

Chapter 22

A fresh hand moved through the fog, slicing through it with a practiced swing. The robe flapped about in the motion but fell back in the eternal dead calm of Putras. Eyes searched through the water vapor, while ears glistened with the mounting dew.

"I don't hear them, sounds like the clear coast," Kynton said, offering his other hand to the body behind him.

"You mean the coast is clear?" Aldrin asked, needlessly correcting him.

"Semantics are the poison of an overwrought mind," the priest riddled, a favorite pastime for him within the prison's halls of healing.

Aldrin walked slowly into the fog, brandishing the only lantern as if it were a cudgel against the darkness. This was mostly unnecessary as the sun had crested a good three hours ago and was casting a very lovely light about the forgotten city, thank you very much.

Behind him, Kynton offered his hand to Ciara who took it, pulling herself free of the hole that either housed a forgotten well or midden. Judging by the exciting specimens of coprolites Aldrin kept pointing out as rocks, she had a good idea which. She stood shakily to her feet, grateful to be free of that passage.

"Let's not do that again," she said, looking towards the back of Aldrin's head but getting the slow smile of a man who for the first time could look at girls without risking some time in the autoclave.

"Third time's the charm," the prince responded, failing to notice the tension, as a wolf surveyed its picking of red hooded girls. The fact they were armed with teeth bigger than it, didn't deter.

Ciara stepped away from the midden hole, her eyes still on Kynton who waved lightly before dropping his head and hand down for the final member. A growl was the only answer he received as Isa, her short stature aiding her better than the oversized priest, rose cautiously. Her fingers gripped tightly to roots that tried to deny their weed ancestry for so long they truly believed they were oak trees now.

Her white hair rose with as much dignity as she could summon while climbing out of an ancient toilet, as the priest stood back, his hand still held out at what was quickly becoming her chest height. She scrambled, her slippers hitting the stone that cracked at the unexpected addition of her weight.

"My lady," Kynton exclaimed, enjoying the witches discomfort as the world reacted to her size within it.

"Say one word priest and I'll wipe the face from your grin!" she swore, anger muddling her words. Or perhaps she was serious. It was hard to tell with witches.

He grinned, stepping back into the one standing pillar, setting off a nest of spiders, "I always enjoyed well rounded women."

The witch advanced, her finger already sparking as magic jumped around it.

Her hair was nearly at full startled hedgehog height before Ciara called out, "Where are we, priest?"

"Where you wanted to be," Kynton said, still watching the dancing spark of the witch as power burned behind her slit eyes, "outside the hospice. Beyond that, I don't know. Day trips were severely punished."

It was clearly a new part of the city, though perhaps new wasn't the correct word. Most stone, long stripped of any color, was bleached and then yellowed with age, like a tobacco addicts mouth. Weeds blossomed into generations of thick wooden foliage, replacing the trees that died out with the gods. It was uncertain what replaced the gods.

Archways were more impressive this deep into the city, as they lay scattered upon the grounds after giving into gravity centuries ago. Some still had small shreds of the gold that once coated each brick, sections glinting where looters couldn't pry the last bits off. And all through the stones, a low howl from the wind.

"So, pick a direction and take it, huh?" Ciara asked.

Aldrin stood upon the base of a pillar that got itself a new job far to the East in Magton. His lantern couldn't get more than a few feet into the fog, which obscured their periphery like an unfinished painting. "I think we

should," he started before dropping his arm and admitting defeat, "go somewhere?"

Ciara tried to look up, searching for a sun that was playing in the clouds. Bearings were something she prided herself on keeping, but that mad dash through old corridors, around closed off hallways, double backing up stairs that collapsed in on themselves and across a rickety cavern that contained a seemingly very peeved monster of flame who didn't trust anyone in robes, Ciara was uncertain what country she was in anymore.

Closing her eyes, she spun a bit and pointed, "We go that way."

Kynton grinned, happy to be going anywhere that was away, "Lead on, I love watching you go."

She didn't hide the shudder as the chill crept through her bones and, taking a cautious step, became the first living souls to plumb the depths of the dead city.

Stone pillars cast long shadows over the assemblage stumbling through the mists, the trees of old forced to give way to the measured advances of nature. The fog would lift as the group came to a small hill or a now roofless shrine so they could gaze down upon the soupy mazy below.

