

City of the Lost God

Part 23 – Ancient Guardians

“Muzzie, I will give you and Lilleth more gold than you can imagine.”

“We can imagine quite a lot.” Said Lilleth.



Even if there had been time to say goodbyes, nobody in the slums seemed to want to talk to them. Merrick was face down across the cart and as far as anyone could see he was dead. Waide the female warrior was out in front, trudging into the waters of the great river at the shallows behind the boneyard. Nethra helped push the cart, but it was really Tarin who was doing most of the work. Tarin leaving the City did surprise many in the slums; he'd never seemed that close to Merrick. “Now there's not one skilled metal worker in the City.”

One working girl had said to her client as the cart had gone past her window.

“Can we do anything for Merrick ?” Asked Nethra.

“Once we're over the river and out of sight of curious eyes.” Answered Tarin.

Twice the cart sank into the mud, but Tarin pulled it out and they reached the opposite bank without losing anything. Waide was still ahead of them, scanning the bushes with an arrow at the ready.

Nethra felt exposed on the river bank and took a look back at the towers. She'd often seen a dark angel swooping down and across the City and she was glad that none of them seemed to be around.

“Come on Nethra. Once we're into the bushes we can make Merrick more comfortable.” Said Tarin.

She pushed and heaved and the cart was up the bank and into the mixture of bush and thorn scrub that covered much of the land between the river and the mountains. The bushes were so thick that Tarin had to use his sword to cut a path in places.

“There's a clearing just ahead.” Called Waide.

It wasn't much of a clearing. A large old tree trunk had been washed down from the mountains years before and it stopped the bushes from covering every inch of ground. They stopped the cart so that the ancient trunk shielded them from the worst of the wind and then they lifted Merrick off the cart.

“Is he really alive ?” She asked.

“Yes, get some river water and we'll clean him up.”

She looked in the cart and found some dried berries that had been put in a small wooden barrel. She put one of her remaining dresses on the ground and poured the berries onto it. Holding the barrel Nethra ran to the river and filled it with water. The river was running fast, so she just hoped the water was cleaner than it usually was. As she stood, she noticed a dark object circling the towers. She moved slowly into the bushes and the dark angel was still circling. Nethra headed back to Tarin, praying to the eight great demon gods.

“Please keep us hidden from her !”

Tarin had already loosened Merrick's clothes and together they washed the dirt and dust from his ears, face and eyes. As Nethra brushed the dust out his hair, Merrick's eyes flickered and he attempted a smile.

“Did you see that ?” She asked.

“Yes,” said Tarin, “he'll be fine. We need to re-arrange the cart so that he can sit in it.”

Tarin and Waide moved the stores around and created an area in the cart where Merrick could sit quite comfortably. He was unconscious once again as they lifted him onto the cart, but his breathing was much easier than it had been.

"You look nervous, anything wrong?" Asked Waide.

"I saw a dark angel circling the towers."

Tarin began picking up the things from the ground and putting them back on the cart, the berries wrapped in a dress had to go in Merrick's lap.

"We should be going," he said, "it's a long hard journey to Avald."

Tarin began to push the cart, while Waide use her sword to clear the worst of the thorn scrub out of their way.

"Don't worry Nethra," she said, "if you'd been seen, we'd all be dead by now."

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"I spread a rumour that Nethra is on her way to Bredon's Edge, that should keep Silsk busy for a while." Said Caspian.

Vella was busy collecting up her last few things and putting them into yet another bag. Two of the bar regulars were waiting downstairs with most of her baggage, but Caspian could see he'd need to carry a few things.

"How did you spread the rumour?"

"Money, people will do almost anything for gold, including lying to the dark angels."

"Where is she going?"

"North with Tarin and Waide, they're going to Avald."

Vella was looking under her bed and found another pair of shoes.

"But they're all crazy in Avald." She said.

"It can't be any crazier than the City."

It was only a small room, but Vella insisted on checking every nook and cranny again.

"I'm ready."

"There is something else before we go. I asked Adamaz about you moving into the Dome and he said that was alright. But I did sort of....."

Vella was holding his hand now and he could see she was nervous.

"You're worrying me Casp, what is the problem?"

"No problem, no problem at all. I just said I wanted you to move in as my wife."

She sat back on the bed and looked stunned by the news.

"Married?!"

"Sorry, I know it's not the most romantic of proposals, but will you marry me?"

