

City of the Lost God

Part 18 – Deep Waters

“The creature’s skeleton was strange, far too many ribs and a lack of symmetry that was disturbing.”



They’d found a few air pockets in the deep cellars, but none were more than a small respite from the constant immersion in cold water. Usually the air pockets were at the top of a rise in a corridor and often with little fresh air, but then they’d found something very different.

“It looks like mirror.” Vella had said.

“Looks like magic,” said Sóli, “we should find another way.”

Caspian had decided he’d had enough of feeling cold and wet, he’d had enough of trying to peer through dirty water, so he simply strode straight into the room beyond the strange shimmering and he was in a dry and well-furnished room. He was creating a huge puddle, water was pouring out of his back pack and the bag containing the ancient weapon. Caspian moved forward into the room and found an empty corner to put his sodden baggage. Then he turned around to get the others, only to find they were all in the room and Sóli was removing their helmets. Vella was smiling at him and beginning to fiddle with the seals and clasps on his helmet, but Sóli gently moved her away and whispered the words to stop the helmet producing air. Then the helmet was removed and Caspian took a deep breath. It had been less than a day since they’d started down the King’s stair, yet he felt like he’d been living in dirty water for weeks.

“The air smells fresh.” Said Merrick.

“Probably magic like the helmets,” said Waide, “but a much greater magic.”

There were two doors at the back of the room and Vella had already discovered that one led to a long corridor and the other gave access to a bedroom, or rather a barracks, as there looked to be at least ten beds. It was difficult to be precise as the only lighting was from their dull green lamps and their light didn’t reach far into the room.

“Let’s get dry before we explore Vella.” Said Caspian.

“And something to eat, I’m starving.” Said Merrick.

Waide didn’t seem worried who was in the room, she began stripping off her wet clothes and draping them over various bits of furniture.

“I’ll use the bedroom.” Said Vella.

She removed her well wrapped change of clothing from her pack and went into the bedroom, closing the door behind her. Caspian was down to his underwear when Vella started screaming.

Merrick beat him to the door, completely naked and carrying just a dagger.

“I was looking for something to dry myself with.” Said Vella.

She’d pulled a blanket off a bed to cover herself; her wet clothes were still in a pile on the floor. The cause of her scream was on the bed furthest from the door.

“Been dead a long time.” Said Waide.

She seemed to consider that was reason enough to ignore the body on the bed and return to the other room to carry on dressing. Merrick prodded the body with his dagger.

“Almost mummified,” he said, “must have died years ago. He won’t hurt you Vella.”

“I’m not staying in here alone.”

“I’ll bring my clothes in here.” Said Caspian.

She followed him to the door and didn't seem to relax until Caspian was alone with her and the door was closed. He helped her dry her back and then he dried himself and put on his own dry clothing. Just being out of clammy clothing made them both feel far better about where they were.

"Do you want to look at him?"

"When we've eaten," said Vella, "and the others are here too."

They returned to the main room and everyone was unwrapping food and drink and looking far drier and more cheerful.

"I never thought dried Rock Cropper flesh would taste so good." Said Waide.

"I'm so hungry that my boot would taste good," Said Sólí.

It was a while before anyone said anything else, they just enjoyed a meal and a drink of clean water from their water bottles. It was curiosity that made Vella the first of them to finish her food and go back to look at the body, pulling Caspian along with her.

"At first I thought it was human," said Caspian, "but it's just a hybrid, a rich one by his clothing."

"What would you know of humans?"

Merrick had followed them into the room, he was still chewing at a piece of dried meat. Caspian ignored the question, he was paying Merrick and felt no inclination to answer. He went through the pockets of the body and found nothing, but there was a book on the floor beside the bed.

"It's a journal, though I don't know the language." He said.

Everyone looked at the neat writing and shook their head, but Waide managed to read the first few lines perfectly.

"It's in Shelzak," she said, "and an old version at that. An ugly language for an ugly race of demons, but my mother taught me how to read it."

