

City of the Lost God

Part 6 – Blood & Shrines

“Let them think he was getting passed it if they liked, he himself thought he was probably only another thousand years or so away from entering the catacombs as a mindless undead”



“Is it alive ?” Asked Vella.

“Yes I can see it breathing.”

The crate hadn’t been solid, but made of wooden slats, fixed to a solid frame of wood and spaced out so they could see the Shuud inside. Sara must have added quite a bit of sleeping drug to its food, as even them dropping the crate down three steps hadn’t woken it. The problem was that Caspian had forgotten about the last set of steps and the wheels on the barrow had worked loose. In the end Caspian and Vella were forced to drag the crate down the last hallway, but they were now safely in the bedroom of Caspian’s rooms.

“Will we have to carry its body back outside ?” Asked Vella.

“No. There’s a ledge of mountain rock a hundred feet under my window. I’ll throw it out at night and I doubt if anything will be left by morning. There’s a lot of life on the rift that will enjoy a freshly killed Shuud.”

He noticed Vella didn’t shudder or look disgusted, perhaps she was stronger than he’d thought.

“I’ll get the things.” He said.

Caspian left his room and walked a few yards down the hallway to the cupboard the cleaners used, he wanted the large metal bucket he’d seen them use. It was perfect, large enough to hold all the creature’s blood, yet short and squat in design. It should fit nicely under the animal as he cut its throat. He added a mop and a few cleaning cloths to his load, just in case of things getting messy and returned to Vella.

“My father showed me how to do this.” She said.

She had his blade, the one they’d used to cut their palms for blood. Vella was using a wet stone to sharpen the instrument even further. After working the blade up and down the stone for some time, she tested its edge on her finger and seemed satisfied.

“It would cut the tail off Lord Valsec himself.” She said with a grin.

Caspian looked at the sleeping creature, its ears occasionally twitching, its breathing steady and even. He took the knife from Vella.

“Right, let’s get this done.” He said.

“We should undress first.”

He looked at her and thought he must have heard wrongly.

“Unless you want to explain the blood to the laundry ?”

Of course she was right and he started to take his clothes off, enjoy watching Vella disrobe as he did so. She caught him admiring her naked form and gave him the kind of smile that spoke volumes about pleasures to come.

“Shall we take it out of the crate.” She asked.

“No. If it wakes up we’ll never control it. I’ll take off the front.”

Caspian removed the catches and pulled off the front third of the crate and the Shuud showed no signs of waking up. He gently pulled it forward a little and placed the metal bucket under its neck. He held the knife in his right hand and hesitated.

“Do you want me to do it ?”

“No. I’ll do it.”

He put his hand under the creature’s snout and pulled its head back. Muzzie had given him instructions.

“Get the head well back! If you try to cut its throat without the head back, the muscles will cover the blood vessels and you’ll just sever its windpipe. Then you’ll have a screaming Shuud on your hands while it chokes to death.”

Caspian put the point of the knife well to the back of the creature’s neck and pulled harder on the snout.

“The major blood vessels are deep lad. You mustn’t be afraid to dig the blade right in.”

As he held the back of the blade against the taught muscle and pushed the creature woke up. Of course it would, he cursed himself for his stupidity, they should have tied its legs. The Shuud started to bellow, an angry bellow that matched its efforts to crash its way out of the crate. The noise was ear numbing and Caspian just hoped his rooms were so far from the main areas of the Dome that no one would come to investigate.

“Grab its legs!” He shouted

The blade had gone quite some way in and blood was flowing, but most of it was landing on the floor rather than in the bucket. Then Caspian noticed the floor seemed to be absorbing the blood and the gap in the wall was very slowly widening.

“Forget the bucket,” he said, “I’m going to push it against the wall.”

The crate had been built to hold a calm and sedated Shuud, not one fighting for its life and the weight of Caspian and Vella as they tried to hang onto it. The slats broke and came loose from the frame and the creature made a break for freedom. Luckily for Caspian it made a dash in the direction of the wall and he used his weight to help it along. The animal hit the wall with some force and gave out a plaintiff cry.

