

## The Ancient Ones

### Chapter 1 – The Rifts

**‘Mussaneth Osranetherer; Emperor over all the rifts, had his palace. The large four armed demon hybrid was still known as Muzzie to just about everyone. He still liked to sleep in his bar, especially since it had been rebuilt after the fire. The facilities were more comfortable than they’d once been. He’d even been known to serve beer to his regulars; some of the worst thieves and vagabonds in the City of the Lost God.’**



Algaria was an empire world, one of the first to join the Menderan Empire. Not through conquest, but because trading within the empire worlds held the promise of a brighter future; there had even been a vote on joining. For several millennia the future for Algaria seemed to be in mining deep space planets. If a world was ridiculously hot, or cold enough turn nitrogen to puddles of liquid; you’d find an Algarian mining crew there, digging deep holes in the ground. What were they mining for? That changed with the demand, but there came a point when mining wasn’t as lucrative as it had once been. As the empire had grown, there were empire worlds where much of their food needed to be brought in on huge merchant vessels. Most of Algaria’s mining ships converted to delivering food and general supplies to the outer fringes of the empire. The problem was that transporting food and clothing didn’t pay as well as mining. By the time Captain Firass Kerr was bringing the cargo vessel Algaria Starburst 4 into a high orbit over a moon of the planet Kahan, even shipping food wasn’t as lucrative as it had been.

“When does it happen.....Will we know when it happens?” Asked Junior Officer Jelran Mosca. Jelran was young and he hadn’t been on the crew of the Starburst long enough to have been involved in previous inventive ways to increase revenue for a fairly standard run of mixed grains from Pesallia Two. Pesallia had been primarily a tech world, but was now the grain basket of the empire; no one had seen that one coming.

“You’ll feel it as Mohr shifts us to the first rift.” Said Dava Nerish. “Relax Jelran, I’m told she’s done this many times with a variety of craft; some larger than ours.”

Mohr was a dark magic user who’d been picked up on Pesallia Two. Her age and where she came from were a mystery, or at least they were a mystery to him. Jelran assumed Captain Kerr knew everything there was to know about her. It was hard to believe at first, but he’d heard rumours right through training. There were dark magic users prepared to land a spacecraft on the first rift, for a price. Dangerous of course, staggeringly dangerous.

“It’s just that I heard rumours.” Said Jelran. “The more often a craft goes through to the rifts, the more damage it takes. Second in command Ubari Desa, says the Starburst has been through a lot of times, maybe too many.”

“Rumours, Jelran.” Said Dava. “I hope you haven’t been discussing our business in some back street bar on Algaria?”

“No, of course not.....I’m loyal.” Said Jelran. “Plus, I need the money; my family needs the extra money. I heard rumours during training that the rifts destroy technology.”

His family really were desperate. Cut back on all nonessentials and where do you cut when there still isn’t enough money to pay the bills? Jelran had given his oath to the captain and was now earning

money in a pretty grubby way, but he needed the cash. They dropped off weapons near to the City of the Lost God. There was a working rift gate there, with links to many places the empire would never sell weapons to. Once the weapons had been sent they took off and Mohr could take them back to a high orbit of a moon of the planet Kahan. Why there ? No one ever visited Kahan; it was a bit of a shit hole.

“The rifts do wreck technology, but the Starburst is fairly new.” Said Dava. “Tech moves on and we can do a quick run to the first rift without tumbling out of the sky.”

“I was told there is no sky on the rifts.” Said Jelran.

“Oh, there is a sky, but no horizon.” Said Dava. “The first time you see that, it will blow your mind. Ahh, here we go.....Feel the vibration ?”

“Yes, I do.”

A modern state of the art food container transporter and they'd just winked out of reality with the aid of Mohr, a dark magic adept. The outside screens on the rec room wall were now showing the blackness of nothing, a huge amount of nothing.

“This just feels so.....Unnatural.” Said Jelran.

“It is unnatural.” Said a passing crew member.

