

City of the Lost God

Part 24 – A Marriage

“They all shovelled the soil back into the hole, covering the two who were strangers, yet destined to spend eternity in the same grave.”



“You’re certain you both want an outdoor wedding today ?” Asked Adamaz.

Vella and Caspian exchanged a look and then nodded vigorously.

“Yes we do.” Answered Caspian.

Vella actually held Adamaz’s hand, making him feel uncomfortable about the time he’d followed her home with murder on his mind. Now she was going to be in the Dome all the time and she seemed the type to have lots of children. Adamaz briefly looked out of his study window and wondered if killing her months ago might have been a good idea.

“We have no suitable outdoor area in the Dome,” he said, “but I can arrange something in the gardens inside the Guild of Sorcerers. I will need to use up a lot of old favours. I need to know you won’t change your minds.”

“No, no, we won’t. I promise.” Said Vella.

“We both appreciate you doing this for us.” Added Caspian.

Vella was actually crying, it would have been quite touching if Adamaz still had those kinds of feelings. He just wanted the Great Library of the City to thrive and continue and Caspian felt like the right person to ensure that.

“Babaef is away,” he said, “some sort of personal trip. Pinthrad though is happy for us to hold a marriage in their gardens. It’s a pretty place with room for all your friends, I have been to a few functions there.”

“How would we get there ?” Asked Caspian.

Security had been worrying Adamaz, they did seem to have some powerful enemies.

“We walk, it isn’t far. Silsk would love to get her hands on you, but the City can’t survive without the library. She won’t attack if we go in numbers, take every librarian with us. After all, they are all your friends. Then there will be quite a few dignitaries from the Guild of Sorcerers with us. We will be safe walking there and back.”

They were smiling at him and Adamaz hoped Aeony had been right about Silsk. Personally he thought the insane Dark Angel was quite capable of slaughtering them all, but Aeony had persuaded him the trip to the guild was safe.

“Silsk will be busy giving our ruffian a slow death, the one she will think killed Olvir.” Aeony had told him.

“When will it be and how do we let our friends know ?” Asked Vella.

“Tonight, after dark seemed safest and more discreet. You can use the apprentices as messengers to send out your invitations. I hear that Muzzie is out of the City, but I’m sure Sara will want to come.”

Vella had stopped crying, though she still seemed intent on holding his hand.

“I’ve arranged for Galla to perform the actual ceremony,” he added, “she has knowledge of the old ways and I thought you’d prefer her to one of the guild.”

“Oh yes,” said Vella, “Galla is perfect.”

They were both nodding at him furiously. Did Caspian really love her ? Had he put too much down to pure lust ? Adamaz began to consider offering conversion to Vella at the same time as Caspian.

Perhaps a couple could run the library better, perhaps they'd have less apprentices leaving before they'd finished training ? Adamaz stood up and gently removed Vella's hand from his.

"Now you must get your invitations sent out and don't forget we are open for business today. Don't use all the staff to arrange your wedding."

He said it with a smile and Vella actually kissed his cheek before leaving.

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"Let her get a good sniff at you, she'll recognise you in a fight." Said Babaef.

Muzzie stood still as Shadow nuzzled and sniffed at him. The creature had growled at Lilleth until Babaef had told her off and been quite firm with her. The large predator seemed to like Muzzie and actually liked his face with her rough tongue.

"It's your animal magnetism." Said Lilleth.

Shadow turned, her red eyes glaring at Lilleth. Then she turned back to Muzzie and gave him another sniff, before running out of the compound and back into the scrub of the rift.

"I'm glad she's on our side." Said Muzzie.

"Only just I think." Said Lilleth.

Babaef laughed and picked up his youngest daughter, kissing her on the cheek before putting her down again.

"We need to get started, there's a lot of river silt to dig through." He said.

It seemed everyone was going to be busy, even his daughters joined the excavation team as they walked towards the buried temple. Muzzie and Lilleth hadn't been ordered to help, but Muzzie took a shovel from the tool stack and joined in with the diggers. Lilleth had been ordered to keep alert and be ready with her bow.

"We need your eyes and your senses." Babaef had told her the night before.