“Help me,” said Caspian, “hold it against the wall.”

Caspian held onto the creatures head and pulled it hard back, causing it to make a pitiful whimpering sound. He wasn’t in the mood to show mercy though, he pushed the blade in deeper and was rewarded by seeing a torrent of dark red arterial blood gush against the wall. Through the windpipe he pushed and then he severed the major vessels on the other side. The Shuud was now silent and he could feel its muscles relaxing as it died.

“The doorway isn’t opening anymore.” Said Vella.

The gap in the wall had indeed become a doorway and as Caspian looked up he could see a gap wide enough for someone very broad to walk through, in the wall of his bedroom. Not smooth, but as if the stones had been unzipped in some way, leaving their rough edges. Blood was still gushing over the wall and being absorbed, but it was obvious the doorway had opened to its full extent. Caspian let go of the dead Shuud and stood back, blade still in hand, to look into the room beyond his bedroom.

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“You can do that to me all day if you want.” Said Nethra.

It was late morning, far too late to be opening her legs for yet more energetic copulation, but there was nowhere she had to be. Besides she enjoyed sex with Merrick. He may have had many and varied faults, but he seemed to have stamina enough to satisfy a dozen women.

“Then I shall!”

Her hips were slightly sore from the four or so hours of being pounded into the mattress, so she shifted herself up the bed a little and lifted her bottom off the bed slightly to receive him. When they had enough money and they could both afford a day off, they stayed in bed, often fucking each other for ten or twelve hours, or until her hips demanded a rest. It wasn't that he was huge, or that he fucked particularly hard, it was his stamina and recovery rate.

'If it's hard it's in you.' He called the game and it had been in her since first light.

"Stop," she said, "what was that noise?"

Merrick stopped thrusting and looked around and Nethra pushed him to one side and started to get up. The sheets were sticky from their morning fun and Nethra hated to leave the warm bed that smelt of very recent sex, but she knew something needed her attention.

"What is it Nethra?" He asked.

She ignored him when she saw the note on the table. Their home wasn't very large and from the bed you could see every corner of the house, yet someone had passed the bolted door and left a crisp folded piece of paper on their table. She picked up the note just as Merrick got out of bed, his erection still rock hard and impressive. Nethra had often wondered if love of that erection was the only thing they had in common, but there were worse things to love someone for.

"Was that there when we went to bed?" He asked.

"No. It's new."

Merrick started to check the windows, but Nethra knew he'd find they were all still closed and bolted. Whatever had left the note hadn't needed an open door or window to enter. She unfolded the note;

'Tarin has done a very brave and foolish thing.

You have to go to the shrine and you must go now.

Take Merrick with you and the demon blade.

Go now!

Aeony'

She knew the note was genuine, no one else knew about the demon blade, she'd even hidden it from Merrick. What had Tarin tried? Nethra didn't want to go to the shrine, but knew she had to. She picked her dirty clothes up from floor next to the bed and started putting them on. Merrick stopped looking in dark corners and watched her.

"What are you doing?" He asked.

"You too," she said, "get dressed. No time to wash or change, just get dressed. We're going out."

He walked towards her and tried to get hold of her arm.

"Why, what was in the note?"

"I'll explain on the way, get dressed and wear your sword."

Merrick looked at her and showed no signs of getting ready to go out.

"Get fucking dressed, or I'll go to the shrine alone!" She shouted.

Finally Merrick found his clothes, but he watched her constantly as she dressed. Nethra went to the drawer where she kept her items of feminine hygiene, a place she knew Merrick would never look. Turning her back to him she removed the demon blade and put it inside her jacket. The Nurigen gauntlets and boots he'd already found a buyer for, but she knew he'd want to sell the blade too, if he knew of it.

"How bad could it turn out to be?" He asked.

"As bad as it can get."

