

City of the Lost God

Part 19 – The Lanes

“She nodded at him, blood ties were all people really had in the City. Everything else could be taken from you.”



Everything about the room looked exquisite. Caspian didn't like putting his dirty, wet underwater gear on any of the expensive looking furniture. Eventually he simply dropped it all on the expensive looking carpet. While Vella removed her breathing helmet, he carefully used the cloth of his jacket sleeve to pick up the crown, placing it back in his pack.

“Do you think the others are still where we left them ?” Asked Vella.

“I hope not, but I don't intend to go back to find out.”

The dry area of the cellars they'd been in had looked as if someone had stripped it of everything of value, but the room they were now in was a statement of wealth. Everything from the carpets, to the figurines in a cabinet, all of it looked expensive.

“Human.” Said Caspian.

Vella jumped, as though one was coming up behind her.

“Sorry. The figurines, they're of humans.”

He opened a glass door, the panels shining as though they'd been dusted that morning. The delicate ceramic figures looked perfect, as though time hadn't moved on since the humans left the City, millennia before.

“They're beautiful.” Said Vella.

“Wrap a few up and put them in your pack. Whoever owned them is long dead.”

Vella seemed hesitant, so he removed an expensive looking embroidered wall hanging and cut it into strips with his dagger.

“They're dead and gone Vella. Use this to wrap up what you want to take.”

He explored while Vella wrapped various objects from the cabinet. In the centre of the room was a large wooden box on a table. It couldn't be that easy, could it ? Caspian expected the box to be locked, but the heavy hardwood lid lifted easily once he used both hands. There was a loud crash as the lid went back and hit the table. Vella put down her pack and came over to see what he was doing.

“Not what I was expecting.” She said.

“Nor me.”

A belt was in the box, made of the green mottled skin of some kind of creature. Attached to the belt was a scabbard, too big for a dagger, but too small for a short sword. A yellowing bone handle protruded from the scabbard and Caspian held it and withdrew the blade.

“This can't be it.” He said.

“I thought it would be bigger, much more shiny.”

The blade was about fourteen inches long and made of a dull metal and it had two bad notches from previous battles. The sort of weapon seen in the slums, being sold on a stall for a few coppers.

“Someone must have found the weapon and left this behind.” He said.

Caspian was putting the weapon back into the box, but then he saw the vision of a smiling human face in front on him. Was it a smile or a leer, he realised the implication for each were very different. The face vanished in a fraction of a second.

“Did you see that ?” He asked.

Again Vella jumped and examined the corners of the room.

“See what ?!”

“Sorry Vella. Nothing, I’m just tired and a bit jumpy.”

For some reason he didn’t want to get rid of the disappointing blade. He put the belt around his waist, fixing the scabbard where it could easily be reached. It was a smile, he was now certain the face had smiled.

“You’re keeping it then ?”

“It might be useful.”

There was only one door, which Caspian tried to open while Vella packed up a few small items made of gold. The room was full of items they’d both loved to have kept, but there was a limit on how much could be carried.

“It’s locked,” he said, “have you seen any keys anywhere ?”

“No.”

He shone his lamp into the lock and he could see the key was in the lock, left there after locking the door from the other side. The door was heavy and strong, but made of a soft brown wood. He gave it a few jabs with his dagger and was pleased when a few splinters flew off. There was a suit of armour in the room, the kind King’s wear on state occasions. It was covered in jewels and quite impractical, but leaning against the right leg was a heavy mace. Caspian picked up the mace, marvelling at the ornate carving and the delicate jewels that covered the business end. He then used both hands to hit the door, the first blow creating a hole right through. Two more hits and Caspian could use his lamp to look through the hole and there was a long clean corridor.

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Maya had spent a long time explaining the changes to his body; Torfi didn’t pick things up fast.

“Trust me, change a few times and you’ll forget you were ever anything other than a Kveld.”

