

City of the Lost God

Part 26 – Inanna’s Puzzle

“The things that slither of course, the dark nasty things !” Shouted the woman by the fire.



Babaef knew it was wrong to have a favourite daughter, but he’d always loved Kapes more than her sister. He cared deeply for both of them, but there had always been that certain something about his youngest daughter. The sharpness of wit, the quickness of her mind, that other quality that’s impossible to define that makes a parent choose. All parents do of course, even though they rarely admit it, they all have a favourite. It made it worse, that love. He knelt on the ground, his tears burning his eyes, as the monster that was now Kapes, hurtled towards them.

“Look away Babaef.” Said Lilleth.

He couldn’t look away; it was the look in her eyes, the look of hate. Twenty feet long and no longer even slightly resembling his daughter, the monster crashed through the scrub at speed. Only her eyes proved she’d once been Kapes and he couldn’t look away from them. Gesse was on her in a few seconds, the two of them tumbling across the rift as they fought. Babaef was almost proud of his daughter when he saw her draw blood, the first time any attack had managed to wound the powerful revenant. Gesse noticed Babaef watching and turned, hiding the monster with his back. Babaef may not have been able to see his daughter, but he still heard the sound of breaking bones and ripping flesh. Soon the sound of her tail thrashing ceased and Gesse was walking back towards them, his hands covered in the monster’s thick green blood, his daughter’s blood.

“Don’t look Babaef,” said Gesse, “I’ll get a shovel and bury her.”

Babaef looked at the misshapen body behind Gesse and still saw his daughter in his mind.

“I’ll help; she’ll need words said over her.” He said.

“They’ll all need burial and a few words.” Said Muzzie.

Babaef hadn’t forgotten that the body of Lagertha was still in the temple, there were just so many that needed burial.

“We can’t just leave them,” said Lilleth, “the carrion beasts that roam the rift will find the bodies.”

The sheer enormity of the task hit Babaef and he could see the others looking at the bodies scattered around the remains of the compound. Muzzie was the first to offer a solution.

“We could put them all in the temple,” he said, “and then I can seal it up forever.”

“Rumours of gold will spread, they always do. I don’t want my family dug up by treasure hunters.” Said Babaef.

Muzzie was shaking his head.

“I can take the temple right down into the ground, cover it in tons of silt and rift soil. No hybrid looking for gold will ever be able to dig them out.”

“He can do that,” said Lilleth, “I saw him do it at the Ring of Volkin.”

Muzzie was giving her such a disgusted look that Babaef found himself laughing.

“So you found the Hand or Arcardis ? Don’t worry I have no intention of telling anyone. In fact I can help you use the hand, teach you about some of the more esoteric spells. For instance, with so many dead bodies at our disposal, there is no reason for poor Chillan to be one legged.”

Babaef now felt he had purpose again and an ally worthy of the name. He shook the worst of the dust off his robe and noticed that the carts had survived the battle in the compound, more good news.

"We'll carry the dead into the temple, just our people of course, let the carrion creatures eat the guardian monsters. We can remove the best gold artefacts at the same time and load them onto the carts."

No one was moving and Muzzie was giving him a look of disgust.

"Fuck the gold, we have wounded to get back to the City." He said.

Babaef realised he'd misread the situation, he thought mention of the gold would motivate Muzzie, not disgust him.

"We can treat the wounded better here, but first we should clear out the temple." He said.

"Heal the wounded now, or I won't help you." Said Lilleth.

"Me neither." Boomed the deep voice of Gesse.

"Very well, though the dead should be collected before they become a health hazard," said Babaef, "Gesse, please find a young healthy body with two good legs. One of the younger guards would be perfect."

"You're changing both his legs?" Asked Muzzie.

Babaef sighed, he had hoped Muzzie might prove to be an intelligent ally.

"He can hardly have one old short leg and one long muscular one."

"I keep telling him he's stupid." Added the vaporous Ventus.