Lilleth carefully climbed the pile of stones that was all that remained of the tower, which had once risen to a hundred feet above the temple roof. The top stone was quite wide and she made herself comfortable for the day. She had water and some food and many might have thought she had an easy day ahead of her. Lilleth felt the responsibility of being the eyes of those below and she began scanning the scrub covered rift.

"I'd rather be digging." She shouted down to Muzzie.

"Sure you would !" He replied.

No one cared or mentioned anything about preserving artefacts, they all just dug. Lagertha was in charge of two servants who sieved the spoil heap, but they only seemed interested in any gold they found. Millennia of history was dug over and ruined in the race to get to the temple door. Even Chillan had given up on preserving anything and he too had armed himself with a shovel.

"Do you want to spend days here ? Dig, dig like your life depends on it." Shouted Babaef.

Lunch was brought to the diggers and they took it in turns to eat. Shadow returned once, her jaws covered in blood, but she quickly returned to her job of clearing enemies from the surrounding area. In the early afternoon Lilleth saw the cloud of dust in the distance and realised it was thrown up by hundreds of running creatures.

"They're coming ! Back to the compound !" She shouted.

It had been a good day, they'd dug down a good twenty feet and lined the vast hole with timber.

Babaef didn't hesitate despite wanting to dig deeper.

"Back to the compound." He ordered.

They were all behind the thorn scrub wall by the time the sound of running hooves could be heard. Then the creatures were the other side of the river and they got their first look at their enemy.

“They’re bigger than the others.” Said Chillan.

“More of them too.” Said Norrex.

The creatures crossed the narrow river and seemed to sniff the air on mass. Shadow appeared from the scrub nearby and the herd of creatures went crazy.

“What is this thing about two or three heads ?” Asked Lilleth.

They looked like cattle designed by a mad man. Some had two heads, some three, but all of them had four strong legs. They were huge and each head was armed with long curved horns. Shadow they feared and they began to stampede, away from Shadow and toward the compound.

“Fire Muzzie, we need fire.” Shouted Babaef.

Babaef and Lagertha were using fireballs against the creatures, but there were so many of them. Thousands, it had to be thousands, all in a panic and heading straight for the thick thorn scrub wall. The guards stood still, no one seemed about to run, but the monsters were still well beyond the reach of arrows. Muzzie brought up the spells granted to him by the proximity of the finger he possessed, the hand of Hand of Arcardis. Some of the names were in an arcane language, but Muzzie seemed to sense their use. Mass immolation sprang into his mind as one spell settled in his consciousness.

“Muzzie ! Fire, fire now Muzzie.” Said Lilleth.

He’d expected a red hot ball of flame to form as he let the spell build. In front and slightly above him though was a black cloud, lightning weaving about in it as the spinning ball grew and grew. The guard were firing arrows by the time he released the spell.

“What have you done ?” Lilleth asked him.

Muzzie discovered that immolation doesn’t really mean fire, even though most people think it does. He discovered it as the cloud spread through the herd, the lightning ripping their bodies apart, covering the ground in their wet entrails.

“Perfect ! Do it again.” Said Chillan.

Muzzie ignored the look of horror on Lilleth’s face. He let another cloud of blackness grow in front of him, bigger than the last. The stampeding creatures were almost at the wall as he sent the cloud of immolation against them, the cloud of sacrifice.

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Gesse was surprised to wake up; he’d assumed the spell his brother had used on him was meant to destroy him. He still couldn’t move, but his eyes worked well enough to see the small demon stood in front of him.

“Wake up Gesse, your brother will soon need your help.”

Gessereth Osranetherer shook his head and blinked several times and the very small demon became clearer to him. Rather than a demon it looked to be the vaporous ghost of a small demon.

“What are you ?” He Asked.

“My master still has little power in the real world, but he sent me to wake you up and release you from this place.”

Gesse’s mind was beginning to work again and for the first time in a very long time, he was curious.

“Who is your master ghost ?”

The swirling vapour turned from grey to red and it was obvious his new friend wasn’t pleased.

“I’m not a ghost fool. I know you’re a revenant, but I didn’t realise you were a fool. I serve Nigon, the one true deity.”

