

The Ancient Ones

Chapter 10 – Rayan Morresa

“Bird was using long words and being profound again. He had good periods like that, or he was under the thrall of the Lady again. Whatever was going on, he seemed more interesting since they’d begun to head for the other side of the endless sea. Bird flew off, circling the boat a few times, before perching high up on the rigging.”



The creatures that flew over the islands and the Sacred Sea had many names. Sockkelf called them Screech, which was strange. Tejan had seen quite a bit of them and they seemed quiet creatures of the sky. Some large and some small, they were probably different species, but to Sockkelf, all of them were Screech. The one thing they all had in common was leathery wings.

“They’re skittish things.” Sockkelf had said. “If I try to call one down in front of everyone, the Screech might fly away. If we’re really unlucky, none of them will answer my call after that.”

“But if we do it in private, our fellow inhabitants of Muddy’s might not believe us. I’m going to sit and watch you do it and being honest; I still might not believe it.” She’d said.

Sockkelf had given her his sad look again, the look that said she hadn’t been born on the islands, so she’d never understand their ways.

“We can risk being stuck here with them, forever.” Sockkelf had said. “Or we can do the whole calling down business in private. Do we actually care if the others believe us?”

Tejan remembered thinking about that for a few seconds. She’d changed since leaving The Damned and part of that change had come from travelling with Sockkelf. She cared what he might think of her, but the others?”

“No.” She’d said and she meant it.

They’d found a very quiet part of Muddy’s and Tejan was currently watching Sockkelf as he looked at the sky. The calling down was done in his mind and seemed to be a skill passed to islanders at birth by their mothers. It sounded highly weird to Tejan, but she’d come across stranger things during her time with The Damned.

“One comes.....I can feel it.....A big Screech.” Said Sockkelf.

When it came it really was big, probably larger than Sockkelf and maybe even heavier. It landed some distance away and sort of waddled right up to man who was beginning to mean a lot to her. Tejan touched the hilt of her blade; mainly a security thing than any real intention to use it. The Screech was huge and it was rubbing its jaw down the side of Sockkelf’s neck. There was a lot of mumbling and muttering going on between them and none of it looked or sounded hostile. There Tejan was, watching two different lifeforms mutter at each other in the common tongue. The really weird thing was how natural it felt once she was used to it.

“It is done.....Help will soon be on the way.” Said Sockkelf.

As the Screech turned to waddle away, it looked straight at her; a few seconds gaze right into her eyes. Tejan nodded at it and the Screech nodded back. It was a clever creature, that much was obvious. A few more steps and the Screech sort of leapt into the air. A few wingbeats and it was up and away, soaring over the top of the trees.

“I think it liked you.” Said Sockkelf.

"As long as a boat turns up, I'll like the Screech." Said Tejan.

Screech seemed to mean one of them, or a whole sky full. It also seemed to be the same word used for both sexes and all ages. Tejan understood where the name came from as their Screech turned and screeched at them as a kind of goodbye. It was loud but friendly.

"It'll pester those in the village of my birth until a boat is sent." Said Sockelf. "There are no total guarantees, but I think we'll see a boat arrive in three or four days."

That wasn't it though; the hardest part of the job had yet to be tackled.

"Come on.....We need to convince the survivors of the Angel's Gaze that we're not crazy or delusional. They need to know a boat is on the way." Said Tejan.

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Rayan Morresa didn't want to change into the hunter on four legs, unless it was absolutely essential. No one liked the Kveld and she'd end up being viewed as an enemy by everyone. As Rayan the travelling cleric on two legs, she could call on the help of many from the City of the Lost God, who lived in Tandalla. Her orders had been to only involve members of the empire from the City, as a last resort. Rayan viewed the entire Tandallan army marching towards the temple complex of Nara-Unadaris, as news that had to reach Muzzie, or one of his senior people. It was something that couldn't be ignored in the hope that it went away. Rayan tapped on the rear door of Miscah Harran, senior Librarian on loan from the City of the Lost God. Miscah could create the paper spells needed to be written on to work, a very rare and valued skill. The Tandallans would think very long and hard before harming Miscah. A female hybrid opened the door. She seemed more surprised than scared. "Blessings of the Gods." Said Rayan. "May chaos always pass you in the night. I am Rayan Morresa from the City and I am in need of the help of Miscah Harran."