"What does it say?" Asked Vella.

"Give me a chance. There are pages of it and I'll need to think about some of it. I'll keep watch while you all sleep and give you the short version when you wake up."

Sleep! Of course, Caspian was so relieved to get to somewhere that was dry, but he hadn't slept for quite some time, none of them had.

"I suppose we should get some sleep." Said Merrick.

"It'll give our boots a chance to dry out." Said Waide.

Sólí was already climbing under the blankets on one of the beds and getting comfortable.

"We can't sleep for long," said Caspian, "we need to move on."

"How about four hours sleep then?" Asked Merrick.

"Sounds fine if any of us had a timepiece that worked." Said Waide.

She'd had a pocket watch, but it was now a waterlogged lump of rusting springs and gears.

"Don't worry," she added, "in the blood wars I didn't sleep for days and I'm a good judge of time. I'll read the book and wake you all in about four hours' time."

No one felt like arguing or offering a better solution and Merrick had already started putting his weapons in an empty cupboard. Caspian and Vella shared a bed, but remained fully dressed and lay like spoons on top of the covers. For a while Caspian watched Waide read the journal by the dim green glow of her lamp and then he fell asleep.

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"Are you sure this is the place master?" Asked Chillan.

Babaef new why Chillan was unsure, they were just the other side of the great river and into the tangle. Kids knew the area as the tangle because it was covered in thorn scrub, which ripped your

clothes and your skin if you weren't careful. At the centre was a huge boulder, washed there by a flood, or so the legend said.

"Not like last time." Said Norrex.

It certainly didn't seem as perilous as the collapsing building in old town, but the very lack of obvious threat worried Babaef. Kids came into the tangle to play, couples came to get acquainted in the dark. Even the giant boulder had graffiti scribbled on it. It was hardly the kind of place to associate with mighty mystic locks that could cage a deity like Nigon. Thrand had not only wanted to come, he'd been quite upset at being excluded from the expedition. But thrall spells could be lifted and Babaef wanted everyone on his team to be there by choice.

"Stay alert and stay in sight of each other." He said.

It was the same team who'd been with him before, but they looked far more affluent. The gold they'd brought back had bought a lot of new robes and some expensive looking swords. Not that Babaef resented their conspicuous opulence. Every one of them was telling a different preposterous story about how they gained their new found wealth and each story added to the what was fast becoming, the legend of Babaef.

"Spread out around the stone, just as we practised." Shouted Chillan.

Babaef examined the boulder and it didn't look like the kind of rock that was washed down from the mountains in the west. It looked hard and red in colour, like the iron that fell from the sky. If it was such a gift from the gods then it might really be one of the locks holding Nigon. The ancient text had been clear about the location and what was required. There was no extra power to be claimed, but say the correct three lines of command and the boulder would split and Nigon would be a little closer to freedom. He noticed some carving on the boulder, but there wasn't time to try and read it properly..... there was something about a warning though.

"The ceremony begins, give me your strength." He ordered.

His men all looked at the ground and gave him their complete obedience. At some level that even he didn't understand, they were giving him their very essence to use in the ceremony. Babaef had memorised the three lines of the ritual, he knew the exact way to intone the words. As he spoke the first line he saw one of his men picked up by a thorn scrub and have his throat torn out.

"The bushes are coming alive !" Someone shouted.

Chillan used a fire spell of some kind and quite quickly Babaef was surrounded by a screaming and burning scene of chaos. But he had to say the rest of the lines, or Nigon would remain locked in the catacombs forever. He pronounced the second line perfectly and wasn't surprised when the entire thorn scrub seemed to rush at his team. Norrex appeared to be as efficient as ever and was using his sword to keep the bushes at bay, but Babaef saw another of his men literally pulled in two by one of the thorn trees. Ignoring the fire and the battle Babaef spoke the last line of the ritual and the huge boulder split, revealing what looked like a hot ember at its centre.

"Master, we need your help !"

