

City of the Lost God

Part 17 – Submerged

“Dead ! No heart beat or signs of breathing, in most of the population of the City, that indicated death.”



Maya had heard Muzzie argue with Aeony, her hearing was far better than most peoples, even in her two legged form. She had no idea what Muzzie was supposed to find for the dark angel, but Maya decided to follow him when he left the tavern in the middle of the night.

“I won’t be long Sara.” She’d heard him say.

She’d been naked under the bed sheets and remained naked as she crept down the stairs and followed the bar owner into the alleys. At the first dark corner she transformed herself into a true Kveld, a creature that ran on four legs and ate what it could kill. Her black fur now made her almost impossible to spot in the dark and the pads of her paws made almost no sound.

“Bit late to be out Muzzie !”

“I couldn’t sleep, needed some air.”

The stranger went on his way, leaving Muzzie to carry on alone. Muzzie seemed to know everyone and Maya decided that getting to know his routine and the people he saw would be useful. There was something odd about the bar owner though, she could feel it. Everyone in the city was a hybrid of some kind, but Muzzie had an aura about him that fascinated her. Maya expected him to keep to old town, but Muzzie headed for the wealthy part of the City and he started to keep to the shadows. For Maya, remaining unseen was natural to her, but she admired how well the huge hybrid managed to fade into the shadows. The stillness, the skill at being there but unseen, is a technique that can take years to gain, but Muzzie had it.

“Thank the eight Great Demon Gods that the plague seems to be going.” Said the guard.

Muzzie was now hiding as much as he could and the two guards walked right passed where he was crouched against a wall. Maya merely stood in a shadow and became completely still, even her heart slowed. No one had ever seen her when she used the stillness, even in moderate light. She followed Muzzie over the wall and watched as he forced open a ground floor window. Muzzie as a housebreaker! Either she was a bad judge of character, or Muzzie was after more than the usual handful of coins and baubles that common thieves took on such occasions.

Maya had no fear of entering houses; she’d once hid in an occupied house for several days, waiting for an opportunity to escape. Over the window sill she went, following the bar owner as he went up the stairs and along a corridor. She had no idea who owned the house, but the carpets were thick and the paintings on the walls looked expensive.

“Who the hell.....”

There was the muffled sound of a scuffle and then someone fell to the ground. She pushed her head slowly around the doorframe and saw Muzzie removing his short sword from the chest of a guard. So he was willing to kill for what was after ! Maya held back until Muzzie moved deeper into the room, then she examined the guard. Dead ! No heart beat or signs of breathing, in most of the population of the City, that indicated death. The blood excited her, she was always hungry, but she had to know what Muzzie was looking for.

He was opening a cabinet and taking something out, it looked like a ring, but the darkness hid the details, even from her eyes. Muzzie walked within inches of her on his way out of the room, but

never realised she was there. Maya was tempted to eat at least part of the guard, but she resisted and followed Muzzie down the stairs and out of the window. Yes, she felt power, real power, he'd taken something that set Maya's senses reeling.

She followed him back to the tavern, even followed him into his back room and watched as he put the ring in a lock box.

"I'm here now, go back to sleep Sara."

Maya watched as he undressed, enjoying being invisible to him, but being disappointed that his sexual anatomy wasn't compatible with hers. So, no fling with the tavern owner, a pity, she liked his aura. She went through the curtain and across the bar, converting back to her two legged form as she entered her room. Maya was no closer to finding out about Borlas, but she now had knowledge about Muzzie and knowledge is power.

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There was no real indication of time on the stairs, but Vella felt hungry.

"Can we stop here for a while?" She asked.

They were on one of the landings on the King's Stair and Vella sat down without waiting for a reply.

The team carrying the equipment put it down and started reaching into their packs.

"It looks like we're taking a break." Said Merrick.

The hours waiting in the restricted area of the library had been tense, but eventually Caspian had joined them and the journey down the stairs had begun.

"Is the corridor with the creature much further?" Asked Merrick.

"No, we must be quite close." Said Caspian.

Vella ate a few mouthfuls of dry bread, it wasn't very tasty, but she wanted to save her proper food for later. One of the worst memories from being imprisoned in the upper dome was the food running out, so Vella was going to make her food last. Caspian was fondling the bag with the terrible weapon in it, he'd insisted on bringing it.