She left him with a promise to see him near Muzzie’s a few nights later and then she crept along the hallways, heading for the portal out of The Dome. It was light, but still far too early for the librarians to be about. Maya saw a cleaner, complete with bucket and mop, but the elderly creature was quite easy to avoid. She was almost at the portal, but she saw Adamaz talking to Aeony and it was obvious they were friends. The dark angel actually kissed the librarian on the cheek, before falling from the window and flying away.

“I know you’re there,” said Adamaz, “you’re very good, but my senses are better.”

She stepped from the shadows and walked towards the head librarian.

“You and the dark angel seem friendly, for long term enemies.” She replied.

“Like much in the City, things are often not as they seem. We need to talk, follow me to my rooms.”

Adamaz kept up a good pace for such an elderly creature. Maya was tempted to kill him as he walked in front of her. His body looked dry as a twig, a quick snap of his neck and throw him from a window. Borlas would be avenged, but then she’d never be able to complete her assignment.

“Here are my rooms, let me adjust the light.”

Maya liked the rooms; there were plenty of dark corners to hide, should Adamaz turn nasty. He showed her to a small table and two chairs, sitting himself opposite her. There was already a glass on the table, no doubt used by Aeony. He seemed to notice her examining the empty glass.

“I have several excellent wines, if you’d like ?”

“No, I’m fine.”

She pulled the chair around so that her back was against the wall and waited for Adamaz to talk.

"I just want you to know that I didn't kill him." He said.

"Who do you mean, Borlas or Ghot?"

Adamaz actually seemed to crumple into his chair.

"I knew Borlas had been turned," he said, "your kind have a certain scent. But I didn't kill him, or order anyone else to do it."

"But you knew he'd been killed?"

"I followed his scent, as you must have done. It ended behind the hut of an old woman, who was telling everyone about a strange dead creature behind her home. A creature with four legs, but the front paws were hands. It was fairly obvious who had died."

Maya never really had thought Adamaz had paid an assassin to kill Borlas. The head librarian was a powerful converted chaos creature, quite capable of killing his own enemies.

"He was killed by an assassin," she said, "one armed with a Kveld silver spear. Podd found the body and disposed of it."

"I have no need of paid assassins, but I can take a good guess at who does."

"Who?"

Adamaz was smiling now, he was in control, he was the one with the information she needed.

"Most people think Silsk and her dark angels rule the City," he said, "and they bang heads together when it's needed and dispose of any bandits who get too greedy. But the real power of any city is in the hands of the rich."

Maya stood and brought a clean glass and a bottle of expensive wine from his cabinet. As she sat and poured herself a drink, she enjoyed the uncomfortable look on his face. It was just a game, who would control the conversation? But Maya enjoyed such games and she sensed that Adamaz didn't.

"So," she said, "who does wield real power in the City?"

"In The Lanes there are a few metal traders. Without metals the City can't function and they've been charging higher and higher prices. Most are rich but harmless, but two of them have ambitions and worse than that, a running feud with each other."

She sipped her drink, knowing he was aching to tell her the names.

"Baillig is a fool, a joker. He has the ambition, but he lacks the courage to try to run the City. Jumban though is a different matter. His full name is Arro Jumban, but everyone knows him simply as Jumban. He's from the City, born here, one of the few children to survive the plague in the year he was born. Claims to be a pure blood dredger, but I sense a lot of Shelzak in him."

"So big and mean!"

"And smart, very smart. Jumban has built up a vast army of personal guards, far too large to simply protect his house and business interests. If you want to find the person who paid to have Borlas killed, then taking a good look at Jumban would be a good idea."

Maya finished her drink and poured herself another glass.

"But why would this Jumban pay an assassin to kill a librarian?" She asked.

Adamaz was smiling at her again, she was beginning to hate that smile.

"I assume Borlas was in the slums trying to follow me?"

She nodded, there seemed no point in hiding the fact.

"I never noticed him, you must have trained him well. I'm not the only one to enjoy what the slums have to offer, Jumban has two regular females he visits. Both are not the sort that a respectable merchant should know, one is hermaphrodite in nature. Borlas was probably spotted in the slums by Jumban's guards. A Kveld in the slums would have made him particularly paranoid about his secrets becoming public knowledge."

“A good theory. I will definitely have a long look at Arro Jumban.”