"But..... that'll mean cutting off his good leg." Said Lilleth.

"Her too, I'm amazed they've survived past childhood." Said Ventus.

"Of course it does," said Babaef, "he won't complain about having the legs of a twenty year old. Now find me that body and begin moving the dead."

They were moving, but not fast enough for him.

"Come on people. Get busy !!" He shouted.

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Silsk looked at the worker of metals and he'd actually peed himself. A patrol on the pilgrim trail had spotted him, boasting of his skills and looking for work. Several of her sister dark angels had brought him and his family back to the towers, along with most of their possessions.

"Look at his arms Aeony; he's never swung a heavy hammer in his life." She screeched.

He cowered on the ground and Silsk could smell the urine that had run down his leg. His family consisted of a wife and three children; just getting them to the towers had been quite a task. The City needed a metal worker though, or it would die.

"What sort of objects do you make?" Asked Aeony.

He didn't move, his hand just pointed at a satchel that was on top of a large trunk. Six dark angels had been required to bring all their belongings to the towers and there had been gold to reward the patrol. It had all been a lot of trouble for the puny creature who wouldn't even talk. Someone was going to have to pay for the fiasco, someone was going to suffer.

"I'll show you." Said his wife.

She was shaking so much that she had trouble unbuckling the satchel. They'd been brought to the seldom used section of the towers, to a vast rubble strewn chamber, high up and overlooking the mountains. Even Silsk had to be careful in the seldom used chambers, strange and dangerous creatures were still seen wandering through the rooms. Silsk had brought them there in case he was a disappointment and needed to be disposed of. The problem was that the desolate surroundings weren't doing anything to relax the worker of metals, or his family. His wife was tall and wispy, Silsk sensed a lot of human in her. She pulled a dagger from the satchel and handed it to Silsk.

"You made this?" She asked.

He seemed to perk up, seeing her handling the exquisite dagger, obviously respecting what he'd created.

"Yes." He said.

"All of it? You didn't just do the ornamental handle?"

"No, it's all my work."

He was wrong for the City of course; they needed someone who could make ploughs, not ornaments for nobles. The wife emptied the satchel onto the dusty floor. Small knives, daggers, beautiful robe fastenings. All of it small and intricate and beautiful beyond anything Silsk had ever seen. Aeony was testing the edge of a blade against her talon.

"He knows his trade," she said, "the edge is sharp and the weapon is well balanced."

It was obviously cold, his children were hugging each other and shivering. Three children seemed a bit excessive to Silsk, she never had understood why the people in the slums had so many.

"Can you turn your hand to larger things?" She asked.

Again the wife answered for him.

"He can learn, what do you require?"

"Swords and axes." Said Aeony.

"And the odd plough." Added Silsk.

She could tell by the look on his face that he'd never be the weapon smith they needed. The City needed another Tarin and she'd been brought a maker of fancy goods. A millennia or two before and the City had the kind of people who needed ornamental daggers, but not now. Silsk looked out of the window and made a decision, the entire family would feed the scavengers.

"You're no good to me." She said.

He still didn't object, still no plea for his life or the lives of his children. Silsk looked at the wife, expecting to see anger on her face, perhaps even loathing for her cowardly husband. No, all that was in her eyes was love. Silsk had a vague understanding of love, but to her it meant the urges that seeing Merrick brought on. The weakness of needing the affection and approval of another person. Silsk had long ago decided that love was over rated and usually a curse. She nodded to Aeony and pointed at the windows, at least the family wouldn't add to the detritus in the chamber.

"He made this." Shouted the wife.

She was pulling the top of her dress to one side, showing Silsk a thin mesh undershirt of some kind.

"I have no use for such finery." Said Silsk.

Aeony and two guards had the children, ignoring their screams and pushing them towards the windows.

"It'll stop any blade." Said the wife.

