

City of the Lost God

Part 31 – Forces of Chaos

“You don’t see it, you don’t hear it properly.” Said Galla. “Chaos is loose in the City. I’m here to save your lives !”



Babaef completed the ritual, which opened a path for chaos, all of chaos. No matter which faction, no matter where from, chaos and all its hordes could enter the catacombs.

“Sident !” Shouted Babaef, finishing the ritual.

He felt it instantly, the change in the way the catacombs felt. No army would arrive from Leng, no chaos invocers would spring out of the shrine. It was the older chaos that would come, in fact it had arrived, it was there, all around them.

“I feel it.” Said Lilleth. “What have you unleashed ?”

“I did what had to be done.” Replied Babaef.

Tarin was simply grinning at him, which was far more unsettling than the vague feeling of evil that surrounded them. Evil, yes evil, a word rarely used in the City. Chaos was worshipped by most in the City, it brought plague, it also brought the good harvests and the years of plenty. Hybrids on the rifts had always viewed chaos as something to be adored and feared, in about equal measure. Whatever was now loose in the catacombs had no ambiguity about it, it was pure evil.

“They won’t harm you !” He shouted. “They’ve come to serve him, the one in the deepest caves.”

Babaef tried to sound confident. He too could see a mist forming and faces within the mist. Evil faces, faces who showed no sign of having the slightest part of a soul. Were they real or in his head ? Babaef had no way of knowing, so he closed his eyes and concentrated on the next part of the ritual. He could hear Chillan fidgeting, the others would be getting anxious too. They were all seasoned fighters, ghost warriors, they should be able to withstand the phantoms of chaos. If not ? Well, Babaef had his plan and most of them were now expendable anyway.

“Quiet !” He shouted. “Please, I need to concentrate.”

He opened his eyes for just a fraction of a second and saw a thing of mist, that nearly took away his sanity. Chaos still had the ability to shock and disturb, so he clenched his eyes tight and concentrated on the next part of the ritual. The intent was the main thing, it could be said in any tongue, the power was in the heart and brain of the one who intoned the lines. Babaef chose to speak in the common tongue of the City.

“I speak here for those who are long past.” He began. “I speak for all those who’ve faithfully followed chaos and those who strayed from the path.”

“Heretic.” A voice spoke in his ear.

Babaef felt teeth gently touch his neck and then they were gone. He was shaking now, if his plan didn’t work, he was likely to be torn to pieces.

“I speak here, because all others have failed.” He continued. “Thousands have tried, for over a thousand millennia and all failed. I speak because they all failed. I speak because no one else has tried for a very long time.”

Babaef felt the animosity towards him fade away. He still kept his eyes shut, as he continued.

“I am Babaef and I ask for your powers. I speak as probably the last to stand here and try. Destroy me, send me away, banish me to where you please. If you do, there will be no release for the dark one, or the powers held in the catacombs.”

He stood quietly for a good minute, letting them digest the meaning of what he'd just said. All were silent as he waited and then began to speak again. He wasn't speaking the ritual, he had no intention of being locked into the course of action the ritual led to. He knew that the words didn't matter, as long as he had enough raw power.

"All those with real power are gone." He said. "They've died in battle, been assassinated or simply died of old age. It's not that the City is indifferent, they still worship the old ways. It's simply that the City is now a place of small people with small ambitions."

Did he imagine it, or did Tarin snort at him? It was of no importance, those that had entered the catacombs, the older powers of chaos. They would know the truth of his words.

"I am your last chance." He said. "Give me your power, trust me. Give me the power and I will release the dark one from the deep caves. I Babaef, will triumph where all others have failed. I will release Yam Kermul, the Chaos Lord, the Lord of Death."

He opened his eyes, he had to face them. They were going to give him what he wanted he sensed it. More corporeal now, the creatures surrounding him looked like waking nightmares. Of course they would though, they really were the stuff of nightmares. It was how the eldest and wickedest powers of chaos controlled and twisted people. They first visited the young in their dreams, filling their heads with images of cruelty and evil, sensing who might be tempted to worship them. Babaef turned towards Muzzie and beckoned him forward.

"I will need your help for what comes next."

Muzzie walked towards him, offering his hand to Babaef. They exchanged a slight nod, it was enough. They both knew of Babaef's plan to defeat Yam Kermul. He hung onto Muzzie's hand, feeling the power of the Hand of Arcadis and pulling it into himself.

"Trust me, give me your power !" Shouted Babaef.

