The Ancient Ones

Chapter 3 – The Eastern Mountains

"Seren usually flew to Bredon's Edge, if she had any reason to go there. Seeing the small town emerging out of the trees was a nice way to see it. The houses straddled the road that went all the way to the Ring of Volkin and beyond. She noticed the two young Algarians kiss as they pointed at the sign for the Maiden Tavern."

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Their second day on the road and they'd be in Bredon's Edge in time for lunch at the Maiden's Kiss. The local farmers tended to call it the Maiden Tavern now, but Galla preferred its original name. The night before had been reasonably comfortable for a night under canvas. She'd have to get used to it though, for when they left civilisation behind and headed east past the mountains. Galla was determined to keep moans about her aching joints down to a minimum. Bird had been flying over the forest since dawn. He came back and landed on her shoulder, before muttering quietly into her ear. He was getting a bit heavy for shoulder sitting, but it kept their conversations private. Galla muttered back at him and Bird was gone again, soaring high over the trees.
"We'll be in Bredon's Edge around lunchtime." Said Galla.
"Anything sinister going on in the forest ?" Asked Lilleth.
Muzzie referred to Lilleth as an old style ranger. Galla knew that anything Bird saw, would be used by Lilleth to keep their group safe. Sadly there wasn't much to report.
"The locals aren't keen on us who dwell in the City." Said Galla. "But as far as Bird can tell, they're not organising anything nasty. We should get a decent bed and meal in Bredon's Edge, with no aggravation."
"We do have two dark angels with us." Said Lilleth. "They'd be crazy to attack us."
"Seren has always tried to treat the farmers fairly." Said Galla.
Ash was walking beside them, watching and taking everything in. He asked the question that Dava, or Jelran had probably asked Seren. It was a little bit of unpleasantness from the history of the City, which hung over the farmlands like a dark cloud.
"Why don't the farmers like people from the City ?" Asked Ash.
"A question for you I think, Itzel." Said Galla. "I think Silsk was the cause of most of the trouble and she was Queen of the dark angels."
Wicked really, to dump the question on poor Itzel. As dark angels went, she was gentler, calmer and definitely less aggressive than most. Not just the dark angels though, the City had given the farmers bad deals; to the point where they could barely feed and clothe their children. Any complaints and Silsk was sent to beat obedience into them. These days the City had a higher population and needed all the food it could get. The population of Bredon's Edge weren't rich, but they were doing pretty well.
"Times were hard, Ash." Said Itzel. "Silsk was Queen of our kind and she enjoyed any excuse to kill the farmers. She ate them and made their families watch. I'm not excusing her at all……Silsk deserved to be killed. It's not surprising that centuries after Silsk died, the farmers still aren't keen on people from the City. But, they like our gold; so we shouldn't have any problems."

“That sounds awful.” Said Ash. “I was told Aeony killed Silsk. Knocked her out and threw her from the roof of the highest tower in the City.”
“You were told the truth, that is what happened.” Said Galla. “Best not to mention it again though; it’s still a very touchy subject.”
“I understand.” Said Ash.
“Just remember that Silsk had few dark angels then.” Said Itzel. “She was tasked with protecting the City and for the most part, she did a good job. She wasn’t just a brutal monster.”
Galla had seen both sides of Silsk, but poor Ash was already looking confused. If he didn’t get a fair view of those times…..Well, it had all happened several centuries ago. Her Bird landed on her shoulder again and imparted the information they’d all been waiting to hear.
“Bredon’s Edge is half a mile away.” Said Galla. “Just around the next curve in the road.”
“Brilliant, I’m starving.” Said Ash.
“Me too, it’s been a long trudge to get here.” Said Lilleth.

