

The Ancient Ones

Chapter 16 – The Gateway

'Ash stormed off through the grounds of Gezenter-Aparen, the perfect place to storm off through. The buildings were beautiful, the city walls majestic with hints of ancient power. There was only one thing seriously bothering Ezzel and one message to the Sorcerers Guild would probably sort that out.

"Time to contact the guild, I think." Said Ezzel. "They can decide if this wedding will take place or not, or rather they'll ask Muzzie to decide."



Seren could understand why the two young Algarians were getting anxious about going through the gateway to somewhere magical. They weren't hybrids after all, or even born on the rifts. They'd both been born and educated on a round planet with a sun and several moons. Having a different physiology to most on the rifts might make them strong and impervious to some magic. On the other hand, they might die the instant they stepped out of the other side of the Gateway, wherever that might be. Seren decided to downplay the possibility of instant death. For a dark angel she was developing a surprising amount of empathy.

"I'm quite happy to answer your questions." Said Seren. "Muzzie was told by the Sorcerers Guild that your origins are likely to make you more resistant to rift magic. I'm sure he mentioned telling you about that."

"He did, but to what purpose?" Asked Dava.

"Why is our resistance to rift magic useful to you?" Asked Jelran.

They were coming at her together, which Seren could handle. She had so many other things to do, but Muzzie had taken a bit of a shine to Dava and Jelran. Seren believed that Muzzie had wanted to keep them out of harm's way, though that hadn't worked out too well. Could she tell them the truth as she saw it? Seren decided to try and see how the young Algarians reacted to it.

"I can give you the truth as I see it." Said Seren. "It makes as much sense as anything else. Will that keep you both happy?"

"Yes, we just want the truth." Said Dava.

Their faces were so keen, so young.....Seren could understand why Muzzie had wanted to keep them away from the dangers and intrigue of the City of the Lost God. If they survived to return to the imperial city, Muzzie would probably bestow the Algarians with grand titles. On the other hand, if they died on the shores of the sacred sea, no one would care; no parents would know of it and grieve for them.

"Muzzie likes you both; I've seen him the same way before." Said Seren. "Yes, your physiology might be useful, but first and foremost.....He gave both of you to me, with instructions to keep you safe. The imperial city can be dangerous for outsiders; lots of intrigue and jealousy."

"Really? We're just here to be kept out of the way?" Asked Jelran.

"Muzzie did mention how two or three years on the rifts would improve your education." Said Seren. Dava began to laugh and to Seren's surprise, Jelran joined in.

"Perfect.....Fucking perfect." Said Dava. "Muzzie didn't know what else to do with us, so you got the job of babysitter."

"That's a pretty fair assessment of the situation." Said Seren. "Your physiology might be useful after gateway, but there's no way of telling."

They were still laughing like crazy people, which was really strange. Seren had expected anger, not the human equivalent of maniacal laughter. It was very off putting.

"Shall we ask her about the marriage now?" Asked Dava.

"Yes, why not?" Asked Jelran.

The world had made sense when Seren had got out of her bed that morning, now it seemed to make no sense at all. Marriage indeed, there was no plan for anyone to marry.

"Marriage.....Who is getting married?" Asked Seren.

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The Bright Magic had seemed to fly through the water, as if it was trying to get to Gezenter-Aparen as quickly as possible. As the sky brightened for a new day, Tejan could just about see cliffs in the distance; they seemed to go for miles along the coast of the Endless Sea. She could even see where a river poured over the cliffs and into the sea. She missed having an horizon, but was learning how to judge distance without one.

"How long until we're at the cliffs?" She asked. "My guess, which is very much a guess; is that we'll get there the morning after next."

"As long as the wind holds, the crew say we'll be there as the sky brightens tomorrow." Said Sockelf.

"So, the Endless Sea does have an ending." Said Tejan.

Tejan and Sockelf looked at the incredibly blue sea and the cliffs in the distance. Already, there felt to be something magical about where they were heading. It wasn't just them; the crew of Bright Magic looked at the cliffs as if in awe of where they were going. Not that the crew were going with them into the City of the Angels. They were going to fill their water barrels, hunt for a little fresh meat and be heading back home as quickly as possible. It seemed they distrusted the magic of the Genova and distrusted Tejan even more. They might cheer her on, she was Sockelf's partner, but trusting her was a whole different matter. Not one of them was willing to scale the cliffs with her.

