

City of the Lost God

Part 25 – Body and Mind

“He held the book with the love that only a librarian can lavish on an old book.”



Gesse could not only dig faster and move more river silt than ten of the guards, he actually enjoyed it. True, some of the servants Babaef had brought with him were initially scared of the revenant, but they quickly realised the value of an ally who was that strong and large. The smell was still a problem and Gesse tended to dig alone, or he brought back small trees that he'd simply snapped off at the roots. The expedition enjoyed a day without attack and with the help of Gesse, by late afternoon; they had a timber lined hole that reached the temple door.

“It’s definitely a curse.” Said Chillan.

“Sadly I agree.” Said Babaef.

It took a while to rub down the temple doors, washing millennia of mud from them and then translating the words in the ancient human tongue that were carved into them. The doors seemed to be made of pure gold, a discovery which had excited everyone.

“Who knows how much wealth might be inside ?” Norrex had said.

Everyone had been promised a share of any treasure that was found. From the lowest to the highest, the entire party were looking forward to being very rich. None of them wanted to stop because of an old curse carved into a door, which was probably nonsense anyway. Everywhere Gesse went, his strange vaporous demon went with him. Babaef was at first eager to learn whatever Ventus might know about Nigon, but he quickly realised the small demon knew very little.

“We’d better ask the small demon,” he said, “get Gesse and his ghost.”

They had to clear the deep hole, only Babaef had room to remain, shoved tight up against the temple doors by the vast bulk of the revenant. Ventus clung to Gesse’s shoulder and looked at the curse that someone had carved into the doors, before sealing them with some kind of wax.

“Oh dear, this is a bad one.” Said Ventus.

Ventus crawled along Gesse’s arm, trying to get a better look at what looked like a carving of some kind of climbing vine.

“There’s too much of you Gesse,” said Ventus, “can you move some of you out of my light ?”

“I will try, but I am what I am.”

Gesse moved slightly sideways, brushing the timber lining of the hole and causing an unsettling but minor avalanche of soil.

“I see it now, this is a bad curse, almost certain to be genuine.”

“Yes it’s bad, you told us, but can you give me any details ?” Asked Babaef.

Ventus stabbed his finger at the carving of the vine, almost falling from his precarious position on Gesse’s arm.

“See this Babaef ?”

“Yes it’s a vine of some kind. Very decorative, but what does it mean ?”

“No, not a vine, it’s a beast of body and mind..... look Babaef, really look !”

Babaef leant on Gesse’s thigh and craned his neck to see the carving. He ignored the foetid smell of death that Gesse seemed to exude from his pores and he studied the carving. He saw not a vine, but a group of creatures that resembled large snakes, very large snakes. Some were crawling over

creatures who looked like humans, while others curled round each other in some kind of horrific embrace.

"I see them Ventus, are these the ancient guardians?"

"I fear so and I strongly advise you to return to the City. Return with more men and then you may survive to break the seal on my master, Nigon, the one true deity."

Babaef straightened himself, rubbing the loose dirt from his robe.

"What does this beast of body and mind do?" Asked Gesse.

Until then Gesse hadn't said a word, but anyone that large tends to get instant attention when they do speak.

"They kill the body by coming up from the ground and crushing and then eating their victims. But that isn't all, they also attack the mind. Anyone can become their puppet, you can't trust anyone. The person next to you may plunge their blade into your back. That isn't the worse thing though....."

"Tell me ghost, tell it all?"

"The people they enter change, they not only become puppets of the ancient guardians, they also change physically. They gradually take on the appearance of their new masters."

Babaef put his fingers on the golden door, moving them over the etchings.

"We're here now Ventus. If we leave others may come and loot the temple, perhaps damage parts of the interior that are needed to break the seals. I have decided, we open the doors today. I'll get Chillan to begin scraping the wax seal out of the door frame."

He turned, expecting Gesse to climb out of the hole. Others used ladders, fixed to the timber lining, but Gesse could simply scale the rough timbers. Instead of moving, Gesse put both of his palms against the doors.

"You want these doors open?" He asked.

"Yes I do."

Gesse pushed and the heavy doors began to move, the wax sealing material falling to the ground.

"No, we should return with an army." Said Ventus.

"Be quiet ghost!"