He was rooting under the bed for weapons from his past as she pulled her boots tight and did up the laces. They'd need lights too, so she took the oil lamp off its hook near the door and put it in her hide back pack. Nethra opened the door and stood outside in the yard. Not only would it hurry him up, but hopefully he'd have fewer chances to ask questions, the sort she didn't really want to answer. Merrick appeared outside looking ready for war and unknown to him, he was probably heading for one.

"I'm ready," he said, "so we're heading for the shrine?"

"Yes and we need to hurry!"

Nethra felt in her pocket for the note and it was gone, vanished. There was nothing to prove Aeony had ever sent her a note, which was obviously what the dark angel wanted. She had no idea what awaited them at the shrine, but Nethra gave Merrick a quick kiss on the cheek and headed there as quickly as her legs would carry her.

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"We can't wait any longer," said Sensan, "we're going into the shrine."

His men weren't happy, he could tell, but the longer they waited the less keen they'd be. He'd sent Bodrin to buy the best lamps he could find, not that even those were any more than a dull yellow glow. The locals hated them, even the merchants, but the lamps would have to do.

"Come on we haven't got all day!" Shouted Bodrin.

He cursed the Shelzak again for getting itself killed and picked up his sword from beside the camp fire. They'd been waiting for some time in the grounds of the shrine for Tarin to appear, but it looked like they'd have to go in and get him.

"Come on ladies," he shouted, "you can get prettied up later, let's move."

He noticed Bodrin took the lead, a good right hand man was Bodrin. Not that the rest weren't first rate fighters. No one liked the shrine, how can even the best warrior fight chaos creatures and pure evil?

"Turn your lamp up Jhorn." Bodrin said.

Slowly the six fighters went up the stairs and into the shrine. Sensan had been told that most who entered the shrine did so in complete darkness.

'The light shows them where you are and then there are the pictures.' Galla had told him.

He was in the passageway and his men were in front. Far from dispelling the dark, the flickering yellow light seemed to enhance every shadow, hint at menace in every side passage.

"Keep going, I'll tell you where we turn off the main passage." Shouted Sensan.

He heard his men muttering and Bodrin telling them to move quicker and then he noticed the first of the pictures on the wall. He didn't recognise the creature being tortured, but its pain seemed to come out of the picture and into his mind. How long had they burnt and cut its flesh before it died? He had no idea, or why anyone would want to immortalise the moment. He hurried past the picture, only to find there were dozens more along the passage walls and each one seemed worse than the one before.

"Turn left now," he called, "that's right Bodrin, where you're standing."

Galla had given them the directions, or rather sold them the directions for a small fortune. If she'd sold them false information he'd cut her throat, even if that did upset Silsk.

"I heard a scream." Said Jhorn.

All Sensan could hear was the constant drip of water, but he knew Jhorn had the best hearing in the group. He had no idea what the boy's mother had mated with, but the lad had ended up with skin the colour of mud and ears better than a pure blood dredgers. His party walked slowly along the

passageway trying to avoid looking at the celebrations of pain and suffering depicted in the pictures on the walls.

"Blood," said Bodrin, "I smell blood, fresh blood."

Every warrior knew the smell, the metallic taste that stuck at the back of your throat for days. Sensan smelt it now and knew there was a lot of blood where they were going. By the time he caught up with them his men were in the doorway of the room, but showing no inclination to enter. If he hadn't known better he'd have thought Bodrin, hero of the 3rd blood war, was scared.

"I've never see anything like it sir."

There was no light in the room and their flickering yellow lamps were simply adding a feeling of menace to every shadow. There was a large statue of a dark angel in the centre of the room and across its feet was what appeared to be the body of Tarin. The body appeared to be at the centre of a still growing pool of blood. Against human adversaries or demon, Sensan would have trusted his men to win against ten times their number, but against the unknown ? Sensan realised he had to regain discipline and regain it fast.

"Get inside," he shouted, "get some lights in there and see what's been going on!"

The lamps didn't help. As his men moved into the room even he had the jitters. Someone had made a mattress of Ashunt blooms in front of the statue and then they'd put Tarin on the mattress. Then they'd cut him in a way Sensan had never seen before and that took a lot of originality.