"What have you got there?" Asked Sóli

Sóli was the specialist, the expert Merrick had hired to work the equipment that would get them through the flooded cellars. So far Vella hadn't seen the equipment, but the bags he and his assistant carried seemed very heavy.

"A weapon," said Caspian, "you'll see it when we get to the corridor."

Everyone seemed to be eating, so Vella opened one of the equipment bags to see the miraculous devices that would get them through deep cold water without drowning.

"Careful Miss," said Amlethus, "there are fragile parts and if you break them, we won't be going very far tonight."

Merrick had introduced Amlethus as a cleaner of wells and huge water cisterns. He looked quite elderly, but he'd carried one of the heavy bags on his own.

"Can you just show me what they are?" She asked.

Amlethus looked at Merrick, who gave a slight nod. The well cleaner very carefully unfolded several layers of folded cloth and lifted a device from the bag.

"It's beautiful." Said Vella.

The cloth was silver and it shone in the light from their lamps. At the top was a helmet made out of what looked like a wire cage and the holes had been filled with glass.

"Indeed it is," said Sóli, "and it will be all that keeps you alive once we enter the water. Not as fragile as it looks, but break the glass and you'll let the water in. Let the water in and you'll drown."

The device was carefully put back into the bag and they collected their things and began to descend the stairs once more. The corridor was only a few more flights down and when they reached it, Caspian removed his weapon from the canvas bag he carried on a strap over his shoulder. The entire party stared at the weapon, the silver metal and obvious seriousness of the weapon demanded attention.

“What is that ?” Asked Waide.

Waide was the final addition to their group, a female fighter who Nethra had recommended. So short as to be almost childlike the fighter seemed to be covered in weapons and claimed to be an expert with all of them. She’d also claimed to have fought in the 8th blood war, which made her over two thousand years old. Of course she might have been lying, but Vella doubted that.

“A weapon,” said Caspian, “a truly terrible weapon.”

“Then it looks like you go first.” Said Waide.

Caspian had left the weapon in full sunlight for days, perched on a window sill in the hidden corridor behind his rooms. As he turned it on the weapon hummed and felt alive in his hands. He moved forward slowly, Merrick and the other following closely behind him.

“Careful Casp.” Said Vella.

The floor was covered in the marks from where the creature had disturbed the dust, moving from room to room. Vella wondered if there was more than one creature, perhaps a great many of them. Caspian used the switches on the weapon as he walked, the sequence was tricky. He’d practised the order many times, but it was different with the open doors and Merrick only a few paces behind him. Caspian puled and pushed until he was certain the settings were right, but no tentacles appeared from any of the rooms.

“Caspian,” said Merrick, “it’s behind us !”

Several glistening tentacles had started to come through one of the first doors they’d passed.

Caspian quickly walked to the rear of the group and knelt down, using the wall to steady his aim.

Waide moved to the wall opposite him and pulled a short bow from the varied collection of weapons on her back.

“How many of them are there ?” She asked.

“I have no idea. Maybe just the one, maybe dozens.”

The tentacles were long and looked gelatinous. Caspian was worried the ends of the tentacles would reach them before the creature’s body was in the corridor. Waide put a black tipped arrow in her bow and fired it at the nearest tentacle. It bounced off and rattled down the corridor and ended up at the foot of the far stairs. Waide just gave a long whistle of disbelief.

“Stand your ground !” Shouted Merrick.

The odd single foot of the creature was coming into the corridor and they’d just seen the creature that moved it forward. Caspian felt slightly sick and very scared, but he put his finger on the switch that would activate the terrible weapon.

“Damn,” said Waide, “those arrows cost me a small fortune, even had them blessed by a shaman.”

None of her arrows were having any effect, they were just bouncing off the creature and it didn’t even seem aware of them.

“Fire at the thing Caspian !” Shouted Sóli.

He ignored all the sounds around him and waited for the creature to move forward, sliding over its single foot and heading towards them. When he had the entire creature in view, Caspian fired the weapon and prayed it would be effective. A thin beam of green light left the weapon and hit the

creature, covering it in a thin glowing green film. The ancient book had said the weapon, used on those settings, was 'capable of killing any living creature.'