It paid well though, more than Jelran's annual pay for just one very risky trip to the first rift. Other craft had done the run and most survived, but sometimes. Ubari Desa had told him not to panic if they saw the remains of the occasional crashed and decaying spacecraft on the surface of the rift.

“We'll be fine.....Relax, Jelran.” Ubari had told him.

Even his own mother hadn't tried to discourage him from getting involved in selling arms. His family really were desperate for the extra money.

“Come on, we can get a better view of the surface from the lower hold.” Said Dava.

Dava was young to be the science officer, but she seemed to know her stuff. As she ran towards the stairs, Jelran ran after her. It was a strange mixture of stairs and elevators to get to the lower hold. He ran down the stairs, enjoying her infectious laughter as she kept well ahead of him. The vibration began again and didn't stop.

“Good, we'll be above the first rift.” Said Dava. “Remember, Jelran.....There's no horizon here.”

There were no windows, but there were a lot screens fed by cameras on the outside of their vessel; even those controlling the flight of the Starburst, did it via cameras and screens. The screens in the lower hold were at an angle to help the safe delivery of massive containers. Most were giving Jelran his first ever view of the first rift.

“Wow, it goes on forever down there.” Said Jelran. “Not a desert though, I heard the rifts were all hot and dry.”

“We'll be landing not that far from the Great River.” Said Dava. “Some of the rifts are all dry sand, but the first rift has forests and farmland. There are also creatures called Growlers; predators slightly larger than you. Given the chance they will eat you, so stay alert.”

“Farmers.....There are people down there ?” Asked Jelran.

“Millions of them, the City of the Lost God is full of them, though most are hybrids.” Said Dava.

“Yes, I remember hearing about the hybrids.” Said Jelran. “I thought it was just another silly rumour.”

The rumours during training came thick and fast; most he'd put down to over active imaginations. If human-demon hybrids were real, what else might be down there ?

“No rumour, they can be a genuine threat while we're on the ground.” Said Dava. “Stay alert and don't hesitate to use your side arm if something comes at you.”

Dava was slightly older than him, but that hadn't stopped them becoming a bit more than friends. Not a relationship yet; whatever they had was difficult to define. They had shared a bed a few times during a stopover on Felos 11. Maybe it was all the talk about risks and hybrids, but they ended up kissing.

'Dava and Jelran.....Please report to the main airlock.'

The voice of Ubari Desa over the intercom and there were internal cameras. Had they been seen kissing? That kind of thing wasn't against the rules; they were a mixed gender crew a long way from home. Sex was fine, as long as it didn't interfere with the smooth running of the Starburst. Having to be reminded to go to the airlock was a potential red flag.

"Come on, we need to get moving." Said Dava.

They'd only one elevator to go, just two more floors and they'd be at the main airlock. They'd be able to smell the air of the rifts and see in its light, which Jelran had heard was high in ultraviolet. The air would stink and their eyes would need to acclimatise. Luckily they'd only be there a short time, so acclimatising didn't really matter. Dava was running between two containers, laughing again; seeming to challenge him to catch her.

"Can't catch me.....How will you avoid the six legged Growlers?" Yelled Dava.

He caught her, actually had his arms around her when the entire ship twitched. The Starburst was a large vessel; though everything was largely run by on-board systems. A crew of around fifty, sixty if there might be some manual unloading at their destination. There were massive side thrusters and so many systems designed to stop the craft twitching. It twitched again, throwing Dava and Jelran against the side of a container.

"What the hell is happening?" Asked Jelran.

"I have no idea." Said Dava.

Bells and klaxons began, enough of them to indicate it wasn't a minor problem. Starburst twitched hard to the left and Jelran found himself lying on a pile of packing material; his arms still around Dava. The noise of the alarms made talking impossible. Jelran kissed Dava on her forehead and hoped it wasn't the last time he kissed her. He held her tight, as tight as he could.

"I love you." Shouted Jelran.

