

The Last Emperor

Chapter 33 – New Sisters

“Runa looked at the four dead street thugs and realised that ruling the city, didn’t mean the streets were safe. For some, a change in the ruling hierarchy was an opportunity. The militia were gone and there was nothing in its place to enforce law and order.”



General Dhūlen was confused, which had once been a rare occurrence. Now Muzzie had him confused on an almost a daily basis. Dhūlen had collected together his essential in a few bags, which could go on a cart. He’d talked to three of his personal team, who seemed happy to go with him. It had all been arranged, apart from a definite date. One of his servants had even raided the stores for supplies. Dried food of course, nothing perishable It was going to happen; had to happen if Dhūlen wanted to see another birthday. He was going to run, as quickly as his legs would carry him.

“Please give him a cheer.....Our victorious General Dhūlen.” Yelled Muzzie.

Muzzie was praising him again, which certainly seemed genuine, but might not be. Dhūlen thought that Muzzie was very much a ‘what you see, is what you get, emperor.’ There had been the arranged reinstatement of the usurped King Zin Thriaxer of Kahan. That had been so unexpected and a little underhand. Muzzie had definitely ordered the death of Pio-Xanash, last living descendant of emperor Xanash the thirty fourth. Everyone knew about that, though no one seemed to hold it against Muzzie. Emperors did sometimes need to be devious and underhand; it went with the job. Was Muzzie really grooming Dhūlen for great things, or trying to give him a false sense of security ? “Aeony will be Queen of the Dark Angels.” Shouted Muzzie. “Aeony will also be Queen of the City of the Lost God, entrusted with the defence of the famous city. General Dhūlen will be head of the city militia, once he’s seen me crowned emperor in Leng. I see my general as being the day to day governor of the city.”

There it was, clear as day and witnessed by thousands in the square near the Towers. Dhūlen would be governor of the city, with Aeony defending against any threats from external enemies. The title of governor was rarely used, but effectively meant the ruler if the King, or Queen, died or was removed by the emperor. It was a serious role and might mean Dhūlen had got it all wrong. Maybe Muzzie never had known he was disloyal ? It meant those who’d agreed to run away with him, had to be removed. A pity really, they had been good friends.

“Next.....Named by Maya as Uula Podda, this.....Is a baby Ancient One.”

It seemed Muzzie was going to stick with Maya’s ridiculous name for the creature, which meant Long Legs in one of the ancient languages of the rifts. There it was hanging around Muzzie’s neck and clearly feeling safe. Muzzie was big on sending out statements. Taking the demon city, Segin-Unadaris, had been a statement to all the rifts, that the new emperor had no favourites. Whoever a city belonged to, if he wanted it as part of the empire, they should submit to his rule or suffer the consequences. Make a statement loud enough and with enough bravado.....Even Leng had forgiven him. Keeping a baby Ancient One close to him, was one hell of a statement.

“According to the ancient scrolls, an adult Ancient One is indestructible.” Muzzie shouted to the crowd. “It is said that their legs are so long, they could step over the city walls of Quron.”

Cheers, loud and genuine cheers for the child of beings who'd once slaughtered millions, right across the rifts. Usually there had been a justification for war, but not always. Uula Podda was likely to be a huge crowd pleaser; mainly because of the reputation of its parents. It, he, or she ?

"Do we have a sex for the child ?" Shouted Dhūlen. "Is Uula a girl child, or a male ?"

"Llud believes we have a girl, a future princess, or even a Queen." Yelled Muzzie. "There is still a little doubt though. It seems their sex isn't obvious until they reach the age of seventy, or eighty years."

"That's a hell of a long time to wait to find out who to go courting with." From Belso.

"I suppose they get used to it." Said Muzzie.

Quron would hear of a baby Ancient One clambering all over Muzzie, as would the High Council of Leng. It was either a piece of genius, or good luck. Dhūlen was beginning to understand Muzzie better and it was the act of.....Not a genius, but a very clever hybrid. As it looked as though he was still going to lead the army against the assembled fighters of Quron.....Dhūlen hoped the young Ancient One thrived.

