

City of the Lost God

Part 8 – The Ring of Volkin

“Do it !” Said Babaef. “Kill me, crush my bones, drink my blood. But then I’m guessing you’ll be stuck here forever.”



“So much for travelling light and living off the land.” Said Muzzie.

He’d been told it would be just a party of four, travelling on foot to the Ring of Volkin. True the sorcerer paying for the trip was fairly elderly, but Muzzie had thought he’d be capable of making the fifteen mile trip to the ring on foot. He’d expected to be carrying a large backpack of essentials then hunting for their meals, hunting to the East of the City was fairly good. Instead in front of him was a large waggon, the sort that needed at least four strong backs to pull and push it, the sort of waggon that meant there was no moving quickly if they got into trouble.

“He’s paying the wages of the waggon team and buying all the food,” Said Lilleth.

Muzzie cheered up a bit, the waggon may mean a slow trip, but he was hoping for better food than the odd Rock Cropper or Shuud hunted along the way. He recognised the four in the waggon team; they were all regulars at his bar. Strong but not too bright, but not the kind to cut your throat in the middle of the night and run off with your belongings. With meat so scarce nearly all beasts of burden in the City had ended up in the pot. There was the odd Farrag, owned by the incredibly wealthy, almost as a status symbol. But like Podd and his cart, as a rule if you had a waggon in the City, you needed someone strong to pull it.

“Are you going to introduce me ?” Asked Muzzie.

The waggon was outside the Winshin’s Building, one of the few general provisions stores left in the City. Winshin himself was long dead, went in the last plague, but subsequent owners of the building had kept the name. Lilleth led Muzzie around the back of the waggon and a tall figure in a long brown robe was supervising the loading of sacks onto the waggon.

“Muzzie this is Annun, he’s the personal servant to Sajaha.”

As the creature turned, Muzzie noticed his skin was strangely translucent, the veins clearly visible on his face and neck, the skull showing beneath the flesh. There was clearly a lot of human in Annun, but there was also quite a bit of something else, something very unusual.

“Greetings,” said Annun, “I’m glad Lilleth managed to persuade you to join our small expedition.”

Muzzie looked at the boxes and sacks already loaded onto the waggon.

“At least we won’t go hungry.” He said.

“Where is Sajaha ?” Asked Lilleth.

“My master is in the store haggling with the proprietor.”

Muzzie gave a low whistle and sucked at his teeth.

“I’d better rescue him,” he said, “no one gets away with haggling prices with old Jonas.”

Muzzie walked through the open door of the store and nodded at one of the assistants who were carrying more sacks out to the waggon. There was the smell of milled grains mixed with spices about the store and Muzzie had always enjoyed a visit to Winshin’s. Every corner seemed to have something rare, interesting, or good to eat in it and one wall had various types of dried meats hanging on hooks. Muzzie couldn’t resist pulling a strip of dried Jangar meat off one of the hooks. The cured meat was likely to cost him a few days takings at the bar, but he loved the taste and

texture. Muzzie's enjoyment of the store's treasures was being spoiled by an angry exchange from the direction of the counter, so he decided to see what was going on.

"Are you trying to annoy me?" Asked Jonas.

"I was merely asking you to reconsider some of your prices."

Muzzie knew Jonas well. If you asked anyone in the City to describe Jonas they've had told you he was old, mean, big and leathery. If Jonas was a pure blood, then Muzzie had never seen any others like him, but then again he was very old. Jonas had been the owner of the store for a few hundred years, so whatever he was, they didn't die young. He had the usual two legs and four arms of a high level demon, but his skin was the colour and texture of boot leather. His upper arms were very powerful, but the lower two were just stubs that he waved about when he was excited and they were now waving around quite a bit.

"There's trouble in the City, if you haven't noticed," said Jonas, "there's even been trouble in upper town, fires and unnatural storms I heard. Lots of people wanting provision, some leaving the City for a while, some for good. So why should I lower my prices for the likes of you?"

