

City of the Lost God

Part 35 – New Sisters

“Ash drank a mouthful of his master’s hard liquor and couldn’t see what all the fuss was about. Hard liquor was bitter to the taste and didn’t take away his thirst.”



Even Podd seemed excited, the whole City knew that the dark angels were gaining new sisters and gaining them that very night.

“More of them bossing us about.” Said Ash.

Podd patted his apprentice on the head.

“We do alright lad.” He said. “Better the devil you know.”

Podd had declared a sort of holiday; no more collections that day, any bodies could decompose in the streets for a day. New dark angels were a huge event and it was rare. The last rebirth had been during the last human occupation of the City and that was many millennia ago.

“Will we see them, the new angels ?” Asked Ash.

Podd had been worried about his much loved collection of body parts from the human era. Aeony had visited him and promised that she’d protect him from any excess puritan zeal in the City.

“Some of my new sisters might try to erase anything of human origin.” She’d told him. “But I won’t allow them to bother you.”

It had settled the worries in his mind and she’d told him a few details about the coming rebirth.

“Aeony told me they’ll fly around the towers after the ritual.” He told Ash. “Think of it lad, a cloud of them, swooping down over the City.”

The boy didn’t look impressed, but he never seemed really excited about anything. He’d often thought about asking Ash if he was happy or if he needed anything. Dangerous though, those kinds of questions can put ideas in youngster’s heads. The last thing he needed was an apprentice with a list of demands.

“It’ll be dark then.” Said Ash.

“You’ll see them against the sky boy and that’s close enough.”

Podd prodded Ash in the stomach, making the boy jump back.

“These will be new born dark angels, hungry for their first feed.” Said Podd. “They’d cut you to bits with their talons and then eat you.”

Podd enjoyed the look of fear on the boy’s face; the occasional tease was good for him. He chuckled and put a few pieces of wood on the fire that powered the fat boiler. They might be having a rare day off, but the boiler always had to be kept hot. Ash was still looking horrified.

“Will they eat the people ?” He asked.

“No boy, Aeony will lead them north, to feed on the wild mountain people. They won’t bother us, we can stand and watch them circle the towers.”

Podd had deliberately kept a purse on him, one they’d found on a body near the river. It was full of City coins, the coins that were only accepted by the City traders. They didn’t look much and had little silver in them, but a few would buy them a feast.

“Here boy, take a good handful and buy whatever fresh food you can find.” Said Podd.

Ash sorted through the purse ignoring the coppers and picking a handful of larger silver coins.

“Sniff everything.” Added Podd. “We don’t want to be ill tomorrow.”

“I will boss, I will.”

Ash was almost at the bone yard gates, when Podd called him back and gave him a Quron gold piece, a fortune in the slums.

“Ale boy and not the crap Barus sells. Go to Muzzie’s and get some decent light ale and a couple of bottles of something stronger. For me of course, you’re too young.”

Ash was back to being an excited kid, all thought of hungry dark angels, gone from his mind. They had a small cart, kept for transporting anything that wasn’t a body part. It was rarely used, but Ash was pulling it out of the shed where it was kept.

“And buy a few things you like.” Bellowed Podd. “No women though, you’re too young.”

Ash laughed and pushed the cart through the gates.

“Thanks boss.”

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Merrick saw Ash pushing the cart towards Old Town and gave him a wave. Everyone seemed in a happy mood and it wasn’t just the likely appearance of new dark angels. The destruction had to be cleared and homes rebuilt. Stone masons were arriving from Quron and skilled builders from all over the rift. They brought their families with them, people with tales from far off places and strange customs. In a very real way, the destruction had brought the City back to life. There was even talk about one of the great holy men coming all the way from Tandalla on the 5th rift.

Meanwhile, Merrick was stumbling over the rubble next to Podd’s yard and walking towards the great river. He knew where he was going, he’d often used the sewer outfall to gain access to the sewers and Old Town. That was when he’d been smuggling people into the City. Now the City needed new blood and migrants from the rifts were being welcomed.

“Why here Ousha ?” He muttered to himself.

