

City of the Lost God

Part 22 – Save Merrick

“They’ll be armed with axes and blazing torches and they’ll burn you to death in the ruins of your home. Do you want that metal merchant ?”



Nethra told Merrick she was going to buy a small cart and provisions, but she wanted to see Tarin first. If anyone could fight off Silsk’s louts it was him. They just needed a day or so to get well out of the City. She always talked of leaving the slums, but deep down she felt at home there. Tandalla would give them freedom from fear, but they could be a bit tough on strangers. Nethra used her key to open the side door of Tarin’s house and found him awake and sharpening some of his tools.

“You rise early.” She said.

He didn’t seem surprised that she’d walked into his home before first light.

“I rarely sleep more than two hours a night.”

Tarin looked more than just healthy; many of his scars seemed to be actually healing. Nethra suspected his whole body was changing now that he’d become a ghūl, a creature who fed on the dead flesh of other beings.

“You look well.” She said.

“I feel well and thanks to you I’m working again.”

Nethra couldn’t cry, her upbringing had driven that skill out of her. She gripped Tarin by the arm and made sure she had his full attention.

“I’m on my way to buy a cart from old Miggs,” she said, “then I’m buying provisions. Merrick and I have to leave the City today.”

Tarin put down his tools and made her sit down, while he fetched a drink for her.

“Now Nethra, tell me everything. Why do you need to leave the City before everyone is properly awake ?”

“It’s Merrick.”

Tarin slammed his fist on the table, upsetting a bowl of fruit.

“I knew it. That useless bastard will be the death of you Nethra. Who has he upset now ?”

“This is more serious than the usual money lenders. He’s upset the dark angels and they’re looking for him.”

“You mean this is something more than Silsk and her obsession with him ?”

“Yes, if he’s caught they’ll almost certainly kill him.”

Tarin said nothing else. He removed his leather working apron and unlocked the cabinet that held his weapons and warrior clothing. Nethra watched as he put on a hard leather jerkin and boots. There were old markings on the jerkin, emblems of armies and regiments who’d fought in wars long forgotten. After the boots, Tarin fitted knee guards and forearm bracers. By the time he put on a belt and longsword, he looked a formidable fighter.

“It feels good to be wearing these clothes again,” he said, “like visiting an old friend.”

Nethra left the house and walked quickly in the direction of where old Miggs lived. Tarin kept close to her side and many they passed looked the other way or closed their doors.

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“We can’t just leave him here Muzzie. He kills people !”

Lilleth hadn't taken him somewhere private. Gesse, his bother the revenant had heard every word and others just as scathing. Gesse didn't react angrily, he just glared at her with blood red eyes.

"I'm not killing my own brother." Said Muzzie.

"Who says you could." Muttered Gesse.

Muzzie knew he could, there were several spells available through the Hand of Arcadis that would reduce his brother to dust.

"Perhaps if you gave your word not to kill anyone else." Said Muzzie.

"Can you give your word not to breathe ? I am what you see and I exist to destroy those who seek to loot this place."

Geese towered over Lilleth. Even sitting down he made her look like a child's doll in comparison to his gigantic form. Lilleth showed no fear though and stood right in front of him.

"Who set you here as a guard ?" she asked.

"This was the home of Gallan, greatest of all demon necromancers. He's been dead long enough to turn his bones to dust, but I assume his powers turned me into this form, but I can't be certain."

"What happened to you ?" Asked Muzzie.

Geese laughed, a deep and unpleasant laugh that echoed off the stone walls.

"Like everyone else I came to steal what I could. I saw a silver trinket box in the slums and broke a thief's arm to learn where it came from. I fell asleep in this accursed place and when I woke..... I was as you see me."

Lilleth sat on the floor and looked at Muzzie. They both knew there was no way of knowing how Gesse had become a revenant, much less how to reverse it.

"We could block the entrance Gesse." Said Muzzie.

"Would you condemn me to death by starvation brother ? I eat what I kill."

Muzzie felt nauseous when he realised it wasn't scavengers that were stripping the flesh from the dead.