The Starburst hit something before Dava could reply; the alarms were so loud she might not have heard him. As the ground was the only thing to hit, he assumed the massive container vessel had crashed. It seemed to hit more things, until it began to turn over, side on side. Jelran's head hit the metal side of a container and the next thing he knew was being outside with light he could barely see by. He was coughing, as was Dava. It seemed it wasn't just a rumour; the air of the first rift really did stink. Training took over; the first thing to do was to check for injuries. Not easy, as Dava still seemed to be barely conscious.

"Dava.....Wake up, the Starburst has crashed." Said Jelran.

"What? Where are we?" Asked Dava.

"Sadly.....We're on the surface of the first rift." Said Jelran. "We need to check for injuries.....Can you walk?"

He stood up to check himself over and he seemed alright. His right knee hurt, but that had hurt since a bad sports injury when he'd been about twelve. Otherwise there was no blood seeping out of anywhere, no panic inducing pains from internal organs. He ached in a few places, but just surviving the crash seemed a miracle. Dava stood up next to him, checking herself over.

"I don't believe it, I seem to have escaped with a bit of a headache." Said Dava. "Oh fuck.....That's not nice to see."

Jelran looked where Dava was looking and saw the mangled body of Mohr. Their only real expert on the rifts wasn't going to be able to get them home. For the first time, Jelran felt a moment of panic, as he realised they were on a very alien world, with no way of ever seeing home again. They were illegally sending weapons through a rift gate that only Mohr could activate. They were criminals well off the Starburst's official flight plan. No one was going to come looking for them.

"We should see if anyone else survived." Said Jelran.

"Survived this.....The Starburst is in a million pieces." Said Dava. "No one could survive this."

"We did.....Come on, we can grab any supplies we see." Said Jelran. "Food of course and water....More ammunition for our side arms. Backpacks too.....Anything else that might be useful."

The Starburst had ended up colliding with the standing stones of the rift gate, so that was probably ruined anyway; even if Mohr hadn't been killed. They were within sight of the tall towers of the City of the Lost God. That meant someone was likely to arrive to loot anything useful out of the wrecked spacecraft. All in all it was a bad situation, especially when they discovered they were probably the only survivors from the Algaria Starburst 4. Finding the ripped apart body of Captain Firass Kerr, seemed to be telling them they were alone; he'd always seemed so indestructible. On the plus side, they had filled a backpack each with supplies and ammunition. Some bedding would have been nice, but it was all too bulky.

"It's getting dark.....Any ideas on what we do now ?" Asked Jelran.

"I've been here a few times, but I'm no expert on the area." Said Dava. "There's a ruined village not that far away. I explored it a little out of curiosity. Some of the houses are still quite secure; they even have working bolts on the doors."

"That sounds a reasonably safe place to sleep." Said Jelran. "After sunrise we can think what we do next."

"There is no sunrise; the sky just gets a bit brighter." Said Dava. "This way.....And watch out for the Growlers."

The village wasn't far away; there was still the hint of a cobbled road leading to it. The closer they got to the village, the better they could see the City of the Lost God. There were large flying creatures larger than a human circling the towers.

"What are those things circling the high tower ?" Asked Jelran.

"I'm no expert, but they're probably dark angels." Said Dava. "Yes, they are very real and would love to eat us as a special treat. At least, that's what Mohr told me. We need to get under cover as soon as possible."

If Mohr had been alive, she'd have known ways to get them home; there had to be other rift gates on the first rift. She'd probably been an expert on such things and what berries on the trees could be safely eaten. Without her, just surviving every day was likely to be a throw of the dice. Another sombre mood hit him; he'd had a few of those since waking up in a wrecked spacecraft.

"After the abandoned village, where do you think we should go ?" He asked.

"Let's think about that when the glow in the sky gets brighter again." Said Dava.

"Air that stinks, no horizon and no sunny mornings." Said Jelran. "What a truly fucked up place this is."

"You'll get used to it.....Another rift problem seems to have noticed us." Said Dava.

It had to be one of the infamous six legged Growlers. Low on the ground, but sturdy looking, it probably weighed as much as the pair of them combined. Like a green skinned lizard, but bigger than any lizard Jelran had ever seen. It was heading towards him with its jaws open and making an unpleasant hissing sound. Its six clawed legs gave it an odd side to side motion.