Ghost or not, Gesse wasn’t going to be insulted by a very small demon. He clenched his mighty fist and raised it to strike. Then he realised he could move again and his mood changed.

“What were you saying about my brother ?”

The apparition actually sighed and looked fed up.

“Deaf as well as stupid ! He’s out on the rifts, at the ancient temple just north of the great river.”

“I don’t know this place you speak of demon.”

“You will Gesse. My master has enough power to break the spell that binds you to this ruined building. I can climb onto your shoulder and show you the way.”

Without asking permission, the demon was on his back and then on his shoulder, its mouth right up against his left ear.

“There, now I can give you directions. Quickly Gesse, your brother will die tomorrow if we don’t hurry.”

Gesse rose and easily pulled open the door Lilleth had closed, hoping to seal him inside. He walked through the basement and then into the sewers beneath the City.

“Am I still a revenant ghost ?”

“I told you I’m not a ghost. I don’t know what you are now, there may not be a word for it.”

They were in the basement, where Podd had discovered the silver objects. To Gesse it had been the furthest he could go, before the invisible chains pulled him back. He took a step forward and there was no resistance, he was free.

“I have been here so long ghost. It feels good to be free.”

Again there was a sigh in his ear.

“My name is Ventus if you feel a need to call me anything. Now move quickly Gesse, we have a long way to go.”

Geese left the building that had been his prison for years and ran through the streets of old town, the vaporous demon on his shoulder giving him directions. Together they kept to the shadows where possible, heading towards the great river.

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Merrick was well enough to walk by the time they saw the first outlying farmhouse. A child glared at them and a woman began abusing them in a strange guttural language. Nethra didn’t understand the language, but the body language and delivery of personal abuse is universal.

“I’ll deal with her.” Said Waide.

The female warrior replied in kind, almost spitting some of the words and putting on a display of aggression. The woman said a few words back in a more polite tone and then pulled the child back into her house.

“What was all that about ?” Asked Tarin.

“Nothing much,” said Waide, “they don’t like strangers.”

Gradually farms became streets and eventually they saw the first two storey store, complete with a sign in the common tongue.

“Silas farm essentials.” Said Tarin reading the sign.

“So some of them speak the tongue of the City.” Added Merrick.

“They all do,” said Waide, “they just like to mess with strangers. They take politeness as a weakness in Avald. Never let a personal insult go without a reply, or you’ll your life here will be hell.”

In the City they talked of Avald as though it was a few buildings in the mountains, clinging to the side of the highest peaks and full of half crazed mountain men. In reality they found a City with stores, taverns, even a small temple to whatever gods the locals worshipped. The roads weren’t just mud, large stone cobbles had been rammed into the ground to make the roads fairly weatherproof.

“It’s cleaner than old town by a long way.” Said Nethra.

They pulled the cart and came to a large open square that reminded Nethra of tales she'd heard of the City of the Lost God, but before the humans had abandoned it. Tales of vast green spaces with huge trees, where people just sat around and enjoyed simply being there.

"It's beautiful." Said Waide.

"I think we're going to enjoy being in Avald." Said Tarin.

The square was large and very green. A short grass filled most of the square, cut short so that it could be walked across or sat on. Many locals were sitting on it, beneath large healthy looking trees. Some of the trees were in blossom, something they'd never expected to see in the mountain man town they'd been warned about.

"Where are you going cock suckers?"

The voice was loud and the shouted question had been in the common tongue. They instinctively knew the comment was aimed at them, the grubby group pushing a few tatty belongings through the streets in a cart.

"Did you hear me, scum?"

Three very large and muscular hybrids were approaching, all of them twice the size of even Tarin.

"There's a lot of Crauch Demon in them Tarin, be careful." Said Waide

Tarin knew Crauch were tough. Not as tough as a Shelzak, but mean and tough, with more than the usual intelligence of a demon. There was a lot of Crauch in the three, Tarin could tell by their walk, they kept their tails almost straight out from their bodies. The biggest, the mouthy one, stopped in front of Tarin and stared down at him.

"We've had enough of freeloaders haven't we?"

He looked round at his friends and they shouted together in unison.

"Yes, no more outsiders bleeding us dry."

