

City of the Lost God

Part 27 – Dark and Slithering

“The City was unforgiving when it came to the insane, they were driven out onto the rifts to die of starvation or one of the other numerous ways the rifts could remove life from the unwary.”



“She’s an angel Casp, we have to do something.” Said Vella.

“Not a good one, think of all the people who’ve died trying to free her.”

They were stood in front of the statue of Inanna, although now they knew it wasn’t a statue, but the body of the Genova, turned to stone. It was harder for Vella to ignore the call or whatever it was the statue exuded. Caspian had his duties, but Vella had all day to wander around the Dome and she invariably ended up stood in front of the angel.

“If she was good, would she be constantly trying to trick people into using the puzzle ?” Asked Caspian.

“She’s desperate Casp, I can feel it. All those years trapped, maybe she can still think and feel. Imagine it Casp ! It might have been us, trapped in the upper Dome by LLud. What might we have done to be free ?!”

Caspian had heard similar outbursts, Vella was becoming drawn into some kind of emotional hurricane by the statue and it worried him. He too felt a desire to solve the puzzle, but he could resist it, Vella could not. Caspian had hidden the puzzle pieces while he was certain that his wife was sleeping.

“We have the sword that can kill anything.” Said Vella.

“So you really want us to go to Gorshan ?”

For a moment he saw the madness in Vella’s eyes, saw her wanting to scream ‘Yes.’ Then sanity returned as quickly as it was gone and she was in his arms, her tears dampening his shirt.

“Of course not Casp, but can we at least do some research and see if there is any way we can help Inanna ?”

The City was unforgiving when it came to the insane, they were driven out onto the rifts to die of starvation or one of the other numerous ways the rifts could remove life from the unwary. Caspian thought about seeing Galla and obtaining one of her powders, but he really had no alternative, he had to do as his new wife asked.

“I will Vella,” he said, “I’ll get Torfi to help and we’ll research everything the library has on Gorshan. It won’t be quick though and you must give your word not to look for the puzzle.”

She didn’t look up at him, but her crying became more intense.

“So you’ve hidden it from me ?”

“It seemed to be for the best.”

“Perhaps it is, I know I’d have to put the pieces together again, if I knew where it was.”

Caspian walked over to the Genova and slapped the stone face.

“It’s all your fault Inanna. I wish we’d never found you.” He said.

Vella flew at him her nails reaching for his face. Caspian held her, allowing her to rake his chest with her sharp nails. Quite quickly she was calm again and sobbing, her head against his chest.

“I’m so sorry Caspian.”

“You need to control yourself Vella. You know what Adamaz will do if he thinks you’ve been touched by chaos.”

She knew well enough, everyone in the City knew that insanity was a sign of a person being touched by chaos. There was never any mercy, the insane were banished from the City and killed if they attempted to return. Caspian had always considered the practise as barbaric, a way for people to rid themselves of relatives who'd become a burden. Now though he wondered, perhaps sometimes people really were victims of some kind of possession.

"Don't worry Vella, I'll research Gorshan and if there is any way it can be done. We will turn Inanna back to being a creature of flesh again."

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"I can see them now." Said Maya.

"They're no threat to us, they're going to the same place that we are." Said Bailig.

Nalia had fed them and given them ale, before showing them to a small room up under the rafters. Maya had climbed out of bed at first light to watch the creatures of darkness slither past, on their way to the catacombs. She tried hard to concentrate on observing their shapes, but it was like trying to concentrate on a dream, or shapes in the clouds.

"There are hundreds," she said, "where can they be coming from?"

Bailig joined her at the window, watching the phantoms drift across the fields, heading slowly towards the City.

"My mother always said that every murder created a dark thing, every bad act." Said Bailig.

Maya chuckled and playfully punched him on the arm.

"I hope your mother was wrong," she said, "or we'll have millions of them to fight."

"So you do intend to fight them?"

Maya watched as the dark things came upon a creature in the fields. A harmless four legged creature, though it was impossible to identify as the slithering things covered it. By the time they moved on, the creature was dead, ripped apart, its blood staining the ground.