Muzzie had a good chance to look at Sajaha while he was arguing with Jonas. He was a converted chaos creature, Muzzie could spot them a mile off. He had his hood up indoors and the voice sounded just the same as most of the educated people of the City, but there was something about the stance, the feeling of huge age. Two arms and two legs like a human, but there wasn't even half a percent of human in Sajaha.

"Some of the goods aren't of top quality. Surely it's not unreasonable to ask you to look at your prices again?" Asked Sajaha.

Jonas was now getting very agitated, no one asked him to relook at his prices, ever. A few of his assistants were wandering in from the warehouse out back and it could easily turn very nasty.

"No insult intended Jonas," said Muzzie, "perhaps you could just add a couple of items free of charge?"

There was the sound of movement as several of the assistants tried to hide. Muzzie was a well-known breaker of heads and some of the staff of Winshin's might have enjoyed giving the sorcerer a beating, but tangling with Muzzie was a different proposition.

"Are you part of this group?" Asked Jonas.

Muzzie smiled at Sajaha. They hadn't been introduced, but he had no doubt that the elderly sorcerer would know him from his description. He could sense a certain relief in his employer and in Jonas.

They both badly wanted a way out of the argument, without losing face.

"I have been hired by them, and Lilleth is outside." Said Muzzie.

There was more activity at the rear of the store. They might be worried about Muzzie, but Lilleth was the famed warrior and smuggler.

"Would you be willing to accept an item free of charge to settle the matter?" Jonas asked.

"That seems more than reasonable." Replied Sajaha.

Jonas noticed the strip of dried Jangar meat that Muzzie was holding and took it from him. After rolling the strip up and putting it into a thin cloth bag, he handed it back to Muzzie.

"The meat is usually seventy and the bag another credit," Said Jonas, "how about taking those free of charge?"

"Perfect."

Sajaha counted several gold coins from his pouch and a mixture of imperial credits and Quron silver. In the end both he and Jonas were happy with the pile of assorted money on the counter and Sajaha walked from the store. Muzzie followed him, amazed and pleased that he seemed to be the winner

of the argument. His ludicrously expensive Jangar meat having been acquired with no cost to himself.

“Problems ?” Asked Lilleth.

“None at all.” Said Muzzie.

Sajaha seemed to have become tired from the incident and climbed into the back of the waggon and reclined in a comfortable looking chair that had been wedged between several boxes of dried goods. Annun though seemed content to travel on foot and joined Lilleth at the front of the group, while Muzzie kept to the rear of the party.

“Everyone ready ?” Shouted Lilleth.

A few heads nodded at her and as there were no dissenting voices Lilleth called for them to set off. The waggon had shafts at the back and front, so the four waggon handlers took a shaft each and the group set off at a reasonable speed over the relatively well made street in the City.

‘Every thief and cut throat in the City will hear us.’

Thought Muzzie as the waggon rattled and clanked its way along the ancient cobbled road and out of the East gate.

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Babaef sat in the chair and looked at the person the other side of the table. His table companion looked asleep, so Babaef picked up a flagon of wine and smelt the contents, it smelt fresh and of good quality. He filled a glass for himself and took a bite out of some fruit, that too was fresh and delicious. Once he’d drunk half a glass of wine he decided to get a better look at the person sat opposite him, so he moved a lamp closer to that side of the table. Shadow woke up, but seemed quite happy to curl up on his lap and see how the day progressed.

The figure had the four arms and two muscular legs of a demon. His torso under a dusty robe looked well-muscled, not the sort you’d want to get on the wrong side of. The interesting thing was the face, it looked completely human, or rather human according to the books Babaef had read. None of the classic demon teeth, his looked quite blunt, no wiry hair, no enlarged ears. Everything about the face looked human. The dust was odd though, not just on his robes, but also on his head, his hair was dusty.

“So you’ve finally arrived.”

The voice was quiet but clear and as the dust fell off his robes, the person the other side of the table pulled himself erect in his chair. He filled a glass with wine and simply looked at Babaef as he pulled a roast bird apart and ate a few mouthfuls of the flesh.

“You’re grown up at last.”

Babaef wished he hadn’t moved the lamp. The face opposite him looked cruel now his companion was awake. There was a certain regal look about the feature, but the cruelty was written deep into the features. His pet seemed to share his views about the stranger and Shadow moved inside his robe, leaving just her eyes looking out.