The things of mist began to merge, forming monsters that turned his stomach. He refused to close his eyes though, he had to gain their respect. No, he had to command their respect.

"I Babaef, command you to give me the power, to release this Lord of Chaos !" He yelled.

The power came and it didn't hurt. Before, much less power had burned, caused pain that had lasted for hours. This time it was almost sensual, like an intimate caress from a lover. Part of the old Babaef had died and now other parts of that soul were dying. It no longer worried him, that version of Babaef had been weak. That version of Babaef had been bullied and cheated on by his wife. Now he'd be strong, he'd never be a victim again.

"I feel it Muzzie, so much power." He said.

"Use it wisely."

Babaef felt for the locks, the chains that had bound the evil for so very long. They were hard to open, both of them, he could understand why so many had failed. First though he gave power to Yam Kermul, helping the Chaos Lord become fully corporeal, gaining his trust.

"I command you ! Open !!" Screamed Babaef.

He could see why so many who had attempted to open the locks had died in the process. The locks were complex and littered with powerful magic traps. Babaef had no intention of playing the game, the way the lock maker had intended. Instead of spells and subtle mystic lock picks, he used prodigious amounts of pure power. Instead of finesse, he used a sledgehammer. The locks melted, literally wiped out of existence by the pure energy that Babaef used against them.

"Rise Yam Kermul ! Rise Lord of Chaos ! Rise !!" Shouted Babaef.

He still had his plan. Only the locks and seals he wanted opened had been melted away. Others were still in place, he even strengthened one or two. What or who could walk away from the catacombs was Babaeſ's decision.

"My Lord rises !" Shouted Tarin.

Yam Kermul, Lord of Leng, Lord of Chaos and would be ruler of the City of the Lost God, rose from the fracture in the cavern floor.

~ ~

It was her age, Galla knew it. The anxiety that stopped her from leaving her shop and going to help her new friend, Hervör.

"Stop being an old woman." She told herself.

That made her chuckle and her ancient pet bird spun to look at her. For the first four thousand years of her life, Galla had been courageous to the point of recklessness. The next thousand had taught her to be cautious. Now though, she knew her lifespan probably had only eight or nine hundred years left. It was so little time, it made her anxious about everything.

"Do I go ?" She asked the scrawny bird.

"Go." It screeched at her.

"Stupid bird."

Galla covered its cage, ignoring its objections and insults.

"Stupid Galla. Stupid old woman. Stupid Galla. Go Galla, you must Go."

Of course her aged pet was right, she needed to go. Why did her normally taciturn bird, have to choose today to become ridiculously verbose ? She lifted a corner of the cage cover.

"Fine. I'll go."

"Good Galla, clever Galla."

She'd already applied various blessing powders to herself, Galla still loathed spells and potions. With her tiny packets of herbs and powders, Galla could destroy armies or heal those with almost incurable illness.

"Dagger Galla, the dagger."

Her bird was muffled by the cage cover, but she knew what it meant. The obsidian dagger she'd been given by her mother. It had a keen edge and didn't stop biting. Once Galla had driven the knife into an imperial guard and the blade had carried on digging through his flesh, dissecting his heart. That had been in her reckless years, she'd been barely two thousand years old then.

"Where is the damn thing ?" She muttered to herself.

The dagger was already in her belt and had been for hours. Her heart was beating fast and a slight mist seemed to fill her vision. All just normal signs of stress for a hybrid in the City.

"Silly Galla has dagger."

"Enough bird, or I'll be having bird soup for breakfast."

Packets and small twists of paper were still in the pockets of her coat, she'd prepared to leave her house at least half a dozen times. She'd found four of the ancient powders, guaranteed to kill anything that lived and breathed, though not her of course. Other packets held lesser spells and enchantments, but still beyond the powers of most to create and use. Galla was pleased that most in the City, viewed her as some kind of harmless old apothecary. In reality, she could probably take on a small army and win the day.

"Hat and I'm ready." She muttered.

Her bird was silent, sulking no doubt. She descended the stairs from her living quarters and pulled back the numerous bolts on her front door. Galla hated leaving her home secured by just the single

front door lock, but there was no alternative. She stepped into the street and instantly felt the evil that Babaef had invited into the City. Gone were the slithering things, they'd all vanished in the direction of the catacombs. Now it was the hint of something forming in the dark, things made of mist that reminded her of childhood nightmares. Galla put her hand on her door, her home was secure, it was covered in more blessings and magical wards, than the Sorcerer's Guild building. "If you don't go they'll die." She muttered. "And so will their children."