"Wait here.....I'll see if he's free." Said the female.

"Tell him I am in desperate need of his help." Said Rayan.

Servant, maybe his wife ? The female might have been a live in lover. She returned and took her along a lot of corridors in a very large house. There was Miscah, hugging two young children and the woman was now crying a little. Miscah was sending his family away to somewhere safe, that was obvious. Probably because of poor Bodrin being discovered and killed, but Rayan still felt a little guilt about it. The poor kids had backpacks, probably for their favourite possessions.

"Look.....Look, I knew you people would ruin my life." Said Miscah. "Spies are a curse.....And now you're here in my home."

Sending his family into hiding was a good idea and she wasn't going to persuade him to do otherwise. As for Miscah ? She needed his help and he had once taken an oath to serve the City and Muzzie, no matter what the cost and regardless of personal safety.

"I regret the need to send your family away, but I need your help." Said Rayan.

"My life here is finished.....What more can you ask of me ?" Askes Miscah.

"There is a speaker crystal in the Great Library of Tandalla." Said Rayan. "A colleague of mine saw it once. I need to use the crystal to let the City know that the army of Tandalla marches on Nara-Unadaris."

"Ahh, so that's their game.....I had wondered." Said Miscah.

"Will you help me enter the restricted section of the library ?" Rayan Asked.

The children were quietly weeping about something they didn't really understand, but they knew it was bad. Sadly it wasn't the first time Rayan had brought misery down upon an ally and it probably wouldn't be the last.

"Of course I'll help you; an oath is an oath." Said Miscah. "I'm not sure if the crystal still works though, it's been locked away for years."

Miscah had a blade under his robe; Rayan saw it as he kissed his family goodbye and wished them well. Once they'd left through a trap door under the kitchen floor, Miscah took Rayan out of the house through the back door.

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Galla had been tempted to say it for quite some time, but she had been trying hard not to mention her aching joints and old bones. She had mentioned being a little old for such expeditions to Lilleth, but she just smiled at her; as though it was all said for effect. Maybe it was ? Deep down, Galla knew there was nowhere else she'd rather be than on Morning Tide, heading towards the legendary endless sea. Was being elderly worse because of arriving at it twice ? Not a bit of it, Galla would happily use another youth miracle and become elderly for a third time. More adventures, more sexual partners while she still had the energy. Youth was wonderful and perhaps it really was wasted on the young. She was currently looking at the Sacred Sea, with Bird perched on the guard rail next to her.

"Caught you.....Daydreaming again, Galla." Said Enster.

"You're right; my thoughts were a long way from here." Said Galla.

Enster Tilly, captain of the Morning Tide and sort of matriarch of Hunthreads; the village she called home. Galla liked Enster because they were similar in many ways, two peas in a pod some would say. Enster wasn't an apothecary, but she had the same no nonsense attitude that Galla had.

"So, what did I catch you dreaming about ?" Asked Enster.

"Galla dreams of faraway places." Said Bird.

Galla had actually been dreaming of her apothecary shop and the male of the species, but Bird's suggestion sounded much more respectable. Galla had noticed something about the ocean in front of the Morning Tide.

"To either side the ocean is a wonderful blue." Said Galla. "In front it seems like the Morning Tide is making its own light. The water actually glows a deeper shade of blue the way we're heading."

"I had noticed that, it's all part of the legend of the endless sea." Said Enster. "Being honest, it was part of the reason I wanted to refuse sailing any further and go home to Hunthreads. The deep blue ocean has never been seen as a good omen."

"Part of the reason, Enster." Said Galla. "What was the other part ?"

"You'll think I've gone a little mad."

"Trust me, I've seen mad." Said Galla. "You're not even close."

"Tell her, or she'll keep pestering." Said Bird.

"All myth and legend.....Nothing but myth and legend." Said Enster. "It is told that those who get to the far side of the endless sea, never want to return. Something happens to them and they become servants of the Ancient Ones for the rest of their lives."

Galla had heard similar stories regarding Muzzie and the City of the Lost God. There were even similar legends about children being drawn to the top of Mount Erran; never to be seen again. All nonsense, all complete rubbish.

