

City of the Lost God

Part 33 – A New Age

“I claim the leadership !” She barked. “Does any one of you dare to challenge me ?”



Podd had seen the glow over the shrine, felt the presence of chaos in all its various shades and types. It meant many things to him, but mostly it meant there would be bodies.

“Come on lad, finish dressing. We may need to make several trips.”

Ash was normally good at rising at first light, but neither of them had slept much the night before. Something had been scratching at their gate; it had even set off their home made alarms. There had been a few things trying the outer wall of the bone yard, but nothing had broken in. Podd had never been one to pray to chaos, but Galla had once given him a few powders to sprinkle around his yard. Obviously they still worked, or the smell of boiling fat had put the creatures off.

“I’m ready.” Said Ash.

No one had wanted the boy with skin and hair the colour of cold ashes. Ash, Podd had named him and despite his sickly look, the lad was strong and showed no signs of perishing from any of the multitude of illnesses, which killed so many children. The boy’s left eye was a little droopy, but his mind seemed sharp enough.

“We’ll do no more than three loads.” Said Podd. “Then you can buy the makings of a proper breakfast for both of us.”

Podd liked the peace of early morning. Even the beggars didn’t get up for another two hours and they usually had the streets to themselves. This morning was different, the City felt more desolate than peaceful. There was an arm, a right arm, on the ground, only twenty yards from their bone yard.

“Put it on the cart boy.” He said.

A certain amount of destruction was to be expected. Podd looked at the smoke curling up from a few of the house and decided that it could have been far worse.

“The tower, look at the towers !” Shouted Ash.

Ash rarely shouted and Podd could see why he was so agitated. Two turrets had gone from the library, probably fallen to become rubble on the streets below. Podd’s eyesight was good and he could see figures moving in the holes left by the turrets.

“Adamaz will have the library weather proof by lunchtime Ash.”

More bits of bodies littered the next street, nothing complete. Podd had hoped for whole bodies, with clean body fat. It seemed a long time since they’d found a body, capable of being rendered down for expensive soaps.

“Rubbing and scrubbing soap.” Muttered Podd. “None of these are even good for candles.”

They quickly filled the cart, without having to wander more than half a mile from the bone yard, but none of the bodies were what Podd had hoped for. They piled up the collection of body parts in the yard and set out again. This time they saw the occasional frightened looking citizen out on the streets. Podd recognised Runa, who had an injured young woman with her.

“Make sure you’re indoors before dark.” Podd said to Runa.

“My home is burned to the ground.” She answered. “We’re going to Muzzie’s.”

Pods looked around, he could still feel darkness in the City.

“Good, you’ll be safe there.” He said. “The worst is over, but dark things still wait in the City, waiting for night to return.”

In a street quite close to the Sorcerer’s Guild, they found six headless bodies. There was little blood on their clothing, it was almost as if their heads had been burned off, the terrible wounds cauterised instantly.

“Odd way to die.” Commented Ash.

“Good clothing, they might have gold in their purses.” Said Podd.

They had seen just about every way it was possible to kill someone that morning, but the burned off heads made Podd shudder. The bodies were good though, just what he’d been looking for. There was always a market for bone meal though, so no body was ever a complete write off. Podd lost interest in the cleanness of their body fat, when Ash showed him the purses.

“They must have picked up what they could carry.” Said Podd.

Four men and two women, all with several bulging purses and pockets full of small valuable. Even the clothing was worth more than they normally made in a week. A few blood stains, but Podd knew people who could make the robes look like new.

“Gold.” Said Ash.

One word and yet it meant so much, had so much meaning when you lived on collecting plague bodies for two coppers each. Just one purse had been opened, yet it alone contained more gold than Podd had ever seen. All in imperial pieces too.

“Open nothing here.” Said Podd. “We’ll get the bodies back to the yard and go through everything there.”

“It’s been a good morning though.” Added Ash.

“It has boy, meat for breakfast and fresh bread, if you can find someone baking any.”

The cart was two thirds full and Muzzie had already decided there would be no third trip that morning. The City was obviously full of mutilated bodies and an extra day or so lying in the street, wouldn’t make them any more dead.