She pushed her door closed again and locked it, pushing the key to the bottom of her cloth bag. There was no going back now, she just hoped Hervör opened her door when she knocked on it. Galla started to cross the street, watching and using her empath skills to sense any dangers. It formed out of nothing, a few wisps of something that might have been mist. A face appeared less than ten feet in front of her, a cruel face, a face that made her wish she'd remained indoors.

"Begone, I have no fear of you !" She shouted.

Her inner feelings didn't match her words, as the mist solidified into a monster that brought back stories from her childhood. The Gods had horns and reptilian faces, she'd seen pictures of them, though not all of them had been good. A seer had once told her that Sevril-Narge had once sworn, to remove all life from the rifts and even Tomma-Goran was known to have quite a temper. No, the Gods weren't always to be trusted and it was generally best to avoid them. The reptilian shape in front of her was no God, though it had the same horned head and fearsome claws. There was something unreal about it, as though it wasn't fully formed. Galla took one of the powders from her pocket, a last resort powder. She doubted if she'd ever find them for sale again and she lacked the skill to make her own. The creature though, if anything counted as needing some kind of last resort solution, it did. Its foetid breath caught in her throat, causing her to cough. Was it grey or green ? Its outline seemed to be constantly shifting, as did its colour.

"Back monster !" She shouted, holding up the powder. "This will kill any living thing that breathes." The creature seemed to grow, towering over her, six huge claws on one hand, raised to strike her. It smelt of something awful, a smell she knew, but just couldn't place. Mildew, yes that was it, like clothes left out in the damp, but a smell ten times as strong and far more pungent.

"I warned you fowl creature." She said.

She flicked the packet open with her thumb and threw it up and over the creature, watching the luminous yellow powder cover the monster's head and back. It moved back, shaking itself and roaring, stamping the ground in its agony. Running sores appeared on its face, its eyes turned from an evil yellow to a sickly red. Still it refused to die, bellowing defiance at the small female hybrid, who had caused it so much pain. It appeared to shrink back a little, but still it dug broken claws into the ground and tried to come after her. Galla knew now that it was no true living thing that she'd attempted to kill. It was a manifestation of the older chaos; someone had opened the seals that guarded the City and the entire rift.

"Madness !" She shouted. "Who would be so stupid ?"

Galla ran, despite being a little too rotund to run well. She was out of breath by the time she reached the front door of the new worker of metals. She banged on the door and looked back, the creature had vanished, but a green ooze marked where it had bled.

"Hervör, it's me Galla. Please let me in !"

Gone was any sense of social etiquette, she kicked the door and hit it with clenched fists. Splinters entered her fingers, but she didn't notice. Wisps of mist were forming near her, many of them beginning to take the form of hideous monsters.

"Wêland, please !! I need to come inside !"

Galla kicked and banged the door, shrieking anything that she thought might encourage her neighbours to open their door. A tiny wisp of mist, moved closer to her and changed into a claw. "Please !!! I'll die out here."

She never did hear the bolts drawn back, her own screams were probably too loud. One moment she was contemplating how painful her death would be and the next, she was being held by Hervör. "Close the door." Said Galla. "Keep them out."

Wēland was looking outside, watching the tendrils of grey mist. Galla screamed and he quickly closed the door and pushed home several bolts. There was no sign of the children, but her friends were looking very concerned.

"Sorry Galla, we didn't hear you." Said Hervör.

"We were in bed." Added Wēland. "That and the noise of the storm. We only just about heard your calls."

Galla looked around their entrance hall and the edges of dark things were trying to gain access to the house. Stull undefined, the tendrils of chaos pushed along every wall.

"There is no storm." Said Galla.

They were still trying to wake up, but looking with sympathy, at the shrieking woman who'd been hammering on their door.

"Then what is that sound ?" Asked Wēland.

"You don't see it, you don't hear it properly." Said Galla. "Chaos is loose in the City. I'm here to save your lives !"

~ ~

Vella didn't need to go anywhere near the kitchens, where she'd last seen Adamaz and Caspian. With luck, the head librarian, would be too amazed by finding the rooms of the upper Dome, to move quickly through the mysterious rooms. There was a collapsed partition wall quite close to the bridge to the library. Vella clambered over the rubble and tried to get her bearings.

"You look terrible. Can I help ?"