"It's falling apart Casp." Said Vella.

The tentacles went first, disintegrating and falling to the floor as a dry dust. The body shook and creased itself up, though no sound of pain was made. It tried to move towards them, but the foot became a pile of dust and quite quickly the entire creature was reduced to a fine green powder.

Caspian started to move forward to examine the remains.

"Casp, there's another !" Shouted Vella.

A tentacle had come from the doorway nearest to him and had almost touched his face. Caspian ran back towards where the rest of the group were standing. He could feel the weapon hum as it prepared itself to fire again, but he had no idea how long it might take.

"Run," he shouted, "run for the stairs !"

Waide drew a blade that shone like glass and Caspian realised she was going to stand her ground. He put his hand on her arm and pulled.

"You know your weapons won't hurt it Waide. Stay here and you'll die."

She looked at him and there was no fear in her eyes, but she ran with him towards the stairs leading down. As they got to the top of the stairs Caspian felt the weapon stop humming.

"Kneel down, I'll need your shoulder." He said

Waide knelt down and Caspian knelt behind her, resting the weapon on her shoulder and aiming it straight at the creature from the 7th rift. It was quite a distance away and only just entering the corridor as he fired the weapon. It was an accident, he still had little idea of how to correctly use the weapon, but he'd done exactly the right thing. By now most of the team had come back up the stairs and were stood near them.

"What's it doing ?" Asked Merrick.

The thin beam travelled a few feet and then began to widen and slow down. First it became a funnel of green energy and then a slow moving cloud, which started to enter the various open doors.

Almost immediately the sound of screaming and roaring came from the closest room, then the sound of heavy objects falling. There was a loud crash against one wall, but no sign as to what had happened. A few tentacles came out of one door, but almost immediately they turned to harmless dust.

"It's killing them all." Said Sóli.

Something big came out of a doorway, perhaps a tail, perhaps an arm. In seconds it had become just black ash. There was another loud crash against a wall and more sounds of heavy objects hitting the floor. From one door, green slime oozed, there were gallons of it, until it too became a layer of green dust. Most of the time there was nothing to see apart from the end of a tentacle, or slime, but it was obvious that a lot of creature were dying. After several minutes the noises ceased.

"Do you think they're all dead ?" Asked Vella.

"If they're not dead, they'll be really pissed off." Said Merrick.

Caspian turned the weapon off as they began to walk down the stairs.

"We might need that again." Said Sóli.

"I don't want to waste the charge, it charges by sunlight." Replied Caspian.

"Not likely we'll be seeing much of that for a few days." Said Amlethus.

Down they went, flight after flight of stairs, until they reached the quiet dark waters that stopped them descending further. Sóli bent and put a finger into the water.

"Not as cold as I expected," he said, "but we'll need the underwater lamps."

The equipment bags were emptied, one contained a helmet and some kind of jacket for each of them, another held lamps and other tools and gadgets. The last and heaviest bag was full of weights, of assorted sizes and shapes.

“You carried these down here !” Said Vella.

Sóli laughed.

“You’ll need them pretty lady, or you’ll just keep floating up to the surface.”

He picked up two of the weights and tied them to her waist with a thick webbing material.

“I can’t walk with these on.”

“Trust me, once we get into the water, you won’t notice them.”

With Amlethus helping, Sóli began to fit everyone with weights and then the jackets that the helmets fixed onto.

“Normally,” he said, “you’d have two days of training at least, but I’ll show you the basics.”

From far above them came a loud anguished cry and then a crashing sound, so loud that the stone stairs vibrated.

“We can pick it up as we go along.” Said Merrick.

While Sóli fitted their lamps and helmets, Caspian put the weapon into its bag. The bag from Winshin’s was supposed to be waterproof, but obviously not intended for hours of immersion. If the weapon was destroyed, it was destroyed, he had to take the risk.

“Something didn’t die.” Said Waide.

There was another crash, far closer this time and a long drawn out wail. Pain or anger ? It was difficult to say, but none of them wanted to wait and find out. They all had their helmets on, so Sóli moved close to each of them and muttered the spell that activated the helmets.