Only Norrex and Chillan were still alive. They'd come to a place used by clandestine lovers, a piece of scrubland with no history of anything strange happening and he'd lost most of his acolytes. Babaef reached deep inside himself and sent out a wall of fire that burned every piece of thorn scrub for miles. Damn, it was the last thing he'd wanted to do, the flames would be seen in the City, the curious would arrive in their hundreds.

"Collect the possessions of our dead and make sure they can't be recognised." He ordered.

There was something he had to do before they left; there was something the ancient texts had neglected to mention. Babaef looked into the gap where the boulder had broken and he knew the

glowing object was important. There was no way of reaching it, the gap between the two halves of the rock was only a foot or so wide. He tapped into some of the power he'd been acquiring and used it to push the rocks apart.

"Master, there are lights coming this way, lots of lights."

He ignored everything and just kept pushing and eventually the gap was just big enough for him to step into. The broken rock snagged his robes, but he managed to get his hand close to the object and there was no sensation of heat. Babaef could now hear the shouts of the approaching mob, so he took a chance and grabbed the object, pushing it under his robes. Norrex and Chillan were still waiting for him, both of them nervously watching the approaching lamps.

"Now we're ready to leave." He said.

Chillan had incinerated the bodies of their dead, which suited Babaef, it prevented anyone from identifying them. Explaining the disappearances might be awkward, but there were plenty of others willing and eager to take their place. Babaef ran into the night, his two remaining acolytes close behind him.

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For Maya the next step was easy, she had to visit the Dome and go through whatever might be left of Borlas' things. Adamaz worried her, his powers were well known and he could use the stillness as well as her. Ash had talked to her about the library at length, his detailed knowledge of its occupants had surprised her.

"Who do you think is the weak link in Dome Security Ash?" She'd asked.

"Torfi is who you want," he'd said, "we see him in the early hours, coming home from seeing a girl in the slums, a courtesan of sorts. Likes the girls does Torfi and the drink."

"Did he know Borlas?"

Ash had been eating his third helping of game pie; it seemed to loosen his tongue better than any torturer could have done.

"Oh yes miss, they were both in the Caspian faction. Caspian is going to run the library one day, everyone knows that and Borlas was part of his faction, along with Torfi."

Maya had waited in the shadows for Torfi to finish bedding the courtesan and she'd watched him paying her. Quite a lot of coins seemed to change hands, more than a lowly apprentice librarian should have. Torfi had secrets, good that made him vulnerable.

"Not tomorrow night, but the night after." She'd heard him say.

Still on two legs, she followed him to the secret door and watched as he tried to activate it. He was very intoxicated and it took him three tries to enter the simple sign. As he stumbled into the room beyond the door, Maya was on him and had him on the floor, with her dagger to his throat.

"Scream and I'll gut you!" She hissed.

"Take my money, just don't hurt me."

The light globe was set on low, so Maya dragged him over to the light and sat him against the wall.

"Let's get a good look at you Torfi."

"I know you," he said, "you're staying at Muzzie's."

Maya put her dagger away and gave Torfi a hard slap, hard enough to get his full attention and turn his cheek red.

"And I know you librarian and how you can afford to be generous to half the courtesans in the City."

It was a bluff, but Torfi had to be up to something. The apprentice actually started to cry.

"It was just a few sheets of parchment, it's all over the place. No one will miss it, please don't tell Adamaz he'll eat me."

Maya was taken aback; maybe Ghot's grandparents had been right about his fate. They'd never accepted the story that he'd run away after being caught stealing. They had no illusions about his nature, the lad was a bad one, but he was their bad one, he was family. He'd been in plenty of trouble, but he'd always run straight for home in Quron, straight to the grand parents and their money.

"He's dead, I know it." The grandmother had told her.

Maya didn't come cheap, a genuine Kveld never did. Once she accepted a client's money she was honour bound to complete the assignment, even if it cost her own life. They'd given her a very heavy bag of Quron gold pieces and instructions to find out once and for all what had happened to Ghot. "Adamaz the head librarian has eaten him," the grandmother had said, "he even wanted the story spread, to deter other thieves."