Silsk stepped forward and felt the thin metal mesh. It was so thin that she could barely feel it in her talons. Silsk held the wife by her throat and stabbed hard at her chest with the ornamental dagger. The blow so powerful that the woman fell backwards, travelling several feet before ending up as a crumpled heap on the floor. She was coughing and having trouble breathing, but there was no sign of blood. The children were screaming loudly and trying to break away from Aeony, trying to get to their mother.

"Shut the brats up." Said Silsk.

She knelt beside the wife, who was still making choking sounds and gasping for breath. Silsk pulled the woman's dress to one side and there was a huge bruise where the dagger had struck, but the skin hadn't been penetrated. Silsk looked up at Aeony, who was just about to throw the children from the windows.

“Leave them for now, come and look at this.” Said Silsk.

Both the dark angels examined the bruised chest of the wife.

“Did you use full force ?” Asked Aeony.

“Yes, I intended to kill her. And look at the blade, it isn’t even marked. This maker of fancy nonsense knows his trade.”

He was still in a heap on the floor, he didn’t seem to even realise how close his children had come to death. Silsk waited for the wife to stop gasping for every breath.

“Can he make other things out of this ?” She asked fingering the thin mesh undershirt.

“Yes, any clothing you want. Gloves, socks, hats..... anything.”

Silsk helped the wife up and looked around for somewhere to sit. There was nothing in the room that was still in one piece, the furniture had been broken up a long time ago. The guards were still holding onto the children and had them standing on the window ledge.

“I told you to leave them,” said Silsk, “bring them back into the chamber and then find some chairs that are still in one piece.”

The guards didn’t look pleased at exploring other rooms, so Aeony went with them. They returned quite quickly, carrying two heavy and dusty old sofas.

“Good,” said Silsk, “now we can talk in a little comfort. Put the father with the children. That’s it, over there, against the wall.”

Silsk sat on one sofa, the mother next to her. Aeony remained at the chamber door, watching for anything they might have disturbed while hunting for sofas.

“I’ll deal with you, not your husband,” said Silsk, “I’ll tell you what I need and it’ll be your responsibility to get him to make it. Do you understand ?”

“He’s not always like this, but yes I understand.”

Again the wife was looking at her husband with pure love in her eyes. It sickened Silsk and also intrigued her. How could she love such a spineless male ?

“What is your name ?” Silsk asked.

“Hervör, my husband is Weland, a famous artisan in the far north.”

Again Silsk looked the woman over, noticing the facial features that indicated she was originally from the frozen lands that were far to the north of the City.

“Why are you so far from home ?” Asked Silsk.

“Weland thought the pilgrimage might improve our fortunes.”

Silsk laughed, a sound so rare and terrifying that the guards drew their swords.

“Who knows, perhaps it has,” said Silsk, “your husband may work for whoever he wishes, once my orders are taken care of. With his skills, I can’t see you or your children going hungry.”

“He becomes unsettled if we stay in one place.”

“Then you must cure him of that problem. If you leave the City without permission, you will be hunted down and killed.”

Silsk called Aeony over, which didn’t seem to please the guards, who were still staring into the darkness of the unlit corridor.

“Aeony, you are to provide Hervör and her husband with a place to work from, somewhere near Galla would be ideal. Give them a small advance and let it be known that they are under my protection.”

“Thank you.” Said Hervör.

Silsk looked at where the three children were now sat quietly with their father.

“Let me down and you’ll only have two children in the autumn.”

Silsk led Aeony away, finding a private corner of the chamber.

"He's useless for our most pressing need of course," said Silsk, "we need Tarin back. I want you to go to Avald and persuade him to return."

"He won't come back without the others," said Aeony, "and that will mean forgiving Merrick."

"I can't just let him come back without any kind of punishment. No one will ever take me seriously again. I know Nethra and Merrick are his friends, but there is this Waide creature. Offer Merrick safe return for either half of the loot he took from the towers, or the life of Waide. Let him decide. As to Tarin, just tell him the City needs him."