"I think it likes you.....Maybe it wants to get to know you better." Said Dava.

For an Algarian woman who'd been through the obligatory two years of military service, she had a strange sense of humour. Weird some might call it, he'd noticed it before. Jelran was good with his sidearm; he'd won a couple of awards while in training. Just a standard military blaster, but they could pack quite a punch. Jelran aimed at the Growler's open jaws and fired twice. The creature of the rifts was probably dead after the first shot.

"Well, that wasn't so tough." He said.

"Wait until we're up against a pack of them." Said Dava. "It's getting dark; we need to get into one of the abandoned houses."

He tried the door on one of the larger houses and set off a sound like an angry bug of some kind. Probably harmless, but Jelran wasn't in the mood to take unnecessary risks.

"Sounds nasty, we'll try the next house." He said.

"Good.....You're learning, Jelran.....You're learning." Said Dava.

No angry bug sound as he opened the door to the next house. They were in some kind of reception area; the windows had no glass and no shutters. Another door, and they were a bit further into the house.

"Wow, I hadn't expected to find a proper bed." Said Dava. "I dread to think how old it is, but it's better than sleeping on the floor."

There had probably never been glass on the bedroom windows, but there were tight fitting shutters. By the time they'd been closed, it was pretty dark in the old abandoned house. Dava found her lamp in her pack by feel and turned it on. The bed looked solid, though there was probably a lot of dirt in the mattress. Not that he was complaining; he was so tired he'd have slept anywhere.

"I slept in worse during military service." Said Dava. "I'll turn the lamp off once we're comfortable." Jelran hadn't assumed they'd be sharing a bed, but he was hoping not to get the filthy floor to sleep on. He cuddled up to Dava, as she turned off her lamp and placed it on the floor.

"This bed is actually quite comfortable." Said Jelran.

Nothing was going to happen; they were both too tired to think of sex. There'd been so many deaths too; they were the last survivors of the Starburst's crew. It was nice to cuddle though, very nice. Just as he was drifting off to sleep, Dava kissed him on the cheek.

"I did hear you.....I love you too." She said.

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Mussaneth Osranetherer; Emperor over all the rifts, had his palace. The large four armed demon hybrid was still known as Muzzie to just about everyone. He still liked to sleep in his bar, especially since it had been rebuilt after the fire. The facilities were more comfortable than they'd once been. He'd even been known to serve beer to his regulars; some of the worst thieves and vagabonds in the City of the Lost God. It had been over five hundred imperial years since he'd been crowned emperor in Leng. When he looked in a mirror he didn't see a young hybrid, or even a middle aged one anymore. He looked as though he was getting on a bit; not bad for his truly staggering age. Personally, he put his longevity down to the small amount of Genova blood in his ancestry. He opened a window and looked out at the City, his City.

"You're getting vain as you get older." Said Aeony.

Where he slept, Aeony tended to sleep. The large Queen of the dark angels had been his lover for slightly longer than he'd been emperor. She had a way of lying back on the bed, which had caused them to have many late mornings. Not that Muzzie was worried; he was the emperor after all. No one would dare disturb them unless the empire was under threat; and that hadn't happened for

over three hundred years. Aeony had the usual wings and claws of a dark angel, but best of all; dark angels were long lived, very long lived.

"I used to hate the angel in my mix, the Genova blood." Said Muzzie. "The number of times that little bit of conscience had got me into trouble. Now though.....I think it's giving me a long life."

"Yes, you still look pretty good." Said Aeony.

Such comments had led to them remaining in bed until the regulars at the bar were enjoying whatever was being served for lunch. Muzzie had sold his bar to a hero of the war for him to become emperor. Actually he'd almost given it away. It didn't feel right for the emperor to own a seedy bar in a bad part of the City. When the old soldier had died, Muzzie had bought the bar back from his family. Aeony was grinning at him, as she allowed the bed sheet to drop away from her breasts.

