

City of the Lost God

Part 34 – King Babaef

“Ousha was old and humans didn’t have the life span of demon hybrids. Ten years she had left, if she was lucky.”



The best part of a week after the night of horror in the City and Podd was collecting the final few body parts. People were pointing them out to him now; a week was making them rather odorous. Some had even banged on his yard gate, complaining at the length of time it was taking to clear the streets of the dead.

“There’s only myself and Ash.” He’d told them. “It’ll be done when it’s done; you just need to be patient.”

Aeony had given him a retainer and they’d found a few full purses, so Podd wasn’t complaining, but the number of dead was huge. No one was officially counting, but people were saying that a fifth of the population had died in a single night. It wasn’t anywhere near that of course, people always exaggerate about such things. Podd kept his own tally, though it was hard to count the parts of bodies.

“Five thousand or so, I reckon.” He’d told Ash. “A lot of dead, but it could have been worse.”

“Some were eaten, nothing left.” Ash had commented.

The boy had been right; there could easily have been another thousand, eaten whole. Aeony had arranged for Dredger Demons to enter the City and dig a pit for the dead, otherwise it would have taken months to dispose of them all. Dredgers in the City, it had been a long time since anyone had seen that happen. There was a spirit of optimism after the destruction; some were even suggesting that a battle of some kind had been won. Won by a hero of the City no less.

Podd shook his head and thought it was probably all nonsense. Babaef was busy arranging his own coronation and Adamaz was helping him. It didn’t mean they’d be friends for long. Aeony was actually being helpful, but again, he doubted if it would last for long. Give them a few decades and they’d all be at each other’s throats again.

“Hey, you, bone collector. There are several bodies in the alley next to my house.”

Podd had never liked Arro Jumban, the metal merchant. He’d never really taken to many people in the City, but the metal merchants he had a special loathing for. Pompous and much too full of themselves. Podd saw himself as a public servant though, with a duty to be polite to everyone. Unless they pushed him too far of course.

“They’re behind your locked gate.” Said Podd. “We can’t get to them and we don’t collect from private property.”

“We don’t do private property.” Added Ash.

Jumban was rich and liked to think of himself as a bit of tough character. He put his face about a foot away from Podd’s and glared at him.

“I’ll unlock my gate and then you can take them.” He hissed. “They’re starting to stink.”

“We only take from the streets mister.” Said Ash.

Jumban turned towards Ash, his face going a nice shade of purple.

“Don’t you give me that nonsense lad.” He said. “I want them taken and taken now !”

“He’s right.” Said Podd. “We only collect from the streets. If you want them taken, get your guards to dump them in the street.”

“They are my guards !” Shrieked Jumban. “I have two men left and a few servants.”

Podd wasn't used to being shrieked at, he tried to avoid confrontations whenever possible. He turned his back on Jumban and began shoving his cart.

“Get the bodies out onto the street and I'll take them.” He called over his shoulder.

They'd gone about fifty yards, when the sound of running caught Podd's attention. Two guards, probably Jumban's surviving men. They looked a little out of condition and were puffing a bit, as they stood in front of Podd.

“Our master demands that you collect the bodies on his property.” One said.

Neither had drawn a sword, Podd did have a bit of a reputation as a retired breaker of heads.

“I'm going to the other end of the lanes.” Said Podd. “Get the bodies into the street and I'll pick them up on my way back.”

It was reasonable; Podd knew he was actually being more reasonable than he usually was. The guards showed no sign of going away though. One actually put his hand on the hilt of his sword.

“Our master wants the bodies moved now, he demands it !”

“Your master might demand that the river flows backwards.” Said Podd. “And that isn't happening either.”

The guard started to draw his sword, but Podd grabbed him, easily throwing him to the ground.

“Do you know what I'd get for killing you both ?” Asked Podd.

The second guard was backing away. As there was no answer, Podd told them.

“I'd get two coppers a pound for your body fat.”

He meant it and they sensed it.

“Fine, we'll put the bodies in the street.”