“Who are you ?” He asked.

His companion banged his fist hard onto the table, upsetting the half empty flagon of wine and causing a large cloud of dust to fly off his robes.

“Four hundred years I’ve been waiting and I was sure you’d say ‘where am I ?’ So as I’ve planned the conversation in that order I’ll start by telling you where you are.”

The eyes of his companion were dark, very dark. They seemed to look right through Babaef. They reminded him of the eyes of young boys as they examined bugs they’d caught in a jar.

“You are in the catacombs,” said his companion, “if you went twenty feet through the wall behind you, you’d be in the main catacombs and the undead would rip you apart. Don’t worry though, they have no way of entering here.”

The figure stood and shook his robes, sending dust and bits of other debris cascading to the floor. Then he ran his hands through his hair and stamped his feet a few times, as though he was getting his circulation going. When he sat down at the table again he looked far more awake, far more cruel and much more dangerous.

“So, you wanted to know who I am ? I have several names among the peoples of the City, but most know me as Nigon. My feast day is about to be celebrated in the City, but I’m told it’s not the event it once was.”

Of course it all made some sort of awful sense. After waiting over four hundred years, to be abducted by the least well thought of member of the lesser demon deities. It was the perfect culmination of his largely disappointing life.

“I was never sure you ever really existed.” Said Babaef.

Nigon banged the table again and filled the chamber with his laughter.

“If I didn’t need you sorcerer, I’d rip your arm off to prove to you how real I am !”

He concentrated on trying to remember the stories about Nigon, the pieces in old books that most thought were myths. There was a long piece in the Chaos-Nagoria, the holy book kept well hidden by the guild of Sorcerers. It spoke of Nigon being defeated by a higher deity and banished.

“You killed my Nanny.” He said.

Nigon seemed a bit surprised by the statement.

“My messenger you mean ? They can be a little unpredictable. But you remembered the date. I wouldn’t mind betting there hasn’t been a day in your life when you didn’t think of this very day ? Come on admit it.”

Babaef merely shrugged and nodded.

“If I’d sent a polite messenger to see you,” said Nigon, “perhaps with the sickly sweet food children crave. How long would you have remembered the event for ? A week perhaps ? No one forgets a visit from a Punisher.”

Babaef had a moment of clarity. The dust on his clothing, the constantly fresh food, the lack of any doors or windows in the chamber.

“You were banished weren’t you ? You’re a prisoner here.”

Nigon was on his feet again and leaning over him, a look of absolute fury on his face.

“Don’t you dare taunt me sorcerer, or I’ll crush your bones and watch you crawl around this chamber on your belly for eternity !”

Babaef wasn’t a particular brave person, nor did he relish a long and painful death at the hands of the deity, but he was no fool, despite what his wife may have thought. He knew Nigon needed him for something, a something that had been over four hundred years in the planning.

“Do it !” Said Babaef. “Kill me, crush my bones, drink my blood. But then I’m guessing you’ll be stuck here forever.”

Nigon seemed to completely lose control. He hurtled at the far wall of the chamber and started to beat his fists against it, bringing down dust and plant roots from the ceiling. Then he turned on Babaef and put his hand around his throat.

“Don’t put your worth to me too high little sorcerer,” he said, “I may need you, but I could send an enforcer to visit your home. You may not care for your wife, but your daughters might concern you.

Dear sweet Kapes barely at puberty and the virginal Itet. Would you like to see an enforcer enjoy them, before giving them a slow and nasty death ?”

Babaef couldn't get enough air to speak, but he shook his head. Nigon relaxed a little and sat back in his chair.

“We understand each other,” he said, “yes I need you, but if you disappoint me I can bring more pain to you and your family than you could ever imagine.”

Nigon picked up the wine jug from the floor and drank was left in it straight out of the jug. Babaef had no idea how or when the food in the room was replenished, but the place was a complete mess.

“No more threats,” said Nigon, “I have a plan to release me from this place and to give you great power and wealth. I take it you're interested in power and wealth ?”

