Said Vella.

They were back in the room with the skeleton and as Vella watched, Caspian hit the skeleton's leg bone with a meat axe he'd borrowed from the Dome kitchens. The bone broke fairly cleanly and Caspian was carefully making sure that all the fragments went into a sack.

"I found quite a bit on sorcerers and quite a bit of other useful information," he said, "you're going to have to trust me."

They'd both brought packs with enough food and water for several days, just in case. In case of what they weren't quite sure about, but they both felt uneasy. Caspian had been remembering exactly where everything had been left in LLud's workroom when they left, it was important. He hadn't told Vella his plan, not because she'd panic, but because even to him the plan sounded a bit stupid.

"Can you see any more fragments of bone?" He asked.

Vella got her face close to the floor and found a last tiny piece of bone that she added to the rest of the skeleton in the sack.

"The last bit, I'm certain." She said.

Caspian picked up the sack and together they went up the spiral stairs and into the dark corridor that climbed up to the top of the Dome. Vella stopped briefly to light their lamp and in a few minutes they were once again in the large room, looking up at the picture of Tomma-Goran on the ceiling and waiting for LLud to appear.

"Come to my work room."

They followed the still nebulous form of the sorcerer along the corridor and into his work room. The shutters were still open and Caspian was pleased that the ghost hadn't moved a thing since their last visit.

"I know you have my bones," said LLud, "I can sense them in the sack."

Caspian kept a firm hold on the sack.

"You promised to open all the rooms for us."

"And I will keep that promise, but you need to put the bones on the floor at my feet."

Caspian could almost see a sign appearing above his head saying 'fool' but what else could he do? Not coming back to the top of the Dome was unthinkable, there was too much knowledge there, most of it behind the doors LLud had promised to unlock. Caspian simply upended the sack and let every bone and bone fragment pour out.

"At last ! At Last !" Shouted LLud.

The dead sorcerer seemed to stamp on the bones, crushing them and as he stamped his body began to gain substance. The air in the room began to get quite cold, as though every bit of warmth was being pulled from the fabric of the room. Eventually LLud stopped stamping and fell into a heap on the ground, his skeleton had completely vanished.

"Are you alright?" Asked Vella.

As she moved closer to him the sorcerer tried to stand up, but he looked so tired that Vella helped him get to his feet.

"You're solid," she said, "are you alive?"

LLud Narren pulled himself to his full height and he looked tired, but very much the master sorcerer of the ancient Dome.

"Alas not alive," he said, "but I have form and substance. I can now easily open all the doors as I promised."

He seemed to concentrate and then they could hear doors unlocking and bolts opening throughout the rooms. Caspian began to wonder if he'd been wrong to doubt the character of the human sorcerer. Then the shutters clanged shut and the light globes came to life in the room.

“You’ll find all the shutters are closed and locked,” said LLud, “I can’t have you opening windows and trying to escape that way.”

“Escape ?” Said Caspian. “You gave your word not to harm us.”

The face of LLud had changed from friendly to cruel and he was giving them both a smile that turned them cold.

“A promise I intend to keep,” he said, “but I’ve already sealed the passage you came in by. You will have all the rooms to explore as I promised, and you may find water to drink, but there is no food at all in the upper Dome.”

Caspian had seen many ways the dead sorcerer might have turned on them, but even he didn’t expect to be sealed up and left to starve to death. He had a plan of sorts and he slowly moved to a table that was essential to that plan.

“How will you get out then ?” Asked Vella.

“Me !” Shouted LLud. “I’m the most powerful sorcerer you’ve ever met. Once my powers are fully restored, which will be very soon. I will move myself to the outside world. Once there I’ll find those who can give me full life once again.”

Caspian was glad the books had been right, the sorcerer had limited powers for just a few minutes. He walked around the table and picked up one of the terrible weapons made of silver metal. At the same time Vella backed away from LLud and crouched down in a ball.

“Don’t you dare threaten me.” Said LLud.

