

City of the Lost God

Part 28 – Appeasing The Shrine

“The face, oh that face, it would be in Muzzie’s nightmares forever.”



The part of the light most creatures use to see, was failing as Maya and Bailig reached the outskirts of the City. Dawn and sunset were meaningless terms on the rifts, the light simply increased in the morning and decreased in the evening. No one knew why, even the greatest luminaries and seers had long ago ceased trying to understand. Like birth, death and all the trouble in between, it just happened and had to be dealt with rather than understood.

“There are thousands of them.” Said Maya.

“Tens of thousands.” Added Bailig.

A background of infra-red light washed constantly over the rifts and creatures like the Kveld could see by it. The slithering things had no body heat, but they interfered with the flow of the wash and Maya could see them perfectly. Bailig was still getting used to the new clarity his Kveld sight gave, but even he could see thousands of them, moving towards the catacombs.

“At least they seem to be ignoring the City.” Said Maya.

Bailig was pointing towards the towers.

“The ones coming from the mountains are even going round the City, to get to the shrine grounds.” He said.

“He wants the City,” said Maya, “him, the dark one, he has plans for it and needs it kept intact.”

“Can you remember his name yet ?” He asked her.

“No and I doubt that it will come back to me.”

Maya knew the power a name can give you over someone and she was annoyed at herself. With a name you can pay the great library for information, with a name you can employ Galla, to create a death powder. With a name so much was possible and yet she’d let it escape from her mind when she was the beast on four legs.

“We should try to contact Babaef.” She said.

“Once we’re rested and changed,” said Bailig, “and I also have some of the best weapons ever forged in my collection.”

Bailig knew The Lanes well; his family had been metal brokers for at least five generations. He led her along the quietest alleys and by the least known routes. Eventually they came to his front door and a servant let them inside.

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Caspian leant across Vella, picking up the warm perfume of sleeping female. It was so tempting to forget about the research and snuggle up against her again, but he’d made a promise. He kissed her cheek and climbed out of bed, shivering slightly in the cool breeze from the open window.

“Are you going to find the books on Gorshan ?”

Vella was watching him, her sleepy eyes barely open.

“Yes and anything I can find on our stone angel. If I can, I’ll bring them back here so that we can read them at our leisure.”

She was brushing her hair out of her eyes and looking beautiful.

“I could come and help.”

“No, Adamaz might throw you out of the Dome, or worse. Torfi is meeting me, so I must hurry.”

He turned his back on her, it was the only way he'd get dressed and leave her. No wash, no clean clothes, he just pulled on what he'd taken off the night before. Less than five minutes and he was ready to leave their bedroom. He turned at the door and Vella was asleep, her head still turned towards him. He'd bring the books back to their rooms, even if it was dangerous. There was no way he was going to leave her at first light again.

Caspian was the head librarian in waiting now, Adamaz had even allowed him to take control of the millennia old project of re-sorting the entire library. No one dare ask him where he was going and he no longer had to creep around at night. He found Torfi in the refectory, eating some fresh bread that he'd charmed out of the cook.

"One day, you'll have to make an honest woman out of Cook's niece." Said Caspian.

They both chuckled, Torfi ripping the small loaf in half and handing it to Caspian. They used the main entrance to the library, giving their eyes a few moments to get used to the dull early morning light. Even Caspian didn't dare break the rule about no naked flames in the Great Library. Once, in the reign of Valsec the 22nd, there had been a fire. It was too long ago for any real records to remain, but the rumours persisted, even after twenty thousand or more years. The library had lost half of its spell books and many librarians had died. It could never be allowed to happen again.

"I remember seeing Gorshan mentioned in the Xanash collection." Said Caspian.

They both knew the library well and that the books donated by Emperor Xanash the 34th were housed in the first restricted area. No need to be furtive, Caspian now had not only a key, but full authority to go where he pleased. The door opened easily and the dull night lights gave enough of a glow to avoid bumping into the cramped bookshelves. Caspian sat himself in a window seat and ate his bread, giving the morning light a chance to increase.

"How many books did Xanash donate?" Asked Torfi.

"A hundred and thirty two."

Caspian saw Torfi's expression and decided to cheer him up a little.

"We can ignore the personal diaries and song books and the seven volume treatise on human poetry. That leaves just thirty one books to look through."

Torfi threw his hands up in mock horror.