“Let’s look at the shrine grounds before we go home.” Said Podd. “Some warriors carry expensive weapons, some even have names.”

Looting was now the order of the day. The disaster that had befallen the City, was a once in a lifetime opportunity for the bone collector and his assistant. They loaded two more bodies onto the cart and it was heavy, as they trundled it into the shrine grounds.

“I don’t like it here boss.” Said Ash.

“Calm boy, we’re safe in the hours of light.”

Everything looked so clean, as though thousands of years of age had been brushed off the ancient stones. There were still fragments of bodies, but they were being quickly absorbed into the ground.

Ash walked towards a large sword, which was still being clutched in the hand of a dead warrior.

“No boy, leave it, leave everything !” Shouted Podd. “It all belongs to her, there is nothing for us here.”

Podd left the cart and the boy and did something that he did very rarely, he walked swiftly. He went to where he should have seen the ruined temple, which had been nothing but blasted stones, for as long as any could remember. The temple had been built over the entrance to the catacombs and there were many and varied legends about why it had been destroyed.

“It’s beautiful.” Said Ash.

“And it hasn’t been like this since the days of Tomma-Goran.” Said Podd. “Get me a single imperial piece from the purse you opened.”

Ash ran back to their cart, while Podd walked swiftly towards the ruined circle of stones, where all the dark angels that had ever lived, had been created. He knew it wouldn't be a ruin any more, the entire shrine was cleansing itself and renewing. Who knew what powers had been released in the catacombs and some of it was being used to build the shrine anew. Ash returned, just as Podd stood and stared in awe, at the perfect statues of a dozen dark angels.

"Don't be scared boy, do you hear me?"

"Yes boss."

Podd grabbed him by the arm and walked through the circle of statues and into the grass covered centre of the invocation circle. There were more statues there, one even rumoured to be of their ancient enemy. Podd stood and looked at the human face of The Chaln , the eternal and ruler of Mendera. Not that he believed the legends, as if chaos would allow his statue in its holiest of places. Podd gave Ash a little shake, just to make sure he had his full attention.

"Kneel when I tell and believe what you hear me say." Said Podd.

"Can we go home? I'm scared."

Podd ignored him and gave him a slight thump on the chest.

"This is important Ash, you must believe it. Right there, in your heart."

"I will boss, promise."

In the centre of the circle had once been more ruins and a dirty mark in the grass. Now there was a perfect concentric ring of columns, with lintels on the top. Podd half dragged Ash through a gap in the columns and right up to a stone basin, set into the ground.

"Kneel, next to me."

Podd took the coin and held it between his fingers.

"Lady of the shrine." He said. "Thank you for the bounty you have given us. Please accept this very humble offering as a token of our gratitude."

He flipped the coin, watching it turn and spin, as it fell into the basin. It never hit the bottom. The coin seemed to melt and disappear when it was almost at the bottom of the basin. Podd pulled Ash to his feet and pulled him towards the cart.

"You'll learn Ash." He said. "I only go to the temple at feast days, but I believe and give the lady her tributes. You should remember that for when you're grown up."

"I will boss, promise."

"We'll find a few more dead bodies to fill the cart and then we'll call it a day." Said Podd.

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Getting out of the catacombs had been a struggle. Not that the lady of the shrine hadn't kept her promise, they'd felt no resistance to them leaving the realm of the undead. The problem was that the undead were still locked into the catacombs and unable to escape the effect of the quakes. There were hundreds of thousands of them, perhaps millions, all in a panic and looking for something impossible to find, a safe area in the catacombs.

Babaef was still half unconscious and babbling something about a 'New Age,' while Chillan supported him. Muzzie led the way, trying to avoid being trampled by the panicking hordes of undead. Lilleth worried Muzzie; she was pale from loss of blood and being carried by Gesse. He'd healed her wounds and tried everything to wake her, but she really needed a proper healer like Galla.

"Light, I see light ahead." He called back to the others.

It looked pale compared to his daylight spell, but the soft glow of a rift morning was comforting. They were going to do something that most considered impossible. They were going to return from the catacombs.