"Of course I'll fight them. Do you honestly feel kinship with these things?" She asked.

"I can feel they serve the same master and obey the same call. But no, I will not stand with them once we get to the City."

Maya dressed, pulling clothes from her bag, things that had already been worn several times. She shook everything, as if that might freshen the clothes and make them more pleasant to wear. Bailig seemed happy to put on the same clothes for days, men were all beasts at heart.

"Do you think the people downstairs can see them?" Asked Bailig.

"Mercifully no, I don't believe they can. Maybe just a shape as the light changes from night to day, but no real detail. If they could see what we see, it would surely drive them mad."

Maya watched as more of the dark things moved past the house, as yet unable to force an entry past locked doors and shuttered windows. She walked down the three flights of stairs into the lower hallway and then into the large kitchen.

"The boy says he saw one," said Nalia, "a dark thing, prodding at the barn door."

The boy hadn't been there the night before, another stray? Maya looked out of the window and saw hundreds of the slithering things, but decided to say nothing.

"We looked from upstairs and saw nothing." She said.

"One did this to me last night." Said the boy.

He looked to be about twelve, too young to be facing such evil and yet too old to avoid it. He unbuttoned his jacket and there was a long wound that ran from his collar bone to the belt of his trousers. Maya examined it and knew it was unlikely to cause the boy any lasting damage.

"It looks nasty," she said, "but it's shallow. Keep it clean and you'll be fine."

"There's bread if you want breakfast." Said Nalia.

"We'd best be off, but we're both grateful for the food last night and a bed to sleep in." Said Maya.

"I'll remember your excellent stew for a while." Added Bailig.

Maya took several coins from her purse and pushed them into Nalia's hand, closing her friend's fingers over them.

"You're giving me far too much for a night's lodging."

"I know Nalia, but soon you'll need coin to buy food."

Nalia pulled her into the hallway and leaned close to whisper.

"You see them don't you? I always guessed you had the sight."

"Yes I see them."

"Is it bad? Should we run?"

"It's bad but don't run. Keep your doors closed and keep livestock in the barn."

They left the house, hearing the old man push at least five bolts home as they walked away from the house.

"I see very few now it's full daylight." Said Bailig.

"As long as they're unable to force entry into homes there is a chance the people of the farmlands will survive." She said.

They'd gone barely a mile when they found the body of a young woman, her clothes ripped from her body, her neck torn apart by dozens of wounds.

"The boy was lucky." Said Maya.

Bailig examined the body and then used her ripped dress to cover her, giving her a little modesty in death.

"They don't seem to feed on what they kill." He said.

"I feel it, so do you Bailig. They just want to kill anything that isn't of the dark. I pray to the eight great demon gods that they're never able to break down locked doors. If they ever can, the rift will be wiped clean of every hybrid."

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They crossed the great river near Podd's yard, just about the only safe place to cross the swirling waters for miles. There were legends that the humans had built a wooden bridge on the spot, but nothing remained now apart from two islands of rubble, which calmed the flow of water.

"Well he can't enter the City, there'll be panic." Said Babaef.

They'd all become so used to having the revenant around that they looked at Babaef as though he was crazy. The smell was still fairly bad, but even Babaef's surviving daughter was happy to ride on his shoulders.

"I suppose you're right," said Lilleth, "can't we simply cover him with a blanket?"

"A blanket! He's twelve feet tall and as many wide." Said Chillan.

"I can move almost unseen in the dark." Said Gesse.

"But it's morning now silly." Said Itet, playfully thumping his ear.

The problem seemed the signal for a rest and everyone sat on the riverbank behind Podd's yard, the smell of boiling fat adding to the pungent odour coming from Gesse.

"Podd has seen a lot of things in his time," said Lilleth, "we could ask him to hide Gesse in his yard until dark."

"Some say that Podd is older than the City." Added Chillan.

"The answer is obvious, or should be." Said Ventus.