"I wouldn't believe a word of it, Enster." Said Galla. "There will be something at our destination, probably something wonderful. Personally, I'm looking forward to getting there."

"The ocean glows.....The ocean lives." Said Bird.

Bird was using long words and being profound again. He had good periods like that, or he was under the thrall of the Lady again. Whatever was going on, he seemed more interesting since they'd begun

to head for the other side of the endless sea. Bird flew off, circling the boat a few times, before perching high up on the rigging.

"Clever pet you've got there." Said Enster.

"Sometimes far too clever." Said Galla.

There were large flying creatures with leathery wings, keeping up with the rather sedate pace of the Morning Tide. One screeched at Bird, who screeched back.

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Rayan Morresa was a spy from the City of the Lost God and a Kveld. She doubted if there was one citizen of Tandalla who wouldn't hate her. Miscah Harran was different, a senior librarian on loan from the Great Library itself. True, he was from the City, but every piece of magic paper he produced, put money in the pocket of someone in Tandalla. He was popular; the general population actually ignored her, but smiled at Miscah. It meant that instead of hiding, they could stride along Library Row, towards the Library of Tandalla. Rayan had a hood pulled over much of her face, but many clerics did that all the time; even if they weren't on the run from agents of the temple.

"We'll only get one try at this." Said Miscah. "Using the crystal will cause agents of the temple to investigate what is happening. Harm any of them and the library will be quickly surrounded. We need to get in fast, keep the message short and get out fast."

"The City needs to understand that the army of Tandalla are marching on Nara-Unadaris." Said Rayan.

"My children need a father.....Keep your message short and fast." Said Miscah.

Rayan had once had someone she'd cared about, but he'd long gone. She understood the feelings that had to be almost overwhelming Miscah.

"I'll make my message as short as I can.....You have my word." Said Rayan.

Library Row ended at a huge set of heavy doors. They might not even be locked, but anyone arriving that way would be observed and reported on. Rayan knew the hidden room where the portal waited, as did Miscah. The portal was a way for senior library staff to avoid all the admin and annoyance associated with the front entrance. Rayan put her hand on the wall to the right of the heavy front doors.

"Innder." She said, the word for open in the language of the old Gods.

Anyone could open the portal room; all they needed to know was the word and where to put their hand. A portion of wall slid open and they went inside. There was a lamp there, kept full of oil and burning brightly; no matter what the time of day. The room closed and Miscah looked like he intended to activate the portal.

"No." Said Rayan. "You'll be noticed using the portal. I should open it."

"I sent my family away.....I've nothing much else to lose." Said Miscah.

Miscah placed his hand on the wall and there were four words this time, all of them in Old Imperial.

A swirling purple portal opened in the centre of the room. Miscah drew his blade, as did Rayan.

When they arrived in the library, there was no telling who might be waiting for them.

"Good luck." Muttered Miscah.

"You too." Said Rayan.

At the Great Library in the City of the Lost God, the entry portal took those who invoked it; to a section of hallway near the staff refectory. In Tandalla it dropped them right outside a room with 'General Storage,' written on the door. It was written in Ubari, but Rayan was fluent in that language.

"This is it; the crystal will be stored here." Said Miscah.

“Are we breaking in, or do you have a key ?” Asked Rayan.

The Tandallans had to have thought the world of Miscah Harran; their guest librarian from the City. He dug in a pocket and brought out a copper coloured and very complex looking key.

“A master key for the library, I can get in anywhere.” Said Miscah.

The Tandallan librarians weren’t likely to think Miscah was wonderful, once they realised it was his master key which had opened the stores. Once they were inside, Miscah locked the door. He set off at a purposeful stride, the walk of a man confident of the location of the artefact they sought.

“It’s in a fairly small wooden box, covered with lilac fabric.” Said Miscah. “It will definitely be stored in this section.”

Once Rayan had the idea of a smallish lilac box in her head, it didn’t take long. Her mind could search without bothering it dealing with the day to day things; like breathing and walking. The crystal seemed to know her name and call out to her.

“There.....I know it’s the right lilac box.” Said Rayan.