She just sat there quietly, ignoring him. Caspian sat next to her.

"I do love you Vella. There just wasn't the time to do things properly. I don't even know how we go about getting married, if you want to that is? Adamaz must know the formalities."

She turned towards him and hugged him.

"Of course I'll marry you Casp, but I want a proper ceremony that all our friends can come to."

"Yes of course."

"And I want to get married in the open air and not in a dark room somewhere inside the Dome."

"Yes I'll arrange it."

"Plus my people believe in a trial to prove your love. You'll need to spend two nights walking over red hot embers."

Caspian looked terrified and confused at the same time.

"If your people require it, I'll do it Vella."

She was laughing at him and punching him playfully on the chest.

"You are so gullible Casp. I had to teach you a lesson for such an unromantic proposal. I made up the hot coals, but I want the outdoor ceremony with our friends."

"You'll get it, I promise."

Caspian picked up her bag and they went downstairs. Muzzie was away with Lilleth, but there were hugs and a tearful farewell from Sara. Eventually he and Vella walked towards the Dome, which was to be their marital home. Behind them walked two of the regulars at Muzzie's, both of them loaded down with a collection of bags and cases.

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"He doesn't know anything, I think we've been given false information." Said Silsk.

Aeony was prodding one of the local farmers who lived at the small village of Bredon's Edge. Silsk had been torturing him for information and now he was curled up into a foetal shape on the ground.

"Is he alive?" Asked Silsk.

"Barely, I think you played too hard with this one."

The single tavern in the village doubled as a boarding house for the occasional traveller and the owner of the establishment was currently tied to a tree. Silsk had already given him several deep wounds that would scar him for life, but she was aware that destroying Bredon's Edge wasn't in the interests of the City. Silsk wrapped the end of her tail around his throat and saw his eyes open.

"You're just a dumb fool Samuel, not a traitor." Said Silsk.

"No strangers have been through the village in days."

A woman had spoken the words, Samuel's wife. One of his sons was already half flayed and dead and the wife was to have been next to be tortured. Aeony walked over to the woman and waited for Silsk to nod before she cut the ropes around her ankles and wrists.

"I believe you now!" Screamed Silsk. "But all this is your fault!"

Silsk had been in worse tempers and most of it was for effect, but she still kicked the dead body of Samuel's son and ripped off the dead boy's face with her talons. His mother cried out and buried her face in her hands. Silsk cut the ropes holding Samuel to the tree. He couldn't stand and fell into an untidy heap on the ground.

"You people lie to me all the time," screamed Silsk, "so are you surprised that I didn't believe you this time?"

"I'm sorry, we're all sorry." Wailed the woman.

There was one son unharmed, he only looked about ten years old. Silsk badly wanted to make him bleed, but she nodded at Aeony to untie him and watched as the lad ran to his mother.

"Any more plots and lies and he'll be next!"

"There won't be, we'll tell you everything that happens."

Silsk carried the dead farmer back towards the towers in her talons; a good fresh farmer to eat was a rare treat. She'd have taken more bodies, but the locals made such a ridiculous fuss about burying their dead. Silsk just saw it as waste of good food. She stopped in the scrub on the way back and pulled the body apart, pushing much of the torso towards Aeony, who had landed beside her.

"If the City didn't need the food they grow, I'd wipe out Bredon's Edge." Said Silsk.

"They are scum." Said Aeony.

They both spent a while eating the softer parts of the dead farmer. Silsk even shared the liver, which all dark angels thought was the best part of any carcass.

"You're certain Merrick is dead Aeony?"

“Several people in the slums saw his body dug out of the ruins of his house.”

“The same people who said he was going to Bredon’s Edge ? I searched the house and unless he was hiding in the walls like a rat, he wasn’t there. Until we see his body, we assume he’s alive.”

Silsk had pushed her head so far into the body of the farmer, that her entire head was covered in blood and fragments of flesh.

“Olvir may be dead, but his trackers still live,” she said, “tell them that if they want to see another feast day, they need to find Merrick. Send them past the Ring of Volkin and out into the tribal lands.”

“I’ve already sent three of our sisters out to cover the pilgrim’s road to Quron. That just leaves North and the mountains.” Replied Aeony.

Silsk had eaten the bits she wanted, so she pushed the remains of the farmer away from herself and licked the blood off her arms.

