

The Ancient Ones

Chapter 12 – Escape From Tandalla

“Rayan had once been told that Kveld mothers had their own kind of maternal instinct. Not that Rayan ever intended to have children; her life was just too complicated. Kveld protection for their pups was more intense than human mothers for their babes. More violent too on occasions. No sensible person ever threatened a Kveld pup. Rayan was trying hard to push her own mothering instinct towards protecting Dynka and Yorn.”



The house was in the north of Tandalla, where the wealthy merchants lived. A large house that would normally have given rise to lots of questions about where N’Faddy had left her children; and who she’d left them with. Rayan knew how the game was played though; questions had to be kept to a minimum. Some claim to have resisted torture, but no one does; not really. If Rayan didn’t know a name for who owned the large and impressive house, she couldn’t be forced to tell anyone else. Just a large house in Tandalla, she’d even avoided looking at the street name. There had already been friction, when Rayan had refused to say where they were heading when they left Tandalla through the gates to the North East of the vast city.

“Now seems the time to tell me where you’re taking us.” Said N’Faddy.

“When all four of us are a few miles from Tandalla, I will tell you.” Said Rayan. “You have my word on that. Names, places, directions.....They’re all dangerous. I haven’t even asked you for the names of your children.”

“My girl is Dynka, my boy child is Yorn.” Said N’Faddy. “You’ve seen them; you’ve probably guessed their ages and how far they can walk in a day.”

Rayan nodded but she was bad at guessing ages, especially the ages of young children. They weren’t tiny or anything like that, but neither were they of an age where they could look after themselves. Rayan had given her word to N’Faddy to keep her children safe and she intended to do that, even if it killed her. N’Faddy used steps probably used by people delivering whatever the people in the house needed delivering. Rayan followed her and kept quiet as N’Faddy knocked on the door. A woman opened the door and for a few moments, the two women hugged one another.

“My children.....Are they safe and sound ?” Asked N’Faddy.

“Of course they are.” Said the other woman.

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“This is a friend.....We can trust her.” Said N’Faddy, while touching Rayan’s arm.

Good, she was learning the gold rule about not giving away names, places and directions of travel.

“Then she is welcome in this house.” Said the other woman.

The children were in a downstairs room, well away from any windows they might be seen through. They cried a lot and told their mother they were scared. Of course they were, it would have been strange if they weren’t.

"Do they have backpacks with the essentials ?" Asked Rayan. "We really need to be out of Tandalla before everyone is looking for us."

Dynka and Yorn loved their mother, but disliked her; Rayan could see it in their eyes. Not that she cared and it might just help to keep them live. The other woman returned with two backpacks.

Rayan was pleased that she'd obviously given the matter some thought.

"Water.....Dried food and a few other essentials." Said the woman.

"Did you give them a blade each ?" Asked Rayan.

"At their age !" Gaspd the woman.

"I'm sure they could use a blade if they were being attacked." Said Rayan. "Isn't that right, Dynka ? I bet you'd use a knife on someone trying to hurt your mum."

"Yes." Said Dynka, while nodding her head.

"I could too." Said Yorn.

The other woman made comments about turning the children into savages, but she did find two small blades in their own scabbards. Both of the children looked excited as the blades were dropped into their backpacks.

"No more goodbyes.....We're leaving now." Said Rayan.

The children liked her a little better; it had to be hard not to like an adult who just had you armed with a cool blue steel blade. They left the house through a gate to a communal garden and didn't see anyone else in the garden. Quite a walk to the North East gate, but no one seemed to recognise Rayan, N'Faddy, or her children. No shouts from a guard, no being hailed by friends of N'Faddy or her children. The gate was going to be a problem though and Rayan was still pondering on a way to get past the inevitable guards. She stopped to talk to N'Faddy while they were still some way from the gate.

"They're bound to have descriptions of all of us by now." Said Rayan.

"How do we get past them ?" Asked N'Faddy.