A chair leapt from the ground and hurtled towards him, but Caspian easily avoided it and placed his hand on the metal base of the weapon. It had been laying in the sunlight, on the table for two days and it had charged itself. As he made the movements the book had shown the weapon started to hum.

“I’ll kill you both,” said LLud, “the girl first. I’ll turn her into a nasty crawling thing and make you watch while I stamp on her.”

A cupboard door rattled loose of its hinges and flew at him, leaving a gash on his cheek, but Caspian brought the terrible weapon up and pointed it at LLud.

“I think not,” said Caspian, “if you could do that you would have by now. Every action you take drains you more and before you can be completely free I’ll use this weapon on you.”

Caspian felt for the first metal switch on the weapon and pressed it down. There was a low but quite audible whine that seemed to panic the dead sorcerer.

“A joke Caspian, nothing but a joke. Surely you can take a joke ? As if I’d harm either of you, you’re like family to me.”

Caspian looked for the second and final switch he’d need and as his finger rested on it, he made sure the terrible weapon was aimed right at the centre of LLud’s body.

“No ! Caspian I could teach you so much.....”

He’d expected the weapon to buck in his hands, or recoil into his shoulder, but he felt nothing. A cone of light hit the dead sorcerer and seemed to turn him to stone. Then the stone went crazy, cracks all over, like a pot that has been on the fire too often. Caspian sensed what was going to happen and put his arms over his face as the body of LLud exploded. There was pain in his forearms and when he looked there was nothing left of the master sorcerer but dust and a small shallow depression in the floor.

“That was amazing, you killed him.” Said Vella.

Caspian could see blood on his shirt from various cuts the flying petrified sorcerer had made, but none of them looked serious. Similarly Vella had a few minor cuts, but they could have come out of it far worse.

“The book said it would freeze him,” he said, “but maybe being a ghost changed the effect ?”

Everything in the room was marked by flying rock fragments, nothing seemed to have escaped unharmed. Caspian checked the shutters and as LLud had said, the controls looked almost welded in place. Vella took a water bottle out of her pack and took a few long swallows.

“So, what’s the next part of the plan ?” She asked.

Caspian put the weapon back on the table and started to walk out of the room.

“First we should see what he meant by sealing the entrance.”

They walked back into the large round room and the door they’d come in by was lying on the floor, so were the pieces of its frame. The corridor it led from was no longer there, it was as if all that had ever been there was solid stone. Caspian banged his fist on the wall and it was solid.

“Well, we’re not going to leave that way.” He said.

They walked slowly back to the LLud’s workroom and Caspian decided to be honest with Vella.

“My plan was to freeze LLud,” he said, “and then we could come and go as we pleased. I never intended to completely destroy him, or get us sealed up in here.”

Vella found her pack and handed him some of her dried fruit.

“Then we have to ration our food,” said Vella, “and the first thing to do is find the water he mentioned. A kitchen, bathroom, there must be running water somewhere.”

Caspian agreed and while they ate their ration of dried fruit he began to have the germ of an idea.

“When the Dome was the centre of life in the City,” he said, “they wouldn’t have used that silly narrow corridor and spiral staircase, that was a back way in. The same as the library, somewhere there will be a portal for the senior staff to use, perhaps more than one.”

Vella smiled at him, he could tell she saw the sense of the idea. No master sorcerer was ever going to use the back entrance every day.

“Where do you think it might come out ?” Asked Vella.

“Let’s worry about that when we find it.”

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“This is my feast day, you know the entire plan, so I’ll send you back home.” Said Nigon.

Babaef was looking forward to leaving the dungeon he’d shared with the exiled deity. It was damp, dark and claustrophobic. Plus when Babaef had seen the creatures that replenished the food, he’d almost gone insane. Once he was home he’d promised himself never to think of the creatures again, but he suspected they’d haunt his nightmares for the rest of his life.

“I’m ready to go.” He said.

Instead of standing up or creating a portal, Nigon simply put his hands across the table.

“Let me see the small creature you’ve been looking after and feeding.”