Babaef smiled at his abductor, he liked the way the conversation was turning.

“I am.”

“Good,” said Nigon, “the first part of the plan is to make you the head of the Guild of Sorcerers.”

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“Sorry I know I was late yesterday, but I'm still not well,” said Caspian, “may I have today to completely get rid of this sickness ?”

Adamaz came close to him and felt his neck, making murmuring noises and tutting. Then the head librarian started to scribble on some of the sacred parchment, before adding the activation seal and handing it to him.

“You still feel clammy,” said Adamaz, “you may have today off on two conditions.”

Caspian nodded obediently, obtaining a day to spend in the top of the Dome was proving easier than he'd anticipated.

“First,” said Adamaz, “I want your assurance that you won't spend the day bedding Vella.”

“No sir, I'm far too unwell.”

“Secondly I want your promise that you'll read the scroll I just gave you as soon as you get to your rooms.”

“Yes sir.”

“Then be off with you and I expect to see you in the morning right after breakfast.”

Caspian gave Adamaz a slight bow and then headed for the stairs. He looked at the scroll and it was a healing and regeneration spell, after yesterday he thought it might really do him some good.

They'd run ! Vella had screamed at the sight of the ghost and both of them hadn't stopped running until they were in his room with the door locked behind them. After they'd calmed down, Caspian had gone to his desk for the afternoon and when he returned to his room Vella was about to leave to work at Muzzie's.

“We left the lights on up there.” He'd told her.

“Let's talk when I get back.” She'd replied.

By the time they were back in bed they'd both had time to think about the situation. They'd made love and worked off a lot of mutual stress and as they lay relaxed in each other's arms, Caspian summed the situation up.

“We need to go back and stand our ground and we need to do it tomorrow.”

“You're worried about the lights ?”

“Yes. We don't know who might see a light in a window and decide to investigate, but it's not just that. This is too big to run away from Vella.”

They'd made their plans and as he walked back into his rooms he found Vella adding a dagger to her pack, along with a selection of fruit and nuts they could eat as they explored.

"I bought another lamp," said Vella, "brighter than the last one and it smells less when it gets hot, or so the merchant told me."

Caspian unfolded the spell Adamaz had given him and read the words, the words he himself had often written on sacred parchment for customers of the library.

"What is that?"

"A healing scroll that Adamaz gave me and he's added a line about regeneration."

Vella chuckled.

"You must have done a good job of convincing him you were sick."

"To be honest I don't feel that well, I think it's the stress of what we found. You hold the paper too while I read it."

Vella held onto the edge of the paper while Caspian intoned the spell and it might have been imagination or wishful thinking, but Caspian suddenly had energy again.

"I feel better in some way." Said Vella.

"Me too."

They both filled small packs with anything that might be useful for a full day in the top of the Dome, food, water, small tools and each carried a sharp dagger. Caspian led the way into his old room, quickly opening the window to check on the dead Shuud that they'd thrown from the window.

"Gone," he said, "not even a blood stain on the rocks."

Everything looked the same. The skeleton behind the bookcases, the opened shutters on the hallway windows. Everything looked undisturbed and exactly as they'd left it, which for some reason Caspian found quite unnerving.

"Come on," said Vella, "or we'll think of a dozen reasons not to go up there."

She'd gone, up the spiral stairs, leaving Caspian to run after her. By the time he'd caught up with her she was leaning against the wall of the dark corridor and lighting her lamp.

"I'll go in there on my own," said Caspian, "if anything happens to me, find Adamaz and tell him everything."

"No. We go in together!"

Vella was gone again, the light from her lamp barely leaving him enough of a glow to see by as he leapt after her. He found her at the gap in the door and looking into the large domed room they'd run away from, only a day before.

"My old lamp is still there." Said Vella.

The lamp they'd left behind was about five feet inside the room, but it had run out of oil and gone out. The dozen or so glowing light orbs were still on though and they could see every inch of the room.

"It looks empty." Said Caspian.

He walked forward, hoping Vella would stay by the door, but she caught up with him and put her hand into his, grasping his fingers quite tightly.

"Together!" She said.