"So, what shall we do today?" Asked Sockelf.

"The same as every other day we've spent at sea." Said Tejan. "Have breakfast and find a comfortable spot to relax and enjoy the day."

"No preparation for entering Gezenter-Aparen?" Asked Sockelf.

"My blades are as clean and sharp as they'll ever be." Said Tejan. "Besides, I've started trusting the news brought by the Screech. If they say the Genova are offering a truce and their protection, I tend to believe them. And being honest, I quite like the idea of entering their gateway to somewhere magical. Who wouldn't?"

Sockelf was looking at her and she was looking at him. There was still a question that required an answer and even the Screech seemed unsure about that.

"Why do you think we've had an invitation to go through their gateway?" Asked Sockelf.

"Well, I was trained as a member of the Damned." Said Tejan. "We're well trained and hard to kill. That has to be useful when taking a gateway into the unknown."

"You really think that's the reason?" Asked Sockelf.

"Not really, but it's as good as any." Said Tejan. "We'll only know for certain when we've entered their gateway and know what's on the other side."

"Has your life always been like this?" Asked Sockelf.

"When I was in the Damned, every day was dangerous." Said Tejan.

She found them breakfast in the small galley of Bright Magic. She also found a small bottle of something mildly intoxicating, which she was becoming quite fond of. After eating she snuggled up to Sökkelf as they took it in turn to sip from the bottle.

"Oh Tejan.....I could get used to this life." Said Sökkelf.

"Once this job is complete we can give that a try." Said Tejan.

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Ezzel Pinthrad knew he'd been unwell for quite some time. He also knew that he was now healed and pretty much his old self again. He knew Galla, so he was giving her all the credit and thanks for healing his damaged mind. Lilleth had helped and even Adamaz had given Galla some dark magic to add to the healing mix. Ezzel knew all that, but he knew Galla; had known her for a very long time. To him, she'd always be the healer who'd given him back his health and sanity. Not to mention nearly all of his precious memories.

"This place is finishing off the healing." Said Ezzel. "The power of the angels soaked into everything they built, every brick, and every piece of timber."

"It was pure luck that we ever went to that island and found you." Said Ash.

"Luck.....Never, it was fated." Said Ezzel. "It had been fated since before I was born; I realise that now."

"Don't fill that boy's head with things he won't understand." Said Lilleth.

"I understand.....I understand very well." Said Ash.

Pinthrad patted Ash's shoulder a couple of times, but he understood what she meant. Ash had been an apprentice to Podd the Bone Collector; for a great many years. He'd learned the business inside out, but that didn't make him an expert on the notion of fate versus freewill. Come to think of it, Pinthrad was only just beginning to understand such things again.

"Leave the lad alone, he knows what he needs to know." Said Itzel.

"I'm not a lad !" Yelled Ash.

Ash stormed off through the grounds of Gezenter-Aparen, the perfect place to storm off through. The buildings were beautiful, the city walls majestic with hints of ancient power. There was only one thing seriously bothering Ezzel and one message to the Sorcerers Guild would probably sort that out. "Time to contact the guild, I think." Said Ezzel. "They can decide if this wedding will take place or not, or rather they'll ask Muzzie to decide."

"Seren needs to be present." Said Galla. "She is the leader of our expedition."

"Then someone needs to find her." Said Ezzel.

"I'll go.....I saw her by the river." Said Lilleth.

No one knew how long the search would take, but no one left. A wedding between Dava and Jelran was to be a formal wedding carried out by the Genova themselves. Such a thing hadn't been witnessed in hundreds of years. It might not be witnessed now if Muzzie called it preposterous and banned it. If that happened the two Algarians might refuse to enter the gateway. Ezzel didn't like to think of the circumstances if that happened. Seren took close to one quarter of the hour to appear and she was carrying Lilleth in her arms.

"Oh, carrying Lilleth.....She won't like that." Said Galla.