Babaef felt in his robes and found the bundle of fur and claws that was his pet. He brought Shadow out and put her on the table. The creature turned onto its back and began to pretend to fight Babaef as he held it. Nigon looked at the creature without even trying to hide the look of contempt on his face.

“This creature means something to you, you care about it ?”

“Yes I do,” said Babaef, “it’s just a harmless pet, she goes everywhere with me.”

The deity took up Shadow in his huge hands and was quite gentle with the creature, allowing it to nip at his fingers and scratch at his wrists.

"It has potential." Said Nigon.

Shadow started to glow as Nigon picked her up by a back leg and spun her around. Babaef was quite worried, but his pet seemed to be enjoying herself and was still making contented sounds when Nigon handed her back.

"You're not going to scare anyone with your fighting expertise," said Nigon, "but as a last resort you should find your pet quite effective."

"What have you done to her?"

Nigon chuckled and stood up, beckoning Babaef towards the corner of the room where he'd entered the dungeon.

"Keep her skills secret," said Nigon, "and use her sparingly and your pet will attack anyone you tell her to."

Babaef tucked Shadow back under his robes and followed Nigon to the corner of the room. The deity made a few hand paces and said a verse in a language he didn't understand. A rotating purple portal appeared and Babaef stepped into it. There was the feeling of dissolving again and when his eyes became accustomed to the daylight again, Babaef realised he was back in his garden. He brought Shadow out into the light and let his pet snuggle into the crook of his left arm.

"No one has tidied a thing Shadow!"

He looked above the remnants of his hedges and the rooftops he'd seen for many years were no longer there. His neighbour's houses had obviously been completely destroyed in the events associate with the visitation. Babaef would have expected to hear building work, but there was only silence. His own garden hadn't been touched at all, plants lay on their sides, broken pots were left where they'd fallen. At least his house still stood and Babaef approached the doors he left the house by and they were closed. He banged on the glass.

"Will someone let me in!" He shouted.

No answer and no sign of movement to be seen, Babaef again wondered why he paid so many staff, yet none of them seemed to be around when he needed them. He walked back onto his now rather tatty lawn and walked around to the front of his house. He didn't actually have a key to the door, no one with wealth ever had a key, their front door was always opened for them. Babaef dispensed with just knocking, he began to kick the door.

"I demand entry to my own home!" He shouted.

Eventually the youngest and most junior maid came to the door and she was improperly dressed. She looked at him as though she'd seen a ghost and burst into tears.

"Stop that girl and tell me where everyone is?"

"The mistress sent them away sir, said you were dead and she was going to sell the house. I'm doing everything and so many people have called, but the mistress won't see any of them."

The girl was so distressed that Babaef put his hand on her shoulder to comfort her.

"Where are my daughters?"

"Staying with their tutor until the mistress is ready to deal with them sir."

Hemetre had never shown any great love for their daughters, but to just send them away.... And what did she mean by dealing with them?

"Where is the mistress of the house?"

"I think she's in her room sir, your room. I took her a meal yesterday but I haven't seen her today. She just shouts at me."

Babaef had left money, lots of money, there was no need for any of the panic and drama he could tell had happened in the few days he'd been gone. He'd never expected to survive the visitation and

had carefully organised his life accordingly. He gave the maid another friendly hug and then made sure he had her attention.

"I'm not dead and not likely to be," he said, "I want you to go to where the housekeeper lives and ask her to come here as quickly as she can. All the servants will be coming back and my daughters will be coming home."

A huge smile came across the maids face and Babaef made a mental note to ask the housekeeper to give the girl a little extra in her pay.

"Who will answer the door while I'm gone?"

"I think I'm capable of answering my own door. Now be off with you girl and tell the housekeeper it's very urgent."

The girl was gone in a happy smiling whirl, had even forgotten her coat. Babaef realised that he was now alone in the house with his wife and perhaps that was for the best. There had been things that had needed saying for many years, perhaps today they'd be said. She'd actually sent his daughters away! He felt Shadow move and stroked his pet as he walked up the stairs to the floor where their bedroom was. He knocked fairly loudly on the door.

"Go away!"