"May the eight great demon gods save us from human poetry." He said.

As the light improved, Caspian went to the dusty rows of ancient books, most printed on the cured hide of a now extinct animal.

"I should have brought a duster."

"I did." Replied Torfi.

Torfi had brought several pieces of rag, which they both used to carefully remove the worst of the dust. Once they could read the titles Caspian pulled the thirty one books off the shelves and put them on their table.

"I have a meeting with a rich customer in about three hours," he said, "but you can remain here as long as you want."

Caspian opened the first book and it was in an old version of the common tongue, the one students referred to as the great incomprehensible, or GI for short.

"Oh hell Casp, they're written in GI."

Lots of silent characters and letters added to the end of words for no apparent reason plus tortuous syntax. They could both read the books, but it was going to be hell.

"The sooner we get started." Said Caspian.

The first three pages were about using common plants in the process of dyeing cloth. Caspian flicked through them and hoped Vella appreciated what he was going through

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Muzzie was the first to admit that his regulars weren't exactly the intellectuals of the City, but they knew the streets.

"Odd things out there today Muzzie." One Said. "Things you see out of the corner of your eye, lots of them..... Not natural and no good will come of it."

The customer then eyed up Gesse, the long lost brother Muzzie has introduced to everyone. He looked nothing like Muzzie; the disguise spell had been hurried. Plus there was the odour.

"Staying long is he ?" Asked the customer.

"That's his business."

"Only asking, no need to get huffy."

Muzzie liked his table in the bar, he could listen to the gossip and pick up a few useful rumours to keep Aeony happy. Of course, the tower would love to know about Babaef and the catacombs, but Muzzie didn't need quite that much excitement in his life.

"They're all talking about these strange slithering creatures." Said Sara.

"They've been drinking in Barus' back room. Odd things he puts in his ale."

Muzzie glared at her and Sara wandered off, though he knew she wasn't about to leave the matter alone. Everyone knew there was something very odd going on and it had nothing to with Barus putting Netric root in his beer.

It was going to be one of those days. Muzzie had just received his usual second breakfast and Chillan was walking through the bar doors. To Muzzie's knowledge the sorcerer had never visited the tavern before, but he strode in like a regular and seated himself opposite Muzzie.

"I never did get to thank you properly for my new legs." Said Chillan.

"I just used a few spells; the guard who died deserves your thanks. It is his legs that you're walking on."

Chillan was a good seven or eight inches taller than he'd been and Muzzie still found it disconcerting. The sorcerer even sat differently, his new long legs making him more erect.

"What sort of ale are you drinking ?" Asked Muzzie.

"I don't usually drink....."

"You come in here, you drink ale. It's on the house, but you can't sit at my table without a drink, it looks bad."

Chillan looked awkward, staring at the drinks in front of the other early morning drinkers.

"I'll choose something for you, something not too potent." Said Muzzie.

Sara had found a full time replacement for a Vella, a daughter of a wealthy grain trader.

"Over here Runa, when you have a moment." Called Muzzie.

Runa looked up and acknowledged him, actually making eye contact. Runa was a good one a real find and Sara had done well. It helped that Vella had married well and moved into the Dome.

Parents with unmarried daughters would now look favourably on their offspring working at the bar, at least for a while.

"What can I fetch you ?" Asked Runa.

"My usual and a jug of mild for my friend."

Runa went, leaving only the hint of her perfume behind. She was perfect for the rooms out the back, but Runa had told him that she didn't fuck for money, she'd been quite firm about it. It was a pity, but he consoled himself by thinking of the drinkers her looks would bring into the bar. Their drinks

arrived quickly and Muzzie watched as Chillan took a sip, of what was probably the first jug of ale he'd ever drunk.

"It's good, very good." Said the sorcerer.

Muzzie finished his breakfast and watched as a group of traders from the north, came down the stairs from the rooms above. Business was good, he was gaining a reputation for running a safe and orderly house.

"I'm sure you didn't just come here to try the ale. What can I do for you?" Asked Muzzie.

"I'm sure you must have seen the creatures entering the City, or heard about them?"

"Sshush Chillan, such things are bad for business, keep your voice down."

Chillan moved his chair closer and leant towards Muzzie.

"But you have seen them?"

"Yes, of course I have. They seem to be leaving the City unharmed and entering the catacombs."

"Exactly where we'll be going tomorrow night."

