

City of the Lost God

Part 4 – Conspiracies

“What is that ?” She asked him.

“No matter what I do tell her, it won’t be the truth.”



“Can we make it to the bone yard ?” Asked Doffle.

Merrick looked and it seemed a very long way to Podd’s yard and most of the distance was over completely open ground. Like most occupants of the rifts he didn’t own a timepiece, but he knew that the sky would start to lighten very soon and then the family he was escorting into the City would be fair game for robbery and maybe far worse. The tower was still completely dark, but he knew that Silsk sometimes hunted at dawn and the family could easily become her breakfast.

“We can’t stay here.”

Doffle was being annoyingly persistent, but Merrick knew his rather dim henchman had a point. Doffle had come cheap and he wasn’t the sort to talk about his business over a glass of ale at Muzzie’s. But even for a medium level demon he was incredibly dim witted on occasions. Merrick calculated the speed he could get the children to run at and decided they couldn’t make it to the relative safety of Podd’s yard before being seen. He examined the sewer outfall in front of them, the intense odours coming from it assaulting his senses.

“We’ll have to go in through the sewers.” He said.

He saw Doffle look at the distance to the bone yard and he wondered if his rather dim and cowardly employee might desert him and make a run for it. He’d ordered Doffle to keep to the back of the family out on the rift, but he’d kept to the middle of the group, almost using them for cover.

“Run and I’ll gut you !” Merrick said.

“But it’s the sewers.”

Merrick put his hand on his sword hilt and looked at Doffle, defying him to run. He knew he was quicker than the medium level demon and he’d decided he really would gut him if he ran.

“The clasps will be rusted up.” Said Doffle.

Merrick was pleased to see his henchman start to pull at one of the four clasps holding the grill over the outfall in place. He looked at the family, all eight of them and hoped they’d all survive until he got them to the safe house. Ideally he’d have brought another two guards, but they were expensive, even the dim ones like Doffle.

“Your greed will get you killed.” Nethra had often said to him.

For the benefit of Doffle and the family he said in a loud clear voice.

“The clasps were clean and well-greased when I came this way last month.”

He saw them all look more relaxed. If Merrick had come this way recently, it must be ok, he hoped they were thinking. He didn’t mention to them that he’d run most of the way with something chasing him, something that slivered and hissed.

“Is there no other way ?” Asked the mother.

She was the only one to say anything the whole trip, the father had just grunted occasionally. For part Dredger demons they didn’t smell too bad, the kids were even quite cute in a pug ugly kind of way. The trouble was that there were six kids of varying ages, so they were slow and noisy and the two hour trip had taken until dawn.

“Not unless you want your kids to be someone’s breakfast.”

Ideally the family would have headed for Quron, lots of half breed Dredgers in Quron, but they'd decided to make for the City and had the questionable luck of being introduced to Merrick. The mother just nodded and crawled under the grill, closely followed by the rest of her family. Once the grill had been re-secured Merrick took them along the walkway that ran beside the fast flowing outfall water. When the light from the entrance was almost gone he stopped and removed his shoulder bag and started searching around in it.

"Have you got the makings?" Asked Doffle.

"Yes, it's in here somewhere."

He pulled out the small lamp and everyone recognised it and the family were expecting him to fill it with the usual oil that burned with a dull yellow flame. But Nethra had obtained something a bit special from Galla, when the old empath must have been in a generous mood. Merrick found the neat package containing what looked like dried herbs and carefully put a tiny amount of it in the lamp, before carefully refolding the paper and putting the packet back at the bottom of his bag. Merrick enjoyed this part and he could see eight faces looking at him in some bewilderment. Merrick made three hand gestures and the substance in the lamp became a bright white ball of light that he knew would burn without any heat for several hours. He gave a slight bow in the direction of the excited children.

"You are a man of many talents." Said the mother.

"Magic from beyond Gateway." He told her.

Merrick took the lead, once again annoyed that Doffle was keeping to the middle of the party.