He was a good foot taller than Tarin, so he hunched himself up and brought his face down, almost touching noses with the weapon smith.

"Turn around and leave, taking your shit with you."

"We don't want your kind." Added one of his friends.

Those with the ability in the City could tell there as something strange about Tarin, a small number could actually sense he was a ghūl. In Avald almost no one had the gift of true seeing and all everyone saw was an outsider with too many scars and slightly grey skin. He looked sickly, his muscles looked slack and he looked like someone best moved along.

"Fuck off out of my face." Said Tarin.

Waide was hissing at him, trying to get his attention, but Tarin remembered about not putting up with personal insults. Scum and cock sucker were so personal that someone was going to have to be hit hard in the face and the likely target was stood right in front of him.

"What did you say to me?"

"You heard, fuck off!"

A crowd had gradually edged towards them, more curious than threatening. There were no other Crauch hybrids in the crowd and Tarin was working on the theory that they were probably local bullies. As the creature in front of him aimed a clumsy blow at his head, Tarin simply side stepped and used all his ghūl strength to hit him right on the nose. His opponent wasn't simply knocked off his feet, he was knocked backwards a good three feet. Blood from his shattered nose went everywhere, covering his two friends and spotting the clothes of the crowd. He was unconscious but alive, everyone could hear the strange snoring sound breathing through a bloody nose makes.

"Now, are you two going to fuck off?"

His friends had seen enough, they deserted their injured friend and ran. Tarin looked around and the crowd hadn't moved, but there were a lot of them, many carrying crude swords. Tarin turned and looked at Merrick.

"Are you fit enough to fight?" He asked.

"Looks like we'll have to fight our way out, so I'll have to be fit enough."

Nethra had her demon blade in her hand and Waide had her bow ready. Cheers were the next thing Tarin heard, the entire crowd was cheering him and smiling. Tarin didn't think the locals knew how to smile, but they were now. They didn't carry him on their shoulders, but hundreds came up and slapped him on the back, some gave him gold coins.

"I thought I'd done the wrong thing." He said to Waide.

"Fuck Tarin, I thought we were all dead. Now I think they might make you mayor or something."

Popularity can do wonders for a person's wellbeing and it was a much healthier looking group who were taken to the best tavern in town. It didn't look like Tarin was going to be mayor, but they were going to get free board and lodgings for a couple of nights for taking care of the town bullies.

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It was getting late and Vella still didn't have a wedding gown and no one was telling her how many of their friends had agreed to attend the wedding. Mild stress had turned into full panic and she leapt on Sara as she entered the room, clinging to her arm as though her life depended on it.

"They let you in here, thank the eight great demon gods!"

Sara had to put down several bags to hug Vella.

"Of course they let me in, I have your gown and Caspian's robe. I left one of the girls in charge of the bar, no doubt she's robbing me while I'm gone."

Vella turned towards the bags, stress turning to childlike glee in a split second. She began pulling at the cloth bags, trying to see which held her gown.

"Let me get it out, you'll rip it. And there are surprises you aren't supposed to see yet"

Vella allowed Sara to remove a long flowing gown from one of the bags. It was the colour of red Ashunt blooms, a traditional colour for wedding clothing on the rifts. It wasn't the cheap plain red dress that Vella had been expecting. The fabric was smooth to her touch and small gems had been sewn into the bodice.

"It's beautiful Sara, you must let me pay you for it."

"Nonsense girl. It's the last decent wedding dress in the City and Muzzie may kill me when he finds out how much I paid for it. But it's our gift to you, as is Caspian's robe."

"Show me his robe."

"No I won't, you know it's bad luck to see his robe before the ceremony."

Vella stepped out her dress, eager to try on her gown. She forgot all about the scars and wounds from her various battles in the flooded cellars. One long scar across her belly was still livid, only potions from Galla had stopped her becoming seriously ill from it. Sara jumped to the wrong, but obvious conclusion.

"Oh Vella, how can you marry someone who does this to you?"

"No, no, Caspian is the gentlest of people. These scars are from....."

Vella stopped and looked at the lines crisscrossing her body, as if seeing them properly for the first time. Caspian had far worse and they'd just accepted them as the price for the treasure they had stored in the hidden room behind their old bedroom.