She had her nose up against a caged off area and there it was; second shelf up and at the back. Poor lighting, but Rayan just knew it was the box they were looking for.

“My master key only opens doors and cabinets holding large objects.....We’ll need to break open the cage.” Said Miscah.

“No problem.” Said Rayan.

She had a small blade which she tended to use for such things; combined with a good shove from her shoulder of course. No magic, just a blade and a little Kveld strength. Once the cage was open, she used the same blade on the lock of the lilac box. There was the crystal, broken into three pieces.

“Fuck.” Said Rayan.

“Don’t panic.....Sometimes they still work when broken.” Said Miscah.

A nice idea, but he was unable to get the damned crystal to work, no matter how much he tried. All that effort to get and now this.....

“It’s as if the Nine Divines are laughing at us.” Said Rayan.

“There is the speaking tube gadget in a back room of the main temple.” Said Miscah.

“Do you think you can find it ?” She asked.

“Yes, definitely.”

Were the Nine Divines setting her up for another fall ? Rayan had done enough bad things to deserve it. Not Miscah though with his pretty wife and adorable children. The Nine wouldn’t screw around with Miscah.

“Come on.....Next stop the main temple.” Said Rayan.

Something had caused an alert, some door they’d opened or listening device they’d accidentally activated. There was no reliable technology on the rifts, but some of the enchanted artefacts behaved like technology. Everywhere they ran, there was the sound of drumming feet not far behind them. Every doorway, every corner, seemed to bring the drumming footsteps closer.

“There are too many of them, I need to run on four legs.” Said Rayan. “Run, get to the main temple and find somewhere to hide. I’ll deal with whoever is chasing us and meet you there later.”

“Are you sure ?” Asked Miscah. “It seems sensible to stay together.”

“Then you’ll die and your children will cry for you.....Go, Run!!” Said Rayan.

Miscah ran and Rayan began the change to the beast which ran on four legs. First she took everything off, including her sword belt. Teeth would be her main weapon, but her front claws could rip out a throat. Her rear claws were capable of opening up a belly and ripping out the innards. By the time she was stood snarling over her clothing and weapons, they were there. Agents of the

temple by the look of them, they knew a Kveld when they saw one. If they weren't terrified, they were stupid. There were a lot of them though, at least thirty, all well-armed. Rayan snarled and ran at them.

"Fire.....I heard they're scared of fire." Someone yelled.

There was always one, full of crap and nonsense heard in the tavern. The truth was that Kveld were partly born of fire and not scared of it at all. There were a few special weapons that could kill her, but on the whole.....She thought the agents of the temple were unlikely to see another morning. A blade went across her shoulder and was just an annoyance. Rayan bit off her opponent's ear, then his nose. By the time she ripped his face apart he was yelling in a mixture of fear and agony.

"Fire.....I told you.....We need fire." Yelled that voice again.

They tried, even pulling a lamp from the wall and sprinkling the oil over her fur. When they set light to the oil the feeling was strange, but not even slightly unpleasant. Another one of them lost his throat and then Rayan began to eat the soft parts of those she'd killed. There has to be something about watching a colleague being eaten. Some of them began to run away.

"We weren't warned about one of them being a Kveld." Yelled a guard, as they ran.

Killing all of them hadn't been her aim, but she did manage to rip a good half of them apart, maybe more than half. Rayan had a few wounds, but nothing that wouldn't heal very quickly. When it was obvious the only enemies she could see were fleeing in fear; she began eating the entrails and other soft tissues of those she'd killed. It wouldn't just help her heal; she loved the taste of hybrid flesh. Eventually she ran in the direction Miscah had been heading. He hadn't bothered closing doors his precious master key had opened; it was easy to follow his trail of open doors. Down two floors, but still above ground, light was coming in through every window she passed. The only sound was the occasional agonised scream from a guard she'd torn into, but hadn't killed.

A large set of double doors were open and beyond them was a long alleyway. Through the door at the other end of the alleyway and she was outside the library. Not a guard in sight; they'd obviously learned not to bother a Kveld running on four feet. No sign of where Miscah had gone, though she knew he'd be heading for the temple. About halfway there she found a derelict building; a perfect place to sleep off her heavy meal and get back onto just two feet.