Ventus hadn't spoken in hours, he'd allowed Babaef's daughter to ride on Gesse's shoulder and the vaporous demon had sat quietly on the cart.

"Well ? Out with it ghost ?" Said Muzzie.

"I'm not a gho..... oh why do I bother. You have probably the two most powerful wielders of magic on the 1st rift and yet you're wondering about hiding Gesse under a blanket!"

"Of course, we can make him invisible." Said Muzzie.

Ventus gave a deep sigh and hit his palms against his forehead.

"Or how about a simple spell to make him appear less.... er.....horrendous."

"I'm stood right here you know."

"I'm sorry," said Ventus, "but a second year student of the art could do it."

"Yes of course, of course. Muzzie, one of your spells might be perfect for this." Said Babaef.

Muzzie pulled up the spells dealing with changing perception, discussing the descriptions with Babaef. It took a few minutes, but eventually Muzzie stood in front of his revenant brother and lifted his right arm.

"You're not going to turn me into something nasty are you ?" Asked Gesse.

Everyone apart from Ventus resisted the temptation to laugh, but he rolled around on the ground, pointing at Gesse.

"Is there anything nastier ?"

"Once again, I am right here you annoying dead demon."

Muzzie ignored them, reciting the words to the spell and focusing the effect on his brother. There was no cloud of darkness this time, no lightning. A dazzling light appeared around Gesse and the twelve foot revenant with rotting flesh and wild red eyes was no longer there, or so it seemed. Now there was a Lord of some kind, or at least a nobleman of good breeding.

"I think you overdid it a bit." Said Ventus.

"What do I look like ?" Asked Gesse.

Even his voice was different. Gone was the booming sound of the revenant and now he spoke in mellow tones, almost musical.

"You look like most of my neighbours in Upper Town. It is a bit overdone, but it will have to do." Said Babaef.

Gesse ran to the river, eager to see his reflection in the calm water by the shore. He looked unhappy at what he saw, using his hand to agitate the water and destroy the reflection.

"I look no different !"

"You won't to yourself," said Babaef, "that is how these spells work. Only others will see you as the..... rather grand looking person in clothes far too good for the slums."

"The smell wasn't affected much." Added Ventus.

Sadly it was true. Gesse now looked like a person of noble birth, but the stench of corruption still hung about him.

"Everywhere in the slums stink," said Muzzie, "no one will notice. We should get moving, or those in the towers might become curious."

"Get the carts back to my house," said Babaef, "and then we can talk about the catacombs."

He may have looked a mere five foot four or so tall, but Gesse hadn't lost any of his strength and he easily pushed the heavy cart past Podd's yard and onto the road that eventually led to the better parts of town.

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Galla was pleased that a new family were moving in just across the street from her, there had been too many empty houses in the street for far too long. Empty houses tended to become used by thieves, assassins or even worse. Empty houses meant nervous customers and that meant fewer sales of her powders and charms. A worker of metal in the street again, Galla was feeling pleased and she liked Hervör, the artisans wife.

"The house is nicely cleaned out, but they did mention someone had been living here illegally." Said Hervör.

Galla chuckled; her new neighbour was going to have to learn fast about who ruled the City and what illegal actually meant.

"There are a lot of families coming in off the rifts," said Galla, "they tend to live where they can. The people who lived here were dealing in stolen goods, so I'm glad the tower cleared them out."

"The tower?"

"Where the dark angels live, you must have seen them."

The woman in front of her went pale and looked around for her children, only relaxing when she'd seen where all three of them were playing.

"Yes, I've seen Silsk and others, they seem..... unpleasant."

"Oh they are, very. Luckily they are few in number and can't watch everything that goes on in Old Town. You'll do well here as long as you tell the tower nothing and treat your neighbours with respect."

"I will, that Silsk creature actually threatened my children."

Children and three of them, all young. Galla was disappointed there were children, but she hid the feelings well and smiled at the urchins as they explored their new home. Children to an empath were like a blanket of fog and they were just across the street from her home. To children every disagreement is the end of the world, every minor injury is agony. Their unrestrained emotions would be like a gun going off in her head, drowning out the softer emotions she was trying to listen to. Children in the street were a nightmare, but she smiled at the youngest and made the right noises.