"Will she be ready to fight against Quron ?" Yelled Runa.

"Sadly not.....But I'm sure her parents will be watching." Said Muzzie.

~ ~

Aeony opened the jar containing the powdered remains of Silsk. She'd killed the dark angel who'd been queen before her. They'd fought on the roof of the Towers and after destroying her wings, Aeony had thrown Silsk hurtling to her death, far below. Dark angels were tough, but even the legendary Silsk, couldn't survive that kind of fall. Mind you, her heart had carried on beating for a few minutes, as she'd hovered between life and oblivion.....

"Not much left, but if I only use a pinch, or two.....There will be enough." Said Aeony.

"I'm surprised you want anything of her in the mix." Said Faal.

"She was brutal and a little mad." Said Aeony. "Tough though and my sisters created with just a little of her in the ritual.....They've been the best in battle."

Faalr'h Ha'radask had probably been the most powerful magician to walk the rifts. Maybe a little damaged by time and spending countless millennia sealed up in the Necropolis.....But he was still more than capable of doing what was required.

They were in a shrine that had been used to create dark angels, in the times when they were so numerous; it was said their wings darkened the sky. A hidden shrine near the top of the mountain and just below the Dome. Muzzie would be needed for the great day, the time of rebirth. Adamaz would be there too and even Podd had a role to play. Officially any in the shrine who weren't dark angels, were to be punished by death. The rebirth though.....Unusual times called for a relaxing of the rules. Aeony opened a jar containing the remains of Aishar. Caspian had left her sister in one piece, after cutting her finger off to recover the ring, which Aeony now wore. As was the tradition, Aishar had been cut into small pieces, to fit into the jar.

"I will use Aishar in the ritual, but she was far from being the best." Said Aeony. "Officially no record is kept of who were used to create who.....But I remember. None of Silsk went into the mix for Aishar. Not even a tiny pinch."

"You seem to be hinting that Caspian the great.....Might not be that great after all." Said Faal.

"Oh, I am saying no such thing." Said Aeony. "Caspian didn't find the blade of Mozzrik, it found him. What looks like pure luck, isn't.....Trust me; I've been watching Caspian for years. He.....Seems to attract good luck and of course.....He always wins a fight."

"Well.....So far he's always won." Muttered Faal.

“Try your luck Faal, challenge Caspian to single combat.” Said Aeony. “I guarantee Muzzie will forbid it, because he needs you, his lucky number eight. If the combat actually happened.....I’ll put Ashunt blooms on your grave.”

“Preposterous.” Said Faal.

His expression didn’t match his defiant tone. Faal might be made up of about two thirds chaos magic, but there was a hint of fear when it came to Caspian. Just as well, the ladies of Muzzie’s court were likely to miss Faal. Aeony had heard the stories of his prowess between the sheets. It seemed he became fully an Emarduk during sexual climax. According to whispers, even Runa quite liked being surrounded by all those feathers. Not Aeony’s thing, but everyone to their own and all that.....

“A surprising number of my sisters survived the battle for the city.” Said Aeony. “The essence of the dead is all that’s required for the ritual. About a dozen of the dead dark angels, will be enough to create around two hundred new sisters.”

“As you asked, I did read the ritual.” Said Faal. “Nothing in the instructions should be a problem, but.....I did notice that the remains need to be crushed down into a powder....Or at least a moist mush.”

Good, he’d actually read the instructions. Not easy, as much of it was in a mixture of Terak and an old human language that even humans had stopped using. Despite a natural cynicism, Aeony allowed herself to be impressed. A memory surfaced, of needing the help of LLud Narren. He needed to be invited as the ritual documents were his. Any problem in translation, had the potential to be catastrophic.

“It’ll be done here, by my sisters and I.” Said Aeony. “On this floor, in our most sacred shrine. We’ll use axes to break up the flesh of our dead sisters. Then will come the hard part, turning their flesh into a mush. Our bodies resist corruption, though some unpleasant odour is inevitable.”