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Babaef had done quite a bit of organising to help the City rebuild, but his main concern was rebuilding the Sorcerers Guild. Actually his main priority was being crowned King of the City, but he was trying to hide such naked ambition.

“Adamaz seems to believe that it would be an insult to the Gods.” Said Pinthrad

“Nonsense, the new extension wasn't as strongly built as the old parts of the City.” Said Babaef. “It wasn't built by a God after all.”

He expected Pinthrad to join in with his laughter, but the elderly clerk just had his usual semi-depressed expression.

“So you still want me to hire builders from Quron ?” Pinthrad asked.

“Yes, yes of course I do.” Said Babaef. “ We've been talking about it for half an hour. Send a messenger and get the stone masons here..... Quickly.”

“Yes Sir, of course.”

It was no use Pinthrad only had one speed, slow. He'd get Chillan to chase things up, once he'd agreed on the procedure and place of his coronation of course. It really was unfortunate, that so many of his servants had died. Nothing seemed to be progressing as fast as he would have liked. Pinthrad left his office and Babaef looked at the swatches the tailor had left. A robe of finest woven Shuud wool, finished off with a fur collar and Thraag feathers perhaps.

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Waide had entered the City with Merrick and Nethra, but she'd decided not to stay with them at Muzzie's. They were her best friends and she'd always be ready to fight with them, but a young couple making plans for the future, can be hell to live with. The City was short of good fighters and

every wealthy family was hiring guards. For a while at least, someone like Waide could name her own price.

“Did you really kill Olvir, Silsk’s lover ?” Asked Barus.

Silsk was dead, it was the talk of the City. Killed during the night when chaos walked the City, though a few were whispering that she’d been assassinated. She was definitely dead, so Waide could be honest.

“Yes, though I didn’t recognise him until after I’d killed him.”

It increased her worth to someone like Barus, who ran a small criminal empire and a tavern. Nothing like Muzzie’s, Barus’ tavern catered for a different type of clientele. Anyone with stolen goods for sale, knew they’d receive a welcome and a good price at Barus’ Tavern. They were sat in the back room of his store, one of the few places in the City to buy weapons and armour.

“Jareg got himself killed during the recent trouble.” Said Barus. “Good guy, but he did drink too much and was going to get himself killed eventually. Do you drink ?”

“I’ve been known to have the occasional drink, but not while I’m working.” She replied.

Barus was looking at her and his two guards, who towered above her. He seemed to have something on his mind.

“Look, you’ve got a reputation, which is good.” He said. “But my customers can be a bit difficult to handle. Jareg could keep them under control, without causing too many broken bones. No offence Waide, but you’re a bit..... erm tiny.”

His men moved towards her, it was obvious that reputation or not, she was going to be tested.

Waide could move like the wind and she’d been in the blood wars, all four of them. She once fought with the League of Forty Thousand and had risen to the rank of General. Two back street ruffians didn’t worry her. She kicked one right behind the knee and sent him sprawling. The other she grabbed by the throat and held against the wall. He was thrashing at her, but was totally unable to escape.

“I could tell you about my huge age and the training I’ve had.” She said. “But you can see that I may be small, but I can take care of myself.”

She dropped the guard to the floor and sat on him, a knife instantly at his throat.

“I’ll keep your clients in order, without killing them.” She added. “I’m good at what I do and I want a room of my own, three meals a day and an imperial gold piece a week.”

Barus was actually applauding her. He was smiling, the first time she’d seen him do anything other than scowl.

“Sorry for the little test.” He said. “But I had to be sure. You can have your room and board, but an imperial a week is too much. I’ll give you an imperial piece every two weeks.”

She put her dagger away and stepped over the man on the floor. Barus took her offered hand and he had a good firm handshake.

“Agreed.” She said.

Waide had her share of the haul from the trip to the basement of the towers, enough gold to last a lifetime. An imperial a fortnight was a vast sum, but it wasn’t the money that mattered to her, it was the respect that came from earning it.