"I'll lock the door, in case someone comes looking for us." Said Muzzie.

He could hear the clanking of bottles, as beer was delivered. Soon the bar would come to life and no one would hear them enjoying a little morning fun. Aeony suddenly got out of bed; definitely not what he'd been hoping for.

"Damn.....Seren mentioned it to me last night." Said Aeony. "A human craft dropped out of the sky and crashed, just beyond the old village. I promised to go with her to look over the wreckage."

Seren was Aeony's second in command; another dark angel who'd been flying over the rifts for well over a thousand years.

"There'll be nothing worth salvaging, there never is." Said Muzzie.

"The watchers on the tower saw movement on the road." Said Aeony. "They even noticed light in the abandoned village. There might be survivors this time."

Survivors from crashed human craft were beyond rare; there had never been any before. It was likely the Growlers would have had them for a meal, but if they'd managed to find shelter; they might be alive. It was important; it was almost unknown for full blood humans to enter the City of the Lost God. Survivors would have news; they'd have gossip about other worlds.

"I'll go with you." Said Muzzie. "If there are survivors I'd like to be there when they're found."

"Yes, that'll be fun." Said Aeony.

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Dava Nerish had risen early, or what she assumed was early. The air seemed to be almost sticking to the back of her throat and the light was brighter, but a long way from a decent summer dawn on Algaria. She'd already decided she didn't like the rifts and the first rift was supposed to be the best. According to the history books she'd read while at school, the first rift was almost a paradise compared to the others. When Captain Firass Kerr had offered her serious money to be part of his arms selling racket; part of the appeal had been the rifts, the worlds with no horizons. It had the promise of lots of cash and the excitement of visiting somewhere truly strange and exotic. Now she was beginning to hate the place and she hadn't seen the other six rifts. Of course, Jelran Mosca lying on the bed and sleeping like a baby wasn't helping her mood. How could he sleep so soundly in such a terrible place? She nudged him until his eyes opened.

"Come on Jelran, we need to eat something and get moving." Said Dava.

"I feel better for that sleep." Said Jelran. "Where are we going to?"

Jelran dug about in his pack and offered her some of the dried fruit they'd bought on Pesallia Two. He'd done the unforgivable though; asking her a question she'd yet to come up with an answer for. She decided to be honest about it.

"I have no idea, but we need to keep moving." Said Dava. "There was a lot of snuffling around the door during the night. I think we picked Growler territory to go to sleep."

"Did you sleep badly?" Asked Jelran.

"I got to sleep, but it took a while."

Not quite the truth, she'd spent much of the night worrying about all the weird noises in the abandoned village. She'd looked through the windows with no shutters in the reception area of the house. She would have sworn to seeing something like a man, but he glowed a blueish colour and walked through walls. Now there was light outside and Jelran was awake, she was less certain what she'd really seen. Dreams were fine, but hallucinations were worrying.

"Can you hear that?" Asked Jelran.

She almost said no, but the sound was there, as if it was made by something travelling very fast.

"Yes, like a huge flock of birds." Said Dava.

They both looked through a window with no glass and saw several dark angels go over the house and carry on in the direction of the wreck of the Algaria Starburst 4.

"They'll be going to see if there's anything worth looting." Said Dava. "They might decide to look this place over. We really do need to decide on a direction and start walking."

She'd joined Jelran in eating dried fruit and drinking a little of their precious water, when there was another sound of dark angel wings.

"More of them.....You're right, we need to get out of here." Said Jelran.

Four more dark angels and they seemed to be landing on the road at the edge of the village. One of the dark angels was truly huge and actually carrying a large male demon hybrid in her claws. She placed the demon hybrid on the ground and then kissed him, which was totally unexpected.

"Spread out." Said the large dark angel. "We need to get them safely back to the city before they become a meal for passing growlers."

"Did you understand that?" Asked Dava. "The dark angel spoke in old imperial."

"Some of it, my school never taught it." Said Jelran. "But I learned a little during military service."

"My family have been in the military for centuries, we all learn old imperial." Said Dava. "It sounds as though they're trying to find us to help us."