The remains of at least three dead sisters were required for each revivification, the renewal or restoration of life. According to the instructions, but no more than eight. Aeony had the distinct advantage of going through the ritual before, though it had been a very long time ago.

“Who is the bringer of knowledge ?” Asked Faal.

“That will be Muzzie.”

“Who is the bringer of wisdom ?” Asked Faal.

“That will be Adamaz.” Said Aeony. “It worked last time, so with luck.....It’ll work again.”

“Who is the bringer of power ?” Asked Faal.

“That will be you..... Faal’fh Ha’adask, magician from Gateway.”

The last time, they’d invented reasons for various nobles to be there. This time it would just be the essential people. Podd the bone collector would have a few words to say. Not important words, but Podd was as essential to the city as clean water and the farmlands. Every great city worthy of the name, needs a bone collector. Podd deserved to be there for the ritual.

“When will you be ready to give birth to new sisters ?” Asked Faal.

Give birth was an odd way of describing it, though last time.....Aeony had felt as though something was being sucked out of her.

“Two days and nights to prepare the flesh of my dead sisters.” Said Aeony. “Three days from now, we will bring everyone here and.....My new sisters will be born.”

~

~

Runa looked at the four dead street thugs and realised that ruling the city, didn’t mean the streets were safe. For some, a change in the ruling hierarchy was an opportunity. The militia were gone and there was nothing in its place to enforce law and order. Actually, not quite nothing.....Runa was out

with a patrol, just fifty warriors and LLud Narren. Actually, not just LLud Narren, the woman who'd briefly been his wife was there too. Fifty of Muzzie's best fighters, a hugely powerful sorcerer and Dhali Pril, the unstoppable weapon. When Runa thought of it that way, her patrol to keep the streets safe, felt a little over resourced.....

"No, leave the dead where they lay." Said Runa. "Podd will collect their bodies; it's how he earns a living to put food on the table."

Two tiny coins from the city, but there was always their clothing to sell and a decent blade would feed Podd and Ash for a week. A decent quality bow and Ash would be sent out to the market to buy meat for their dinner.

"They have a cart.....That would be useful to carry my boxes." Said LLud.

"Yes, we'll take the cart." Said Runa.

An officer ordered three of the warriors to push the cart. They weren't happy, but they'd push the cart all the way to Quron if ordered to. They'd won, so the fighters weren't happy with patrolling the streets. They wanted to be enjoying themselves in a brothel, while getting drunk. A reasonably ambition, it was how Runa had decided to spend her first free day.

"How are you, Dhali?" Asked Runa. "Any ill effects from turning into.....The weapon?"

Runa had been in the south of the City of the Lost God and hadn't seen Dhali change into hundreds of deadly creatures. Others had seen it though and it sounded incredible. Runa was sure they'd see Dhali transform again, during the battle for Quron.

"Fatigue will be a problem for a few days." Said Dhali. "Becoming so many creatures.....It's very tiring."

"Yes, I can understand that." Said Runa.

LLud was looking over the cart, telling the fighters the best way to push it, once it was fully laden with his boxes of precious artefacts. Runa noticed that he and Dhali, often touched hands. There had been a few seconds, when they'd actually held hands. Were they rekindling an old romance? Runa had put up with so much gossip about her own love life.....LLud and Dhali were both adults. They could screw each other's brains out if they wanted to. It was no concern of hers.

"Are we going all the way to the Dome, LLud?" Asked Runa.

"No, I left everything at the Sorcerers Guild." Said LLud. "Pinthrad has hired some guards and the building seemed a safe place."

Some of the hired guards might well turn out to be Muzzie's fighters. Fresh from a battle and eager to earn a little extra in gold. Muzzie wouldn't care, as long as they were ready to march, when the day came to lay siege to Quron.

"Be nice to see Pinthrad, he was a friend of my father." Said Runa. "Let's get moving then.....There will definitely be some decent wine at the guild."

Dhali and LLud touched hands again while walking to the guild. At one point, LLud did something that made his ex-wife laugh. Runa knew the signs, the expressions. If they weren't currently sharing a bed, they soon would be. Luckily, Runa was alert and expecting trouble.