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Seren usually flew to Bredon’s Edge, if she had any reason to go there. Seeing the small town emerging out of the trees was a nice way to see it. The houses straddled the road that went all the way to the Ring of Volkin and beyond. She noticed the two young Algarians kiss as they pointed at the sign for the Maiden Tavern. There was passion there, but not much genuine feeling. That’s how it was with youngsters though; passion at first and affection came later. If they were still alive in a couple of years and still together; that was the test of their relationship. Not that Seren was an expert on young humans, but the young Dredgers followed pretty much the same pattern.
“Look……They’ve come out to greet us.” Said Dava.
“Muzzie probably sent a runner here, days ago.” Said Seren. “They’ll know you’re well thought of by the emperor, but not much else.”
“It’s a beautiful town; so green.” Said Jelran.
The locals were coming out of their houses in droves, all smiling at the youngsters. Galla was getting a lot of greetings too, but she and Lilleth were heading away from the Maiden’s Kiss, with Ash trudging along behind them.
“You’re not joining us at the Maiden ?” Asked Seren.
“I know someone here.” Said Lilleth. “I’ve a standing invitation to stay with them. We’ll get settled and join you for lunch.”
“Fine, just be careful.” Said Seren.
Itzel joined Seren and the two young Algarians, just as they seemed to be surrounded by smiling, curious farmers. They’d arrived with their gear and provisions on three large waggons and each waggon was pushed by a dozen Dredgers. Dredgers didn’t look fierce, but they seemed to be born fighters. Seren knew that if things turned nasty, she could count on thirty six Dredgers being on her side; thirty seven with their road boss. A descendant of the long dead Bizzi, Chenad Gurd. Chenad was famous for getting things done and Muzzie must have pulled a few strings to get him. Being surrounded by happy farmers wasn’t something Seren had expected, they’d even brought their children with them. When Seren saw flowers in the hair of the children, she was beginning to realise the happy, smiling people; weren’t just happy to see the members of their expedition.
“Happy feast day…….All worship Nigon.” Shouted a girl child.
“It’s the feast of Nigon.” Said Itzel. “We couldn’t have arrived at a better time.”
Some might have thought it was the Gods moving their luck, or manipulating their fate. Seren had been around for a long time and was cynical about such things. To her it was just good luck, though

she was glad they'd arrived during the feast of Nigon. There'd be no trouble from the local farmers. Nigon was out of favour in the City, but many other towns and cities still honoured his feast days.
"Who is Nigon ?" Asked Jelran.
"If Galla hadn't wandered off…..She's the expert." Said Seren. "Nigon is worshipped as a demon God, but many believe him to have been cast into the void by other, stronger Gods. In places like Bredon's Edge the old beliefs linger on."
"We seem to have arrived at the perfect moment." Said Dava.
Seren knew that Nigon had once been called the Lord of Death, yet the children were offering them garlands of flowers. One female farmer was actually pushing flowers into Seren's hair. Well, it seemed only polite to join in with the general party feeling.
"Thank you." Said Seren. "May Nigon see you and bless you."
"May Nigon bless you all." Someone shouted.
As they were escorted by happy people to the Maiden Tavern, someone was saying there'd be no charge for their lodgings and food.
"No visitor is given a bill during the feast." Someone yelled.
It seemed a weird way to do business, but Seren wasn't going to argue. It was known that the farmers around Bredon's Edge had done well for several years. They could definitely afford to give them free food and lodgings for one night. One young farmer was dancing about with Dava, but Seren knew she'd be safe. They really had arrived at the perfect time. Even their Dredger waggon haulers were having flowers pushed into their hair. Chenad Gurd was actually laughing, something Seren had never seen before.
"Are we really going to stay here for free ?" Asked Dava.
"Oh yes, they take the feast of Nigon very seriously." Said Seren.
Bird was swooping about and calling everyone stupid, which was pretty much his usual behaviour. Not that Seren wanted him to go away; he was their early warning in case the inhabitants of Bredon's Edge decided to forget all about Nigon and kill two dark angels. Not that she thought they would, Seren knew genuine happy, jolly people when she saw them. By the time she'd booked the remainder of their group into the Maiden's Kiss and the food was cooking in the kitchens; Galla returned with Ash and Lilleth.
"I'd forgotten about the feast of Nigon." Said Galla. "They won't even accept payment when we leave in the morning."
"It turns a grumpy place into lots of happy people." Added Lilleth.
"Can we eat now ?…….I'm so hungry." Said Ash.
"You won't be hungry for long." Said Lilleth. "The management of the Maiden seem to be cooking up enough food to feed an army."
"Worship Nigon." Shouted someone from the kitchen area.
The food was good, everyone agreed on that. There was even enough drink for those who wanted it, though Seren advised caution. They did after all, have another day and half's trudge to get to the Ring of Volkin. Neither of the Algarians had asked about the Ring of Volkin, not even what it was, or who was Volkin. That was bound to happen though, they were a curious pair.
"Wow, what is this shredded meat ?" Asked Dava. "It's delicious."
"That, is locally caught rock hopper." Said Galla. "I can never get enough of it."
Bird wasn't forgotten, everyone was offering him all sorts of treats. He too seemed to enjoy the shredded rock hopper. His real favourite though, were living, wriggling Nesh bugs out of the container Galla always had in one of her pockets.