"Let's not talk of such things on my wedding day." Said Vella.

"Your business is your own. I'm just pleased you're not marrying a wife beater."

Sara put the dress over Vella's head and then had her stand on a chair so that she could see how it hanged.

"Perfect length, it just needs taking in a little."

"Is there time Sara, it's already late?"

"There is time. Take the gown off and I'll do the alterations myself."

Sara sat on their bed and removed a sewing kit from another of the bags she'd been carrying.

"See, I came prepared."

While Sara sewed, Vella paced the room, still dressed only in her underwear.

"Have many of our friends accepted invitations?" She asked.

"Don't fuss girl, you have each other. I'll be there and your friends from the library."

Vella seemed upset, but she looked at the lovely gown and smiled.

"And a beautiful gown. Yes Sara, as long as we're married, I don't care who turns up."

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Gesse stopped running by the time he reached the slums, something felt strange in his insides. He actually felt something that hadn't bothered him for many years. Gesse felt the need for food, he felt hungry.

"Why are you slowing down?" Ventus asked, whispering into his ear.

"I need to eat."

"We're in the slums, you should find a child to eat fairly easily."

Gesse remembered eating those who came to rob the building he'd been forced to guard. It had never worried him, but now it did and the memories almost made him vomit.

"Not that kind of food ghost, I need proper food. Wholesome meat and bread."

"I knew it was a mistake waking you. You're going to be more trouble than you're worth."

Gesse took a swipe at Ventus, but his hand went right through the vaporous creature, causing him to hit his own head.

"Fool!" Shouted Ventus.

"Help me ghost and we'll be on our way sooner."

"This is the slums and although an infant might be easy to obtain as a meal, wholesome food is rather rare."

Gesse could hear the small demon sniffing the air.

"You're in luck, bread and meat. Though knowing the slums, you might have to fight for it."

"Not a problem."

The irresistible smell of good food was coming from a long hut that seemed to have a guard at the door. Gesse didn't need Ventus to tell him the occupants were likely to be either thieves or assassins. They were just about the only people who ate well in the slums.

"A large hut, likely to be a few of them in there." Said Ventus.

"Can't you sense how many?"

"I told you, my master, Nigon the one true deity, is weak at present."

"So you're useless!"

Ventus didn't answer, but he did kick Gesse in the ear. They moved silently round the hut, looking for an open window, or an unguarded door.

"Any suggestions?"

"How would I know, I'm useless."

"A sulky ghost, perfect."

There were no windows that weren't covered by heavy shutters and there was no other door. Gesse had been out of current affairs in the City for centuries, but he was certain that the hut was a thieves den and they sold their loot from the premises.

"To hell with it." He said.

The guard at the door died as Gesse crushed his head with a single blow. The sword the guard dropped was like a toy in Gesse's hand, so he picked up the heavy wooden chair the guard been sitting it.

"You're seriously going in there armed with just a chair?"

"Quiet ghost, fighting is my area of expertise. You can stick to being useless and vapoury."

Gesse kicked in the door and stomped into the hut. There were a good dozen heavily armed thieves inside and at least four of their customers. A female customer stopped counting coins from a purse and looked towards the door. She started to scream and it took him a few seconds to realise it was his appearance that was causing her to scream. He'd almost forgotten that he might now feel like an ordinary hybrid, but his body was still that of a savage revenant.

"Do something fool." Said Ventus.

Gesse could see a table full of food and all of it looked delicious. His hunger was his only thought as he advanced into the room.

"I'm hungry!" He shouted.

Gesse hadn't thought of the effect a revenant shouting he was hungry might have on a group of people. They all thought they were his intended meal and none of them were going to simply accept their fate. Ventus gave a long sigh as the thieves and their clients joined forces to become one desperate group of fighters.

"What is it?" Asked the female customer.

"Something escaped from the catacombs, I reckon." Someone said.

"It's a fiend come to devour us!"

That comment received a lot of acknowledgements and a lot of nodding heads gave their agreement. It seemed unanimous in the hut, a fiend had come to eat them.

"I just want food." Said Gesse.