“North !” She Said. “Only a fool would go north into the ice and snow of the mountains. But Merrick just might make for Avald to fool us. Send three or four paid assassins to Avald.”

“Yes Mistress Silsk.”

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It was later afternoon before Babaef was happy that the camp was secure and his team were ready to begin excavating the site of the ruined temple. Everyone was given a shovel. A few of the guards moaned until Babaef mentioned huge bonuses if they found what he was hoping to find.

“What are we digging for ?” Asked Pontus, the leader of the guard.

“I’ll know when I see it.”

Even Lagertha picked up a small hammer and began tapping on stone floors.

“I’m looking for any hollow places.” She told him.

Babaef knew they’d be safe until dark, so he even allowed his daughters to play among the spoil heaps, sifting the soil for anything that might be valuable or useful. He didn’t know how he knew they’d be safe until after dark, he just knew it. It was like a new sense that all the power he’d taken into himself had created.

“They’re untrained diggers, they will destroy priceless knowledge in their haste.” Moaned Chillan.

“Let them dig as fast as they like,” replied Babaef, “I want to spend as few nights here as possible.”

Norrex was in his element and seemed to be everywhere. He encouraged tired guards; he gave brushes and shovels to the household staff. He didn’t seem happy until everyone was either digging or picking through what had been dug up.

“We offend the deities with our haste.” Muttered Chillan.

“Be quiet or go back to the camp !”

“I’m sorry master.”

Itet, his eldest daughter had found a gold ring in the sieve and showing it to her father probably saved her life. As he examined the ring, Babaef heard a scream and looked up just in time to see one of his servants vanish into a hole in the ground.

“Stop digging !” Shouted Norrex.

Babaef walked as close as he dared to the hole and he could see what had happened. They’d loosened a stone or two with all the digging and they’d fallen into a room below. He knew the servant, he was a keen lad who’d helped him keep the garden free of weeds.

“Philo, are you injured ?” He shouted into the dark below.

There was no answer from the hole and Babaef felt more stones shifting under his feet.

“There might be a massive cavern under there.” Said Norrex.

His daughters were crying, so Babaef ordered a servant to take them back to the camp. He too mourned the servant, because he had an idea he'd fallen over a hundred feet to his death.

"Did you bring the book bag Lagertha?" he asked.

"Yes, I have it here."

In the bag was a book which showed the design of human temples. The book was more than illicit in the City, the dark angels would kill anyone found carrying it. But it was worth taking the risk, Babaef was certain they'd found an intact temple several millions of years old.

"You see?" He said to Lagertha, "the pile of stones we thought was a ruin are just a few remnants of roof ornamentation. The temple is below our feet, buried in the ground."

"So poor Philo fell through a hole in the roof?"

"Exactly my dear, the temple is buried under millennia of river mud."

"Or something buried it." Added Chillan.

Babaef ignore the comment and paced out the temple from drawings in the book.

"The entrance doors will always face the river." He said.

About twenty paces back from the hole where poor Philo had met his doom and quite close to the river, Babaef stopped.

"Here, this is the spot," he said, "we'll dig until dark. There isn't long, but we can get down at least five or six feet."

"I'll go back to the camp and look after the girls." Said Lagertha.

"Yes, of course my dear and take a servant, they can get the cooking fires started."

The hole would need bracing and lining, which would mean some of the team had to be cutting timber instead of digging, but Babaef was confident they'd find the entrance in two or three days. His people had purpose now and they all still wanted the promised bonus.

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As night came they moved away from the path and made a kind of tent by draping tree branches over the cart. It gave them a makeshift shelter which was almost impossible to spot among the trees. Not that it was a real path, few travelled north from the City and those that did tended to avoid Avald. Animals had made the path and the odd travelling merchant had widened it, but it was still little more than a vague clear track through the dense woodland.

"Can we risk a fire?" Asked Nethra.

She looked at Waide, as did Tarin. The small female warrior had become their leader once they'd entered the forest of the north. People in the City feared the woods and rarely entered them, but Waide knew how to survive beneath the green canopy of trees.

"Best not," she said, "the woods are strangely silent, I feel someone is following us."

They ate a cold meal of berries and dried meat, all washed down with very weak ale. There was nowhere to wash and the Nethra was already feeling very grubby.

"Were you really in the last blood war?" Nethra asked Waide.

"Yes, I was with the League of Forty Thousand. We tried and failed to conquer the second rift and ended up founding the city of Tandalla."