“All worship Nigon.” Screeched Bird, quite often.

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Dava Nerish had enjoyed the final day of walking from the City to the Ring of Volkin. She had asked why the dark angels hadn’t carried them all to the ring, though the answer was fairly obvious. Carrying the people there was easy, but three waggons full of supplies was a different thing entirely.
“Dark angel wings are very powerful, but not that powerful.” Itzel had told her.
Galla had mentioned the days before the people of the City had devoured most of the beasts of burden. It seemed there’d been large four legged beasts that could be ridden. Those creatures could transport a heavy rider from the City to the Ring in less than half a day. Sadly there were no such creatures left in the City of the Lost God. They were now at the Ring and Dava was impressed with the rows of upright stones. Galla had to told her that some of the stones could open portals to many locations, while some portals did nothing at all. Some of the stones could actually be dangerous and a few careless users of magic had died in horrible ways.
“So, who was this Volkin ?” Asked Dava.
She knew she’d asked the question everyone dreaded, when Galla and Seren began to exchange looks that yelled ‘you tell her, no you tell her’. Either they were scared of giving too much away, or they were both bored with the question. Dava tended to lean towards them being bored.
“Come on, I’d like to know too.” Said Jelran.
“Me too……..Muzzie told me a lot, but not everything.” Added Ash.
“I can tell you about Volkin, though it’s not a pleasant tale.” Said Lilleth.
“Tell us Lilleth ?” Asked Dava.
Lilleth held up her hand and swept it across the rings of standing stones, the way a showman points out his best acts.
“The Ring of Volkin, was never actually built by Volkin.” Said Lilleth. “Five rings of stone circles, which have stood here since the rifts were young. No one really knows who erected the standing stones, but it was likely they were pure blood demons. Volkin was a powerful magic user from Leng, who had tried for centuries to become immortal. He’d failed, but had decided if he couldn’t enjoy his immense wealth forever, then no one else would.”
“I heard he was from the darkness beyond Leng.” Said Galla.
“It varies…..I heard he was a mage from Leng.” Said Seren.
Lilleth coughed, as if asking them to stop disturbing the flow of her story. Was it just a story ? Being honest, Dava didn’t really care, just so long as it was interesting and explained the facts.
“Anyway, Volkin dug pits in the ground near the stone to bury his wealth.” Said Lilleth. “He was so active here with armies of workers, that the place became called the Ring of Volkin.”
“On that……..We’re agreed.” Said Galla.
“Please old friend, let me finish.” Said Lilleth.
“Sorry……..Please carry on.” Said Galla.
“Long before he became emperor Muzzie was hired to dig up Volkin’s treasure.” Said Lilleth. “He was accompanied by a young ranger, who knew a few things about the Ring. That ranger was me.”
“I’d heard that.” Said Seren.
“We both nearly died.” Said Lilleth. “Volkin had put traps in place that…….They’d have been approved by the dark adepts of Leng itself. That is why the ancient ring of stones became the Ring of Volkin.”
“Did you find the treasure ?” Asked Ash.