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Lilleth had gone back into the wild areas of the rift, checking on the seer Louelle and others who didn’t take to living in the City. Most had just had the skin wall of a yurt to protect them from the slithering things. Muzzie had offered to go with her, but she’d told him that the City needed him

more than she did. As he strode the streets, accompanied by Bailig, he thought she was probably right.

“All Babaef seems interest in is his damn coronation.” Said Bailig.

Maya had left the City too.

“Unfinished business in Tandalla.” Was all she’d told them.

The pilgrim trail was likely to hold many dangers, but Muzzie thought that they hadn’t seen the last of Maya Orresa. Bailig had been grateful for Muzzie healing his arm, but they’d also quickly formed an unlikely friendship. Not that the arm was completely healed, or ever likely to be. It looked human though and although the elbow joint was damaged, Bailig could still swing a sword with that arm. The finger, the Hand of Arcadis had provided the spell, though Muzzie had felt very tired for a few days.

“Give him a year as King and he’ll be as brutal as Silsk ever was.” Said Muzzie.

“All Kings become tyrants.” Said Bailig.

Babaef was supposed to be with them at the meeting, but he was too busy ordering people about at the guild.

“If I’m not here,” he’d said to them, “Pinthrad will sleep all day and nothing will get done.”

He had agreed that they could agree a time and date on his behalf though, as long as it didn’t conflict with the celebration of his coronation.

“This place always makes me shudder.” Said Bailig.

They were at the entrance to the towers, outside the main door. No one ever used the main doors, even though they were always slightly ajar. Creatures of chaos had taken over the lower floors of the towers and there was no one in the City with the power to make them seek a new home.

“Maybe.” Said Muzzie. “Maybe if we can create enough dark angels. We might see the towers cleansed.”

“Have a care Muzzie, the Lady of the Shrine might not appreciate that.”

Aeony had offered to have them brought to the meeting, but Muzzie didn’t fancy being carried over the City in the talons of a dark angel. There was a ramp that went round the side of the towers and gave access to the great stairs.

“A good sign.” Said Muzzie. “The library still looks to be busy.”

It wasn’t just rumour; the houses protected by blessing spells had definitely fared better than those that weren’t. The library was likely to be at the start of a busy period and a good dozen people were walking up the ramp. Muzzie thanked a woman who held the door open for them and they were at the start of the great stairs.

“I haven’t been here for years.” Said Muzzie. “Though Sara has bought a few spells.”

To their left were the doors leading to the lower levels. Successive generations had driven huge bolts into the stonework and the doors, until they looked capable of resisting an army. It was the same on the next floor up, massive girders fixed across the doors. It wasn’t until the third floor, that the doors opened to allow them access to the Great Library.

“Now fourteen floor of the library to climb.” Said Bailig. “Maybe we should have accepted Aeony’s offer?”

“I might be agreeing with you by the time we get to the top.”

They were early, so Muzzie kept to a slow pace, enjoying the famous ceiling pictures of ancient creatures and a landscape long gone. The stairs were more gradual than the great stairs and they reached the top floor, without feeling tired. Caspian met them as they arrived at the highest level of the library.

"I'd forgotten how huge this place is." Said Muzzie. "How many books are there?"

Caspian was smiling and leading them towards the private rooms, the rooms reserved for the library's best customers.

"Depends who you ask." Said Caspian. "Adamaz always says around a million book, but I worked out an approximate figure of one and a half million. Most are just reference books of course and contain no spells at all."

"That's still a lot of books." Said Bailig.

The room Caspian took them to was large and well furnished; there were even several bottles of various alcoholic drinks. Obviously the customers who spent well, were well looked after. Aeony was there with Aishar, who seemed to be her second in command. Caspian remained in the room too, so they made a fair number, even without Babaef.

"No Babaef?" Asked Adamaz.

"He's given us full authority to agree a date and time." Said Muzzie.

"As long as it's not his coronation day." Added Bailig.

Everyone laughed; they were all beginning to recognise that their new King was rather vain and selfish.

"We left him choosing the material for his coronation robe." Said Muzzie.

It was Adamaz who banged the table to get them to come to order.