"Tandalla hasn't had security problems for several centuries." Said Rayan. "There'll only be two guards on this gate, I guarantee it. I can deal with the guards and then we each get a child up on our backs and run. No arguments, no asking where we're going. You follow me until we're among the sand dunes to the North East. Then I'll tell you who we're joining up with and where they'll be."

The children looked excited, but N'Faddy knew the reality of 'dealing with someone.' The guards had to die and that gate was fairly quiet. With luck, no one would see which way they ran.

"Your plans are always a little rough around the edges, but they usually work." Said N'Faddy. "Come on, let's get this done."

There were only two guards and there was no one else waiting to enter Tandalla by the gate, or exit to take the road North East. It was the perfect situation, as long as you weren't one of the guards.

"Destination.....Where are you headed for ?" Asked one of the guards.

"It's them you fool.....It's them !" Yelled his friend.

No using her teeth, the children might panic if they witnessed that. Rayan was strong, really strong; snapping a guard's neck was easy. As the second guard came at her with his sword ready to strike; Rayan stepped to one side and drove her blade deep into his chest. The children gasped, but there was no screaming. They didn't really know Rayan, but they'd passed the point of being scared of her.

"Up on my back Dynka." Said Rayan. "Arms around my shoulders and hold on tight, we're going to have to run now."

No hesitation, the girl child was clinging to her back, as N'Faddy got her son to climb up on her back. Rayan knew N'Faddy was an Ubari female hybrid. They were tough and strong, often sought out as female bodyguards. Running for a few miles with Yorn on her back wouldn't worry her.

"Come on.....Now we run." Said Rayan.

They ran across dry stony soil and when the sand dunes began, they ran across those. Five miles they ran, maybe six. As they collapsed in a gap between two high dunes, Rayan was pretty confident that no one looking for them would find them. Everyone looked tired, even the children were breathing heavily. They all had a drink and some dried food.

"Now.....Tell me where we're going?" Asked N'Faddy.

"Rest a while and then we walk, even the children." Said Rayan. "I can feel who I'm looking for, he's one like me. My mother knew him once, though he isn't my father. He's the headman of a group of travelling shepherds. Once we find him, we should be safe. He's a long way from us though, several days steady walking over the dunes."

The trudge over the dunes took three days, with a lucky find of a small fresh water oasis on the second day. By the time Rayan was looking from the top of a dune at a mass of tents next to a lake surrounded by lush vegetation; they were all grubby, smelly and badly in need of a bath and change of clothing.

"We're there.....Mahlgrim Oasis." Said Rayan. "There are many of my kind here.....We will be safe now."

"Thank you, Rayan.....I owe you a debt I hope to repay someday." Said N'Faddy.

Of course Bodrin was dead, as was Miscah, father of N'Faddy's children. Not that Rayan felt a need to mention that, but both of them had died so that her information could reach the City of the Lost God. The children were wide eyed at the sight of a great many Jangar beasts, which the nomadic tribe traded in wherever they stopped. Not huge monsters these, but a small version of the beasts, usually sold for the cooking pot.

Out from among the trees he came, the leader of those who were camped at the oasis. They moved around a lot, but had promised to wait for her. Tall for a Kveld, but there was a definite grin on his rather grubby face.

"We could have done with you earlier, Rayan." He said. "A few Jangar broke a gate and ran off.....We've only just recovered the last runaway."

Rayan hugged him, before turning to introduce him to N'Faddy and her children.

"This is Lanssor, a good friend." Said Rayan. "He tends to run things in the camp."

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Muzzie had thought about bringing Faal to the meeting with Ginnda-Aanash, the Hive Mother. The Silver Lady was already going and adding Faal meant adding Jenda, his assistant. If they both went Aeony would be doing a lot of muttering about being invited. Before he knew it, Muzzie would have a full meeting of the war committee, without really intending it to happen. At the moment the movement of the Tandallan army was more annoying than a genuine threat. Muzzie had decided to give it a while to see if the threat level increased.

"I'm glad you didn't invite Faal, he can get so.....Excitable." Said the Silver Lady.