It was strange that like everyone else, Nethra didn't consider for one moment that Waide was lying. Waide looked small and she looked like a hybrid of no more than fifty or sixty years old. Young for a hybrid, still in her child bearing years and attractive to males.

"But that must have been thousands of years ago?!"

Waide crinkled her eyes as she smiled and suddenly Nethra could see millennia of humour and wisdom locked up in them.

"It was thousands of years ago and I wasn't young then. I've looked much as you see me now for around fifteen thousand years."

"Are all your people long lived?"

Waide laughed and leant back against a wheel of the cart.

"My people! I'm just a hybrid like you. It's all luck I think. Someone gets a weakness and dies young and others get a strange mixture of demon blood that makes them live for a very long time. I've met others like me, hybrids with lifespans that cover millennia, but we're rare."

Nethra couldn't help staring at Waide, a life that covered thousands of years. It seemed so wonderful.

"Will you live forever?" She asked.

"No, only the converted chaos creatures seem to go on forever and they become more undead than alive. I'll die of old age one day, or an arrow will find my back."

"Still, to have been alive that long, to have fought in the famous blood war."

Waide took a long drink of ale and let out a long sigh.

"To see the same daft thing fought over by another army of fools. It's not all good Nethra, living a very long life. I've buried seven husbands and so many children that I've lost count. I've hundreds of grandchildren and great grandchildren that I've never seen and it's likely I'll outlive them all."

"So your children were just ordinary?"

"There are times I'd settle for ordinary. I haven't married or settled with anyone in a long time. There are only so many times you can stand the pain of watching someone you love take their last breath."

They sat quietly for a while, listening to Tarin's gentle snoring. He had done the bulk of the work pushing the cart, so they didn't resent him sleeping while they packed the food away and looked after Merrick.

"Would you like some food?" Nethra asked him.

Merrick shook his head.

"Just some ale."

His voice was weak and so far he hadn't moved without being carried. Tarin had taken him into the trees twice to do what was needed and Nethra was glad that he didn't seem to need another visit. But Merrick was talking and would obviously live, though Tarin thought it might be weeks until he was back to full health.

"Do it quietly, but wake Tarin." Said Waide.

"Why?"

"Someone is coming along the track."

Waide vanished into the dark without a sound and Nethra went back under the makeshift shelter and gently rubbed her hand over Tarin's cheek.

"Wake up. Waide thinks someone is coming."

He seemed to be instantly alert and merely nodded at her before he too walked noiselessly into the trees. Nethra pulled her demon blade out of her belt and stood guard over Merrick. There was the sound of a scream in the woods not far away and then a shout in a voice she didn't recognise.

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The sound was the first thing Muzzie noticed. Like a gnat that refuses to go anywhere other than right next to your ear, but magnified a thousand times. He could see Lilleth looking around, but in the dark the noise seemed to be coming from everywhere. Then, as they climbed a hillside and saw the fires of Babaef's camp, the creature attacked.

“Do something Lilleth !”

His night vision wasn't that good, certainly not as good as he knew Lilleth's to be. In the dark all he could see was a head and teeth that kept biting him and it had claws. How many heads and how many claws he didn't know, but he could feel the bites were doing real damage.

“Use a spell.” Shouted Lilleth.

“I can't see it well enough.”

He tried an incineration spell and missed, but hit a bush and suddenly the rift was bathed in the light of the fire. It had two heads, that explained the frequency of the bites. The creature was flying around him and using two large front claws and both heads to attack him. Muzzie swung his sword and the creature flew away from him, but quickly turned to attack again. Lilleth had been given the chance she needed though and two arrows hit the monster, one sinking deep into its chest. Then another arrow hit one of the heads and the creature was tumbling across the ground with Muzzie chasing after it.

“It's mine !” He shouted.

Muzzie hacked at one head with his broadsword and when it stopped moving he cut the other to pieces. Even in death the monster was impressive and must have had wings twenty feet across and claws several inches long.

“The rifts produce some strange creatures, but I've never seen one like this before.” Said Lilleth.

Now the heat of the battle was over Muzzie could feel the full pain of the bites on his shoulders and the claw marks on his back. There was the all too familiar feeling of dampness as his blood ran under his clothes.

“How bad is my back Lilleth ?”

She prodded his back, making him howl and then lifted his jacket and prodded him again.

“Go easy !”