"Watch out!" Yelled Runa. "Coming from the old exchange building.....Largest full blood Shelzak I've ever seen."

A huge male Shelzak demon, who'd been wounded. It looked like most of one shoulder had been smashed, but with a Shelzak.....That would have just made him angry. Blood in his eyes and a rage building in his mind. There'd be no reasoning with him, but Runa felt the need to try. Just about everything on a Shelzak was armoured, even their groin. Fighting one was just about impossible....

"There is no need for this." Yelled Runa. "Calm down and we can have a drink later....Laugh about when we nearly killed one another."

No, he wasn't going to calm down. If anything the Shelzak increased his pace, as he headed straight at Dhali. At least he seemed intent on attacking someone who stood a chance of killing him in a fight. Lots of heavily armed fighters, the Shelzak was certain to die, but not until he'd created a lot of death and pain on the way. One of the Greys from Annill stood in his way and the Shelzak crushed his skull with a single blow. The warrior was wearing a metal helmet, which was buckled and pushed deep into his head. The fighter fell to the ground and the Shelzak carried on striding towards Dhali. It was one of those times, when Runa did a quick count on her life, the good things she'd done, versus the bad. She thought the scales were pretty much in her favour.

"I'm ready to die." She said. "I can cause you a lot of pain Shelzak, while I'm on the way to dying."

Runa wasn't wearing that much armour and the brute had to be four times her size, with the weight that went with the size. Muzzie had fought a few Shelzaks and he was still alive, while most of the Shelzaks had died. That meant his words had weight and deserved respect.

"They have bone plates under their skin.....Everything is armoured." He'd told her. "There is one weak point on a Shelzak. Between the bone under the skin of their chest and their upper arm bone plate.....Is a small unarmoured gap in their armpit. Stab there and as long as they haven't used a metal armour shield, the Shelzak will die."

"Supposing they are wearing a metal shield?"

"Well....You could try stabbing it in the eye, but that is a real one in a million type of move.....Really, you need to stand toe to toe with it and pummel it to death."

The pummelling method had nearly got Muzzie killed. If a friendly Genova hadn't been around, Muzzie might have died a very long time ago. For her, the whole pummelling thing was a non-starter. Runa waited for the brute to come to her. She then ran her blade across the back of its right hand. Through its gauntlet and deep into the muscle. It might have bone plates just about everywhere, but cut it.....And it still felt pain. The Shelzak yelled, roared at her, then yelled again.

"Go.....Go from here.....Or die." Shouted Runa.

No one had ever accused a Shelzak of being too clever, of over thinking things. They were the ultimate in big, but stupid. Runa had hurt it, so she had to be killed. As it raised a fist to hit her, Runa stabbed at its armpit. There was a screech, as the tip of her blade found a metal plate. Fuck.....The Shelzak had armoured just about the only weak spot on its body. It actually smiled at her, which was fairly terrifying.

"I get it.....You're stupid, but not that stupid." Runa yelled.

Something had hurt it during the battle for the city. Runa thought the gash on its face, which was still bleeding, probably hadn't improved its mood. Some Shelzak spoke the common tongue of the rifts, though most got by with roaring and grunting. This one spoke.

"You will die.....Now."

The voice matched the way it looked; angry, brutal and not too bright. The Shelzak grabbed her hair, where it bunched up below her helmet. It pulled her head backwards and lifted its club like fist. It would die at the hands of Muzzie's warriors, but only after it had killed her.

"No !" Shouted LLud Narren.

LLud grabbed the Shelzak's arm, which as fighting moves went, seemed fairly useless. The brute was obviously curious, which delayed it crushing her head with one blow.

"I am sorry." Said LLud.

The Shelzak was gone, vanished completely. Runa was left looking at the space where it had been. She'd have preferred to see it crushed, or dying in a ball of fire, but being sent far away would do. "Thank you, LLud.....Where did you send it ?" Asked Runa.