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After telling Caspian to leave the puzzle pieces alone, it was Vella who went to find them in the middle of the night. It was like not knowing the end of a story; she simply had to know what the puzzle was. She'd left the bed she shared with Caspian and still naked, she'd entered the hidden library behind their old bedroom. The puzzle was in the top drawer of the old desk, Caspian had told her that's where he'd put the dozen or so puzzle pieces. Every part of her sensible side was telling her to go back to bed, but she had to know the secret of the puzzle.

Vella pulled an old chair over to the desk and turned up the lighting globe, which they normally left at just a dull glow. The drawer creaked as it opened and she had to give it a bit of a jerk to unstick it. "They're here." She muttered to herself.

Vella felt ridiculously pleased at finding the shiny pieces of silver metal. She took them from the drawer one by one, counting them as she went. Thirteen pieces in all, whatever they formed when put together had to be quite small. Vella sat very still and listened, Caspian often woke and followed her if she left their bedroom. Hearing nothing, she picked up several of the puzzle pieces with particularly flat edges. Logic told her the designer of the puzzle would have been cleverer than that, but two of the pieces interlocked perfectly. She was disappointed, it looked like the flat edges were at the bottom and the puzzle was likely to be very easy. There was a slight noise and Vella stood up. "Is that you Casp?"

She only spoke gently, but her voice seemed to boom in the quiet of the night. No answer and no more noise, so Vella looked at the other pieces with flat edges. They linked together to form a base of some kind. As Vella watched an apparition formed in front of her, a three dimensional picture of a mighty castle, but only up to the first floor windows.

"Yes, I understand it now." She muttered.

The second row was harder and no matter what she did there was a gap that none of the pieces fitted into. Perhaps a piece was missing? Vella actually began to cry, but then she saw where she'd gone wrong. She took the second row apart and put the pieces in the right order and then sat back in her chair. The apparition was clearer now and it filled the table. Still only up to just below the battlements until she'd completed the puzzle, but she could see the castle was surrounded by a water filled ditch and there was a river. There were people there, humans, all of them. Most seemed to be male warriors, but the occasional finely dressed female walked past a window. There were even boats on the river and a young boy fishing. All of it was in vivid colour and seemed to depict a glorious sunny day. Vella put out her hand to touch the castle and her finger went right through it. "I must see it all!"

As she touched the puzzle the vision of the castle vanished. Her hands eagerly went for the six remaining pieces, she'd have the puzzle finished in seconds. Then a hand appeared from behind her and pulled the puzzle apart, sending the pieces flying across the room. She stood and spun around, seeing Torfi stood behind her.

"You must never touch that puzzle again." He said.

Vella tried to use her hands to cover her nakedness and found it far harder than it looked in paintings. She wanted one hand to hit Torfi, but that meant exposing her breasts.

"How..... Why are you here ? Get out, can't you see I'm naked !"

Torfi ignored her and the odd blow she was landing on his head. He brushed the remainder of the puzzle pieces onto the floor, stamping on them and trying to break them.

"The pieces must be destroyed. I know that place, I've seen pictures of it in the old books." He said.

Vella had to protect the puzzle, she forgot her nakedness and tried to claw out his eyes with her fingernails. Torfi was strong though, far stronger than she imagined. He held her arms firmly to her sides and looked into her eyes.

"The puzzle will take you to a terrible place Vella."

She calmed a little and noticed the terrible scratches she had given him, his right eyelid was almost cut through.

"I'm so sorry Torfi, I don't know how I could have....."

His grip on her eased, but he still didn't let her go.

"It's that place Vella, it effects people like that. You must destroy the puzzle."

"It's such a beautiful castle Torfi."

"That castle is Gorshan, the place of death."

Caspian was naked as he walked into the room and looked at his naked wife in Torfi's embrace. Vella felt embarrassed and ashamed, she also felt guilty for trying to put the puzzle together. Torfi let her go and she sat on the old chair.

"We all need to have a chat." Said Torfi.