Maybe he's replace him after this trip, but then again he was very cheap.

"Keep together." He shouted.

The walkway was slippery and the water in the channel was running very fast, but he felt the need to push the family to walk faster and faster. Merrick remembered the slithering creature and the feeling of dread it had induced in him. He took a wrong turning and as he was collecting them all together to turn them around he heard an unmistakable hissing sound. Doffle gave him a look that told him he'd heard it too, but the family seemed too busy falling over each other and trying to head back the way they'd come. Merrick put his hand on his henchman's arm and kept him back as the family moved away.

"I want you at the rear, right at the rear." He told him.

"No. I'm not paid enough for this shit!"

Merrick often lied about much of his time in the wars, but he did know how to handle a blade. He'd never mentioned it to Nethra, or anyone else in the City, but for a while he'd been an assassin in the employ of the merchant's guild in Tandalla. He pulled his blade from his belt and held it to Doffle's throat.

"You'll do your job, or I'm leaving you here."

"What do you mean leave me here? I'm not getting myself killed protecting stinking half breeds."

Merrick could see the mother and the children looking at them, confused yet sensing what was going on. He'd have loved to send them on to the next junction, but they only had the one lamp.

"You're not exactly pure blood yourself." He told him.

"I don't care I'm not staying at the rear and you can't make me."

"Then I guess I'm going to have to leave you here."

Merrick had the blade barely an inch from his henchman's throat and he knew the precise point to insert it. No mad slash, no plunging it in with all his strength. A gently push would open the artery and then he'd lead the family out of the sewers.

“What do you mean, leave me here, asshole ?”

Merrick cursed the eight great demon Gods for sending him such a stupid employee. He nicked him with the blade, just enough blood from his neck to make sure he had his attention.

“I mean.” He began, “that I’ll cut your throat and push your worthless body into the channel for the bugs to eat. Now are you going to do your job and keep to the rear ?”

He could see the fear in Doffle’s eyes and he knew that he had to take care of the problem and take care of it now. Either the dim fucker was going to do his job, or he was going into the outfall.

“You wouldn’t do that, you know my mother.”

Yes he’d known the mother of the dimwit, but then again he’d known a lot of women in the City and he hadn’t let feelings for any of them interfere with business.

“Yes I would. I haven’t got all day. Are you going to obey my orders ?”

The eyes looked down and Merrick knew he’d won, but he knew he could never trust Doffle again.

“Alright, there was no need for threats though.”

“And you’ll keep at least five paces to the rear ?”

“Yes ok, stop jabbing me with that thing.”

Merrick walked past the mother, nodding at her as he moved ahead of the group and took them to the turning he’d missed. As he headed for the main sewer that went under the old town he looked back and was pleased to see Doffle keeping well to the rear.

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Nethra had thought spending time with Podd would be a nightmare, but as she examined yet another body part from a demon of unknown ancestry she realised the story of the City was in that shed in the bone collector’s yard.

“See,” Podd told her, “the joint is insect like, but the bone is strong human bone.”

True Podd smelt like decaying flesh and his clothing had stains from bodily fluids she didn’t even want to think about, but he was far cleverer than most gave him credit for.

“And this ?” She asked pointing at a brain in a jar of pickling fluid.

“Old, very old. I found the body in the marshes a few miles south of the City. It’s almost entirely insect in structure.”

“How old is it ?” She asked.

Yes she’s wanted to get close to Podd, gain his trust, but now the interest was genuine and she wished she’d befriended him years before. She was also determined to introduce him to the concept of basic hygiene in the very near future. They were completely alone in the shed, yet Podd gave a look over his shoulder, which invariably meant he was about to tell her something he considered to be dangerous information.

“The mud in the marshes preserves things for year, millions of years. I found a weapon with the body that I’m sure comes from the 3rd war of occupation.”

Nethra knew of at least a dozen wars of occupation, when humans had ruled the City and countless tens of thousands of demons had died trying to retake it and sometimes succeeding. Now though talk of those days was frowned upon and those that dwelt on the times the humans ruled the great City of the Lost God were likely to disappear.