"Who the fuck would do that to someone ?" Said Bodrin.

The knife had been left near the body, a long tapering blade, designed to slice and flay. There was no skin left on Tarin, it all seemed to have been removed quite expertly and left in a pile of curled slices next to the statue. Then they'd sliced his muscles away from the bone, all his leg muscles and those on his arms had been completely severed and left lying next to the blood red bones. The muscles on his ribs cage had been picked at and mutilated, almost as though a giant bird had been pecking at him. The eyes were still intact though and glistened yellow as Sensan brought his lamp closer.

"He's alive !" He shouted.

The eyes had moved, he hadn't imagined it. The lips had gone with the skin of the face, but the teeth were moving, as though Tarin was trying to say something.

"He can't be alive it's impossible." Said one his men.

Sensan placed the lamp near the head and got down on his knees.

"Keep quiet, he's trying to say something !" He shouted.

There was no need to keep quiet, the voice when it came was clear and distinct. The ribs oozed blood as Tarin took in a big breathe.

"I thought it might all be for nothing," he said, "that I'd die before you had the courage to come in here."

"It's not natural," said Bodrin, "he should be dead with those wounds. We should finish him off."

The tension must have been getting to him, Sensan could have sworn the face on the shrine in the corner had looked in his direction.

"We're not finishing off anyone," he said, "send one man back to the camp to get blankets and tent poles. We'll make a stretcher to take him out of here."

No one moved and Bodrin seemed to be preoccupied with the far corner of the room.

"I'm not going back alone." Said one voice.

"We should all go together." Said another.

Sensan drew his sword, if absolutely necessary he'd kill one of them as an example, he wasn't going to have his orders questioned. Then Tarin started to laugh.

“Did you get my note ?”

Everyone stopped talking and looked at the man on the ground, most of them still not believing anyone so grievously wounded could be alive.

“Have I shed enough of my blood ?” Tarin began.

“Have I sacrificed enough of my flesh ?”

“Is it enough my lady, will you do my bidding ?”

The answer when it came was a female voice, soft and gentle, with no trace of menace.

“Yes Tarin, you have done all that was required.”

The movement in the corner began again and Bodrin screamed and dropped his sword. The fair faced woman in the shrine at the far left was pulling herself from the wall, but she was no longer a soft and gentle woman. There were twelve arms coming out of the wall and each was armed with a long sharp blade. Her legs were muscular and powerful, her head now wore a battle helm.

“It can’t be,” said Sensan, “you don’t exist, you’re just a myth.”

“A myth that will kill you all.” Said Tarin.

His first two men died without even drawing their swords, cut to pieces by the whirling arms, their blood adding to the pool already on the floor. Bodrin threw his lamp at the creature and as it burst the burning oil gave Sensan his first clear view of the beast. He now realised he’d been lured into a trap, a trap he couldn’t escape. The leader of the guild dropped his sword as he watched Bodrin have his still beating heart cut from his body.

“You can’t be real.”

The beautiful female face of the creature looked at him and smiled as she severed Bodrin’s neck and dropped his body on the floor. Sensan ran for life, it was all he could think of doing, but as he got to the door he felt the knife enter his back and dig deep into his lung.

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“Is he alright ?” Asked the customer.

“Yes, he’s just quite old.” Whispered Borlas

Adamaz hadn’t quite fallen, the stick he habitually carried had steadied him enough to keep him on his feet. He glared at the apprentice and was rewarded by a lowering of the boys head and an apology.

“I’m sorry sir.” Said Borlas.

Let them think he was getting passed it if they liked, he himself thought he was probably only another thousand years or so away from entering the catacombs as a mindless undead. But they had to respect him, otherwise there would be more thefts and more unpleasant punishments he’d need to inflict. Feeding on a drunk in the slums every few years was one thing, but there were already far too few bright apprentices in the great library.