"Oh yes Torfi, thank you. If Adamaz was to find any of our things....."

She led the way, through rooms and along corridors, trying to remember where they might have left clothing or other things that might identify them. Adamaz would see that someone had recently been in the Upper Dome, they had blown apart several doors. If he knew it had been Caspian, he might decide to pick another successor.

"Not that way." She said. "That way leads to LLud Narren's workshop and we removed all our things from there."

Torfi obviously had no idea who she was talking about, he just ran beside her, following her deeper into the Upper Dome. There was the place where the weapon had nearly killed Caspian, they'd left things there. Blood ! There had been blood on some things they'd abandoned. Adamaz would know it was Caspian's, he'd be able to tell from the smell.

"Quick, this way."

It seemed to take a long time to reach the rooms at the very top of the Dome. By the time Vella was stood where they'd blown in the heavy wooden doors, she could hear voices in the hallways far below.

"Adamaz and half the library, by the sound of it." Said Torfi. "It'll be a while before they get this far though."

There were bits of Caspian's clothing everywhere, even a pair of her knickers, which she'd decided were too grubby to put on, after being worn for four days. Vella had picked up a light bag before

leaving their rooms, but there was a better bag nearby, the one they'd used to bring food into the rooms.

"I didn't realise we'd left so much behind." She said. "We never thought we'd find a way out. The thought of anyone else finding our things..... it never occurred to us."

"I'll help, we need to be quick." Said Torfi.

Vella picked up her dirty knickers, before Torfi noticed them, pushing them to the bottom of the bag. He may have seen her naked, but her smelly knickers were something she was determined to keep private. There were cups, a water bottle clearly marked with a library crest and much else that left no doubt, someone from the library had recently visited the Upper Dome. They searched every corner and all of it went into the bag.

"That's everything." Said Torfi, pushing a bloody shirt cuff into the bag.

As she closed the bag, Vella noticed her own handiwork. Four bags he'd had stolen, so Vella had actually embroidered his name on the edge of the bag.

'Caspian's hands off.' It said.

Supposing Adamaz had seen it? Her heart began to thump in her chest. Torfi saw the writing and frowned at her.

"Where else Vella, do we need to clear up anywhere else?" He asked.

"I think this was where we dropped everything." She answered. "The way out is in the next room. Yes, I'm certain this is everything."

He was closing up the bag and giving the corridor a last look over.

"Are you completely certain Vella?"

She wasn't and the sounds of excited voices were getting closer.

"No I'm not. I just need time to think!"

~ ~

Runa waited at the entrance to Muzzie's for her father to arrive. He'd been picking her up a lot lately, worried by the number of young men who seemed to want to escort her home. Her parents had heard about Vella marrying into The Dome and they'd actually been keen on her working at Muzzie's.

"Caspian must still drink there." Her mother had told her. "Get introduced to the other librarians." The problem was that Caspian had only been in Muzzie's once and then he'd only been in the bar for about ten minutes. Runa liked the young hybrids who seemed to treat Muzzie's as a second home. They were funny, interesting and they gave her lots of admiring attention. Her father had decided there were just too many young admirers and began picking her up.

"Maybe working there was a mistake." Her mother had said, just that morning.

The first few times it had seemed exciting, being picked up by her father, accompanied by no less than three armed guards. Quickly it had felt more like being a prisoner than a daughter.

"Come inside until your father arrives." Said Sara. "There's a bad feel about the City tonight."

"I can see the lanterns; he's not far away Sara."

"Ok, stay safe."

Sara went back inside, leaving her with just the reassuring sounds of a rowdy crowd in the bar. It had been a busy night; many seemed to feel safe in Muzzie's. A lot of the veterans of various wars, were liars of course. Some though, they had the look and feel of men who'd survived terrible things and perhaps, done terrible things to others. It didn't worry her, she too felt secure among the crowd who frequented the bar.

It was her father, she could see him, striding along in front of the guards, all of them carrying bright lanterns. No one in the City had beasts to pull carriages, they'd all been used as food a long time ago. The rich could hire or buy waggon, to be pulled along the badly repaired roads, by gangs of sweating waggon handlers. Her father preferred to walk, he had decided it was far more dignified than being hauled about in a waggon and Runa tended to agree with him.

"Runa, you should have waited inside." Her father called.

It was a slight criticism, meant kindly, but something inside her felt deflated. Runa loved her parents, but some of their ambitions for her, seemed impossible for her to achieve. The sad thing was that Runa was young, beautiful and popular. Yet she already felt that in some way, she'd failed as a daughter.