Each door must have weighed several tons, but Gesse moved them with ease. Back the doors went, grinding over centuries of dust and grit, until they were fully open. In front of them was the near perfect interior of a human temple. They were in the world of their ancient enemy and even Gesse waited a few seconds before entering the temple. Babaef shouted up to the crowd who'd gathered at the top of the hole.

"We need lamps down here and we need Philo's body removed."

Poor Philo, the faithful servant who was now just a stinking carcass that needed to be removed. He'd landed in an open area of the temple and been killed instantly by the fall. Two large stone blocks had fallen near him, but neither had caused any damage beyond cracking a few floor tiles.

"It's beautiful." Said Ventus.

Their only light was coming through a small hole in the ceiling, high above them. It was enough though, to see the fine carvings on the walls, the perfect statues of the gods the human's worshipped.

"It is beautiful, for a place of evil." Said Babaef.

"I'm sure you don't believe that, any more than I do." Said Ventus. "The humans were no more evil than us, they were and are just an enemy."

Gesse was approaching the body, the aroma that repelled others drew him forward. Babaef noticed the struggle going on between Gesse and his urges.

"We need to bury him Gesse, his mother is a cook in the camp."

"I no longer eat the dead Babaef, but the urges still linger."

Guards arrived from the surface, putting up lamps and wrapping Philo's body in a shroud, before carrying him to the surface. Pontus, the leader of the guards had been badly wounded during a recent attack on the camp. That didn't stop him climbing the ladders and entering the temple. Everyone had a stake in the loot from the temple and rumours of vast wealth were beginning to spread.

"There are gold statues, can we begin taking them out?" He asked.

"Nothing is moved until I give permission."

"When will that be?"

Babaef looked at Pontus, hating the fact that he needed the leader of the guard and couldn't kill him for his insolence.

"There is a curse to be removed." Said Babaef.

"A very bad curse." Added Ventus.

No one felt really comfortable around Ventus, he did look like a small ghost. That lack of comfort demanded respect and Pontus backed away from the gold statue he'd been looking at.

"Of course, I'll leave you to remove the curse."

"I'll need Lagertha and Chillan, please tell them to join me."

"Yes sir."

With the word 'Sir,' discipline was restored and Babaef could ignore any likelihood of a mutiny in his group, at least for now. Babaef smiled at Ventus, they both knew that lifting the curse was beyond the ability of anyone in the City and perhaps beyond Nigon himself. Muzzie and Lilleth had entered the temple and both were admiring the beauty of the artefacts and the fact that most of them seemed to be made of gold and silver.

"I'm glad you're both here, I'd like you to stay for the ritual." Said Babaef.

"The one to remove the curse?" Asked Lilleth.

The temple seemed full of servants and guards, though none seemed relaxed enough to actually touch anything.

"Yes the curse. The temple has to be cleared of anyone not needed for the ritual, it may be dangerous."

It took a while to clear the temple, even with the threat of a potentially dangerous ritual to remove a particularly nasty curse. Eventually only the small group needed for the ritual were present and Gesse, who for some reason assumed he was invited.

"Could you close the doors please Geese." Said Babaef.

Gesse walked over to the doors, the high ceiling allowing him to walk upright in the temple. He put his hand on the doors and noticed there were no handles on the inside.

"They may be difficult to open again from this side." He said.

"No matter, we can't have interruptions during the ritual. Please close them."

Gesse closed the doors, pushing them tight against each other and effectively sealing them into the ancient human temple. Everyone moved towards Babaef, all of them keen to see the ritual carried out.

"Today we are going to break two seals," said Babaef, "two seals that bind the great Nigon. This will be dangerous and it is important that I am not disturbed."

“What about the curse ? Is it real.” Asked Muzzie.

“The curse is real enough, but I have no way of lifting it. For now, we’re just here to break the seals and that is what I intend to do.”

No one looked happy, even Lagertha was glaring at her lover. Chillan seemed to be the only person not to be worried about the curse, he seemed obsessed with the artefacts in the temple.

“Please form a circle round me,” said Babaef, “I wish to begin the first piece of ceremonial magic, required to bring Nigon closer to freedom.”

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Adamaz had given Caspian dominion of their section of the Dome. All the rooms and corridors to the right of the bridge to the library were theirs, all twenty rooms. It had been an unpopular part of the Dome anyway, due to rumoured hauntings and a general strange feeling. Caspian and Vella both knew the cause of the rumours and now the ghost of LLud Narren was destroyed.