The outfall was where two large tunnels ended, dropping all the sewage from the City, into the great river. It wasn’t an ideal way to get rid of waste, but no one had ever come up with anything better. Downstream from where the drinking water was collected of course, but there was still the risk of spreading parasites and worse. The sewage came out of the pipes and flowed down a gully to the river. The gully was where Ousha wanted to meet him. It stank down there of course, but Merrick didn’t mind that. Stench made it difficult for those who tracked by using their sense of smell.

“Merrick my friend.” Said Ousha. “I hoped you’d come.”

“Of course I came.”

They hugged. They had shared in the hatred and violence of Silsk, often helping each other to heal wounds and seek the aid of Galla. A common enemy brings people together and Merrick thought of Ousha as being family. He could easily guess why she wanted to meet him.

“So, you’re finally getting out of the City ?” He asked.

Ousha sat herself on a large rock and beckoned him to sit next to her.

“Aeony is a massive improvement.” She said. “But I have managed to sell some of Silsk’s things and I have the money to live in Quron. Who else would I come to, asking about guards to make sure I get there in one piece ?”

He held her hand and remembered her gently rubbing soothing creams over angry bruises.

“Not as easy as it once was.” He said. “Anyone with a full purse is hiring extra guards. That’ll pass of course.”

“I wasn’t planning on leaving for a while. Once the pilgrim trail is fairly safe, I’ll begin my journey.”

Merrick thought about it for a minute or two, weighing up the various options.

"That helps." He said. "The people we hired in Avald are still in the City, earning quite a few coins as guards. They'll go home eventually and I'm sure they wouldn't mind a detour to Quron.... For a price of course."

"Thank you Merrick, talk to them and let me know how much they'll cost."

She was holding something in her hand, a cloth bag, barely large enough to hold anything of importance, but her hand was shaking as she gave it to him.

"I found this with her knife from Leng." Said Ousha. "She obviously thought it was important."

He opened the bag and found a piece of skin, his skin. It still bore the tattoo he'd been given on becoming a full male of his tribe. The trials had been hard for a boy of barely thirteen, but he'd completed them perfectly.

"You call yourself a man ?!" Silsk had shrieked

Merrick had refused her again, told her that he wasn't sleeping with her. Silsk had sliced the tattoo from his arm, taking a good depth of muscle with it. The wound had been large and slow to heal. Merrick had developed a fever and might have died.

"I still remember Muzzie carrying me to Galla's." He said. "With you telling him to get a move on."

"I knew you'd want it back. Silsk even cleaned it to stop it rotting. I saw her take it out every so often and smile, as though it gave her power over you."

At that moment he decided to slash the profit he'd make on getting Ousha to Quron. He'd still make a profit of course, business is business, but he'd charge her half of the price he'd charge anyone else.

"It might have done." He said. "These tattoos are sacred to my people. I've certainly felt different since Silsk died."

He brought out his purse and began fingering the coins.

"I must pay you for this Ousha, something to go towards your move to Quron."

She was pushing his hand away.

"No, it's a gift. I don't want your money."

"Nothing is for nothing in the City, you know that. A lack of coin can mean starvation, so there is always a price, for everything."

He hadn't meant to be quite so generous, but a full imperial fell out of the purse and into his hand.

"That isn't my way !" She shouted.

"Well it should be."

He actually pulled her fingers apart and made her grasp the coin.

"Take it Ousha, it's important to me."

The withered old human female took the coin and added it to her own purse. She was about to thank him, so he placed his finger over his lips and quietly shushed her. Something had followed him, or her, something that was moving about.

He looked over the edge of the gully and saw a full blood Dredger, searching for them. There hadn't been many Dredger demon sightings for years, but after the troubles they seemed to be everywhere. Aeony had even paid a few to dig pits for the dread, though he didn't like to think of the price Aeony had paid. Dredgers had a taste for the flesh of hybrids.

"A Dredger looking for us." He whispered.

