



The Elder Scrolls: The Infernal City

By Greg Keyes

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And it is in Umbriel's shadow that a great adventure begins, and a group of unlikely heroes meet. A legendary prince with a secret. A spy on the trail of a vast conspiracy. A mage obsessed with his desire for revenge. And Annaig, a young girl in whose hands the fate of Tamriel may rest . . .

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Editorial Review

Review

"This action-based fantasy will find a following among YA and adult gamers." ---Library Journal

About the Author

Born in Meridian, MS, in 1963, Greg Keyes spent his early years roaming the forests of his native state and the red rock cliffs of the Navajo Indian reservation in Arizona. He earned his B.A. in anthropology from Mississippi State University and a master's degree from the University of Georgia, where he did course work for a Ph.D. He lives in Savannah, GA, where, in addition to full-time writing, he enjoys cooking, fencing, the company of his family and friends and lazy Savannah nights. Greg is the author of *The Waterborn*, *The Blackgod*, the Babylon 5 Psi Corps trilogy, the Age of Unreason tetralogy (for which he won the prestigious "Le Grand Prix de l'Imaginaire" award), and three New York Times bestselling Star Wars novels in the New Jedi Order series.

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Chapter One

A pale young woman with long ebon curls, and a male with muddy green scales and chocolate spines, crouched on the high rafters of a rotting villa in Lilmoth, known by some as the Festering Jewel of Black Marsh.

"You're finally going to kill me," the reptile told the woman. His tone was thoughtful, his saurian features composed in the faint light bleeding down through the cracked slate roof.

"Not so much kill you as get you killed," she answered, pushing the tight rings of her hair off her face and pressing her slightly aquiline nose and gray-green gaze toward the vast open space beneath them.

"It works out the same," the other hissed.

"Come on, Glim," Annaïg said, tossing herself into her father's huge leather chair and clasping her hands behind her neck. "We can't pass this up."

"Oh, I think it can be safely said that we can," Mere-Glim replied. He lounged on a low weavercane couch, one arm draped so as to suspend over a cypress end table whose surface was supported by the figure of a crouching Khajiit warrior. The Argonian was all silhouette, because behind him the white curtains that draped the massive bay windows of the study were soaked in sunlight.

"Here are some things we could do instead." He ticked one glossy black claw on the table.

"Stay here in your father's villa and drink his wine." A second claw came down. "Take some of your father's wine down to the docks and drink it there." The third. "Drink some here and some down at the docks . . ."

"Glim, how long has it been since we had an adventure?"

His lazy lizard gaze traveled over her face.

“If by adventure you mean some tiring or dangerous exercise, not that long. Not long enough anyway.” He wiggled the fingers of both hands as if trying to shake something sticky off them, a peculiarly Lilmouthian expression of agitation. The membranes between his digits shone translucent green. “Have you been reading again?”

He made it sound like an accusation, as if “reading” was another way of referring to, say, infanticide.

“A bit,” she admitted. “What else am I to do? It’s so boring here. Nothing ever happens.”

“Not for lack of your trying,” Mere-Glim replied. “We very nearly got arrested during your last little adventure.”

“Yes, and didn’t you feel alive?” she said.

“I don’t need to ‘feel’ alive,” the Argonian replied. “I am alive. Which state I would prefer to retain.”

“You know what I mean.”

“Hff. That’s a bold assertion,” he sniffed.

“I’m a bold girl.” She sat forward. “Come on, Glim. He’s a were- crocodile. I’m certain of it. And we can get the proof.”

“First of all,” Mere-Glim said, “there’s no such thing as a were- crocodile. Second, if there were, why on earth would we care to prove it?”

“Because . . . well, because people would want to know. We’d be famous. And he’s dangerous. People around there are always disappearing.”

“In Pusbottom? Of course they are. It’s one of the dodgiest parts of town.”

“Look,” she said. “They’ve found people bitten in half. What else could do that?”

“A regular crocodile. Lots of things, really. With some effort, I might be able to do it, too.” He fidgeted again. “Look, if you’re so sure about this, get your father to talk Underwarden Ethten into sending some guards down there.”

“Well, what if I’m wrong? Father would look stupid. That’s what I’m saying, Glim. I need to know for sure. I must find some sort of proof. I’ve been following him—”

“You’ve what?” He gaped his mouth in incredulity.

“He looks human, Glim, but he comes and goes out of the canal like an Argonian. That’s how I noticed him. And when I looked where he came out—I’m sure the first few steps were made by a crocodile, and after that by a man.”

Glim closed his mouth and shook his head.