Caspian had instantly banned the cleaning staff from their corridors during the hours of night, so now they could wander around without fear of running into a member of the library staff. This was just as well, as they were in the habit of wandering around naked. Sex was their pastime, their passion and all they both thought about. Sex in Muzzie’s tavern had meant various people listening in and giving them marks out of ten. In the Dome there had been some really epic sexual encounters, but Vella always had to be leaving for her next shift in the bar. Now they could fuck each other’s brains out all night and all day if Caspian was on a rest day. Rest day was now hot and sweaty day, a day of vigorous coupling and comfortable afterglows.

“What do we do with it all ? We’re rich Casp, really rich.” Asked Vella.

They were naked and still a little moist. Luckily it was a warm evening and they could walk around the hidden library without feeling cold. It was the first time they’d piled up their treasure in one place and it was now a huge pile. Not just gold and silver, but precious stones and priceless statuettes. Some of the human spell scrolls would fetch huge sums, if they could get an introduction to the right buyer. Caspian surveyed it all and looked pleased.

“We are now probably the richest people in the City.” He said.

“Really ? Some of the metal merchants are very wealthy.”

Caspian picked up an ancient codex, written over a million years before but still in mint condition. He held the book with the love that only a librarian can lavish on an old book. As yet he could only read a few words, but he was negotiating with a Seer on the 4th rift, someone who could teach him the dead language needed to unlock the secrets held in the huge tome.

“This book alone is worth more than the entire city Vella,” he said, “and then there are the statues upstairs.”

Vella had long ago lost her fear of being naked. Once she’d felt at her most vulnerable, but now her nakedness made her feel free and ready for anything.

“The statues ! We never did get a proper look at them.”

Vella was gone, after picking up an old and rather dim lamp. The statues were in a room where the light globe had been smashed, which was probably why they visited it so rarely. Caspian ran after her, both of them naked as the day they were born. Caspian caught up with Vella as she was looking at the perfect statue of an Angel, a Genova as the humans called them.

“I wish we could have this in our lounge area Casp.”

“Can you imagine the fuss if the dark angels heard of it, they’d attack the Dome.”

Vella caressed the statue, running her hand over the lifelike face, fondling the stone hair.

“I know Casp, but she was so beautiful.”

“We can see her any time we want and I’ll hang up some decent oil lamps. Let’s look at the other statues; we never did get a good look at them.”

Using the glow of the pale yellow lamp they examined the statues of what had been the human inhabitants of the City, long before the demons had taken over. The colours were striking and realistic, it was almost like looking at ghosts of the long dead humans. One or two were so large that they’d been jammed up under the ceiling at odd angles, their bases chipped and damaged.

“They seem to have been in a hurry to put them in here.” Said Caspian.

There were dozens of them, all priceless and yet they knew the statues had to be their secret. In the City mention of humans could mean death, the statues would be seen as the ultimate heresy.

“Perhaps it was someone like us who put them in here,” said Vella, “a hybrid who didn’t want to see all this beauty destroyed.”

Some of the small statue could be moved, but the larger ones weighed several tons and trying to move them could become a risk to life and limb. Caspian gave one statue that was jammed under the ceiling a hard shove.

“It’s falling Vella, get out of here !”

They were in the corridor when it hit the floor, a statue of a woman in some kind of ceremonial dress. She lost part of her arm in the fall, but she hadn’t even dented the hard stone floor.

“At least we can see behind it now.” Said Caspian.

They clambered over the fallen statue and in the corner of the room was a group of statues with faded colours. They were exquisite, the detail superb. Only the faded colour detracted from the far better quality of the ancient statues. Everything about them made them look far older than the other statues in the room. Style of dress, level of detail, realistic attitude of the people carved into a hard stone. It was as though the newer statues were in some way lesser copies of the older works they were looking at.

“There are superb Casp, we can’t leave them in here.”

Caspian put his arms around one and just about managed to move it a few inches, but it wobbled dangerously as he let go.

“If Merrick was in the City, we might move them with his help, but there’s no one else we can trust.” He said.

Working together they carefully moved the statues around, making small gaps between them so that they could see all of them. It was hard work, especially naked and Vella added a few more bruises and grazes to her already impressive collection. She looked down at her battered body and rubbed off some of the worst dust.

“Oh Vella, we should have dressed, you’re getting cut to pieces.”