"Sara was with me father." She answered.

He hugged her and kissed her on the cheek and led her back towards old town. The guards looked nervous and one suggested cutting through the alleys at the rear of Muzzie's.

"Really ?!" Her father said. "It just looks like a bit of mist to me."

"Bad things roaming the City tonight Sir. Best if we keep to the back alleys."

"Fair enough, you know these streets better than I ever will."

The mist did seem to go away, as they veered off towards the towers. There was an unsettling blueish glow coming from the towers, but the guards seemed more intent on avoiding the mist. Two alleys south of Muzzie's they found the mutilated bodies.

"Look away child." Her father said.

Too late, she'd already seen the dead faces and the bent limbs. Her father knew how to handle a sword and the guards were veterans of many rift wars. Yet they all seemed stunned and slightly nervous about what they'd found.

"Never seen anything like it Sir. Almost as if all fluid has been drained from them."

"Or all the blood." Added her father. "Their flesh is grey."

"Not natural Sir, we should keep moving."

The scream of some kind of wild creature made her jump, it seemed to come from the towers themselves. Her father leant towards her, offering her a dagger with a seven inch blade. A knife, her ! She'd never held a weapon in her entire life.

"Take it Runa, use it if you have to."

She took the dagger, feeling the weight in her hand, doubting if she had the courage to jam it into someone's body. Her father had a look in his eyes, it was fear.

"Don't tickle them with it." He added. "Stab them hard and then run for home. Don't stop until you're in our house. Do you understand Runa ?"

They were all looking so serious, him and the guards. She wanted to say so much, but so little came out of her mouth.

"Yes father."

They seemed to be moving away from the towers now and every alley brought the horror of fresh dead bodies. Some looked to have been burned alive, but there was no sign of any fire. One of the guards was some way ahead of them and appeared confident the way was clear.

"Nothing this way." He called, waving them forward.

It was the last thing he ever said. A long thin tendril shot out from behind a wall and wrapped itself around his neck. Runa was rooted to the spot, more out of shock than terror. The guard was some way off, but she saw his face go grey, as the tendril curled round his neck. More tendrils appeared,

binding his legs and then his torso. Larger tentacles appeared on the wall and then Runa screamed as the body of the monster appeared.

“Run for home child !” Her father shouted.

She stood her ground, watching the creature from the deepest rift. Caspian had been terrified of just such a creature, when it had touched his cheek in the deepest cellar of the tower. That one had been sluggish in its movements, slow and merely curious. Now they’d been disturbed and looked for vengeance on someone, or anyone who came too close. Eventually they’d tire of the 1st rift, the light didn’t suit them and it was much too cold. They’d more than likely hibernate in the towers again, but right now, one was ripping the guard to pieces.

“Father ! No !” She screamed.

One of the blue tentacles had grabbed him round the waist, pushing her father’s head towards the twitching body of the abomination. A flap opened, no a mouth. She wanted to look away, but something kept her watching. Her father’s face vanished into the soft gelatinous body and then there was a slight crunching sound, as his entire face was bitten off. Runa screamed and tried to run, but her legs refused to move. She saw the monster take another bite out of her father and then she ran. The knife was dropped, she knew she was no fighter. Runa ran, not knowing if she was heading towards home or in the other direction.

Instinctively she avoided anything that seemed to have a blue iridescence and narrowly avoided being snared by a long thin tendril. On she ran, ignoring the bodies, ignoring the screams. Runa ran for home, she ran and ran.

~ ~

Muzzie tried not to be afraid of Yam Kermul, but the Chaos Lord was hard to ignore. He wasn’t well read and had no idea if the horns and claws were normal, or part of a form the General of Leng had decided to take.

“At last !” Shouted Yam Kermul. “It seems aeons, since I last had physical form.”

So far so good, Yam Kermul seemed happy and Babaef seemed safe. Muzzie backed away a few paces and went through the available spells, granted to him by the Hand of Arcardis. No destructive spell this time, Muzzie looked for the spell that granted almost godlike powers to the person it was used on. Only for a brief period, timing was going to be critical.

“It is good to greet you once again Master.” Said Tarin.