Lilleth didn't look at all put out by her mode of transport. Despite his reputation for being awkward, Ezzel didn't argue the point with Galla. Seren set Lilleth gently on the ground and approached Ezzel.

"I heard you want to contact your guild." Said Seren. "Can that be done here, right now ? It'll be good to get it over and done with."

"It's the wedding you see, between Jelran and Dava." Said Ezzel. "Muzzie needs to know and approve of their union. I can talk to the guild, who can talk to the emperor. With luck we'll quickly have an imperial blessing, or refusal to the marriage."

"And if Muzzie says no to the marriage?" Asked Seren.

"If Muzzie refuses to give his blessing, we could be in a lot of trouble." Said Ezzel. "The young Algarians might refuse to enter the gateway and they must enter of their own free will."

"Do it now, before Dava and Jelran come along." Said Lilleth. "Then it might become a complete shambles.....A dreadful mess."

"Very well.....This will only take a moment." Said Ezzel.

Pinthrad had first created the window to help Muzzie's army keep in touch, all those centuries ago. He in turn had been taught the skill by a now long dead head of the Sorcerers Guild; a dangerous hybrid from Leng called Babaef, but he'd known his dark magic.

"Babaef taught me this, before the creatures of darkness claimed him." Said Ezzel.

Ezzel used just the forefinger of his left hand, to draw the outline of a large box; though some called them windows. An entire squad of soldiers would be able to walk through the window once it was activated. Ezzel would create a window if Seren wanted to get everyone back to the City of the Lost God; in a hurry.

"I've heard about these, but never actually seen one." Muttered Lilleth.

"This one is just to talk to my Guild." Said Ezzel. "No one will be travelling here, or going there; at least not today."

Pinthrad ran the index finger of his right hand over the window he'd just created; while muttering an incantation in the language of Leng. A forbidden language, though no one ever complained. The words formed in the back of his throat and sounded a little like gargling.

"That should be it.....Now we wait a few minutes." Said Ezzel.

The created window clouded over, before beginning to resemble frosted glass. As the frosting melted away, Pinthrad could see the office of the Head of the Sorcerers Guild. The connection wasn't expected, so it wasn't surprising that Norrex looked surprised to see so many people looking at him; just about the entire expedition to find Maya and Uula. Norrex was about the tenth of his line to become leader of the guild.

"By the Nine, Pinthrad." Said Norrex. "You should warn people before appearing like that."

"Yes, I'm still working on that." Said Ezzel. "We have a great need to get a message to Muzzie, and receive a reply. I appreciate that the Guild are not messengers, but your help would be appreciated."

"Very much appreciated." Added Seren.

"Who have you got there, Pinthrad?" Asked Norrex. "It looks like the entire group who set out to find Maya and Uula Podda."

"And we have found them, my old friend." Said Galla.

"I can see Lilleth too.....Well, well." Said Norrex. "Tell me this message to Muzzie and I will deliver it myself. The emperor is in his palace today, so it'll be delivered within an hour. Create another window and I should have an answer for you in no more than two hours from now."

"It is all very important." Said Adamaz.

"Yes, yes.....I've already agreed to be your messenger." Said Norrex. "Now, what is this vital message I am to tell the emperor?"

The Sorcerers Guild would be planning for war, but Norrex hadn't once mentioned that; or how valuable his time was. Pinthrad liked Norrex, he was the perfect no fuss and nonsense leader for the guild.

"Tell Muzzie that Dava and Jelran wish to marry." Said Seren. "If they're not allowed to, they are likely to refuse to use gateway. Muzzie will know how that might wreck certain long term plans." Norrex scribbled Seren's words on a piece of parchment, before reading them back to her. Once the accuracy of the message had been confirmed, Pinthrad dispelled the window. But not of course, until Norrex had been thanked for his help

"That's it.....It's all in Muzzie's hands now." Said Pinthrad.

"Don't forget Aeony.....She has a liking for the two Algarians." Said Seren. "So, we'll meet here again in two hours and hope Muzzie approves the wedding."