“Here, follow me.” Said Podd.

There were a large number of sheds in the yard at various stages of dilapidation and they walked past one that seemed to have completely collapsed at one end.

“It’s the river,” said Podd, “the damp eats away at the timbers.”

Nethra tried to hold her breathe as they walked past the continually bubbling fat boilers and they were finally at the rear of the yard and she could see the mountains far to the south over the fence. Podd turned and looked at her as if undecided about something.

“You mustn’t tell anyone, especially Merrick.” He said.

It was a reaction to Merrick she was used to, everyone seemed only too aware of his many and varied faults.

“I tell him less and less and he doesn’t even know I come here.”

Podd nodded at her.

“Ash,” he shouted, “where are you boy ?”

Nethra liked the young apprentice and wasn’t surprised to see his head appear from behind a pile of fat barrels not far from them. He’d obviously been listening to their conversation, but she didn’t feel bitter about it, the kids was just looking after his mentor.

“Get by the main gate and if you see anyone heading this way, come and tell me.”

Ash nodded and was gone and Podd started pulling back bolts on the door that led out to the rift south of his yard.

“We’re going onto the rift ?” She asked.

“Not far, not far at all.”

Podd must have developed a slight back problem because he winced and gasped as he bent down to open the four lower bolts. Then he pulled the door open and in front of them was the barren scrub of the 1st rift.

“Don’t worry girl, nothing really bad come this close to the City.”

Nethra remembered her encounter with the chaos creature.

“You might be surprised.” She told him.

Podd looked around and spent at least two minutes looking at the sky above the tower before he pointed to their right and started walking towards a pile of rubbish. As they got closer she could see it was discarded rotten timber, old barrels and pieces of clothing too far gone to be even sold for rags. They were obviously approaching the rubbish heap for the bone yard.

“Pity, can’t even sell this to the rag man.”

Podd kicked a pile of blood stained clothing, making some of it crumble to loose fibres. The smell was worse than near the boilers and Nethra dreaded to think what might be under the pile of refuse. For once Nethra felt nervous, even scared. There had been quite a few strange disappearances from the slums and the culprit had never been found. Podd ? She hoped not and carried on following him through the stacks of evil smelling junk.

“Here.”

At the centre of the centre of the dump was the biggest heap and Nethra could see several Mingal skins, which explained why they hadn’t seen any bugs in amongst the junk. Mingal were a carrion beast famous for the overpowering smell they could produce and their skins were normally burnt. Even the usual bugs that enjoyed nothing better than a bloated corpse to eat shunned the odour of Mingal skin.

“Better than a twelve foot fence and twenty guards.” Podd said, winking at her.

Under an overhang of rubbish she noticed a door. You needed to be almost on top of it to see it and the piles of rubbish hid them from any prying eyes. Nethra noticed the rags had been stitched together and quite a lot of work had gone into creating what looked like a natural hole in the junk. There was no lock on the door and Podd gave it a push and beckoned her inside before closing the door behind them.

“Careful,” he said, “I’ll give us more light.”

There was a dull glow from a lamp which Podd turned up and then he went along an aisle between benches, lighting lamps and activating plates of the expensive light weed. Podd obviously wanted to impress her and by the time he’d finished the shed buried under the junk heap was brightly lit. In front of her were four long workbenches, some with almost complete bodies on them.

“They’re all human.” Said Nethra.

The shed was huge and the benches went almost from one end to the other. As Nethra followed Podd she noticed two piles of junk on the floor at the end of the benches and then she realised they were piles of armour and weapons.

“Have you seen an Arcadian before ?” Asked Podd.

It was obviously the most prized item in his collection and surrounded by bright lights. The skin had the leathery look that all creatures removed from the marsh mud had, but apart from that she was perfect, almost beautiful for a full blood human. She’d been tall and her hair was still there at both ends and was still a silvery blonde colour.