There was Muzzie’s dilemma. He’d agreed with Babaef, that Tarin was to be granted the powers that the godlike spell bestowed and Muzzie wasn’t sure if Tarin could be trusted. He backed away further to stand beside Lilleth again. He’d never seen a twelve foot tall lizard, but Yam Kermul’s physical form wasn’t that impressive. Gesse as a revenant had looked more awe inspiring, though the smell of decay had spoiled the effect.

“Thank you Tarin, your loyalty is not in doubt.” Said Yam Kermul. “As for these others..... Babaef must think me a fool. And as to Maya and her childish attempt to get close enough to use a Genova weapon against me. They must all die here !”

Quite suddenly things weren’t going well and Muzzie was drawing his sword. No magic, he had to keep the spell fresh, the one he’d promised to use on Tarin. Babaef was cursing in the old tongue, obscenities always sounded better in the old tongue of the City.

“The ghost army have turned on us.” Said Lilleth.

Babaef used a fire spell on Yam Kermul, but it seemed to have no effect. Tarin’s army had now obviously decided that the Lord of Chaos was their true leader and they were attacking just about everyone. Not Tarin though, he had vanished from the fight and Muzzie couldn’t see him anywhere.

“What the hell is Maya using ?” Shouted Chillan.

She hit one of the army of ghosts with what looked like a simple long handled battle axe. The warrior may have already been dead for countless years, but he could obviously still feel pain. He burst into flames and screamed as the inferno consumed him. He was gone in seconds, nothing but a small pile of ash, to mark where he'd been. Armour, weapons, all gone.

“Looks like a weapon, best avoided.” Said Muzzie. “Even though she does appear to be on our side.” Lilleth had aimed an arrow well, it had pierced the left eye of one of the ghost warriors. It didn't go down though, it didn't even slow down. It came at her, seemingly ignoring the arrow, which protruded a good foot and half out of its head.

“Sides !” Yelled Lilleth. “There are no sides, this is no battle. This is chaos.”

“Exactly, this is chaos.” Said Gesse.

He'd been so quiet, that Muzzie had almost forgotten his brother was there. As if declaring war, Gesse picked up one of the ghost warriors. He held the creature over his head, as easily as a child holds a doll.

“Yam Kermul ! You are not leaving these catacombs alive.” He shouted.

He threw the ghost warrior straight at Yam Kermul. A more subtle attack might have been anticipated and countered, but the Lord of Chaos seemed confused by such a simple attack. The ghost warrior hit him in the face, causing Yam Kermul to fall over backwards and land with the ghost warrior on top of him.

“Now !” Shouted Babaef. “Kill the bastard.”

Muzzie watched as Babaef attacked the Lord of Chaos. Muzzie had agreed to keep out of the fight as much as possible; his spells were their backup plan, if Tarin failed. Tarin wasn't there though; he must have wandered back along one of the numerous passageways. Muzzie kept to the plan though, he fended off two of the ghost warriors and remained ready to cast the spell. It granted invulnerability, strength and something else that was still unclear. The image associated with the spell, showed the walls of a vast city crumbling, as a Godlike figure raised their hands. It certainly looked impressive and Muzzie was quite keen on seeing it in action.

“He fights like a berserker.” Said Lilleth. “Who'd have thought Babaef had the heart of a warrior.”

The ghost warriors were now protecting Yam Kermul, getting between him and anyone attacking him. Chillan and Gesse were steadily fighting their way through the defenders, but Babaef was going crazy. He was using fire spells and his sword, cutting through the warriors, shouting threats and abuse at the Lord of Chaos.

“I'm going to help him, wait here.” Added Lilleth.

Muzzie was alone, with a perfect view of the battle. Bailig was now killing far more of the ghost warriors than anyone else. His sword seemed to suck the life out of them, leaving lifeless husks behind. Yam Kermul was on his feet again, but so blocked by the ghost warriors, that he was finding it impossible to fight anyone. Maya got through to him, swinging her axe and sending two of his guards to their final rest.

“No, he's mine !” Screamed Babaef.

Maya took no notice of him, she moved in for the kill, swinging her axe with skill and Kveld strength. Down came the blade, striking him on the shoulder and making him yell out with the pain. A thin film of fire covered the Lord of Chaos, but it quickly faded. He was obviously damaged, but he still managed to taunt his attacker.

“You think angel's tears can hurt me Kveld.” He yelled. “I am born of chaos and you are in my realm.”

He hit her, sending her flying for a good fifty feet. Maya hit the cave wall and collapsed into a tangled heap. Muzzie had no way of knowing if she was alive or dead, but she looked to be out of the battle. Yam Kermul was using spells now, using gestures of his claws to send Chillan hurtling across the cave and then Babaef.