“Of course we did.” Said Lilleth. “For a while Muzzie and I were quite wealthy, but that was a very long time ago.”
“Can I be rude and ask you……How old are you Lilleth ?” Asked Jelran.
“I'm as old as my tongue and a little older than my teeth.” Said Lilleth.
Dava applauded, it seemed the right thing to do. Her history teacher was always so dry, but Lilleth had brought life to the tale. Mind you, her history teacher had probably never had the opportunity to dig for buried treasure. Galla was calling for her pet, which gained everyone’s attention. A quick mutter between the two of them and Galla was nodding her head.
“I’m certain which stones need activating.” Said Galla. “Get yourselves ready, I’ll be opening the portal in one fifth of an hour.”
To Dava the way some of those from the City spoke about time, was a little eccentric, but understandable. She pulled Jelran to one side and held his hand.
“Still happy to be going…..No regrets ?” She asked.
“None at all……..How about you ?” Asked Jelran.
“Just that they don’t have cameras on the rifts.” Said Dava. “No technology at all is going to take some getting used to.”
The forest which surrounded the Ring of Volkin was beautiful, as were the ancient rings of standing stones. There was the odd mound which looked out of place. Dava assumed that they were the work of treasure hunters, digging for Volkin’s treasure. All too soon, Galla was calling them all to gather in front of two of the largest upright stones. Huge stones, so heavy it made her wonder how they’d been brought there and pulled upright. One night on the road and only if she seemed talkative; Dava was determined at ask Galla a lot more about the Ring. The two huge stones were wide enough apart for an army to march through the gap.
“The portal will close, but not for quite some time.” Said Galla. “No need to rush……Just don’t take too long to follow me through.”
Bird perched on a nearby bush, watching as Galla used her arms to make signs and spoke several lines from the journal she always carried. She used a packet of powder too, casting it into the gap between the stones. Galla had told her, more than once, of her love of magical powders. It seemed she was famous for them, throughout the rift.
“It begins.” Yelled Galla.
A purple spiral of energy formed in the gap between the stones and Bird flew through it. A minute or so later he reappeared, seemingly happy and unharmed.
“It is safe……..Next the waggons.” Said Galla.
It seemed to take a long time to get everyone through the portal, though it probably hadn’t been that long. They came out onto a hillside, a rather cold hillside. Luckily Seren had checked that everyone had packed cold weather clothing. To their left was a forest and to their right, a huge mountain rose right up into the clouds. There was a road leading down to a large lake. There was only one way to go, but Galla said it anyway.
“Follow the road…….We’ll camp at the lake tonight.” Said Galla.
Dava noticed the air was different, cleaner in some way than it had even been in the farmlands at Bredon’s Edge. The air on the hillside was colder, crisper and the nasty taste at the back of her throat had gone. Jelran had obviously noticed it too.
“The air……It’s so much nicer here.” Said Jelran.
“We’re high here……..The mountains are said to touch the roof of the rift.” Said Lilleth.

The purple spiral of the portal, didn't stop until they were halfway down the hill, with everyone helping to stop the waggons from hurtling down the steep gradient of the road. For some reason the closing portal made Dava feel lonely and cut off. She was now even further from Algaria, her home.
"Is the lake part of the Sacred Sea ?" Asked Jelran.
"No, Jelran…….The Sacred Sea is a very long journey from here and the Ancient Ones were said to live on a large island at the other side of the sea." Said Lilleth. "It may take us a year or more to reach the island."
"Eventually, we'll need to acquire a ship to cross the sea." Said Seren.
It was the way she'd said acquire; it hinted at by any means necessary, including violence.