Hand in hand they reached the centre of the room and once again there was the distant sound of footsteps. This time the shapeless cloud moved around the edge of the room, until it came to the large metal reinforced door they'd come in by. As they watched the door closed with a loud clang.

"Don't be alarmed."

The voice sounded old and male, the language was of the City, but spoken as though by a visitor. The cloud formed into the shape of a human in robes, the sort worn by clerics and sorcerers.

"It has been so long since I saw anyone, I didn't want you to run away again."

"Who are you ?" Asked Caspian.

The figure was now that of a tall male, in the purple robe of a high level sorcerer. As far as Caspian could tell, the features and form of the ghost were completely human. The edges of the figure were a bit indistinct, but the face wasn't unpleasant.

"You may have found my remains in the room below. I am, or rather I was LLud Narren, master sorcerer to the deity Tomma-Goran and now sadly reduced to the role of guardian of these chambers."

Vella gripped his hand harder and moved closer.

"Guardian." She said.

"Oh, don't be alarmed. I only allowed you to open the door because I craved your company. If I sensed you were a threat, I do have certain resources, but I mean you no harm."

Caspian guessed that the master sorcerer was likely to have prodigious powers, even when dead, but he also realised if the ancient guardian had wanted them dead, they'd be dead by now.

"Can we explore the rooms here ?" He asked.

The ghost faded a little, but reappeared a little further from them, at the entrance to a corridor leading from the room.

"Most of the rooms are sealed, but my workroom is open, if you'd like to see it ?"

Caspian looked at Vella and she nodded enthusiastically.

"Yes we'd like to see it." She said.

LLud Narren moved up the corridor, ignoring at least five doors and finally going through the final door on the left, which was wide open.

"This," said LLud, "has been my home and workshop for longer than many entire worlds have existed."

There were windows, which after Caspian pulled on the shutter chains, looked out onto a small courtyard.

"No lights ! I often see the dark angels fly over at night, but they take little notice of the Dome." Said LLud.

"You know what they are ?" Asked Caspian.

"Oh yes and I know what you are, a hybrid. The rifts aren't good for humans, not just our technology falls apart here. Over a time our bodies begin to degenerate, our children are born deformed. I was one of the first to experiment with mixing human lines with demon."

LLud moved closer to Caspian and looked closely at him.

"It's good to see you hybrids were a success and you still walk the rifts."

The room was full of strange devices, most of which Caspian didn't recognise, but there was a globe in one corner. Caspian had once seen a globe in a private room that Adamaz used to meet visiting dignitaries. The globe was a good five feet across and hung on bearings so well made that the huge metal sphere turned easily at the slightest touch.

"That was my planet," said LLud, "probably long gone now, it was called Amorb."

Vella put her pack on an empty table and started pulling out some fruit, handing some to Caspian.

"What's a planet ?" She asked.

"I've read about them," said Caspian, "legendary home of the holy warriors, no one really believes in them."

Vella took a drink from her water bottle, before handing it to Caspian. LLud was standing in front of the globe and seemed very animated, for the ghost of a long dead sorcerer. He also seemed to have quite a few powers for a ghost and as he waved his barely visible hands about, the globe turned.

"It's no legend," he said, "my home was here, near the ocean. The planet was huge, millions lived on its surface."

LLud was stabbing a finger at a point on the globe, but Vella was laughing at him.

"Don't be silly. The people at the bottom would fall off."

LLud was gone and all they could hear was his fading voice shouting;

"Fools, they're nothing but fools here," over and over again.

Caspian shrugged at Vella and dug into his own pack for some dried meat that he enjoyed. It was a bit early for lunch, but now they'd settled somewhere he was feeling hungry. Vella was moving the globe about and looking at the continent at the bottom and shaking her head.

"It's just silly Casp, no one can live upside down."

As their host seemed to have vanished, Caspian started opening the numerous cupboards and drawers around the room and with Vella's help the most interesting items were put out on tables.

"I'm sure these are human spell parchments," he said, "but I can't read the language they're written in."

Vella opened a large cupboard and inside were several truly terrible weapons. Caspian had no idea how the weapons worked, but he had an instinctive fear of them.