"They're delightful," she said, "you must be very proud of them."

"I am, but they're difficult to keep amused. Is there a teacher in the area you could recommend?"

A teacher! Someone in the City who actually wanted her children to do well. Galla was beginning to really like the woman from the North.

"There is a school in Upper Town, but it's expensive. I know of two women who can teach the common tongue, a little arithmetic and enough history to keep your children occupied. I could get them to call on you, if you'd like?"

"Yes, please do. I'm having trouble keeping them out of Weland's workshop and he gets so angry with them. While you're here you must meet my husband."

There was no chance to refuse, the lady of the house had the back door open and was leading Galla towards a large and solid outhouse.

"It's perfect," said Hervör, "the last occupant must have been a worker of metals."

"The last three occupants of your house were apothecaries, good ones. Old Oleg built the outside workshop, must have been a hundred years ago or more. He dabbled in dangerous potions and didn't want to risk setting his house on fire."

"You knew him well Galla?"

"Oh yes, I knew all of them well, this whole street was nothing but purveyors of powders, lotions and potions once. If you wanted a love potion or a cure for warts, everyone came to our street."

Galla was chuckling as they approached the door to outside workshop and Hervör pushed it open.

“Are there still many apothecaries in the street ?”

“No, I’m the last and I’m not a traditional apothecary.”

Her new friend was obviously expecting her to say more, but her husband was turning and scowling at the interruption to his work. Galla noticed he was constructing a furnace against the far wall.

“We have a visitor dear. Galla has the shop over the road.”

He avoided eye contact with her as he turned, which didn’t impress Galla.

“Galla, apothecary, seer and healer, it’s good to meet you Wēland.” Said Galla.

His eyes suddenly changed and he actually moved towards her.

“Galla of course, they told me you could provide me with better light than the awful oil that burns a dull yellow.”

Galla was becoming curious about who the ‘they’ were who’d been recommending her, probably Silsk’s private guard.

“I have some of the weed from beyond gateway, from the place that is never named. It burns as clear as daylight, but it is very expensive. Only thieves, smugglers and assassins can usually afford it. I do have treated oil that burns with a bright white light and that will cost you much less. I can also provide a powder that will light your furnace wood on the dampest winter day.”

“Excellent,” said Wēland, “I can see we’ll have to visit your shop once the children are asleep.”

“You are most welcome, but you haven’t told me what you make. How can I tell my customers that they must buy your wares, if I don’t know what they are.”

It was his wife who took her over to a simple shelf that looked to have been hung on the wall quite recently.

“Wēland still has to get his forge working here, but we brought these with us.”

Galla was amazed at the workmanship. Belt buckles, fancy buttons, daggers, ceremonial knives. Nothing large or capable of being used in a serious battle, but everything was exquisite and of the finest quality. A ceremonial knife caught her eyes, it looked to have been based on Pilgrim’s knife which hung in the temple in Tandalla. Galla picked it up and flicked her finger nail against the blade, enjoying the bell like noise of perfectly hardened steel.

“You visited Tandalla ?” She asked.

“No, I’ve seen pictures in books.”

Galla had her own ceremonial knife, it even had two enchantments that a visiting shaman had placed on it. It looked quite ordinary though and customers expected a bit of showmanship these days, a bit of theatre. She imagined their faces as she sliced off a wart with the knife she held, or used it to cut through an umbilical cord.

“It’s perfect, how much is it ?” She asked.

“We’re not really open for business yet.” Said Wēland.

“And we’re not really used to the local money.” Added Hervör.

Galla held the knife up, allowing the light from the window to glitter off the semi-precious stones that had been expertly inserted into the handle.

“Then I will teach you, “she said, “for a knife of this quality you could easily expect to get a hundred imperial.”

They were both looking at her with no sign of understanding.

“Imperial, what’s that ?” Asked Hervör.