"The stairs look new." Said Gesse.

Where there had been nothing but scree and rubble to climb, there was now a wide stone staircase.

"As foretold." Hissed Babaef. "It's a new age for the City."

The stairs were steep, with hundreds of white marble steps, rising up towards the entrance. Muzzie helped Chillan and they carried Babaef between them. It still took them some time to reach the heavy metal gates at the top of the stairs.

"Looks like everything was renewed," said Muzzie, "including the locked gates."

He made sure Babaef was safely lying on the stairs and approached the gates, wondering what spell might break the six heavy locks. Muzzie began chanting the words for a spell of destruction, hoping it wouldn't backfire on them.

"No Muzzie." Called Chillan. "You'll offend the lady of the shrine."

He ignored him. What did Chillan want to do, stay there till they all died of thirst? Muzzie let the spell build and almost missed the clangs as each of the locks opened. The gates opened and folded back, allowing them to climb the few remaining stairs and enter the temple. Chillan seemed to be filled with almost childlike excitement.

"It is as the master said it would be." He said. "A new age for the City, the shrine is renewed. The whole City will praise Babaef, for defeating Yam Kermul."

Muzzie liked Babaef and had no wish to argue with Chillan, but he had to speak.

"The City should praise Tarin." He said. "I have no doubt that he was he who destroyed the Lord of Chaos and with Bailig's sword."

"Yes, yes of course. Tarin deserves to be honoured, but my master did summon Yam Kermul."

Summon indeed. Muzzie remembered it a little differently, but he knew when he was beaten. The entire City would praise Babaef, Chillan and the rest of the Sorcerer's Guild would make sure of it. Babaef would probably get his name carved on a few walls and columns, while Tarin would be forgotten.

"Lilleth, wake up Lilleth." Said Muzzie, kissing her cheek.

It was no use, she didn't seem to hear him. Her flesh was pale and her breathing was shallow and slow. Lilleth was going to die and probably before he could find a healer.

"I could try again." Said Chillan.

"We've both done all we can." Answered Muzzie.

Muzzie saw the altar of the temple, in front of the statue of the lady of the shrine. No face in the wall now, but a statue twenty feet tall, with a dozen arms and two muscular legs. In desperation, Muzzie picked Lilleth up and carried her to the altar.

"No Muzzie!" Shouted Chillan. "You don't know the invocations. You'll die and you might get us all killed."

Muzzie gently laid Lilleth on the altar, before turning towards Chillan.

"I don't care about the words, I don't care about invocations." He said. "I just don't want my friend to die."

Muzzie knelt in front of the altar, ignoring Chillan, who was still complaining about heresy and the consequences of a bad invocation.

“Lady of the Shrine.” Said Muzzie. “I don’t know the right word. I did what I could to help in the defeat of Yam Kermul and we seem to have won. I ask for nothing for myself, but please heal Lilleth.”

Nothing, just the sound of Chillan muttering again. Muzzie thought the shrine had chosen to ignore him, until he heard Lilleth cough. Her colour had returned and she was looking at him, as if wondering why she was lying on a cold stone slab.

“Muzzie, I had such a weird dream.” She said. “About the creature from the shrine.”

“Tell me later, once we’ve made sure Sara is unharmed.”

“You’re going to bring them back to life Muzzie.” She persisted.

“Who ?”

“The dark angels, the shrine showed me that and much more.”

“I want to hear it all Lilleth, once we’re back home.”

Muzzie was worried about what he might find. The tavern was his life and Sara was a big part of that life. He felt guilty that he was only just beginning to worry about Sara and Runa.

“I’ll be King !” Shouted Babaef. “They’ll make me Babaef the 1st, greatest King of the 1st rift.”

Chillan simply rolled his eyes and kept a firm hold of his master.

“He needs sleep, but he can walk far better.” Said Chillan. “I’ll take him to the Sorcerer’s Guild and send for one of our healers. He just needs sleep.”

