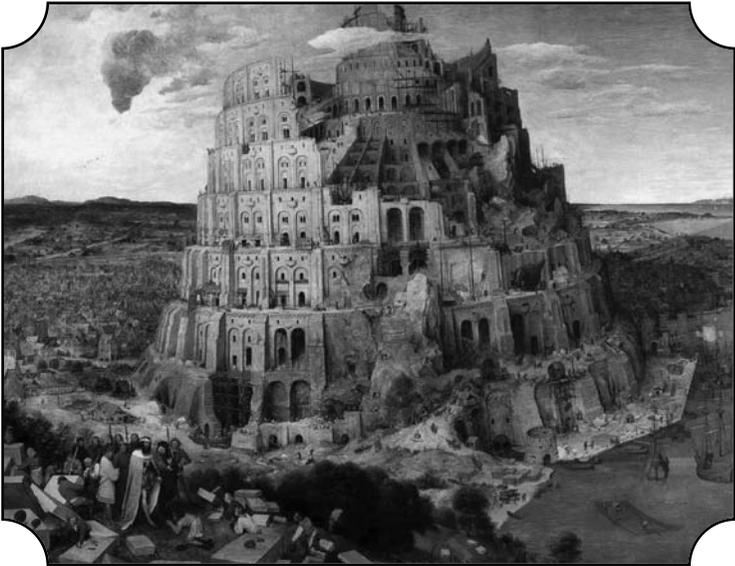


# CITY OF THE GODS

## FORGOTTEN



By M. Scott Verne  
& Wynn Mercere



RAVEN PRESS

# **CITY OF THE GODS: FORGOTTEN**

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*From a fragment found in the ruins of a Roman temple.*

*The Gods have forsaken us.*

*One by one, they all left our world.*

*Their temples remain, but no answers do they give.*

*No justice do they mete out or favors do they grant.*

*Chaos and death have come since they left.*

*We who pledged ourselves to them face  
the dangers of the world alone.*

*Perhaps they grew bored with humans and our ways,  
or great wars in the afterworlds pulled them away.*

*There may be as many reasons they left our mortal realm  
as there are Gods. Even a few of their high priests,  
most favored servants and rulers have vanished.*

*One day perhaps, our children will learn where  
the gods have gone and why they left us...*



## Girl in the Gutter

There was no heroic last stand to stop the invasion. There were only three meddling gods whose sudden interference no one had foreseen. One challenged, the second seduced, and the last gambled all of their might on a single, dirty blow. To say the heavens shook would not be true, but what transpired over the realm of Olympus was like the catalyst of so many wars, a unique and pivotal act. As ash whirled above a smoking crater, one of the trio turned to leave, already bored now that the deed was done.

“Wait. We must be sure.”

The most cautious, still clad in residual flashes of lightning from the attack, pinned the other two with hard eyes. Of all of them, he had the most reasoned basis for intervening. He prided himself on the moral rightness of what had just been done. He viewed the others with a slight disgust, well aware that they had assisted for reasons more self-serving than noble. While he was willing to overlook their innate deficiencies, he was not open to allowing those failings to undo his own plan.

“Sure of what?” his darkest accomplice sneered. “That it’s dead? Death is no absolute here.”

“You struck so quickly and now chide us for haste?” the female chimed in.

“I’m sure you have been accused of far worse.”

The object of the righteous one’s accusation shrugged, sidled closer to the dark one and stroked the side of his neck. A streak of blood was left behind. He pulled away from her touch.

“Linger if you must,” he said. “I will not be caught here.” With a last glance at the burning landscape and an irritated swipe at the gore left on his throat, he merged with the cloud of ash and vanished. After an awkward moment of glaring at one another, the remaining defenders also fled the scene. The countryside of Olympia burned in bright testimony to what they had done for the sake of the City far beyond its borders.



In that City, everlasting life ran its course, the populace ignorant of the greater deeds on the fringes of their world. A small house on one of its humblest streets was home to D’Molay, a man who was a tracker for the gods. On this morning he sat by his hearth, staring into the flames. They fascinated him, beckoning him to join once again in their dance. He closed his eyes and managed to look away for a moment, trying to think of something else. Distraction was provided by the goblet of rum sitting on the table. The last swig it held burned its way down his throat, sharp and sweet. He carelessly dropped the drained goblet to the floor. “Well, that’s the last of you,” he said to the empty room. D’Molay’s voice was low and gravelly. He hadn’t said a word for hours, and he hadn’t drunk this much in a long time. When he kicked the cup away, it mockingly bounced against the fireplace wall and drew his attention to the fire once again.