“You must be from a long way North, I’ve never met anyone who doesn’t use imperial gold coins. It’s the currency of our sworn enemy, but it’s of known purity and value, so everyone uses it. There are

gold coins minted by the metal brokers in the City, but some have very little gold in them and a lot of other rubbish instead. City coins are only used to buy food and whores in the slums. Ushong coins have a lot of lead in them, so you ask for three times as many Ushong as you would imperial. Then there is Tandalla, but I can see your eyes glazing over.”

“No, we have to learn all this.” Said Wēland.

“Agreed, but it’ll be a lot easier tonight, with some wine at my shop.”

Galla was again lifting the beautiful ceremonial knife and smiling.

“You could get a hundred imperial for this, but you’re going to let me have it for twenty.”

“Why would I do that ?” Asked Wēland.

“Because I will teach you the ways of the City, about its inhabitants, its money and I will encourage my clients to commission items from you.”

Wēland was still standing there with his eyebrows raised and didn’t seem inclined to let her have the knife for twenty.

“For instance,” Galla added, “the thieves using your house probably came in through the sewer grate in your basement. Have you made sure it’s now secure ?”

“We don’t have a basement.” Said Hervör.

“Oh yes you do, I’ve been down there on more than one occasion. Follow me.”

Galla was enjoying herself now, knife still in hand she led the way across the rubble strewn yard and back into the house.

“Here, see ? Press this panel and push.”

“The children wondered about the dirty mark.” Said Hervör.

Countless hands had pressed the panel for years and as Galla pressed and pushed, a wooden door opened in the scullery wall and the first three or four steps could be seen, leading down into the darkness.

“We’ll need a lamp,” said Galla, “and perhaps a sword. Silsk’s guards may not have cleared out the basement.”

The children appeared, eager and curious, but Hervör sent them to play in another room. Her husband brought a lamp from another room and he’d found a wicked looking short sword. Galla took the lamp and led the way, it seemed the best way to earn her discount on the knife.

“As I thought,” she said, “the basement hasn’t been cleared out. They probably heard the guards upstairs and fled through the sewers.”

There were candles everywhere and all had burned down to nothing. Several plates held the remains of a poor meal of some kind of grain and even the family’s best cups had been left behind in the haste to escape.

“There are children’s clothes here.” Said Wēland.

“Thieves can have families,” said Galla, “they’re not all bad, but some of those who enter the City as refugees aren’t always good either. I’d lock down the grate before they decide to return and see what you possess that is worth stealing.”

Wēland went to the far corner of the basement, where a trap door was still leaning against the wall.

“I need light over here.” He said.

Galla swung the lamp over the hole and the grate was wide open, they could see right down into the sewer below. On the floor next to the trap door was a child’s toy, a homemade rag doll that had seen better days.

“Where do you think they went ?” Asked Hervör.

“Another house in Old Town,” said Galla, “there are lots of empty houses.”

"I'll bring my equipment and make sure the grate never opens again." Said Wēland.

"Just jam the lock so you can open it from this side," said Galla, "the dark angels are fickle and one day you made need a way to escape the City. Oh, and put something heavy on the trap door, I have a marble statue of Lord Valsec the Usurper on mine."

"Thank you Galla," said Hervör, "we might have been killed in our sleep."

Galla saw her opportunity and counted out twenty imperial from her purse. She held her hand out and looked at Wēland.

"Will you accept twenty for the knife now?"

He smiled and accepted her money.

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Tarin rechecked his pack, he was taking just the minimum required for the trip back to the City. A bed roll on top of his pack, he'd build a makeshift shelter out of branches and leaves each night. Most hybrids would freeze to death during the sub-zero mountain nights, but Tarin wasn't normal, he was a ghūl and almost indestructible.

"I don't want your gold Merrick, I never came with you for the gold. You're friends and you needed help." Said Tarin.

Nethra was holding two of the incredibly pure gold coins, the type they'd brought back from their trip to the flooded cellars. Each one was the weight of fifty imperial coins and Nethra had trouble holding them.