Muzzie left Chillan to take the babbling Babaef back to the guild. Chillan was treating his master as though he’d temporarily lost his sanity. Muzzie wasn’t so sure, he could see Babaef becoming the King of the City, the first King in many millennia.

“We should get Lilleth to the tavern.” Said Gesse.

Lilleth looked tired, but otherwise fine. It gave Muzzie an idea, about the way his brother looked nothing like him. There seemed to be power to be had in the shrine, perhaps given willingly by a grateful local version of chaos. He wouldn’t ask, he’d just use the spell and hope.

“Think of how you looked as a kid, how we both looked.” He said to Gesse.

“There’s no time for this brother, we need to leave this place.”

“Please, do as I ask. There may never be another chance.”

As the spell built, Muzzie thought of their childhood, how Gesse had looked when they played together. He released the spell and uttered a few words, asking the lady of the shrine to aid him. When the haze of the spell vanished, Gesse looked different.

“Well ?” He asked. “Do I look as you remembered me ?”

“No. You don’t look like my brother, but you do look like someone who grew up in the same village, a first cousin perhaps.”

They both laughed, Gesse really did look like some long lost relative of Muzzie’s, instead of a visiting noble with a serious hygiene problem. The smell had gone too.

“Am I still a revenant ?” Asked Gesse.

“Oh yes and you always will be. But you look far better and smell nicer.”

They helped Lilleth up and walked out of the shrine grounds, heading for Muzzie’s tavern.

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Galla waited for Hervör to be up and about, before leaving to go home. She made sure the amulet she’d sold Hervör was still hanging on their door and left her with a warning.

“There will be dark things in the City for days.” She said. “Make sure the children are indoors well before dark and keep the shutters closed until next day.”

She crossed the street, seeing the dark outline of the one she'd killed, burned into the cobbles. She'd killed one of them, though she'd had no idea then that it had been a creature of chaos. There would be consequences, there always were, she'd need to be very careful and apply a few extra blessings on her home.

Her door was still closed and locked, but there were numerous claw marks and a few deeper gouges in the wood. She unlocked her door and entered her home, a hand on a particularly powerful packet of powder in her pocket. It was safe, nothing had managed to enter her home, she felt it. Galla could even hear her elderly pet bird fussing about in its cage.

"I'll feed you soon" She called.

Galla put every powder she'd taken out with her, back in its place in her shop. The really dangerous powders went into a locked box, sealed and protected by a few tricks her mother had taught her. When everything was in order and her front door secured by a dozen locks and bolts, Galla climbed the stairs to her living quarters. She lifted the cover off the cage and was pleased to see her ancient pet was alive and pecking at its empty food bowl. Galla opened the cage and ran her hand over her pet's tummy, receiving a soft purring sound from the bird.

"You wouldn't believe what's been going on in the City." Said Galla.

No response, it looked like her pet was going back to being taciturn. Maybe the dark powers Yam Kermul had unleashed, had caused its recent talkative nature? Galla quite liked a quiet home and a pet bird that spoke once a week, suited her perfectly.

"Galla will be busy." Muttered the bird.

Someone began knocking on her door and Galla knew her pet was right. She ignored the knocking and fed her bed and filled its water bowl. The knocking became louder, but she still ignored it, opening curtains to let a little natural light into her home.

"No use." She muttered. "I can't cure everyone in the City and they'll blame me for everyone who dies."

Her bird just chuntered at her.

"I'm not heartless, there are just too many injured and too few healers."

Again her pet looked at her with its almost blind, glassy eyes, but said nothing. There was a voice to add to the frantic knocking, a voice she recognised. Maya the Kveld and she sounded very upset and unlikely to go away.

"Silly Galla." Said her bird.

"You know me too well bird."

Galla was too soft hearted, her mother had told her that it would be her undoing. She couldn't refuse anyone seeking help and her empath powers were making Maya look like a glowing fire outside her door. She slid back the bolts and turned the locks, opening her door and beckoning Maya inside.

"That will need stitches." Said Galla. "Sit yourself down and I'll get my needles."

"No, it's not me, its Bailig." Replied Maya. "You must come with me."

Galla looked at the horrific wound that crossed Maya's face and shook her head.