A voice he intended to be quiet boomed out and everyone drew whatever weapon they had and attacked him. The chair killed two of the thieves, crushing their bones and spilling their blood over the floor. The chair fell apart and he was down to using his huge bare fists and prodigious strength. A sword hit his chest and simply rattled off his hardened skin, its owner's blood adding to the growing pool.

"I just wanted food, but now you're all going to die."

He crushed skulls in bare hands and shattered bones. Something within Gesse remembered being the mindless revenant and he killed without mercy. One sword did manage to wound him, but just two drops of grey blood fell from the wound.

"I'm impressed, you are a superb fighter." Said Ventus as he clung to his shoulder.

He was wading through broken bones and ripped flesh by the time his last enemy died. Gesse had intended to spare the female, but she'd died while he was killing in some kind of mindless state. He saw her jammed into a corner, her arms at an impossible angle to her ruined body. Now the food was his and the table was still miraculously undamaged. Bread, meat, ale, even some kind of backed vegetables. A meal for at least twenty hungry thieves and Gesse ate the lot. Every plate was cleared, every flagon of beer drunk.

"Feeling better?" Asked Ventus.

"Yes, we can go now."

He ran for the great river, diving deep into the water to wash the blood from his body. As he rose to surface and swam for the far shore, he heard Ventus coughing in his ear.

"Please warn me before doing things like that Gesse."

"I meant to ask, can you die ?"

There was a few moments of silence as his new friend thought about the question.

"I'm not sure, but I doubt it."

It wasn't a proper answer, but Gesse knew it was the only one he was likely to get. He pulled himself out of the river on the opposite bank and waited for Ventus to give him direction.

"We follow the river upstream for fifteen miles. Run and we can be there in time !"

Gesse ran like the wind, taking huge strides and simply jumping over all but the largest obstacles. He had fed, he now had his full strength and best off all, he was free.

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Vella didn't know why she had the sword that could kill anything in her hand; they'd left it in the hidden room in the dome. Sara must have upset her in some way, because she was plunging the weapon into her chest, over and over and over again. Sara had green blood, the colour of soup made from wild greens. There was the odd swirl of red, but whatever hybrid Sara had been, there wasn't much human in her.

"Are you alright in there ? We heard a scream."

Caspian was at the door, how she hated his weak whiny voice. He was like Sara, he was watching her, wanting her to fail. She ignored him and began to cut the skin from Sara's face, slicing it off in long narrow pieces.

"Like skinning fruit." She muttered to herself.

"I'm going to break the door down if you don't open it Vella !"

What a useless wanker Caspian was, now actually threatening her. Vella unlocked the door and looked out. Caspian had Adamaz behind him. The head of the library was plotting against her too, they were all bastards. She stabbed Caspian twice in the chest with the sword and enjoyed seeing his flesh shrivel and the life go out of his eyes.

"Kill them all Vella." Said Torfi.

Only it wasn't Torfi as she remembered him. He now walked on huge paws connected to huge furry legs. His head was still the same though, a young apprentice's head stuck on the body of a dangerous beast.

"I shouldn't be doing this." She said.

"Nonsense, they all hate you. Kill them all." Said Torfi.

Vella stabbed Adamaz six times, she knew he was tough and dead already. Could the sword kill something that had been dead already for thousands of years ? Adamaz collapsed in front of her, his flesh becoming nothing but dry powder the colour of mud.

"Now the rest, kill them all."

Vella knew deep down that something was seriously wrong.

"I shouldn't be doing this, I shouldn't be doing this. I most definitely should not be doing this....."

"Not doing what ? Wake up it's time for the ceremony."

Sara was shaking her, there was no blood on her, her face was smooth, the skin perfect.

"You're alive."

"Snap out of it Vella, you fell asleep in your gown and creased it."

At the mention of her gown, Vella was off the bed and smoothing the creases with her hand.

"Everyone is here and Galla wants to perform the ceremony before first light." Said Sara.

"How late is it?"

"Only an hour or so to go before daylight."

"I must have slept for hours."

"You must have and I've been too busy to notice. Here is your anointing oil. Rub it on your neck and we can get the ceremony started."