Chillan emphasised the point by giving him a long hard stare.

"Babaef feels we should appease the shrine tonight," he added, "to avoid any potential interruptions and problems."

Muzzie banged the table and shouted at a customer he noticed carving something into one of the tables.

"No manners the morning crowd," he said, "yes I do see the advantage of going to the shrine tonight. Then we can go straight into the catacombs tomorrow."

"Can you bring your brother and Lilleth?"

"Yes, that shouldn't be a problem. They're both here, still asleep I think."

Chillan leant even closer and almost whispered.

"It would be a good idea to warn Lilleth about saying too much while Ventus is around." He said.

"She already is careful, we both think he's more than a little creepy."

Chillan was scowling and looking towards the room at the back of the bar.

"Personally I'd like to deal with our friend Ventus," he said, "but Babaef suspects he might be tougher to kill than he looks."

"I get the same feeling. So, assuming he comes with Gesse, what is the plan for tonight?"

"Come to the Sorcerer's Guild building with Gesse and Lilleth and we'll leave from there. There will be just the five of us, Babaef thinks that will be enough."

"I hope he's right, I heard what the shrine did to Tarin!"

"Or, what Tarin did to himself."

Muzzie looked questioningly at Chillan, but it was obvious that he wasn't going to say any more on the subject.

"I need to go," said Chillan, "get to the guild building an hour after full dark."

Muzzie watched him go, finished his beer and then threatened to throw out a few of the regulars. Not for any specific offence, it just kept them generally better behaved.

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Tarin had trudged for miles over and through landscapes as varied as a snow covered forest to several miles of blasted and barren rock. Rumour told of a huge fire breathing monster that had destroyed that region, but Tarin knew it had been a volcanic event several thousands of years before. The plain from the forest to the Great River was the worst in many ways, mile upon mile of featureless grasses. There were few animals though and Tarin had found two dead farmers, ripped

apart by something that hadn't bothered to feed on their flesh. It was late afternoon by the time he looked at the Great River and saw the dark angel sat back on her tail, waiting for him.

"You're losing your touch," said Aeony, "you were spotted as you left the forest."

"I was eager to get back, just in case Babaef succeeds in setting him free."

"Nigon you mean?" Asked the dark angel.

"So you've heard the rumours too?"

"We heard them in the tower, just after Babaef killed his wife."

Aeony was enjoying herself, trying to outdo him on the strength and depth of her intelligence. She had to win of course, only fools withheld information from the tower and they quickly became dead fools. He grinned at her and sat on the ground beside her.

"You actually believed the Nigon story?" He asked. "Nigon was never this effective, or this cruel."

Aeony let her tail collapse, landing her gently on the stony ground. She removed a pack from her shoulder and produced a bottle. After taking three huge mouthfuls, she passed the bottle to Tarin. He was amused to note that the liquor was of human manufacture and strictly forbidden.

"Good stuff, you must let me know your supplier." He said.

"So, who is your best bet as the real cause of all the activity in the catacombs?" Aeony asked.

He took a long drink from the bottle and felt a warm tingle, right down to his toes.

"We can both make a few guesses or bets, but I actually know. We served him you know, the ghul once fought for him in huge numbers."

He watched her, had she known his secret, or had he just given the tower another weapon to control him? Aeony took the bottle back and began to laugh.

"Ok, ok Tarin, this time you win. Who the hell is it causing all the trouble?"

"I'm loathe to mention his name this close to the City. You have heard of him, the rifts in their entirety once obeyed his commands. It is Yam Kermul, trying to gain substance in our world again." Aeony actually looked shock.

"Yam Kermul! Are you certain?"

"No doubt. I saw him as he used a vision to call out to the faithful and we've met before. I once commanded an entire legion of his army."

They were both mildly intoxicated and Aeony was very close, so close that he was getting the full force of her irresistible pheromones. He kissed her, without really thinking about it. Her mouth opened, allowing him to kiss her like a lover. His hand went to her breast and Aeony's body automatically released other scents, those designed to ensure her mates appetite grew.

"We can go to my home." He said.

"Here is fine."