"I remember learning about moss growing on a certain side of the tree?"

"Do you see any trees?" Isa snapped at Aldrin's innocuous question.

He pushed the moistened hair off his forehead for the tenth time and tried to peer through the stone woods. Shadows were the only answer back. "No, I suppose not. Besides, I forget which side it grows on anyway."

"It's North," Ciara's voice was strained, as if she were speaking through a clenched jaw. Probably because she was.

"Right!" Aldrin exclaimed before lapsing back into his near infuriatingly calm contemplation, "did we want to head North?"

"We need a road, any road will do," Ciara said, who feared she'd been leading them about in circles. It was getting hard to tell but she thought

that broken statue of a half woman half squid looked familiar.

“Provided it doesn’t travel back to the Hospice,” Kynton’s jolly mood was even wilting under the mounting air of desperation and humidity.

“Why have we let this babbling priest continue to follow us?” Isa’s mood surprisingly remained the same.

The priest turned his jovial eyes upon the infuriated witch and smiled like an antelope that led its brother to the crocodile, “You’d miss me terribly, sweetheart.”

“Not twice, I wouldn’t,” Isa crossed her arms, but the air began to taste metallic as magic folded upon her. “I’d be doing the world a favor, saving it from one more peddler of snake oil in the form of everlasting salvation.”

“Have you ever had a soul inside you?” Kynton asked seriously, as if he were about to wave his fingers over her forehead and bless her.

Isa growled slowly, like a dog protecting her territory.

The priest walked towards her carefully, his slippers shredding upon the broken floors of what used to be a bath house. He towered over the witch, the top of her static hair only coming to the stubble already sprouting upon his chin. As he stared down, the edges of his lip curled, “Would you like to?”

The witch’s fist popped into that whiskery jaw before the priest had a chance to dodge.

“AH!” the pair of them cried in pain. Kynton staggering from the mighty blow of a woman able to throw her considerable weight into anything, Isa from her fist meeting with the jaw line of a priest who’d spent his entire life taking one on the chin.

Aldrin dropped his lantern, the candle over half gone already, and grumbled at the pair of mortal enemies howling in nearly simultaneous pain. “Serves them,” he said to Ciara.

Her skin glistened under the fog, a fact the prince was doing his best to pay no attention to, as she leaned against one of the pillars. Exhaustion was evident in her voice, “They won’t change, people rarely do. They’ll simply pick up their fight again later.”

“Perhaps we should gag them, lest they alert anyone,” Aldrin said, his

voice belying any sarcasm.

"Sure, I'll take the six and a half foot priest, you get the witch," Ciara responded, punctuating her threat with a raspy cough, "She's feisty."

Aldrin laughed, it'd probably take every man in the Historians caravan to gag Isadora and some wouldn't get out of it alive. She didn't just have a strong will, she seemed to shape the very fabric of the world to fit her puzzle. Perhaps that was most of her power. Aldrin had wanted to ask her if she could call flint and tinder from the air, freeze enemies to their marrow or move shit with her mind. But he felt the resentful gaze of Ciara whenever the 'M' word was raised and quickly dropped his line of questioning. Imagine the scandal, the King and defender of Scepticar believed in magic.

That was the first moment in all of his life that Aldrin ever thought of himself as a King. It tasted wrong, like strawberries poured atop chicken.

He'd have kept worrying that thought until it was little more than a pile of threads, but a brown hand caught his knee and squeezed. All moisture in his throat somehow evaporated in 200% humidity. His body froze, afraid that any slight movement on his part would stop that moment of physical contact.

But Ciara wasn't watching Aldrin, her ears picked up something in the distance. She held her finger up to her mouth and motioned silence to the prince who looked paler than usual in the dead city. He nodded and mimicked her gesture. But only the howl of the winds answered back, a low moan of aging stone.

Her hand dropped and she waved it about her face, trying to get a breeze going through the forest of rock. A few blessed bits of sweat slipped from her over persperated brow before her overheated mind finally hauled itself off the couch. The fan hand slowed, coming to a complete stop and drawing Aldrin's waning attention.

He looked at her quizzically as she licked a finger and held it up into the air. She rose carefully and waved her finger in a new direction.