“Stop being a baby. I've seen you get worse chasing Sara around the bar, you'll be fine. I'll rub in some healing unguent when we get to the camp.”

Muzzie grumbled and straightened his jacket and followed Lilleth as she headed towards Babaef's camp.

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“How much damage was inflicted on Bredon's Edge ?” Asked Adamaz.

“Three dead and a lot of scared farmers, but the food will still flow into the City.” Replied Aeony.

They were both sat in Adamaz's chambers, Aeony had a glass of the now traditional strong human liquor. Adamaz obviously had contacts within the holy city, but Aeony never asked him any awkward questions.

“Do you know where Nethra is going ?” Asked Aeony.

“Are we both agreed that Tarin is essential to the City ?”

Aeony was looking at him, the sort of look Silsk gave her victims just before ripping their liver out. Adamaz forced himself to relax, he trusted their friendship to save his dried up carcass from evisceration.

“I'm not sure if I'd agree with essential. He is a good metal workers, but no better than many others.” She said.

“What others ? He is the only weapon smith left in the City, or rather he was. When he had his last problem and couldn't work for a while, I had a farmer in the library asking for a spell to create a new plough.”

Aeony was laughing at him and anger caused him to forget about being cautious in his speech.

“Laugh, yes laugh. When the food runs out will you be laughing then. Even Silsk will find it hard to rule an angry and starving mob !”

She reached over and put her hand on his arm.

“I am sorry old friend,” she said, “you’re right of course. I accept that Tarin needs to be returned to the City, so that he can resume his profession. Now do you know where they’re going ?”

“And you won’t tell Silsk ?”

“Have I ever told her about your dealings with the humans or your feeding habits ? No I won’t tell Silsk.”

Adamaz had to trust her, he needed her help. She was right, she never had repeated any of his confidences. Some of those confidences were so extreme that Silsk would have had no alternative than to act them.

“They going north,” he said, “to Avald. Merrick is alive but very weak. Tarin has gone with them to help and a female warrior called Waide is with them.”

“Is she any good, this Waide ?”

“She was a full legion leader in the last blood war.”

Aeony sipped her drink and Adamaz could almost hear her thinking.

“How do you know so much, when Silsk has learned nothing ?”

“Caspian talks to Vella and Torfi listens in the shadows. Torfi is now a Kveld by the way, turned by that bitch Maya. He and I have come to an understanding and he tells me everything he hears.”

“Life in the dome has become quite complicated Adamaz.”

“You could say that.”

They sat in silence for a while, both caught up in their own thoughts.

“So this information I’m not giving to Silsk,” she said, “what do I do with it ?”

“I’m assuming Silsk is in a killing rage because of the death of Olvir ?”

“Yes. I had a certain amount of affection for him. He was good in bed and just finding someone with genitals that fit yours can be a minor triumph. But Silsk seems to have been genuinely in love with him.”

“Then you need to find someone who she will believe is his killer. Find a ruffian on the streets with enough weapon skill to make it believable. Extract a confession and Silsk will be happy. In a few weeks Tarin can simply come back to his home.”

“Silsk will want to interrogate him herself. She’ll want to personally hear the confession.”

Adamaz got up and walked to a bookshelf and pulled a piece of yellow parchment from between two books.

“Rare,” he said, “a spell to make our ruffian believe anything we tell him. He’ll tell his own mother he killed Olvir and he’ll be convincing. You find someone and I’ll do the rest.”

“What do we do about Merrick and Nethra ?”

“I have no interest one way or the other.” Answered Adamaz.

Aeony gave a smile that chilled his blood. Adamaz had no real idea why Aeony had chosen him to be her friend, but there were times when he was very glad she had.

“He does have a way of driving Silsk insane. I think he can remain in peace in Avald for a while. There are three assassins on their trail, but if Waide is as good as you say she is.....”

Aeony stood and opened the window, letting the cold night wind ruffle the papers strewn about Adamaz’s desk.

“We really should do something about Silsk,” said Aeony, “she is becoming increasingly unstable.”

“I’m hoping Babaef may take care of Silsk for us.”

“Babaef, surely he’s a fool ?”

It was Adamaz’s turn to give an enigmatic smile.

“Be back before dawn with a suitable ruffian and I’ll tell you what I think Babaef is planning.”

Aeony fell from the window and then extended her wings and soared over the City.

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“I’ll be fine, help the others.” Said Merrick.