Adamaz could still feel the power in his head that had nearly sent him tumbling to the dusty floor of the library. Even without looking outside he knew it was coming from the shrine, like a huge lamp, pouring chaotic luminescence over the entire city. Someone had invoked a creature of real power and that was bad, very bad. He should have been able to tell what type of creature from the flare of power, but his memory wasn’t what it was. Probably just a minor servant of chaos, like a hand maiden. Yes it was, he knew the feel of this kind of power flare, it was definitely a hand a maiden of chaos.

“A hand maiden after all these years.” He muttered.

Borlas and the customer, a servant from the tower, were giving him another odd look. Adamaz wanted a window that overlooked the shrine, or a door. He remembered the side door that opened towards the Old Town and walked towards that part of the library.

“There will be plague, bound to be plague.” He muttered.

A shape moving the other way stopped to stare at him, probably another of the library staff thinking he was going crazy. This time it was a senior member of the Sorcery Guild, looking back over his shoulder and nodding at Adamaz.

“And worse than plague!” He said.

Those that could see it knew what it meant. You couldn’t invoke a creature like a hand maiden and expect everything to go back to normal afterwards. There were consequences! For some reason Adamaz quickly touched the arm of the sorcerer, he usually hated them all, but he had a feeling the City would need a cessation of old animosities for it to survive. He walked to the open door and was almost blinded by the flare of power coming from the shrine. Everyone who could see the power would avoid it, even the dark angels. Adamaz almost felt pity for anyone who might be at the shrine. “There will be consequence!” He muttered.

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There was some natural light in the room, probably from a window on the far side of the mountain peak. Still naked and carrying the knife Caspian walked through the doorway they’d opened with blood.

“Supposing it closes behind us ?” Said Vella.

He grinned at her and pulled her through after him.

“Then they’ll talk about our vanishing for centuries.”

Caspian approached the light globe on the wall, it was the same design as elsewhere in the Dome and operated by a simple chain pull. He pulled and after a few flickers the dull glow became a bright source of white light.

“That’s better.” Said Vella.

While she started to examine one of the bookcases, he went through an open door and into another hallway. There were windows and one of the shutters had a slight gap in it. They had similar shutters in the library refectory, but they weren’t covered in centuries of dust and patina. Again the controls were chain pulls and after a few odd grinding sounds the aged shutters rolled apart to reveal a view of the 1st rift beyond the mountain, beyond the City of the Lost God.

“So beautiful, but so barren.” Said Vella.

She’d joined him to look at the view that went on for tens of thousands of miles and in the far distance they could see the purple shimmer that marked the edge of the rift, where it ended and the wastes of eternity began.

“Do the windows open ?” She asked.

As they looked out a flying creature was hurtled past the window by the almost legendary fierce winds at that side of the mountain.

“Probably,” he said, “but I think that escape route would be a last resort.”

To his left was a short part of the hallway leading to a spiral staircase that went up about thirty feet and ended at an open doorway. To his right the hall bent slightly around the mountain peak and gave access to two open doorways. Opposite the doors was another set of shutters and Caspian moved towards them. Vella held his arm.

“Before we explore further we should probably get dressed ?”

He nodded at her.

“And I found something I think you should see.”

Vella led him to the bookcase they'd seen through the gap in the wall and she'd moved one of the books to a dusty table.

“Are they still readable?” He asked.

“They're in very good condition for their age, but I can't read the language.”

Caspian looked at the book and turned a few pages, all of which were surprisingly crisp and legible for a book that was so incredibly ancient. The language looked familiar and he remembered seeing some human carvings once that had the same style.

“I think it's a language from the human occupation of the City.” He said.

“That's not what I wanted you to see.”

There were two more floor to ceiling bookshelves and behind them on the floor was a body, or rather what was left of a very long dead body. Caspian bent down to examine the skeletal remains and the metal chain around its ankle that was fixed to the far wall.

“It's human isn't it?”

Vella was excited. Humans, pure blood humans were never seen in the City, even dead ones. He pulled aside the remains of some sort of clothing. Five fingers on each hand and foot, no sign of a tail at all, the teeth, the jaw line. Caspian had read a lot about human physiognomy and he had no doubts.