Pure blood Dredgers had the same four arms and two legs of other pure bloods, they just didn't walk upright. Their main function was digging in the ground, hence their usual name. It looked like a giant insect, as it scuttled along the ground, smelling for them.

"How close is it ?" She asked.

"Getting closer." He replied, putting his finger to his lips again.

He almost admired the creature, finding them in all the sewage stench. Some could talk and some couldn't, most Dredgers weren't exactly the cleverest of demons. The problem was that when there was nothing to dig, they tended to turn to thievery and murder. This one had obviously been paid to follow him, or Ousha, or both of them. He pulled his short sword from his belt.

"What are you going to do?" Whispered Ousha.

He ran his finger over his throat and she looked quite pale. Merrick carefully climbed out of the gully and hoped he hadn't over estimated his own fighting skills. A Dredger might scuttle about on the ground, but it was still eight feet long and very strong. Still, something wouldn't let him stab it in the back.

"Are you looking for me?" He called.

The demon spun round and then stopped, almost as though it had expected to see someone else. Merrick held his sword up, but the creature didn't advance, so he walked towards it. He'd never known a cowardly Dredger, but this one ran for the City, as though half the legions of chaos were chasing it.

"Your reputation must be formidable indeed."

Ousha was behind him, watching the Dredger throw up dust, as it went past Podd's yard and vanished into the slums.

"Never seen one run from a fight before." He said. "And I'm pretty certain it was you it was following."

"Ohhhhh. Why me?"

"Just be careful and stay in the towers as much as possible. A lot of people are curious about what the dark angels are doing. You are Aeony's servant after all."

It was strange; Dredgers never refused a fight, even one they were certain to lose. Someone had hired it to follow Ousha, someone it was really scared of. That worried Merrick.

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Tarin was engrossed in creating a thing of beauty. Beautiful to him, if not to others, the plough was ready to be fitted with a harness. Few farms had beasts to pull such things through the ground; half a dozen farmhands would fit the harness over their shoulders.

"It's time to leave." Said Flax.

He knew he'd lose track of time, he always did when he worked. Flax had been given the task of reminding him, when the light began to fade. He was taking her, the girl who'd once had the nerve to name herself after a deity.

"Help me damp down the fire." He said.

Muzzie was taking Gesse and Caspian was going to be there, so he was taking Flax. The Lady of the Shrine had told him to keep the girl close, so he was going to do just that. Once he was certain the fire wasn't likely to be a danger to anyone, he went to his room and changed into full armour.

"You were a warrior of chaos." Said Flax.

She seemed to follow him everywhere, watching and learning. She hadn't asked a question, just stated the fact from all the runes on his armour.

"I still am." He said. "The vows are for life, perhaps even beyond life."

He'd given Flax some coins to buy new clothes, she'd seemed to only own the dress she'd arrived in. The result had been her having three almost identical dresses, all of them the colour of ripened corn. She perplexed him, but he liked having her around.

"You don't need to be scared." He said. "No one will hurt you."

"I know."

He'd lost his own sword and Bailig's sword seemed to have been destroyed by being driven into Yam Kermul. Eventually he'd create a truly beautiful sword for himself, but even finding the right metal was a slow process. Tarin had bought a sword from Barus of all people. It was likely to have been stolen from its rightful owner, but it was of good quality metal and had a sharp edge. He fitted the sword to his belt and offered a dagger to Flax. She just shook her head.

"Ready?" He asked.

"Yes."

She left the house first, while he made sure the three locks on his door were solid and likely to deter the ever growing army of thieves in the City. It was a long walk to the towers, but they should still arrive early. From the towers, Aeony was arranging a way for them to get to the sacred place. That was almost certain to mean being carried in the talons of a dark angel.

"Carried like a piece of carrion?" He'd asked. Aeony had merely smiled at him.

Tarin hadn't expected to walk through empty streets, but he hadn't expected roads lined by cheering people. He hadn't mentioned the time he was leaving to anyone, yet they were there, the people of the City. Flax was smiling and saying something, but her words were lost in the noise of hundreds cheering, perhaps thousands. He leant in close to Flax, so that he could hear her.