It had been some time since Tarin had been with a woman. He entered her, thrusting deep, driving her back into the stony ground and hearing not a single word of complaint from the dark angel. He used his knees to lift her thighs and thrust deeper, causing her to release yet more powerful pheromones. The sexual expertise of the dark angels was legendary, almost mythic. His genitals grew engorged with blood to the point where he thought they might explode. Deeper and deeper he thrust, hearing Aeony whimpering with pleasure. As he thrust he tried to forget everything apart from the rhythmic pounding. Tarin hoped to lose himself in sexual congress, to put from his mind all thought of Yam Kermul, the Lord of Death.

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Galla genuinely liked Wēland and his family. The children did fill her day with emotional explosions that hindered her empathic skills, but they went to bed fairly early. Night was the dangerous time, the time when she had to know who might be lurking near her home, with intent to harm her.

“You did say to tell you when you’d spent ten imperial.” Said Galla.

Hervör had come to buy just a little something to freshen her bath water, but was now surrounded by packets of powders and bottles full of brightly coloured liquids. She was sat on the pile of cushions that Galla kept for her preferred clients and she even had a complimentary glass of wine in her hand.

“But you have so many things I need, put my limit for today up to fifteen.”

“Have you considered an unguent to..... enhance your marital pleasure ?” Asked Galla.

Hervör was clapping her hands and squealing with delight as she took the jar from Galla and read the label on the lid.

“Longer and more frequent orgasms..... Galla you’re scandalous. I was in my twenties before I even dared to say the word orgasm.”

“But I think you’re going to buy the unguent. Get Wēland to apply it for you, that’ll get you both in the mood.”

More wine and the expensive unguent joined the pile of Hervör’s purchases. Galla knew that Wēland had just received a huge advance on a commission, so she saw no problem in relieving her friend of a few imperial.

“I do believe, I might also buy the amulet I looked at earlier. Tell me honestly Galla, is it really made from a falling star ?”

Galla went behind the counter and found the item, an amulet on a gold chain. The jewel in the centre of the amulet was as dark as night and had been cut from a piece of glass which had fallen from the sky. Galla herself had placed a blessing on the amulet, an old blessing that was commonly used by tribes out on the rifts.

“The gem was cut from a fallen star,” said Galla, “the gold is pure and it has a blessing to protect the wearer.”

She handed the amulet to Hervör, thinking that it was perfect for her, considering the current problems in the City.

“I can’t read the inscription on the back.” Said Hervör.

“It says; May Chaos Always Pass You In The Night.”

“How quaint.”

The people of the north didn’t worship the old Gods, Galla knew that much. They had temples to the spirits of the forests and the mountains. They had no notion of chaos and the darkness it brought. Hervör hadn’t even mentioned the slithering things, perhaps her family hadn’t even seen them?

“The blessing is real, it might ward off..... Anything nasty that might try to enter the City.”

Her friend was looking at her blankly and Galla felt no response. It was indeed likely that the people of the north had nothing at all of the sight.

“No matter,” said Galla, “I hope you enjoy it as a piece of exquisite and expensive jewellery.”

“Talking of expense, what is my final total ?”

Galla added the amulet to her list and showed it to Hervör, it was sixteen and a half imperial, though fractions were normally paid in local currency.

“Fifteen will do, if you’ll make an old lady a promise you might not understand.” Said Galla.

“That sounds mysterious, what would you have me do ?”

Galla took fifteen imperial out of her friend’s hand and put it in the drawer behind her counter.

“You have more bags than you can carry,” said Galla, “I’ll help you home with them and tell you on the way.”

Hervör could easily have carried everything, but Galla made a huge fuss about the weight of everything. The family lived on the other side of the road and just a few houses down, just close enough to walk, as long as you were cautious.

“Don’t be alarmed Hervör, but please hang the amulet on the inside of your front door, just for a few days.”

“Why, what’s wrong ?”

No one in the City would have asked her that, they all had a shared history, they knew what sort of things could happen in the City.

“You’re new here, so please just trust me about this. The City has been here since anyone can remember, it was actually built by a God. The great Tomma-Goran, though you’ll find no temple to honour him. The City will outlive us and all those who follow us. But sometimes dark and dangerous creatures are seen on the streets.”

Hervör was looking around, obviously nervous.

“Don’t worry.” Continued Galla, “just be cautious for a few days and get the children indoors before full darkness. This..... Problem will pass, as all other problems have passed. Just hang the amulet on the inside of your door for three or four days.”

One of the children opened the door and eagerly took the bags, Hervör quickly removing the jar of sexual unguent.