Vella rubbed a little of the sweet smelling oil on her neck. Tradition had it that holy oil worked as an aphrodisiac, ensuring the happy couple procreated quickly after marriage. It was all nonsense of course, but Vella rubbed a little of the oil on the top of her thigh.

"Ready?"

"Yes."

Pinthrad had found a room for her to use, but it was a long way from the cloistered garden. Vella had plenty of time for nerves to build. Supposing the large garden was empty? What if everyone had turned up, but had left because the ceremony was so late? Out of nowhere the image of Torfi as some kind of beast came into her mind.

"Is Torfi here?" She asked.

Sara didn't stop, she had hold of Vella's hand and was gently pulling her along corridor after corridor.

"He's the quiet one, with pale skin isn't he?"

"Yes."

"I think I saw him. Why are you worried about him?"

"I think he might be a Kveld."

Now Sara did stop. She looked hard at Vella before nodding at her.

"We'll talk of this another day, but we will talk about it."

"I'm not mad am I Sara?"

"No, maybe not."

The guild didn't employ many guards these days, Pinthrad blamed members who didn't pay their annual fees.

"They expect everything to be perfect, but never want to pay for it." He'd told Sara.

Despite that he'd supplied six guards in full uniform, two of them at the double doors they were approaching. There was something about the guards that made Vella feel safe, even if the long handled axes they carried were purely ornamental these days.

"Thank you." Sara said as the guards opened the doors.

They were now in the cloistered garden and it took a while for Vella to realise the space was crowded. Everyone had come to her wedding and they'd been patient enough to wait for the ceremony.

"You look beautiful," said Galla, "but we should get started."

Everyone was there, even the regulars from Muzzie's. It seemed they all wanted to comment on her gown, so Galla began to get irritated.

"We need to hold the ceremony; some people have been here for hours, including me."

Vella had no idea why the ceremony had taken so long to arrange. By now she was just happy to be getting married and trotted along obediently behind Galla.

"Good fortune child." Said Adamaz.

"Thank you."

Galla glared at him and pulled at her arm. Up against one wall a shrine had been hurriedly constructed, a shrine to the goddess Vella's family worshipped. A few things had been placed slightly wrong, but it was a useable shrine to 'Agnes the Wise.'

"Did I get it right?" Asked Caspian.

He was next to her, Torfi behind him. For a second she studied Torfi, but he was the usual hybrid with two arms and two legs, not paws. Then Caspian in his red robe had her full attention, he looked so handsome that he took her breath away. Vella wasn't delusional and she'd always realised that Caspian might have many good qualities, but he was quite plain. But now! She blinked and for the first time she really meant what she said;

"I love you Caspian."

"And I you, but did I get the shrine right? I only had a few old pictures to go by."

Vella moved a statuette and rubbed the face of the bust of Agnes, while muttering something in the language of her people.

"Now it's perfect." She said.

Galla leant right in towards them, ignoring their personal space and whispering so that only they could hear.

"You've asked for a ceremony to the old gods, under the old rules. That means your vows are for all time and if one of you commits adultery, you will die. Such a ceremony is rare these days, perhaps too rare. Do you wish me to perform such a ceremony for your marriage?"

"Yes please." Said Caspian.

Vella held Galla's hand.

"Yes."

Galla stood back, glaring at the crowd who'd become restless after hours of waiting for the wedding to actually happen.

"Quiet!" Shouted Galla. "For the next half an hour, I want mine to be the only voice in this garden." When she had the full attention of the crowd, she began.

"The couple have agreed to have a wedding under the rules of the old ways. If either of them breaks their vows, they will lose their life and their soul will be forever restless."

There were a few exclamations of surprise and a few of the older members of the crowd seemed pleased.

"Respect for the old way," said Adamaz, "good!"

Galla put her hand in a bag and threw some red dust into the air. It spread out, forming a thin cover over the gardens and then it was gone. Galla had cleansed the site of the wedding and everyone felt slightly happier.

The ceremony went on, with Galla speaking in a language that neither of the happy couple knew. At the end Galla once again leant towards them.

"Now, repeat what I tell you to the crowd and you'll be married."