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Even though Widden had lived, the loss of a waggon full of expensive supplies needs to be properly accounted for. Everyone knew Nethra, but it still felt as though she'd received a hard time from the army police. It wasn't as if the supplies had been stolen. Someone determined enough could dig them out of the Quella Traps; not that Nethra was going to volunteer for the job. There were two issues which meant her coming under suspicion. Suspicion of what was unclear, but as the army investigator said.

"We're still unsure why you're here of your own accord; right in the centre of a potential hot spot in an upcoming war. You've got a thriving business in Annill.....Why are you here Nethra ?"

"I'm a Chinnura, warfare is in my blood." Nethra had said. "When the war starts you will be glad I'm here in Nara-Unadaris."

"I'm sure we will, but it doesn't answer the question.....Why are you here ?"

She went through several answers, none of them sounding convincing; even to her. The other problem was a huge mark against her honesty, called Merrick. They'd been partners in business, as well as in sharing a bed. There were even rumours that she'd killed Merrick to get total ownership of their tavern; the Annill Defender. Merrick was tough, but an easy neck to snap for a Chinnura in a rage; and Merrick often got her in a rage.

"Mainly.....I suppose I'm here to help if the war starts at Nara-Unadaris." She'd said.

"Then see the recruitment people and join the army. You'll get a lot less hassle."

They let her go, of course they did; she'd done nothing wrong. She'd even saved the life of Widden, an expert waggon driver. Nethra was currently wandering around the very busy temple and portal complex. It was possible to get a portal to just about anywhere from Nara-Unadaris; she could get a portal home to Annill if she wanted to. Aimless wandering can sometimes be good; there can be a serendipity benefit. She found Chosen sat on a low wall, while giving small value coins to three children, his children.

"Buy what you want, just don't tell your mother I gave you the money." Said Chosen.

"You spoil them." Said Nethra.

"We're given children so that we can spoil them." Said Chosen. "I thought you'd be back in Annill by now."

"I need to be here." Said Nethra. "Though to be honest, I have no real idea why. I hear the battle drums and I have to follow them."

"That sounds a good reason to join the garrison here." Said Chosen. "I heard the pay and conditions are very good."

It sounded a good reason, but Nethra needed something more, something.....That felt like a holy commandment from the Nine. Or at least something more meaningful than good pay and decent food.

"Who knows, I might sign up for the garrison." Said Nethra. "No matter what I decide, I'm sure you'll see me around the portals for quite some time."

"Good to hear that, I'll sleep easier tonight." Said Chosen.

He wasn't being sarcastic, he meant it; she'd have known if he'd been aiming an insult at her. Nethra carried on wandering through a very busy portal complex. She doubted if the war would now start in Nara-Unadaris. The Tandallans weren't stupid enough to attack so many battle hardened troops. There would be a war to remove Muzzie as emperor, but Nethra was fairly certain that it would begin somewhere else.

"Nethra.....I had no idea you were with the garrison here." Said Den-Phraxis-Ohm.

One of the Hive mother's almost adult children; they were all given the strange three barrelled names. His name meant something, but it was in the dark language of the original demons who'd ruled the rifts. Over countless centuries, the language had sort of leaked from Nethra's mind, until she barely remembered a word. Galla understood the names of the children of the Hive Mother, but Galla was always full of fairly useless information; mixed in with her priceless memories.

"Den.....Good to see you here." Said Nethra. "Are you joining the garrison?"

Many younger children of Ginnda-Aanash seemingly appeared out of nowhere, clambering all over Den. Once he was covered in them, they climbed all over Nethra. She couldn't help laughing, as the small spiderlike creatures made chirruping noises at her.

"My siblings like you, Nethra." Said Den. "We're here under orders from Muzzie. The children of the hive will pester and scare the Tandallans, without actually attacking them. Well, if they attack us, we may defend ourselves."

"That sounds so much fun." Said Nethra, and she meant it.

One small child of the hive was nibbling at her left ear in a friendly way, while making the familiar chirruping sound.

"You're a Chinnura, one of us really." Said Den. "Join us.....There will be a few gold coins for you and we'll keep you well fed. It really should be fun; say you'll join us in scaring the Tandallans."

"Do I get a proper bed?"