“Sara saw the scars when I put on my wedding dress. She thought I was marrying a wife beater.”

He held her, gently cuddling her and kissing her neck.

“What did you tell her ?” He asked.

“Nothing, just that you’re a gentle person who would never hurt me.”

They began to kiss, their need returning. It had been at least three hours since they’d last had sex and that is an age to a pair of healthy young hybrids. Vella was beginning to turn around, offering him her rear as she began to get onto her hands and knees. Sex on the gritty floor excited her, but her back was already covered in bruises. She caught a glimpse of the statue behind the others, in the furthest corner of the room.

“I recognise that face, even if we didn’t see it for long.” She said.

Her tail swiped him across his thigh, it was an instinctive and unconscious act. It meant that she was no longer receptive sexually, something else more urgent had her attention.

"It's him, LLud Narren, the dead sorcerer." Said Caspian.

They picked up the lamp and moved through the gaps between the statues, Caspian feeling a little disappointed that even in death, LLud Narren was spoiling his sex life. It was him, or rather an almost perfect likeness of the dead sorcerer. Wedged tight into the corner, he looked so life like that they both hesitated to touch the carved stone.

"He can stay here," said Vella, "I don't want any reminders of him in our home."

He was holding a bowl in his hands and by moving the lamp, they could see that several pieces of metal were in the bowl. Caspian put his hand out to pick up whatever was in there.

"Don't !" Said Vella. "It'll be another trap. Yet another way to get some unsuspecting fool to set him free."

"He's dead Vella, dead twice. He was dead and then we killed him again. I don't think that even a sorcerer can come back from being shattered into millions of pieces."

He felt in the bowl and came out with a handful of metal pieces. They were intricate and obviously made by an artisan far better than any currently in the City.

"I have no idea what they're for, but they look valuable." Said Caspian.

Vella rummaged through the pieces with her fingers, picking up two oddly shaped pieces of silver metal and slotting them into each other.

"It's a puzzle," she said, "but we mustn't solve it. I don't trust LLud, even dead he'll be tricky and dangerous."

"Alright, I'll put them in a drawer in the hidden library and we'll forget about them."

"Good."

Torfi watched them from the shadows and he agreed with Vella, the puzzle was dangerous. He was in his four legged form and his senses were telling him that the pieces of metal meant danger, grave danger. It was the first time he'd had the nerve to follow the young couple into the hidden rooms, that whole section of the Dome gave him strange feelings. Part of him relished the sensation of power that seemed to ooze out of the walls, but the hybrid in him recognised how dangerous the hidden rooms could be.

Vella was getting down on all fours, they seemed about to finish something they'd started earlier. Torfi stopped watching and walked away, he felt uncomfortable about watching them fuck. Being a spy was one thing, but he could think of no justification for being a voyeur. He had no intention of telling Adamaz or anyone else about the hidden rooms, Caspian and Vella were friends. They'd invited him to their wedding and no one ever invited him anywhere, usually. They needed help to move the statues and he had that strength now. When the time was right he'd reveal himself to them and offer to help.

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Maya gnawed at a thigh bone and she should have felt content, but something troubled her. Bailig was an attentive lover, who she could hunt with, her life had never been so complete, so full of the things most others took for granted. Love, a home, the companionship of her own kind. All of those things were almost impossible for a Kveld, yet she had them. Maya couldn't turn back into her two legged form, her belly was too full of the farmer they'd recently killed. She nuzzled at Bailig and then lay down on the blood soaked ground and sought peace in slumber.

She had felt the Roruss die, though she didn't know it by name. Maya merely knew that something old and supposedly immortal had been destroyed and something was unhappy about that. In her

form that could speak, she found it hard to describe such things, but as the beast she knew. She saw it like a chill wind, its fingers creeping over everything, seeking the death of all those who opposed it. A name came into the crude mind of the beast, but then it was gone again and there would be no retrieving it once she walked on two legs again. She slept and even sleep didn't stop the thoughts, they simply turned into dreams.

She was running, Bailig behind her and following her along the sewers under the City. She'd never hunted in the sewers, the vermin there fed on too much excreta to be good eating. But she knew the sewers and travelled at speed, knowing which way to turn. Left at the junction under The Lanes, right at the large pipe under Old Town and then straight across the next junction. A wall was in front of her it had always been there. Now there was a hole in the wall and the chill wind was beckoning her in. Not just her, there were others running in the darkness and not many were Kveld. Other things, even darker things, they felt the call and came to help it. None were there to fight it, to stop it growing even stronger. Through the hole in the wall was the catacombs and no one ever escaped the catacombs.