"I'm not proud of sending it there, but I had to be sure it couldn't return." Said LLud. "I sent the Shelzak to the scorching desert of the seventh rift. No escape from there and in a few hours; it'll be nothing but a pile of ashes."

Hell ! Was what most called the hottest part of the seventh rift. Hotter than an oven, maybe even hotter than a metal worker's forge. Very few living things could cross that desert and survive. Runa felt pity for the Shelzak, but she was also grateful to be alive.

"It was offered a choice and chose badly." Said Dhali.

"Time to move, the dead warrior can go on the cart." Said LLud. "I'm going to feel far safer once I collect my artefacts from the Sorcerers Guild."

"Anything really special, or powerful ?" Asked Runa.

"Everything is special, Runa.....And Powerful." Said LLud. "One particular weapon from another world; will blast holes through the toughest and widest of city walls."

~ ~

Muzzie liked the baby Ancient One and it seemed to like him. Uula Podda was a strange name, but even after just a few days of being alive, the creature knew its name. It loved to eat live Nesh bugs, but would eat just about everything, even some types of leaves. It was useful having servants to collect the food Uula liked and of course, to clean up her droppings. Muzzie had forbade anyone to dress the child in a nappy.....It just didn't feel right. After all, the Ancient Ones were still considered sacred to many tribes on the rifts.....

"You're sure you don't mind me bringing Uula to the ritual ?" Asked Muzzie.

"No, my sisters think it's a good thing.....Even a blessing." Said Aeony. "And there are those waiting to clean up any little presents, she may leave in dark corners."

Faal had mentioned it was likely to be two years, before the child spoke. Uula was bright though and would probably house train herself long before then. Despite not having much of an interest in having his own children, Muzzie was looking forward to watching Uula learn and grow.

Grow.....She'd soon need a huge home of her own.

"Did you hear from Podd ?" Asked Muzzie.

"Yes, he'll be there and he's allowed to bring the boy, Ash." Said Aeony. "There are so many friends who have to be included and hangers on.....We'll have trouble fitting them all inside the shrine. Vella insisted on bringing N'Fady, in case her gown requires adjustment."

Muzzie had been at the previous rebirth of new sisters, or revivification as Adamaz called it. The shrine was only reachable by flying, which meant carrying attendees without wings. Last time is had taken two of the dark angels to carry Muzzie. As he was their emperor now, he hoped there'd be less rude comments about his weight.

"I hate wearing clothes, but the instructions call for me to be in these robes." Said Aeony.

"Personally.....I think you look gorgeous in them."

"Thank you."

Aeony briefly touched his lips with hers and Muzzie felt something. They'd never be married or anything like that. There'd never be children either; dark angels were incapable of giving birth. Everyone knew they were together though, for the long term. As Aeony had kissed him, Muzzie knew he wanted them to be together forever. In a world where romance tended to be all about

whether the bits fitted, they'd found something special. And of course, the bits did fit, in a truly wonderful way.

"You look nervous.....Do you want me to carry you to the shrine ?" Asked Aeony.

"No, that would be worse.....Two of your sisters I don't know is far better.....Far less embarrassing." Muttered Muzzie.

Muzzie had dressers, to get him into the official armour of the emperor. They'd spent ages pulling and tugging, but Muzzie liked to have a few moments by himself, with just a mirror for company. As he looked in the mirror and adjusted his belt, Aeony gave his neck a playful nip with her very sharp teeth.

"Good enough to eat." Said Aeony. "No hurry, I will go now, but the emperor can be as late as he wants. Don't forget to pick up Uula, or she'll get upset."

Aeony left and Muzzie found Uula sleeping on the bed he shared with Aeony. The child wasn't allowed in their bedroom at night. She seemed far too good at realising the very worst moment to clamber all over them. He picked her up and even half asleep, she wrapped herself around his neck. "It's time Uula.....The new sisters are about to be created." Muzzie muttered.