“No,” she answered, “she was very tall.”

In the City most women were no taller than five feet, yet the Arcadian female must have stood at well over six feet tall, perhaps taller in her boots. Her arms still looked well-muscled and at first glance Nethra couldn’t see any wounds to the body.

“How did she die ?” She asked.

Podd held the body gently and turned it over to reveal a dreadful wound to her back that had cut through her spine and left her left lung exposed. Podd laid the body on her back again with more care than she’d seen many give to living loved ones.

“We have to go now, someone might come to the yard.” Podd said.

All thought of meeting Aeony had gone from her head, she just wanted to see more of the bodies on the benches and she wanted to get a look at the weapons. She noticed Podd was using a blue liquid and a cloth to gently clean the body of the Arcadian female. She had no idea what was in the blue fluid, but there wasn’t a sign of decay on the skin.

“There is so much to see,” she said, “can I come back another day ?”

“Perhaps.”

The bone collector started to turn out the lights beginning with the expensive light weed. Nethra rushed up to him, grabbing his arm and trying to get his full attention.

“Please Podd ! I promise never to tell another living or dead person about your secrets.”

For the first time Podd seemed to see the mark of chaos on her arm and he gave it a rub with his large stubby fingers.

“Alright. But if I leave you here I’m locking the back gate to yard. You’ll need to walk right around the outside of my yard to get back to the river.”

It took her a few seconds to realise that the bone collector was actually going to leave her alone with his collection.

“I’ll be fine,” she said, “and I’ll be very careful.”

“You take nothing away from here. Do you understand ?”

“Yes of course, I’d never steal from you.”

Podd carried on turning off lights, leaving just a few sickly yellow oil lamps and a hand lamp which he gave to her.

“Turn the rest off when you go, apart from the one at the door. Turn that as low as it’ll go.”

She looked and saw what was effectively a twenty gallon amphora with a wick in the top and nodded at him. Podd still looked a little ill at ease.

“Aeony will probably be here tonight if you stay that long. Just leave her in peace and she won’t hurt you.”

Nethra had completely forgotten why she’d become friends with Podd and now fate had given her the chance to see Aeony in private, the chance that was so vital to saving the City from ruin. She followed Podd to the door and as he closed the door he looked at her arm.

“I’d like that,” he said, “when you die. I’ll make sure the rest of your body has a proper burial if you’ll leave instructions that I’m to get your body.”

Nethra was shocked, but then again everyone dies and even she had to admit that a long life and a peaceful death didn’t seem likely for her. She really didn’t see Podd wanting to add an urchin female half breed to his collection, so she didn’t see any reason not to agree.

“I’ll leave a note with Galla and tell Merrick. If Merrick forgets I’m can trust Galla to make sure my wishes are carried out. I promise you’ll have my body.”

Podd closed the door and she heard his footsteps as he walked away. Nethra turned up the hand lamp and started to examine the various bodies that had been so lovingly preserved by Podd.

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Merrick picked the youngest girl child up. He hadn’t wanted to, it left his sword arm wrapped up in her and her clothing, but it was clear she was exhausted and couldn’t go on.

“Is it much further ?” Asked the mother.

He looked at the exhausted child and realised it had been a mistake to come through the sewers. He wasn’t lost, but a quick journey for one reasonably fit person who knew the way well had turned into a nightmare journey for a family with six kids. And of course the slivering kept getting closer and louder, so loud that the family had begun to ignore it, as though it was just part of the ambient sounds of the sewers.

“We’ll rest for a few minutes.” He said.