"I will look after you first." She said. "Then I will go with you and do my best for Bailig. First though, I'm going to bolt and lock my door. Now do as you're told and sit."

Maya still didn't sit down and continued to look towards the door.

"Sit and let me tend to your wound, or I'm going nowhere with you."

Maya sat and Galla relocked her door and fetched her pouch of needles and thread. On the way she opened a drawer and chose a powder to make Maya's face numb, she was going to need it. She pulled a chair over and sat in front on Maya.

"This isn't something I'm good at, you're going to have a nasty scar." She said.

"I must tell you about Bailig."

"Keep still girl, or I can't stitch you." Said Galla. "I can't treat everyone in the City, so I'm going to treat the people in front of me and that's you. I don't care if the ghost of Lord Valsec himself knocks on my door, I'm going nowhere until you're stitched."

Galla rubbed the powder deep into the wound, ignoring the noises that Maya made.

"A little pain is good child, it teaches us to be more careful in future."

She threaded the needle and began to stitch Maya's ruined face together.

"Be still now and you might have a pretty face again, once it heals."

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Aeony stood, letting the wind from the open hole in the library wall, ruffle her long dark hair. She liked watching the librarians fixing a temporary cover over the holes where the turrets had been, they looked so keen and efficient.

"I feel we should do something for the entire City." She said. "Something to get the rebuilding organised and the injured healed."

Adamaz snorted at her, he had done it a few times lately. Aeony was tempted to dangle him from the tower roof one night, teach him a few manners. She didn't want to become as cruel as Silsk, but there would be times when some needed to be put in their place.

"Who would do it?" Asked Adamaz. "The City no longer has a militia. There are a few guards employed by the tower, but their duties tend to be mostly symbolic these days."

"So, we just leave them to muddle by?" She asked.

"It's what they've always done in the past." Said Adamaz. "They'll repair and rebuild and healers will do their best for the living and those that die will be mourned. Do you know who will do the most good out there in the City?"

She gave him a smile, knowing he was off on one of his famous rants about the City.

"I'm sure you're going to tell me." She said.

"Podd and the strange foundling child that he took in, to be an apprentice." Said Adamaz. "It'll take them a few days, but they'll collect every scrap of every dead body in the City. Far better than them being dumped in the river, to poison the water."

Aeony found herself nodding in agreement.

"Every city needs a good bone collector, ours probably more than most." She answered. "I will continue to pay him a retainer to clear the streets, though I suspect he makes a good living from looting the bodies of the wealthy."

It was Adamaz's turn to give a knowing smile.

"Good." He said. "Serves them right for dying in the streets, instead of at home in bed."

The dark angel went right to the edge of the hole, looking down at the broken roof below.

"They walked the City last night, ripping off heads and killing at will." She said.

There was no need to say who the 'they' were; Adamaz knew she was talking about the creatures from the far rifts, the creatures who glowed blue in the dark.

"They were seen returning, just before first light." Said Adamaz. "We'll give them two days to settle down before repairing the roof."

Caspian was leaning out at a dangerous angle, so Aeony helped him to fix a strong canvas across half the hole in the wall. She liked Caspian; he was intelligent and versatile and would make a good head librarian, one day.

"Are you going to rebuild the turrets?" She asked Caspian.

"Probably not, everything not built by Tomma-Goran has gone. Adamaz seems to think it's a warning of some kind." Replied Caspian. "We're likely to replace the windows as they originally were."

"Probably wise." She said.

Caspian didn't seem awkward around her, which pleased her. If half the rumours about his various adventures were true, he was going to be really important to the City. Not Vella though, there was something unsettling about the wife Caspian had chosen. Aeony returned to stand beside Adamaz, safely away from curious ears.

"You picked a good successor." She said.

"Yes, though I still think something needs to be done about his wife." He replied.

"I tend to agree with you, perhaps an accident." She said. "Once the City calms down of course."

"They've been reading about Gorshan." Muttered Adamaz. "Her idea."

So Vella had to be taken care of! No doubt Caspian had friends as versatile as himself and they might discover secrets in Gorshan, secrets best left alone.