"Lilleth is right," he said, "you can't be left here. You could kill hundreds more."

Muzzie felt for the right spell and decided the one with three warnings and marked 'eradication' looked perfect. He held up his left hand and pointed his palm at his brother.

"See you in hell brother." He said.

Geese didn't move as the yellow vortex began to form in front of Muzzie.

"Wait !" Shouted Lilleth.

Both brothers were looking at her now, but the spell was still building.

"There is the new head of the guild, Babaef," she said, "there are rumours that he has access to the old powers. Trust me, this Babaef is no ordinary sorcerer. We should at least consult him about the problem."

The spell didn't stop, it changed, into a green smoke that covered Geese and then vanished. Lilleth approached the creature and tapped his arm, which was now solid stone. His entire body now looked like a very detailed and intricate statue.

"I can reverse it quite easily. Or if we don't find a cure....."

It was left unsaid, the statue would remain there until the City itself crumbled. The smell of corruption though was still strong and would take a long time to dissipate.

"Do you know where we can find this Babaef ?" Asked Muzzie.

"I know where he lives."

They left the halls of Gallan the necromancer and went to look for Babaef.

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Babaef was the other side of the great river and leading his group along a valley that would take them to the ancient human temple.

"We've been lucky with the weather." Said Chillan.

The sky was clear and the infamous cold wind from the north had shifted round to come from the warmer west. His daughter Itet had managed to find a few wild flowers to play with and the expedition had become a pleasant trip into the countryside. The guards were alert though, strange and dangerous creatures were known to inhabit the lands north of the river. Pontus, the leader of the guard seemed particularly anxious.

"The two men I sent to scout ahead didn't return for their food ration." He said.

"We can't send more out," said Babaef, "we need the guards here, with the main party."

"We're blind without scouts." Said Pontus.

Chillan rarely argued with the head of the guild, but he supported the leader of the guard.

"With no scouts, there could be anything waiting for us around the next corner."

It had been a mistake to bring the girls, Babaef realised that now. Their presence was making him too cautious, too keen on protecting the carts because his daughters rode on them. Then he realised that Nigon had given him a gift that he hadn't been using to its full potential.

"We have a scout," he said, "and one far better than a dozen men at arms."

Babaef removed Shadow from her pocket inside his robes and his tiny pet was fast asleep.

"Wakeup, I have a job for you."

The carts had stopped moving and everyone was now watching Babaef as he put the tiny creature on the ground. Even the long stems of scrub grass seemed an obstacle for Shadow as she stretched and looked up at Babaef with large dark eyes.

"Scout ahead, make sure we're safe..... and look for two of our guards who haven't returned."

Shadow grew and changed. Not into the monster that was all teeth and claws, the form she'd chosen to adopt as the best to kill his annoying wife. This time Shadow became long and lean, though the claws on her front feet still looked formidable. A good three feet high she stood and most of her body seemed to be made of muscle and sinew. She nuzzled Babaef briefly and made the purring sound that showed she was happy. Then his pet ran off at speed, heading in the direction the two guards had been scouting. Pontus bowed to him and went back to his men.

"Such a beast is worth a hundred hybrid guards." Said Chillan.

His daughters were actually cheering as Shadow vanished up the valley. The carts began to move again and they moved at a slow but steady pace over the increasingly stony ground.

"The carts slow us down." Said Norrex.

"It isn't a race." Replied Babaef.

Two miles further up the valley they found Shadow, she was alert and watching the terrain and at her feet were the bodies of the two guards. Babaef stroked and petted Shadow, before sending her to scout the land ahead.

"Destroy any dangers."

She made an eager barking noise and vanished into the scrub. The guards had been dead for some time; their bodies were now food for hundreds of crawling creatures. Next to the bodies was an empty liquor bottle.

"They got drunk and probably fell asleep." Said Norrex.

"See the bites on their throats ? Looks like something killed them while they slept, maybe even a pack of creatures." Said Pontus.

Their armour had been pushed up in places and something had fed on their flesh. Chillan went back to make sure the main party didn't see the grisly remains of the guards.