The tone of voice his wife used when she felt she was being put upon, a tone of voice he was all too aware of. Babaef opened the door and walked in, to find his wife sat at her dressing table and preparing herself to go out. She simply turned and looked at him in amazement, her jaws moving but no sound coming out.

"But you're dead!" She finally said.

No running to his arms, no signs of relief that he was alive. True he'd never really loved Hemetre, but he had cared for her, given her the best of everything. He'd even turned a blind eye to her occasional indiscretions.

"As you can see I'm not dead. Why did you send the servants and our daughters away?"

Far from being in a state of confused grief, his wife was putting on her best clothes. In his mind Babaef wondered if she was off to see the latest of her many affairs. He decided keeping quiet about such things would no longer be in his nature.

"And where are you going? Off to see another young stud who'll lose interest once you stop giving him money and presents?"

She was giving him a look of pure hate as she stood up and walked towards him.

"I'm selling the house," she said, "you're not wanted back here, nor are those awful children you made me bear. You will pack your things now, or I know people who can make sure you stay dead this time."

Shadow was moving in his arms and he looked at the tiny creature. Was there more intelligence in its look than there used to be, more understanding?

"Nonsense Hemetre, this is my house. I've sent for the housekeeper and my daughters will be back in their rooms tonight."

She flew at him, trying to dig her nails into his eyes and he hit her. The first time in all those hundreds of years of marriage, he hit her and sent her flying onto the bed.

"My lover will make sure you're dead by morning and your daughters."

She'd said the words so coolly and so calmly that he knew she'd meant it. He had no idea who her lover was, most likely a low life she'd picked up in the slums. With the run of the house and no militia, there was a fairly good chance his wife could accomplish her threat. Babaef had no real

thought that it might work, but he remembered Nigon's comments about Shadow and he put his pet on the floor.

"Shadow, please kill my wife."

Hemetre giggled as the tiny bundle of fur approached her, but the giggles stopped as Shadow suddenly grew to at least three times her normal size. The front canine teeth grew and became sharper, the claws elongated and began to shine like burnished steel. Then Shadow let out a long howl that made the room vibrate and Babaef saw his wife try to hide under her dresser.

"No Babaef, please." His wife begged.

He wasn't even sure he could stop his pet now, even if he'd wanted to. Not that he wanted to, his wife might carry out her threat and he was determined that no one was going to hurt his daughters. Shadow hurtled at his wife, moving so quickly that her claws were just a blur. His faithful pet had his wife by her throat the jaws going left and right, the claws ripping into the eye sockets. There was a frenzy of claws, fur and teeth and when it ended his wife was a dead bloody mess. He could still just about recognise the face of his wife, but the eye sockets were now empty and her throat was just a mass of blood and sliced flesh. His pet wiped her claws and teeth on his wife's dress, her best dress, the one she wore to see her lover. Then Shadow shrank back down to normal size and when Babaef picked her up, she was just a tiny harmless bundle of fur again.

"Thank you."

He kissed shadow on her nose and enjoyed hearing her make the rather odd rumbling sound she made when she was happy. He left the bedroom and closed the door. He'd never been in there, everyone knew he was a little scared of confrontation with his wife. When the housekeeper arrived he'd take her to see his wife and they'd make the tragic discovery together. A wild creature let loose by the events in the neighbourhood or perhaps a hungry animal that had gained access to the house after Hemetre had sent the servants away. Yes, a false economy that had led to her death, it was not only plausible but also had a lesson to teach. Babaef had reached his work room and he placed Shadow in her basket, the place she usual lay and watched him from.

"Something special for you to eat tonight."

Babaef could hear sounds at the front of the house, probably the housekeeper arriving. He stroked his pet and went over his story once again in his mind. Not that murdering your wife brought any official punishment in the City, there was no militia or courts. But being known as a wife killer wasn't good for one's social standing.

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Nethra was going to see if she could help Galla in the slums as it appeared the plague, if it was the plague, was getting worse. Getting the adults this time, not the kids. Was it better that it seemed to be taking longer to incubate, or worse? The trouble was that there was no real government in the City and no one was looking at the whole picture. There were only about three decent physicians in the City and they'd only work for cash, twice the normal fee if it was plague.