“Yes, it's human.”

A naked Vella was doing a little dance of excitement in front of him.

“I knew it. When are we going to tell the others? They won't believe it.”

“Others?”

“I didn't mean in the Dome,” she said, “but Muzzie and Sara, they know people. The books alone are probably worth a fortune and a human skeleton..... it must be priceless.”

Caspian shouldn't have been shocked, because that was Vella's world. Everything was only good for its sale price and for what that money could buy.

“No one must know!” He said.

He stood up and walked back into his room, Vella following him and looking upset.

“Of course, this is your home. I didn't mean to.....”

Caspian put the still bloody knife down on his bed and held her, enjoying the feel of her nakedness against him.

“Tell anyone and we're dead.”

He stroked her hair and gently moved her head back so that he could see her eyes.

“This is all forbidden,” he began, “human writing, their existence in the Dome, all forbidden. The fanatics have killed people just for mentioning humans once lived here.”

“I promise I won't tell anyone.” She replied.

“We don't know what's in those books or why the human was held prisoner. Muzzie could sell the books to someone who might want to kill anyone who had knowledge of the books.....”

“I get it,” she interrupted, “I really do. No one but us is to know about the rooms we found.”

She had that certain look in her eye and her breasts had the blush about them that told him she was roused, but he had a gap in his bedroom wall that could lead to anywhere.

“We should get dressed and move the bed into another room at least.”

Vella nodded at him, neither of them fancied sleeping in the room, it had a skeleton in the room opposite and who knew what was up the spiral stairs. They both got dressed and carried the bed to

another empty room just down the hall, then the mattress and lastly the contents of the wall cupboards.

“Not quite as nice, but the door locks and there are no skeletons.” Said Caspian.

“I prefer it,” she said, “the windows overlook the mountains and not the City.”

It took them until dusk to clean the room and transform it into a comfortable boudoir. Caspian had intended to explore the hidden rooms before going to bed, but he and Vella had already had a tiring day and he kept getting glimpses of her superb breasts as they made the bed.

“The skeleton has been there a long time,” he said, “it’ll still be there in the morning.”

Vella took off her clothes, apart from her panties, she knew he liked to remove those. Then she lay on the bed and waited for him to join her. Caspian locked the door, he hadn’t bothered locking his old bedroom, but then he hadn’t known about mysterious spiral staircases and unexplored rooms.

“You will really keep all this a secret won’t you ?” He asked.

“Yes. I love you and I’d never do anything that might get you hurt.”

Did she mean it ? Caspian took off his pants and threw them on the floor, he’d put them in the laundry pile in the morning. As he lay next to Vella and put his hand between her legs he wondered if anything else had happened in the City that day.

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Nethra couldn’t quite work out what the camp site was as she entered the courtyard.

“Who has been living here ?” Asked Merrick.

“I’ve no idea.”

The tents were in disarray and bedding had been strewn over a wide area. The fire was still smouldering and Nethra noticed something had been wedged across it. As they got closer she realised it was a body, or at least most of a body.

“That’s a guild uniform.” Said Merrick.

The left hand side of the body was gone, completely and there was no sign of it in the camp. The intestines had been pulled out of the remaining half of the body and piled up in the embers of the fire. They were bubbling fiercely and giving off a disgusting smell. There was enough of the genital area remaining to say that it had been a male, but the face had been mutilated until it was unrecognisable.

“The guild are tough fighters,” she said, “who could have done this to him ?”

Merrick walked towards the stair leading up to the shrine itself.

“There’s another over here.” He said.

Nethra followed him and the second body was beside the stairs, exactly where she’d found the body of the chaos touched creature, on her previous visit to the shrine.

“Something has eaten part of him.” She said.

“Another guild uniform.” Said Merrick, as he turned the body over.

The face looked caught in a moment of some sort of supreme horror, the eyes bulging, the teeth barred. Something seemed to have eaten most of the flesh from the left arm, tooth marks clearly visible on the remains.