"I'm sorry," said Pontus, "I should have searched them for strong liquor."

"Get them buried," said Babaef, "it's a bit early, but we'll set up camp for the night."

There was lightning over the mountains far to the north and Babaef hoped it wasn't a bad omen.

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Maya returned willingly with Bailig to his mansion in the lanes. It seemed strange to be a very welcome guest and lover in a place that had briefly been her prison.

"You need to be fully in control of when you change. I can teach you that." She said.

His household were treating her like they were walking on egg shells, but then she had killed several of their number. The guards especially seemed reluctant to remain in the same room with her.

"They'll be fine," Bailig had said, "I pay them to have short memories."

Sex kept interrupting his study of even the basics. He'd be on four legs and she'd be forced to convert too, or risk being his next meal rather than a lover. They had a traditional meal, she was insistent that he needed to eat his normal meals at normal intervals.

"Nothing shouts Kveld louder than an empty larder and no cook in the house." She'd told him.

There was a lot she had still to teach him. To Maya it was all obvious, but a lot of her kind had died before realising how obvious the simple things were.

"We don't get winter fever or any other diseases," she'd told him, "so pretend to get them and tell your friends how long you were in bed for."

He was a quick learner and was ahead of her on some things.

"And wear a bandage even though a wound is healed." He said.

"Yes."

She almost jumped for joy at his quick mind. Teaching the late and very stupid Borlas had been frustrating work.

"We heal overnight, but you need to keep a bandage on for days." She added.

Between sessions of fantastic sex they worked on his Kveld law and training, until Maya decided he needed a lotion to help him control the change.

"This Galla creature will know, or at least have the ingredients." She said.

They dressed in their outdoor clothes and Bailig sent for two of his men to accompany them to old town. Galla's store wasn't in the worst bit, but with old town there were no particularly good bits.

"Bring gold, plenty of gold," said Maya, "I hear she doesn't much care for our kind, but everyone cares for gold."

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Nethra bought the cart and with Tarin she found two stalls in the slums that sold provisions suitable for a long journey across the rifts. Anything fresh would spoil and anything in jars was too heavy. Jars could be dangerous too, Merrick had been sick for a week after she bought some Jangar meat in a large glass jar.

"You can't go wrong with dried meat strips and hard biscuits." One stall holder advised.

No one seemed surprised that she was preparing for a quick exit from the City and that worried her more than anything. Everyone seemed to know Merrick had offended the inhabitants of the tower in some way. She bought enough bottled mild beer to last them several days and the small cart was full, or would be once the gold was packed up and put between the bottles.

"We can carry our bedding and a small tent." She told Tarin.

Nethra should have known something was wrong when there were no children playing in the area of the slums where they lived. She helped Tarin pull the cart around a bend in the badly rutted lane and her house should have been fifty yards ahead, just before the drainage ditch. Nethra spun about, trying to fix her location and knowing the impossible was true.

"It's gone." She said.

"What's gone?"

She was pointing at a gap between two shacks, where there was nothing now but dust and a few loose wooden boards.

"Our house, it's gone!"

No one was about, everyone was hiding in their shacks and houses. Normally the slightest hiccup in the daily routine of the slums caused a gawping crowd, but not a living soul was looking at the remains of her house. Tarin pulled the cart onto the space where they'd been planning to build an extension.

"Everything is ruined, all my nice clothes."

Nethra was down on her hands and knees trying to retrieve a few of her precious dresses from under the broken walls, but everything was ripped and ruined.

"There is one good thing," said Tarin, "they probably did this because they couldn't find Merrick."

"But he was here. I left him packing our things."

Nethra didn't cry, girls of her tribe were taught not to cry almost as soon as they were born. A door opened in a nearby shack and a child leant out and quietly mouthed one word at her;

"Silsk."

Then the door closed. No one wanted to befriend those under a sentence of death from the towers.

"Help me," she said, "the gold was in the new cellar Merrick was digging, they may have missed it."