"You're stuck with me tonight." Said Merrick.

Tarin just smiled and reached for his best bottle of hard liquor. In truth Tarin didn't really need a baby sitter anymore, but he and Nethra now felt responsible for him. Merrick brought out one of Galla's little pill boxes from inside his jacket.

"Galla said these will stop the pain, but won't make you feel tired."

"Thank you, I'm hoping to start working again in a few more days."

They began the ritual with Tarin taking off his shirt so that Merrick could smooth healing cream over his back. Tarin was now able to put the cream just about everywhere on his body, but his back

needed the help of a friend. Merrick took the jar of foul smelling brown cream from the shelf and undid the lid.

“The smell doesn’t get any better.” He said.

“It certainly doesn’t.”

Merrick cringed every time he saw the scars and holes in Tarin’s back. The holes had healed, but they still went into his flesh for quite a way and every cut had left livid scars. Tarin might be able to return to work soon, but he’d always be able to clear a room by taking his shirt off. Merrick hid his disgust and gently worked the healing salve into Tarin’s back.

“How bad is the plague now ?” Asked Tarin.

“No one knows,” said Merrick, “no one has died yet, but there are a lot of infected people, mostly adults. Galla isn’t sure if they’ll just be very ill and recover, or die.”

Merrick helped Tarin on with his shirt and he was amazed at the amount of healing in so short a time. It wouldn’t surprise him at all to see Tarin working metals again in a matter of days.

“Is there any panic ?” Asked Tarin.

Merrick put the jar of cream away and settled himself in the chair that Nethra normally occupied, though she was less fond of Tarin’s strong liquor. Merrick took a long drink of the delicious amber fluid.

“Winshin’s are doing well selling tents and supplies to the wealthy, but where can they go ? Quron will either turn them out as half breeds or simply kill them, and Tandalla is just a legend to most of them. My guess is that they’ll camp out on the rifts until the first attack by beasts and then they’ll all return to the City. Plague or no plague, there is nowhere else for them to go.”

They sat in silence for some time, Merrick enjoying some of the best liquor in the City, while Tarin brooded. Was he brooding more than usual ? Merrick suspected he was, but then again he wasn’t an expert on the local weapon smith.

“Is the plague my fault ?” Asked Tarin

Oh dear the question he’d been dreading. Nethra would kill him if he upset Tarin even more, but lying to him wasn’t going to help either.

“Well Galla says there was a lot of chaos energy flowing from the shrine that night. But Adamaz has been telling everyone that these plagues come and go in cycles, so perhaps you just speeded things up a bit ?”

There was another long silence before Tarin looked straight at him.

“You can be honest with me, I’m not going to kill myself or anything stupid. Do you think I caused this plague ?”

Merrick silently cursed Nethra for dumping the care of Tarin on him. As if it wasn’t bad enough having to rub another man’s back, now he wanted him to give him an honest answer !

“As I see it Tarin, if you hadn’t arranged the deaths of Sensan and his men the City would have been finished and everyone would have been out on the rifts hunting rock croppers and digging up roots to live. So you did a good thing, at least I think you did. But if you want to know if I think you caused the current outbreak of the plague ? Yes, I honestly think you did.”

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There had been no further attacks on the camp and now Muzzie was actually pleased that Sajaha seemed to be what he’d told Lilleth he’d be; just another nutter looking for the treasure. They’d developed a pattern for the day. Sajaha and his servant Annun would carry a huge book on a stand to the entrance to one of the barrows and an incense burner would be lit. Then Sajaha would

proceed to intone, very loudly, about five or six sentences from the book. Nothing would happen of course and then after looking a little disappointed they'd move onto the next barrow.

"We're moving again." Said Lilleth.

Muzzie was quite comfortable on the fallen stone where he'd been sitting for a while, but he and Lilleth were expected to give the next barrow a good search for any potentially dangers. There had been an odd looking serpent creature the day before, but Lilleth had killed it easily with a single arrow. To be honest the stink of incense and the loud chanting had long ago scared off any self-respecting predator in the area.