"You are famous, I knew it."

"So it seems Flax, so it seems."

Obviously not everyone was believing the official report of the recent troubles, the one being put about by Babaef and the guild. Muzzie knew the truth, as did a few others and they had talked to a few more..... until he was being cheered by street after street full of hybrids. Not just hybrids, there was the occasional Dredger mixed in with the crowd. The full blood demons were returning for some reason, there had even been reports of a high level demon being seen near The Lanes. Flax was shouting at him.

"They want you to say something!" She shouted.

They were quite close to a small square, where a statue of a long forgotten emperor had stood. The statue was now rubble, which Tarin climbed, helping Flax to stand beside him. The roar of the crowd continued, so he banged his sword against his shield for silence. Flax was squeezing his arm.

They were beginning to kneel to him. First the front rows and then moving back, until they were all kneeling, tens of thousands of them. Every street, as far as he could see was full of quiet and kneeling people. Then the chant began.

"Tarin, Tarin. Tarin, Tarin....."

Then a few began mixing the word emperor into the chant, until the thousands were chanting.

"Emperor Tarin, Emperor Tarin, Emperor Tarin....."

He was being tested, he knew it. But he also knew chaos and understood that there was no wrong decision to be made, but there would be consequences. Refuse the crowd and the City might turn to anarchy, accept and there might be civil war with Babaef and the guild. He raised his sword high above his head and the crowd were silent.

"I am nothing but a humble worker of metals." He said.

The crowd remained silent, they knew he had to say more, there had to be more. Tarin only decided on the words as they came out of his mouth and even he was surprised at his response to the crowd.

"Thank you!" He shouted. "I will be your emperor!"

Flax was hugging him and the crowd were going wild. There'd be trouble in the City when various factions met each other, but there was no escaping that. Aeony would like his decision and support

him, but Babaef definitely wouldn't. He clambered down from the rubble and the crowd followed him.

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Muzzie's tavern was quite close to the towers, so he didn't have to leave until after dark. By then the word of Tarin proclaiming himself emperor had reached his regulars. Mouth to ear, mouth to ear, then repeat ten thousand times and news could travel across the City, faster than the swiftest runner.

"I never saw that coming." Said Sara.

"Nor I." Said Gesse.

Getting used to Gesse's new look had taken a while, most of the regulars were a little wary of anything magical anyway. Even Sara had screamed when she saw him. Muzzie had forgotten to tell her about Gesse looking a lot less like a noble and more like his long lost cousin.

"There was a look in his eye in the catacombs." Said Muzzie. "I think Emperor Tarin will be very good for the City."

"He's stuck his thumb right into Babaef's eye." Said Gesse.

He was right of course, Babaef would be furious, but he had no army. Babaef had money and the guild behind him. Would he hire mercenaries and make a fight of it? Muzzie thought that the City had seen enough destruction and few wanted a civil war.

"We should be leaving." Said Muzzie.

"Do you think Babaef will turn up?" Asked Sara.

"He'll be there." Said Muzzie. "Offending the dark angels will finish him."

He wished he was really as confident as he sounded, but Muzzie was unsure if the rebirth would happen. If only Lilleth was there, she'd be able to read the politics of the situation, she'd know what the hell was going on. He and Gesse left the tavern and walked towards the towers.

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Babaef dropped the dagger and looked at the dead servant. Chillan wasn't looking at him and hadn't said a word for some time. Killing the bringer of bad news, it wasn't just a silly saying. It had felt so good to cut into the servant, stop that mocking voice.

"Tarin is emperor !" The man had shouted.

He hadn't even followed the basic civility of knocking on the door before entering. He's run in and started shouting it as though Babaef should be pleased. Chillan had told the servant to be quiet, but he'd just carried on shouting.

"Isn't it marvellous? It was in Old Town, not long ago. He's agreed to be our emperor."

Babaef had drawn a dagger with the intention of threatening the man, but cutting him had worked far better. He'd slashed neck and face, until even the irritating gurgling sound had gone.

"My robes are ruined Chillan." He said. "I'll need clean clothes and shoes."