They listened and turned towards their gathered friends and acquaintances, who must have easily numbered over two hundred assorted hybrids. Together and only slightly out of sync with each other, they gave their vow.

"We ask the old gods to witness our vow. We now proclaim ourselves to be as one, a couple under the old laws, passed down to us by Tomma-Goran, who he built this city. We accept that any infidelity will make our lives forfeit."

A small glowing red cloud appeared over the garden and then it was quickly gone.

"Your vow is accepted, you are now married." Said Galla.

There was no more restraint, the crowd went crazy. A marriage under the old rules and the old gods had actually accepted the vows. Of course it might have been one of Galla's tricks, but no one seemed to mind. Caspian and Vella kissed for a long time and that too, no one seemed to mind.

"A very clever trick." Adamaz said to Galla.

"No trick I assure you, I was surprised too."

Caspian and Vella were happy, probably the happiest they'd ever been. Neither of them wondered who or what had accepted their vows, which was surprising. They'd been to so many strange places and Vella had suffered from a truly horrific nightmare. It would have been wise to investigate further, but they didn't and that was a huge mistake.

~ ~

Muzzie kept watch while Norrex managed the digging of the graves. Just one guard and a female servant had been killed. It was a miracle, considering the number of attacks on the compound. The sheer number of dead creatures between their camp and the old temple had been a cause for concern.

"They're already stinking and we'll get diseases from them." Lagertha had pointed out.

They'd spent precious hours, burning and burying the remains, often only to be attacked yet again and again, right through the night. First light was just appearing and Babaef was saying a few words over the dead.

"Would anyone else like to say anything?" Asked Babaef.

"May the Lost God look over you." Said Lilleth.

They all shovelled the soil back into the hole, covering the two who were strangers, yet destined to spend eternity in the same grave.

"I'll start the teams digging again, there is enough light." Said Babaef.

"I need sleep, even if only for an hour." Said Muzzie.

"Me too." Said Lilleth.

"We all do." Agreed Lagertha.

Babaef looked at them all and nodded.

"Yes, we need sleep. Two hours and then we'll eat breakfast and begin digging again."

He'd hardly said the words when Lilleth began looking in the direction of the City. She seemed to be listening for something, or to something.

"I hear it too." Said Muzzie.

"Will these creatures give us no peace?!" Shouted Lagertha.

They looked in the same direction that Lilleth was watching with intense concentration. Something large was pounding across the rift, throwing up dust and causing small creatures to flee in panic.

"It seems to be alone." Said Lagertha.

"Fuck, it's huge." Said Norrex.

Lagertha gave him a look of disapproval and he apologised for the obscenity. That amused Muzzie, as he'd been swearing at anything and everything since arriving. He brought up the list of spells from the Hand of Arcardis and wondered what manner of beast approached.

"I think it's your brother." Said Lilleth.

"But we left him paralyzed by a spell."

There was no mistake, Muzzie too could see it was Gesse running towards them and he seemed to be waving as he ran.

"So, we are to meet your brother, the revenant." Said Babaef.

Gesse stopped running fifty yards from them and walked, holding his hand up, as if trying to show he meant them no harm. There was still the smell of decay about him, no amount of running in the fresh air would ever take that away. Lagertha dabbed perfume on a ludicrously small hanky and held it against her nose.

“He doesn’t seem to be a mindless brute,” she said, “are you sure he’s a revenant.”

“We’re sure.” Said Lilleth.

Gesse stopped a few feet from them and then they all saw the small vaporous demon climb from his shoulder and stand on the ground. The strange apparition actually bowed to them.

“Do you travel with a ghost now brother?” Asked Muzzie.

Ventus changed colour slightly, the vapour becoming darker, slightly clearer in form.

“Another fool,” said Ventus, “I’m no ghost.”

“We’re here to save you.” Said Gesse.

“He seems a very polite monster.” Said Lagertha.

Muzzie felt odd introducing everyone to his brother, but families in the City were often odd.

Everyone seemed to have a relative they rarely talked about, but Muzzie knew having a revenant for a brother was a bit strange, even for the City.

“This is my brother Gessereth Osranetherer,” he said, “everyone calls him Gesse.”

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Part 25 will be posted at the end of October.