Doffle looked about to object, but he squatted down onto the filthy floor and just looked thoroughly miserable. Merrick decided he could do with a rest himself, so he found a place in the passage with slightly less unpleasant fluids on it and settled his behind on the floor. The child was asleep and he decided she looked a lot less ugly than he’d originally thought. True she had the unnerving bug eyes, but she was asleep now and all sleeping kids look cute. Her brothers and sisters looked agitated. They’d had nothing to eat for hours and precious little to drink. Now they had nothing at all left to drink and it was still quite a journey to the sewer exit in the old town. Then in the direction they were headed he saw a scaled head cross the path. Just close enough to still be seen in the light of their lamp, but far enough to make detail unclear. A pair of green eyes looked their way and then blinked and were gone. Merrick looked at Doffle and was pleased to see he’d missed seeing the creature, but the oldest son was staring ahead of them and looked terrified.

“Bad dream ?” Asked Merrick.

“No, I saw.....”

Merrick put his finger to his lips in the sign that means be quiet just about everywhere. The boy was old enough to understand and nodded at him before snuggling closer to his mother. No need to scare the family over something that might decide they were too big to eat. He rose to his feet and pulled a boot knife from his right boot.

“We need to move on,” he said, “can you use one of these ?”

He'd spoken to the father and mother, but he wasn't surprised when the mother eagerly took the razor sharp knife off him. He knew there was no need to tell her to be careful with it by the way she held it. He gave her a smile that she returned and he knew that she'd not always been a harmless mother of six. Still carrying the youngest child Merrick headed towards where he'd seen the head with the green eyes and he hoped it would be gone when they got there. As the slithering sound followed them he looked back and noticed the children pick up their pace.

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Nethra had only intended to look briefly at the bodies and then move onto the pile of weapons, but every corpse held her attention. Some were just portions of a body, a leg, an arm, sometimes just an internal organ, but all of them were human and that made them exciting and forbidden. To Podd the most precious item was the almost complete body of an Arcadian, but Nethra had spotted the hand in amongst several other in a jar of preserving fluid at the back of one of the benches. It had taken her a while to unscrew the cap and then longer to use an old knife to dig several hands out of the jar, but now she had the hand in front of her and there was no mistaking the holy symbol on it. No tattoo, but an enchanted mark that told her it was the right hand of a holy warrior. Priceless, Merrick would know the right contact to sell it for them and they'd be out of the City and living in the best part of Quron.

"So you recognised it?"

She'd been so intent on examining the exhibits in the strange shed that Nethra hadn't noticed the hours drift by, or Aeony arriving. Nethra had never been in such close proximity to one of the de facto rulers of the City and she felt her mouth dry up.

"There are pictures on walls in long deserted towns on the 3rd rift."

She found the nakedness of the dark angel unsettling and the tail that seemed to have a life of its own. Aeony walked even closer to her and picked up the hand.

"There are lots of forbidden things on the 3rd rift, but who told you their meaning?"

Aeony was smiling, was she playing with her? Nethra could feel a return of the panic she'd felt at the shrine, but then a hand was reassuringly placed on her shoulder.

"Relax, everything here is forbidden and yet something draws me to it," said Aeony, "like the drinks from the holy city and the herbs peddled by Galla, much in the City is..... at least in theory forbidden. So you had a good teacher, perhaps the holy man of your tribe?"

She relaxed a little, but the end of the tail moving things around the bench was off putting, as was the intense gaze of the dark angel. Did they ever blink?

"Wise woman, we had a female wise person. I heard she was killed by the drought a few years ago, many on the rifts died of thirst then. She taught me how to read some of the human common tongue, but she never mentioned holy warriors fighting in the City."

Aeony opened the large jar and pushed the hand back into it and put the jar back where it had been.

"They fought in the City a very long time ago and Podd didn't find the hand out by the walls. It was found when they were building a new well for Muzzie's and Podd bought it for just a few credits. Not that Podd gives a damn about the value in gold, he loves every putrid flake of skin and bone in his collection with equal fervour."

Nethra looked at the hand in the jar and her own fingers started to reach for it.

"You can't have it," said Aeony, "Podd will notice and he has friends in some surprising places. Plus of course we both know that sudden wealth is more likely to kill Merrick than poverty."