"We could take one outside the City and try it." Said Vella.

Caspian ran his hand over one, being careful not to touch any of the metal sticks that protruded from it. He didn't just feel it was incredibly dangerous, he knew for certain it was.

"When we know more," he said, "let's go through everything else."

There were cupboards full of chemicals in sealed glass bottles, packets of dried animal parts that neither of them recognised, but in one cupboard was a box so heavy that they couldn't lift it out.

Caspian used a short sword he'd found to break open the lid and inside was gold.

"Oh, it's beautiful." Said Vella.

Caspian pulled one of the round coins out of the box and even one was almost too heavy for him. He didn't recognise any of the symbols or marks on the coin, but there was no mistaking the purity of the soft yellow metal.

"There must be enough in that box to buy a house in Upper Town and live like Lords." Said Vella.

"Probably," said Caspian, "but with all sorts of strange storms and goings on in Upper Town lately, perhaps moving out of the City might be a good idea."

They each put three of the strange coins in their pack, to get them tested and because neither of them wanted to leave the newly discovered rooms empty handed. The day drifted on and when Caspian was about to suggest they call it a day and head for home he opened a dirty looking document case at the bottom of a drawer. He sat himself on the floor and read the manuscript in amazement. Not just because it was in a language he knew, but because of the information it contained.

"What have you found Casp?"

He read the second page, his hands trembling.

"It's the instructions as to items needed and the various incantations required to create a dark angel. I doubt if anyone in the City has the power to perform the rituals, but to the right person this grubby heap of paper would be priceless."

There was a slight draught and their host was back, once again looking calm and friendly.

"There's more, lots more," said LLud, "this is just one room and some of the other rooms have secrets that only Tomma-Goran knew."

"Can we see those rooms another day?"

"If I was at my full strength I could unseal those rooms, but alas without my bones I'm a mere shade reduced to a few parlour tricks and scary noises."

Caspian looked at Vella and shrugged.

"So you're saying that if we bring your bones to you," said Caspian, "you can open up all the other rooms for us."

"Yes. I give you my word that if you bring my skeleton to me, I'll open up all the rooms for you to explore."

Vella looked at Caspian and nodded at him.

"I think we could do that for you," said Caspian, "but we'd need to find a way of unlocking the chain around the ankle."

"No need, no need at all, anyway you'd never do it. Just break the leg bone and put my bones into a sack. Quick and simple, but just make sure you get every piece of bone."

Caspian folded the manuscript for the creation of a dark angel and lovingly folded it again and put it into his pack.

"I need to work in the library," he said, "but I can come back on the feast day of Nigon, that's in three days."

"I'll need to work in the evening, but I can come here all that day." Said Vella.

Caspian turned towards the ghost of LLud Narren.

"We'll be back with your bones in three day's time. Do you give me your word that we won't be harmed once you have your full power and that you'll open all the doors for us?"

"I give you my word as master sorcerer to the living God himself!"

They picked up their packs and left the room, Caspian pushing the expensive short sword through his belt before they left. This time Caspian remembered to turn off all the light globes as they went.

They had to push open the door LLud had closed, but they were quickly back in the main part of the Dome and Vella was examining the gold coins they'd brought back.

"It's real," she said, "I almost expected it to be gone when we got back, or made of tin."

Caspian has been worrying about something all day, but he hadn't wanted to mention it with LLud lurking about.

"We need to be very careful when we go back." He said.

"Why?"

"Because if LLud was the master sorcerer of Tomma-Goran, effectively the top person in the Dome. Why did they chain him to a wall?"

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"It's the plague isn't it?"

Galla had other roles besides running her store. In a City where physicians were rare, Galla doubled as doctor and midwife to most of the old town and a few in upper town. She had a reputation for delivering fewer dead babies than many of the high priced physicians and on a good day she'd throw in a reading of your future.

"Just a rash Jarl, don't start worrying yourself into an early grave." She said.

"My crotch looks worse than that!" Said Merrick.