Nonsense of course, Maya knew Ghot and his type. He'd stolen from the library, been caught and had run off with some doxy from the slums. No doubt she'd run him down in the back streets of the old town, fornicating and drinking until the money ran out.

"Did you know Ghot?" She asked Torfi.

He was sobering up fast and merely nodded at her, his terrified eyes never leaving her.

"Was he eaten?"

Another nod of the head.

Maya hadn't intended to do more than use Torfi to enter the Dome, perhaps get a look at the rooms Borlas had used. Now though her plan was changing by the second and she wanted to get some time alone with the boy.

"Would you like to earn serious money, without having to steal?"

"Yes."

She had him on his feet and took him over to the portal step.

"Go to your room. Don't look out for me. Don't talk to me. Most importantly, don't try to lose me, or it won't be Adamaz that eats you. Do you understand?"

"Yes Miss."

He'd become a sulky child, which suited Maya. She followed him into the portal and then kept to the shadows as he walked to his room. Just as they were passing the main refectory, she noticed a slight movement in the gloom. Torfi noticed nothing and just carried on walking, but she had seen something and she guessed it was Adamaz. Yes, the shape moved as if to follow the boy, but then took a different route. Adamaz, she had seen him, but much to her satisfaction, he hadn't seen her. As Torfi opened his door she came up behind him and followed him in. There were two beds, but one didn't have any bedding on it. Maya simply looked at the bed and didn't need to ask the question.

"We only share when there's a new intake," said Torfi, "I have the room to myself now."

The room was small, but he had his own bathroom and running water, something almost unheard of in most rift towns.

"You live well in the Dome." She said.

"I know, would you like some water?"

"Yes please."

She sat on the unmade bed and took the glass from him. The water was crystal clear and tasted clean. Actually it tasted of nothing, as good water should. Most water in the City or out on the rifts tasted slightly of mud, or decay, or something far worse.

"Are any of Borlas' things still in his room?"

“No Caspian has some things, but his clothes were burnt.”

Caspian, the lad who was going places. Maya thought it was time to have a word with Caspian.

“Is Caspian in his room ?”

“Rooms you mean, he has almost an entire section of the Dome, just past the bridge. But he isn’t here, he’s on a long break with Vella, his girlfriend.”

Maya had still been wondering about turning the boy, but now she made her mind up, she needed a pair of eyes and ears on the inside. Borlas wouldn’t have come to any harm if he’d done as she’d told him, but he’d insisted on trying to follow Adamaz. Torfi seemed terrified of the head librarian and unlikely to repeat the mistake. She had to find out what Adamaz was trying to hide. Hiring an assassin with the skill and weapons to kill a Kveld must have cost Adamaz a small fortune, so he must have bigger secrets than one eaten librarian. Then there was this Caspian to look into, he sounded worth investigating.

“Would you like to be strong Torfi ?” She asked.

“Yes.”

“So strong that you never have to worry about anyone ever hurting you again ?”

“Yes.”

She moved and sat beside him on his own bed.

“It will hurt at first, but by morning you’ll have real power. Shall I go ahead ?”

“How much will it hurt ?”

Maya had a lot of gold in her purse, she never knew when a speedy exit from town might be needed.

The imperial coins were the most valuable, but the Quron coins were bigger and far more shiny.

There was a lot of lead in Quron gold pieces, but they looked exactly as people expected gold to look. She removed two of the large heavy coins from her purse and put them in his hand.

“About this much. Shall I go ahead and make you strong ?”

He leaned towards her and nodded.

Maya put her hand across his mouth and sank her teeth into his neck. Turned Kveld didn’t have all her powers, she’d been born a pure blood, both her parents had been shape changers. But Torfi would have power enough and she could give him training. He was struggling and trying to scream, but she held him firm and kept her hand over his mouth. Down her teeth went, until they met the bone in his shoulder. Maya pushed her tongue deep into the wound and began to excrete a creamy fluid from the base of her tongue.