"Yes, yes, we're all aware of Babaef's flaws, but we do need his expertise." He said. "And he is fully supportive of what we're going to do."

"Yes of course, no insult was intended." Said Aeony.

A kitchen girl fetched drinks and then they got down to business. Adamaz produced a large and very old document and placed it on the table. It looked to have been printed on some kind of animal hide.

"I must apologise." Said Adamaz. "We need this document, but it is printed on demon hide."

Muzzie was the only person that didn't look disgusted. It was just a book to him and he'd seen plenty that were printed on human skin.

"Foul humans." Said Aeony. "Do we know what type of demon?"

"Dredger I believe." Replied Adamaz.

There was a minute of insults to the humans who had inhabited the City and humans in general.

There were few hybrids in the City, who didn't have a touch of Dredger blood in their family tree.

"This book may be horrendous to us, but the humans give lots of additional information about the spell or rebirth." Said Adamaz. "Firstly the remains of the dark angels need to be reduced to a fine powder."

"Most have been dead for so long, that they're already nothing but powder." Said Aeony.

"There's Silsk's body." Said Aishar.

"We dark angel aren't squeamish." Said Aeony. "I'll do what needs to be done with Silsk's remains." Adamaz nodded at her.

"There is another thing that isn't essential, but the document says that a gift of blood will make the reborn much stronger." Said Adamaz.

"Are you asking us to open a vein librarian?" Asked Bailig.

Aeony was laughing, though not in a cruel way.

"When the humans talk of a gift of blood they mean only one thing." Said Aeony. "A sacrifice."

"Yes." Agreed Adamaz. "Ideally the sacrifice of an innocent, the Amstera Miltus."

Once again Muzzie felt both confused and a little angry.

“Remember that we’re not all scholars of arcane knowledge.” He said.

“He means the heart of a child.” Said Bailig. “Specifically, a new born.”

“No !” Shouted Muzzie. “You said it wasn’t essential and I’m having nothing to do with killing children.”

“It could be an adult.” Said Adamaz. “From the slums, someone who won’t be missed.”

It was Bailig who brought sanity back to the meeting.

“Everyone is missed.” He said. “I agree with Muzzie..... no one dies.”

Adamaz looked around the room, specifically at Aeony, who nodded at him.

“Fine.” Said Adamaz. “We’ll leave the gift of blood out of the ritual. Next a date and as Babaef is to be crowned in twenty one days time, I’d recommend sooner rather than later.”

“We don’t want to upstage his gown.” Commented Caspian.

Adamaz banged the table to regain order but Muzzie noticed that the elderly librarian had joined in with the laughter.

“May I suggest a week from today at an hour after full dark.” Said Adamaz.

They all agreed and the meeting became informal. Muzzie decided to sample the drinks kept for the best customers of the library.

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Ousha had been Silsk’s servant for many years and she’d actually enjoyed most of it. Good servants were hard to find in the City and she’d been paid a decent wage and fed well. She had suffered at the hands of Silsk, even had some of her ribs broken. Silsk had been a sadist and Ousha was often the target of her blind fury. Her injuries always healed though and Silsk invariably gave her a few presents to serve as an apology. So life could have been worse.

She didn’t even mind being taken over with the apartments, like some piece of human furniture. Aeony wasn’t as brutal as Silsk, everyone knew it. With luck the beatings were over. Aeony knew she was a full blood human of course, everyone with a little of the sight knew. But good servants were hard to find and poor misshapen Ousha wasn’t about to harm anyone. She’d been left alone to get on with her duties.

Ousha had known where Silsk kept her best jewellery though and the hiding place for her expensive weapons. At first she’d left everything in their hiding places, just in case Aeony knew of their existence. It was obvious that her new mistress either didn’t care about or didn’t know of Silsk’s valuables. Ousha filled a large satchel, the sort made of animal skin. The old human was stronger than she looked and had no trouble in carrying the satchel through the streets of the City.

“I have something you might be interested in.” She said.