Bird.....Everyone in the City of the Lost God he vaguely knew, seemed to be going to the shrine. If a baby Ancient One could go, it seemed cruel not to include Galla's pet. Too late to send someone to find him....Galla would have him shoved down her robes, or he'd miss the gathering of the millennia. "I'm not sure if you'll like Bird.....He can be annoying." Muttered Muzzie. "Now.....You need to hold tight."

As Muzzie left his rooms at the Void Gate, two dark angels followed him. He knew them both, but was determined not to put his memory through the usual mental gymnastics. If he'd had sex with them after a boozy night in his bar, so be it. It had no relevance to now and what he had with Aeony. The gate was still set for the City of the Lost God. He, Uula and the two dark angels, arrived somewhere between the sewage outfall and Podd's yard.

"Ahhh, the stink of home." Said one of the dark angels. "Not far to the shrine from here. Are you ready to go, my emperor ?"

All of Aeony's surviving sister had taken an oath to serve him, but hearing him called their emperor.....It would always surprise him.

"Aeony said something about me arriving suitably late and.....I've always wanted to see the city from the roof of the Towers." Said Muzzie.

"We can take you there, if you wish to go ?"

"I do wish to go.....Take me there."

Muzzie didn't like heights, of course he didn't. If ever a creature had been designed for being on the ground, it was him. A large and heavy full blood demon, with enough Genova in him to stunt the growth of two of his arms and make him look a little odd. He held tightly onto Uula and closed his eyes, as the dark angels carried him away. He didn't open them until he felt his feet touch something solid. He was there, standing on the highest building in Tomma-Goran's city.

"There.....Today has a clear sky." Said Itet. "You can see the snow on the mountains to the north of Avald."

Muzzie was sure it was Itet, the first new born dark angel at the last series of rebirths. They used the names again; there'd soon be another Aishar. Not always easy to keep up with, but he was sure it was the original Itet.

"Which way is Leng ?" He asked. "I should know where I'm eventually going."

It was strange, how such fearless fighters, never liked naming Leng. Uula unwrapped herself from his neck a little and screeched, while looking towards the east.

"The child knows.....Leng is east, a very long way east of the city." Said Itet.

There was nothing to see really, just the distant mountains. Beyond them and a long way off, there'd be the shimmer where the first rift ended. After that came the second rift, the third.....Until there was the deadly desert of the seventh rift. Gateway was the end of the rifts and beyond Gateway was Leng. As for beyond Leng ? Muzzie had no desire at all, to see the dark worlds beyond Leng.

"A few quiet moments and my memory works." Said Muzzie. "You're Itet and Seren, I believe ?"

"We are, Muzzie. I'm not flattered; we once knew each other.....Very well." Said Seren.

"Be kind sister.....Muzzie has known a lot of us, very well." Said Itet.

His life had always seemed so much fun and he'd loved running the bar. The occasional smuggling trip with Merrick, had been the icing on a delicious cake. Now though, looking right across the first rift.....His life before being cursed by prophecy, seemed so shallow and trivial.

"Do you think I'm late by the right amount of.....Lateness ?" Asked Muzzie.

"I'd give it a while yet." Said Seren.

"Some of the guests should be quite annoyed by your lateness." Said Itet. "If you like, I can tell you the right moment to leave here and fly to the shrine ?"

"Yes please, that's a good idea." He said.

Muzzie actually kissed Uula's scaly head; he didn't think she'd mind. The child made a gurgling noise and seemed pleased by the attention.

"Where do you think I should build my palace, little one ?" He muttered.

No answering screech or squawk, the first time must have been a fluke. Aeony had mentioned rebuilding the now destroyed militia headquarters. It had been a miserable old building though, in an awful neighbourhood. Even if he rebuilt it, that part of the city would still be awful. There was the block around where his bar had once stood, but Muzzie had decided to rebuild his bar.

"The bar will be constructed of the finest marble this time." He whispered to the child.

The south of the city was nice and there was a gap in the buildings, where the bar of Barus had once stood. His palace in a business district though.....That didn't feel right.

"Seren.....Where do you think I should build my palace ?" He asked. "Itet too.....I'd appreciated a few ideas."