“Has the City, no worthy opponent for me ?” Asked the Lord of Chaos.

“I have a weapon that will kill you, it’s already tasted hundreds of the slithering creatures.” Said Bailig. “See how you rate me as an opponent.”

Yam Kermul allowed Bailig to come close, actually picking up and using the battle axe that Maya had dropped. It was a ruined weapon now, but Yam Kermul used it and circled Bailig. Size actually handicapped the Lord of Chaos, it slowed him down and even made it difficult for him to grip the weapon. He resisted using spells though and moved round Bailig, blocking his blows. Bailig was the best swordsman on the rift and eventually skill provided him an opportunity. He lunged and ran the edge of his blade over the back of Yam Kermul’s left hand.

It could easily have been the end of the fight. Two of his claws turned grey, withered and actually fell to the ground. Yam Kermul stamped the ground and bellowed in pain, but he didn’t stop fighting. As Bailig moved in for the kill, Yam Kermul span, hitting Bailig high on his right shoulder, shearing off flesh with the axe. Bailig screamed and landed in a heap, unconscious. Muzzie badly wanted to unleash a destructive spell on Yam Kermul. That would mean allowing the spell he’d been building to dissipate and he wasn’t prepared to write off Tarin, not yet.

“So, Babaef.” Said Yam Kermul. “It seems you still live, but not for long.”

He brushed Lilleth aside, as though she was an annoying insect. He hit her with the back of his hand and she became another unconscious heap on the ground. Babaef seemed to fascinate him. He picked up the sorcerer and pushed him against the wall, examining his face. He pointed a sharp claw directly at Babaef’s face and drew it back.

“Kill me and you’ll be trapped here forever.” Said Babaef. “Only I can release the last lock.”

“You lie sorcerer. More deceit to save your life.”

Muzzie was impressed by Babaef, he gave Yam Kermul a steady glare, eye to eye.

“Feel the locks if you don’t believe me. I fooled you, not all of them are open.”

“But..... but how. You completed the ritual.”

Babaef was actually laughing, straight into the face of Yam Kermul.

“No I didn’t, there was no need. Chaos gave me enough power to open the locks anyway. Kill me and you’ll rot in this catacomb forever.”

The lord of Chaos dropped Babaef and kicked him hard, though not hard enough to kill him.

“You’ll open the locks sorcerer, or you’ll watch me kill all your friends. I’ll take my time over it, some will scream for days, as I remove their skin an inch at a time.”

He looked around the cave, eyeing up each huddled and unconscious form.

“Who shall I start with ?” Asked Yam Kermul.

“How about me ?” Asked Tarin.

~

~

They were treating her with respect, which really surprised Galla. She’d arrived at their house, telling them the City was full of evil things. Evil things that they were unable to see or hear. It was asking for a huge amount of faith and she hadn’t known them that long.

“We need to protect the children’s rooms first.” She said.

They were smiling at her but not doing anything, no reaction at all. It occurred to her that they might be thinking of her as a dangerously insane person, who needed to be humoured. Wēland had a short sword, she'd seen it. Surely he'd be waving it at her, if they did think she was insane.

"I know I'm asking you to accept an awful lot, with no evidence." She said.

"I trust you." Said Wēland. "You found the hidden entrance in the cellar and saved us all from being murdered in our beds."

"Yes." Added Hervör. "We believe you, of course we believe you. We just don't know what needs to be done."

Good, they hadn't decided to treat her as a lunatic. Galla decided to take things one step at a time.

"Show me where the children sleep." She said.

Hervör moved towards the steps and led the way up to the next floor.

"We have more rooms than we know what to do with." Said Hervör. "The children have all decided to sleep together though. They still seem a bit nervous of our new home."

"Good." Said Galla. "It will be easier to protect one room and the children can support each other.... if the attack is subtle."

"What do you mean by subtle?" Asked Wēland

"Oh don't mind me, they'll probably be fine."

By subtle, Galla had meant an attack in their sleep, a gradual invasion of their dreams. It was hard to counter such attacks and Galla didn't want to scare them.

"Oh my, this is bad." She said.

There was nothing subtle about the claw hovering over their son's head, or the reptilian face, half hidden in the wall. There were sounds too; murmurings and whisperings that no native of the City would ever think were sounds of a storm. The children were wide awake of course, woken by the thumping on the door and the agitation of the visitor.