It was obvious he wanted her to leave, but she just sipped her drink and ignored his fidgeting.

“Did you kill Ghot ? Did you eat him in some way ?” She asked.

Adamaz actually banged his hand on the table in annoyance.

“Who are you to judge me,” he shouted, “already one guard has been found with his throat bitten out and we’re likely to find more of your victims. At least I usually only feed on the vermin of the City, those we’re all better off without.”

She let him rant, he seemed to have a need to explain himself. Perhaps as another who killed to feed, she gave him the opportunity to confess to someone who might understand.

“So why Ghot ?”

“I offered him a way out. If he’d just admitted to his thieving ! But no, he had to lie and threaten me with that awful family of his. It seemed a waste to simply kill him, so I fed on him. I suppose you were hired by the family ?”

“Yes, they heard you’d admitted to killing him.”

“So what happens now ?” He asked.

What did happen now ? Her assignment was over, she just needed to report to the family. But there was still Borlas to be avenged.

“Eventually I will report to my client, but first I will stay in the City, to investigate the death or Borlas.”

Adamaz was very still now and glaring at her.

“So once you report, I can expect the assassins to arrive ?”

“Probably, but at least you are forewarned.”

She was fairly sure he wasn’t strong enough to kill her, but she was still relieved when he smiled at her and stood up.

“Of course,” he said, “and while you are here please come and see me if I can help in the Jumban matter.”

She waited in a few dark places, watching for him to follow her, perhaps try to kill her before she left the Dome. But there was never anyone behind her and she safely used the portal to leave the Dome. Maya made her way back to Muzzie’s, she needed to rest, turning Torfi had drained her. Then she’d pay a visit to the bone yard, to see what Podd and Ash knew about Jumban.

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“Can I go with you this time ?” Asked Lagertha.

Babaef had checked the book several times, he’d even cross referenced the site with several other respected arcane documents.

“Not a good idea,” he said, “we’ll need to dig up a temple built by the humans.”

It was a long journey, north of the great river and then a little east. He also remembered vague rumours about Aeony visiting a human temple in that area, which was another good reason not to take his lover.

“You need me,” she said, “you have so few people left.”

She was right of course. Of his original group of acolytes, only Chillan and Norrex had survived their last adventure. Families and friends of the dead were already asking awkward questions and he still hadn’t thought of a plausible explanation for the disappearance of so many.

“Hired guards will do for this expedition,” he said, “no one wonders about the occasional missing guard, death is an occupational hazard in their line of work.”

“I have some contacts among the assassins, but not anyone who hires out reliable guards.”

Babaef had a plan in his head now, a good plan.

"I'll send someone to see Nethra," he said, "she'll know a dozen for hire, even if Merrick is out of the City."

"What can I do my love?"

"Supplies, we will need supplies for a party of up to twenty people. Food, water, tools etc for about a week. No, let's be safe, make it enough to last two weeks. Everyone can carry a pack, including us."

Lagertha looked pleased, there was the glint in her eye that often meant impromptu sex.

"So I am going with you?" She asked.

"As you'll be doing much of the organising, I can hardly leave you behind."

She smiled at him, her hand reaching for the area between his legs. But he still had things to tell her, so he held her hand before it reached the place that would drive everything else from his mind.

"Don't buy too much from any one supplier," he said, "try not to arouse anyone's curiosity, but everything needs to be ready in three or four days time."

Babaef pointed at a strange symbol that was next to the temple. The map was ancient and the key to symbols had worn away, but he was sure what it meant.

"That character denotes a place of prophecy," he said, "the humans believed a power remained there, locked away until it was needed."

"Do you believe such things?" She asked.

"Yes I do and so should you. We need to be cautious and remember my dear....the guards are expendable."

He released her hand and Lagertha began to expertly undo his trousers and push her hand inside.

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Muzzie knew the path across the stream, but he still got his trousers wet up to his knees. He thought of Podd and Ash pulling the cart through the water several times a day and cringed, but it was probably better than living too near to other people. Neighbours were unlikely to put up with the stench of boiling bodies. He knocked on the gate and received no answer, so he gave it a shove and the sound of metal clanging against metal was deafening.