"Take them Tarin, you might need them one day. Put them under your mattress or bury them in the yard, one day you may need a little insurance." She said.

He took the coins from her and had to undo his pack to put one down each side. It made his pack far heavier, but still well under the weight he was capable of carrying.

"Thank you Nethra."

Tarin shook hands with Merrick and deliberately kept hold of his hand.

"She's far too good for you."

"I know," said Merrick, "I'm a huge disappointment to everyone, including myself, but I will do my best to keep her safe."

"Make sure you do."

Tarin picked up his pack and walked to the door, Waide following him into the snow covered street.

"They'll be fine," she said, "the locals have accepted them, they just need to keep busy."

For some reason he hugged her, it just seemed appropriate and much to his surprise, Waide hugged him back.

"Look after them and don't worry, no one is turning you in to Silsk."

"I know." Said Waide.

"Once things are quiet in the City, I'll send message or come and get you all myself."

He ignored the path, his internal compass knew the way to the City and he could reduce the distance by a third. Paths and roads snaked down steep hills, they veered off to find the shallow river fords.

Tarin could march straight across country and swim against the fiercest river currents.

Less than two miles from Avald, he saw the body of a small creature that had been ripped apart. The dark things had been seen in Avald, but not talked about. A few household pets had vanished and two or three people who'd been silly enough to wander into the woods at night. On the whole though, Avald saw the slithering things as someone else's problem. Avald was high in the mountains, there was nowhere for the dark things to come from and only a few had been seen. If they were going to cleanse the City, well good, it had needed a good clear out for a very long time.

“Seems a waste to miss a meal.” He muttered.

The creature was small, but it was fairly fresh and gave him a few mouthfuls of muscle and viscera. He watched as several slithering creatures came down a nearby valley and headed in the direction that he intended to follow. They didn't see him as a threat, he was of the dark too. Tarin concentrated and saw them in far more clarity than Maya had managed. Like weevils they looked to him, three foot long weevils the colour of soot and with the texture of stagnant pond water. They made no sound and only stopped to see if anything they passed was not as they were and in need of killing.

“You lead and I'll follow.” Said Tarin.

Unlike Maya he also knew the name of the one that called the dark things, he felt the call too. The ghūl had once followed him into battle, though that had been an almost unimaginable time ago. It hurt Tarin to look that far back along the race memory, but he had him, knew his name and what he was intending to do.

“No you won't !” Shouted Tarin.

Tarin knew the call would lead him to the catacombs, he knew he'd be welcomed, the power there had never forgotten that the ghūl were once its servants. Tarin would go there and he'd find the one who was calling forth the dark things. Then he'd pull its head from its shoulders. He was so happy at the thought that he began to run through the snow.

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“Has everyone had enough to eat ?” Asked Babaef.

“Your hospitality is amazing, but I should get back to Sara and my business.” Said Muzzie.

The plan had been to help Babaef back with the carts, agree a time for a proper meeting about entering the catacombs and then leave. Muzzie didn't have a timepiece, but the dim light outside told him they'd been with Babaef all day and night was fast approaching.

“I too would like to leave and find a comfortable bed for the night.” Said Lilleth.

“You can have the best in my tavern,” said Muzzie, “and if it's taken, I'll throw the current occupant into the street.”

Everyone laughed, a little too much Tandallan wine had been drunk and a few drops of a human hard liquor that Babaef had acquired from mysterious sources. They'd helped to unpack the carts, it seemed the polite thing to do, especially as they'd been offered a freshly cooked lunch. Lunch had never come, the cook's son was one of the servants killed at the temple. The families began to arrive, of dead guard and servants, even Lagertha's aged nanny had put in an appearance. Muzzie had been asked to go over the details of the battles a dozen times, so had Lilleth. So much wailing, Muzzie began to lose patience. He'd lost friends, Babaef had even lost a wife, yet they hadn't given themselves over to hours of wailing. It was still going on now, in a room upstairs, Muzzie could still hear someone crying.