"Of course you do, though the young of the hive might want a cuddle in the night."

A Chinnura and one of them, Nethra had heard such talk before. She wasn't born of the Hive Mother, but she was one of the ancient creatures of the rifts. She felt more at ease talking to Den, than she did with most hybrids. Was this her purpose, to fight with Ginnda's children? It would be fun and she was almost designed for hit and run warfare.

"I will join you, Den." She said. "Where do I have to go?"

"I'll take you to where we're camped.....I'll take you right now." Said Den.

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Rayan Morresa had suggested that N'Faddy's children should learn to fight. It was a good way for them to keep fit and fairly soon they'd be big enough to use their blades properly. Fighters often underestimate children in a fight. Rayan had seen a young Kveld gut an enemy warrior, who hadn't taken them seriously. If a young Kveld little more than a large pup could do that, so could Dynka and Yorn. They fought on the move, often having to avoid young Jangar Beasts. To Rayan the conditions were perfect, but N'Faddy was occasionally worried for her children.

"I know they have to grow up fast." Said N'Faddy. "They're using real blades though.....I worry that they'll accidentally wound each other."

The children enjoyed fighting, hearing their blades clash against each other. There had already been a few minor cuts, but nothing that put them off training. Yorn had looked amazed at seeing his blood

coming out of a cut on his arm. He'd looked even more amazed when a Kveld healer had stopped the bleeding and made the wound disappear. A bad wound would be a test to see if the children had it in them to be fighters. To Rayan a bad wound was a necessary rite of passage for Dynka and Yorn. For N'Faddy it would be a moment of terror for the lives of her children.

"They will be wounded, it's inevitable." Said Rayan. "Kveld healers will look after them. As long as their blood still flows, they can be healed."

"If only they were a bit older." Said N'Faddy.

"You'll still be saying that when they're married and have children of their own. Do you want me to stop teaching them to fight?"

N'Faddy looked at her children, but said nothing for a while. Yorn was the fastest with a blade, but Dynka seemed to have a genuine love of battle. Who was the better fighter? Rayan wouldn't like to be the judge of that, but time was likely to tell. There would be a war, everyone could see that. Rayan almost had sympathy for the enemy who faced N'Faddy's kids in battle, once they were a few years older.

"No, don't stop.....Keep training them." Said N'Faddy. "Teach them everything you know and ignore any scared faces I might pull. Their father is no longer in the land of the living; my children must know how to defend themselves."

It seemed strange to talk about wars and dead fathers in such an idyllic part of the Pilgrim Trail. The pathway was covered in a kind of grass, which was a particularly bright shade of green. Rockhoppers jumped about in the woods beside the Trail; a few of them would be part of their evening meal. Their only worry seemed to be rainy nights and teaching two children how to use a blade. All of that seemed a long way from the war that was beginning to look inevitable.

"Mum.....Tell her." Yelled Yorn.

"Stop teasing your brother, Dynka." Said N'Faddy.

Rayan decided to move their training on a little. She knew of caves in the area where N'Faddy's children could learn to hunt one another in just the light of one very small candle. By the time they reached Mount Erran, Rayan wanted them both to be young warriors worthy of the name.

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There were no paths up to the top of the cliffs; they'd have to climb to the top. The crew of Bright Magic had helped them get their supplies to the base of the cliff, but now they were leaving. They wanted no part in anything a professional assassin was doing, even if she was sleeping with Sockelf. The Screech were still there though, giving valuable information to Sockelf.

"Once at the top we'll see a road." Said Sockelf. "Turn right onto that road and we'll reach Gezenter-Aparen after about a two hour walk."

"Easy as that huh?" Asked Tejan.

Of course it wasn't going to be that easy; she would be hated by most of the people in the old city of the Genova. The ones that didn't hate her were likely to be obstructive to help those who did hate her. The good thing was training and extra strength from once being one of the Damned. Carrying their supplies to the top of the cliff would be easy. Sockelf was grinning at her.

"On the plus side.....I've always wanted to see a pure blood angel." Said Sockelf.

"I'll carry our bags." Said Tejan. "Come on, let's begin climbing these cliffs."