“Your helmets will hold fresh air for five days, now I think we should leave this place.” He said.

They had a plan, a simple one, to follow the stairs down until they reached the portal room. From there, in theory at least, you could get to anywhere in the towers, retrieve any treasure or artefact. Merrick led the way, carefully walking down the stairs and into the water.

Fifteen minutes after they’d all vanished beneath the water, the green viscous ooze started to flow down the stairs.

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“I don’t really understand what you think I’ve done.” Said Babaef.

It was only just beginning to get light and he’d been dragged out of a nice warm bed, where he’d been next to a nice warm Lagertha. He’d allowed Thrand to enter his home, but only to keep the noise off the street.

“You know full well, you’ve always wanted the Ingermast Ring, but I never thought you’d kill one of my guards to get it. Not content with ruining my reputation, now you’ve sent someone to burgle my home.”

Thrand had brought two guards with him and now his guards were glaring at Babaef’s guards and it could easily turn nasty.

“My guards want justice Babaef,” he continued, “Griss here is the brother of the dead guard, try telling him you have no idea what we’re here for !”

Babaef no longer feared physical violence, mainly because he could easily kill Thrand and his two grubby looking hybrids. He could see the spark of a spell forming in Thrand’s hand; it would be so easy to kill the annoying sorcerer. After all, it would really be self-defence. But there were his daughters to consider, sleeping peacefully upstairs and the servants. His household had only just settled down after the death of his wife, so Babaef decided to allow Thrand to live.

"I have no need of your ring," he said, "I've been here all night and so have my guards. Now please leave my home, before I have you removed."

His own guards weren't the usual scruffy hybrids, Babaef had acquired his men by recommendation from Merrick and they were the best cut throats money could buy. Thrand might have left without any further nastiness, but Griss was still upset about the death of his brother.

"Bastard !" Shouted Griss.

He stabbed at Babaef with a short sword, but before the blow could land, he'd been run through by Babaef's guards and killed. Thrand began to ready a spell, but Babaef made a simple sign with his hand and drained the sorcerer of power. He held Thrand by the throat, enjoying the look of fear in his eyes.

"Is there a problem my dear ?"

Lagertha was on the stairs, looking worried and wide eyed at the body by the door.

"No, there's no problem, Thrand was just leaving."

The anger went out of him and he let go of Thrand. The body of Griss had bled a lot, the green and red stickiness had to be cleaned up before his daughters woke up.

"Go home Thrand," he said, "take your guard, my men will bring the body of Griss to your house later today."

Thrand simply nodded and indicated to his surviving guard that they were leaving.

"I had nothing to do with stealing your ring," said Babaef, "the Ingermast Ring may give total control over another, but just for a few minutes. I could teach you a Thrall spell that lasts for years, if you'd like me to?"

Thrand still had a lot of friends and influence, Babaef had decided he would be more use as an ally than as another corpse in his hallway.

"Yes, thank you, that would be appreciated."

"Come with me to my workroom. You won't need your guard, he can help my men carry Griss."

He beckoned Thrand up the stairs, the sorcerer not evenly realising that he'd been a victim of the spell he wished to learn. As they approached his workroom Babaef turned towards his new acolyte.

"Of course you will owe me a favour in return for my knowledge."

"I understand Babaef."

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Maya hadn't realised that Muzzie's never closed, but a constantly open front door had its advantages. She dressed and left her room just as the day was starting, easily avoiding the attention of the two or three drunken regulars in the bar. The boy the colour of cold ashes was waiting for her, almost hidden in the morning shadows.

"You came."

"Yes miss, but I've been up all night and I want to get to my bed." Said Ash.

She'd hired the boy as a guide from Podd, given the bone collector a few coppers, with a promise to give the boy more. She wasn't sure if he'd turn up, but he had what she needed, up to date knowledge on the inhabitants of the City.

"Give me a morning boy and I'll send you home with gold in your pocket."

"Where do you want to start miss ?"

To Maya the choice was obvious, the library. She needed to know everything about the place Borlas had called home for so long and she wanted to know more about Adamaz.

"The great library," she said, "do you know anything about the place that most people don't ?"