“I trust you Galla and I will do as you ask.”

Her friend kissed her on the cheek and remained at her door until Galla had crossed the street and entered her shop. Galla briefly waved before closing her door. She was still troubled though by the fact that Hervör and her family seemed blind to the darker side of the City. Galla would have to do something about that, if her new friend was to have a long and happy life.

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Babaef liked his office in the guild building, there was space to spread out his things and staff on call at any time of day or night. No one would ask him why Muzzie and two friends were visiting him, no one would dare. Babaef had changed things at the guild, it was now a far more efficient place than it had been. Plus everyone paid their dues on time, since he’d thrown two members out onto the street. He wasn’t loved, he knew that, but he was respected.

“Mussaneth Osranetherer and two others are here to see you Guild Master.”

It took Babaef a second to realise the uniformed guard was talking about Muzzie.

“Excellent, send them up here right away.”

“Pity it’s dark, they won’t see the view of the gardens.” Said Chillan.

“Yes, I heard Caspian and his lady really enjoyed our gardens. Perfect spot for a wedding of course, just a pity I wasn’t in the City.” Replied Babaef.

Muzzie entered the office first, grinning at Babaef and dropping a bag of equipment on the floor.

“She made me bring every weapon we could find.” He said.

“It pays to be prepared.” Answered Lilleth.

Gesse arrived after his smell, the ever present odour of corruption. The guard wrinkled his nose, but treated the revenant with respect.

“Will you be needing anything Guild Master ?”

“No, thank you.” Replied Babaef.

The guard closed the door and Muzzie playfully punched his brother on the arm, as though they were two schoolboys out for some mischief. Gesse dropped a bag on the floor, the end of a grappling hook protruding from it. Babaef walked round his desk and gave the bag a gentle prod with his foot.

"Climbing equipment." Said Gesse, nodding towards Lilleth.

"And some pry bars." Added Lilleth, defensively.

Babaef nodded at Chillan, who picked up a bag containing the strange glowing rocks.

"I'm sure Lilleth was right to bring the pry bars," said Babaef, "now let's begin our walk to the shrine of the dark angel."

He pressed a section of the wall and opened the door to his private stairs, enjoying the look of wonder on Muzzie's face.

"There are lights, but they're not very bright and the stairs are steep."

Down they went, coming out of a doorway in a courtyard at the back of the guild building. Babaef waited for a few second after opening the door, listening for movement and feeling the night with new powers he didn't fully understand.

"It's safe." He said.

The five adventurers strode along an alley and towards the shrine. A creature of some kind was startled by their approach and ran off into the night. Babaef could see the glow they were creating, the combined power of three magic users and a powerful revenant. Anyone with the sight could easily see them and Babaef just hoped that nothing too powerful decided to investigate.

"Not far, it's not that far." He said, as much to himself as them.

He drew a short sword from his belt, to hell with it, he pitied anything that tried to get in their way that night.

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Caspian had brought nearly forty books back to their lounge, even enlisting three apprentices to help him. Everything he could find in the Xanash collection that mentioned Gorshan and a few obscure books that had sections on the petrification of angels. One was even called 'Stone Genova,' though Caspian had never heard of any others apart from Inanna.

"What will Adamaz say if he finds out about all these books?"

Vella was looking around their living area, which now looked more like an annexe for the library.

"He saw Torfi and me bringing some here. I just told him we were researching the history of the Genova."

"Was he angry?" Asked Vella.

Caspian smiled and picked up one of the largest and dustiest of the ancient tomes.

"No. He just rolled his eyes, shrugged and said 'fine.' I think he's becoming used to our eccentricities."

Caspian pushed the book on stone angels towards her.

"This might interest you. I'll begin reading about Gorshan. It was an amazing place, before it was destroyed in the 6th great cleansing."

"Destroyed? But we saw it Casp, in the puzzle. It was still full of humans, some even fishing in the river."

"I don't know how the puzzle works, but that image of Gorshan is from the past. I think I can find you a picture of the castle as it is now."

Caspian put the book down and dug through the others, finding a book of etchings and drawings by various artists, most of them human.

“Here, this is just a drawing, but it gives you an idea of what Gorshan will be like now. This is where the puzzle wants to send us.”