That desire to stare into flames always overwhelmed him when he was near a fire.



## *City of the Gods: Forgotten*

There were many flames in the City: funeral pyres for high priests and treasured slaves; eternal flames devoted to the gods; candles and torches to light temples and dungeons; and hearths that kept mortal folk warm on cold nights. Fortunately for D'Molay, he was usually in a rush and time allowed only a glance at their seductive glow as he passed them by. On this day, however, the fire hungered, demanding to be fed.

Opening a small wooden box on the table, he took out a silvery object. He knew its every edge and groove without looking. Long ago, it had been so important. D'Molay squeezed it one last time before tossing it into the flames. The metal object sat atop the crackling logs, blackening as the heat did its work. D'Molay stared, entranced. He had to see how his once treasured item would stand up to the heat, needed to absorb every detail of what the flames would do.

After a moment, the scorched object started to lose its shape, relaxing on the top of its burning wooden bed. A thread of bright silver liquid broke free, spilling over the logs and disappearing into the glowing red coals. Finally, the entire mass of gleaming metal flowed down the log and pooled at the bottom of the hearth's black andirons. The silvery liquid formed a misshapen puddle on the soot-covered stone of the inner hearth. A few stray drops added themselves to the slowly congealing glob as it took on a grayish hue.

D'Molay wiped his face with the back of his sleeve as he beheld the fate of the last vestige of a life that had no meaning for him here. The fire had given him a parting gift of knowledge, teaching him something he hadn't known about his treasure. The token had pooled to base pewter, not silver, just as his fate had somehow dissolved from glory to ignominy. The bitter thought echoed through his head as he realized he had spent too much time on the past and rushed to leave his house. It was a procession day, and moving through the crowded streets would take more time than usual. He grabbed his coat from a hook and stepped out to join the crowd heading toward the temple district of the City of the Gods. The going was slow, as he had feared.

Even those in official processions found their progress impeded. By City law, common foot travelers had to give way for temple parades, but even those granted the privilege of walking in ritual formation did not enjoy a pleasant stroll. D'Molay was trapped behind one such procession and he could hear a girl within it grow more frustrated by the minute.

"Still your veil! I can't see," she complained. D'Molay watched her dare a tug on the headdress of another priestess as billowing fabric snapped back into her face. The other girl ignored her. The thin linen continued to whip annoyingly in the wind until D'Molay heard the irritated girl speak a prayer to calm the stiff breeze. He was rather surprised when her petition was quickly answered. The fabric fell back into its proper position, allowing everyone a better view of what had caught her eye on the other side of the street.

"Whose statue is that? What's it doing in the gutter?" she asked, pointing, hoping someone in the crowd would know. Unfortunately, her sect mother was the only one who responded to her curiosity.

"The statue holds her tongue, as you should," the lady answered, not even looking back over her shoulder to deliver the loud rebuke. The chastised girl bowed her head, embarrassed. She closed ranks with the others and turned her eyes from the strange sculpture as the procession ran up against several sedan chairs and all movement came to a halt. D'Molay, realizing he would be going nowhere for a few minutes, stepped aside to wait out the congestion.

No longer of interest now that there was a traffic jam to contend with, the pale statue

## *Chapter 1 - Girl in the Gutter*

spotted by the girl remained undisturbed by the busy residents of the City. No one noticed as a slight trace of pastel spread across its feminine form. A series of shudders wracked it, the movement disproving the assumption that it was made of stone. The power of life forced itself in. A trickle of wastewater flowing around the side of a beautiful face coaxed senses into operation. The touch of wet, cold, street stone dominated several other vague feelings. It was uncomfortable, and she didn't like it.

The cobblestones broadcast a shuffling song to her awakened ears. What made the noise was unseen, for her eyes were still shuttered to the outside world. Movement seemed a very unnatural concept, but the girl managed to open her eyelids. A wisp of curly hair, almost white with a hint of honey color to it, lay across her face. She peered through it.

She could see the uneven surface of the street on which she lay, and one of her hands, but the rest of the world was out of focus. Indistinct things were moving - people walking? Wheeled boxes rolling? The girl wanted to get away from the things, yet at the same time wished to be closer so that her weak eyes might see them better. But to progress either forward or backward, effort would be required. She wasn't sure she could shift her body, but she had to try. She stared at her hand. Would it respond if she tried to make it move? It twitched as she concentrated, then slowly and painfully reacted to her thoughts. It seemed odd and unnatural to make it obey in such a way.