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Seren liked to fly, especially in what most considered to be the darkness. Dark angels could see in the ultra violet backwash, that filled the rifts on what most called night time. She could see well, often better than during the time most thought of as daytime. She could see Enster's boat the Morning Tide for miles and being honest, she needed the exercise of a long nightly circuit of the night sky around the boat. Flapping wings was actually a better exercise than walking across the rift. Sex was even better but no one on the Morning Tide interested her in that particular way. As she'd done the night before, Seren ended her long flight by sitting among the rigging at the top of the tallest mast. Her talons gripped well, even when she was asleep. To a slightly bored dark angel, sleeping up in the rigging was just about perfect.

"The Screech can't kill Tejan. She travels with Sokkelf, one of the people."

Seren had seen the birds with leather wings, who seemed to rule the skies of that part of the sacred sea. It seemed they were the Screech. Bird and the Screech had been talking the night before, ignoring the dark angel clinging to the rigging. It was strange, they must have known she could hear them talking in fairly good Old Imperial. Mind you, the previous night Bird had been talking extensively about fish parasites tasting better than Nesh Bugs; even live ones. Now the conversation

was becoming far more interesting. Everyone in their group knew that Tejan was the assassin sent to kill Dava and Jelran. Travelling with Sökkelf was something useful, another name to listen out for.

"Maya though, who is listening to Maya?" Asked Bird.

"The Screech are, the Screech will always serve Maya and Uula Podda." Said the Screech.

It was one of those moments. They'd been looking for clues about where Maya was and a leathery looking flying creature knew. By the sound of it Bird had a pretty good idea too. Bird.....Who was hardly one of the most important members of their group. Seren swung through the rigging; she did it so well that Ender had offered her a full time job. As Seren came to rest just a foot or so from Bird and his friend, they didn't seem concerned by large dark angel joining them.

"You really know where Maya is?" Asked Seren.

"Of course.....The boat is heading in that direction." Said Bird.

"Maya is on the people's island." Added the Screech.

"Why didn't you tell us, Bird?" Asked Seren.

Bird puffed himself up, a kind of I'm not taking any crap pose.

"Pinthrad knows." Said Bird. "I assumed he'd told you."

Seren liked Galla's ridiculous pet, or she might have bounced his head off the mast a couple of times. In a way he was right of course, they should have asked Pinthrad a lot of questions about their new destination. Asking him over and over, might have helped bring back his lost memories.

"Never assume again old buddy." Said Seren. "Always tell me everything."

"Yes, of course." Said Bird. "You are our leader."

Was there a touch of sarcasm there? Seren was willing to give him the benefit of the doubt. Besides, getting angry might cause the Screech to fly away. She had no authority at all over him, her or it.

"So, Screech.....May I ask you a few questions?" Asked Seren.

"Yes." Said Screech.

Seren had always found it hard to identify the gender of flying creatures. A little ironic really as she was a flying creature herself. She was getting a definite female feeling from Screech.

"Is Tejan close enough to be a threat to those I travel with?" Asked Seren.

"Not now, no." Said Screech. "She is on Muddy's uninhabited island a long way from where you're going. We don't like assassins, but she travels with Sökkelf; one of the people. If he wants to chase after your boat.....The people might help him. For now though, Tejan is no threat."

An answer that was fairly optimistic, without definitely saying yes or no. It was obvious that someone in the City of the Lost God was still looking into Bird's mind. With luck they'd be picking up Screech memories from Bird.

"Bird.....Are you talking to the Silver Lady, up here?" Seren asked, while tapping her head.

"Not allowed to say.....Galla wouldn't be happy." Said Bird.

So much for respecting her as leader of the group, Seren was becoming angry.

"I'm not happy, Bird." Said Seren. "Tell me.....Are you giving information to the Lady?"

"Not allowed to say." Said Bird.

He was away, circling the mast and calling for Screech to come with him. There was a brief mention of the Children of the Hive. Was Ginnda-Aanash involved too? Seren began yelling for them to return and explain themselves. No good, Bird was hurtling into the night, closely followed by Screech.