"I was thinking about the scrolls to give rebirth to my sisters." She said. "If it acts as a way to bring the City closer together, then it might be a good idea."

She'd never seen the ancient librarian look so happy.

"Good, good." He said. "I'll see Babaef, assuming he still lives."

"I need to feed." She answered. "I'll go to the Sorcerer's Guild on my way, see if there's any news on Babaef and his friends."

Aeony dropped from the open section of the window, building up speed. Then she unfurled her wings and soared over the City, looking at the destruction below. Very few of the population were out and about and even fewer were involved in rebuilding. That would change though, the City of the Lost God would thrive again. Aeony screeched, proclaiming her presence to all below.

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Babaef was never quite certain when he recovered his sanity. It was as if several other souls were trying to inhabit his head at the same time and causing mental chaos. One moment he was arguing with one of the voices in his head, about complete nonsense. The next he was looking at the destruction all round him and the noise in his head was gone. Babaef stood still, taking in the ruined areas of Old Town and the number of dead bodies, or parts of bodies.

"We should keep moving Master." Said Chillan. "You need rest. It isn't far now."

"Is it all like this Chillan?" He asked. "The entire City."

Chillan ran over to him and looked at him, as if trying to see if he was sane again.

"Master, are you..... yourself again?"

"Yes my friend, there is only my voice left in my head." Said Babaef. "I feel different, but it is Babaef, leader of the Sorcerer's Guild, who stands before you."

"I am so pleased, but we should hurry, there are looters in the City."

Babaef laughed and put his hand on Chillan's shoulder.

"I have recovered Chillan, the looters need to fear us!"

They walked through Old Town, helping where they could, even dragging an injured woman out of a burning building. There was some clearing up going on, but most were still in a state of shock.

Babaef knew the rebuilding would start, people just needed a while to come to terms with the scale of the damage to the City.

"Thank you Sir." Said the woman.

Babaef moved on, noticing the winged creature circling the area. He waved and received a wave in reply. He thought the dark angel might land, but she headed north, over the Great River.

"Too friendly for Silsk." Said Chillan.

"Silsk is dead, if the voices in my head spoke the truth." Said Babaef. "That was probably Aeony, leaving the City to feed."

Chillan was shielding his eyes against the light, watching the flying creature head north.

"Surely there is food enough in the City." He said. "We've passed dozens of fresh bodies and I heard they feed happily on carrion."

Babaef had once seen Silsk feed, her head buried in the abdomen of a hybrid who was still half alive. He shuddered at the childhood memory.

"Aeony always leaves the City to feed." He said. "So as not to disturb the population. If you'd seen a dark angel feed, you'd understand..... Their favourite food is a fresh liver."

Babaef moved on, Chillan following. None bothered them, even groups of looters dispersed as they approached. Some knew Babaef, some were just scared and he felt it himself, the aura of power that he now exuded. They approached the guild building from the north and saw the destruction at its worst. A new wing had been built onto the old building and that wing was now nothing but rubble. The garden courtyard and cloisters, were now open to the world and looters were already picking over the rubble.

"Bastards !" Shouted Babaef.

"Careful master, they have numbers on their side."

The guild was known to have wealthy members and a dozen or more looters were moving the rubble around, looking for valuables, one even had a half full sack of what she'd collected. What really annoyed Babaef, was that at least two of them were in the uniform of the City guard.

"Once chance I'll give you !" Shouted Babaef. "Drop what you've stolen and leave."

They showed no sign of leaving, or being worried by his threat.

"Or you'll do what ?" One asked.

Babaef casually waved his hand at the man who'd spoken and there was brief flash of flame and the man became nothing but a pile of smoking ashes.

"Leave or die !" Shouted Babaef.

They left, the woman dropping her sack and running.

"And tell others what you saw here." Called Babaef.

Chillan picked up the sack and laughed as he went through the contents.

"Half of this stuff, isn't even ours." He said.

A door opened and Pinthrad appeared, the elderly clerk running to Babaef and actually hugging him.

"I am so pleased to see you Sir." He said. "The guards ran off and looters have been trying to break in."