Galla opened her door and let her inside. She felt safe in Galla’s shop, the empath had provided her with healing powders, after some of Silsk’s beatings had left her with broken bones. There was also some human in Galla. Not a huge amount, but enough for Ousha to see and make her almost kin.

There were a few others in the City with a touch of human in them and they too were left in peace. In a City where all are hybrids, even the intolerable are tolerated.

“How is your new mistress treating you ?” Asked Galla.

Ousha walked over to the couch and cushions that were kept for friends and really good customers. She knew that Galla wouldn’t object, she’d often sat on the comfortable couch.

“I can’t complain.” Said Ousha. “Aeony seems to be stable and sane, which will make a nice change. Not sure if I like the idea of there being lots more dark angels.”

Galla poured two glasses of wine, she always had the best wines in the City.

"They'll keep the City safe." Said Galla. "Babaef can give himself the title of King, but it will always be the dark angels who wield the real power."

Galla sat beside her and lifted the satchel onto the drinks table.

"You're sure these things won't be missed?" She asked.

"I'm certain." Said Ousha. "Aeony seems unworried about jewellery and such things. She hasn't the vanity that Silsk had, I've only seen her look in the mirror once."

Some of the more fragile items in the satchel had been wrapped in rag. Galla carefully unwrapped the precious things and placed them on the table.

"Careful with the large bowl, it burned my fingers." Said Ousha.

She watched as Galla unwrapped the blue bowl, being careful to avoid touching it with her bare hands.

"There is real power in this bowl, real darkness." Said Galla. "I will buy this from you and give you a good price. The jewellery I can find buyers for."

There were so many beautiful things, that they spread off the drinks table and onto the floor. Galla seemed only interested the various pieces of magical paraphernalia.

"Oh Ousha, my friend." Said Galla. "I never knew that Silsk was into ancient magic. These things are superb. This dagger is from beyond gateway and well beyond what I can afford."

Galla was waving a black metal dagger around as she spoke.

"Will there be enough gold for me to leave the City?" Asked Ousha.

"Enough to hire a whole army of guards and live wherever you please, even Tandalla."

Galla was grinning at her. They both knew that the zealots in Tandalla, didn't take to hybrids, let alone a pure blood human.

"Quron will do for me." Said Ousha. "I know people there and they say that Quron wasn't damaged too badly during the troubles."

The apothecary had moved several items into a small heap and was counting on her fingers.

"The bowl is worth fifty imperial, the amulet a good twenty." Muttered Galla. "I'll give you an honest price, but it will clear out most of my savings. A hundred and twenty imperial, I'll give you the money now."

"Keep it for me." Said Ousha. "Aeony seems fine, but my room might be searched."

"Yes, I'll hang onto your money." Said Galla. "I don't think you realise how much money you're likely to get. It'll take a while, but with the jewellery and the small statues..... I can see you ending up with a thousand imperial, maybe a bit more. As to the dagger!? I doubt if anyone in the City could give you it's real worth."

"Is it really that valuable?"

Galla lowered her voice to a whisper.

"Made by the artisans of Leng, it's priceless. The right buyer would give you two or three thousand imperial, but with the troubles..... few have that kind of money available."

Two or three thousand! It was an unimaginable sum, as was the thousand Galla was promising for the jewellery. Ousha was old and humans didn't have the life span of demon hybrids. Ten years she had left, if she was lucky. She could live like a Queen for ten years in Quron, on a quarter of the money Galla would give her. She picked up the dark knife and shuddered at where it had come from.

"Would you like this..... thing?" She asked.

"Yes of course." Replied Galla. "Just owning it would increase my reputation and bring in more customers."

Ousha pushed the dagger towards Galla.

“Then take it, as a gift.” She said. “And there is no hurry about selling the rest. It’ll be months until the pilgrim trail is safe again. I’ll talk to Merrick about hiring guards for the journey, but as I say, no hurry.”

“Thank you Ousha, I don’t know what to say. Such a wonderful gift.”

“It is a thing of evil, I feel it.” Said Ousha. “I’ll be happier, knowing you have it and that it’s not going to hurt anyone.”