"What?" the prince asked, but she ignored him, scrambling over a long crumbled staircase to again raise her finger at the world that raised it right

back.

“No wind,” Ciara’s voice mumbled, “There’s no wind!”

“Aye, that’s why it’s so dreadfully sticky,” the prince agreed, regretting the Ostero heat that boiled his blood.

“Then what’s causing the moaning?” her voice cracked, as shadows, once shrugged off as clouds across the sun, moved menacingly in the fog.

The priest and the witch broke off from their argument to watch the girl tumbling off what had once been the Mayor’s prized chariot-port. “Don’t worry your silly head,” Kynton said to the dark one as she raced to get footing on level ground, “it’s probably ancient pockets of gas escaping from the ground.”

But her words clung a dangerous truth to the witch whose eyes flared in recognition. “She’s right, this is...wrong.”

“Magic?” Ciara asked Isa, honest for once. Her personal beliefs were put on hold until they got out of danger.

The witch nodded, terror creeping across the back of her face. Kynton closed the gap between him and Aldrin, the only other port of sanity in this rocky storm.

“Clearly you ladies have gone all hysterical from bleeding,” the priest said, making a stab at the handful of whispered female terrors he’d heard from his peers, “There’s no such thing as fog monsters.”

This would be an appropriate time for something sixty feet tall with a mouth ringed in ten sets of razor sharp teeth to come roaring out of the fog. Even for a pack of dog sized lizards, ravenous for fresh flesh, their tails as thick as a sailor’s rope. But all that answered back was a shuffle, slow and methodical, as if someone moved about in stone shoes.

Each head swiveled to the new sound breaking over top the not wind moan. A black dot, little more than a small blotch upon the vision, lurched forward in the distance, slowly gaining in size. Ciara steadied herself, wiping her hands off as much as she could and raised her dagger. Aldrin unpocketed his sword, the rust gleaming in the mist. Isa waved her hands around and probably prepared to make a few stinging sparks that had the potential to annoy.

Kynton, raised on a heavy diet of taking the world with a grain of salt, peered into the hazy void. Maybe there'd been a bit more to that monster talk he'd overheard from the Bishop than he'd believed. In his narrow world, monsters were either patients who hid their chamber pots deep under the bed or parents. It was hard to picture either attacking the hospice.

He was so transfixed at the distance, even excited about meeting a real live monster that he failed to register the thud against his back. The soft body tried thudding a few more times to get his attention and finally the priest's head turned to see a familiar old woman, shoeless and in a simple moth eaten pilgrim robe.

"Oh, Mrs. Warters. I'll be with you momentarily," his head made it a quarter turn before the brain finally reset out of intern mode.

Shrieking like a school girl who just got a glimpse of the Empire packaged bard, Therin Heart, Kynton tumbled back away from the old woman whose head bobbed downcast. His backside crashed with Aldrin's and fingers grabbed the prince's rotted sword before the boy realized what was going on.

"Hey!"

Kynton swung the sword wide, dicing up some of the fog's favorite living room, "Stay back! I know how to use this!"

Ciara's concentration broke from the advancing threat to the priest idiotically waving the sword around like it was a fly swatter, "No you don't."

The priest stopped his waving and held the sword in front of him like a pike, hoping the demon would simply impale itself and save him the trouble.

All three looked at the old woman stumbling nearly naked in the cold and then incredulously at the mad priest. "Friend of yours?" Aldrin asked, grabbing Kynton's sword arm but unable to break the tight grip of fear.

"That's Mrs. Warters. I changed her filthy sheets for a month and all she'd do is kick my backside."

"I think I like her already," Ciara mumbled, enjoying the sight of the

cocksure cut down to size.

"She hung on far past her allotted time, they gave her last rites three times over just to be sure," Kynton was babbling, inching back as the woman stumbled after him. "It took two of us to lay her body out."

"What are you getting at?" Ciara asked, looking back over her shoulder at the dot, that was now more of a menacing line.

"She's dead!" Kynton squeaked as the previously very deceased Mrs. Waters head lolled back. An eternal stare bored into the soul of the man who'd tossed her bones to the hard world.

"What? What do you mean she's dead? She's moving!" Aldrin shouted back at him, trying harder to get his weapon back.