The page unfolded from the book, giving Vella a picture over two feet across to look at. It showed a castle in ruins, barely one block of stone still standing on another. A few dead trees were all that remained of the once great gardens and even the river had dried up to a trickle. The artist had tried to hint at something sinister. The odd claw at the edge of a stone, a wing tip above a ruined battlement.

“Can it really be like this ?” Asked Vella.

Caspian took a long look at the picture, drawn and etched long before even Adamaz was alive, or undead, depending on how you viewed it.

“You have to allow for a little artistic impression Vella. Nature will have softened the edges over the millennia and much of it will be overgrown. But yes, I think that if we do go there, it will be a ruin.”

She was looking at him with eyes that almost glowed with excitement.

“So we might actually go there Casp ?”

“Read Vella, read as much as your head can hold. Once we know the layout of the place as well as the human who designed it. Then we’ll read about Inanna and her fate, until we know that as well as any of the human scholars who wrote the books.”

Vella was actually clapping her hands.

“Then we’ll go there ? Please say yes Casp.”

Caspian was surprising himself, he was now becoming quite keen on visiting Gorshan. They did have the sword that could kill anything and they’d beaten the Roruss. Why not let the puzzle take them to Gorshan ? A ruined castle seemed much more inviting than one full of human warriors.

“No promises Vella, but we just might see if we can free Inanna.”

Vella was kissing him when Torfi walked into their lounge, coughing and looking awkward.

“I did call out, but you both looked a bit..... busy.” He said.

“We’re going to Gorshan.” Shouted Vella.

“Only maybe and only after we’ve read just about everything in these books.” Said Caspian.

Torfi picked up one of the volumes and sat down with it.

“What do you want me to do ?” He asked.

“See what you can find out about the guards that have been put there.” Answered Caspian.

“What guards ?”

Caspian held up the book with the picture, being careful not to damage the priceless drawing. He pointed to six places where claws, teeth and wingtips had been cleverly added to the background scenery.

“Those guards.” He said.

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Muzzie followed Babaef as he walked through the broken gates and into the grounds of the shrine of the dark angel. Once there had been sorcerers in the City, with the skill and power to create dark angels. They had not all been human, a few hybrid magic users had mastered the art, but none had managed to create a dark angel in many thousands of years, perhaps millions. The City had been built by a God and its structure didn’t age like brick or stone. Muzzie often wondered if the City was millions upon millions of years old.

“Watch out for chaos creatures,” said Babaef, “they are likely to be attracted by events in the catacombs.”

They ignored the large central circle, the place where dark powers had worked unspeakable magic. Babaef took them to the long narrow stairs, which led into the heart of the shrine temple. No lamp light for them, Babaef spoke a few words and a globe of light appeared just above his head. Instantly something screamed and they heard a creature running away.

“Most things here abjure the light.” Said Lilleth.

Not to be outdone, Muzzie ran through his spells in his mind, the powers granted to him by the hand of Arcardis. He decided that the daylight orb sounded perfect and spoke the words required. The light Babaef had created became a pale glow. A small ball of sunlight appeared above Muzzie and a few paces behind him. It lit the shrine better than what passed for daylight on the rift. From the area near the catacombs came screams of protest and something which sounded like a heavy creature falling over.

“We should be on our way.” Said Chillan.

Few people entered the halls of the shrine temple and those that did, normally crept along in near darkness. Not Muzzie, he almost leapt forward. Even the graphic pictures of torture, which filled the walls, didn’t dull his enthusiasm.

“Wait ! I have a map.”

Muzzie waited while Babaef produced a cloth map from his pocket and flattened it against the wall. It was badly blood stained, which strangely made Muzzie trust it more.

“Blood always adds authenticity.” He muttered.

“It should be genuine, I paid enough for it.” Answered Babaef. “I’ll lead the way.”

Babaef went past two junctions with other corridors and then counted their steps. By the time they stopped at an entrance on the left, all their ebullience had drained away. They still had the ball of daylight, they were still powerful wielders of magic. It was just something about the temple, it seemed to drain the life out of them.

“This is where we turn.” Said Babaef.

The corridor was smaller and there was a body. For some reason the light made it worse, took away any shadows that might have hidden the brutality. The body was female and dressed in the robes of a temple servant, though which temple wasn’t clear. Muzzie gently took hold of her shoulder and turned the body over, finding that something had eaten most of her face.

“Her offering was obviously rejected.” Said Ventus.

“How can you joke about something like this ?” Asked Muzzie.

