

The Ancient Ones

Chapter 14 - Gezenter-Aparen

“Maya had actually seen full blood Genova, even though they were now said to be incredibly rare. When Muzzie had first entered Tandalla as emperor, there had been several Genova on a hill just outside the gates. There to celebrate an easy win for Muzzie, or to remind him that more powerful creatures still walked the rifts ? No one was sure afterwards, but they hadn’t attempted to hurt Muzzie, or his imperial army. Muzzie had a little Genova in his ancestry, so they might have viewed him as their kin.”



Maya loved the way Uula could barely seem to be putting effort into beating her wings, yet the islands below hurtled past. Child of the Hive, Nim; had to beat his wings fairly fast to keep up with Uula. All sorts of legends existed about the Ancient Ones flying right across the first rift in a day. As far as Maya could tell, such a journey would take at least two days. Still an epic flight across a vast area of land and ocean. Tareq was tied to the riding harness, just in case he fell, or lost his balance. Nothing for him to be ashamed of. Maya had been flying on Uula’s back for over five hundred years and she was still learning. The Sacred Sea had become the Endless Sea and Maya could see the coastline not that far away. Just one last island to fly across and they’d be in what had once been the lands of the Angels, the Genova.

“Can you land on the island below us, Uula ?” Asked Maya. “It would be nice to arrive at Gezenter-Aparen feeling fresh and rested.”

“Yes.....I’ll fly in a circle to give Nim a chance to realise we’re landing.” Said Uula.

Uula swung around in an enormous circle, though the beach was the only place for such a huge creature to land. Nim-Phraxis-Deh the grown up son of the Hive Mother was following Uula, as she spiralled down towards an empty area of beach.

“Oh, I’m feeling a bit nauseous.” Said Tareq.

“I used to, you will get used to flying on Uula.” Said Maya. “I promise.”

“There’s an old camp site.” Said Uula. “I’ll land there; it doesn’t look to have been used for a very long time.”

There was a bump as they landed and Tareq groaned. Maya thought he might vomit, but he didn’t. She helped him get down from Uula. She then had a chance to look around. The camp site did look old; it might have been a century since the crew of a visiting ship had lit a fire there.

“Are you beginning to feel better ?” She asked Tareq.

“A little.....I just need a really good sleep tonight.” Said Tareq.

Uula was looking out to sea in the direction of the fairly close coastline. Nim was still flying around, looking over the interior of the island. There might only be the food and water they’d collected on a larger island, but Maya felt safe. Nothing would get past Uula Podda and a fully grown son of Ginnda-Aanash.

“We need a fire.....I’ll start collecting dead wood.” Said Maya.

Tareq helped, but two days flying on the back of Uula, had left him looking a bit wobbly and nauseous. Maya had once felt the same way after a long flight, but those days were now long gone. There was plenty of wood, some just the right size to pile up in a heap. Maya had enough magical

skills to easily light a fire and they soon had a warm and comforting campfire. Not that they needed the warmth, the wind over the Endless Sea always seemed to be a little too warm.

"Food, you need fresh food." Said Nim. "I know these seas.....I'll find some food."

Maya had reached that moment, when stress and fatigue simply vanished. She was tired though and once she lay on the sand with her eyes closed, she was fast asleep. The next thing she knew was a distinct smell of the sea, coming from somewhere close to her; very close.

"Creatures of the Sacred Sea.....They're good to eat." Said Nim.

Maya would have called them fish, but everyone seemed to have their own name for them.

"Wow, Nim caught us enough food to last for days." Said Tareq.

Skins of green, glistening with silver; the fish looked magnificent; it almost seemed a shame to cook and eat them. Maya was hungry though. As Tareq cleaned the fish and put them on skewers above the fire; Maya looked for fruits she recognised in the bushes below the trees. Nim would have fed himself while he was hunting for the fish for Tareq and her. As for Uula ? She sometimes ate nothing for days, before eating a truly staggering amount of food. As far as Maya was concerned, her two huge and impressive guards were quite capable of looking after their own needs for food and fresh water.

"Make the most of a good rest, Tareq." Said Maya. "As soon as there's full light tomorrow, we'll fly the last few miles to the coast. Gezenter-Aparen shouldn't be far along the coast from there.