If she thought Faal was excitable, she hadn't seen Aeony building up to a full rage. The dark angel who'd been his lover for many centuries had wanted to mount a full scale war against Tandalla. The news about the Tandallan Army marching on Nara-Unadaris to grab the empire's portals had cost two lives; so far. Muzzie felt he owed those two people the respect to think long and hard about the

information Rayan had sent down the speaking tube. Then he probably would throw his army at Tandalla, but it wouldn't look hasty or ill-advised.

"I thought the portals at Nara-Unadaris were secure." Said Muzzie. "Ginnda disagrees though, which is why we're going to see her."

"Ask Ginnda to send her older children to fight Tandalla." Said the Lady. "She'll make short work of them."

"It may well come to that." Said Muzzie.

Muzzie trusted the Hive Mother; if Ginnda had wanted him dead, she'd had plenty of opportunities during the war to make him emperor. She believed in the oldest rift doctrine though, that nothing was ever given for nothing. Being his ground army against Tandalla wouldn't be cheap and Muzzie was worried about how much gold Ginnda might ask for. She might even demand to rule Tandalla as their queen. Not that Ginnda ruling Tandalla was necessarily a bad thing.

"We're here.....There always seem to be more of her children." Said the Lady.

"We need her children." Said Muzzie. "Several died searching for the assassin sent to kill Dava and Jelran. They may not always get it right, but they fight well."

"As long as they're always on our side." Said the Lady.

That could be said of a lot of people, including the Lady herself. Nothing was ever guaranteed, but Muzzie had total trust in the loyalty of the Hive Mother.

"You're right.....I've never seen so many children of the hive in the tunnels." Said Muzzie.

The tunnels were below his imperial palace, so Muzzie always thought of Ginnda's young as being in his home, rather than the other way round. The spider like creatures made a chattering sound, as if they were pleased to see him and the Lady; perhaps they were. Ginnda crawled out of her lair to greet them.

"Greetings.....Welcome to the hive." Said Ginnda. "I've called in more of my children, as I'm assuming you'll have need of them. I've also called in yet more of my children to my old lair in Segin-Unadaris on the fifth rift. I can provide you with an army of my children which will make your enemies fear the empire. Command it and Tandalla can be a ruin."

"Let's sit and talk over all the news." Said Muzzie.

A strange comment as Ginnda didn't really sit, she wasn't design to sit. She'd know what he meant though. Recent news and events needed to be thought about, and all options considered.

"No hasty actions.....Nothing too hasty." Muttered the Lady.

Which seemed ironic, as is she'd had her way; Ginnda's oldest children would be on the way to destroy Tandalla and slaughter the entire population. Ginnda's young provided refreshments and Muzzie let the Lady sit down first, before he caused the sofa to make a wheezing noise under his weight. He didn't look overweight; he was just a very large demon hybrid with a good pinch of Genova in his ancestry. He had the extra pair of arms which were rarely used.

"Ginnda, thank you for seeing us with so little notice." Said Muzzie.

"I understand.....The Tandallans making their move against the empire." Said Ginnda. "That's something which can't be ignored. I have to say that Rayan Morresa did a super job."

Praise of Rayan was unexpected, but it helped with the next part of his plan. Muzzie was aware that he was in a meeting with two powerful individuals, both hoping to see Tandalla reduced to a smoking hole in the ground. Tandalla controlled Aarabash, the farming city, which was surrounded by fertile farmland. Without Aarabash there was a real possibility of the City of the Lost God going hungry. If Muzzie had learned one thing as emperor, it was that hungry people are hard to govern. Ginnda was hanging on a thick rope of silk she'd just attached to the ceiling of her lair. The Hive

Mother was slowly turning in the air, which was fascinating to watch, but bad for his concentration on matters at hand.

"I had several long talks with Rayan before she left for Tandalla." Said Muzzie.

"A pity Bodrin and Miscah Harran died." Said the Lady. "What did Rayan think she was walking into at Tandalla?"