"What do you want..... oh sorry Muzzie, didn't recognise you."

Ash opened the gate and beckoned him into the yard, apologising several times for inflicting the alarm system on him.

"No problem lad, it must be over a year since I was last here. I forgot about the alarm."

"More like three years." Said Podd.

The owner of the bone yard came out of the door to his shack, the smell of stale sweat and decay following close behind him. Muzzie took a bottle of expensive liquor from his pocket and offered it to Podd.

"I'd appreciate some information," said Muzzie, "but I haven't come empty handed."

Podd didn't have a best room, or anywhere to receive visitors. He took Muzzie to an outside table and chairs that were about as far from the fat boilers as the width of the yard allowed. If it was a dry day and not too cold, it was where Podd took his rare guests.

"Fetch glasses boy."

Podd wasn't fat, but he still needed two chairs to feel comfortable. Muzzie wondered, not for the first time, who had fathered the bone collector. His mother had been a local dredger girl, quite a good looker. Either Podd's father was the ugliest bastard on the rifts, or something strange had happened at his birth.

"So, what do you want to know?" Asked Podd.

Muzzie put one of the door handles he'd bought at Winshin's on the table.

"Old Jonas said that he got this from you."

Podd handled the object, turning it around and looking at the crest on it.

"Yes, I found five or six of them in a basement in old town. Looked like someone had been collecting them, but never took them away. There they were, all piled up in a heap."

"Was there anything else in that basement?"

Podd tapped his fingers on the table.

"How interested are you in knowing?"

Nothing was for nothing in the City, it was just the way things were. Muzzie understood that and placed two small gold coins on the table.

"Is that interested enough?" He asked.

"It'll do. There was a bag with a few items in it. Nothing that valuable, no gold. It was a long time ago, before Ash was around and my memory isn't as good as it was. But there were a few items made of silver and everything had that crest on it."

"Have you still got any of it?"

Podd gave a thunderous laugh and drank a glassful of the liquor.

"I don't collect trinkets, you know that. Everything was sold years back."

"Do you remember where it was, can you take me there?"

"I check there sometimes," said Podd, "I check most places in old town."

"Old town is good for bodies." Added Ash.

"Was there a body in the cellar?" Asked Muzzie.

"No," said Podd, "that was the odd thing. There were signs of struggle and the looted items, even some blood on the floor. But there was no body. Why are you so interested?"

It was Muzzie's turn to laugh.

"How interested are you in knowing?"

Podd picked up the two gold coins and put them carefully in his purse.

"I have no curiosity, none at all."

"So will you take me there?"

Podd looked at Ash.

"There's two full boilers boy, will you be able to manage them both?"

"I'll manage."

Podd stood up and beckoned Muzzie to follow him.

"I'm busy at nights," he said, "if we're going, we'd best go now."

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It had been a mistake to put so many gold objects in their back packs. Caspian was feeling very tired and Vella had insisted on yet another short rest.

"This place goes on forever," she said, "how big are the damn cellars?"

"We might not be in the cellars, the crown could have taken us anywhere."

At first they'd looked in every room they passed, but as the corridors went on and on, they'd lost all interest in exploring. The plan had been to keep heading up at every staircase or set of spiral steps, but they seemed no closer to any exit. Vella was looking at him, her face was very pale.

"Do you really think that Casp?"

"No, I'm just tired. The books all said the weapon is in the cellars. We just need to keep heading up until we get back to the library, or....."

"We get back to the flooded area and the creatures." Said Vella.

As a plan it had several major flaws, but it was all they had. Caspian helped her to her feet and they trudged along yet another corridor with expensive carpet. Most doors they passed were closed, but ahead of them was an open door, with something jutting out of the room. They'd been so used to everything being clean and in pristine condition. Finding the body shocked them both.

"What could have done that to him ?!" Shouted Vella.

Caspian knelt beside the body and looked hard at the badly lacerated face. The body ended at the waist and one arm looked badly chewed, but Caspian knew who it was.