Ousha saw that Galla was confused and watched her for a long time, as she left the store and walked up the street. Galla had a little human in her, but not enough to understand why Ousha was so pleased to be rid of the dagger, the thing of evil, the thing from Leng.

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Merrick was out of course, he always seemed to have a deal to do or some meeting to attend. Nethra was actually pleased. They’d made a success of their brief time in Avald and they’d come home with a fair sized fortune from Merrick’s trip to the lower basement of the towers. Add it all together and Merrick was now a confident and assured person. Of course, Silsk being dead helped a lot. Sara had been left to run the tavern, when they’d arrived outside with their carts.

“We’ll need a decent sized room and somewhere to store our gear.” Nethra had said. “If you’ll have us?”

“And I suppose you’ll need the yard to keep your carts, a sit down meal in half an hour and all for a copper a day.” Sara had replied.

Nethra remembered being stunned and Merrick looking upset. Then Sara had laughed.

“Of course you shall have your room.” Said Sara. “The extension was full, but people are beginning to go home, living in whatever shelter they can throw together. The dark angels patrol all night now, to protect the City from looters.”

Merrick had gone deathly pale at the mention of dark angels and Sara had laughed again.

“Don’t worry Merrick, Silsk is dead.” She’d said. “Killed on the night of the troubles. There were a lot of deaths and you’ll see a lot of changes. Now let me show you the top floor of the extension. You’ll love it, good view and you can hardly smell the animals from up there.”

Sara had sent two of the tavern’s regulars to show their porters where to put the carts. Then another half dozen of the regulars had carried their bags, trunks and chests up their rooms. Sara seemed to treat the regulars as unpaid additions to the staff, though none of them seemed to mind. They’d been given the entire top floor of the extension and at a good rate.

“..... and then there’s King Babaef, or at least he soon will be.”

Sara had filled their heads with all the news and changes in the City. Runa had helped her to make their rooms look more homely. The poor girl who’d lost her entire family became her friend, as had the maid who followed her everywhere.

“Her mother’s maid.” Sara had told her. “Seems a bit touched by the events of that night, quite a few are. No harm in her though and she helps out in the kitchen.”

The maid slept on a straw mattress, in a corner of Runa’s room. It was a little strange, but strange seemed to be the new normal in the City. Cas was the maid’s name, or at least the name she now answered to. Nethra had taken to them both and a recent incident had given her even more respect for Runa.

Runa had gone out into the yard, to fetch a bird for the pot. One of the customers had taken a bit of a shine to the girl, most of the customers had. Nethra was watching from a window and quietly descended the stairs, in case things became serious. The customer cuddled Runa and touched her where she wasn’t happy to be touched.

“Runa didn’t say a word, not a word.” She later told Merrick.

Runa had pulled a dagger out of her belt and cut him. Not too deep, nothing dangerous, just a scar on his chest to teach him a lesson. Then she’d held the knife up in front of his face, still not saying a word.

“I’m so sorry Runa.” He’d said. “Too much to drink. Please don’t tell Sara.”

Runa had used her dagger, to point at the gate into the side alley.

“There’s the gate.” She said. “Go and don’t come back until you’re sober.”

He’d left and as far as Nethra knew, Runa had never told anyone about the incident. Now they were friends and Nethra was waiting for Runa to arrive with their lunch. Runa was no longer the carefree girl she’d once been, but the City did that..... it changed people.

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Tarin had found a new building in Old Town; his old home had been torn apart by the recent quakes. Aeony had helped him find a building from the days of Tomma-Goran, a building that had survived for countless millennia and likely to last for many more.

“Solid stone placed here by a deity.” Aeony had said. “One street away from Galla and well away from the slums.”

He’d also be only one street away from Wēland, the new worker of metals in the City. Wēland intrigued him and he was looking forward to meeting the competition. Aeony had officially given him the house, but he couldn’t see Babaef objecting. Part of Tarin knew he should resent Babaef for claiming to have destroyed Yam Kermul, but he never had sought fame. Fortune maybe, but never fame. A young woman walked into his workroom and placed a glass of ale where he could easily reach it. She had her own glass and she sipped from it, as she watched him work.