Muzzie settled back into the comfy sofa and sipped at the herbal tea Ginnda knew he liked. Taking a little time to reply to questions was one of the perks of being emperor of all the rifts.

"Like all Kveld, Rayan has good intuition." Said Muzzie. "She told everyone in the war committee that Tandalla were planning and preparing for war, but no one took her seriously."

"Tandalla do so well as part of the empire; your empire." Said Ginnda.

"They'd do even better if it was their empire." Said Muzzie. "Or they think they'd do better.....I have no intention of letting them find out. I sweated so much to win the war to be emperor and I lost so many friends in battle."

"Indeed.....Bless the fallen." Said the Lady.

Ginnda stopped spinning and was still on her silk rope; she ended up very still and looking into his eyes. Those ancient eyes of hers seemed to look right into his soul.

"Of course.....Bless the fallen." Said Ginnda. "So my emperor.....What do you intend to do about this Tandallan business?"

Several of Ginnda's children were hanging on her now, all of them giving Muzzie a long hard stare. The children of the hive might look like large spiders, but there was an intelligence behind their eyes. Muzzie could never resist petting Ginnda's young offspring, even if they didn't look very loveable. He stood up and began petting the youngsters; who began making a kind of happy tinkling sound.

"My children like you." Said Ginnda.

"And I have a soft spot for them." Said Muzzie.

"I hate to rush you, but.....Are you sending Ginnda's children to Tandalla?" Asked the Lady.

Very bad manners to pester the emperor, but Muzzie had been deliberately delaying his answer.

There'd be more effect now, more realising that he'd entered Ginnda's lair with a decision already in his head.

"Annill will provide the fighters." Said Muzzie. "About half their army will be sent out on a long march to the portals at Nara-Unadaris. The greys I think, roughest and toughest of the army in Annill. My guess is that by the time the greys arrive to reinforce our forces there, the Tandallan army will be back home, or maybe out on manoeuvres somewhere. They won't face my army in battle and peace will be restored; at least for now."

"And what plans for my children?" Asked Ginnda. "They do so love to please their emperor."

Muzzie began to pet one of Ginnda's children who had to nearly an adult. It liked being petted though; its droning sound was making the floor tiles shake.

"I want most of your older children sent to Tandalla." Said Muzzie. "Not to attack the city, but to keep hidden most of the time, and only occasionally seen. They can defend themselves if attacked, but there must be no attack on Tandalla. I want the people of the city to see what could happen, if I wanted it to happen. Can you do that for me Ginnda-Aanash?"

"Yes.....My children enjoy a little fun." Said Ginnda. "We'll scare the people of Tandalla for you."

The small children of the hive were on him now; two had even climbed under his imperial robes.

There was a nice feeling to having a dozen or so of Ginnda's children clambering over him. Ginnda was happy, so her children were happy. If only it was as easy to make the Silver Lady happy. Her face was telling its own story, most of it about feelings of being underused and unappreciated.

"I know the Silver Lady was keen to be part of an attack on Tandalla." Said Muzzie. "I have no doubt there will be an attack on that city, but it will be at a time that suits us; not them. As it is, we'd know very little about what happened to Olvir, Adamaz and Pinthrad, if it wasn't for the Lady. I am very grateful for all her help."

She wasn't making tinkling sounds and climbing into his robe, but Muzzie could tell the Lady was happy. He'd need to have her by his side when he marched on Tandalla, or she'd become upset. An upset Silver Lady wasn't something to risk, even for an emperor.

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Nethra now owned and ran the Defender Tavern in Annill. Her partner Merrick had been a half demon thief, though no one had seen him for several centuries. Had he died a natural death of old age ? He had betrayed Muzzie, so he might have been quietly killed and dropped into the Quella Traps. Or Nethra might have slit his throat while he slept, after catching him with yet another bit on the side. That was the generally accepted fate of Merrick, though no one was certain. Nethra could have told them, but she never did. Nethra ran the Defender with the help of Merrick's old gang, or at least those who'd survived centuries of relying on their wits and skill with a blade. The Defender was on the perfect corner to see the Greys march out of Annill.