She was coping with an impossible situation, it was how the holy woman of the tribe had taught her. First she'd try to find the gold and then she'd search for Merrick. If necessary she'd find a way into the tower and cut Silsk's throat, but she wasn't going to give up.

Tarin had the strength of a ghūl and working together they quickly had the broken walls and roof pushed into the street. They had no one to watch the sky, Nethra just hoped the dark angels wouldn't return that day.

"Here, there's a trap door." Said Tarin.

The trap door had been under their bed, but now it was covered in broken plaster and her ruined underwear. Tarin pulled at the trap door and there seemed to be a body in the cellar. An arm was raised over a dusty head, but there was no movement from the body.

"Who is it, are they dead?" Asked Nethra.

Tarin grabbed the arm and pulled and the body was up out of the ground and placed in the ruins of the house. Nethra did cry now, she thought she'd never stop crying.

"Oh no, it's Merrick!" She yelled.

Tarin grabbed hold of Merrick and rubbed the dust off his lips and blew into his mouth.

"Calm down Nethra. Merrick knew what he was doing. He hid down there knowing there wasn't much air, but there's a lot of dredger in Merrick and he can survive for a long time with very little fresh air."

Tarin held Merrick up, dangling him like a doll, constantly thumping his chest. Eventually a few bubbles of grey liquid appeared out of Merrick's mouth and Tarin seemed satisfied.

"He'll live, but he'll be weak for days." He said.

At that moment a person rather well dressed for the slums approached and it took Nethra a moment to realise it was Caspian.

"I came to warn him ! I see I'm too late." Said Caspian.

Waide was with him, their paths had crossed by the edges of the great river. Waide was more wary than Caspian and only showed herself once she perceived there was no threat.

"This looks like Silsk's work." She said.

"More likely to be Olvir and his gang of throat cutters. But Merrick lives, though he's likely to be ill for some time." Said Tarin.

"It wasn't Olvir." Said Waide.

She moved a finger across her own throat, the usual sign for indicating death had come for the person being discussed.

"Are you sure ?" Asked Nethra.

"Yes, did it myself. Didn't know it was him at the time. Silsk will turn the City inside out looking for whoever killed him."

"You all need to leave the City. I'll take my chances on the protection of Adamaz in the Dome." Said Caspian.

Tarin wrapped Merrick in a grubby blanket, while Nethra dug the dusty bags of gold out of the cellar. To anyone watching it would look as if Nethra was taking her clothes and Merrick's dead body, which was what Tarin wanted them to think.

"So where are we going ?" Said Waide, assuming Nethra would accept her company on the road.

"Quron, then the pilgrim trail to Tandalla." Replied Nethra.

"I'll travel with you until Merrick is fit again." Said Tarin.

Caspian was shaking his head and pointing towards the towers.

"You'll never survive the first day going that way," he said, "they've probably already sent people that way and it only needs Aeony to spot you from the air. They know Quron will be your first choice."

"So where do we go ?" Asked Nethra.

"Head north. Go across the great river and head straight north into the mountains. You can be at the settlement of Avald in two days."

Tarin whistled.

"They're all crazy mountain people in Avald."

"Yes," said Caspian, "so crazy that the dark angels never go there and no one will suspect you'd go that way."

"They're not that bad. They believe in live and let live. If we leave them alone, we'll have no problems in Avald." Added Waide.

Nethra had appointed herself leader, at least until Merrick was his old self again.

"It makes sense," she said, "we'll go to Avald and stay there until things have cooled down. Then we'll make the journey to Quron."

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Muzzie took Lilleth back to his tavern to tidy up; their covering of grime and stink of decay had been gaining unwanted attention from passers-by.

"Where have you been ?" Asked Sara.

She was turning up her nose while she found him fresh clothing.

"I have a tunic and skirt somewhere that will fit Lilleth." She added.

"We were on our way to see Babaef, but we thought he wouldn't see us if we turned up looking like ruffians."

Lilleth had claimed their bedroom to change in and was shouting through the slightly open door. Muzzie was changing in the back room, much to the disgust of Sara.