“Stay a little longer,” said Babaef, “I can send a servant to let Sara know where you both are.”

“Thank you Babaef, that is very considerate.” Said Lilleth.

It took a while to find a servant who wasn't grieving or nursing a wound, but eventually a house guard was sent with a young maid, one of Lagertha's. They had orders to let Sara know that Muzzie would be home soon and then they were to be back before full night came to the rift. Gesse looked like a nobleman to all the staff, but they'd quickly heard that the noble with the hygiene problem was in reality, a revenant.

“Surely we all just show up at the entrance to the catacombs in two night's time.” Said Gesse.

“Sadly there is much to do before we dare enter the catacombs, but we will need to meet at the ancient shrine to the dark angels.” Said Babaef.

“I hate that place, it reeks of evil.” Said Chillan.

“Then you will hate what I’m about to say.” Said Babaef.

Muzzie had guessed that entering the catacombs wasn’t going to be easy. Like the others, he watched Babaef, waiting to hear how bad things were likely to get.

“Really we should go to my workroom,” said Babaef, “but I hate seeing the empty basket where Shadow slept.”

He took the leather strap off a heavy rolled up parchment and let it fall over the cups and plates on the dining room table. It was a picture in full colour, a rare thing in the City. In the centre was a statue of a dark angel and around the statue were at least six minor shrines and altars to various gods and deities.

“Please don’t say we have to go there !” Said Lilleth.

“We have to appease the living shrine.” Said Chillan.

Muzzie groaned, he knew what the living shrine had done to Tarin and to Sensan and his men.

Nethra had mentioned a ‘cleansing,’ which had scared her almost witless.

“You can’t trust that place,” said Muzzie, “it always tricks those who seek knowledge and we’re all likely to end up flayed alive.”

He thought Babaef would be angry, but the sorcerer merely looked at him and nodded.

“Yes Muzzie, all you’ve said is right, but you need to trust me. I have something the shrine values and I know how to gain her favour. Besides we have no option, unless the shrine is appeased, we will never leave the catacombs alive, or dead for that matter.”

Babaef waved at a servant to refill their glasses and then he left the room and they heard him climbing the stairs.

“I think he’s gone to comfort his daughter.” Said Lilleth.

The servants tidied the room and eventually the night shutters were locked over the windows. It had been at least an hour and Babaef hadn’t returned, everyone felt uneasy about leaving though, as though something vital needed to be settled. Chillan had been telling them stories about the glory days of the Guild of Sorcerers and even he was running out of amusing anecdotes.

“We should leave and return tomorrow.” Said Gesse.

Just as they’d all collected their belongings and put on coats, Babaef appeared, carrying something wrapped in a blanket.

“I’m sorry,” he said, “my daughter is still very upset and I was delayed.”

“Of course, we understand.” Said Lilleth.

By the effort involved, whatever was in the blanket was obviously heavy and Babaef put the bundle in the centre of the dining room table.

“We could come back tomorrow, if you wish to be with your daughter.” Said Muzzie.

“No, no, I told you I have something to appease the shrine and here they are.”

He pulled back the blanket and unwrapped three rocks that glowed like red hot coals, yet seemed to put out no heat. Babaef lifted each one and put them where the others could see them.

“I found one at each of the last three sites,” said Babaef, “Lagertha found the last just before she was killed.”

“Have you discovered their purpose master ?” Asked Chillan.

“No and not even Nigon himself is sure what they are. Lagertha discovered that they are sought after by the shrine, for some reason we may never know.”

Ventus climbed off Gesse's shoulder, touched one of the stones and jumped back, as though stung by something.

"Give them to the shrine if the almighty Nigon knows them to be useless." He said.

"I am certain they will appease the shrine," said Babaef, "and hopefully gain a certain amount of straight talking from her."

"I wish Nethra was here, she has a way with the shrine." Added Lilleth.

Babaef folded up the blanket, leaving the stones on the table.