Nethra thanked whatever fate had led her to finding the demon blade in Podd’s yard. She held it tightly in her hand and ran in the direction the shout had come from. She could see quite well in the ultraviolet glow that covered the rift, certainly better than Tarin. Her confidence was nearly her undoing as she almost collided with a professional assassin. His cloak blended in perfectly with the trees and only her superb night vision allowed her to avoid him and his swinging sword.

“Who are you ?” She asked.

It worried her that he didn’t reply. No threats, no bragging out how easily he’d kill her. Nethra knew she was up against a trained killer whose only motivation was to kill her quickly. He moved with a silence and ease she’d never seen before, his jet black sword swinging at her neck. She dodged just in time and ran her demon blade across the back of his hand.

“Hsssss.”

It was the only sound she’d heard him make and it sounded chillingly alien to her. There were rumours of assassins who charged a small fortune, assassins who weren’t quite normal. To farmers out in the wilds or ignorant peasants the assassin would have been terrifying, but Nethra had lived in the City for years. Strange unnatural creatures were two a penny in the City. She smiled as he swapped his sword to his left hand.

“What will you do when I ruin that hand ?”

His right hand was wounded, but not ruined. He produced a throwing knife from somewhere and threw it at her. She dodged it, but it nicked her tail on the way past and made her yell in pain. Had the face inside the hood smiled ? Nethra thought she’d probably imagined it. Her tail gave her balance and it was a very sensitive part of her body, the wound was painful and slowed her down. There was the sound of a scream quite near them and the assassin turned his head to listen. Nethra took the opportunity to lunge at him with her demon blade. He was fast though and used a fist to knock her away and wind her at the same time.

“Are you the one called Nethra ?”

His voice was as alien as his hiss and he spoke in a whisper that was barely louder than the sound of the wind in the trees.

“Yes.” She answered.

He held his sword pointing down and advanced on her, ready for the killing strike. As Nethra prepared to try a last minute dodge, she saw a long shaft of wood that had seemed to grow out of his neck. Another sprang from the side of his head and he fell to the ground. Only then did Nethra realise the wooden shafts were arrows and Waide was stood not far away. The warrior beckoned her over and then spoke in a whisper.

“There were three of them. I got one not far away and Tarin chased the third. We should go after them.”

Nethra nodded and followed Waide through the gaps between the trees. Bugs and webs were ignored in their hurry, Nethra just hoped nothing that scratched over her skin was venomous. A body was propped up against a tree and Nethra was relieved to see it was the assassin Waide had previously killed. They ran faster, hearing the sound of a struggle not far ahead of them. By some

strange quirk of fate Nethra was in front of Waide and saw Tarin first. She felt nauseous, but Waide seemed unfazed by what they saw.

"He needs to feed." She said.

Nethra had to turn her back on the horror.

"You know what he is ?" She asked.

"I had my suspicions, the strength and then there is the slight but unmistakable smell of a ghūl. They were quite common once, they used to follow the armies of Lord Valsec the Usurper."

Nethra walked back to the cart and Merrick, Waide walking beside her.

"He can control the urges."

"I know Nethra. Don't worry, I'll never tell anyone what he is."

Merrick was awake and alert when they returned, he even had a sword in his hands.

"Where is Tarin ?" He asked.

"He needed a moment....."

"Oh, I see."

They helped Merrick out of the cart and into the makeshift shelter. As they made themselves comfortable, Tarin returned and climbed into his bedroll.

"Are they all dead ?" Asked Merrick.

"Yes," said Tarin, "three assassins, they even had the guild tattoos. I've no doubt Silk sent them this way, just in case we headed for Avald."

"Will there be more do you think ?" Asked Nethra.

Tarin seemed to need a second or two to think.

"Maybe not. If Silk really thought we'd headed north, she'd have sent two or three of her sister dark angels this way. I think we'll be safe in Avald, at least for a while."

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Muzzie and Lilleth had been greeted at the camp with several arrows aimed at them and a fireball. Around them they could see the charred remains of several strange creatures. Some were like the flying two headed monster they'd killed, but others were much larger and most had at least two heads.

"You in the camp," shouted Muzzie, "we're friends. It's Muzzie and Lilleth, we seek refuge."

"Approach and show yourselves."

They walked forward, all the time prepared to run if things turned nasty.

"Is there just the two of you ?" Asked Chillan.