"Is Gezenter-Aparen a proper city, or a ruin ?" Asked Tareq.

"Depends who you ask." Said Uula. "Whatever the truth it's a city of the angels and will be different to anywhere else you've been."

"The Hive Mother says that the angels still live there." Said Nim.

"I hope so.....I'm sure we'll eventually meet some Genova." Said Maya. "Then we'll find out if Gezenter-Aparen really is a gateway to somewhere magical."

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They'd risen early and Tareq still wasn't sure if he was properly awake. He was in the riding harness for Uula, with Maya by his side. Behind Uula, Nim was making rather sorrowful noises, as though he felt it was too early to be awake and flying towards the unknown shores of unknown seas. Tareq hated to be negative about anything, but he had to say it.

"Sorry Maya, but it is so ridiculously early." He said.

"The light will be just right when we get there." Said Maya. "Not too bright, but not dull and difficult to see by."

When they got there was interesting, because there was no definite idea about whether the Genova city was a couple of hours away, or it would be right beneath them when they crossed the coast.

There was no beach where they intended to fly over the coast; just many miles of steep and dangerous looking cliffs. Uula said the cliffs were a good sign, but she considered many things to be a good sign. Half a dozen Screech flying below them was good, but a dozen Screech was considered to be bad luck.

"I see something..... Grey marble buildings." Said Tareq, while pointing.

Uula changed direction slightly and began to descend towards where Tareq had pointed.

"You've good eyes, Tareq." Said Uula.

The land below was covered in trees, but not the lush green growth as seen on the islands. The trees were larger than on the islands, with thicker and darker looking bark. No proper roads below them, but there were distinct tracks going off in various directions. There was a river that went past the

city and probably flowed into the Endless Sea. As they approached the Genova city, it looked as though no one lived there. A wonderful city built of attractive grey stone, but it looked uninhabited.

"No one lives in Gezenter-Aparen." Said Tareq.

"As you said.....We're early, very early." Said Maya. "And don't forget that we're here because I was sent for. I felt it in my mind.....We have been sent for."

"I feel it now.....The angels are near." Said Uula.

Uula landed about twenty yards in front of the main doors to the city. They were a kind of bright brown material which Tareq had never seen before but it definitely didn't look like wood.

"Any ideas on getting inside ?" Asked Tareq.

"I know something the Hive mother taught me.....Might work." Said Nim.

"Worth a try." Said Maya.

Nim made a crackling noise, which seemed strangely apt for a child of the hive. There was no language Tareq could recognise, but there was a definite pattern to the crackles. There was a thud of opening locks, just before the doors began to slowly open.

"Well done, Nim." Said Maya.

"What Ginnda teaches is always useful." Said Nim.

There was no one there behind the doors, no one to greet them to the ancient Genova city. Then again, as Maya had said; it was very early.

"What do we do ?" Asked Tareq. "Do we go inside ?"

"Of course we do.....We have been sent for." Said Maya.

Maya had told Tareq about actually seeing full blood Genova, even though they were now said to be incredibly rare. When Muzzie had first entered Tandalla as emperor, there had been several Genova on a hill just outside the gates. There to celebrate an easy win for Muzzie, or to remind him that more powerful creatures still walked the rifts ? No one was sure afterwards, but they hadn't attempted to hurt Muzzie, or his imperial army. Muzzie had a little Genova in his ancestry, so they might have viewed him as their kin.

It seemed the gender of full bloods was hard to see, they'd all been wearing thick robes and head coverings. Large creatures, a fully grown Genova could be close to thirty feet tall and quite well built. They had the ability to become invisible, so Maya hadn't seen them for long. Four arms and two stocky legs, they resembled pure blood demons; Galla thought they might have a common ancestor from many millennia ago. Powerful magic users, probably the most powerful on the rifts. It was said that some of the Old Gods had feared the Genova. On the whole though, the Genova weren't called angels for no reason. They tended to use their magic for good. Of course, some would say the ideas of good and evil were open to interpretation.

"A door is opening in the temple to our left." Said Uula.