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Farmers were keeping to their homes at night and it was becoming harder to feed. Maya had decided to visit a small village she knew, one where they thought of her as a wealthy woman of good standing, even if they had no idea where she came from.

"Everything looks boarded up." Said Bailig.

"I know a woman who rents out rooms, or at least I did. It's been several years since I was last here."

Maya looked Bailig over and he looked like he'd been sleeping rough for a while. She probably didn't look much better. Her cloth bag had been left behind too many trees while she hunted, the clothes inside left to the damp to do its damage. Too many nights on the road and too little care taken over their belongings, Maya should have known better.

"We need to tidy up," she said, "or Nalia will never let us in."

They stripped and brushed down their clothes as best they could. She trimmed his beard and he brushed the worst of the knots out of her hair. Once dressed again Bailig looked far less of a ruffian and she hoped she did too.

"How do I look ?" She asked.

"Good enough to eat, though to be honest.... We both need a bath."

Maya sniffed herself and had to agree, but there was no time to find a river to bathe in. The dark thing was calling them both and they wouldn't be able to resist the call for long.

"Nalia will have hot water, as long as she still owns the house." She said.

The village was spread out along a single street that Maya remembered being muddy during the rainy season. They walked openly along the centre of the street, looking for any signs of life.

"Every door and window is barred or shuttered." Said Bailig.

"It's not just us who are answering its call." Said Maya.

No one opened a door or looked out of a window as they walked the length of the village. The large house had been the home of the local headman, Nalia's father. He'd died during one of the plague epidemics and Nalia had taken to renting out her spare rooms. Again, all the windows were shuttered and the house looked lifeless and deserted.

"It might be the plague." Said Bailig.

"Maybe."

She didn't really think so, but neither of them needed to worry about infectious diseases any more. As a Kveld she'd had to pretend to have the occasional illness, to appear normal. Maya ignored the front door and walked around to the rear, the entrance she'd used while staying there. She banged on the door with her fist.

"Nalia, it's me, Maya."

There was no response, so she leant against the door and used her Kveld senses. There were four in the house, two male and two female. She had no idea if her old friend Nalia was in the building, but it wasn't deserted.

"We should go, no one has lived here for a long time." Said Bailig.

She shook her head at him and pounded her fist on the door again.

"Nalia, we need shelter for the night. Don't leave us out here."

Eventually there was the sound of bolts being drawn back and keys being turned in several locks. A man's head looked around the door and then he spoke to someone behind him.

"There's two of them Nalia, a woman and a man."

"Get out of the way you old fool and let me see."

The next face at the door was Nalia and she looked them over, giving Bailig particular attention.

"It's been a few years Maya."

"That it has, I thought you might have sold the place and moved on."

"No, they'll bury me here. Who's this?" She asked, nodding in the direction of Bailig.

"A good friend. We need a bath and a room for the night."

Nalia smiled at her.

"Just one room eh? You haven't changed."

Nalia was looking past them, as if they were trying to hide a group of bandits in the bushes.

"You'd best come in then."

The door was opened and they carried their belongings inside. An elderly man was inside the hallway and he locked and bolted the door behind them, moaning all the time.

"Take no notice of him, come into the kitchen, I'm sure I can find you something to eat."

"No good will come of taking in strays." Muttered the old man.

A man and woman were in the kitchen, huddled in front of the fire and looking nervous. Nalia ignored them and went to a large pot that was bubbling on the fire. Maya remembered that the pot was left constantly boiling and all kinds of things were added to the stew it contained.

"Mostly vegetables, but you might find the odd bit of meat." Said Nalia.

"I remember your stew pot, that'll do us fine." Said Maya.

They were given a bowl each and some fairly fresh bread. The stew smelt and tasted wonderful and Maya enjoyed the meal. Nalia sat quietly while they ate and they could hear the old man pacing about in the rooms above them.

"He thinks they might find a way in." Said Nalia.

"What are these things and why is the village boarded up?" Asked Maya.

The couple by the fire looked at her as though she was insane.