“Do you mind me watching ?” She asked.

“No, stay as long as you like.”

A girl from the slums, his for a few coppers. She’d claimed that her name was Sevril, which had amused him. The names of the old deities were carved all over the City, just a pity that the girl had chosen the name of the most evil deity ever to walk the rifts. Sex with the girl had been good, but she had really been an experiment.

“I could stay..... if you like.” She said. “Cook something if you want ?”

He dug in his pockets and found a few City coins. They didn’t have much silver in them, but most of the food sellers accepted them.

“That would be nice.” He said. “Buy a few things, fresh bread if you can find some.”

She gave him a huge grin and took the coins. He’d fed her the night before and he was feeding her again, feeding her might become a habit. Was that a problem ? Tarin had been eating normal food and actually enjoying it. He still felt an urge to eat the flesh of the dead, but the urge was very mild and easily controlled. A reward from the Lady of the Shrine perhaps ?

Sex with the girl had been good, surprisingly good. He’d paid her extra to stay the night and she was still alive. The experiment had been a success. He no longer had the uncontrollable appetite of a ghūl. He had the more positive attributes though, he still had the strength and heightened senses of a ghūl. Tarin hit the hot metal on his forge and gradually it became the blade of a plough. No swords for a while, the City needed ploughs, spades and hammers.

“I bought a live bird from Muzzie’s.”

He’d been concentrating on his work and it felt as though the girl had only been gone for a minute or so. Just walking to Muzzie’s and back was an hour’s journey.

“Brilliant.” He said. “Nothing like a freshly cooked bird for dinner.”

He ate dinner with the girl and discovered that her real name was Flax. The sex had been good again, actually far better than just good. Flax had refused his offer to pay her and moved from being a working girl to being a stray who might stay a while, or might not.

In the darkest part of the night Tarin awoke. He felt no urge to feed on Flax, he gently stroked her face until she woke.

"I need to go out for a while." He told her. "You're quite safe here and I'll be back before morning." She never asked him where he was going, she just smiled and kissed him. Tarin dressed and headed for the shrine grounds. He had to know if he was permanently cured of the ghūl hunger, or if he was just going through some sort of phase.

He entered the shrine temple with no clear plan. There were chaos creatures hiding in the temple, he could feel them, but felt no fear. He stood in front of the altar and looked at the statue of the Lady of the Shrine. What to do ? He'd brought no gift, no offering. He looked at his shoes and fell into the kind of trance that he often fell into while working. Time went past, yet he seemed to have been stood there for only a few seconds.

"Well Tarin, are you ever going to say why you're here ?"

Tarin looked up and the statue was alive. He could see her eyes glowing in the darkness, feel her breath on his cheek. There was even a slight perfume of Ashunt blooms in the air. Each of her arms moved and each held a dagger. Tarin knew that chaos owed him a debt, but he'd still need to be careful.

"I am sorry..... I have no offerings."

Stupid thing to say, in truth he didn't really know what to ask her.

"Ahh Tarin, are you jealous of Babaef ?" She asked. "You'd make a much better leader for the City. Not a King, but an emperor..... Tarin the Great ! I will gladly snuff out that fool Babaef and make you emperor....."

For a second or so, he saw himself at the front of a vast army. He saw himself as emperor of the City and all the rifts were under his control. Then he was just Tarin the worker of metals again and that pleased him.

"No, I am content. Actually more than content..... I am happy."

The Lady extended a finger and gently rubbed his cheek. The finger felt soft and comforting.

"I begin to see Tarin." She said. "Yes, I did give you a reward, of a kind. I could sense that your ghūl nature was not only causing you distress, but might put you at risk."

"Thank you.....I erm..... thank you !"

"Don't forget you will always be a ghūl." She said. "It is your nature and gives you strength. Once a year at least, you will need to feed. Keep it away from the City and keep it secret."

"I will, thank you."