The girl tried to sit up, using her hand and arm to steady herself. This all seemed very wrong somehow, but she accomplished it with some effort. A moment later she felt very dizzy and almost fell right back to the cobblestones, but was able to resist the sense of vertigo until it passed. Feeling steady again, she realized the fog had lifted from her eyes. She sat stunned for a few more seconds, taking in her surroundings. Nothing was familiar to her at all - including herself.

As she sat frozen in shock trying to remember who she was, she noticed that not everyone on the street was walking by. A group of men in colorful garb had stopped to stare intently at her. Some of them were talking in hushed tones. A few seemed amused. Several had a strange flushed look on their faces that she did not recognize at all. Others in the crowd, which continued to grow, seemed annoyed, even angry. One of the angry ones approached her. He was an older man with an air of authority, clad in a long burgundy coat with a brushed sheen. His black boots were wrapped with leather straps. She especially noticed the long curved sword at his side.

"How dare you lie out naked in the streets like this, harlot!" he said in a loud clear voice. His accent was heavy and almost rhythmic.

"N-naked? I - I'm naked?" It was the first time the girl had heard herself speak. She had a soft, gently pitched voice that immediately contrasted the rough sounds of those around her. She quickly looked around and saw that no one was naked except for her.

"Take my coat and get back to the pleasure district! This is no place for your whoring!" The offended man removed his outer garment and threw it down to her. She held it over her body as he quickly walked away. A pair of youths began to laugh at her as a different man from the group stepped closer.

"What's your name, girl? Who do you serve?" he asked hoarsely. He cleared his throat and spit once after speaking, as if the words cost him considerable effort.

She looked up at his stony face for a few seconds. "I'm sorry. I don't know my name," she replied somewhat ashamedly. She wasn't sure if she even had one. As for the man's second question, she had no idea how to answer.

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“Did you fall from the sky and strike your head?” Everyone but the girl laughed at his incredulous question.

“Don’t see any wings,” one of the laughing boys pointed out. “Maybe she hit a wall. Look for a dent.”

The older man exhaled a weary sigh and looked up at the surrounding buildings as if he might actually see such evidence. “Well, did you hurt yourself?” he asked.

“I don’t know.” She stiffly turned to get a better view of the man, still getting used to moving her body. “I don’t feel like I hit my head.” She reached up to touch it for the first time. Her fingers met the warmth of soft, thick curls.

“Whether you did or you didn’t, you can’t lie in the streets with no clothes.” The man ignored the smart comment from the other teenaged male demanding to know why not. “Something must have happened to you. I’ll take you to a healer who can help. Can you stand up?” He held out his hand, but she was very slow to respond. For a moment it seemed she didn’t understand the question or his gesture. Then, clutching the heavy coat with one hand, she reached out and took his hand with her other. She held on tightly as he pulled her up. To her, it seemed like an awkward way to do things.

As she rose from the ground she felt a rushing sensation in her head. Unable to balance, she fell forward. The man was quick to move his arms under her own to catch her. The coat she was holding dropped, leaving her completely exposed once again. Her creamy white skin and blonde hair stood out against his darker complexion and brown clothing. Men of all ages around them chuckled again, some making odd hooting and whistling sounds.

“Perhaps it will be easier if I just carry you. You can’t weigh too much.”

“I feel like I weigh a thousand minas. I don’t mean to be so much trouble,” she whispered.

He looked her directly in the eye for a few seconds to evaluate the truth of her words. “I think I can bear the trouble of carrying a beautiful woman down the street,” he said at length, casting a glance at the grinning spectators who were nodding as if they already knew his answer. “No, I won’t mind a bit. Hold on!” And with that, he scooped her up in his arms and marched off, leaving the coat behind on the ground. After all, he couldn’t hold her and pick up the coat at the same time. Besides, he was enjoying the view as he carried her away.

Continuing down the street with the light burden in his arms, he realized he had no idea what one ‘mina’ weighed, let alone a thousand of them. The girl probably just imagined she was heavy. In D’Molay’s experience, women, especially maidens like this one, often overestimated their own weight. He had no idea that much more than that vanity was burdening the girl’s mind. In truth, her psyche was on the verge of bursting from all the questions within it.