"Don't worry." Said Babaef. "I'm back now and we'll soon get things organised and the rebuilding begun. And of course there is the matter of my coronation."

Pinthrad looked confused, but incredibly happy.

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Muzzie was less affected by the damage to the City than the others, he'd expected far worse. They'd kept to the main streets and had been attacked twice by looters, looking for a full purse. Gesse still had his revenant strength and they'd left a trail of crushed skulls behind them.

"Now I'm happy." Said Muzzie.

His tavern looked just as he'd left it, there was even a customer outside, with a full glass of ale.

"No one would tangle with your regulars." Said Lilleth.

Muzzie wasn't sure if that was a compliment, but he was glad to see his tavern open and busy, judging by the amount of noise coming from inside. He pushed open the door and had to push his way past the crowd near the door. The place was full and they all appeared to be buying his ale. Muzzie was happy.

"Galla has been in looking for you." Said one of the barmaids.

He had no idea why she might be looking for him and filed the information away. Muzzie went through into the private area at the back, letting Gesse help Lilleth through to the spare bedroom. Sara was stood in their kitchen, half a dead bird in her hands. To Muzzie, she'd never looked more beautiful.

"I was worried, you know....." He said.

"Me too."

He kissed her, moving a hand to her buttock and squeezing hard, as if making sure she was real.

"We're full." Said Sara, once he'd let her go. "Even the new rooms, everything is full."

"The extension wasn't even finished."

"They don't seem to mind." Said Sara. "And they're paying top prices."

Muzzie looked in the money drawer and it was full of gold, most of it Quron, but gold is gold. He opened the chest where they put the imperial coins and it was half full of the pure gold coins.

"Wow." He said.

"And they're drinking, we need a new barrel of Muzzie's finest bringing in from the back."

"How urgently?" He asked. "I really need a few hours sleep."

"I can always get a few of the regulars to do it, you get some sleep. Oh, Galla was in looking for you, seemed quiet agitated about something."

"So I heard."

He walked into their bedroom to find that after putting Lilleth in the spare room, Geese had claimed theirs. He was fast asleep and resisted all Muzzie's attempts to wake him. He returned to Sara.

"Any empty rooms, anything at all?" He asked.

"Nothing, just the straw out the back with the animals."

"I'll sleep in the bar."

"Someone is sat at your table."

"Not for long."

It took just a few seconds for Muzzie to move the people sat at his table. He then sat back in his favourite chair and ignoring the noise, he fell into a deep sleep.

"It's him, he can do it!"

It wasn't just that Galla had woken him from a good dream, is what that her shouting was likely to be bad for business. People became nervous when an empath started shouting and they stopped buying his ale.

"Galla." He said. "What do you want?"

Maya was with her and they were both ignoring him. The Kveld had a nasty wound to her face, which looked freshly stitched. Muzzie remembered Yam Kermul throwing her again the cavern wall.

“Maya, good to see you got out of the catacombs.”

They were still ignoring him. Galla was pointing at him, her eyes seeming to look right into his soul.

“Him !” She shouted. “He has the power to cure him !”

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It had been fully dark for several hours, when Aeony dropped from her rooms in the tower and soared over the City. The rooms had been used by Silsk; now Aeony had taken them over, even keeping Ousha as her servant. Dark Angels were impressed by aggression and ambition, Aeony had to prove she had plenty of both.

In truth, she felt nervous as she shrieked and swooped low over Old Town. The creatures of chaos had been far more powerful than her and some might still be lurking in the shadows. The dark angels had to prove they could protect the city; the surviving population had to feel safe. Aeony turned and crossed into the shrine grounds at only about fifty feet from the ground, landing on the lintels of the stone circle itself. She released dark angel pheromones, flapped her huge wings and screeched into the darkness. Nothing answered, nothing challenged her.

Relieved at still being alive and intact, Aeony took to the air, heading for the sacred place in the mountains. She realised, from reading the rebirth spell, that the sacred place wasn't a temple at all. It was where the humans had brought her kind back to life, to act as guards for their great City. That was why the sacred urns, containing her dead sisters, were stored there.