“Quiet Torfi, soon you’ll be stronger than you ever imagined.”

The conversion would take until morning, but then the librarian would be hers, bonded to her for life.

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“So you’re finally going to extend the tavern ?” Said Jonas.

Muzzie had come to Winshin’s to buy his building supplies for years. There were other cheaper places, but old Jonas didn’t skimp on quality and he always knew a few skilled builders.

“We’ve had a good year. I’ll need two good builders, if you know anyone looking for work ?”

“I can think of a few Muzzie. I’ll send them to see you.”

Muzzie went through the timber, most of it would need further planing and general tidying up, he definitely needed at least two builders. Hardwood for the stair rails and perhaps even a bit of panelling, after all, they had the money now.

“So, no one found out what became of Sajaha and his gold huh ?”

Muzzie didn't think Jonas could get his leathery old face to smile, but he was giving him a huge grin now. The problem was that Muzzie could hardly tell everyone he was earning the money by spying for the tower.

"Very amusing. Is that the current rumour Jonas ? That we killed him for his gold ?"

Jonas just shrugged at him and carried on adding up the price of his purchases.

"No one liked him," said Jonas, "people in the City don't take to his kind, you know that. As long as you spend the money in the City, no one really cares how you came by it."

Muzzie came to a whole barrel full of door handles. Most were old and had been salvaged from ruined buildings, but a few looked in excellent condition. Brass handles on the bedroom doors, that would get the tavern noticed.

"How much for the brass ones ?"

"Tell you what, the way your bill is looking, I'll throw in six brass handles."

Muzzie opened the barrel and Jonas was no longer smiling.

"Don't worry I'll put them back."

Muzzie found eight almost perfect handles, all with a crest on that he didn't recognise. He put the pile back in the barrel and carried his find to the counter.

"I'll just charge you for two."

"Do you know where they came from Jonas ?"

"Podd sold them to me, he picks up all sorts of bits and pieces on his travels. I've learned not to bother asking Podd where he found things, he never answers."

Muzzie wrapped the handles himself, the finish on them was beautiful. One had a scratch mark, but they'd still look perfect in his extension. Wooden nobs on the inside of the doors of course, with brass on the outside to add a little luxury. Jonas handed him a long hand written bill, it was a huge sum. Add on the two builders and it was as much as his tavern made in half a year. But Sara had told him the girls who entertained at home weren't always paying her their commission.

"That girl Caspian was seeing only ever paid me a few coppers, but I know he saw her for months a year or so back."

Once the extension was built all the entertaining would be on the premises and Sara was confident they'd bring in a lot of extra gold.

"How much of this do you need now ?" He asked Jonas.

Jonas started scowling at him. Muzzie didn't take it personally, old Jonas scowled at everyone when it was time to discuss money.

"I'm glad of the business Muzzie, but I'll still need a third down. I'll have to order some of the hardwoods and hire a delivery team. Then a third when I deliver what I have in stock and the final third on delivery of the timber."

Muzzie placed a bulging bag of gold on the counter. He wanted Jonas to know he was good for the rest and then hopefully he'd order the wood fairly quickly.

"How long do you think the wood will take to arrive ?" He asked.

"A quarter year, it'll be here before the rainy season."

Rainy season indeed. Muzzie had lived in the City a very long time and as far as he could tell it was always rainy season. He handed over the gold to Jonas. He unwrapped one of the handles and slipped it into a pocket.

"I think I'll ask Podd a bit more about where he got these."

"Good luck Muzzie. Getting information out of Podd is like getting a drink out of a Shelzak demon."

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“Urgh wet boots,” said Caspian, “we’ll all get foot rot.”

Sóli seemed to be the only one who’d thought of bringing a fresh pair of dry boots, the rest of them were complaining and looking very uncomfortable. After a brief breakfast they all wanted to hear what Waide had learned from the journal.