There was general laughter from Jarl and his family and Galla was glad she'd asked Merrick to come with her to the slums. She rarely came to the slums. There was a lot of need for her skills, but even a very good empath can't sense every danger and she didn't want to get her head caved in for the few coins she earned. There were guards, but their fees were usually more than she'd earn from many

visits to the slums. Merrick was different, he had need of favours from her, as did Nethra, so he was acting as her guard for free.

“Anyone else in the family with a rash ?” She asked.

Jarl’s wife had a livid rash on her back, which looked quite nasty, but the three children were all clear. The last time plague had hit the City, the children had been infected first, so Galla hoped it was just one of the hundreds of other types of rash in the slums.

“Have you eaten anything strange ?”

“We eat what we can get.”

Galla understood life in the slums, there had been times in her own life..... but she’d didn’t like to dwell on those times. The families bedding was probably infested with several types of parasites and they probably ate little fresh food. But the children looked healthy and they were sleeping in the same filth.

“I know you can’t wash it, but give all the bedding a really good shake outside and send for me if it gets worse.”

Galla put her hand on Jarl’s arm and tried her best to sense his future, but she could only see pain and suffering. Not that her skills were perfect. Most people seemed to assume she could read them like a book, but in reality it was like listening to whispered secrets in a dark and crowded room.

Merrick knew more than he was saying, but even with him she was finding it hard to read what he knew. Galla gave Jarl some ointment with instructions on how to use it, then she and Merrick left the small one room house. Outside a dark shape moved in the alley, but moved away again when Merrick put his hand on his sword.

“Why do you live here ? You have enough money to move out of the slums.”

“It’s home.” Said Merrick.

They walked quickly along the muddy alley until they came to a better road, the one that Merrick usually took into old town.

“Tell Nethra to see me tomorrow and I’ll have the healing salves ready for Tarin.” She said.

Galla had a few ideas about why Tarin needed the salves, but even to her the ideas sounded absurd. If Merrick didn’t want to tell her, she wasn’t going to push him. Whenever she looked into Merrick or Nethra, all she saw was blood, rivers of blood.

“So Jarl has the plague then ?”

Galla knew Merrick well enough to know he’d prefer an honest answer.

“Yes I’m certain it’s the plague,” she said, “I’ve seen the plague several times and each time it’s different, but in many ways it’s always the same. I fear that the next person to visit Jarl will be Podd with his cart.”

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“What was that ? There’s someone on the road.” Said Lilleth.

“It’ll be an animal looking for dinner,” said Muzzie, “the fire will keep it away.”

Muzzie had finally got Lilleth alone and on a pile of blankets well away from the main party by the waggon and he wasn’t going to let a hungry night feeder spoil his fun. Lilleth relaxed back onto the blankets while Muzzie pulled her britches down to her knees. They’d both had a long days walk, covering a good eight miles, which is hard work if you’re helping haul a waggon across streams and up hills. Neither of them had bathed, but that didn’t seem to worry either of them. Muzzie had just let his fingers wander through the bush between her legs when Lilleth heard something else.

“Animals don’t have boots with metal nails.” She whispered.

She was up on her knees and fastening the belt on her britches, while Muzzie found his own trousers and sword belt. Muzzie really hoped there was an enemy on the road, one he could give a good beating for spoiling his fun. They'd built their nest behind a fallen standing stone, about a hundred yards from the main camp. After two days in the constant company of the waggon handlers, they'd both really needed a bit of privacy and uncomplicated lust. The waggon had been set up where all visitors to the Ring of Volkin set up camp, inside the walls of the ruined temple. It may not have been a real temple, but that was what everyone had called it for years. Just four old solid walls about six feet high, surrounding a decent amount of space and with entrances to the north and south. Put together two makeshift gates from the local thorn bushes and you had a decent enclosure that was easy to defend. Add a large and well fed fire and few things bothered the camp, as long as you didn't stay too long. Lilleth put her head slightly above the fallen stone.

"Looks to be about a dozen of them. Not very good either, I can smell them as well as I can see them."

Muzzie looked over the stone and saw them too, highlighted against the glow from the large camp fire in front of the waggon. Muzzie had told them, told them all several times on the way.