"I've told you about this before," she scolded him, "if one of the girls sees you naked it might give her a nasty turn."

He grinned and took a playful swipe at her backside. If Lilleth hadn't been in his bedroom, the playful swipe might have ended up as an afternoon of carnal delight.

"Good job you came back here, Babaef isn't at home." Said Sara.

Lilleth appeared, looking better, but still smelling her own arms.

"Give me five minutes under the water pump and I'll be ready." She said.

"How do you know he's not at home?" Asked Muzzie.

Sara threw his dirty clothes onto the laundry pile in the corner and gave a long drawn out sigh.

"Where have you two been? In a cave out in the scrublands? The whole town turned out to see Babaef lead his expedition out of the City."

Muzzie helped Lilleth pump the water into the sink and then he washed his own arms. After quite a bit of sniffing each other, they seemed satisfied they no longer stank, or at least not enough to offend the general populace.

"We've had all sorts of dramas Muzzie," added Sara, "Caspian and Merrick have upset the dark angels in some way and Vella is up in her room and packing to leave."

"Packing to go where?" Asked Muzzie.

Vella leaving was serious. Aeony might want her money back and he'd given most of it to Jonas at Winshin's, in return for the pile of building materials that now filled his back yard.

"She was talking about marrying Caspian and moving to the Dome."

Muzzie's head was spinning with the possibilities that might offer. He might get enough sellable information to buy another entire tavern.

"Where was Babaef going?" Asked Lilleth.

"North it seems. He took his daughters with him, several servants and two carts. They must be leaving a trail that a blind cleric could follow."

"Where did they cross the river?" Asked Muzzie.

"Right behind the boneyard, they crossed and headed north east."

"We should go after them, they can't have gone far with children and servants in the group."

Muzzie nodded at her.

"I need to speak to Vella before we go, I won't be long."

As he climbed the stairs to the staff rooms he heard Sara asking Lilleth about where they'd been and he knew Sara would soon learn of Geese and his fate. He knocked on the rickety door of Vella's room and waited for a mumbled response before opening the door. The room was small and dark, much better room were planned for the new extension.

"I hear congratulations are in order?" He said.

She was sat on the bed, two large cloth bags full of her belongings by her side. She was crying. Not loudly, but her face was wet and she was quietly sobbing. He shoved her bags to one side and just managed to fit his huge frame on the bed beside her. He hugged her, it seemed the only thing to do and she hugged him back.

"I want to move to the Dome, but I'll miss you all so much." She said.

"You can come and visit us."

That comment caused much louder sobbing.

"I can't Muzzie, we'll almost be prisoners. We did something really bad. So bad that the dark angels want to kill us."

"What did you do that was so bad?"

She was whispering to him, he had trouble hearing the first few words, but he heard enough.

"..... we found a weapon, a weapon that can kill anything. We killed something called a Roruss and that is why everyone is so upset."

He couldn't help his excitement, that knowledge alone might gain him enough gold to furnish his new extension to the tavern. A Roruss indeed, that explained a lot.

"We can come and visit you then, Sara and me and perhaps some of the staff."

"You would? That would be wonderful Muzzie."

He actually hated himself, but he had to say it.

"We can keep you up to date with gossip about the tavern and you can tell us what goes on in the Dome."

"I'm sure you'd be bored by the lives of the librarians."

He reached for her hand and held her gaze.

"I'm in trouble with the dark angels too. I really do need to know what happens in the Dome, but I won't pass on anything that could hurt you or Caspian."

She nodded at him and leant up and kissed his cheek.

"I understand Muzzie. It seems we'll need to look after each other."

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Adamaz had been watching Torfi and the boy had learned to hide his new gifts well. There was the aura of Kveld about him and Adamaz had been expecting Maya to turn another member of the library staff. Torfi though seemed a natural. He obviously hunted and fed at night, but he still had a full breakfast with his friends and showed no outward signs of his recent conversion to a beast that hunted on four feet. Was the admiration due to him or Maya? Adamaz suspected Maya was very good at instructing those she turned, but Torfi had used that training very well. He'd invited the boy for a talk in his chambers after the library closed and the apprentice had seemed a little nervous.