"That sounds a dangerous assumption." Said Jelran. "I've heard stories of dark angels eating people like us."

The large four armed demon hybrid was walking down the centre of the road and would soon be right outside the house. Dava had a certainty in her mind that him and the dark angels meant them no harm. No one who wasn't civilised would speak old imperial so well.

"Go house to house.....Watch out for growlers." Shouted the large dark angel.

Again, that perfect old imperial. Dava made up her mind.

"We're going out.....I'd rather go out to them, than be found skulking in here." Said Dava.

"You're sure?" Asked Jelran.

"Yes, I am."

"Fine.....I'll be by your side." Said Jelran.

They went out of the door together, which seemed to surprise the dark angels; there was a lot of flapping of wings and urgent sounding calls. The demon hybrid came straight at them.

"People, humans." Said the hybrid. "This was a human village once, a very long time ago. Do you understand what I'm saying?"

"I do, but my friend doesn't know old imperial that well." Said Dava.

"We mean you no harm, are you injured?" Asked the hybrid.

"No.....We were lucky." Said Dava. "But all the crew of our ship were killed in the crash."

"We'll bury those we find, but the Growlers move fast." Said the large dark angel.

An idea was forming in Dava's mind, a memory of a note in the history book on the great imperial wars that went right across the rifts. A note about a large demon hybrid and his mate, a particularly large dark angel.

"I have to ask.....Are you him ?" Asked Dava. "Are you the emperor Mussaneth Osranetherer ?"

"Very clever, yes I am, though everyone calls me Muzzie." Said Muzzie. "The large dark angel is Aeony, who fought by my side at ever battle."

"I seem to remember missing one or two." Said Aeony.

They seemed so normal, so friendly; even Jelran was relaxing.

"We're Dava and Jelran.....I'm Jelran." Said Jelran.

"You can't stay here." Said Aeony. "The closest working rift gate is a good ten days walk from here and that won't send you to any human worlds."

"Aeony is saying you need to come with us, but we'd never force you." Said Muzzie. "Be our guests for a while and we'll work out a way of getting you home."

"My parents will be go crazy." Said Dava. "After a day or so, with the Starburst reported missing. They'll think I'm dead."

"Mine too.....Everyone will think we're dead." Added Jelran.

Dava had a sort of boyfriend too, but now wasn't the time to mention that. She was planning on ending their relationship the moment she'd got home. Now life seemed intent on complicating things.

"If you trade in illegal weapons, this kind of thing can happen." Said Aeony.

"Come and stay in the palace, it's very comfortable." Said Muzzie. "Definitely no Growlers there. Share a little gossip about what's happening in the human worlds. We have one of the most powerful magic users on the rifts; if Faal can't get you home, no one can."

"Plus, you'll know what it's like to be carried by a dark angel." Said Aeony. "Are you coming with us, or do you want direction to the rift gate at the Ring of Volkin ?"

The next rift gate sounded a long way off and they might well get lost. Being carried by a dark angel sounded exciting and terrifying in equal measure. Dava looked at Jelran, who nodded at her. Going to Muzzie's palace seemed their only sensible option.

"We'll go with you." Said Dava.

"Thank you for taking us in." Added Jelran.

"Good.....If you're not good with heights; close your eyes until we get there." Said Muzzie.

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When Aeony had told him there were two humans in the palace; Faalr h Ha radask, generally known as Faal, had thought Muzzie must be finally going insane. Humans inside the City of the Lost God, a city fought over by humans and demons for.....So many millennia that even he wasn't sure exactly how long. At one time the dark angels would have disembowelled them on sight and devoured them. Things had changed though since Muzzie had become emperor; he was very different to any of his predecessors. Faal had an unnaturally long lifespan, due to many factors; some of which he didn't fully understand. He'd lived in Leng for a truly staggering length of time and had served most of the previous emperors. The Xanash dynasty mostly with Xanash the 34<sup>th</sup> being the most merciless and brutal. Muzzie's leadership style was different and most, including Faal, liked the change.