"We've already talked about that." Said Seren. "With no insult intended, there really is only one place for your palace and the barracks for the army who will need to be based here."

"Tell me.....I really want to know ?" Asked Muzzie.

"Beyond the shrine of the dark angels, is an ancient ruined temple." Said Itet. "Looking from here, beyond the temple is the entrance to the catacombs."

"You're explaining it wrong." Said Seren.

"You do it then." Snapped Itet.

"The shrine is our shrine, though the Silver Lady keeps it cleansed." Said Seren. "Between that shrine and the catacombs, is a large area of the city that hasn't been used in centuries. It has a bad reputation, but if you rebuild the entire neighbourhood....."

"I understand; it will have a chance to get a good reputation." Said Muzzie.

"Exactly.....It is the only sensible place for your palace." Said Itet. "Plus.....The Silver Lady is certain to approve."

"Definitely." Added Seren.

Did he need the approval of the Silver Lady ? It couldn't hurt and now it had been pointed out to him, it was a wonderful position for the imperial palace.

"You are now.....Just about annoyingly late for the ritual." Said Itet.

Muzzie hung on tight to Uula and allowed the two dark angels to carry him up off the roof and away.....In the direction of the ancient shrine.

~ ~

Muzzie being suitably late, gave her a chance to look around and go through everything in her head. Aeony had been through it all, creating several hundred dark angels, from pure chaos and the powdered remains of their dead sisters. Like hybrid reproduction, nothing was ever certain. A beautiful genius, copulating with a famous warrior, might produce super children.....Or, they might not. Various bio-viziers over many millennia, had sought to breed perfect hybrids. Often the result was a lot of quite ordinary children, or sometimes.....Something so grotesque it had to be killed soon after being born. Aeony could put a pinch of Silsk into the mix, with a pinch of Aishar, but the mix was never guaranteed to deliver the hoped for results.

"The emperor is here." Someone shouted.

Lateness was always a good ploy for a leader. Making everyone wait for you, made you seem special. A few in the crowd had been getting a little annoyed at being kept waiting. Now just about everyone was on their feet, to watch Muzzie walk into the shrine. Not Estrin of course, she was one of the nine after all. Estrin smiled, but remained sitting. It was a miracle she'd turned up at all, to watch such a dark ritual.

"Please.....Please ignore me and carry on." Said Muzzie.

Carry on indeed, he'd know full well that nothing would happen until he arrived. They were all there, the great and good of the City of the Lost God. They'd brought their essential servants, the hybrids who made sure their hair was always perfect. Podd looked out of place among all the expensive robes and glamorous gowns, but he had more right to be there than some. Aeony banged an ebony staff against the tiled floor, to quieten the crowd down a little.

"Thank you all for coming." Yelled Aeony. "You are here to witness the birth of my new sisters. Birth is always messy and some of my dead sisters will have an odour of decay. Once I begin the ritual, please keep still, silent.....And please, try not to faint."

There was a ripple of laughter at that comment, but Aeony did have a few concerns. A fainting servant could delay matters at a crucial moment. Aeony struck her staff against the floor, until it was the only sound in the large chamber.

"Who brings the words ?" She shouted.

"I bring the words." Replied Adamaz.

All part of the ceremony, Aeony already had a copy of the instructions for the ritual, including the sacred words needed to invoke the chaos energy required to create a new dark angel. She'd seen them moving inside the marble walls, while she'd crushed the bodies of her dead sisters. Like fire elementals, they had no proper place to exist in the real world. Creatures of pure chaos from beyond Leng, there to give her enough power to do what had to be done. No summoning had been required, they knew they were needed and had simply arrived.

"Who brings the knowledge ? Who is our witness ?" Aeony shouted.

"I do, I was there at the last rebirth." Yelled Muzzie.

Just ceremony again, but it hadn't always been that way. For thousands of years there had been no written record of the ritual. Everything was learned by repetition of spoken words. Then the witness had been needed, if there seemed to have been a flaw in the ritual.

“Who is my bringer of power ?” Aeony shouted.