"You can relax Torfi," he said, "I know what you've become and I don't see it as a problem. In fact it may be an aid to your future career."

Would he bluff it out or confess? Adamaz hoped they weren't going to fight. He didn't doubt his ability to turn Torfi into a dry husk in a matter of minutes, but he genuinely liked the lad.

"I didn't ask to be a Kveld," said Torfi, "but I do enjoy the strength and speed it gives me. I haven't seen Maya since she gave me the gift."

Adamaz smiled at the boy and gave him a glass of very expensive and illicit human liquor.

"I have no intention of banning Maya from the Dome, but you may never see her again. She obtained the information her client required and will probably leave the City."

Torfi drank his liquor and Adamaz relaxed, there would be no need for anyone to fight.

"Most of the apprentices leave after a few years," he said, "very few remain to become senior librarians. We can offer you a certain amount of protection and somewhere where your..... gifts won't be a hindrance to your work."

"Thank you sir, I do enjoy my work in the library."

Adamaz had no intention of replacing Caspian as his heir in waiting, even though the whole marriage thing had caught him by surprise. Caspian was unreliable, greedy and vain, but he had a brain and he'd keep the library strong. Torfi was bright enough, but he'd never be good enough to run the

library. He had other uses though. Adamaz pushed a few gold coins across the table, he'd never met an apprentice who didn't like gold.

"There may be other work, more suited to your new gifts. I will of course pay extra, if you'll agree to serve the library as a Kveld?"

Torfi was beaming at him, the lad seemed overjoyed.

"Oh yes sir, I'd like that very much."

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There was a lot of agitation in the City; someone had upset the status quo in a serious way. Galla felt the vibes and she'd sensed the ancient creature die, though she had no idea it was a near mythical Roruss that had died. Galla had added a few metal struts to strengthen her front door and device that prevented it from being bashed in. She let her door fall back against the anti-intrusion device and looked out at Bailig and his small party.

"We need your wisdom and some ingredients." Said Maya.

Galla was in no mood to be rushed, not even by a rich metal merchant. She let her gaze fall on each in turn and found no malice in any of them. She opened her door wide and beckoned them inside.

"So now you travel with the one who almost killed you." She said.

Galla took them past her business counter and into her back room, she wanted to hear about Bailig and his new companion and that meant getting somewhere she could sit in comfort. She shuffled about to get comfortable in her favourite chair and left her guests to sit where they wanted.

"What do you need from me?" She asked.

"He needs something to control the change." Said Maya.

Bailig was quiet and seemed to be in the grip of some kind of inner turmoil. With some alarm Galla realised he was fighting the desire to transform, a fight he was losing.

"I have something." She said.

Galla got up and to everyone's surprise she ran into her store and came back with a small packet of powder.

"This will work temporarily while I prepare an unguent." She said.

She ripped the folded end off the packet and sprinkled a fine golden dust over Bailig. He instantly seemed more relaxed.

"Thank you, what was that?" He asked.

"Something to increase your resistance, but I need to prepare something stronger. The ingredients are difficult to obtain and very expensive."

Bailig took a bulging purse from his belt and allowed it to drop onto the floor in front of his chair. It made the kind of sound that left no doubt that it was full of gold. Galla picked up the purse and removed a large number of coins.

"There is one fresh ingredient required, one Maya should find it easy to provide." Said Galla.

"What do you need?" Maya Asked.

"I need the 'Amstera Miltus.' The essence of an innocent."

"Does it need to be alive?"

"No, a fresh kill will do."

Maya looked around the room and noticed the stairs leading up.

"Can I use your bedroom to undress?" She asked.

"Yes, but don't harm my bird."

Maya climbed the stairs and they all heard the bird squawking. Then there was the sound of a window opening and Maya had gone to obtain the precious ingredient. Galla ignored everyone and began collecting the ingredients she already had on her shelves.

"You can get things off high shelves for me. Your guards can keep well out of the way." She told Bailig

Everything went into a large marble bowl, while Galla stirred the ingredients and sent Bailig to bring her jars and boxes of all shapes and sizes.