Ash moved off at an easy pace, crossing the street to avoid a small group of people. Maya followed him past several ruined buildings and eventually they came to the towers from the rear.

"See the small building with no windows?"

Ash was pointing and Maya saw the house, it looked to have been built into the side of the mountain. She looked up and saw the Dome itself glinting in the morning light.

"I see it."

The boy had a twinkle in his eye, she could tell he was about to impart, what was to him, a great secret.

"I know the sign to open the door," he said, "and inside is a portal to enter the Dome."

She knew that already of course, Borlas had told her, but she didn't want to crush the lad's enthusiasm. Besides, Borlas never had given her details of how to enter the building.

"Show me the sign Ash."

She followed him across the small deserted square and watched as he put his palm flat on the wall and then moved it left and then right, simple as that. The door opened and then about thirty seconds later it closed.

"Takes you to the bridge miss. The portal inside does, but be careful in there, if you go."

The boy had scruffy hair the colour of coal, so she ruffled it and obtained a cheeky grin from him.

"Do you know a good place where I can buy us both breakfast?" She asked.

She watched as Ash thought about it and then his hand rose and pointed out towards the river.

"I know a place," he said, "when we've had a good night I buy our breakfast there. It's in the slums, but the food is always good."

Maya had never heard of a decent place to eat in the slums, but she was willing to trust Ash.

"Lead the way," she said, "and while we eat, you can tell me everything you know about Adamaz."

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It felt like they'd been going down the stairs forever. No one had mentioned things like getting a drink dressed in the helmets, or resting. Picking things up as they went along had been awkward, irritating and embarrassing. Caspian never was going to get used to relieving himself and watching the water change colour for yards in every direction.

"We're certain to find dry areas," Merrick had said, "air bubbles where the water can't get to."

They had to all touch helmets to talk, another trick that Sóli had taught them. They had the occasional group hug, everyone touching helmets to have a chat and keep morale from crumbling. It didn't work; they all seemed fed up with being wet and in semi darkness for hours. They all had a lamp of sorts that was on all the time, a green glow very similar to the night lights in the library. Not quite bright enough to see by, but bright enough to show you the bruises from colliding with hard objects. They had brighter lamps, but Sóli had told them to use them sparingly, their charge would only last for a few hours. Vella touched helmets with Caspian.

"At least we haven't seen anything alive down here." She said.

He nodded and smiled at her. There had been bones on the stairs and more signs of damage to the stone steps, but mercifully no more corridors and no more living nightmares.

"Merrick has stopped." He said.

The water was far from clean and their lamps far from bright, so Caspian could only see that the blur in the water he knew to be Merrick, had stopped moving. He moved further down the stairs and realised why, the stairs were gone. Under Merrick were solid stone steps of huge age, steps that seemed as solid and permanent as the City itself. A few feet in front of Merrick they ended in a ragged break and below that break was complete darkness. Sóli activated his bright lamp and

crawled right to the edge of the stairs and aimed the light downwards. He turned the lamp off and beckoned them to join in a huddle.

"Nothing there," he said, "the light penetrated for hundreds of feet and there's just a huge hole."

"What happened to the stairs?" Asked Waide.

Huddled together they could all see each other's faces in the dim green glow of their lamps and they all looked scared. Whatever had taken out hundreds of feet of solid stone stairs had been massive.

"A spell perhaps," said Merrick, "I watched sorcerers destroy whole buildings in the wars."

It was left to Vella to say what they were all thinking.

"Or a creature of some kind," she said, "something huge and powerful."

"If we go back, it means going through that corridor," said Merrick, "if we can!"

Caspian thought he should be the one to decide, after all he and Vella had paid the others to come.

"No, we can't go back," he said, "look around, there must be another way."

They all put on their bright lamps and spun them around, the scene was one of utter destruction.

Something must have exploded, something huge. Not only the stairs were gone, but so were the

walls of the staircase and the rooms nearby. An occasional stone showed where a pile of rubble lay,

but most of the structure of building was now a heap of stones, hundreds of feet below them. Waide

became excited and pulled at Caspian while pointing a little down and to their left.

"A room, or at least part of one." She said.