Bailig nipped playfully at her rear, but as she looked she saw not Bailig, but something darker sinking its teeth into tail. She yelped and ran, deeper into the catacombs, always deeper, always answering the call of the chill wind. Her dream shifted, as dreams do and she was now watching Babaef as he began to remove a seal that held it in place, the cold thing, the dangerous thing. Muzzie was there, watching over Babaef, as was Lilleth. Didn't they know that no one ever escapes the catacombs? Maya wanted to rip out Babaef's throat, perhaps Muzzie's too. Surely the others around her would help, surely Bailig would help. But no, Bailig was gone and a dark thing had taken his place, only the dark thing was Bailig. They'd all come to guard Babaef, not kill him, none of them were there to stop the release of the cold thing, except her. Maya herself was unsure what to do, kill Babaef, or aid him?

She woke up and found she'd been digging her paws into the ground so hard, that as she became the two legged Maya again, one of her fingernails had pulled right out. The pain from the bloody hole where a nail had been must have brought her out of the dream and she was grateful. Bailig was next to her, awake and looking as wretched as she felt.

"You dreamt it too?" He asked

"Yes, it calls us, the cold thing wants us."

"It is pretending to be Nigon, but it isn't."

She looked at her lover and tried to remember the name that had flown through the mind of the beast, but it was gone.

"I know," she said, "I knew its name, but now it has fled my mind. It is old and it draws all things dark to itself, things like us."

"Do we go to it?" He asked her.

It was good that he still deferred to her, still treated her as a respected teacher. That might just save his life and hers.

"I think we have to answer the call or it will drive us insane. Whether we help or aid this thing is another matter. I feel Babaef, the chill wind that surrounds him is out along the great river. If he doesn't succeed there the call may stop, or at least diminish. If he breaks the seals there, the cold thing will be irresistible, we will have no option but to answer."

Bailig was finding their clothes, bringing hers to her and looking awkward at his own nakedness. How she loved him and his strange eccentricities.

"We could run," he said, "head even further into the southern plain, live on farmers forever."

“No, we’ve run enough and there will be no running away if Babaef succeeds in breaking the seals by the great river. We’ll travel back towards the City at a leisurely pace and run like the wind if the call gets stronger.”

Maya pulled on her boots and once again she looked like a respectable woman of good blood, someone most mothers dreamt of their son bringing home.

“I may not obey this thing that calls us, I may try to stop Babaef,” she said, “that could mean both of us dying.”

“I’ll follow you anywhere and fight by your side.” Said Bailig

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Babaef gave himself a few moments to calm his thoughts; breaking two seals at once was going to be tough and potentially dangerous. He briefly wondered where his daughters were and then that thought too was banished from his mind.

“Give me your strength everyone,” he shouted, “pray if praying is your way, just pray that I succeed.”

He was glad that the revenant had turned up, though he still didn’t understand where the vaporous demon fitted into Nigon’s plan. Having Muzzie and Lilleth watching over him made him feel secure. Strangely he felt that Gesse was also an asset to him, even if he didn’t understand why the huge creature was helping him. He nodded at Chillan and prepared to speak the first of eight lines of a tongue so ancient that most of his pronunciation was going to be guesswork.

“Quiet ! Babaef begins.” Shouted Chillan.

No one had been making any noise at all, which made Babaef want to giggle. He was stressed, too stressed. The only way to relieve that stress was to get on with it, so he spoke the first line of the incantation. From memory of course, he’d actually hired a minstrel to help him remember the lines. He learnt the trick that the minstrel used to remember hundreds of songs. He was under more stress than any minstrel, a misremembered song is unlikely to cause the death of him and all his loved ones.

“Sident.” Said Chillan, the word for I agree, or so be it, in the common tongue.

Lagertha muttered the same word and then everyone said it, even Gesse roared the word, so loudly that dust fell from the ceiling. Good, they were concentrating on him, giving him all their positive thoughts. Babaef spoke the second line, hoping for a sign that it had been heard, even just a feeling that it had worked, there was nothing.

“Sident !” They all shouted in unison.