As she rode along in her benefactor’s arms, the mystery of her current predicament was foremost. Looking up at the confident face of her new friend, however, pushed some of the fear away. Perhaps if she relaxed and observed the world around her she would remember something. She tested this first by examining the man. His dark hair hung straight to his shoulders, uneven edges brushing a thick half cape that hid the mass of his upper arms. Those were encased in a thinner coat that closed in the middle with hard, oblong protrusions that nested into rope loops. His coat was not as soft against her naked side as the one the other man had thrown, and it was plainer and darker in color. She reached up to touch the side of his cheek. Her fingers brushed against hair that grew densely around his

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mouth and on parts of his chin. Checking her own face, she found nothing at all like that. She wondered if everything in this place felt different from everything else.

At her touch, he smiled very slightly. "It's been too long since I've seen a barber."

"Is a barber like a healer?" she asked, and his smile broadened into an open laugh.

"They like to think they are, at least when it comes to cutting things off. But I wouldn't trust them with anything beyond my beard." He'd known many a barber whose surgical skills were barely a notch above butchery, so he would not entrust this strange girl to just any knife-happy surgeon.

The mention of things being cut off caused a small gasp to pop from the girl's mouth. She wasn't sure why this was so upsetting. She didn't feel like she was missing anything, and from what she could see she had the same number of body parts as everyone else here. Since everyone else was clothed, however, she couldn't be absolutely sure.

Her body shifted in his arms as he began to ascend a new kind of street, one made of smooth stone steps. Up and up they went, and the man exhaled a weary sigh of relief when they finally came to the top. "Why is it that no one ever sets up shop at the bottom of a hill?" he grumbled to himself.

An amused voice from behind them answered. "Because, D'Molay, there is no drama in convenience."

"Kafele, you appear like an actor from a stage trapdoor. Foolish of me to think I'd find you in the apothecary where you belong," D'Molay said. Kafele had the jarring gift of being in the right place at the right time. Many patients would be dead today if not for his effortless ability to arrive with aid at the critical moment. For as long as D'Molay had known the healer, this trait should no longer be surprising; yet he still found it uncanny.

"Your assumption was reasonable, just incorrect." Kafele took a step closer to D'Molay and looked down at the girl. "She is ill?"

"No," she bravely responded for herself, comparing Kafele to her friend, who now had a name. While D'Molay was strong and solid, Kafele was taller. His gestures were more fluid, and his face, along with most of his head, lacked hair. The robe he wore was enveloping and it seemed thinner than the fabric of D'Molay's garments. Her embarrassment was increasing as she learned more about the others around her. She had no clothes, lacked a name, and had no idea what she looked like. "I don't know who I am," she admitted nervously.

"Interesting. Let's go inside." Kafele shifted a knapsack that was slung over his left shoulder and withdrew a set of keys from it. "Despite D'Molay's belief that I'm a frustrated street entertainer, I do not normally treat patients in the City square."

"You would if you had an audience," D'Molay charged.

"And you two are drawing one." Kafele gestured to a few men grouping around the three of them, hoping to get a better look at the naked girl. "I think we should continue our visit at my new dispensary. Come." Kafele turned in the very direction from whence they'd just come and started down the great stone steps.

"Don't tell me I climbed these steps for nothing!" D'Molay balked.

At the sound of his protest, Kafele grinned back over his shoulder. "If you're tired, I will mix you a vitalizing tonic. Now hurry up before our patient catches a cold."

As they walked, D'Molay told Kafele how he had found the girl on the street. They went almost all the way back down to the bottom of the steps before Kafele stopped at a

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sturdy door. It bore no sign, and the window beside it was empty of any display. As the healer thumbed through the many keys on his ring, the girl in D'Molay's arms began to wiggle. The pressure of the man's arms against her back and under her legs was starting to hurt.

"I'm sorry you had to carry me so far," she said, feeling a bit guilty about the unnecessary trip up the steps.

"That's all right. I feel fine, strong as ever." D'Molay was determined not to let Kafele force any of his vile potions down his throat. Now was as good a time as any to draw that line in the sand. He shifted impatiently from one foot to another as Kafele continued to fiddle with the door. "Are you keying that lock, or picking it?"

"New shop," Kafele shrugged as the door finally swung open. "I don't have the knack of this clever Egyptian padlock yet." As they stepped inside, the light from the street came with them, illuminating a large room with several counters and shelves lining the walls. Packed baskets and trunks, tightly tied sacks of herbs, and a line-up of exotic potted plants filled most of the empty floor space. Kafele waved them to come deeper into the building as he put down his sack beside a cabinet filled with glass jars of ointments and lidded stone vessels marked with the names of medicines. "You caught me on moving day."