"Yes, we came looking for Babaef, we seek his knowledge."

There was some talking going on behind the thorn scrub wall and the guards had yet to lower their bows.

"We have enough mouths to feed, we don't need two more."

"We're not after your food, we have our own. Let us in, we need to see Babaef." Said Lilleth.

There was more talking inside the camp, some of it quite animated.

"Be on your way," said Chillan, "there's no place for your sort here."

Muzzie was becoming agitated and anger usually followed agitation. He felt for the spells the hand of Arcardis gave him and began to select something suitable.

"Our sort ! Who among you would like to face me and say that again ?" He yelled.

"Let them in you fools !" Shouted Babaef.

It was quite difficult for the guards to pull the heavy gate out of the way, so Muzzie helped them by pushing from the outside. Eventually they were inside the compound and the gate was being pushed

back into position. There were several bodies of flying creatures in the camp, some looked to have been half eaten. It was as if Babaef had sensed their next question;

"I have a guardian creature who kills these creatures quite easily. She is currently searching for them in the nearby hills. She's a very efficient killer, but there are always more of these monsters."

Muzzie looked around and the camp seemed undamaged. Some of the guards looked scared, but it was obvious that they were still well disciplined.

"Thank you for letting us in, Muzzie has been hurt and we needed a safe place to heal him." Said Lilleth.

"Of course, my people are normally good natured, but we've had some ferocious attacks by these monsters."

He turned towards Muzzie and gave him a strange look, as if assessing him in some way.

"Come to my tent and let me look at your wounds." Babaef continued.

Chillan was still glaring at them and Muzzie wasn't so sure about the good natured people comment. No one dared say anything nasty to them though, they were obviously all in awe of Babaef. He took them to his tent, his daughters were playing at one end.

"Please take off your jacket Muzzie."

He took off his jacket and Babaef muttered some spells and ran his fingers over his back and the pain vanished.

"Thank you, that feels so much better."

"No need to thank me, I'm hoping I can persuade you both to stay for a while. I need to do something at a nearby temple and I need peace and quiet to do it. Someone with your power just might make my task a little easier. I will of course pay you both."

He was giving Muzzie the odd look again.

"Actually we came to see you about a problem." Said Lilleth.

"Perhaps we can help each other then, tell me what I can do for you?"

Muzzie told him of his brother Gesse. Babaef made no attempt to hurry him, so he told him everything. About their childhood and the numerous times Muzzie had been the cause of problems for his bother.

"He took so many beatings that should have been mine."

He then told him of their discovery that Gesse had become a revenant. A dead thing, reanimated and set as a guard over a mansion that was now just an ancient ruin.

"Do you want to give your brother a peaceful death, or turn his conditioning so that he serves you?" Asked Babaef.

"I was hoping to make him a person again."

Babaef shook his head.

"That is beyond my skills at the moment, but if you'll trust me for a while I give you my word I will be able to do as you ask."

"But you will be able to make Gesse a person again?" Asked Lilleth.

"Oh yes. The ritual I need to perform at the nearby temple is just a part of gaining the power I need. Then I will go to the catacombs beneath the City."

Muzzie exchanged a look with Lilleth. Everyone knew the catacombs, no one ever returned from the catacombs.

"I can tell by your looks you think I'm crazy, but with two wielders of ancient power, our small group might just succeed. Yes Muzzie, I do sense you have access to immense power, perhaps even greater than mine."

Muzzie began to object, but Babaef held his hand up.

“I neither care nor want to know where you obtained this power. I just want you and Lilleth to help me here and then come with me into the catacombs. In return I will use the power I obtain there to turn Gesse back into a living being again.”

Muzzie looked at Lilleth.

“I’ll go with you, but I can’t expect Lilleth to risk her life in the catacombs.”

“Do you think I’d let you go without me?”

Muzzie put his jacket back on and he was about to leave the tent, but he remembered something important had been said, but he’d forgotten to follow up on it.

“You mentioned paying us?” He asked.

Babaef laughed and slapped Muzzie on the back. Luckily it didn’t hurt now he’d been healed.

“Muzzie, I will give you and Lilleth more gold than you can imagine.”

“We can imagine quite a lot.” Said Lilleth.

From outside the tent they heard the shouts of the men and the screeching of creatures, as the next attack on the camp began.

“Sounds like your first chance to earn that gold.” Said Babaef.

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Part 24 will be posted at the end of September.