There was a room, about fifty feet from them and much of it looked intact, which meant it must still

be connected to other parts of the building. Caspian aimed his lamp towards the room and saw the

edges of two doorways leading from it.

"We can easily swim that far." Said Sóli.

"I can't swim." Said Vella.

True the City was a long way from any ocean, but it was built on the banks of the great river and

most inhabitants of the City learned to swim at an early age.

"I'll help you," said Waide, "just kick out with your feet, it's not far."

"You don't understand, I'm petrified of water."

Like the others, Caspian looked at her in disbelief, they'd been submerged in dirty water for several hours.

"This is different!" Said Vella.

"Come on," said Waide, "we'll go first. I'm a strong swimmer and I can pull you that far if I need to."

There wasn't going to be an argument. Caspian watched as Waide grabbed hold of Vella's arm and

pulled her off the stairs. At first Waide pushed up and away from the stairs, but they started falling

slowly as they crossed the open space. It seemed to take a long time, but eventually Waide gave a

few hard kicks with her feet and they were safely inside what remained of the room.

"You and Merrick next," said Sóli, "then I'll come over with a bag of our equipment. Amlethus can come over last, he's the strongest swimmer."

Caspian had the heavy terrible weapon and Merrick had several metal weapons. It was less a swim

and more a barely controlled fall into the room, but they both arrived unscathed. Caspian had a

chance to look at the room and it was deeper than he'd thought. It went back over fifty feet and

several empty doorways led into a solid looking corridor. As he turned Sóli arrived, carrying a bag

with their food in it and some spare underwater equipment.

"Look!" Vella was shouting at him.

The others couldn't hear her, but Caspian grabbed arms and pointed back to the stairs.

"What is that thing?" Said Merrick.

Amlethus was trying to kick out from the stairs, but something had hold of him. The water was dirty and no one seemed keen on shining a light in that direction, so the details of the creature were unclear. It looked to have at least a dozen arms, though some might have been legs. The head end was shaking Amlethus and then the water was even dirtier, filled with a cloud of blood and then parts of his torso. The tail they didn't see until the creature had eaten most of their friend and headed down, following the ruined stairs down into the depths. The tail took a while to pass their view and it took even longer for Merrick to get them together in a huddle.

"Do you think there are more of those things?" Asked Vella.

"First things first," said Merrick, "what was Amlethus carrying?"

"A few bits of equipment, but he had the rope, all our rope and climbing gear." Said Sólí.

"Fuck!"

"We go on," said Caspian, "we have to keep going."

Just using his pale green lamp he walked to the nearest door and looked down the corridor. To his left he could see blasted and damaged bricks and then nothing, to the right the hallway went on for some distance. He didn't want to risk the bright light, so he trusted to luck and turned right. After a few feet he looked back and the remaining members of his group were following him.

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The first thing Nethra noticed was the sound of a heavy hammer on metal; she hadn't heard Tarin hard at work in a long time. She could hear the sound quite a distance from his workshop and see the smoke coming from his forge. The gates to his yard were open as usual, no thief in the City would dare to try and rob Tarin. Again, as usual he had his back to gates as Nethra walked into his yard, yet she knew he'd know she was there.

"You bought the animals I see." She said.

He put down the tools he'd been repairing and turned towards her. He was still rather pale, but fully clothed he looked like he'd always looked, large, muscular and badly scarred.

"Yes, I'm actually getting to like roast Rock Cropper."

The old shed in the yard had a new door and the sound of animals was quite clear, as was the unmistakable odour of their food and droppings.

"Have you time for a drink?"

Merrick was on a trip with Caspian from the library, though he wouldn't say where to. But how much trouble could he get into with a librarian? It did mean she wasn't keen on hurrying home to an empty house.

"A drink would be nice."

The house looked tidy, the smell of leather and floor cleaner had replaced the stench of decay. She sat in her usual chair, while Tarin poured them both a drink and produced some fruit from a pantry. He saw her trying to look inside his pantry.

"Don't worry, there's nothing in there to offend you, my other food is in the cupboard under the stairs."

She shipped her drink and took it with her to the cupboard he'd mentioned.

"May I look inside?"

"Yes, if you like."