“Or a man stepped in some crocodile tracks,” he said. “There are potions and amulets that let even you

gaspers breathe underwater.”

“But he does it all the time. Why would he do that? Help me be sure, Glim.”

Her friend sibilated a long hiss. “Then can we drink your father’s wine?”

“If he hasn’t drunk it all.”

“Fine.”

She clapped her hands in delight. “Excellent! I know his routine. He won’t be back in his lair until nightfall, so we should go now.”

“Lair?”

“Sure. That’s what it would be, wouldn’t it? A lair.”

“Fine, a lair. Lead on.”

And now here we are, Annaïg thought.

They had made their way from the hills of the old Imperial quarter into the ancient, gangrenous heart of Lilmoth—Pusbottom. Imperials had dwelt here, too, in the early days when the Empire had first imposed its will and architecture on the lizard people of Black Marsh. Now only the desperate and sinister dwelt here, where patrols rarely came: the poorest of the poor, political enemies of the Argonian An-Xileel party that now dominated the city, criminals and monsters.

They found the lair easily enough, which turned out to be a livable corner of a manse so ancient the first floor was entirely silted up. What remained was vastly cavernous and rickety and not that unusual in this part of town. What was odd was that it wasn’t full of squatters—there was just the one. He had furnished the place with mostly junk, but there were a few nice chairs and a decent bed.

That’s about all they got to see before they heard the voices, coming in the same way they had—which was to say the only way. Annaïg and Glim were backed up in the corner, and here the walls were stone. The only way to go was up an old staircase and then even farther, using the ancient frame of the house as a ladder. Annaïg wondered what sort of wood—if wood it was—could resist decomposition for so long. The wall- and floorboards here had been made of something else, and were almost like paper.

So they had to take care to stay on the beams.

Glim hushed himself; the figures in the group below were gazing up—not at them, but in their vague direction.

Annaïg took a small vial from the left pocket of her double-breasted jacket and drank its contents. It tasted a bit like melon, but very bitter.

She felt her lungs fill and empty, the elastic pull of her body around her bones. Her heart seemed to be

vibrating instead of beating, and the oddest thing was, she couldn't tell if this was fear.

The faint noises below suddenly became much louder, as if she was standing among them.

"Where is he?" one of the figures asked. They were hard to make out in the dim light, but this one looked darker than the rest, possibly a Dunmer.

"He'll be here," another said. He—or maybe she—was obviously a Khajiit— everything about the way he moved was feline.

"He will," a third voice said. Annaïg watched as the man she had been following for the last few days approached the others. Like them, he was too far away to see, but she knew him by the hump of his back, and her memory filled in the details of his brutish face and long, unkempt hair.

"Do you have it?" the Khajiit asked.

"Just brought it in under the river."

"Seems like a lot of trouble," the Khajiit said. "I've always wondered why you don't use an Argonian for that."

"I don't trust 'em. Besides, they have ripper eels trained to hunt Argonians trying to cross the outer canal. They're not so good at spotting me, especially if I rub myself with eel-slime first."

"Disgusting. You can keep your end of the job."

"Just as long as I get paid for it." He pulled off his shirt and removed his hump. "Have a look. Have a taste, if you want."

"Oh, daedra and Divines," Annaïg swore, from the beam they crouched on. "He's not a were-croc. He's a skooma smuggler."

"You're finally going to kill me," Glim said.

"Not so much kill you as get you killed."

"It works out the same."

And now Annaïg was quite sure that what she felt was fear. Bright, terrible, animal fear.

"By the way," the Khajiit below said, lowering his voice. "Who are those two in the rafters?"

The man looked up. "Xhuth! if I know," he said. "None of mine."

"I hope not. I sent Patch and Flichs up to kill them."

"Oh, kaoc'," Annaïg hissed. "Come on, Glim."

As she stood, something wisped through the air near her, and a shriek tore out of her throat.

“I knew it,” Glim snapped.

“Just—come on, we have to get to the roof.”

They ran across the beams, and someone behind her shouted. She could hear their footfalls now—why hadn’t she before? An enchantment of some sort?

“There.” Glim said. She saw it; part of the roof had caved in and was resting on the rafters, forming a ramp. They scrambled up it. Something hot and wet was trying to pull out of her chest, and she hysterically wondered if an arrow hadn’t hit her, if she wasn’t bleeding inside.

But they made it to the roof.

And a fifty-foot fall.

She pulled out two vials and handed one to Mere-Glim.

“Drink this and jump,” she said.

“What? What is it?”

“It’s—I’m not sure. It’s supposed to make us fly.”