"Where have you been lately ?" Asked Nalia.

"We've been out in the farm lands, far to the east."

"That explains it. This whole area has been beset with strange events. Children gone missing, only to turn up half eaten. Then there were the livestock mutilations."

"Only a mad man would do the things I've seen done to our cattle." Said the Man by the fire.

"They had to leave their farm, things got so bad." Added Nalia.

So the couple were another pair of strays, the old man's words now made sense to Maya.

"Then we started to see them. Only at night, but they're becoming clearer and clearer all the time.

So far they've never entered anyone's home, but we're all worried."

"See what ? What are they ?" Asked Bailig.

"The things that slither of course, the dark nasty things !" Shouted the woman by the fire.

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"I knew it," said Vella, "I had a sort of dream about you running on four legs."

Torfi had told them about his conversion to a Kveld and seemed quite disappointed at their reaction, or lack of it.

"We killed the Roruss." Said Caspian.

It was like a game of weird one-upmanship and Torfi was losing at every throw of the dice. Vella seemed to sense that Torfi was a little put out by them taking it in their stride.

"You now have friends in the Dome who know," she said, "you can talk to us whenever you like, though preferable when we're dressed."

They were now in their lounge area and Vella had pulled on a loose gown, which covered everything but in many ways, was more provocative than being naked. Caspian had simply put on a pair of trousers. Caspian poured three glasses of wine. It may have been the middle of the night, but they all seemed to need a drink. Vella moved next to Torfi on the sofa and examined his face.

"You're almost healed." She said.

"I heal really fast now."

"It was Maya wasn't it ? We all knew she was a bit strange, all of us in the tavern that is."

He looked forlorn again, so Vella held his hand.

"How long have you been..... as you are ?" She asked.

"Not long, I'm still getting used to it. Maya has left the City, so I've no one to ask about my new skills. I feel a bit lost to be honest."

"You can help us if you'd like to, we want to move some old human statues around." She said.

Torfi lowered his head, but he gripped her hand quite firmly.

"I know," he said, "I've seen them. Adamaz asked me to spy on you, but I've told him nothing."

"You've been watching us ?" Asked Caspian.

"Yes, but I always stop watching when you're being..... intimate."

Vella actually laughed and kissed him on the cheek.

"Being intimate ! You are being very polite Torfi, but it's nice to know we can trust you." She said.

"It has to stop," said Caspian, "you're welcome in our rooms, but no more spying."

"Yes, of course. It was her by the way, the Genova created the puzzle."

Vella could almost feel her jaw drop, they'd both assumed the puzzle was another trick from LLud Narren.

"How do you know ?" Asked Vella.

"I knew I'd seen the face before, so I looked in the restricted section of the library."

"Rogget's study of angels ?" Asked Caspian, interrupting.

“Yes, he was a superb scholar, for a human that is. The translation we have is in mint condition and there is a whole section on Inanna, the Genova who built the puzzle.”

Vella refilled their glasses and noticed the sky was beginning to lighten. Whatever passed for dawn was about to happen over the 1st rift.

“I’d love to know more, but I need some sleep Torfi. Can we meet later, perhaps all have dinner together tonight ?” She asked.

“Of course, but promise me you won’t touch the puzzle pieces.”

“We promise,” said Caspian, “but why would an angel create a puzzle that sends people to an evil place like Gorshan ?”

Torfi was looking at them as though they were both idiots.

“To be free of course.”

“Free from where ?” Asked Vella.

“Free from being turned to stone. You do realise ? That isn’t a statue you have, it’s the angel herself. Inanna the renegade angel, turned to stone when Tomma-Goran still walked the streets of the City.”

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With the use of the magic that Muzzie could draw from the Hand of Arcardis, the injured and wounded were almost back to full health. Chillan had scars on his legs that looked quite nasty, but he was up and walking on the legs that had once belonged to a twenty one year old member of Babaef’s guard. Muzzie felt it was all a little odd, especially now that Chillan was a good six inches taller than he had been.