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Muzzie had been scared of the Silver Lady, until he'd begun to talk to her on a regular basis. A dark deity whose lair was below the part of the City where he'd wished to build his palace. They'd quickly come to an agreement, where both of them gained something. The Silver Lady no longer had the entrance to her most sacred of places in the most seedy part of town; not after Muzzie had the entire area cleaned up. He'd even had the thieves and vagabonds discouraged from being there, even if some of them were regulars in his tavern. One of the worst areas of the City became part of the grounds of his imperial palace. The Lady's followers were allowed unlimited access of course. Muzzie gained protection of his palace by some of the most powerful practitioners of the dark arts in the City.
The Hive Mother, Ginnda-Aanash also had her lair beneath his palace and few attempting to enter the palace who weren't welcome there; survived an encounter with one of Ginnda's adult children. Muzzie was still wondering if one of Ginnda's children had killed the Shelzak who'd been sent to kill the two Algarians. Faal was unlikely to have killed the Shelzak and his companion didn't have a scratch on her. There was the occasional squabble, but on the whole; the arrangement worked well for everyone. Muzzie never ordered the Lady to come to his palace, but he'd learned how to suggest things in a diplomatic manner.
"My dear Muzzie…….So nice to be inside the palace again." Said the Lady.
"You're welcome here anytime." Said Muzzie.
No guards in his study with them, and the Lady was one of the few allowed to carry a blade while alone with him. Without her help he'd never have become emperor and he was never going to forget that. A tall female with a silver tinge to her skin, though she didn't always dress in silver coloured robes. Her hair was pure white and most thought her to be one of the ancient deities. Most Dredger homes had fresh Ashunt blooms where the family ate, to celebrate the Lady's feast days. Some thought she was an incredibly powerful high level demon, but Muzzie was sure she was a deity. As with those who live very long lives, the truth about her was muddled by millennia of hearsay and misinformation. He found her attractive, but he'd been with Aeony for a very long time. Far too long to risk losing her because of even tentatively testing the water. Plus, Aeony had once promised to do dreadful things to his genitals if she caught him straying.
"I was hoping to see you." Said the Lady. "Two of my minions were patrolling the palace and saw who killed the Shelzak. It was one of the Hive Mother's offspring, a particularly strong and skilful child."
"I did guess it wasn't Faal." Said Muzzie. "A very good magic user, but not made for the rough stuff."
"Who is, Muzzie ? We're all getting too old for it."
"I won't argue with that." Said Muzzie. "I've reached an age when I grunt as I get out of bed."

“Faal came across my minions and they told him what had happened.” Said the Lady. “They assumed he’d let you know what had occurred.”
“But he didn’t.” Said Muzzie. “I’ll use that to embarrass him one day.”
The Lady had the most intense gaze, with silver-green eyes. It was his turn to talk about why he’d wished to see her and she was quietly waiting to hear what it was.
“I was wondering if you still had a link with Bird, Galla’s pet ?” Asked Muzzie.
“We’d both like a link with the expedition, but Bird is a far more sentient being than he was some five hundred years ago.” Said the Lady. “He resists my control now. I could push the link harder, but that might damage his mind. I don’t think Galla would thank us for harming her pet.”
“I see that……We can’t risk that unless it’s an emergency.” Said Muzzie.
It was just that several expeditions sent to find Maya, had vanished without trace. It was as if they’d walked over quicksand somewhere east of the mountains and been sucked down to oblivion. Having regular reports from Bird would have been useful.
“Have you a link with anyone on the current expedition ?” Asked Muzzie.
“Not a link, but now you mention it.” Said the Lady. “The Dredgers are my people, most will pray to me every morning. Those prayers are private, but I can look at my people with a scrying mirror. Perhaps if we met up once a week ? You’d know if the expedition was still on its way east.”
“Yes, that’s perfect……Exactly the sort of thing I was hoping for.” Said Muzzie. “Can you join me here every seventh day of the week, after breakfast ?”
“That would be acceptable old friend.” Said the Lady.