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Rayan thought she'd hidden herself away fairly well, but someone was pulling at her arm. Arm was the key thing, she was now the creature that hunted and ran on two feet. It was still a little dark, but

Rayan just about recognised the woman from Miscah's house. His lover, his wife maybe ? She definitely seemed to be the mother of his two children.

"Wake up, Rayan." Said the woman. "Miscah should have shown up where I took the children. Was he killed helping you ?"

An instant accusation and attempt at making Rayan feel guilty. Not that it was needed; Rayan already felt guilt at breaking up their family. How had the woman found her ? Rayan was beginning to realise that Ubari hybrid females could possess strange and inexplicable powers.

"When I last saw Miscah he was alive and well." Said Rayan.

"I sense him here, I smell him on you." Said the woman.

What was the woman's name ? Muzzie had briefed her on many things in Tandalla and there had been mention of a female linked to Miscah by children. N'Faddy, yes that was her name. An Ubari female hybrid called N'Faddy. Rayan swung her arm, pointing at the grubby room in a derelict building.

"Look.....I am alone." Said Rayan. "But I was following Miscah's trail as he left the library.

Truthfully N'Faddy I have no idea where Miscah was heading. Can you still sense him ?"

"A little, but not as much as usual." Said N'Faddy.

"I can feel he went past here, heading north." Said Rayan. "I can only sense him a little, but like two; one eyed hunters.....We might find him."

N'Faddy was nodding furiously and smiling, which might be giving the idea more credit than it deserved. They were going to attempt to follow a trail which was close to being a day old. Rayan felt stiff from what had effectively been a night sleeping on a bare stone floor. She actually groaned as she stood up. N'Faddy offered her a bottle of water to drink from.

"Thank you, I needed this." Said Rayan.

"I have some food if you need to eat ?" Asked N'Faddy.

"That's not a problem.....I ate very well yesterday." Said Rayan.

They both knew what she meant and N'Faddy didn't look at all worried about being alone with a Kveld. Ubari were a bit special though, they saw much that others didn't, even Seers. Rayan clambered out of the hole in the wall of the ruined building, with N'Faddy right behind her. Would the Ubari have their own unique fighting skills ? Rayan accepted that there was only one way to find out.

"Miscah came this way." Said Rayan. "The trail is fading, but still there."

They moved fast, which wasn't always a good idea. At one crossroads in the back lanes, they had to try several times to pick up Miscah's trail. There were other trails overlapping his. Agents of the temple looking for him ? Or it might simply have been Tandallans making an early start for the day. There were a few dead ends and for a while, they lost the trail completely. Finding a dead temple guard set them on the right trail, but it was a worrying find.

"Do you think Miscah killed the guard ?" Asked N'Faddy.

"Yes.....But it means he was alive when he carried on from here." Said Rayan.

Another twisting back alley and there was an open door with blood over the handle. Rayan knew the blood belonged to Miscah; it was one of the things Kveld were good at. She had to tell N'Faddy, there was no good reason not to.

"The blood.....It's Miscah's." Said Rayan.

The main temple of Tandalla was huge and once through the door they were in a tiny part of it. It didn't surprise Rayan that no one seemed to have discovered, or disturbed the body of the guard Miscah had killed. Sadly, Miscah lay dead only a few feet from the guard. N'Faddy didn't cry, but she

did gasp. Rayan knew Miscah and the guard were both dead, without examining their bodies; it was something else that Kveld were very good at.

"I'm so sorry, but Miscah is dead." Said Rayan. "We should leave him where he is. There is nothing we can do for him.....And the temple will make sure he gets a proper burial."

"I'll go with you.....He'd have wanted me to help you." Said N'Faddy.

Rayan did need her help, everything was so much harder when trying to do it alone. On the other hand, it felt wrong to ask Miscah's widow to help her so close to losing him. There were those adorable kids too; supposing N'Faddy died trying to help her ?

"I couldn't ask you to do that." Said Rayan.

"You're not asking, I'm volunteering." Said N'Faddy. "I've seen the speaking device. I know that it works. I also know where they keep it. You need my help Rayan Morresa."

Logic told Rayan that N'Faddy was talking sense and as she'd put it; she was a volunteer.

"Well, if you put it that way.....Let's find the speaking device." Said Rayan.

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