

## The Ancient Ones

### Chapter 15 – Pilgrim Trail

**“A heavy waggon pulled by any strong beasts the owner could acquire. The army had found wild Farrag somewhere and eight of them were pulling the ten wheeler. Farrag were tough and almost feral; it was reputed that they hunted full grown Jangar beasts. Four legged, nasty, aggressive and full of rage. Even whoever fed Farrag had to be very careful of the brutes.”**



N’Faddy’s children Dynka and Yorn were happy; that obvious and lasting happiness which children seemed so good at. The girl was Dynka and the boy was Yorn; both names shortened versions of longer names. Dynka was the older by about year and a half and looked to be about seven years old, maybe eight. The Kveld gave birth to pups, so Rayan Morresa’s understanding of hybrid children was far from perfect.

“So much laughter from them, N’Faddy.” Said Rayan. “Your children seem to be enjoying the nomadic life of the shepherds.”

“They are happy, partly because they feel safe among your Kveld.” Said N’Faddy.

The Jangar Beasts frequently gave birth to young and the children treated every baby Jangar as a pet. Occasionally a mother Jangar would growl at the children, a kid of mildly threatening warning to leave her young alone. On the whole though, the fully grown Jangar ignored N’Faddy’s children; in much the same way they ignored the Kveld shepherds.

“How long until we’re on the Pilgrim Trail ?” Asked N’Faddy.

It was midmorning on the rift and the light was as good as it was going to be on a day with no rain and not much in the way of clouds. Rayan pointed at two tall towers about a mile to their west.

“Do you see the two junction towers ?” Asked Rayan.

“Only now you’ve pointed them out.”

“Towers built by Dredgers when the rifts were young.” Said Dynka. “Your friend Lanssor told me about them.”

Lanssor was more style than substance when he told tales about the Ancients Gods, Dredgers and the other assorted creatures who’d once inhabited, or still inhabited the rifts. The towers had been built by demon hybrids, but Rayan saw no need to correct Lanssor. The junction towers were so old that few knew for certain who’d constructed them.

“The towers mark a major cross roads on the Pilgrim Way.” Said Rayan. “We turn right at the towers and begin a very long walk.”

“How long a walk ?” Asked Yorn.

“Ahhh, Yorn.....What is the longest walk you can think of ?” Asked Rayan.

“He thinks it’s a long way from our house to the temple.” Said Dynka.

It wasn’t their house anymore and never would be again, but that was conversation for another time, maybe when they were a little older. Their home might well be in the City of the Lost God by then.

“You’ll both be two years older when we finish this walk.” Said Rayan. “You might even be a little older than that.”

“Wow, where are we going ?” Asked Dynka.

Rayan looked at N'Faddy and cocked her head a little, as if asking if it was alright to tell her children where they going. There'd be no more seeing their friends in Tandalla, or going to the same school they'd been at. N'Faddy nodded at her.

"We're walking the Pilgrim Trail to Mount Erran." Said Rayan. "With a little luck, we'll see the ancient deities there. Not all of them, but a few of the Nine Divines still inhabit the holy mountain."

"Wow." Said Yorn. "Which ones?"

"Come on you pair." Said N'Faddy. "Go and play.....Leave Rayan in peace for a while."

N'Faddy waited until her children were out of earshot, though she still seemed anxious about voicing her thoughts.

"What if there are none of the Nine at the Holy mountain?" Asked N'Faddy.

"Such a thing is unthinkable." Said Rayan. "Who could throw the Nine out of Mount Erran? If such a terrible thing had occurred, we'd be looking at another long walk to the City of the Lost God."

"Supposing Muzzie is beaten, the City of the Lost God in ruins?" Asked N'Faddy.

"Then the world is given over to pure chaos." Said Rayan. "We'd stay with the Kveld Shepherds and see where we end up."

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Nethra had lived so much of her younger life in tents and yurts, that the back of the waggon was beginning to feel like home. Her clothes, clean and grubby, spread around on top of sacks of supplies. Her freshly cleaned and polished blade shoved between two planks in the side of the waggon. She'd left Annill in a hurry and the short blade was the most precious thing she'd remembered to pick up. Not that a lack of personal belongings was a problem, not now that she had a purse full of imperial gold pieces. Chosen gave a polite cough before looking back at her; there had been an early morning incident of partial nudity. Poor Chosen seemed more worried about it than Nethra.

"We're at the Quella Traps." Said Chosen. "You may get bumped around a little."

The traps, where ancient holes in the ground that had been the death of many creatures. Not always predators who fell victim to the Quella Traps, but they definitely seemed to make up the bulk of the remains dug up and examined. A sticky pool of brown gunk at the bottom of the traps, held on hard to anything unfortunate enough to fall into the traps. It was rare, but sometimes those unfortunate beings were soldiers in Muzzie's army and their carts or waggons.

"I'd better see if I can help." Said Nethra. "My way of paying something for my bed and food all the way from Annill."

"Find Vita.....She's driving a ten wheeler through the traps." Said Chosen.

There had been no serious trouble from the fight between the Annill greys and the Tandallan regulars in Nethra's bar in Dessine. The local guard had obviously believed the nonsense about a group of raiders killing the Tandallans; or as was more likely. They didn't want to risk tangling with some very well armed and very tough imperial fighters. No one had even turned up to take a statement about it.

"I'll find Vita." Said Nethra.