“I am the bringer, the vessel of chaos magic.” Yelled Faal.

Faal walked behind her and stood next to the vessel, where her new sisters would receive that vital spark of life. Ancient sorcerers, creating new life.....It had to be the ultimate heresy to the nine divines. Yet there was Estrin, still sat there and still smiling.

“Seren.....You will open the sacred jars.” Yelled Aeony.

There was a ceremonial instrument, that looked like a spoon mixed with a ladle. Seren picked it up and looked at her. It was all now Aeony’s decisions, which of her dead sisters went into the mix. She could see the jars lined up, and she’d already picked the forty or so she wanted to use. In theory the jars weren’t labelled, so her choices were random. In practise, Aeony recognised the different glazes used for each new batch of jars. That gave her the century the remains had been crushed and sealed, roughly. The marks on each jar were different and as Aeony had a superb memory.....She knew who was going into the mix. Most of her surviving sisters would also know, her first choice was Aisha.

“That one.” Shouted Aeony, while pointing.

Last time the entire jar had been brought to her, but this time it was a spoonful of Aisha’s remains. They were still very wet and fresh, but that was alright. Fresh dark angel remains had a certain unique odour, which didn’t bother Aeony. She noticed Faal wrinkle his nose up. Aeony took a good pinch from the spoon and dropped it into the bath like depression in front of the shrine itself. The shrine was a statue in black marble.....So old that few recognised the creature represented by the carving. Some said the figure of an original dark angel, was over a million years old.

“That one next.” Yelled Aeony.

A good pinch of the very dry and dusty remains of Silsk. Aeony chose another two of her dead sisters, before calling for the Amstera Miltus, the essence of an innocent. Though few would admit it, everyone in the shrine would know what had needed to die, to give life to her new sisters. Birth was always painful, always messy. For new dark angels, birth always required the death of an innocent. Only one for all of the two hundred intended rebirths, the process wasn’t wasteful. The spoon Seren offered her contained very fresh and wet remains. Her sisters had acquired the Miltus the previous night, it had to be fresh. The heart of a young Shelzak demon had been crushed and placed in its own jar. Seren had assured her that the unwilling sacrifice hadn’t reached puberty.

“I need silence now.....To speak the words.” Aeony yelled.

Four lines in a long dead language. The last time, Aeony had rehearsed the lines for days and shouted them out loud. This time she knew them by heart. No shouting, she muttered the lines. Each line held power; each line could be dangerous if spoken by the wrong person. Once she was finished, Aeony banged the staff on the floor, seven times.

“It is done.....A new sister will arise.” Shouted Aeony.

The depression in the marble filled with a red froth, which began to bubble. Once it had begun, the shape of a dark angel appeared, fairly quickly. In less than a twentieth of an hour, there was a creature in the bath like depression. A living being, a female dark angel, who blinked her eyes, but didn’t move.

“A name is needed, our names give us power.” Said Aeony. “Using the name Silsk has been suggested.....It hasn’t had an owner in a very long time. How does our emperor view using that name ?”

Muzzie had the baby Ancient One in his arms, stroking it as though it was a pet.

“Yes, I agree to using Silsk, as a name for your first reborn sister.” Said Muzzie. “It is a good name.....A strong name.”

Aeony gently held the hand of her reborn sister. Her eyes looked a little confused, but that would pass. Some of the dark angel skills had to be learned the hard way, but the essentials were species memories; there from birth.

“You are named Silsk.” Said Aeony. “Stand.....Meet your sisters.”

The crowd went wild and seemed to want to cheer the new Silsk until they lost their voices. Aeony waited patiently, knowing that by rebirth five, the crowd would barely applaud. By rebirth two hundred, most would have left the shrine. Aeony gave Silsk to Seren, to check that everything was alright with their new sister. With luck, Silsk would be flying around the Towers that night.

“No delays now.....I’ll begin the ritual again.” Shouted Aeony. “Stay or go, as you please. Those who stay will be in for a very long day.”

~ ~

© Ed Cowling ~ September 2024