“All the bodies are inside the temple.” He told Babaef.

“And the gold ?”

“The doors melted and flowed into the cracks in the ground, it’ll need an army with picks to get the gold out of the ground. All the statues and other artefacts are on the carts.”

Muzzie felt like adding that Babaef’s eldest daughter would now have to walk back to the City, but they all knew that Gesse had volunteered to carry her.

“Don’t give me that look Muzzie,” said Babaef, “it may seem a bit greedy, but even you will appreciate your share once we’re back in the City. Your new brothel must be eating into your savings.”

Muzzie hated Babaef at that moment, mainly because he knew he was right. The gold would be handy, very handy. The others were slowly arriving, none of them keen to enter the human temple. Words needed to be said though, the rite of passage from life to death needed to be witnessed, the rituals followed.

“I never really liked Lagertha, but I will miss her.” Said Itet.

They’d run out of material to make shrouds, many of the dead were still in the clothes they’d died in. Body parts that couldn’t be recognised were simply piled up against one wall. It was disrespectful and fairly horrific, but it had been the quickest way to get the dead buried. The 1st rift was unusually hot this year and some of the bodies already carried the whiff of decay.

“I know some of the common language ritual for burying the dead. I take it no one will object to me performing the ceremony ?” Asked Babaef.

“I know the proper words according to the laws of the City,” said Gesse, “I was a holy man once, just for a brief period in my life.”

“It hardly seems right, a revenant speaking over the dead.” Said Lilleth.

“I’m sure the right words are more important than who says them.” Said Muzzie.

There was general agreement, though a few of the surviving servants kept well away from the huge revenant. Gesse spoke the words of the lawful instrument for the interring of the dead. He gave each line just the right emphasis and his booming voice added a certain gravitas. When he'd finished Babaef thanked him.

"I don't think anyone in the City, ever had a better send off. Thank you Gesse."

There was no rush to leave the temple. Babaef had a few minutes with Lagertha, speaking a few private words over her body. Several of the servants cried over their own dead, but eventually all that could be said, had been said. No one gave an order, everyone simply left the temple and stood in a group next to the river. Muzzie lifted his left arm and found the spell he'd used at the Ring of Volkin. He had no idea what the name of the spell was, but he picked up something about earthquakes and chasms.

"It's going." Said Lilleth.

It was as if some power was pulling the temple from below. The ground shook, clouds of dust rose into the air and the entire temple began to sink into the ground. Down it went, ten feet, then twenty and still picking up pace. Once it was fifty feet down the river bank started to give way, as the soil of the rift began to fall into the hole. Soil, rubble, even small boulders, everything began to fall into the hole, effectively sealing the tomb for all time.

"Run, or you're going to get wet!" Shouted Chillan.

Muzzie carried on, pulling the temple down until it hit the bedrock, which was a long way down. He felt the bank under him give way and then he was in the water and being dragged down by the swirling current. Muzzie kicked for the surface and then eager hands were pulling him ashore. The temple was gone and now there was a lake, or more accurately a new part of the river. The temple was now over a hundred feet down, mostly buried and now covered in a good twenty feet of water. Muzzie gave himself a pat on the back for a job well done.

"No one will ever disturb their resting place." Said Lilleth.

"Indeed," added Babaef, "though a warning about the flooding might have been nice."

Muzzie had to chuckle as the sorcerer wrung out the sodden ends of his robe. There was no reason to remain, Gesse popped Itet onto the top of the treasure in the cart, as though she was the decoration on the top of a cake. He pushed one cart with ease and all the others struggled to push the second cart and keep up with him.

"I will never moan about being bored again," said Muzzie, "I intend to stay in my tavern and do nothing but drink beer for weeks."

"Nonsense," said Babaef, "three days from now you'll be in the catacombs with me."

They stopped, so suddenly that Gesse had to catch Babaef's daughter as she fell from her perch at the top of the cart.