"Yes Master !"

Chillan left the room without commenting on what had just occurred. Babaef looked at his very expensive robes and they were covered in the servant's blood. Green blood mostly, but with quite a few swirls of red. He couldn't recall the servant's name, but there has been quite a lot of human in him. If Shadow had still been alive, he'd have fed her the fool's entrails.

"Fucker !"

Babaef kicked the body and then moved away to remove his clothes. His trousers were streaked with blood and his shoes were now more green than brown. He stood naked and realised that blood

was running down his face and into his eyes, he needed a wash too. Chillan returned with fresh clothes and a different pair of shoes.

"Water, hot water." Said Babaef. "I need to wash. Only you Chillan, bring none of the other servants in here."

"Yes Master !"

He'd gone again and Babaef stood where he was, not wanting to drip blood on his new clothes. There would have to be an excuse for not wearing his fancy new robes of course. The tailor was too slow perhaps ? Yes that would do.

"It's very hot water master, let me clean you."

He stood and allowed Chillan to wash him from head to foot, even using a cloth to get every drop of blood out of his hair.

"There must be a way to turn this to our advantage." Said Babaef.

Chillan silently helped him on with his clean clothes and shoes. There was a mirror in his office, but it was quite small and he had to move around to see everything.

"How do I look ?"

"Like a King master."

It was exactly the answer he wanted to hear, Chillan was very good at things like that. He locked his office door, the mess could be cleaned up later and the body left where Podd would find it. Babaef led the way down the guild stairs and out into the night, Chillan running to keep up with him. There was a way to gain something from the situation. It wasn't as much as he'd hoped for, but still a position with power and influence.

"It will work Chillan..... hurry, we can't be late."

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Aeony listened to Aishar as she whispered the latest news to her. Then she walked back to stand beside Adamaz, ready to greet their guests.

"Well, they are all on the way here." She said.

"You were right to encourage Tarin to be emperor, he'll do far better than that fool Babaef." Said Adamaz. "If only he'd left his announcement for a week or so."

"The will of the people." She replied.

Adamaz was looking at her suspiciously.

"You didn't pay some agitators to move things along did you ?" He asked.

"No, you overestimate my reach and my wealth. Today's crowd was spontaneous and nothing to do with me." Said Aeony.

The crowds were still chanting in the streets and there were likely to be fights. Add that to the general feeling of excitement in the City and Aeony was glad that she'd soon have some new sisters. Only the dark angels could guarantee peace in the City. Their reputation alone, could quieten most mobs.

"Muzzie arrives." Said Adamaz.

Seren had carried the tavern owner up from the towers and it had taken three of her sisters to carry Gesse. The revenant might now look like a rather merry looking farmer, but he still weighed as much as half a dozen hybrids. He wasn't strictly needed for the ritual, but no one was being strict about who could come. Aeony leant into Muzzie and whispered to him.

"Mussaneth Osrannerer." She said. "Any debt you may have owed me, in the way of information or gold, is now fully paid."

"I just hope this works." Replied Muzzie.

“So do we all.” Said Adamaz. “Caspian knows where you need to be for the ritual.”

Muzzie went to consult Caspian, while Gesse went in search of liquid refreshment. The next to arrive were Tarin and Flax. Aeony had heard about Tarin taking in a stray and she actually felt jealous of her. Tarin was a good and energetic lover and she hadn't quite finished enjoying him herself.

“I don't know why I'm invited, but I'm here.” Said Tarin.

Aeony bowed slightly.

“The emperor may go where he wishes.”

She was teasing, but only slightly. He was smiling at her, but not looking embarrassed.

“The crowd was enthusiastic.” He said. “But I think I'll try the role on for a while, see how it fits.”

“Good.” Said Adamaz. “There is a lot of betrayal about Babaef... killed his wife, thought he was betraying Nigon, sought to betray a Lord of Chaos...”

“Quite so.” Added Aeony. “We may approve of some of the results, but he does reek of betrayal.”

“You can never trust him.” Added Flax.