The bolt on the door looked new and she needed to use a lot of strength to pull it back. Inside were a lot of jars, Tarin had taken to pickling his special food. She recognised some of the body parts in the jars, but some were a mystery to her. There was a large covered roasting dish and inside it a human arm was soaking in a curing mixture of salt and herbs. Tarin was definitely a monster, but he

was now a very tidy and efficient one. Nethra returned to her chair and started to eat some of the fruit.

“How often will you need to kill.”

“Three or four times a year and Louelle will help me to get it down to two times.”

He looked and sounded like her old friend, so she took a conscious decision to ignore the cupboard under the stairs and treat him as she always had.

“Did you see Galla about the Kveld ?” He asked.

“She told me they were extinct and I could hardly tell her about Borlas. She still had a few items and sold me a few charms, though she seemed to think I was mad.”

Tarin looked out of the small window into his yard, watching the fire in his forge.

“And what of Merrick, is he off on some adventure ?”

She relaxed back into the chair and laughed.

“Merrick is off somewhere with Caspian,” she said, “they may have Vella with them. He was quite secretive about where they wanted to go, but it appears he’s their guide.”

Tarin laughed too, the first good honest laughter she’d heard from him in a while.

“Well at least you know he’s safe,” said Tarin, “probably looking for a lost book.”

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Muzzie considered himself to be a retired warrior who owned a tavern, he even had some Genova in his blood. So he was quite surprised that he hadn’t heard or seen Aeony arrive, arrive in his own yard no less.

“I knew you wouldn’t let me down,” she said, “though there is gossip about Thrand having a ring stolen. Killing a guard was sloppy Muzzie.”

Maybe he was getting a bit slower than he used to be, but he wasn’t used to being a common thief and he’d only robbed Thrand because the alternatives seemed to be leave the City or die.

“He was asleep and woke up just as I was creeping past him.”

“A sleeping guard, the bastard had it coming.”

He removed a twist of cloth from his pocket and from it he brought out the Ingermast Ring.

“Thrall on anyone, but only for a few minutes,” said Aeony, “I’m almost tempted to keep it and tell Silsk you refused to help.”

She was enjoying seeing him squirm, but even Muzzie wasn’t brave enough to do anything but glare at her. The dark angel was almost completely naked, none of them usually wore more than just a belt to attach a weapon to. Aeony had a pouch on her belt into which she placed the ring.

“Don’t worry Muzzie, you’ll have no more trouble from the tower over the Sajaha matter, I keep my promises.”

“Thank you.”

The dark angel looked at the dilapidated building he was currently using to as a shed for the animals.

“You bought the building a few years ago and you have permission to extend your premises.”

Muzzie remembered the interview at the towers to get permission to renovate the old building. Two hours with silk and then having to pay twenty imperial for a piece of parchment. But no one did anything in the City without permission from the tower and there was always a price.

“Yet you haven’t gone ahead with the renovation, why ?”

“Money. I have regulars and we get by, but there are less travelling merchants. Sara has other ways of bringing in business...”

“The whores you mean ?”

Muzzie wasn't sure if the tower was supposed to get a cut of that side of his business, they seemed to want a cut of just about everything. There were no official taxes in the city, but the towers always got their percentage.

"Sara knows a few willing girls and one or two men, who appreciate the attentions of generous strangers....."

"Whores."

"The towers have never objected to that side of my business."

Aeony now looked bored.

"So why haven't you converted the building into a bigger and better whore house?"

"There is never enough spare money, even with what I earn for the odd guard assignment."

Aeony had a pouch in her hand, a very heavy looking money pouch.

"I need someone who knows what's going on," she said, "I need a pair of eyes and ears in the City. There will be enough in it to get your whore house built. Are you interested?"

A spy for the towers, it could easily get him killed, but he did need the gold. Plus of course he need only tell her what he thought she needed to know.

"I'm interested."

She gave him the pouch, all of it, no arguments, no threats.

"Good, there will be more where that came from. Silsk was paying someone to keep an eye on Adamaz and they were killed. I don't know who they were, but we need to know what the library are planning."

At first Muzzie wondered why he was worth so much money, but then he understood.

"You want me to recruit Vella as a spy?"

"And to think Silsk calls you a fool!"

~ ~

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Part 18 will be posted at the end of March