“No Muzzie, he’s right.” Said Lilleth. “I’ve seen this before. The wrong invocation, the wrong mixture of anointing oils. The shrine can be very unforgiving.”

“I’ll take her body outside when we leave.” Said Muzzie. “At least Podd will take the remains away.”

“She’ll be gone by morning Muzzie. The temple will cleanse itself and it is dangerous to interfere with what it considers to be..... its property.” Said Ventus.

“How do you know all this ?” Asked Babaef.

The ghostly apparition moved from Gesse’s shoulder and jumped onto the floor, bowing low to Babaef.

“I am merely a servant of Nigon. I humbly offer my knowledge and hope it is of use.” He said.

Babaef nodded at him and they moved on, but Muzzie noticed that Ventus had avoided answering the question. The air was feeling cold by the time they reached the room on the right. Babaef stopped, while Chillan found an old battered lamp in his bag.

“No magical daylight here Muzzie,” said Babaef, “the shrine doesn’t appreciate light.”

Babaef lit the old oil lamp and dispelled his own light globe. Muzzie did the same and they were left with just the dull yellow glow of the lamp.

“Wait, I have another lamp.” Said Lilleth.

Hers was newer, but the oil still only burned with a flickering yellow light. At least they had two lights, Muzzie didn’t like to even think of being left in complete darkness.

“As little sound as possible now.” Said Babaef.

They entered the room and there were signs of the dead woman’s presence. A lamp still glowed near the shrine in the corner of the room, a bowl still stood on an oil burner. Nearby a newly cut bunch of Ashunt blooms covered the floor, as though dropped in a hurry. Babaef took the bag of glowing rocks from Chillan and checked the contents of his own pack.

“Sit the other side of the room and remain quiet.” Said Babaef. “An amusing joke might well be the death of all of us.”

Lilleth walked past the dark angel statue in the centre of the room and sat as far as she could away from the shrine Babaef was approaching. As she had the only other lamp, Muzzie joined her, quickly followed by the others. The floor felt damp and Muzzie could hear the sound of dripping water. It surprised him; he’d always assumed that chaos would have a shrine that was more ostentatious, perhaps even comfortable.

“Mistress of the night.....”

Babaef was chanting and brushing oil over the face of the shrine. Muzzie heard some words, but then Babaef would begin muttering. Something was moving in the shadows, probably a night scavenger. Muzzie had gone past anxiety though, he was now bored with sitting on a damp patch in the dark.

“I offer this token.....”

Babaef opened a jar, using a thin brush to paint the contents over the face of the shrine. Even at a distance there was no mistaking the smell of freshly spilled blood. As Muzzie watched, the face of the shrine came to life, whispering to Babaef. One of its arms came away from the wall and began to beckon the sorcerer forward.

“I have a gift, the likes of which even you have never.....”

Again the muttering but she was impressed. Arms reached out to grab the glowing rock. The face, oh that face, it would be in Muzzie’s nightmares forever. It was an attractive face and Muzzie could never properly explain to anyone why it had terrified him. It was as if an eternity of evil acts, cruelty and sin had been etched into it. Gone was the beauty of the shrine, the creature of chaos was showing her true self to Babaef.

“Very well, I agree.....”

Babaef allowed the creature to take the rock and Muzzie watched as she placed it against her chest and absorbed the essence of Nigon, the dead God. He noticed Chillan had his hands over his eyes and was rocking back and forth. Gesse too seemed in a state of shock, his eyes fixed on their lamp. Of Ventus there was no sign, but Lilleth still watched Babaef negotiate with the shrine, her eyes alert and wary. Babaef was listening intently, actually writing on parchment, as that horrendous face whispered to him. Eventually the sorcerer took the second rock from the bag, the second part of a dead God.

“I need a guarantee the seal will be broken.....”

Her full torso was now away from the wall, at least eight arms reaching for Babaef. Then Muzzie heard her scream and his hand went for his sword. As he tried to stand, Lilleth was on him, her hand clamped over his mouth.

“No Muzzie,” she hissed in his ear, “he knows what he’s doing. Keep still !”

He relaxed and her hand had gone, her eyes were still on him though. He nodded at Lilleth and took his hand away from his sword. Babaef was giving the second fragment of Nigon’s essence to the creature and once again it was absorbed, perhaps eaten in some way.