“Short version or long ?” She asked.

“Just the essentials.” Said Merrick.

Even after just one night they all felt at home on the beds and it was only the mummified corpse that spoiled the room. They all sat on the beds and waited for Waide to begin.

“The body is the remains of Seb Hawes and he seems to have arrived here about the time the last blood war ended. I’m guessing they were a group of old soldiers and he was their commander, he talks about the other survivor as a good trooper.”

“How many were there ?” Asked Caspian.

“Seven to start with. They came in a different way to us, looking for whatever they could collect and sell. There is mention of another entrance from old town and spending days in the water. Various creatures killed them one by one, until only the two of them were left when they discovered this section of the towers.”

“Did they discover anything ? Treasure I mean ?” Asked Merrick.

“Nothing much. There is a bag with a few gems in it in the chest at the end of the bed, along with his underwater helmet. I found it last night, but the helmet is so perished that it’s useless.”

Merrick opened the chest and took out the ancient helmet, throwing it on the bed with the corpse.

He lifted a small bag out of the chest and poured the contents into the palm of his hand.

“Not bad he said, not bad.”

In his hand he held a dozen assorted gems, all looked good quality and highly valued.

“Not much for seven lives.” Said Vella.

“Perhaps only six lives,” said Waide, “the good trooper may have survived.”

Merrick put the gems back in the bag and went to hand it to Caspian.

“No, it’s not what we came for,” said Caspian, “share them out among everyone.”

It wasn’t exactly a fortune once divided up, but it did cheer everyone up and took their minds off wet boots.

“What became of this good trooper ?” Asked Vella.

“Seb and the trooper were here for a quite a while, weeks I think. They explored this section of the towers and found another entrance a long way down, it took them two hours to get to it. They never did see another living soul, or find out who’d put the magical seals in place to keep the water out.”

“You did say short version.” Said Merrick.

“Trust me, I’ve left out the nasty bits,” said Waide, “they ran out of water and started to drink the nasty, dirty stuff outside. They found a way of catching some sort of creature to eat and even Seb says they ‘ate an abomination.’ Not surprisingly Seb became ill, very ill and didn’t look to have long to live. The good trooper took the best helmet and set off to leave by the lower exit, with a promise to return with help.”

“Help that never came.” Said Sóli.

“It looks like we have to follow the trooper,” said Caspian, “we can’t stay here.”

“Nor can we go back the way we came.” Said Waide.

No one seemed keen, but everyone was nodding in agreement. Staying meant drinking filthy water and trying to catch foul creatures to eat, there really was no alternative. They collected their equipment, packed their still damp clothes and prepared to start out.

“There is a final paragraph in the journal,” said Waide, “and by then Seb was probably crazy with the fever, but I think you should hear it.”

“Go ahead, read it.” Said Caspian.

“The good trooper has gone. I spoke such spells as I know to protect him from the abominations, but I fear they will be of little use.

Once he goes through the lower door he will be in their domain and there are hundreds of them there, hundreds!”

Waide closed the journal and put it by the right hand of the body on the bed.

“It might help others one day.” She said.

They left, Caspian leading the way, to find the first of the stairs that led down, always further down and deeper into the cellars.

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“It’s not mentioned in any of the texts.” Said Babaef.

Shadow was besotted with the object he’d found in the boulder, his pet was rubbing her face against it and making happy purring sounds. Lagertha was helping him read through the enormous number of ancient texts he now had in his attic workroom.

“Is it part of the lock ? Should it have vanished ?” She asked.

“No, I felt the lock release, this is something different and it’s not supposed to have been there.”

It looked like a rock, the sort you found on the beach and threw into the sea, but it glowed slightly and it had been at the very heart of the boulder. No heat, that was the puzzle. It looked hot and seemed to glow like burning coals, but it was cool to the touch.

“It’s no good,” said Babaef, “I’ll have to visit the circle in the guild cellar and ask Nigon.”