Did everyone in the City know of Merrick's character flaws, it certainly seemed that way and Nethra had to admit that the thought of Merrick with enough money to satisfy some of his darker urges was

a little scary. She remembered when he'd helped someone important to escape the City just before dawn one stormy morning and had been well rewarded, over rewarded. Merrick had disappeared for weeks and on his return had been too jumpy and confused to do any work for months. The nest egg they could have kept for a rainy day had gone on drink and other substances and they'd ended up far poorer than they had been.

"If you want something to take," began Aeony, "look in the piles of weapons and armour. Podd has no respect for them and will eventually just throw it all away."

Nethra hadn't forgotten the reason she'd gone to so much trouble to meet Aeony, but the dark angel showed no signs of leaving, so she started to look at the pile of armour, pulling some of the heavier pieces to one side. Most of the items were extremely corroded, but there was a breast plate with what looked like gold decoration on the front. No it was just thin plating that had rubbed off in places. Then she saw the gauntlets shining like new in amongst the dross and they were reachable. Made for the holy warriors by one called Nurigen, she'd been told by Tarin when he'd shown her a breastplate once. Worth a lot of money, not as much as the hand in the jar, but enough to repair the roof of their home and buy a few new clothes. Out of habit she gave the gauntlets a shake. No one who wants a decent life expectancy in the City ever put on gloves or shoes without shaking them to remove any one of the dozens of venomous creatures that might be hiding within them.

A Nesh bug fell out and brushed against her leg on the way to the floor. She knew it hadn't bitten her because she wasn't rolling around in agony. A few well aimed stamps from her foot and the nine legged creature was just a green stain amongst many other stains. Nethra banged the gauntlets hard together and noticed Aeony grinning at her.

"I think I saw the boots in there somewhere." Said the dark angel.

Much more carefully now, since finding the Nesh bug, she started to pull at a rusty breast plate that seemed half buried in the floor. Then it moved and as she pulled it to one side she saw the glint of Nurigen metal. Both the boots were together and looked in perfect condition, but the right one felt heavier and as she pulled them from the pile she saw the stub of bone protruding from the right one. Nethra knelt down to get a better look and realised most of the foot of its last owner was still inside the boot. Dried by the heat of the rift it had mummified inside the boot, so seeing a knife on the floor she picked it up and used it to hack at the bones and dried sinews.

After turning the boot upside down a few times and hitting it with the knife handle she was fairly sure that most of the foot had been removed and that there were no bugs lurking in either boot. Nethra stood up and put the boots on the bench and only then did she look at the blade she'd picked up and the surprise almost made her drop it. The blade was only about six or seven inches long and looked fairly crude and flat, but the almost black metal shone back at her as though it had been made yesterday. The handle was made entirely out of some kind of precious stone, but it was the demon inscription on the blade itself that had shocked her.

"May I see that?" Said Aeony.

Nethra realised it was a request she couldn't refuse and handed the knife over, hoping that unlike the hand in the jar, it might be given back to her. The dark angel turned the blade over in her hand and then let it gently touch the back of her hand and a small trickle of blood started to flow from a tiny wound it had created.

"A demon blade," said Aeony, "only a demon blade could pierce my flesh so easily. Can you read the inscription girl?"

Nethra knew many of the old languages of the rifts and had even picked up some of the old demon tongue from the glory days of the City.

“Yes,” she said, “it says ‘Xanash 34th emperor’.”

Aeony looked the blade over a few more times before handing it back to her.

“Wrap the blade well, it will bite you with the same glee that it bit me.”

Nethra took a piece of rag from the bench, it looked to have once been a dress for a lady of some importance. Using the demon blade she cut off a long strip and used it to carefully wrap the knife before pushing it between her belt and her skirt. Then she put the gauntlets and boots in the remainder of the cloth and folded and tied it all into a kind of bag.

“Would you like my advice ?” Asked Aeony.

Nethra wondered if anyone had ever dared to say no, so she just nodded at her.

“Don’t tell Merrick about the blade. He’ll be delighted with the other items and you don’t need me to tell you about his character. Besides someone with the mark of chaos on their arm is going to need a good blade sooner or later.”