“I have a final offering, but I require a high price.....”

She was out of the wall now and standing on powerful legs, the legs of some kind of demon. Muzzie felt his genitals shrink as she screamed at Babaef. That scream, it was getting right into his mind, but Muzzie resisted covering his ears.

“You dare to refuse me sorcerer !” She shouted.

Each of her hands had a knife now, bright shiny knives, they reflected the yellow light from Babaef’s lamp.

“No ! I cannot and will not give you that.....”

More muttering from Babaef and now the monster was behind him and screaming in his ears. Muzzie admired Babaef now, he doubted if he’d have sat through that experience and remained sane. Chillan was now lying in the foetal position, his hands still over his eyes. Lilleth looked at Muzzie and smiled and then they both watched Babaef once more.

“That is my final offer Babaef..... accept it or leave.....”

“Yes, but you must give an oath in the name of chaos.....”

She hated that and began screaming in his ear and stomping around him, but Babaef held the rock tight against his chest. After what seemed an eternity, the creature leant down and whispered in Babaef’s ear.

“And do you agree to be bound by this ?” Asked Babaef.

More whispering and Babaef was smiling and giving the last piece of Nigon to the monster. Muzzie remembered Podd telling him that there were always consequences for disturbing chaos and he wondered what doom they’d just inflicted on the inhabitants of the City. After absorbing the glowing rock, the creature of chaos pointed one of her arms at the dark angel statue.

“Move, quickly !” Shouted Babaef.

Muzzie stood up and moved as the enormous black marble statue rose from the floor and began to turn. Chillan was still in a state of shock and would have been crushed, if Muzzie hadn’t pulled him clear. Beneath the statue was a flight of stairs, leading down.

“Our army is down there,” said Babaef, “we must go and awaken them.”

The creature had other ideas though, she moved between Babaef and the stairs.

“Tell them now !” She said, “Tell them and they must agree. Then I’ll be bound to our agreement.”

“Tell us what Babaef ?” Asked Lilleth.

The sorcerer looked spent, he even seemed to be having trouble standing.

“I had no choice. It was agree or give up on entering the catacombs.”

Muzzie was pulling Chillan up off the floor, shaking him back to reality.

“We got everything I wanted, but only five of us will enter the catacombs.” Added Babaef.

Muzzie made sure Gesse was alright, while his mind did a quick calculation. There were only five of them, so what was the problem. Then he realised, the creature was counting Ventus into their group.

“So we get everything, but one small problem. One of us has to die.” Said Lilleth.

“Who chooses ?” Asked Gesse.

The creature was now looking at them, her gaze moving around them. Her arms moved, the knives slicing through the air.

“Fate,” she said, “one of you will fall in battle before you can enter the catacombs.”

Muzzie grinned at Lilleth and he knew he had to kiss her. She seemed surprised, but returned the kiss with some fervour.

“Why not ? I agree.” Said Muzzie.

“So do I.” Added Lilleth.

“Of course I agree.” Said Babaef, “Or it will mean having to abandon everything I’ve worked for. Please agree Chillan, or Lagertha and my daughter will have died for nothing.”

“No coercion !” Screamed the creature of chaos. “They have to agree of their own free will.”

“I agree.” Said Gesse.

Chillan was actually laughing and Muzzie wondered if the events of the night had turned his mind. As he talked, Muzzie realised he was probably the sanest there.

“Of course I agree. Don’t you understand.” He said. “We’ll probably all die in the catacombs anyway. Who really believes we’ll return alive ?”

No one answered him, but the creature still waited for her sixth answer. Ventus appeared, seeming to coalesce out of the darkness.

“No one will attack me, while bigger and more stupid targets live. I agree.” He said.

He’d just insulted them all, but no one complained. Muzzie looked back at Babaef and the creature was gone, back into the wall. The beautiful woman of stone was back on the wall again, her features spoiled by a layer of congealed blood. Babaef looked to be falling, so Muzzie rushed to him and held him upright.

“You need to rest.” Said Muzzie.

“I need to rest for a very long time, but alas she won’t leave the entrance open for long. Help me Muzzie, we need to descend into the vaults below.”

“Can we have some decent light ?” Asked Lilleth.

“No, just the lamps.” Answered Babaef.

Muzzie held one of the dim yellow lamps and helped Babaef descend the stairs.

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Part 29 will be posted at the end of February.