“They look almost like human tooth marks.”

Merrick nodded at her and from years of habit he removed the money purse and a nice looking silver ring from the body. Nethra almost stopped him, but remembered that they’d often only had food to eat because of such looted items.

“You still intend to go inside ?” He asked her.

“Yes,” she said, “light the lamp and use lots of the light weed, make it nice and bright.”

While Merrick went through the strange ritual to create the light the weed gave off, she stepped onto the stairs and looked up. There was blood, a lot of blood where something had been dragged out of the shrine and down the stairs. She had no doubt it had been the two bodies they'd found and who knew what else they'd find in the shrine. But she had to go, not because of the note from Aeony, but because she was certain Tarin had only entered the shrine to help her. As Merrick's lamp burst into a bright white ball of light she started to walk up the stairs. A few feet inside the entrance they found a lamp, its handle covered in blood.

"Almost like an invitation to further in." She said.

"No sign of its owner"

"Probably one of the poor devils we found outside."

Nethra picked up the lamp and gave it a shake. It was almost full of oil, so she decided to keep it. Trying to ignore the pictures of torture and much worse on the walls, they reached the junction where they needed to turn left. There they found another two bodies.

"It's Sensan, head of the guild" said Merrick, "I've seen him around the City a few times."

Both of the bodies had been stabbed in the front and back dozens of times, the attack seemed to have been frenzied. Again there was the look of shock and horror frozen on their dead faces and once again parts of their arm muscles and been chewed off and devoured. This wasn't good for the City, the guild had powerful friends.

"A good full purse." Said Merrick.

Nethra chose to look away as Merrick pulled the bodies about to get at their valuables. It may have been both prudent and sensible, after all the next person to discover the bodies would almost certainly take their money. But Nethra still didn't like the feelings looting the dead gave her. She almost snapped at Merrick to hurry, but then she noticed a particularly fine gold ring on the second body, which she pulled off the bloodless finger and put into her own pocket.

"There's no mistaking where they came from." Said Merrick.

They had enough light to see some distance down the passage they were about to enter and the blood stains from where the bodies had been dragged could be seen going off into the darkness. Nethra had never really considered Merrick to be a brave person, just someone who had found violence was a fairly easy way to put food on the table. But she was proud that he instantly followed her, as she set off to follow the trail of blood.

"Two more." She said.

The last two bodies were just outside the shrine room itself. They'd been so mutilated that even Merrick hesitated before rifling through their clothing for valuables.

"Great Nigon, what went on in there?" He said.

Not just blood, but a trail of wet viscera went from the bodies into the room. It almost looked like something had been feeding on their soft body parts as it dragged them out of the room.

"There's light in there of some kind." Said Nethra.

Merrick drew his sword and went first into the room, to find a flickering yellow lamp illuminating what had obviously been the scene of a major battle of some kind. There was blood everywhere and he had to place his feet carefully to avoid slipping on it, plus there were the body parts.

"A servant of chaos was here, I feel it." She said.

Merrick was kicking a pile of what looked like slivers of skin, when she noticed the body lying beneath the statue of the dark angel. Nethra moved towards it and knelt in the same spot Sensan had knelt to examine the body.

"It still draws breathe." She said.

The lips parted and she could see the damp air of the breathe against the flickering light. The eyes looked at her and very faintly she heard the body speak.

"I did it Nethra, but the price was very high."

She couldn't believe it was Tarin, yet she knew the voice. The eyes, yes the eyes were his. Nethra looked at the ruined body, the slices of muscle paired from the bones, as though someone was preparing meat for the pot.

"Merrick, the body, it's Tarin!"

"He can't be long for this world Nethra, he's lost too much blood."

Then looking up she saw the face of the shrine in the far corner looking at her and then she saw the small bloody footprint leading to it. Nethra got to her feet and started to approach the shrine.

"No Nethra," said Tarin, "she's not as you remember her, keep away from her."

Nethra looked back at Merrick, who was now kneeling besides Tarin.