For every full blood Genova, there were said to be hundreds of hybrids and they were rare. Muzzie wasn't the only Genova hybrid Maya had met, but there'd only been two others in her already long life. Shorter than full bloods and usually with just two fully working arms. Less magical ability, but they were still very dangerous. About twenty hybrids were coming out of the temple and heading towards them. They were all dressed in yellow robes and scarves which covered most of their heads.

"Wow, these must be the angels." Said Tareq.

"No, these are all Genova hybrids." Said Maya.

The hybrids bowed to them, but never said a word. They grouped together in front of Uula and got down on one knee. They were obviously showing huge respect to Uula Podda; a rare survivor of the Ancient Ones, though no one was sure why they seemed to have largely vanished from the rifts.

"They seem to worship Uula." Said Nim.

"More respect than worship." Said Maya.

There was no stomping sound as the pure blood left the temple, even though they had to weigh close to two tons. Close to twenty five feet tall, the pure blood was very impressive. Dressed in the same way as the hybrids, but males and females sometimes had brightly coloured head scarves. No way to be certain, but Maya was fairly sure that the approaching Genova was female.

"This.....This is one of the angels." Said Maya.

The female angel walked up to Uula and joined her colleagues by getting down onto one knee. It was an incredible honour for Uula; actually it was an incredible honour for all of them. Maya was happy that they were all safe; nothing nasty was going to happen to them in Gezenter-Aparen.

"I am Juliette, longest lived of the so called immortals." Said the female angel. "I trained Giron, most senior of the Genova elders. You are the first to arrive Maya from the City of the Lost God and I welcome you to the city of Gezenter-Aparen."

With that Juliette stood up and all the hybrids stood up with her. They were an impressive sight, like an angelic guard of honour. As far as Maya was aware, even Muzzie had never been honoured in such a way. Though, there was one obvious question.

"First to arrive.....Who else are you expecting, Juliette ?" Asked Maya.

"Let's get you comfortable before mentioning the other guests on the way." Said Juliette. "Uula Podda and Nim-Phraxi-Deh are a little large for rooms in the temple. We've set up quarters in the barracks, where you should have privacy and comfort."

Juliette knew all their names; she probably knew all the names of those travelling with Seren. Who else though ? Had the Algarian assassin been invited ? With luck, all would soon be made clear.

"Here.....Large double doors so our visiting Ancient One can get in and out easily." Said Juliette.

"Thank you.....I do tend to take up a lot of space." Said Uula.

"I do believe I once knew your mother, Uula." Said Juliette.

"For over five hundred years, I've called Maya my mother." Said Uula.

It was said in a tone that defied anyone to say otherwise, even the most powerful of the Genova immortals. Galla had once told her that Juliette was dead, killed while fighting on the same side as The Damned. Who they were fighting was never made clear and Maya assumed Galla was mistaken.

"Here.....A very large room for Uula." Said Juliette. "A little further along the hall is another large room for Nim. Maya and Tareq.....Your rooms are a little further. A complete suite for your use; it was once used by The Chaln  himself, Emperor of the Menderan Empire."

"Wow, you're spoiling us." Said Tareq.

"Thank you Juliette, it's nice to feel welcome." Said Maya.

The rooms were huge and there were a lot of them. Tareq had never known such opulent living and part of him hoped they'd be there for some time. Maya whispered that Muzzie would be jealous, as their rooms were over half the size of his entire palace in the City of the Lost God.

"Eat what you like, drink what you like." Said Juliette. "Ask one of the servants and whatever you want will be yours."

"I'm going to be huge when I leave here." Said Tareq.

"We just want your stay to be comfortable." Said Juliette.

That was nearly it, as Juliette turned to leave them to get settled into their truly palatial set of rooms. Why such rooms were in the barracks ? Tareq didn't care; they were opulent beyond his imagination. Maya had a question though, one which hadn't been answered.

"You mentioned expecting others.....Will you name them now ?" Asked Maya.

"Ahhh, yes of course." Said Juliette. "Seren leads the expedition from the City of the Lost God, who are searching for you and Uula. Galla is with them, I know you've travelled with Galla."

"Yes, Galla and I are good friends." Said Maya. "And her pet of course, I know Bird well too."