"What do you see?" Asked Hervör.

"Nothing good." Replied Galla. "No. Stay in your beds, my powders will protect you."

The children had begun to get up, folding blankets back and watching their parents.

"What's happening Mamma?" Asked the eldest girl.

"Nothing dear, just a ritual to help you sleep soundly." Said Hervör. "Galla will perform the ritual and you all like Galla."

The children nodded enthusiastically. They did know and like the strange old woman, who always seemed to have treats in her pockets. They pulled up their covers, their eyes watching Galla intently.

"Just a few words and a few of my powders." Said Galla. "Some of them might make you sneeze."

The children laughed, she just hoped they'd take no harm from the darkness trying to enter their room. Galla had often teased other apothecaries, for intoning ancient prayers, while using potions or powders. The words usually had little or no effect, yet she found herself chanting an old prayer of blessing. As she chanted, she sprinkled powders over the walls and the wisps of mist began to vanish.

"It tickles." Said the boy, sneezing.

"It will child, but you'll sleep better."

She had plenty of powders and used them liberally and by the time every corner of the room had been covered, there wasn't a sign of anything malignant. The eldest child was actually asleep and the others looked about to drop off too.

"I feel it." Whispered Wēland. "As if something unpleasant has been removed."

"And the storm sounds have gone." Added Hervör.

Galla led them to the door and began to walk down the stairs.

“What next ?” Asked Hervör.

“Next we do your room and all the doorways of every room.” Said Galla. “I even brought charms that need to be fixed over the outside doors. Then I have no intention of going out again tonight, so I’m hoping you’ll invite me to sleep in a chair by the fire.”

~ ~

Runa was probably saved by running, there were easier things to hunt on the streets, than a girl who ran like the wind. She only slowed down once she saw her home and then physiology saved her from being eaten. Some hybrids have a body temperature that is quite a bit warmer than their surroundings, but Runa was always at the ambient temperature of the City. She had no idea the creature of darkness had passed her by, but it was looking for warm flesh to feed on.

She climbed over the low garden wall and approached her home. It was in the part of Upper Town where the new moneyed classes tended to live. Her parents weren’t really rich, but they were still able to afford a decent house, guards and a couple of servants. The house looked perfect, as if the troubles of the City had left it unscathed. Somewhere inside, Runa knew that was nonsense. She was an intelligent girl, but it suited her to ignore the horrors she’d run through and pretend it would all be gone by morning.

“Oh no, no, please no !” She yelled.

Her mother’s maid was hanging out of an upstairs window, blood dripping from a terrible wound in her back. Something was moving behind her, something indistinct. Runa ran again, towards the back of the house, towards where her bedroom was, her sanctuary.

“Fuck ! This can’t be happening !”

But it was, there were flames in her room and her window was hanging open. All her precious things, her journal and her clothes, all going up in flames. Runa sat on the immaculately kept lawn and almost gave up. Why not ? Why not just sit there and wait to be killed ? Her life would never be the same and dying was easier than trying to cope with the horrors around her.

“I’ll face them, get it over with.” She muttered to herself.

Runa started to walk towards the main doors of the house. She’d walk inside and use her finger nails on the first monster she saw. Maybe she’d be lucky and claw out its eyes, before it ate her. Then Runa saw her father’s shed, the one where he kept his weapons and armour from his life as a warrior. Her mother wouldn’t let him keep weapons in the house, so he’d built a shed for them, an outhouse about fifteen feet square. She hadn’t seen her mother’s body, but she must be dead, it seemed like most of the City was now dead. Not Muzzie’s of course, they could deal with such things. If only she’d stayed by the fire in the bar.

Her father’s shed had become her unofficial play room when she’d been tiny. He’d often found her asleep beside his old melee weapons. There was no lock, who would dare to enter the grounds of their house. She pulled open the door and closed it behind her, giving her eyes a chance to adjust to the darkness of the interior. It was clean, her father kept it spotless. Runa needed to sleep, she was sure everything would be much better in the morning.

“It’ll all be better in the morning.” Was a favourite saying of her mother’s.

Runa found the spot where she’d hidden as a child and crammed herself into a gap between a weapon case and the outside wall of the shed. Her feet didn’t quite fit, she was much bigger than when she was a toddler. Runa curled up and slept, hoping it would all be much better in the morning, but knowing it wouldn’t be.

~ ~

© Ed Cowling – April 2016

Part 32 will be posted at the end of May.