“Do you think the mark was put there by the Lords of Chaos ?” She asked.

The dark angel took hold of her arm and studies the mark, rubbing it none too gently with her talons.

“Some say there are no Lords of Chaos,” she said, “but someone with power has marked you and that is never a good thing.”

Nethra picked up the makeshift bag containing the Nurigen boots and gauntlets.

“You’re certain Podd won’t mind me taking these ?” She asked.

“It’s only his precious collection of body parts that he cares about. Eventually all of it, including the demon blade would have ended up being dumped out on the rifts.”

Aeony looked at her, as if unsure about asking her something.

“I take it you befriended Podd to look for something of value, something you could take. You can be honest with me ?”

Nethra felt embarrassed at leaving it so long to mention her real purpose, but the Nurigen items had driven it from her mind and then the demon blade had been such a shock.

“Actually I made friends with Podd so that I could talk to you, in private.”

The dark angel simply looked at her.

“You have my attention and young Ash rarely comes here, so you can say whatever is it you wish to say.”

“The shrine told me something about you.”

Aeony was leaning back on her tail in a way that unnerved her, but she knew she had to carry on.

“Silsk is paying the assassins guild to have you killed.”

Far from looking shocked Aeony gave her a huge smile.

“I knew she’d try it one day. So the time has come ? We need to talk, but well outside the City. Pick up all your things and I’ll take us south, to a valley rarely visited by others.”

Nethra picked up the precious bag and followed the dark angel out of the shed, turning the lamp to low before closing the door.

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‘I’m not a fucking hero !’

Merrick had repeated in his head at least once a minute since he’d seen the creature he was chasing. It was as big as him and ran along the ground on six very powerful looking legs. The slivering seemed to come from the silver scales on its back that rubbed against the tunnel walls as it tried to keep ahead of him. It seemed absurd to be chasing an almost certain painful death, but the creature had the oldest girl child in its jaws and the child was still screaming.

Doffle had let him down, he knew he would. They'd all been seeing glimpses of the creature, a silver scaly back, a brutal reptile like face. It was only a matter of time before it made its move, yet when it had Doffle had frozen to the spot. He would have gutted him then and there, but he needed him to guard the family waiting in the dark, while he tried to rescue the girl. He realised he didn't even know her name, didn't know any of their names, but they were under his protection and he'd do his best to bring the kid back alive. There was blood to follow, plenty of blood. Some was from the child, but most was the strange light blue fluid that flowed in the creatures veins. He'd been at the front of the group and Doffle had just stood there, but the mother had given the creature a nasty wound as it took her child. It obviously wanted peace and quiet to eat its meal and Merrick was determined not to give it any.

The screaming stopped and as he turned the next corner he realised he'd entered some sort of maintenance room that the creature was using as a den. The child had been dropped in a far corner, but was still moving about and alive. The creature was looking at him, an intelligent look in its eyes. Merrick pulled his sword from his belt and once again wondered why he was stood there. He could have taken the family to the sewer entrance in the old town and told them that losing a child was normal, they should be grateful they had another five. Part of Merrick, a large part, wanted to forget about the creature and run back and tell the mother just that. If only Nethra hadn't been so brave about going to the shrine on her own, risking being turned into something unnatural by the chaos creature. How could he let her down by running away now ?

"I'm not a fucking hero !" He shouted at the creature.

Yet there he stood and the creature lifted its head and seemed to sniff at him. Where had it come from ? Merrick knew most of the creatures that inhabited the City, but he'd never seen anything with silver scales and six legs before. The creature moved closer and started snapping its jaws at him, as if trying to frighten him into leaving. Merrick decided to take the fight to the creature and stabbed at its snout. There was a screeching sound from the creature and more of the light blue blood splattered his jacket, but the creature was far from beaten. It leapt not at him, but at the lamp he had in his left hand, using its jaws to grab it and send it flying to the far end of the room. The lamp was made in an age when objects had to be built to last and it bounced off the ground and lay on its side giving off the same brilliant white light. The problem was that various parts of the room were now hardly lit at all and the creature seemed to draw courage from having areas of dark shadow to hide in.