"How many barrows are there ?" Asked Muzzie.

They were now a short distance from Sajaha and able to talk freely.

"Hundreds, but he is working to a plan." Said Lilleth.

Muzzie was happy they hadn't found anything so far. What was Sajaha expecting anyway ? A hidden door to appear, a set of steps leading down ? Those sorts of things would probably mean him having to go into a dark hole in the ground to fight who knew what. Muzzie was far happier enjoying the fresh air and decent food for ten days. Lilleth and he had even found a decent shelter inside some kind of stone structure to spend their nights. Close enough to the main camp in case they were needed, but far enough to be able to enjoy some quite expressive sex and talk things over about the day afterwards.

"He has a map on metal inside the big book," Lilleth had said last night, "no one on the rifts uses metal like that. The humans did that for important information they wanted to last a very long time."

Muzzie had gently wiped the sweat off her brow and kissed her.

"So what is he really after ?" He'd asked.

"Nothing to do with Volkin I guarantee. I think Sajaha is looking for something far older."

Muzzie said another quiet prayer to the eight great Demon Gods that all Sajaha's efforts would be fruitless. He looked at the five enormous rings of stones and the hundreds of barrows and smiled, no one had ever found anything and he was certain they wouldn't either. The whole site covered hundreds of acres and they only had ten days.

"This is the twenty first barrow we've been to and he's definitely working to a pattern." Said Lilleth. Whoever had been buried in the barrow had been dug up by treasure seekers long ago and no doubt their burial goods had been stolen. Not that the obvious evidence of pits and excavation worried Sajaha. He started the incense burner going and then he started intoning his ritual.

"Always different." Muttered Lilleth.

"What is ?"

"What he says. Slightly different at every place."

As Sajaha finished his intoning there was a definite vibration under their feet. No swaying of bushes, no animals running off in panic, but there was a definite slight vibration. Muzzie noticed Annun was looking at him and giving him a huge happy smile.

"Good, good," said Sajaha, "but there is still a lot of work to do. We must move on to the next place."

As he and Lilleth trudged after the sorcerer Muzzie let out a long sigh. Somewhere deep inside he knew there was going to be a dark hole in the ground and that they'd expect him to go down into it.

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Just about all celebrations for the feast of Nigon had been called off. The plague was moving across the City and there had also been the strange events in upper town. The people in the slums were

viewing any public events as a potential danger and the wealthy were also hiding behind the walls of their mansions. Sökkolf the current head of the guild of sorcerers had been determined to appear in his finery, even if only in front of a few well-chosen friends. He'd put on his best purple robe, the one his mistress had said made him look particularly distinguished and he'd been about to put on the official headwear of his office, but then the punisher had shown itself.

The chaos creature, a punisher, had been there for some time, merging itself into the room effectively becoming invisible. A very alert sorcerer might have noticed the odd movement out of the corner of his eye, but Sökkolf was just another fool in a fancy hat. The punisher could remember sorcerers worthy of the name, warriors some of them. One he'd been sent beyond gateway to kill had been a truly worthy adversary, the fight had lasted nearly an hour and the punisher still bore a scar from that day. Now though he seldom met anyone who took longer than a few seconds to kill. Sökkolf had two guards with him, even in his own bedroom, but they both looked like servants who'd simply been given a sword each.

"Please put the hat down," said the punisher, "it mustn't be damaged."

As the punisher showed itself the head of the guild of sorcerers gave a small scream, but he did at least drop the ceremonial hat. The two guards simply looked terrified; one had actually urinated in his trousers. The punisher enjoyed a fight, enjoyed inflicting pain, but only on worthy opponents. He simply broke the necks of the guards and turned his attention to Sökkolf, who was running for his bedroom door.

"You're pathetic." Said the punisher.

He grabbed Sökkolf and spun him around, sending the sorcerer crashing to the ground in a crumpled heap. Still the punisher didn't move in for the kill, but almost seemed to be daring Sökkolf to use magic against him.