"It's Sóli." He said.

The body was dry and further into the room was the bag with his diving helmet, which looked intact. Vella picked up the bag, while Caspian examined the wounds.

"Something immensely strong did this," he said, "something with sharp claws and teeth."

"One of the underwater creatures ?"

"No, something different, something we haven't seen yet."

They were about to leave the room when they heard the sound of fighting. It was obviously some distance away, but they both heard Merrick screaming defiance at someone, or something.

"They're alive." Said Vella.

Caspian saw the face again, smiling at him. There was no mistake this time, the disembodied face of a human was smiling at him and nodding at a set of drawers in the corner of the room. Caspian ran to the drawers and opened the top drawer, nothing.

"Casp, we have to go, they obviously need our help."

The face had gone, but he'd seen it, he wasn't delusional.

"Just a minute , this is important."

Second drawer down, nothing.

"Casp !!"

"Shhhush."

Third drawer down and there was a map on parchment. Just a map of one room, but it was an important room. Caspian folded the map and put it in his pocket. He was smiling now and even Vella relaxed a little.

"What is it Casp ?"

"The way out of this place."

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Silsk woke from the nightmare and paced her bedroom. Olvir hadn't even opened an eye as she'd leapt from the bed, she'd obviously worn him out again. He still amused her enough to keep him alive and she had to admit, he was very good at his job. Any information she needed, Olvir would find just the right person to extract it from and he wasn't squeamish about the method of extraction. Naked and with the aroma of recent sex still on her, she fell from her bedroom window.

As the ground hurtled to meet her, she unfurled her wings and extended them to their full length.

"You'll do that trick once too often and we'll be scraping you off the ground."

She'd given Ousha a couple of good bruises for that remark. Silsk knew her body, knew the exact point to use her wings to get just the right amount of lift. Up she soared, screaming as she flew over the roofs. She knew people would huddle together in their beds, listening to her screams and fearing her.

"Weakling scum." She muttered.

The roof of the towers was quite small, just enough room for two dark angels, or one who wanted a little solitude. The nightmare was dominating her nights, something was being disturbed and it

didn't like being disturbed. She noticed a light in a window of the Dome. Adamaz would be feeling it too, as would that bitch Aeony. It was below her feet, far below. Something deep inside the ground was being disturbed, something powerful and unpleasant. Silsk had no wish to know what the creature was, the old cellars were somewhere she had no curiosity about and certainly no wish to go. Some creatures had ways of getting into the deep water in the cellars, but Silsk was happy to stay well away from such places. If only they'd stop disturbing whatever lurked down there, so that she could get a little sleep. She heard a set of wings and Aeony was circling down to join her.

"It invades your dreams to?" Said Silsk.

"Someone is in the deep halls," said Aeony, "they disturb its rest, so it disturbs ours."

"Can it be killed?"

Aeony smiled, happy that once again Silsk was treating her as more knowledgeable in such matters.

"No, but they may escape with rare items, artefacts we may find useful."

More lights were being lit in the City. It was crying out for aid, but no one still lived who cared or even could come to its aid.

"Do you know who went into the cellars?" Asked Silsk.

"I know this may sound like a joke, but Merrick has been missing for a few days, along with that old fool Sóli, the mender of wells and cisterns."

They both laughed, Silsk relishing the excuse to inflict some pain on the one male in the City who'd ever refused her sexual advances.

"I must send Olvir to see Merrick, once he's seen back in the slums again."

"Send a few men with him," said Aeony, "Merrick is a lot tougher these days, or so I've been hearing."

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They'd been following the battle for some time, but never catching up with it. Every corridor they passed through had a tale to tell about the ferocity of the fighting. Armoire that had stood against walls for millennia lay in pieces on the ground. Doors torn off hinges, carpets ripped up, strange claw marks in the woodwork. It was as if they were constantly arriving just after some kind of apocalypse had passed by.

"That is definitely Merrick's voice said Vella."