"No way, you're crazy," said Lilleth, "there are only a few of us left and most importantly. No one ever returns from the catacombs."

"I hate to say it, but she has a point. We are few in number." Said Chillan.

Babaef threw back his arms and spoke to them as though he was addressing a meeting.

"We have enough gold to hire an army," he said, "and we may be few in number, but we're all worth a hundred of most others. Chillan and I are the best Sorcerers in the City and then there are the rest of you. Lilleth, the famed warrior and tracker. Muzzie with a power he doesn't fully understand, but he alone is capable of standing up against the entire army of undead in the catacombs. Then, if that wasn't enough, we have Gesse and his ghost."

"I'm not a ghost." Shouted Ventus.

They all laughed and cheered up and as they trudged towards the City, Muzzie was already forming a lie in his head. Just the right lie to enable him to get away from Sara and the tavern for the next part of the mission.

“So how do we get into the catacombs ?” He asked.

It was all too easy to find the newcomers in Avald, Aeony just had to keep in the shadows and listen. For a large creature, she moved silently and could cross the loosest floorboards without making a sound. A while spent listening at the back door of the tavern and Aeony knew all about Tarin, the hero.

“If they just knew what he really was.” Muttered Aeony.

The small tavern where they were staying looked secure at ground level, but no one had bothered to close the window shutters on the top floor. She knew her wings made a distinctive noise that made stealth impossible. Aeony climbed, using her tail to give extra support at tricky points. Her perfume was a problem, the natural dark angel pheromones that she could do nothing about. The locals would notice the sweet and attractive perfume, but it was unlikely to mean anything to most of them. Merrick on the other hand, might think Silsk had come to keep her often made promise to kill him. Aeony moved round to the windy side of the building and hoped most of her natural odour would be lost.

“Tomorrow I’ll look for a workshop, may as well keep myself busy.”

Aeony heard Tarin’s voice and looked through a top floor window. They were there, all of them in a large shared lounge. A low table was covered in dirty plates and half full drinking glasses; they’d obviously just finished a late meal. She’d thought about how to handle this kind of situation and Nethra had to be the hostage. They might like Waide, but they’d all be protective of Nethra.

“They transport goods to the far north, I might hire myself out as a guard,” said Merrick, “carry on with the same line of work I had in the City.”

“You were useless at it there.” Said Aeony.

She came through the window fast, ignoring Merrick and punching Tarin hard in the chest, sending him sprawling backwards over a couch. Waide was quick; she had her bow off the floor and an arrow in her hand. Aeony hit her with the end of her tail, sending her crashing into a heap beside Tarin. Merrick was trying to find his sword, but Aeony ignored him, he was still slow and stiff from his recent injuries. Nethra was Aeony’s next target, though she was careful to avoid getting Nethra’s tail slammed into her face. She grabbed the hybrid and held her tight, a talon at her throat.

“I didn’t come to harm you,” said Aeony, “if I did you’d all be dead by now and I’d be on my way back to the towers.”

Merrick finally had a sword in his hands, though he didn’t look too keen on a fight.

“Don’t you dare hurt her.” He said.

“I’m just here to talk.”

Waide had her bow back in her hand, but Tarin just got to his feet and looked at her.

“Talk about what ?” He asked.

“Going back to the City, I’m sure you all want to.”

“Not me,” said Waide, “I’m glad to be away from the place.”

“You may be glad, but not the others. The City may have its faults, but its home. You’re heroes here now, but we all know that you’ll never be really accepted in Avald.”

Aeony let go of Nethra and allowed her to run to Merrick.

“So how are we going to return to the City, without Silsk killing us all ?” Asked Tarin.

Aeony sat herself on the sofa and picked up a half empty bottle of wine and sniffed it. She poured most of the contents into her mouth and slowly swallowed.

“Not bad,” she said, “order more and some food. Then we’ll talk about how you all get to go home and stay alive.”

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Part 27 will be posted at the end of December.