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Jelran Mosca wasn’t a complete novice at warfare. Like Dava, he’d been through a period of service to Algarian security, just after leaving college. He knew the small tree laid across the road looked like a trap, as did its position. Seren didn’t like the look of it either, so they’d come to halt.
“A tree across the road, right in the middle of a dense area of woodland.” Said Chenad Gurd. “It’s a trap, no doubt about it.”
“That tree looks heavy……Must be a few of them waiting to attack us.” Said Lilleth.
“Or the tree might have been placed there years ago.” Said Itzel. “Still…..I think we need to assume it’s a trap.”
Attack them, or anyone using the road ? Jelran had asked, but hadn’t received a definite answer. Galla had muttered about killing their would-be attackers and worrying about their motives later. Jelran was becoming quite fond of Galla and her strange pet.
“I don’t like surprises.” Said Seren. “Send Bird to have a look around, Galla.”
Bird didn’t like the cold weather, as he’d told them several times since they’d come through the portal. He’d been keeping inside one of the waggons most of the time. Galla whistled for him and he came and sat on her shoulder.
“Cold Galla……..too cold.” Said Bird.
“Go and look at that tree blocking the road.” Said Galla. “See if it’s a trap……..Flying about will warm you up.”
Bird stayed up high, probably to avoid arrows. He passed over the tree and then came in lower for a second pass. He seemed to lurch to his left, before heading back towards them. He landed on Galla’s shoulder and muttered to her for a while.
“There are six or seven of them in between the trees.” Said Galla. “One is an archer and nearly got one of Bird’s tail feathers.”
“They look like bandits.” Added Bird. “Well armed bandits.”

Bird went back to his warm place inside the waggon, leaving them to ponder on the news that at least half a dozen bandits were waiting to attack them.
“Probably local bandits who make a living from robbing the occasional traveller.” Said Chenad.
“We can’t get round them with the waggons.” Said Seren. “We’ll need to deal with them. Itzel and myself will fly down there and fight them.”
“Carry me down there; I want to fight them too.” Said Dava.
“Me too…….We can fight, we’ve been well trained.” Added Jelran.
Well trained was probably an exaggeration, but they’d both been taught a little hand to hand combat and how to fall without breaking anything. Sadly all their weapons training had been with standard issue blasters and they didn’t work on the rifts. Their only training with a blade had been a few hours practise with Itzel.
“No, that’d be far too dangerous.” Said Seren.
“If you won’t let us fight, why bring us ?” Asked Dava.
“She has a point, Seren.” Said Lilleth.
“You can’t keep us as though we’re made of glass for the next two or three years.” Added Jelran.
“Let them fight if they want to.” Said Ash.
Jelran noticed that Seren was looking hard into his eyes, as if sizing him up. Neither Dava nor himself had that much experience with a blade, but Itzel seemed impressed with them. Jelran had decided that if he died, he died. It was better than being treated like some kind of delicate child for years.
“Very well……..I’ll carry Jelran.” Said Seren. “Itzel can bring Dava.”
“Remember the first rule of combat……..Don’t get killed.” Said Galla.
Jelran had closed his eyes when being carried in a dark angel’s claws from the abandoned village, but this was different. Blade in hand he was soaring over the trees, almost as if it was him who could fly.
“This is amazing !” Yelled Jelran.
“Just don’t die…….Muzzie will never forgive me.” Shouted Seren.
To their right was Itzel, carrying Dava in her claws. Dava was waving at them, which was a bit too brave for Jelran. He was keeping as still as he could be, until his feet were back on the ground. Itzel came down to land near the trees to the north of the road. Seren went over the top of the tree blocking the road and came down there.
“Don’t just stand there, move into the bushes.” Said Seren.
They’d landed near two of the bandits, who were looking on in awe, as Seren flapped her huge wings. One of them swung a sword at Seren and she used a clawed hand to remove the left side of his face and jaw. He died bleeding and screaming. As an introduction to serious combat, it was probably good, but Jelran wanted to vomit. The other bandit tried to stab him with a long thin dagger. Something seemed to waken in Jelran. He blocked the blow with his own blade, then drove his blade straight into the throat of the bandit. Jelran twisted his blade to make sure the man died. He’d never seen so much blood pour out of anyone before, as the bandit fell to the ground.
“Well done, Jelran…….Come on, the others landed quite close to here.” Said Seren.
No flying, they both ran round the tree. Seren was hit by an arrow, which didn’t seem to worry her that much. There it was, sticking out of her right wing, as they found Itzel and Dava. Two more dead bandits were on the ground, with two more running away, straight down the centre of the road.
“Get them, Itzel……..They can’t be allowed to escape.” Said Seren.
The dark angels used their wings and easily caught the two fleeing bandits. They used their claws on them to rip their clothes apart and then dig into their bodies. It took a moment for Jelran to realise what the dark angels were going to do.