The third line was supposed to release power to the speaker, give them the ability to break the seals. Nothing was in the ancient books about whether Babaef would be invulnerable to the guardian creatures, he just hoped. He spoke the third line he’d rehearsed and there was once again the roar of;

“Sident.”

A green mist flowed up through gaps in the floor tiles. Green ?! Babaef wasn’t sure if that was right, it hardly seemed the right colour for power given by the gods. The mist ignored the others and swirled round him, before entering him and disappearing completely. He didn’t feel any different, there was no sudden feeling of power within him. It was all beginning to be very disappointing.

Babaef spoke the fourth line, the one that was supposed to open the lesser seal, the one buried deep in the ground beneath their feet.

“Sident.”

The ground shook slightly, which was a relief, his pronunciation of 'Sre amnit donara' must have been correct. Calling on the oldest darkness itself was always risky and as Babaef felt the ground shake he smiled.

"The lesser seal is broken !" He shouted.

The tremors didn't stop, the floor tiles moving as though floor was becoming liquid. First heads appeared, the heads of some kind of giant snakes. Babaef recognised the creatures from the carvings on the door, but not everyone had seen those carvings. Out from the ground they came, hissing and threatening with row upon row of ferocious teeth in serpent like jaws. They ignored Babaef, moving around him as though he wasn't there. The others were attacked though and quickly had to fight for their lives. He almost went to help Lagertha, who was using fireball spells to keep the ancient guardians at bay, but he had to complete the ritual. Babaef calmed his mind again and tried to ignore the madness that he had unleashed on his small expedition. He spoke the fifth line and there was no answering Sident this time. He looked across the temple and saw Lilleth cutting the head off one of the monstrous serpents, killing it. So, they could die, that pleased Babaef, he hadn't released a deathless curse upon the entire world.

"Babaef, open the doors, please let us in !"

Above him Pontus was leaning into the hole in the ceiling and calling down. The hole was a good hundred feet or more above him and he didn't recognise the faces at that distance. At least a dozen heads peered down from above, many shouting, pleading to be let into the temple. Babaef could now hear screams coming from outside and he hoped his daughters were safe. He needed to calm himself for the sixth line, but events seemed to be conspiring against him. As he prepared to speak, a large section of the ceiling could no longer bear the weight of so many people. It collapsed, showering him in grit and stone fragments as the stone blocks hit the ground.

People fell with the ceiling, a good half of those who'd set out from the City with him. Such a jolly group they'd been, laughing and arguing about who rode on the carts. Now they were dead, their bodies twisted and ruined by the fall. Not all of them dead, two bodies moved, pushing at the ground, trying to rise. One of them was Pontus, though parts of him were no longer Pontus. His arms were shrunken now, his jaws distended and instead of shouting he now hissed. Babaef thought he'd go mad, but then Gesse crushed the abomination with a single blow of his fist.

"The servant too, she changes." Said Babaef.

It was Lagertha's personal maid, such a sweet creature. Now she had row after row of needle sharp teeth and strength enough to move a massive stone block. The revenant crushed the life out of her, leaving just a heap of blood and broken body parts as he moved on, attacking more of the deadly serpents. Babaef wondered how Lagertha would take the death of her servant, but he saw that she too was dead. Her half eaten body rested not twenty feet from him, but in the heat of battle, he hadn't seen her die.

"I must finish, or it is all for nothing." He muttered to himself.

Like an automaton he spoke the sixth line, knowing it had been said perfectly.

"Sident."

Muzzie had given the response and smiled as he killed yet another serpent, using his sword to spill it's steaming innards over the temple floor. They could do it, he could do it. Only two more lines to be spoken. The seventh line would grant him more power and open the dimension door to the major seal. Babaef calmed himself and closed his eyes, it was the only way to ignore the carnage around him. He felt something hit him and he was pushed backwards, his left elbow breaking as he hit the stone floor. Opening his eyes he saw it was Gesse who'd run into him, chasing at least two of

the serpents and killing them with his mighty fists. Gesse seemed unaware he'd knocked Babaef down, he'd simply spun around and found a new enemy, there were still plenty of them. Babaef stood, but his left arm was now useless, the elbow was shattered and bone fragments stuck out of his skin.

"Fuck !" He shouted.