"You're lucky," she told him, "few seers have Indrex eggs in their collection of ingredients and the Indrex is now almost extinct."

Within an hour Maya was back, carrying a bundle wrapped in a grubby blanket.

"Where did you get it?" Asked Galla.

"The slums, does that matter?"

"It might, if it carries a disease."

Galla put the grubby bundle onto her work bench and unwrapped the body of a hybrid infant. The child had a lot of dredger in its makeup, but it looked to have been healthy.

"A child," said Bailig, "it looks only a few months old. Is this mumbo jumbo really necessary?"

Galla turned on him, fury in her voice.

"Yes it is! Unless you want to find yourself alone in a mansion full of decaying corpses. You'll feed on all your staff and guards and eventually they'll come for you. One morning you'll find hundreds of people surrounding your home. They'll be armed with axes and blazing torches and they'll burn you to death in the ruins of your home. Do you want that metal merchant?"

"No."

Bailig wouldn't even look at her now, he averted his gaze and stared at the wall. Galla used a sharp knife to cut into the body, loosening the tissues around the tiny heart. She carefully removed the heart and then cut into it, looking for the precious essence. Most people wouldn't have noticed the small piece of flesh she looked for, but Galla had been taught well. She used a pair of tiny pincers and the knife to remove less than a quarter of an inch of tissue from the heart.

"Is that it?" Asked Maya.

"Yes, we're all just dust without the Miltus."

Maya looked at her with eager eyes as Galla dropped the tiny piece of flesh into the bowl. The contents convulsed and a green mist rose up from the bowl and touched the ceiling before subsiding.

"It worked," said Galla, "the child wasn't diseased."

For over an hour Galla worked the contents of the bowl, reducing everything to a fine unguent. She added a few drops of plant extract to give the mixture a pleasant smell, before putting it all into a stoneware pot.

"Use it sparingly and it should last a year. After that your control should be much better without the unguent." She told Bailig.

"Where do I apply it?"

"Any patch of bare skin. No more than twice a week, or you may find changing at all becomes difficult."

Bailing was still avoiding her gaze, but he gave her more gold from the purse and then left her store.

Maya followed him and his guards followed her.

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"I know everyone is tired Pontus, but I want a fence of thorn scrub around our camp, before we go to sleep tonight." Said Babaef.

It was only an hour before dark, the guards would have difficulty finding enough thorn scrub, but Babaef had a feeling they'd need the fence. All day Shadow had been returning to him on a regular basis and every time her teeth were red with the blood of those she'd hunted. She only hunted predators, so that meant no one was sleeping until there was a solid scrub fence around the camp. Babaef could see the ancient human temple, or at least the few remaining stones that marked where it had once stood. It was about two hundred yards away, on the bank of a small river that flowed down the valley. He was nervous and he wasn't really sure why.

"We're a long way from the temple." Said Chillan.

"Close enough. Tomorrow I want the fence reinforced and a proper gate added."

"Yes, of course master."

His daughters were playing without a care in the world, but Babaef looked at the harmless pile of stones by the river and knew something bad lurked under them. Lagertha put her hand in his and followed his gaze.

"It troubles me too, there is something there that hates us." She said.

"If I was sensible I should take us all back to the City in the morning."

"But you won't."

"No, I won't. The potential prize is too important."

His nervousness seemed to rub off on the guards and a very solid thorn scrub fence was built well before they wanted to settle down for the night. A gate of scrub with particularly long thorns was placed in the gap in the fence and a watch was set to keep the camp fire blazing all night. Shadow didn't need a gate, she leapt the fence and dropped the head of a fearsome predator at Babaef's feet.

"Are there many of these?" He asked his pet.

She simply nodded and looked at him, if only Nigon had given her the power of speech.

"Keep close to the camp while we sleep."

Shadow had gone, back over the fence and into the night. Babaef told his daughters a bedtime story and then he joined Lagertha in their tent.

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Part 23 will be posted at the end of August.