"You're head of the sorcerers, why aren't you attacking me. You could at least try a fire spell of some kind."

Sökkolf twitched his fingers, but it was obvious that he wasn't about to attempt any kind of offensive magic.

"Would it do any good?" Asked Sökkolf.

The punisher grabbed his leg, pushing his claws deep into the flesh until they met bone. The sorcerer screamed for mercy.

"You ! You are the top sorcerer in the City," said the punisher, "no wonder Nigon wants you replaced by one of his own."

Despite the pain the intelligence returned to Sökkolf's eyes and he looked straight at the punisher.

"Nigon sent you ! Who is he going to put in my place ?"

The punisher ignored the question, even dead men were only allowed so much information. He brought up his claws to finish off his very unworthy opponent.

"Wait ! I can give you money, lots of money."

The punisher gave a snort of disgust and plunged a claw deep into Sökkolf's chest, going straight through the bones and sinews. He twisted his claw and pulled out much of the contents, letting the sorcerer contemplate his own viscera for the few seconds it took him to die. Then there was sound on the stairs, probably servants coming to investigate the noise. The punisher merged with the room once more and became almost invisible. The screaming would start now, there was always screaming. He really enjoyed the screaming.

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They'd found water fairly quickly, in what was obviously the accommodation for the dignitaries of the Dome, there were bathrooms attached to each room, most with running water.

"It'll be drinkable," Caspian had said, "all the water in our part of the Dome is."

Once they'd seen the extent of the area they had to explore, Caspian had decided to map it, with notes about what they found. It would take time, but at least they wouldn't end up checking out the same room numerous times. Finding the kitchen had been strange, because it was on the same floor as the kitchen for the great library and probably used the same water source.

"I'm telling you," said Caspian, "behind that wall where the sinks are, the cook and his assistants are making lunch for the librarians."

They found the stairs leading down, great wide stairs and at the bottom they'd found a very tidy kitchen that looked like it had been used the day before. That was how it was, some rooms looked as though someone had been there recently and yet in others the solid wood furniture crumbled at their touch.

"How thick is the wall?" Asked Vella.

Caspian walked up to the wall and gave it a good punch, it sounded very solid.

"If you're thinking of tunnelling forget it. No one has ever made a hole in the walls of the Dome and the sound proofing is perfect."

They'd filled one of the huge sinks and rinsed the bits of LLud Narren off their skin and out of their hair. Feeling better they'd explored further and found other rooms that seemed to entwine with the rooms Caspian called home. A study directly behind the rooms Adamaz used, a meeting room with a long table, behind the rear wall of the main library. A complete and complex part of the towers and the Dome, but hidden away so well that no one had found it after countless millennia of searching.

"It proves one thing," said Caspian, "there must be another entrance for all the people who must have lived here."

"We just have to find it." Said Vella.

Vella looked very tired and he supposed he did too.

"We should probably go to bed."

Vella agreed with just a nod, but there was a twinkle in her eye that suggested they might not go straight to sleep. The map proved useful and they were soon back in the room they'd decided to sleep in. The bed was solid and the mattress was still useable, there was even some kind of light quilt that would keep the chill of the night off them. There were windows, but like all the shutters in this part of the Dome, LLud seemed to have almost welded them closed in some way. Caspian turned the lighting globe down to just a dull glow and they undressed and got under the quilt. They both felt very hungry, but realised the dry food they expected to last no more than two or three days, might have to last much longer.

"Will Adamaz come looking for you soon?" Asked Vella.

"He thinks I was ill and is unlikely to send anyone to look for me for at least another day. Then for all we know LLud may have reset the entrance from my old room. Will Muzzie come looking for you?"

Vella snuggled against him and kissed his neck.

"Muzzie is out of the City for a while and with the plague... Sara may just assume I'm staying with you to keep safe."

"Looks like we're on our own then."

Vella pulled back the quilt and started to kiss his chest. Then her mouth moved down his body and when she lingered over the area between his legs Caspian forgot all about their problems.

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Part 10 will be posted at the end of July