Babaef had few secrets from Lagertha. He wasn’t in love with her, he only had real love for his daughters. But Lagertha did amazing things to his dick with her tongue and surely that was as good as love ? He’d told her just about everything that had passed between him and Nigon, leaving out just the demeaning insults.

“What now, at this time of night ? The servants will be asleep.”

Babaef had meant in the morning, but the more Lagertha complained, the more it seemed a good idea. Why not go now ? Nigon hardly kept store keepers hours. Plus he felt angry. Babaef had put his life at risk and yet Nigon had hidden things from him.

“Yes now Lagertha, go and wake the housekeeper. Tell her I need the waggon at the front of the house within the hour.”

Then a thought struck him.

“You can come too my dear, it’s about time I introduced you to Nigon.”

By the time they were dressed in their outdoor clothes the house was alive with servants and guards, all looking miserable at being woken in the middle of the night. Shadow was in her usual spot, in a pocket inside his robes, as Babaef opened his front door and looked for his waggon.

“It’s a dark night sir,” said his waggon master, “I’ll send a lad in front with a lamp, to look for potholes.”

Babaef was gaining quite a household; the staff seemed to think it was alright to fill his house with their assorted offspring. They were useful though and Babaef was considering extending the servants wing of his house.

“Up you get.”

He helped Lagertha into what he called his waggon, but it was really a very comfortable carriage for two. He'd had the inside hung with expensive drapes and the floor carpeted. There were even springs on the axles, still a rare and expensive luxury in the City. There were still spine jarring jolts if the waggon hit a pothole, but it was a vast improvement to the waggons that were rented by the hour. Guards at front and rear, his servants pushed the heavy waggon at about two miles per hour. Only the poor walked anywhere in the City and even they rarely walked at night.

"At least we'll be the only waggon on the streets." He said.

As they reached the end of the street his guards called out to someone moving in the bushes and there was the sound of a scuffle and then a scream. No doubt they'd disturbed a robber waiting for a chance to rob a house or anyone out and about at night. His guards wouldn't bother him with the details; the body would be dragged into a ditch and left for the night creatures.

"If only it was safe to travel at night." Said Lagertha.

Babaef thought it would be nice too, perhaps even safe enough to walk through the upper town. But there was no militia and no law and the best victims of crime could hope for was that their assailant might meet some armed guards in the dark.

"We need a militia, a City watch." He said.

He had power and was likely to get much more. Babaef had his own ambitions, but how far could he go? The dark angels were few in number and the City badly needed a proper government, perhaps even a King. Not now, but eventually, once the last lock on Nigon was removed, just perhaps?!

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Caspian had kept up a good pace, yet it taken them nearly three hours to reach the bottom level Seb Hawes had written about.

"This must be the good trooper." Said Waide.

All the hallways they had walked down had been in pristine condition, almost as though they were regularly cleaned. But the final room in front of the shimmering door was different. There was a dismembered body that had been dead a long time and the skeleton of something large. Everywhere was a mess, upturned tables, broken chairs.

"He put up quite a fight." Said Merrick.

"Was he attacked, or was he trying to catch it for food?" Asked Vella.

The creature's skeleton was strange, far too many ribs and a lack of symmetry that was disturbing.

"Something from the 7th rift." Said Sóli.

Caspian righted two tables and began putting his underwater gear onto it. The others hesitated for a second and then they too began to prepare to leave the dry and go back into the water.

"Good trooper died over two thousand years ago," said Caspian, "the creatures are probably all dead by now."

As if to mock him a dark shape appeared the other side of the door and then a single yellow eye looked in at them. The creature pushed about an inch of tentacle into the room and then it was gone.

"They seem to stick to the water." Said Merrick.

"Seb wrote that there were hundreds of them!" Said Waide.

Sóli was the only one still putting his underwater gear on.

"We still have no other option." He said.

"There just might be." Said Caspian.