He couldn't help seeing Chillan, his most useful ally was sat right in his eye line. He looked to have had a leg bitten off, but the sorcerer had surrounded himself with a circle of fire and continued to fight. Good old Chillan, if he could carry on without a leg, then so could he. Babaef waved at Chillan and then gave him a slight bow. He then closed his eyes again and quickly spoke the seventh line of the ritual. More green mist, lots of it, mixed with strands of red and purple. It all flowed towards Babaef, his body seeming to absorb the mist, taking it in and using it all. He felt stronger and then to his right he saw a section of the temple wall melt away and where it had been was a window, a window that looked out over another world.

It was night in that other world, or perhaps it was always dark ? Babaef heard the calls of strange creatures and hoped he wasn't about to destroy their world, or let something truly evil loose upon it. The final line needed to be said.

"Gesse," he shouted, "protect me, I need to speak the final line."

The revenant stood behind him, as if daring anything or anyone to attack the one he guarded. Babaef took a deep breath and said the line, enjoying the way the vowels came off his tongue. It was perfect, he knew he'd pronounced it as well as any human sorcerer could have pronounced it. All the doubting, all the years of being mocked, all the years of fear... he'd spoken the ritual, despite the temple crashing down around him.

"Sident !" Shouted Gesse.

The window to another world filled with fire and flame. Babaef felt the deaths of millions of creatures before the window closed. Nothing about that had been in the ancient texts. Had Nigon tricked him ? The death of a world seemed a huge price for Nigon's freedom. No more guardian creatures bothered them, they had obviously failed in their duty to protect the seals and had no further purpose. Screaming could still be heard coming from outside and the next urgent matter was to get out of the temple. Muzzie was alive and only seemed to have a few minor wounds.

"I thought you'd have used more spells." Babaef said to him.

"I'm a fighter. To be honest I never considered using magic once the fighting started."

Babaef slapped him on the back with his good arm.

"I know Muzzie. Sometimes it's just easier and quicker to draw a blade. I've been in the same situation myself."

Lilleth was helping Chillan, dressing the wound where his right leg had been bitten off above the knee. Gesse was unharmed of course, nothing had even scratched the mighty revenant.

"I think we all owe you our lives Gesse." Babaef said.

"I certainly do," said Muzzie, "he pulled a good dozen of those foul brutes off me."

"Has anyone seen Norrex ?" Asked Babaef.

Lilleth shook her head and pointed to where a hand protruded from under a pile of heavy stones.

"He was killed when the roof came down." She said.

Another death, another lost friend. Babaef suddenly felt weak and sat on the floor, ignoring the sharp stones that dug into his rear. So few of them had survived and the most dangerous part of the plan to release Nigon was still to come, the final seal in the deep catacombs.

"I'm feeling weak Muzzie," he said, "have you any spell or device that can get us out of here ?"

Gesse began thumping the doors, but they were designed to open inwards and refused to move. "They sound solid," said Gesse, "I think the pit outside may have collapsed."

Muzzie was concentrating, though no one could see the spells he was scanning through his mind. "I can take us back to the City," he said, "create a portal to the Dome. Is that any good?"

"No, my daughters are outside and the remainder of those who came with me. Have you nothing else?" Asked Babaef.

Muzzie didn't say anything else, his actions spoke for themselves.

Babaef watched as the bar owner raised his left arm and pointed at the huge doors, the heavy doors, made of pure gold. They melted and flowed as liquid and then the dirt and rocks beyond melted. The group of survivors moved as far away as they could from the doors, the heat had quickly become unbearable. Still Muzzie kept pouring power against where the doors had been, carrying on until there was a hole the size of wagon, burnt all the way to the river. Muzzie didn't stop until he saw the light on the river and heard the sound of insects in the scrub.

"There," he said, "but we'll need to wait for it to cool down."

"Muzzie, you are a person with hidden talents." Said Babaef.

"Indeed he is." Said Ventus.

They'd all forgotten Ventus during the fight. The small demon had vanished, probably hiding on Gesse's shoulder. The creature of vapour was giving Muzzie a very curious look.

"We're all allowed our secrets." Said Babaef.

Over an hour they waited, for the tunnel to cool to a temperature that wouldn't bake them to a cinder. Eventually they stepped over the still cooling pools of gold and ran through the tunnel, arriving on the banks of the river. They could see the compound from there and it wasn't a pleasant sight. The thorn scrub fence had burned away, part of it still smouldered. Bodies could be seen on the ground and the remains of several giant serpents. They had put up a good fight in the compound, though no sign of a life could be seen.