“Supposed to? Where did you get it?”

“Why is that important?”

“Oh, Ththal, you made it didn’t you? Without a formula. Remember that stuff that was supposed to make me invisible?”

“It made you sort of invisible.”

“It made my skin translucent. I looked like a bag of offal walking around.”

She drank hers. “No time, Glim. It’s our only hope.”

Their pursuers were coming up the ramp, so she jumped, wondering if she should flap her arms or . . .

But what she did was fall, and shriek.

But then she wasn’t falling so fast, and then she was sort of drifting, so the wind actually pushed her like a soap bubble. She heard the men hollering from the roof, and turned to see Glim floating just behind her.

“See?” she said. “You need to have a little faith in me.”

She barely got the sentence out before they were falling again.

Later, battered, sore, and stinking of the trash pile that broke their final fall, they returned to her father's villa. They found him passed out in the same chair Annaïg had been in earlier that morning. She stood looking at him for a moment, at his pale fingers clutched on a wine bottle, at his thinning gray hair. She was trying to remember the man he had been before her mother died, before the An-Xileel wrested Lilmoth from the Empire and looted their estates.

She couldn't see him.

"Come on," she told Glim.

They took three bottles of wine from the cellar and wound their way up the spiral stair to the upper balcony. She lit a small paper lantern and in its light poured full two delicate crystal goblets.

"To us," she said.

They drank.

Old Imperial Lilmoth spread below them, crumbling hulks of villas festooned with vines and grounds overgrown with sleeping palms and bamboo, all dark now as if cut from black velvet, except where illumined by the pale phosphorescences of lucan mold or the wispy yellow airborne shines, harmless cousins of the deadly will-'o-wisps in the deep swamps.

"There now," she said, refilling her glass. "Don't you feel more alive?"

He blinked his eyes, very slowly. "Well, I certainly feel more aware of the contrast between life and death," he replied.

"That's a start," she said.

A small moment passed.

"We were lucky," Glim said.

"I know," she replied. "But . . ."

"What?"

"Well, it's no were-croc, but we can at least report the skooma dealers to the underwarden."

"They'll have moved by then. And even if they catch them, that's a drop of water in the ocean. There's no stopping the skooma trade."

"There certainly isn't if no one tries," she replied. "No offense, Glim, but I wish we were still in the Empire."

"No doubt. Then your father would still be a wealthy man, and not a poorly paid advisor to the An-Xileel."

"It's not that," she said. "I just—there was justice under the Empire. There was honor."

"You weren't even born."

“Yes, but I can read, Mere-Glim.”

“But who wrote those books? Bretons. Imperials.”

“And that’s An-Xileel propaganda. The Empire is rebuilding itself. Titus Mede started it, and now his son Attrebus is at his side. They’re bringing order back to the world, and we’re just—just dreaming ourselves away here, waiting for things to get better by themselves.”

The Argonian gave his imitation shrug. “There are worse places than Lilmoth.”

“There are better places, too. Places we could go, places where we could make a difference.”

“Is this your Imperial City speech again? I like it here, Nn. It’s my home. We’ve known each other since we were hatchlings, yes, and if you didn’t already know you could talk me into almost anything, you do now. But leaving Black Marsh—that you won’t get me to do. Don’t even try.”

“Don’t you want more out of life, Glim?”

“Food, drink, good times—why should anyone want more than that? It’s people wanting to ‘make a difference’ causing all the troubles in the world. People who think they know what’s better for everyone else, people who believe they know what other people need but never bother to ask. That’s what your Titus Mede is spreading around—his version of how things ought to be, right?”

“There is such a thing as right and wrong, Glim. Good and evil.”

“If you say so.”

“Prince Attrebus rescued an entire colony of your people from slavery. How do you think they feel about the Empire?”

“My people knew slavery under the old Empire. We knew it pretty well.”

“Yes, but that was ending when the Oblivion crisis happened. Look, even you have to admit that if Mehrunes Dagon had won, if Martin hadn’t beaten him—”

“Martin and the Empire didn’t beat him in Black Marsh,” Glim said, his voice rising. “The An-Xileel did. When the gates opened, Argonians poured into Oblivion with such fury and might, Dagon’s lieutenants had to close them.”

Annaïg realized that she was leaning away from her friend and that her pulse had picked up. She smelled something sharp and faintly sulfurous. Amazed, she regarded him for a moment.

“Yes,” she finally said, when the scent diminished, “but without Martin’s sacrifice, Dagon would have eventually taken Black Marsh, too, and made this world his sportground.”

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