"Officially we're not at war with Tandalla." Said Jenda K. "But it can only be a matter of time."

Jenda K was a thief, a really good thief. Muzzie had made use of her during the war to make him emperor, but she was back with Nethra now. She had to be a thousand years old, but that's how it went with hybrids. Some died after a hundred years or so, while others seemingly lived almost forever.

"The Greys look impressive." Said Nethra. "Tandalla won't risk a fight with them."

Nethra had blue skin and small wings, which were capable of getting her into the air. Even Galla had no idea of Nethra's ancestry and if she was being honest; Nethra had no idea who her father was. Her mother had been a fairly ordinary Dredger Hybrid and, as far as she knew; both of her parents were long dead.

"The last time I saw Annill go to war, I ended up following the army." Said Nethra.

Not that Nethra hadn't been busy since Muzzie had become emperor. She'd worked hard on giving the Defender a reputation for good food and fair prices, which Merrick would never have achieved. She now owned no less than two other properties in the same street; both of them clean and comfortable lodgings aimed at travelling salespeople. There were more of those since Muzzie had made the roads safe to use, or at least much safer to use. There was always a report of someone being robbed of their purse and goods.

"Hey, don't get ideas.....I can't run things on my own." Said Jenda K.

"Look, they even got Higgall out of retirement." Said Nethra.

"Crap, I heard he was dead." Said Jenda K. "Some say he's older than the Gods themselves."

Higgall was at the front of a section of marching Greys; the oldest and most experienced fighters in the army of Annill. He was big and had a permanent angry look on his face; which made him the perfect section leader. Nethra had seen him stop a bar fight in the Defender, all on his own. Best of all he hadn't needed to kill any of her best customers.

"You could run things.....While I follow the army for a while." Said Nethra.

"We're busy, Nethra.....Never been so busy." Said Jenda K. "And you know the reputation of camp followers. Stay here and forget you saw the fighters marching to war."

It was seeing Higgall, Nethra knew that. If the self-admitted oldest man in Annill could go to war, she could go too. As for the reputation of camp followers ? Muzzie encouraged the warriors to take their

wives and children now, rather than paying a gold coin for the intimacy of a stranger. The drums started, the large war drums of the sixty eighth. It was no use; Nethra knew she had to follow the army out of the city gates of Annill. Despite being quite small, war was in her blood. Somewhere in a tribal yurt out on the rifts, Nethra had been touched by chaos. Little more than a baby then; only a tiny bit of chaos but it had latched onto her soul and refused to go away. Using her claws on an enemy was a need. She might have kept that need well under control for years, but now it wanted to come out and play.

"You have spare keys to everywhere." Said Nethra. "Please.....Look after the place. I have to go to war, or I think something inside me will drive me insane."

"Now, you want to go now ?" Asked Jenda K.

"Yes, this very instant." Said Nethra.

Jenda K was a large hybrid who'd had a busy morning. She was grubby and a little sweaty, but when she hugged her; Nethra hugged her back.

"Come back in one piece." Said Jenda K.

"I will do my best." Said Nethra. "Once I get settled, I'll find a way of getting a message to you.....Look after the Defender Tavern, the old place means a lot to me."

More hugs and quite a bit of backslapping. Even a few tears, though they'd have eviscerated anyone stupid enough to accuse them of crying. Nethra then went high, using her claws to get right up to the roof of the Defender.

"I see you Higgall.....The waggon behind you must be yours." Nethra muttered.

Everyone knew her, of course they did. There wasn't a single warrior among the Greys who wasn't a regular customer at the Defender. Merrick's old gang was hers now and they still had a reputation for obtaining the unobtainable. All she had to do was drop into Higgall's waggon and she'd have bed, food and rations until the army reached the portals at Nara-Unadaris.

"Merrick would say I've gone crazy again." She muttered. "Perhaps I have."