Aeony passed over Muzzie's on the way, hearing the cheerful sounds of drinking and merry making. It wasn't the only place still showing lights, the slums had suffered, but they still had lights outside the shacks that were left. She swooped over The Dome and saw figures moving in the refectory window. Life went on in many places; Tomma-Goran's great City would survive.

She circled the mountain twice, deliberately making herself late for the gathering of her sisters. Aeony had been Silsk's second in command for a long time and she'd learned how to make an entrance. The sacred place was a temple cut into the mountain itself, though the entrance was quite narrow.

“They're all waiting.” Said Aishar.

Aishar was her best friend among her sisters and likely to be her second in command, if all went well. Aeony merely smiled and walked along the narrow passage and into the main room of the temple. It all meant so much more to Aeony now, the depression in the centre of the room, the carvings on the wall.

“We almost started without you.” Said Seren.

“You could have tried.” She answered.

Seren, her main rival and probably as strong as she was. Provocation was always avoided where possible, but Aeony had a real sense of purpose and she knew something they didn't. She did the unthinkable; she walked to the leader's position, without being officially declared their leader. Her sisters looked astonished, but Aeony felt capable of achieving anything and that confidence seemed to give her a glow.

“I claim the leadership !” She barked. “Does any one of you dare to challenge me ?”

There had been an age, when half a dozen would have demanded to fight her and settle the matter by combat. Now they were so few and her sisters had hidden themselves away, while she had been helping Adamaz in The Dome. They had seen her fight and most of them were scared of her. Seren alone, held her gaze for a while, before nodding her agreement.

“You've earned the right to lead us.” She said. “I will follow you, for now at least.”

“Good.” Said Aeony. “I'm sure it's no surprise that I name Aishar as my second in command.”

There was no applause, the dark angels rarely showed that kind of emotions, but there were a lot of nodding heads. Aeony walked to the depression in the floor and knelt down, rubbing the rough edges of the stone floor.

“My next selection may surprise you.” She said. “I name Seren as trainer of our new sisters, the ones to be reborn.”

She had their attention now. First she’d promise them power and strength in numbers, then she’d tell them the price.

“This never was a temple.” She continued. “It was never really that sacred. This is where the human rulers of the City stored our remains and then used them to give life to new dark angels.”

“How do you know this Aeony ?” Asked Aishar.

“I have seen the spell of rebirth, Adamaz found it in the Upper Dome. The walls which sealed off the hidden rooms have fallen and Adamaz will share what he finds with us.”

They looked startled, a rare thing for a dark angel.

“The dust of our dead sisters can be mixed to produce new dark angels.” She continued. “We’ll never fill the skies again, but we can double, perhaps triple our numbers. If you wish it ?”

No dissenting looks, lots of nodding heads. Even Seren didn’t hesitate to give her agreement. They all knew the danger from being so few in number. There was no one to come to your aid, a simple dispute in the City, could lead to being outnumbered and being able to fly, didn’t guarantee safety. No one liked to think about the truth; most of their fallen sisters had died at the hands of other dark angels.

“How can this be done Aeony ?” Someone called.

“We will all need to help each other in the City.” She replied. “They need our protection, but we need Babaef to cast the spell and Adamaz for his arcane knowledge. We’ll also need the help of Muzzie, the tavern keeper and a few others.”

“They can’t enter the sacred place.” Said Seren.

“They must.” Said Aeony. “They are needed to give our sisters rebirth.”

Aeony walked back to the leader’s position and stamped her foot to gain attention.

“I wish to allow those not of our kind, entry to this sacred place.” She said. “Only then can we gain new sisters and once again, rule the skies of the 1st rift. Do you approve ?”

Of course they did, they were never going to refuse the opportunity to be powerful again. They’d be harder to control once there were more of them, but Aeony was almost looking forward to arguing with some new sisters. As for Babaef becoming King?! She’d mention that to them on another day.

“I will start the arrangements for the rebirth.” She said.

They cheered her, an unprecedented thing in the sacred place.

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Part 34 will be posted at the end of July.