"There is a complication as two young Algarians travel under Seren's protection." Said Juliette. "The assassin sent to kill you both was trained by the damned; a woman called Tejan. She will arrive here soon and things could become very complicated."

"When will Seren and her group arrive here?" Asked Tareq.

"That is why I wish you to be comfortable." Said Juliette. "They could be here in a few days, or a few weeks; but they are definitely on their way. I can stop any bloodshed while everyone is here, but after they leave.....Things could become very complicated."

"Thank you for letting me know, Juliette." Said Maya.

Tareq wanted to immediately see how comfortable the beds were, his usual excuse for daytime sex. Maya had no objection, she enjoyed their physical fun.

"First though.....I need to tell Uula to expect Tejan." Said Maya.

"Very complicated.....If Juliette says complicated one more time." Said Tareq.

"Very complicated." Mimicked Maya.

They both laughed and decided to check the comfort of the beds, before telling Uula about an assassin being on the way.

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It was an island paradise and everyone there seemed to love Sockelf. They treated her well too, but Tejan suspected that was only because she was Sockelf's lover. Someone far away had mentioned it to a Screech; that she was an assassin. Even worse the gossip had spread that she hunted two young humans. The people of the Sacred Sea might not like humans that much, but it was a world where no one likes an assassin. Tejan thought she might have been killed if she hadn't obviously meant a lot to Sockelf. Behind every smile was someone wishing Tejan was elsewhere, anywhere than on the islands. Plus, there was still a contract to fulfil and her final fee to be collected.

"I need to finish the job I accepted." Said Tejan. "Come with me if you like, but I need to hire one of the fishing boats and begin looking for the two Algarians."

They were still eating breakfast and Tejan thought she knew how Sockelf would react, but she was a long way from being certain. He was the much loved son of an islander of some fame; hence the love he was often showered with. It had to be hard to get on a small shellfish collecting boat and head away from home with an assassin.

"No one will hire you a boat." Said Sockelf.

Tejan had few things that pressed her anxiety buttons, but being stuck anywhere against her will was one of them. Her mind did a flip and she was thinking about taking a boat by force; not that she'd ever hurt Sockelf. He began smiling at her and she instantly relaxed.

"I'm not keen on being the honoured son of the founder." Said Sockelf. "That is why I left and you found me looking for work in the seaport Nara-Abash. I'll hire you a boat and come with you, of course I will."

"Thank you." She said, while hugging him.

"We'll need a crew and they'll want good pay." Said Sockelf. "I hope you have enough gold?"

"I do.....Can we hire a boat now?" Asked Tejan.

"Hey, let me finish breakfast.....Then I'm yours for the day." Said Sockelf. "With luck we'll hire a boat and crew today and be heading across the Sacred Sea in two days' time."

Tejan had put up with a lot of things when she was a member of the Damned. Nothing had got to her as much as a whole island of smiling people, who she knew hated her. The Screech probably hated her too, but that didn't matter; they were just flying creatures. Tejan was relying on the Screech to aim her in the right direction. The two young Algarians had to die soon; and die by her hand. Tejan hugged Sockkelf again and only realised she'd been trembling slightly, when the trembling stopped.

"When this is over, we have to build a house somewhere no one knows me." Said Tejan. "We can get lots of pets and live comfortably for the rest of our lives. Lots and lots of pets."

"A really big house in a secluded area of woodland." Said Sockkelf.

"Yes, that'll be perfect.....But first I have a job to do." Said Tejan.

"Do you see children in our huge secluded house ?" Asked Sockkelf.

What had been done to her, the changes to turn her into one of the Damned; had always been a conversation for another day. There was adoption of course, but Tejan was never going to have her own children.

"No.....The Mendera Empire changed me." Said Tejan. "They have this paranoia about the Damned having dozens of indestructible children and forming dynasties. So, no babies for us I'm afraid.....Unless we adopt them. Even the Menderan Emperor will never marry and have children." There was that look of doubt on Sockkelf's face, which had been expected. Most men don't make a huge thing about wanting children, but that doesn't mean they don't like the idea.

"I can live with that." Said Sockkelf. "I've seen them in the slums of Nara-Abash, the grubby kids no one wants. We can give a few of them a home. Just a dozen or so to start with."