D'Molay spied a cushioned wicker chair with a tall back shoved into a corner. He helped the girl settle into it. Stretching the kinks out of his arms, he stepped out of Kafele's way as the healer began to look her over. Then, idly lifting the lid of a small basket to snoop inside, he asked, "Why did you leave the City apothecary?"

Kafele made a non-committal murmur. "There are advantages to working alone. For one, you can treat cases without interference. By now, half my former associates would have your lovely friend covered in leeches, and the rest would be sprinkling her with salt. Now tell me," he continued, speaking directly to the girl. "Can you remember anything at all before D'Molay found you?"

"N-no, I'm afraid I can't. I don't remember anything until I woke up in the street."

"I'm going to place my hands on you to see if I can feel any damage. All right?" She nodded nervously.

Kafele reached out and carefully put his hands on the top, back, and then the sides of her head. He could sense no physical injuries at all. However, as he looked down her torso between her breasts, he noticed something out of the ordinary. It was something he'd seen long ago and hadn't expected to ever see again. He quickly composed himself, then leaned over and whispered in her ear.

She shook her head as she looked up at him. "Oh, everything about me feels . . . wrong," the girl said in quiet frustration. She sat rigidly in the chair, unsure how to explain that all the things the others were so comfortable doing seemed so alien to her. Kafele raised a brow as he noticed her hands clutching the arms of the chair as if she feared she would slide off onto the floor.

"D'Molay, inside that blue trunk behind you are some spare robes. She might be a little warmer and more comfortable if she were wearing something." As the other man turned away to look in the trunk, Kafele retrieved a smaller box from a nearby pile. "Let's see if we can spark a memory. I'll show you things, and you can tell me if any of them look familiar."

Kafele pulled out small effigies of different gods. Then he showed her bone runes,

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sacred tokens, and calligraphy stones. She handled small carvings of common animals and fantastic monsters. The girl stared without comprehension at miniature pyramids and domes. Her fingers played gently over an unusual whistle shaped like a bird, but Kafele could sense that her interest in it was that of discovery, not memory. He slipped a leather string through a hole in the little bird's tail and tied the whistle around her neck. "You should always wear this, it will keep you safe," he whispered to her with a friendly smile.

"Nothing ringing a bell?" D'Molay ventured, turning back with a yellowish silk garment. D'Molay noticed the girl was twiddling her fingers oddly over her throat, and assumed she was still very frightened and jittery.

"Bell?" the girl questioned.

"Never mind. Let's get this robe on you," Kafele said. He had to manipulate her arms, for she didn't seem to grasp how to slide them into the garment's long sleeves. As he tied a loose knot in the cloth belt at her waist, he whispered something else to her. Then he looked at D'Molay as if he had come to a decision.

"She doesn't need medicine," he told D'Molay. "She needs a seer, one who can look into her mind and find what's been erased. If they can see even one thing, it might be enough to bring her memory back." Kafele stepped over to one of the counters, rummaging through his belongings until he found a square of parchment and an inkwell. He dipped a stylus into the brownish liquid and scratched out a message. "I'm referring her to the Oracle at Buddha's Retreat, across the lake. This pass will admit her." He held the parchment out to D'Molay.

"Thank you," the girl said.

"He really hasn't done anything," D'Molay jibed. "I have to get you there, but he'll still want a coin."

"Oh, you Freeman clutch your purses so tightly. You forget I have provided clothing, a referral to the Oracle, and made sure she has not suffered any physical damage. But if I must do even more to earn my coin, let me then give our pretty friend a temporary name." Kafele put a finger to his lips, thinking. "Let's call her . . . Aavi, for now."

"Aavi. Agreed. I suppose good advice is worth a coin, and here's another for the robe." D'Molay handed the money over. "Looks like I'll be showing you more of the City, Aavi."

Aavi smiled as Kafele helped her stand up and D'Molay held the door open for them to leave. She was relieved that she wasn't sick and that the men were continuing to help her. She had a fleeting thought that such goodness had become rare, but the notion quickly flew out of her head as D'Molay began to speak of the journey before them. Aavi listened intently as he began to tell her how they must ride in a cart and cross a large lake to visit Buddha's Retreat.