They'd shouted out a few times, but the noise of battle probably drowned out their shouts. There was no response from Merrick, just the constant curses and screams at his foe. As they gradually gained on the moving battle, they heard the deep roar of whatever their friend was fighting. It reminded Caspian of the roar of a giant creature he'd once seen in a cage when the traveling fayre passed through the City. Caspian ran now, all thought of arriving fresh for the battle was gone from his mind. How long had Merrick been fighting? Three hours, perhaps four? Their friend couldn't keep it up for much longer. They came upon the battle quite unexpectedly, after going through yet another door that had been turned to matchwood.

"Oh fuck, it's a Roruss." Said Caspian.

There was no other door to the room, the creature had them trapped. Merrick had pulled a heavy table up against the far corner of the room and he'd pulled Waide behind it. Caspian noticed Waide was unconscious, blood covering her legs. Merrick seemed to be favouring his left arm, his right held against his body, but he was still using a heavy mace to keep the Roruss at bay.

"What is a Roruss?" Asked Vella.

It had heard her, its heavy fur covered head turned towards them. The deep low roar was far more menacing close up. The creature had four powerful legs, each ending in a row of sharp claws.

Caspian knew what it was, he'd seen numerous pictures in the library. Of course the people of the City considered the Roruss to be a myth, a creature of legend. As it reared up on its hind legs and roared at them, Caspian realised the ancient creature may well be the last of its kind, but it was no myth.

"The humans used powerful enchantments," he said, "used them as invincible guards for very important places. But they're older than the humans, far older. The Roruss are a remnant from the days before even humans ruled the city. They go right back to the age of deities."

The creature had finished looking at them and was approaching them, one of its claws ready to tear them apart.

"What will kill it?" Asked Vella.

"Nothing, it's invincible, nothing can kill it."

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Maya had decided to have a look at Bailig first. Adamaz didn't seem to take him seriously, but Maya had learned to make her own decisions about people. Even if he did turn out to be a harmless fool, he was a fool who hated Jumban and he was sure to have information she could use. Maya had waited near the rear of his house in her four legged form. His guards might be well trained, but kitchen staff were always sloppy about security. A pretty young girl had opened the back door and looked for a particular guard. While they flirted, Maya squeezed through the gap in the door and moved soundlessly into the vast house.

"Something has his seer rattled. Probably nothing, but stay alert."

So Bailig had his own seer, hardly a person a vain fool would have on his staff. Maya had found the perfect spot; she lay on top of a wooden beam that crossed the main hall. People rarely look up and if they did, she could vanish into the stillness. From her vantage point she could watch the coming and going of the house guard and hear their conversations.

"The dark angels seem to be flying around more than usual, something has the City spooked."

Maya could feel it too, the disturbance of something very ancient and very angry. She had an idea that it was somewhere underground, but she lacked the clarity of a trained seer. It mattered little to her though; she had come to have a quiet word with Bailig. Three hours she waited, looking down into the hall watching the servants and guards move through their routine. The pretty kitchen girl appeared with a gong and hit it several times with a small hammer.

"Dinner is ready, get it while it's hot!"

"What has cook burned for us tonight Deni?"

"The food you left on your plate yesterday."

There was general laughter and the group went through a door and down the stairs to the kitchen area. Bailig seemed to have happy staff, which was good, they were likely to be gone for well over an hour.

"If only you'd move." She muttered.

One young guard was left in front of the door which led to the master's quarters. A sloppy guard she could have bypassed, but he was keen and alert. There was probably a way over the roofs and through an open window, but Maya didn't have time to spare. Slowly she edged forward until she was right over him and then she dropped, crushing his throat between her jaws. He made no sound, but his sword made a ringing sound as it hit the floor. Maya pulled his throat out and chewed the soft flesh, while she listened for any alarm or running feet. Nothing, but there was another body to be found and that would start the rumours. Another week, perhaps two and Maya would have to leave the City, or risk the wrath of the mob. She was tempted to eat her fill, but that would mean

remaining on four legs until it digested. Maya changed to her two legged form and opened the door, which was unlocked. For many, being naked might have made them feel vulnerable, but Maya liked to hunt in just her skin. Clothes got in the way, became stuck on sharp objects, they were recognisable. No guard had ever given a decent description of her, they were always too busy getting over the shock of her being naked.