"Oh, just a dozen huh ?" Asked Tejan.

"To start with." Repeated Sockkelf.

It was a wonderfully absurd idea, Tejan didn't want to ruin the moment with common sense or logic. They finished breakfast and went to see someone, that it was rumoured had a boat and crew for hire. Shellfish had been plentiful that year, but some boats are just unlucky. The house was really a shack well above the high water line, but the exterior had been kept clean and well maintained.

"Sebennial had a really bad year." Said Sockkelf. "We'll have to be careful, it can't sound like charity. Done right we'll be able to hire an excellent boat and crew for a very good price."

"I like the name Sebennial." Said Tejan. "It has a ring to it.....I know we're going to get on with this Sebennial."

"Old Imperial for Citizen." Said Sockkelf. "His family have been on the islands for centuries."

Sebennial seemed to know they were coming. Sockkelf had probably let it be known that they were looking for a boat to hire. Sebennial probably liked her money, but his expression said he didn't care for her. Tejan let Sockkelf do most of the talking, though she did let Sebennial see the gold was coming from her purse. She hadn't imagined it; he became far more friendly towards her after that.

"Wow, that was a good price for one of the best boats in the islands."

Said Sockkelf as they walked through the small town, Sockkelf nodding at just about everyone they met.

"It's gold." Said Tejan. "Show someone a full purse and it's as if they've been drugged. Even if they're not getting every gold piece in the purse; they behave as though they might."

"You'll like his crew; they're hardworking and honest as the day is long." Said Sockkelf.

Tejan knew Sebennial wouldn't be joining them; few boat owners went out with their boats. They trusted good crews to get the job done.

"All we need now are a few good Screech to show us the way." Said Tejan.

“Easy.....I just need to call them early on the day we need them.”

Supplies were purchased and stored and the crew were promised a completion fee for getting them to where they needed to go. Not that Tejan mentioned Gezenter-Aparen to them. The ancient Genova city had so many dark rumours surrounding it, that no amount of gold was likely to induce them to go. The crew were told that Sockelf and Tejan needed to get to the other side of the Sacred Sea. That was it, all the details that Tejan thought they needed to know.

“Wow.....I’ve seen Bright Magic a few times.” Said Tejan. “But like this, everything cleaned; polished and ready to go. She’s a beautiful boat.”

The crew looked clean and tidy and Bright Magic looked ready to sail round the entire world, maybe twice. The boat was beautiful, like a racing boat being used to get them where they needed to go. There were even oars to drive her through the water if the wind becalmed them. As soon as Tejan set foot on the boat, the crew cheered her. It was unexpected, but meant a lot.

“Well.....Thank you for that.” Said Tejan. “Time we were on our way though.....Let’s see how fast Bright Magic can move.”

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Nethra was putting the five hundred gold in her purse, as the sound of fighting began in the long bar.

“Is that.....Are they fighting ?” Asked Garus.

“I believe they are.” Said Nethra. “Lock the door after I leave the office. I’m going to teach a few Tandallans why they should never fight a Chinnura.”

Nethra hadn’t arrived in Dessine looking for a fight, but now one had begun in the tavern she owned; she was determined to enjoy it. It would also be memorable, a scene of carnage the citizens talked about for generations. It would be the kind of battle to deter further trouble in the Dessine Defender for a very long time. Nethra heard Garus lock his office door before she moved towards what already looked like a ferocious fight. Tandallan regular troops against the greys, the best fighters Annill had to offer. Well trained and famous for never walking away from a fight. The Tandallan army on the other hand, had offered Muzzie almost no resistance at all, in the wars to make him emperor.

“Tandallan scum.” Yelled Nethra. “I’m going to enjoy this.”

Talking angry produced a rage in Nethra. Using that rage in battle let loose the Chinnura within her. Once when the rage had grown and grown during an argument, she’d nearly put Merrick through a bar wall of their tavern in Annill. Her Chinnura abilities had many facets, but super strength and the ability to fly at speed were Nethra’s favourites.

“The Annill bastards started it.” Yelled a Tandallan soldier.

Others must have come to join the fight; there were at least two dozen Tandallans there and about the same number of greys out of Annill. There were dead on the floor, two or three from either side.