“They’re going to eat parts of their insides.” Said Jelran.
Ash was running along the road, obviously excited by something. All Jelran could think about was the two dark angels pulling the viscera out of dead bandits; before eating it.
“I heard they prefer a freshly extracted liver.” Said Dava.
“I killed one of the bandits.” Said Jelran.
“So did I, that one.” Said Dava, while pointing.
Dark angels eating the innards of their enemies, a creature with grey skin running down the road towards them. It was all so different to life on Algaria. Jelran grinned at Dava, who grinned back.
“I think I’m going to like it here.” Said Jelran.
“Me too.” Said Dava.
They hugged, a really long hug. They were still hugging when Ash finally arrived, a little short of breath.

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Tad Dunne had once been high up in the Algarian military, he’d even been rumoured as next for the really big job; head of Algarian defences. Tad was greedy though and he resented the idiots he’d known at school, having nicer things than him. It didn’t help that his wife felt the same way. They deserved nice things and there was a relatively easy way to afford them. Risky of course, there were long prison terms for those in the illegal weapons trade. Tad was forty five and just about ran that trade, right across the Menderan Empire. Want enough firepower to take control of an entire planet ? Tad Dunne was the man you needed to see. It was his shipment that Dava and Jelran had seen smashed to pieces when the Algaria Starburst 4 had crashed onto the surface of the first rift.
“Hvorchak……..I read your report on those two Algarians.” Shouted Tad.
Tad was becoming angrier sooner than usual, about just about everything. His wife wasn’t helping by saying things like prison uniforms not suiting his complexion. Tad had a nice home in Tranquillity City on the planet Algaria. A nice wife when she wasn’t trying to wind him up. He was well thought of; his neighbours considered him to be a commodity trader, a successful commodity trader. His two almost grown up kids thought he was respectable, a pillar of the community. All that might fall apart if Dava and Jelran were ever interrogated by the Algarian police.
“Hvorchak……..Where are you ?” Shouted Tad.
“On my way……Just getting your afternoon snack.” Yelled Hvorchak, from the kitchen.
Hvorchak came in with a large tray, holding a lot of drink and food for both of them. Tad was angry that a Shelzak demon who’d been very expensive to hire, had proven to be as useful as a grave robber in a crematorium. Not that Tad was going to let that spoil his afternoon meal.
“Before we spend serious money to hire another expensive assassin.” Said Tad. “You’re certain that the girl, Dava Nerish; knew names, dates and above all…….My name ?”
“Yes, Ubari Desa, second in command of the Starburst was one of ours.” Said Hvorchak. “She told me that Dava had an alarming amount of information she shouldn’t have had. Luckily she thought of Ubari as a friend. Ubari was supposed to meet me when she got home and give me more details, but…….She’s now spread over the first rift with most of the crew of the Starburst.”
Tad wanted to bang the table out of frustration, but controlled himself. It was the rifts, he’d never wanted to use the rifts as a waypoint to smuggle weapons. When his base on Pineus had been captured and destroyed by the Menderan Guard, he’d had no option but using the first rift. It had worked so well, until this had happened. One ship with a container of blasters and it was fast becoming a money pit.

“Come on, I know you must have an assassin in mind.” Said Tad. “Someone to rid us of this damn girl.”
Hvorchak didn’t like being yelled at, who does ? His mixture of PA and enforcer had been with him for years though and he was paid extremely well. That didn’t stop him looking a bit hesitant to mention a name.
“We need someone with contacts on the rift.” Said Hvorchak. “Someone with more intelligence than the Shelzak. She isn’t cheap, but she’d helped us out of tricky situations in the past. I’m suggesting that we hire Tejan for this job.”
Tad was ready to yell, he even had a lung full of air ready. When he thought about it though, Tejan was perfect for the task. Tejan was a rarity, one of the Menderan imperial guard who’d resigned and started doing her own thing, mainly taking care of people like the two young Algarians. The Menderan imperial guard were known as The Damned and they were almost unstoppable and indestructible. Apart from being ridiculously expensive, Tejan was perfect for the job.
“Yes, hire Tejan……..She’ll get the job done.” Said Tad.

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