They all turned and stared as Flax spoke. Aeony smiled at the girl and decided that she liked Tarin's choice of companion.

“She's right, we can't trust him, ever.” She said.

“He's here.” Said Adamaz.

It would have been better if Tarin had moved away from the entrance, but nothing could be done about it. Babaef strode into the sacred place, Chillan a few paces behind him. Aeony noticed that Flax didn't seem to be at all in awe of Babaef and her respect for the girl grew.

“Babaef, you're politely early.” Said Aeony. “We now have everyone required to carry out the ritual.”

“Yes, I saw our plan was working well and wanted a chance to congratulate Tarin.”

Tarin approached Babaef and shook his hand.

“Thank you.” He said.

“A perfect plan.” Added Babaef. “You become emperor of the entire 1st rift and perhaps other rifts, while I become King of the City.”

Tarin smiled at Babaef and then hugged him.

“Yes my old friend, the plan worked well.” He said. “We shall have a joint coronation of course, to show the City that we are still like brothers.”

Babaef was pleased and excited; Aeony could see it in his eyes. It wasn't all she could sense about the head of the Sorcerer's Guild, something had happened to him in the catacombs.

“We should actually think of a name for our City.” Said Babaef.

“It has a name, though few remember it and even fewer speak it.” Said Adamaz. “Tomma-Goran gave his City a name when he created it.”

“I know it too.” Said Tarin. “A good name and it should be used and carved onto pillars at the City gates.”

Everyone turned towards Tarin, waiting for him to continue.

“The City is called Mariba, which means refuge in a tongue long gone.” He said.

“A human tongue?” Asked Aeony.

“No, no.” Said Adamaz. “A language of pure blood demons who once walked the rifts.”

He was lying, she recognised the style of human words. Aeony smiled though, a name was just a name and they'd soon claim it as their own.

“Then we have a name for our City.” She said.

They all nodded at her and Adamaz led Babaef away, Chillan following them.

“I think we have refreshments.” Said Adamaz. “If young Gesse hasn't drunk everything.”

Aeony stepped close to Tarin.

“That was the first you knew of your plan, wasn’t it ?” She asked.

“Yes, but it keeps Babaef happy.”

“You must never trust him.” Added Flax.

“Once again your friend is right.” Said Aeony. “Come, it’s time to begin the ritual.”

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Merrick had come home tired and carrying a small bag. He’d been reluctant to show her the patch of skin it contained, but Nethra had made him take it out of the bag.

“I remember that you nearly died from the wound.” She had said.

They’d spent a long time, discussing what to do with the piece of shrivelled skin. Have it stitched into an undergarment, have it copied by a tattoo artist in the City and several other ideas. In the end Merrick had made the decision.

“Once we’ve found a house we like and we’re settled.” He’d said. “We’ll have a brief adventure and travel to my tribe on the 3rd rift.”

She’d nodded, she knew what he wanted.

“A seer or shaman of my tribe will copy the tattoo to my other arm.” Merrick had said.

They had then gone to bed early and the sex had been good. Unhurried and well away from anyone else’s ears, they’d been able to express their love for each other. Nethra was still sore, as she silently climbed out of their bed. Merrick was fast asleep and wouldn’t wake. She smiled and touched his arm.

“Sleep well.” She muttered.

Nethra wanted to get as high as she could and the roof of Muzzie’s extension was one of the highest points in the City. Not damaging the building was important, so she carefully used her tail to get a good grip on a drain pipe. It held her weight, she weighed very little. Her tough little fingers were as strong as claws and she could use them to hang onto the brickwork.

Up she went, crawling over the outside of the building and then reaching up towards the guttering. It started to bend, so she used her tail again. Just long enough to grip a pipe on the edge of the roof and she was up and onto the tiles. Really careful now, Muzzie wouldn’t be amused to have his nice new roof damaged.

On her toes, she crept towards the larger of the two chimneys and used her fingers to dig into the bricks and climb. The chimney gave her another ten feet of height and one of the best viewpoints in the City. It was happening tonight, the whole City knew. Most hid indoors, both excited and scared about the new dark angels. Nethra clung to the top of the chimney and waited. Eventually Aeony’s new sisters would circle the towers and Nethra had the perfect place to watch them.