"Bastard !"

It had seemed to come from nowhere to take a bite out of his left arm, but Merrick was quick with his sword and cut a good ten inch wound into the creatures belly as it moved away. It yelped like a dog and he could see its blood everywhere. How could it lose so much blood and still live ? Then instantly it was gone and back into the shadows, but Merrick now understood the creature's tactics and moved forward just as the jaws were once more starting to close on his left arm. Down came his sword across the creature's neck, only to rattle off the silver scales. He used his foot to kick the creature down and then pushed his sword into its right eye. Most of the creatures he knew had their brain behind the eye, so he dug the sword in deep and twisted it, hoping to scramble anything the beast might have as a brain. Still it kicked at him and tried to get to the shadows, so he pulled out the sword and drove it into the other eye. This time the creature lay still and continued to be still after he'd given it a few hefty kicks. His left arm was bleeding quite profusely, but he knew it would congeal and stop fairly soon.

He retrieved the light and the child seemed ludicrously pleased to see him, considering the journey she'd just had in the creature's jaws.

"Let's have a look at you." He said.

There were tooth marks under the kid's clothes and there was some bleeding, but nothing serious. Merrick assumed the creature liked to feed on live food. He picked the girl up and carried her back to the others, the journey taking him less time than he thought. Doffle was sat on the floor looking fed up, but the mother instantly leapt up when she saw them approach.

"She's fine," he told her, "a few bite marks, but nothing serious."

"Thank you." The mother replied.

Did the father ever react to anything? The mother was all over her kid, yet the father just gave him a blank look. The other children seemed pleased to have their sibling back and Merrick made a decision.

"There's an exit to a wrecked building in old town. It's not where I intended to take you, but it's safe and not too far away."

The mother just nodded at him. Did she have connections in the old town? He supposed so, but it was really none of his business. Once he'd taken them out of the sewers it was up to them where they went in the City. He had arranged accommodation for some families, at a price of course, but they'd simply said it wasn't needed.

"We should move," he said, "I think there was only one of those things, but just in case..."

They needed little extra encouragement to get started and with Merrick in the lead they quickly reached the metal grating he'd painted a symbol next to a few months before. He knew it meant an abandoned metal workers shop in the old town. The building was a wreck, but the cellar was solid and would provide the family with shelter until they moved on.

"One at a time, father first I think," Said Merrick.

He climbed the short ladder that he knew was securely fixed to the wall and pushed up the grating. No sound of movement from above, so he pushed his head up into the cellar and swung the light about. Deserted, good.

"Next the boys."

There was no reason to send the boys ahead of the girls, but it just gave them order and something to think about while Merrick kept an eye out for any mate of the creature. He didn't need to tell the mother to be last, she kept well to the back, her eyes always alert for any threat to her kids.

"Thank you." She said as he helped her up.

Merrick took the light and climbed down the ladder. The family would be in the dark, but not for long and he knew they weren't the sort to panic.

"This is as far as you go." He said to Doffle.

"You hurt me and my mother...."

It was as far as he got before Merrick's sword cut a deep gash in his throat and he fell to the ground. Doffle was still gurgling and trying to grab Merrick's foot as he pushed his body off the walkway and into the channel of sewage. The last he saw of Doffle was an arm sliding under the foul smelling liquid.

"What will you tell his mother?"

The mother was looking down at him from the grate above and put out a hand to help him up. As he knelt to close the grate from the cellar side he turned to her.

"People die all the time in the City, it's a dangerous place. I am certain of one thing though."

The kids sat against the walls while the mother examined her injured child and rubbed an ointment onto the bites.

“What is that ?” She asked him.

“No matter what I do tell her, it won’t be the truth.”

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Next part will be posted on 28th Feb