"Wrap him as best you can," she said, "use the guild uniforms outside. We're taking Tarin out of here."

"But he can't possibly survive Nethra."

"If his heart still beats he'll live. Try to get everything wrapped up, it might be needed, or it might not, I'm not really sure."

She could see Merrick was still unsure, he just knelt looking at the ruined body that has once been the best weapon smith on the rift.

"How do you know this Nethra?"

"I just do. Please Merrick, do it for me!"

Nethra stood watching until she was certain that Merrick was carrying out her request. Then and only then did she turn and follow the footprints to the shrine in the corner of the room. The face was alive and looking at her, but the expression was harder than she remembered and there was a trace of blood on the lips. Nethra knelt in front of the shrine and abased herself, pushing her forehead hard against the cold tiles of the floor.

"So Chosen one, you have returned."

Nethra slowly lifted her head and was pleased to see that the face on the shrine now had a slight smile.

"May I ask a question?"

"One question chosen, then you must collect Tarin and leave. There is much still to be done, the shrine must be cleansed."

There were a dozen questions she'd wanted to ask, but one came almost unbidden to her lips.

"Why did you do this to Tarin?"

A knife appeared on the floor in front of her, a long thin blade of the kind she herself had used to prepare meat.

"That is Tarin's blade," said the shrine, "take it and him out of this place. You I will never harm, but all trace of the guild warriors must be cleansed from the shrine and Merrick is not under my protection. As to your question..... Tarin used that knife on himself. It was a price he was willing to pay for what you've seen today. Now go!"

Nethra once more placed her forehead on the floor before rising and walking back to where Merrick was fitting a pair of trousers to Tarin as best he could.

"I think I got everything inside the trousers." He said.

"We have to leave soon, the shrine wants to cleanse itself!"

Merrick was fitting a very large uniform jacket onto Tarin and trying to get as much of the sliced muscles into the sleeves as he could.

“That sounds like a thing we should avoid.” He said.

She helped him fit the jacket and hoped that the small pieces of flesh left on the floor weren’t essential.

“How about the skin ?” Asked Merrick.

Damn, she’d forgotten the skin and perhaps it was important ? Tarin was unconscious, the pain and blood loss seemed to have finally given him the peace passing out brings.

“Take Tarin, put him over your shoulder,” she said, “take the bright lamp and go, go quickly, run if you can.”

“Will you be alright.”

“I’ll survive the cleansing, but you won’t. Now go, go !”

Merrick threw Tarin over his shoulder with ease, and started towards the door. Tarin was quite heavy, but Nethra knew fear was giving her man added strength. She looked around for something to put the skin in and noticed a large back pack on the floor. Obviously dropped by one of the guild, she emptied its contents onto the floor and put the bloody slices of skin inside it.

“Add some Ashunt blooms.” She heard.

She looked in the direction of the shrine, but in the flickering light of her oil lamp she couldn’t see if the face was still looking at her. Nethra put in many of the blooms, they were rumoured to have preservative qualities. As she got up to leave she noticed quite a few pieces of flesh that had fallen out of the clothing they’d put on Tarin. There was a grinding sound coming from the direction of the small shrine, but Nethra carefully picked up all the pieces of flesh and put them in the pack.

“I hope he can use these in some way.” She muttered.

It had taken her quite a while to find every piece of flesh and as she closed the pack and put it over her shoulder, she noticed the twelve armed creature standing just within the light of her lamp. She bowed to the creature and recognised the form as a hand maiden of chaos, so at least she now had a name for her benefactor.

“GO!”

She walked quickly out of the room and turned left past the two bodies. As she walked up the hallway she heard the sound, the unmistakable sound of flesh being cut and then chewing. The cleansing had begun and although she knew she had nothing to fear, instinctively she knew it was something she didn’t want to witness. She ran and caught up with Merrick at the top of the stairs.

“Hurry ! Get down the stairs,” she said, “the cleansing has begun.”

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Part 7 will be posted at the end of April.