He opened his pack and brought out the Crown of Arcadis, being very careful to only hold it by the cloth it was wrapped in.

“When you’re already close, this is supposed to take you to object we seek. If we are close enough and all touch it together it might take us there.”

Caspian put the crown on the table and Merrick put his hand out.

“Don’t touch it,” said Caspian, “Vella and I know it works, we’ve used it in the old town.”

“What is this object you’re looking for ?” Asked Merrick.

“That is our business.....”

Caspian held his hand up to Vella, they all needed to trust each other.

“A weapon of great power, a sword I think.”

“There are a lot of ifs and maybes,” said Sóli, “ supposing we end up in a room with no exits ?”

“Then we touch the crown and it brings us back here,” said Caspian, “or at least it should. When we used it, it seemed a bit temperamental.”

Waide gave a huge laugh.

“That could be said about most things in the City.”

“Or it might put us all inside a solid block of stone.” Said Merrick.

“No,” said Caspian, “it doesn’t seem to work like that.”

“But you can’t be certain ?”

Waide began putting her helmet on, as did Vella.

“Would you rather fight hundreds of those creatures ?” She said.

Merrick didn’t answer, but began to put on his own helmet. Once they were dressed for being submerged, Sóli checked the various seals and spoke the words to activate the helmets. They all put their hands above the crown and watched Caspian.

“Now !” He shouted.

They all touched the crown and nothing seemed to happen, but then the world seemed to dissolve and Caspian found himself in large room with the crown on the floor in front of him. It was dry and although his lamp didn’t reach far, the room looked clean and well furnished. He started to release the locks on his helmet, but Vella was pulling at his arm to get his attention.

“What’s wrong Vella ?”

As he turned around he realised why she was so worried, they were alone. He turned on his brighter lamp and examined the entire room. It was a large room and looked very comfortable, but they were alone.

“Where are the others ?” Asked Vella.

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Babaef closed the basement door and locked it. They hadn’t seen anyone else in the guild building, but he wasn’t going to risk being disturbed.

“Will I be safe outside the circle ?” Asked Lagertha.

“Yes of course. This is Nigon I’ll be invoking, a friend, not some psychotic elemental.”

He sat her on a plain wooden chair that was usually used by Chillan and then walked into the circle in the middle of the room. Almost immediately he heard the clear and unmistakable voice of Nigon.

“Another lock on my prison has been removed, you are doing well Babaef.”

There wasn’t the usual hint of derision in the voice and he was glad he’d brought his lover with him.

“I found something unexpected inside the boulder my lord.”

“Show me.”

Babaef removed the rock from his pocket and unwrapped it from the cloth bag he’d put it in.

“It glows like metal from the furnace yet is cool to the touch.”

There was a lengthy silence and Babaef began to suspect that Nigon was as confused by the object as he was. Eventually he received his instructions.

“It is of no consequence Babaef. Keep it somewhere safe and I will deal with it once I am free.”

Babaef gave a slight bow, though he had no idea how much Nigon could see of what went on in the basement. He put the rock back in the bag.

“And who have you brought to see me ?”

“This is Lagertha, who has become like a mother to my children and is invaluable in my researches to free you.”

Babaef felt he needed to add the last part. Nigon could have an odd sense of humour and it might have amused him to order the death of his lover.

“I know Lagertha. I may be imprisoned, but I see much of what goes on, especially the activity of my servants. Lagertha has offered me her service many times over. I am pleased with both of you, very pleased. Now go and prepare to break the next lock.”

They turned off the lamps and left. Lagertha was like a happy child and kept up a continual excited chatter as they climbed the stairs.

“To think he heard me at every ceremony, pledging myself to his service. It’s like a dream come true.”

He hugged her and shared her obvious joy at being appreciated by a living god. But Babaef knew Nigon was either lying about the rock, or simply didn’t know what it was. Yes, he’d keep it safe, but he’d also investigate what it was and how it might be of use.

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Part 19 will be posted at the end of April