"Head out of town with a large waggon after buying lots of expensive provisions and you're almost certain to get the attention of bandits."

The noise of the heavy thing over the old cobbles on East Street must have woken every back stabber in the slums. Muzzie cursed and drew his sword, the only advantage they had was being behind the bandits and Lilleth was about to ruin that.

"Wake up in the camp," she shouted, "you're being attacked !"

There was a few seconds of confusion before the bandits obviously decided to press on with their attack and charged the camp in the ruined temple. Muzzie had no idea if anyone had heard Lilleth, but he was sure they must have heard the scream as he plunged his sword into the back of the nearest bandit. Some would have called it unfair to strike his opponent in the back, but Muzzie looked upon it as maximising his odds. A good solid blow to the side of the skull finished his man off and Muzzie was once more chasing after the bandits. One was hit in the throat by an arrow and went down in a heap, at least someone in the camp was awake. Muzzie hoped they were awake enough to recognise friend from foe.

"Protect the waggon," shouted Lilleth, "I'll go to the handlers."

The southern thorn tree gate had gone, it had been intended to deter wild animals, not a determined gang of bandits. Lilleth was ahead of him and went through the opening and turned right, towards where the waggon handlers had put out their bed rolls. Muzzie was about to enter the gate when he saw one of the bandits start to scale the six foot wall and then he saw the tail. There were a lot of strange mixtures in the slums, hybrids of things that even without mixing their blood were pretty bizarre. Muzzie jumped, grabbed the tail and used all his weight to pull the creature from the wall. It was dressed as a normal hybrid would dress, if any hybrid can ever be called normal. But Muzzie noticed at least eight legs and the tail was trying to wrap itself around his neck. His opponent was half his size and weight, but Muzzie felt his senses going as the tail stopped the flow of air. He relaxed as much as he could and used his left hand to find the razor sharp dagger he always kept behind his belt. Just as he was seeing flashes of light in his eyes and starting to lose consciousness he brought the dagger up hard into his opponent's chest.

Muzzie was up on his knees and looking at the dead creature in front of him and even for the slums the eight legged bandit was strange. He could have quite happily spent the next ten minutes on his knees recovering, but he remembered he was supposed to be protecting the waggon and the

sorcerer who was paying their wages. Muzzie wiped his dagger and put it away and then he was through the gate and running towards the waggon as fast as he could.

“Where is the key?”

“Kill me and you’ll never find it.” Said Annun.

A more traditional sized bandit was aiming his sword point at Annun. He was at least part high level demon, with the usual four muscular arms, but at less than six feet tall there was obviously something else in his makeup. Muzzie had no idea what the conversation was about, but he realised Annun needed help, so he swung his sword at the bandit’s neck with all his strength. Again it was from behind, but Muzzie settled his very minor twang of conscience by feeling he was probably saving Annun’s life. The bandit’s head was cut cleanly from its body and had rolled some distance before the body fell over.

“Thank you.” Said Annun.

There was a lot of noise and a lot of screaming coming from the direction of the handlers’ camp, so Muzzie assumed Lilleth was still alive. He left Annun to recover and approached the rear of the waggon. Just as he was reaching for the cloth door a bandit came out of the waggon screaming and holding his face, his skin seemed to be melting away from the bones. The bandit carried on screaming until he ran full tilt into a stone wall and broke his own head open.

“That was exhilarating.”

Sajaha had come out of the waggon to see the effect of his spell and he seemed pleased. There was no hood this time, so Muzzie could clearly see the holes in his head, holes that had healed up a long time ago. The holes that meant he’d been converted from a pure creature of chaos into someone’s service. Who the original master was no longer mattered, Sajaha was now likely to only be serving himself. There was the sound of running feet and Lilleth arrived with two of the handlers, all of them covered in blood.

“The other two?” Muzzie asked.

Lilleth just shook her head and Annun arrived still looking unsteady on his feet.

“It could have been much worse.” Said Lilleth.

Muzzie nodded and helped her remove the bandit’s bodies from the camp, but he wasn’t so sure it had worked out well. Now he’d probably have to help pull the damn waggon back to the City.

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Part 9 will be posted at the end of June