“You’re no harmless fool Bailig.”

The room she was in was large and well lit. One wall was covered in traditional weapons. Not the kind his guard would use, but the best ever made, many with expensive jewels added for decoration. Each weapon would have made the owner famous, but a wall hung with dozens ! It meant not only wealth, but a real love of everything that could kill and maim. Maya only ever hunted for food, or to complete an assignment and she carried her own weapons, in her jaws.

The other wall was hung with unusual weapons. Spears to kill mythic beasts, swords with double blades, daggers with poisons etched into the steel. In one corner were six or seven weapons that disgusted her. She had a headache just being near the Kveld silver weapons, they also seemed to hypnotise her. She simply had to put her finger against the blade of the longsword.

“It burns !”

Maya clenched her jaw to avoid crying out, the top of her finger looked like it had been held against a branding iron. Then she saw the empty hooks and chains and all thought of the burn left her mind. The spear, the weapon that had killed Borlas. In front of her was the gap where it had hung on the wall. Bailig was no plain merchant, he was the bastard who’d killed one of her own and had the means to kill dozens more.

“Bastard.”

Her caution didn’t go completely, but she knew she was making too much noise. She slammed doors back, rushed down corridors, didn’t check the rooms she passed. By the time she reached Bailig’s bed chamber all her former composure was gone. There was a meal on the table, still hot and steaming, a fork still embedded in a piece of meat.

“Not so fast my dear, not so fast.”

As she spun the Kveld spear cut into her leg, then it was wrenched to one side and used to tear a hole in her calf muscle. Maya fell, banging her head on the bedroom wall and collapsing in a heap.

“Change and I’ll gut you.”

The merchant in front of her was obviously Bailig and he was handling the spear like an expert. Her natural response to pain and fear was to change, but she knew that would mean her death. She was losing blood though, enough to kill her if the wound wasn’t treated.

“You must be Bailig.” She said.

He thrust the spear at her, stopping only an inch from her face.

“Like it ?” “Cost me a lot of money to buy back the silver and have it recast, a lot of money. What do I call you girl ?”

Maya didn’t answer, she looked around the room for a way out, there was always a way out. The spear nicked her cheek, causing her to cry out.

“You’ll talk to me before you die girl. You’ll tell me everything I want to know.”

He was too alert, too tense, she needed to get him to relax a little.

“What do you want to know ?” She asked.

“Good, good. Let’s start with your name.”

“My name is Maya Orresa.”

He was smiling now, his eyes had the triumphant look that usual meant he was losing the edge he needed to stay alert.

“Now Maya, who paid you to spy on me and why ?”

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“You really think he might still be alive ?” Asked Sara.

Muzzie went through the drawer and brought out the only thing his brother had ever given him. A dagger in a sheath with a crest on it, the same crest as on the door handles he’d bought at Winshin’s.

“I know it’s a long shot, but Podd showed me where the basement is. I owe it to Gesse to at least look the place over tonight.”

Gessereth Osranetherer, his brother. They’d both shortened their names as they reached adulthood. Muzzie decided he’d never get laid if he didn’t and Gesse wanted to stop being beaten up. That was how they were, Muzzie got into fights and relished the military life. Gesse was the family coward, running away from something all his life.

“You owe him nothing Muzzie, not after he stole from you.”

“He’s blood Sara, that matters, you know it does.”

She nodded at him, blood ties were all people really had in the City. Everything else could be taken from you.

“At least take Lilleth to watch your back.”

Muzzie felt slightly ashamed. He’d already asked Lilleth to join him at the basement, he just hadn’t wanted to tell Sara.

“Alright, I’ll go to her place first.”

He strapped on the belt with his favourite blade and made sure the finger was tight against his back. Muzzie felt for the place in his mind that he didn’t really understand and spell after spell floated in front of his eyes. Sara was giving him an odd look, so he smiled at her and gave her left buttock a playful squeeze.

“Look after the place Sara, I’ll be back before morning.”

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Part 20 will be posted at the end of May.