Flying creatures weren't an everyday thing in Annill; especially ones whose wings beat so fast, that they buzzed. People in the streets turned to watch her hurtle towards the army leaving the city. Children actually shouted her name and waved, so Nethra waved back. She felt more alive than she had in a very long time.

"Now.....Where is that waggon ?" She muttered.

Over the city gates rather than through them and Nethra could see Higgall strutting along the main road out of Annill. The warriors were waving at her now, some shouting her name. The wives and children known as the camp followers would be right at the back of the procession and the last group to leave Annill. Nethra got herself over the top of the waggon and came down very gently, until she was sat next to the waggon driver. Unusually for the rifts; Annill still had beasts to pull waggons.

"Going with us are you ?" Asked the waggon driver.

"Yes, but not officially." Said Nethra.

"Good.....I'll tell the lads; we won't let you starve, Nethra."

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Despite a promise to send other boats for those left behind, the crew seemed in no hurry to get to Monazin Island. The island where Sokkelf had been born was named after Monazin-Conosin, one of the old Gods. Some thought Monazin was long dead, while some believed him to be hiding somewhere. Millions of faithful demanding followers could be irritating and all the surviving Gods were rumoured to hide for a while when they needed a little peace and quiet.

"I get the feeling there will be no boats sent back to Muddy's Island." Said Tejan.

"I'll ask the headman about it when we get to Monazin Island." Said Sockelf. "Realistically though, there is no way I can guarantee anyone will agree to take boats there. They did threaten the crew of this boat."

And there had been a very public killing of a woman passenger. There was just about enough food and water on Muddy's to enable those left behind to survive indefinitely. They were going to squabble though, Tejan knew it. Would there be anyone left to rescue in a few months' time ? Tejan decided it wasn't her problem. They'd rescued a great many families and that would have to do.

"Yeah.....Whatever happens, they had it coming." Said Tejan.

There was no privacy among so many, even if you whispered. A woman brushing her daughter's hair looked at Tejan and nodded. There had been some good people left behind, but the majority were trouble; often homicidal trouble. Tejan had killed for money, but there was always a purpose to it and; she never killed young children. A large Screech landed on the deck near Sockelf and they seemed to have a conversation. The Screech might talk in Old Imperial, but that didn't make them easy to understand. After it had flown off, Sockelf made a loud announcement to everyone on the Shellfish fishing boat.

"We'll be at Monazin Island the morning after tomorrow." Sockelf yelled.

The boat had to know the route; they had to fish those waters every few weeks. It might be proper fishing, or collecting shellfish from the bottom, but they'd know the time and distances involved.

They cheered Sockelf as though he was a great leader and acted as though he'd given them wonderful news. Tejan had her own secrets, but she was sure Sockelf had a few too.

"Are you the King of Monazin Island or something ?" She asked.

"Not at all.....When I'm at home, I'm a humble farmer." Said Sockelf.

"And when you're not at home ?" She asked.

"If you like my home and think it might be our home ? I'll gladly answer that."

Their home.....That was something she hadn't seriously considered. Mind you, if she emptied every bank account she had on the planets of the Menderan Empire, she could live well for the rest of her life. Actually, they could both live well for the rest of their lives. Sockelf kissed her and she kissed him back, causing a kind of 'Awww' sound from the adults and a giggle from the children. Tejan was looking forward to a little privacy when they reached Monazin Island. She'd already asked him about sharing his house with assorted inquisitive relatives. There were no relatives sharing his house, she'd have him all to herself.

"One day I'll take you to the fifth moon of Pesallia Two." Said Tejan. "A fairly barren looking world with one huge advantage.....There are rarely more than a dozen people living on the entire moon. Privacy Sockelf.....A place where we'd be guaranteed some privacy."

"It sounds wonderful." Said Sockelf

They kissed again and once again just about everyone on the boat giggled, or made an 'Awww' sound. Tejan would never have left any of them on Muddy's, but a larger boat with their own cabin; would have been wonderful.

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