Sockelf objected of course he did. Son of a famous man of the islands, he had to object to her carrying all the bags. He was a kind and caring man, but sometimes he was a pain in her backside. Once that had been properly explained, he let her carry all the bags.

"It is beautiful here, I'll give it that." Said Sockelf.

At the foot of the cliffs, with the boat still there. So easy to change her mind about the city of the angels and a gateway to.....Only the Gods new where. What then though ? She'd spend the rest of her life wondering what might have been. Tejan took her first step on the long climb to the top of the cliffs. It took a while and they both needed a drink and a rest at the top of the cliff. There it was though, the road the Screech had promised was there. Not much of a road, but a road is a road.

"I know it's crazy, but I'm getting quite anxious now." Said Sockelf.

"When I was in the Damned I never felt fear." Said Tejan. "Something to do with changes to my nervous system. Now though.....I'm anxious about what might be waiting for us. Not scared, just wondering about it."

"The Screech said we'd be safe in Gezenter-Aparen." Said Sockelf.

Tejan held his hand and pondered on the idea that flying creatures of some kind, had told them they'd be safe. It was insane, but she wasn't going to mention that to Sockelf; the hand she was holding was already wet with anxious sweat.

"Come on, we'll walk side by side into this city of the angels." Said Tejan.

They found the doors, which were open. Something came out of the doors and flew at them. Not a Screech, it was large bird with black and white feathers. It circled them a few times.

"Tejan stupid.....Tejan useless." Squawked the bird.

It then flew off back inside the city walls of the old Genova city.

"Well, that was unexpected." Said Tejan.

They laughed all the way to the open gates. Inside the city walls and on a grassy area, there was something happening. It looked very much like a wedding.

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Dava was impressed with her Genova wedding. Lots of flowers, chanting in a language she didn't know; there was even a choir. It didn't matter that the best day of her life was being carried out in several languages she didn't know; it was all so beautiful. Her dress was a soft cream colour and fitted perfectly. Even Jelran was in a suit that seemed to make him look especially handsome. Juliette was carrying out the ceremony, in the version of Old Imperial used by much of the population of Algaria. It was all so wonderful, Dava had cried twice and she suspected Jelran had too.

"Muzzie sends his best wishes." Said Juliette. "He wishes you both a long and happy life. There was also mention of naming your first child Muzzie, even if it's a girl child."

"We might just do that." Said Jelran.

Dava thumped him gently on the arm, while wondering about having a daughter called Muzzie Mosca; it might just work, it definitely had a ring to it.

"The cake of happiness." Said Juliette. "It's time for the second cake."

It had all happened so quickly. There had been a questions and answers session with Juliette, but that had been quite short. Dava had no idea what came next, but that didn't really matter.

Eventually someone would tell them they were now married.

"We already had one cake." Said Galla.

"That was the cake of long life." Said Juliette.

Everyone got a tiny cake that was delicious but was gone in two mouthfuls. Tiny cakes infused with Genova magic according to Uula, they'd all be affected by the magic for the rest of their lives. Yes, Uula was there sprawled on the grass. The size of the ancient one was one of the main reasons for holding the ceremony out in the open. Maya was stood beside Uula in a white dress that seemed to glow like the first full light of morning.

“Where is the drink ?” Asked Maya. “I was told there’d be a drink of longevity.”

“Patience child.....Patience is always a virtue.” Said Juliette, with a smile.

There was another tiny cake for everyone, which appeared to be just a wonderful tasting cake.

Juliette muttered at Dava that the holy drink marked the end of the ceremony. They’d enter their names in the city archives and become officially married.

“I’m not sure about more longevity.” Said Galla. “I’ve tried being youthful twice and I think it might be overrated.”

“You’re such a grouch, Galla.” Said Lilleth.

The drink came in a tiny cup and it made Dava feel warm inside. She smiled at Jelran and kissed him, even though it might be the wrong place in the ceremony for them to kiss. Everyone cheered, so it seemed to be alright. The drink made her feel a little sleepy, but she was sure Bird was fluttering around the wedding party.

“They’re here.....Tejan and Sockelf are at the gates.” Shrieked Bird.

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