"Please," said Babaef, "help me look for my children."

The battle seemed to be over, which was just as well, they were all spent and having to carry Chillan. Lilleth one side and Muzzie the other, they carried the rather overweight sorcerer up to the compound and placed him on the first undamaged chair they found.

"I always thought she's return to being small if she died." Said Babaef.

Shadow, his powerful and seemingly indestructible pet was dead. Her head had been ripped out of her body, the sinews stretched like warm cheese. Around her were the bodies of several of the guardian creatures, but eventually she'd met a more powerful enemy. Muzzie knelt down and looked at the head of Babaef's dead pet.

"There are no bites," he said, "something actually pulled her head off with brute strength."

They all began to scan the rift, watching for whatever monster had managed to kill Shadow so easily. Lilleth was the first to hear the sound of crying and even she found it hard to hear, or make out where it was coming from.

"Quiet!" She shouted. "Listen!"

Three tents still stood erect and undamaged and the survivors were in the second tent that Lilleth entered. A guard, driven half-crazy by losing an eye and by what his one good eye must have seen. At first he advanced on Lilleth, lifting his sword to strike. As he recognised his master in the group he changed, gripping Babaef and holding on to him, crying as he tried to speak.

"I saved Itet," he said, "but Kapes is one of them, only the gods can save her now."

"Make sense man, what do you mean one of them?"

Babaef forgot about the man, pushing him to one side as he saw his eldest daughter sat among the few terrified servants. She ran to him, burying her face in his robe.

"I never thought I'd see you again," he said, "but where is your sister?"

His daughter's face was filthy, so he rubbed her forehead and around her eyes with the bottom of his robe.

"She's gone father. Kapes began to change, she killed my tutor! She grew into something terrible father."

His daughter was crying again, he let her cry, she needed to release the torment of what she'd seen. Five, just five remained alive and most of those had life altering wounds. Babaef found a water bottle and began to clean his daughter's face properly, while Lilleth tended to the wounds of the few survivors. Muzzie put his head into the tent;

"Something approaches," he said, "something large."

Babaef stood with Gesse and Muzzie, all of them hoping that yet another horde of two headed monsters wasn't coming to attack them again. There was no longer a thorn wall around the compound, or much of a compound. A small mixed bag of adventurers guarding a few badly injured survivors, they were all likely to die in the next attack.

"It comes!" Boomed Gesse.

Babaef fell to his knees when he saw the head of the beast. Despite the enlarged jaws and the rows of teeth, it was still unmistakably his daughter. Her legs had been absorbed into a serpent's body, though two small arms still remained. She screeched as she saw them, the first sound they'd heard any of the creatures make. Over twenty feet in length, the monster that had been Kapes hurtled at them, knocking thorn bushes out of the way as though they were grass stems.

"I will deal with this monster." Said Gesse.

He was looking at Babaef, seeking agreement, needing permission to kill what had once been his daughter. Babaef merely nodded and began to weep.

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The undead in the catacombs were restless, they'd felt something change. Most were completely mindless, but a few knew that something massive had occurred, something that would shake the very fabric of the rifts. In the City too, many had a sleepless night, feeling the change, but unable to pinpoint what had actually occurred. Silsk sat on the roof of the towers and looked east, sensing the chill Babaef had caused near the great river. No one spoke of it, even the powerful knew when to be quiet, when to be humble.

In the deep caverns beneath the catacombs it managed to coalesce into a physical form, the first it had managed to form in..... so long that it couldn't really remember the number of years. It saw its own feet and approved of the powerful muscles and long claws. It lifted an arm and again the muscles and sharp claws met with satisfaction. It didn't last for long, the physical form dissolved into a vapour that disappeared among the rocks. It didn't get angry or depressed, it knew there was only one seal left and then it would be free. Then that fool Nigon could be thrown into the wastes of eternity, to boil away to nothing. There was only a shell left of the ancient deity anyway, a shell that it controlled.

Soon, very soon, Babaef would enter the catacombs and break the last of those hated seals. It began to call out to the dark things, the things that kept to the dark places, the things that slithered. It needed them now, it needed them to protect Babaef. Until the seal was broken of course, then Babaef and the other fools would be destroyed.

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Part 26 will be posted at the end of November.