"I know dead. I spent over half my life learning dead. That's dead!" Kynton shouted back at the prince.

As a horde the group backed up slowly, away from the dead woman inching towards them. Ciara's shoe caught a rock as she grabbed the priests shoulder for leverage and hissed, "You don't burn your dead?!"

But Kynton wasn't about to accept the blame for this walking corpse, "Ashes requires fuel, vultures are free. I'd rather eat than humor some bitch in a diaphanous gown in the sky."

"Maybe she just got better," Aldrin added unhelpfully, his eyes blinking rapidly to make up for the corpses endless gaze.

Kynton rolled his eyes and in the process glanced towards Isa, "Ha. Ask your witch. She looks downright terrified of the thing."

And sure enough Isa's eyes were so wide they filled half her face, her hair giving her a half a foot in height. Ciara glanced from the witch to the corpse before spinning to face their first concern, that black dot in the fog.

The dot was gone, only fog answered back through the city of the dead. "Shit," she mumbled under her breath. Turning back to face the old woman whose limp arms, which once hung like a rag dolls seemed to be stitching the nerves back together the nearer she drew. A hand shuddered against gravity, rising momentarily before flopping back.

Kynton's heel smashed into the only remaining wall of the Temple of Dhager. The others touched their dead end tepidly, fingers hoping to find

some magical doorway through stone (as if it were possible). The priest waved his sword at the corpse which took an actual step, gaining more motor skills with each passing second.

Ciara gripped her dagger and asked, “Anyone got an idea how to rekill a corpse?”

Sprinting along the temples roof beams, the black dot became more man sized as it somersaulted over the edge and landed behind Old Lady Warters. The corpse didn’t bother to turn, its dead stare yards past as a sword glittered through the mist and sliced through rotting neck meat. Her head rolled with the momentum, crashing to a stop at the foot of a nameless demigod, the eyelids still open.

The man stood slowly, inspecting his surprisingly clean sword. The long dead didn’t tend to bleed much. He turned to the group and smiled his familiar crescent moon, “Nightingale, and boy king. I see you’ve discovered a new friend.”

“I wondered how long it’d take for you to show, Taban,” Ciara said failing to hide a note of warmth in her voice. At this point she’d have welcomed the Emperor himself if he’d been able to deal with the walking corpse.

The assassin raised his arms in a large shrug, “You are forcing me to earn my bread this month. Could you not avoid kidnapping, death, and,” he sniffed at the priest, “religion for just one month?”

Aldrin glared at the addition who’d saved his life so much it was becoming rather obscene. He was about to open his mouth and say something rather petty that the prism of his teenage mind turned witty when a jerking motion caught his eye.

Even with the head lolling about under the ennui of Teve the Utter Disappointment To His Parents, the body remained standing and began to adjust to its new center of gravity. Kynton shrieked as the headless neck twisted about as if something were still attached and the corpse took a step forwards.

Taban looked at his sword momentarily, but if losing the head didn’t stop this monster there was a good chance he’d be hacking for hours until

it was dust. "I'm out of ideas," the assassin admitted.

"Run?" Ciara asked.

"Run," Aldrin agreed and for the first time addressed the assassin as if he were something other than a very deadly fly in the ointment, "I assume you know the way out."

Taban smiled again, "A running tour of the dead city, and it's not even my naming day."

Without waiting for a groan, the assassin knocked into the still shuffling corpse, sending it bouncing into a wall and beat feet towards the real North, not that fake North all the moss pretended to grow towards. Kynton pushed past Ciara and Isa and ran after the black man, displaying the true sense of chivalry trained to someone of his station.

Aldrin looked over at Ciara, her dagger arm was drooping as she fought against her failing body for just one more burst of adrenaline. He took her free hand and smiling grimly, pulled her after the assassin. The witch stood still, watching the corpses twitching fingers rising towards her. She tried to breathe but the oxygen was overpowered by the magic seeping from the still walking corpses pores.

"Isa, come on!" the prince's voice called, breaking her free from the spell. Snarling, she batted away the headless woman's arm and kicked the corpse in the knees sending it flying backwards over broken ruins where it landed like a turtle on its back.

The witch ran on, never looking back at the thirty other bodies beginning to move in the mist.