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It had all been rehearsed in her head, yet Aeony felt the importance of what she was about to do and froze for a second or two. Muzzie looked at her and she saw his lips about to move, but he then decided that a smile was enough.

She’d read the detailed instructions several times and somethings didn’t matter that much, yet get something else slightly wrong and she’d have no new sisters. Even worse, mess up a particular part of the ritual and her new sisters would awaken as brutal and insane monsters.

“That one.” She said, pointing at an urn.

All the urns had been unsealed and the contents stirred around and checked for lumps. Everything they used had to be a powder, though the instructions failed to say why. After checking, the urns had been stacked against the wall and Aeony had no idea which of her dead sisters was in each urn.

One of the dark angels half rolled the urn towards her and removed the lid. Another handed her a large bronze device that looked like a ladle. Tarin had constructed it from ancient human drawings. 'The remains of up to no more than eight, but no less than three.' The instructions said. She had plenty to choose from, so Aeony had decided to use four sets of remains for each rebirth. She put the ladle into the urn and brought out a spoonful of the powered remains of one of her long dead sisters. Another three ladles and the amount looked about right, so she smoothed it over and looked along the rows of urns.

"That one."

Again the ladle brought out the fine dust of a dark angel who'd been dead for countless millennia. Not just her remains, something else had been stirred into each sacred urn. Aeony had to pretend to respect the wishes of the others, but the instructions mentioned a gift of blood several times.

'A gift of blood, especially of the innocent, will greatly improve the strength.....'

The sacrifice hadn't been a child, but a grown man from the slums. Seren had caught him without being seen and they'd drained his blood into a large bowl. It had been boiled until it was black and then left to dry, a little of the resulting powder being mixed into each urn. Again, three ladles of the contents of the urn, tamped down and smoothed.

"That one."

The remains were those of Silsk. Aeony knew from the freshness and the smell, which had taken days to get out of her hair and talons. It was a powder, but fresh and there was still some moisture held in the remains. There was no sending it back, a choice was a choice and she ladled out the remains three times. It took a while to smooth out, but eventually she was ready for the last urn.

"That one."

Powder as fine as face powder, the remains of one of the really ancient. It might have been millions of years since this sister had flown over the rifts, but they were really strong and powerful in that age of the City. Perhaps fate had helped her pick Silsk and one of the ancients? Aeony smoothed the powder and the large metal bowl was filled to within an inch of the top, perfect. She nodded at Babaef, it was his time to speak the words.

No rehearsal, it was forbidden to speak the words outside of the actual ritual. Besides, Adamaz was being territorial about much of the paperwork and keeping it locked in a chest in his quarters. Aeony knew that Babaef had read the invocations several times and thought about them, but this would be the first time that he'd say them out loud. Adamaz handed him the paper with eighteen lines written on it and Babaef stepped forward.

Babaef looked at Muzzie and the tavern owner began to weave a spell, a dark grey cloud forming above his head.

"Complete silence now, until the rebirth is complete." Said Babaef.

He spoke the lines as though the long dead language was his native tongue. Aeony had confidence in Babaef and he didn't let her down. Three lines he read and then he turned towards Muzzie. The cloud above the tavern owners head grew and began to sparkle, as Muzzie gripped Babaef's arm. Another three lines and the marble floor ceased to be white, as streaks of red began to stretch from the wall, reaching right to the bowl full of dark angel remains. Flax muttered something, but Tarin quickly silenced her.

Another three lines and the floor was now a spider's web of red, it even seemed to throb with life in places. Muzzie still held Babaef's arm, but he seemed lost in the moment. The ball of spinning energy above him now showed dark angels. Not completely or at a distance, but like a window with

the angels competing to get a view. A wing, then an arm and sometimes a face glaring balefully out at the sacred place.