"Come on Jenda." Said Faal. "About time we had a look at these two humans Muzzie found. I'm told one speaks fluent old imperial. I have no idea what the other one speaks. Listen and take notes, Jenda.....Lots of notes."

"I heard they're from Algaria.....A language very similar to the common tongue of the Menderan Empire."

There it was again, she'd have once been flayed alive for mentioning the Menderan Empire in the City. Things changed though and it was nice to be able to speak more openly. Jenda was his apprentice, one of the best he'd ever had. Not that she needed to know that, it might make her ask for more pay. She was a hybrid with the usual mix of demon blood and Dredger in her ancestry. She also had a significant amount of Genova in her blood, which was unusual. Even more unusual was her training from the Guild of Assassins, which was never mentioned in public.

"Come on, they'll be having breakfast on the veranda." Said Faal.

The two humans were indeed, having breakfast on the veranda where Muzzie liked to sit and look out over his City. Faal knew their first names were Jelran and Dava, but that was just about the full extent of his knowledge. Muzzie thought they'd be perfect for a task he had in mind and the emperor was rarely wrong about such things. The two pure blood humans were drinking herbal tea and eating grains covered in syrup, exactly like a million other inhabitants of the City. They'd had three days to recover from the crash of their craft. A skilled healer had even dealt with a congenital joint problem the male, Jelran; had suffered from since birth. If they decided to go home, they'd be fit and well when they went.

"Hello, I'm hoping you've heard of me." Said Faal. "I am Faal and this is Jenda, my apprentice."

Muzzie was right; the two humans were wearing local clothing and could easily pass for apprentices in the Great Library, or trainees in the Magicians Guild. They were perfect and best of all, if they were caught or killed, Muzzie could deny all knowledge of them.

"Hello." Added Jenda. "I will be taking notes."

"Yes, yes.....Muzzie did say you'd be coming to see us." Said Dava.

"Is this a convenient moment to ask you a few questions?" Asked Faal.

"Yes, we usually take a long leisurely breakfast." Said Jelran.

Faal sat at their table, while Jenda sat behind them, where she could watch their body language as she took notes. The two Algarians looked friendly and eager to please; add on an obvious intelligence and they were perfect for Muzzie's task.

"I can probably get you to one of the worlds of the Menderan Empire." Said Faal. "I'm assuming you can make a few calls and get home from any Menderan world?"

"Yes, we can call and arrange for transport home." Said Dava.

Their eyes opened wide at the thought of getting home. They'd have probably already discussed their fate if they did get home, but it didn't hurt to remind them.

"Of course, going home may well end up with you both in an Algarian prison for.....Well, a very long time." Said Faal. "The Starburst will have been reported missing by now and you're the only survivors. The only ones who can be charged with illegal weapons trading."

"We did discuss this, but home is home." Said Jelran.

"There are ways you could have well paid careers here, on the rifts." Said Faal.

"As Jelran said.....Home is home." Said Dava.

"Of course, it will always be your choice if you decide to stay here." Said Faal. "It may be possible to get messages to your families on Algaria. Have you ever heard of the Ancient Ones?"

They were both shaking their heads, but they were still curious, he could tell they were curious. Faal was hoping that if they did accept Muzzie's task, that they'd return alive and well to the City. A few had gone looking for Maya and the Ancient Ones; so far none of them had returned. The humans might well be different, their physiology more resistant to magical damage.

“No, who are they ?” Asked Dava.

The woman was the key, get her to accept and they’d both be heading for the mountains in the east. Faal decided to answer a question with another question, even though he hated people doing it to him.

“No one is entirely certain, but they resemble dragons.” Said Faal. “Tell me.....Have you ever wanted to see dragons ? Perhaps watch them soar through the sky ?”

“Oh, yes.....I’d love to see that.” Said Dava.

Jelran just nodded, but Faal could see it in their eyes. They were just about ready to say goodbye to Algaria and set off to look for Maya. Faal eased his conscience with the thought that serving Muzzie had far more to offer them than half a lifetime in an Algerian jail.

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