"My door is open to you all at any time," said Babaef, "otherwise we'll meet two nights from now at the shrine of the dark angel. Arrive just before full darkness and wait by the gate if you see any creature of chaos lurking around the grounds."

"Do you want me to hire some extra muscle?" Asked Muzzie.

"That you can leave to me." Said Babaef.

Muzzie was at the door with the others when Babaef asked him for a few moments of his time, to examine one of the spells the Hand of Arcardis could provide.

"It might be useful at the shrine Muzzie, just a few moments once the others have gone."

They went back into the dining room and Babaef picked up one of the rocks, handing it to Muzzie.

"Did you see Ventus jump as he touched it?" Asked Babaef.

"Yes I did, what does that mean?"

"I'm not sure, but I have my suspicions about Ventus and I don't want him to know what I'm about to tell you."

Muzzie sat at the table, turning the rock in his hands, marvelling that something that looked red hot, could feel so cool.

"And where Gesse goes, there goes Ventus. I see your need to get me alone." Said Muzzie.

"I won't keep you Muzzie, I'm sure you're keen to see your tavern and Sara again."

Muzzie was amused at the order Babaef had used, but smiled and waited for the sorcerer to continue.

"Lagertha did most of the research, but I'm certain that the rocks are all that remains of Nigon. I believe he sacrificed himself to lock away something far old and darker than anyone imagined."

Muzzie put the rock to his ear, though he had no idea what he thought he might hear.

"And it's this old and dark thing that you want to release?" He asked.

"No, I have other plans for it. It's sad that Nigon has such a reputation for being a rather disappointing deity, it appears he was far more noble than anyone knew. I believe he boiled himself away into the wastes of eternity, made the ultimate sacrifice to imprison the dark one."

"Hoorah for Nigon." Said Muzzie, bouncing the rock on his hands.

"Don't damage it, that piece of a once living God is important."

"Tell me the plan, Ventus will never hear of it from me Babaef."

The sorcerer lifted one of the glowing rocks and stroked it, almost lovingly.

"Most people don't realise that the shrine hates us, hates all living things. It has an almost limitless amount of hatred and resentment that it lets loose in the form of plagues and other more petty annoyances. Piece one of Nigon should appease that hatred and gain some truth from her lips. Piece two will buy our exit from the catacombs when we wish to leave and hopefully some protection from the undead that inhabit the lower regions."

Babaef took the piece of rock from Muzzie and put it with the others on the table.

"The third piece I will give the shrine in return for the extra muscle you mentioned. The shrine has killed countless warriors over the years, including Sensan and his warriors from the Guild of Thraan.

The third piece of the once living God, will buy back their souls. They will be your extra muscle, they will be our army against the undead.”

~ ~

Podd was probably the first person in the City to see one of the slithering things. One of the first that had come from somewhere not too far away and had beaten the other tens of thousands. Podd saw it as it hugged the ground and dropped into the main entrance to the catacombs.

“What was that ?” Asked Ash.

“You saw it too boy ?”

“Just a shadow out of the corner of my eye. Is it a chaos creature ?”

“No ! Calm yourself, it means no harm to anyone in the City. It sees us as dark things like itself. There will be many others, entering the catacombs to serve something that lurks there.”

Podd had seen more than a shadow, Podd had always had the sight. There had been a time, after the second great defeat of the humans, Podd had been put forward to command the thirteenth legion. But he'd had enough of blood and crushed bodies by then, he just wanted to be left alone. Everyone leaves a bone collector alone, it seemed to be the perfect career for a warrior who no longer wanted to crush skulls or disembowel his foes.

“So what do we do ?” Asked Ash.

Podd had seen the creature's claws and its teeth, yet he felt no fear of it. A few household pets might go missing, but he knew the dark slithering things were too keen to enter the catacombs to cause any real damage to the City.

“You can help me lift this body for a start. Then we do what we're best at, you know what I mean Ash.”

“I know, we tell no one and forget we ever saw it.”

“Good lad, here's an extra few coppers to buy yourself a treat.”

~ ~

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Part 28 will be posted at the end of January.