“They tried to kill my wife.” Shouted Chosen.

Chosen’s wife was called Vita, a fierce woman who’d run with a group of raiders for a while. How she’s ended up marrying the rather unassuming Chosen was a mystery to everyone. Vita had killed a Tandallan, so they’d tried to kill her. Nethra had so much chaos energy running through her; she could have probably taken on half the Tandallan Army. It was time to get involved in the bar fight; that was going on in her bar. She beat her wings until the hum was almost deafening. She leapt up and looked to be hanging from the ceiling; though she was really using her wings to hover there. The Tandallans looked confused and scared, but so did a few of the greys.

“I am a Chinnura.....Born out of the darkness.” Yelled Nethra.

Fighter's blade in her hand and teeth ready to bite, Nethra fell among the Tandallan regulars. She hacked and slashed at anywhere not covered in armour and few had worn full armour for a night at the local tavern. When a throat came close to her, Nethra used her teeth to rip it open. Vita stayed close to her, inflicting her own share of damage and death on the Tandallans.

"I hate these bastards." Said Vita. "Two of them tried to kill me on the way here."

"They've tried before." Added Chosen.

Nethra never did find out why the Tandallans had tried murder to remove Chosen's wife from the land of the living. Garus opened his office door and the bar staff came out of wherever they'd been hiding.

"You've killed them all." Said Garus.

"I had help." Said Nethra.

"She's a wild thing.....We could do with her on the front line." Said one of the greys.

Lots of bodies, including a few of the greys among the Tandallans. They needed a plausible explanation for what had happened at Nethra's bar that night. The authorities didn't have to believe it; they just had to accept it as a reason for the blood and carnage. Widows would need settlements; any children would need looking after. It all took gold and a good excuse that no one might believe, but they'd pretend to believe.

"Shit.....What do we tell the town guard?" Asked Garus.

"Raiders.....They'll accept that raiders did it." Said Nethra. "No one wants to be the cause of total war with Tandalla. Raiders came into the tavern and you locked yourself away, with the bar staff. When you came out, the floor was covered in the dead. Do you think you can sell that to the town guard?"

"Not easy, but I can do it." Said Garus.

"We need to get moving.....Must be back in camp before first light." Said Chosen.

"You're right, let's get going." Said Nethra.

"Aren't we going to say a few words over our dead?" Asked a grey.

"Say them when the town guard bury them with full honours." Said Nethra.

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When the Morning Tide arrived in a narrow bay beneath steep cliffs, no one suggested they were in the wrong place. It was Pinthrad, who was now fully in touch with his sanity. He seemed so balanced, so confident, so self-assured. When he said they needed to climb the cliffs to find Gezenter-Aparen, no one doubted him; not even Enster Tilly.

"If Pinthrad says we climb the cliffs.....We climb the cliffs." Said Enster.

Galla had sent Bird to see if there was an ancient Genova city beyond the cliffs, but her pet hadn't returned. Even the usually calm Galla seemed worried about Bird. The Screech wouldn't talk to them, or even acknowledge their presence.

"The main group should climb the cliffs." Said Seren. "Itzel and I will fly up there and see if Gezenter-Aparen is up there."

"Don't suffer the same fate as Bird." Said Adamaz.

"As far as we know Bird is alive and well." Said Galla.

"No insult, Seren. But at times like this.....I wish Muzzie had sent Nethra with us." Said Lilleth.

"No insult taken, I wish she was here." Said Seren. "However, we use the resources we have."

Dark angels were tough, but an angry Chinnura was just about the toughest fighter in the multiverse. Given a choice of companions Seren would have chosen Nethra and another dozen dark angels, but she hadn't been given a choice.

“Come on Itzel, it shouldn’t take us long to reach the top of the cliffs.” Said Seren.

Maybe not quite as fast as a Chinnura saturated with chaos energy, but Seren and Itzel could fly fast and high. It took them no time at all to find the ancient city of grey stones. For them the doors were already open and a Genova hybrid was beckoning them inside.

“Bird.....He always lands on his feet.” Said Seren.

There was Bird, being fed what looked like live Nesh Bugs; by an angel.

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