Another three lines and there was a sweet smell in the air, a smell of corruption, but overlaid with the perfume of spring flowers. Aeony wanted to speak, to discuss the occurrences, but knew that was out of the question.

Babaef spoke the final three lines slowly, as though scared of what might happen after he'd spoken the final line. He ended and Muzzie let go of his arm and walked to within a foot of the metal bowl. He aimed his hands at it and the cloud of energy entered the bowl, heating the contents and filling the temple with the stink of corruption.

"Arise sister, arise." Shouted Aeony.

There was something there in the centre of the room, standing in the bowl. Like a creature made of hot mud, its surface bubbled and gave off tiny jets of steam. It had the stink of death about it, but also the heady perfume of a dark angel. Wings formed first and they began to beat slowly while expanding. Muzzie had to step back, to avoid being knocked over by the beating wings. Then her legs began to gain the texture of skin, dark grey skin with a subtle hint of blue. Definitely a she, from the clump of hair and clearly visible pudenda between her legs.

"It worked, it worked." Shouted Babaef.

Breasts now, growing out of the chest and taking on the familiar shape, a dark areola forming around each dark black nipple. She had muscular arms, they began to move once the muscles had fully formed, moving around, helping her blood to reach every extremity. Talons glinted in the light from the lamps, but the creature still had no face, just an area of blank mud at the front of her head. Aeony thought the ritual might have failed, but the face came last and it was both beautiful and terrifying in its beauty. A good strong jawline and eyes that were bright green. Her hair began to change, taking on the reddish hue that was talked of in the old books.

"She has the look and bearing of one of the ancients." Said Adamaz.

The creature threw her tail out behind her and walked towards Aeony, obviously trying to speak. Only noises came out of her mouth and they sounded like the raucous noise of a great winged beast. That didn't worry Aeony, she had been warned by Adamaz, that her sisters would need to be taught everything, including a language.

"They should learn quickly." He'd told her. "Treat them like children, large, powerful and potentially vicious children."

Aeony hugged her new sisters and was hugged back.

"Shhister." She heard.

"Yes, I am your sister."

They wouldn't need long to learn, some memories were still there, including some kind of race memory of their common speech. Aeony beckoned over Aishar to look after their newly born dark angel.

"Does she have a name?" Asked Aishar.

"Not until you give her one. Be inventive, think of names you've heard from the days of the ancients."

Aishar led the new dark angel away and Aeony looked at the now empty metal bowl, still steaming and giving off heat. She turned towards Babaef and Muzzie.

"When you're both ready." She said. "We'll do all that again."

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It was just after the first light of morning had begun to spread over the rift. Podd had fallen asleep in a folding chair, but Ash saw the dark angels fly high up to the top of the tower and then circle the City. Aeony in front he decided, with no less than six new sisters following her.

Six reborn on the first night, no one had expected as many as that. They'd become powerful again, just as Podd had told him. Ash drank a mouthful of his master's hard liquor and couldn't see what all the fuss was about. Hard liquor was bitter to the taste and didn't take away his thirst. He drank half a glass of mild ale and watched as the new dark angels circled the City and then headed north over the great river.

The City would be feared again and he hadn't decided if that was good or bad. As he heard a distant cry from one of the new angels, he finally fell asleep.

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Nethra too, had managed to stay awake, though mainly because she had to because of her precarious vantage point. If her tale had relaxed its grip on the chimney, she might well have fallen to her death on the cobbles below.

"Six." She muttered. "Aeony has kept them busy tonight."

Carry on at that pace for a week and Emperor Tarin would have a winged army to strike fear into all the inhabitants of the rifts. Two of the new sisters flew low and Nethra picked up a good whiff of their natural pheromone, which excited her. She had no misgivings about the new dark angels. They would bring peace and law, of a kind, to the City. She wasn't sure if she could bring children into the world, but she was determined to try. Children needed peace to thrive and the new dark angels would ensure that peace.

Nethra climbed down and back into their bedroom, hoping that Merrick would be easy to wake.

Now that she'd decided to have a child, there was no time like the present, to work hard at making it.

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Part 36 will be posted at the end of September.