The Lady of the Shrine leant towards him and actually kissed his lips. Her breath was moist and warm, but not unpleasant.

"Tarin, you are currently my favourite child of chaos." She said. "Are you sure you don't want to be my emperor and rule the rifts ?..... I might even let you attack Leng itself."

It was very tempting, but the days of ghūls were past. He had no desire to be anything other than a maker of weapons and ploughs.

"I am always your to command." He said.

"Indeed you are Tarin, indeed you are. Seven times you've taken an oath to serve chaos and obey all commands to the best of your ability."

Tarin knelt, it felt the right thing to do.

"If you order it, I shall be your emperor and gladly attack gateway itself..... but I would rather just be Tarin the worker of metals."

Laughter, though not of the unkind sort.

"Get up Tarin, no kneeling today and no orders."

She seemed lost in thought, the huge statue that was no longer a statue, but a living creature of immense size and power.

"Keep Flax by you Tarin, she may be useful." She said. "Become quiet Tarin who bothers no one. I will have use of your sword arm again and then it will be an order. For now though, enjoy being a worker of metals."

It was a statue again, made from a white marble of some kind. It could have all been a delusion, if it wasn't for the bunch of Ashunt blooms at his feet. The offering he'd been too preoccupied to remember. He picked up the blooms and placed them on the altar.

"I am always yours to command." He said.

He returned home to find Flax still asleep in his bed.

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Where to take the body ? Aeony had intended to break up Silsk's remains in the temple where the urns were kept. Then she thought that seemed an insult to the deities. Turning the sacred place into an abattoir was wrong, she intuitively knew it. It had to be done during darkness, that she was certain about. It was likely to take two or three nights, so there was no time to lose.

"Oh Babaef, what have you done ?"

Aeony had liked the ancient human temple that lay the other side of the great river. She'd often gone there to think and be alone. Most people from the City, shunned anything of human creation. She hadn't seen the temple, since it had been destroyed and buried deep into the ground. It had seemed the perfect place, a deserted temple that few visited. Perhaps it still was the perfect place. On the river bank there was an area of stone floor, with a mosaic of a serpent in the centre. Aeony had knives and hammers in her bag, but there were stones here, heavy stones.

"For better or worse Silsk, it shall be here." She muttered.

Aeony removed the top from the urn and the smell of corruption rose to greet her. She'd known it was going to be unpleasant, but she'd done worse. She'd fed on worse, during the famous bad winter a century or so before. Silsk had stiffened in death, her body was jammed into the urn. Breaking the sacred urn was out of the question, especially as it was needed to take the powdered remains back to the City. A creature of some kind was foraging in the nearby thorn scrub. It picked up the scent of a dark angel and fled whimpering into the night.

"Sorry old friend." Said Aeony.

She pulled at Silsk's arm, ignoring the sounds of snapping sinews and breaking bones. Her dagger sliced through flesh and bone and Silsk's arm was thrown onto the mosaic floor. The next arm was easier, there was now more space in the urn. The head came up out of the urn just enough for Aeony to be able to get at the neck. The bones of the spine were tough, but Aeony quickly added Silsk's head to the growing pile of body parts.

"Good idea picking somewhere near a river." She muttered to herself.

Upraising the urn to get at the body had allowed the liquids inside to pour out and cover her from head to foot. Aeony's knife was now slipping about in her hands, so she washed them clean in the river. Not the rest of her, that was likely to become even grubbier and covered in more bodily fluids. She'd clean herself properly later.

Silsk's body had swollen up a little and was wedged, she had to cut it apart while it was inside the urn. Then the hip bones had to be broken apart and of course, the legs became jammed. Eventually Aeony was covered in foul smelling fluids and looking at a pile of dark angel body parts. She washed out the urn and left it upside down to drain out and dry. Now came the really nasty part and it couldn't be avoided. Maybe it was some kind of penance for killing her old friend and mentor ? Everything had to be broken apart, crushed and eventually powdered. Aeony picked up a large piece of broken marble and brought it down on Silsk's head, then again and again.....

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Part 35 will be posted at the end of August.