Nethra's wings ached a little; she had been flying around more than she usually did back home at the Defender Tavern in Annill. She took it slow, flying in a wide circle around the waggon she now thought of as a home away from home. The ten wheeler Vita was driving was unusual by its size; there were few ten wheelers left in the world and Nethra couldn't remember the last one she'd seen taking goods across the rift. A heavy waggon pulled by any strong beasts the owner could acquire. The army had found wild Farrags somewhere and eight of them were pulling the ten wheeler. Farrag

were tough and almost feral; it was reputed that they hunted full grown Jangar beasts. Four legged, nasty, aggressive and full of rage. Even whoever fed Farrag had to be very careful of the brutes.

"Farrag.....Even dark angels are careful around them." Nethra muttered.

At a time when war might be around the corner, people grabbed whatever they needed, or something close to what they needed. Someone in the army had decided Farrag would do when there were no Jangar available. They were wrong of course and Nethra hoped the beasts didn't turn really nasty trying to negotiate pathways through the traps. Nethra hovered close to Vita, who was working very hard to keep the ten wheeler going in a straight line. Chosen's wife was sweating so hard that Nethra could see the sweat from several yards away.

"Oh dear, someone bought a few Farrag." Shouted Nethra.

"Awful, stupid beasts." Vita shouted back. "They stink too, like a sweaty Shelzak demon's armpits."

Two of the Farrag roared, as if annoyed at the description. Not that the brutes could understand anything said to them. Maybe a loud call of 'Food,' but nothing more meaningful than that. Nethra had never met anyone who'd let their child keep a young Farrag as a pet. Annoying brutes they might be, but fit strong adults were worth a lot of gold. Someone in the army must have had more money than sense.

"Can I sit with you, Vita ?" Asked Nethra. "Just in case you have problems."

"Yes, I'd appreciate your company." Said Vita.

Nethra was nosey, almost to the point of it being a problem. She had to know everything and her one saving grace was keeping what she heard to herself. She had to know what the enormous ten wheeled waggon was carrying to the temple complex at Nara-Unadaris.

"Do you mind if I look in the back ?" Asked Nethra.

"Fine.....But you'll be disappointed." Said Vita. "Use light magic though.....No naked flames with this cargo."

That made Nethra think, but she knew a few ways to produce light by magical means. She pulled open a door behind where she and Vita were sat and a familiar scent hit her nostrils. Actually two odours prevailed, Cring Berries and Ashunt Oil, but there many other strong smells. Most weren't that inflammable apart from Ashunt Oil, which had destroyed many warehouses in an accidental fire and maybe a few that weren't quite so accidental.

"Ashunt Oil." Said Nethra. "To anoint the dead and celebrate the living."

Nethra created a light globe and sent it up to the ceiling of the waggon. There were all sorts of oils, spices and magical ingredients in barrels and jars; enough to keep Galla happy for years, maybe decades. There were a lot of barrels of Ashunt Oil, maybe too many. An insanely dangerous cargo being pulled by crazy Farrags. Things could get complicated very quickly.

"If the beasts lose their footing." Said Nethra. "Don't get dragged into the traps with them. Let me fly you away to safety."

Vita didn't say yes, but she nodded twice. Abandoning Ashunt Oil was abandoning at least a thousand in gold for every barrel. Cring berries were almost as valuable. Still, the entire cargo of the ten wheeler wasn't worth dying for.

"I pray to the Nine that it never comes to that." Said Vita.

"So do I." Said Nethra.

It seemed Farrag were stupid and aggressive, but they also had a good sense of self survival. Maybe they felt the ground to the side of the track being a little fragile. Or perhaps they could smell the putrefying remains of beasts who hadn't kept to the track. Whatever the truth they kept to the

tracks Vita steered them along and when she pulled them into a turn, they turned. They roared and barked in annoyance of course, but they turned.

"I might have misjudged Farrag." Said Nethra. "Just a tiny amount."

"Widden has well trained Jangar." Said Vita. "But it looks like he's in trouble."

Widden was well known at the Defender Tavern in Annill. Not only a good fighter, he could steer a wagon just about anywhere, over the worst of ground. His waggon was much smaller than the ten wheeler, but it seemed to be pulling to one side. Unless the pull was corrected, the waggon was going to end up at the bottom of the Quella Traps.

"Crap.....What is he carrying ?" Asked Nethra.

"Weapons and armour.....Too much weight." Said Vita. "I told him so many times.....Too much weight for a small waggon. You might get away with it on the level, but not in the traps."

Widden's waggon was to their left, having successfully negotiated the turn. Vita was right though; there was a lot of weight there for a relatively small waggon. It refused to totally straighten up and was likely to become a victim of the traps. Jangar Beast were clever, they seemed to sense that something was in the process of going horribly wrong. They were screaming at one another.

"Poor Widden.....Looks like his waggon and load are going to be destroyed." Said Vita.

"Not him though, I'll fly over there and pull him out." Said Nethra.

"Leave it to the last possible moment, Nethra." Said Vita. "Pull him off his waggon a minute too soon and he'll never forgive you."

"I'll remember that." Said Nethra.

Nethra needed anger to feed her Chinnura side, a lot of anger. Rage would do even better. As usual she thought of Merrick and his stealing, his lies and worst of all; his sleeping around. By the time she was thinking of Merrick's fifth or sixth affair; her wings were beating fast enough to produce the buzzing sound she loved. Nethra flew around Widden's waggon and it was definitely destined to be claimed by the traps. No one could have straightened it up on the track, not even one of the ancient heroes; and few of them still survived.

"I can do it.....I just need another few minutes." Yelled Widden.

In a few minutes he'd be dead, but Nethra was happy to wait before carrying him to safety. Widden was a large hybrid, with some Ubari in him by the look of him. A large heavy hybrid, who was also likely to be wearing heavy leather armour and have the weight of a steel longsword hanging off his belt. Not that his weight bothered Nethra. In her current state she could have carried Widden and his brother to safety.

"Don't leave it too long." Shouted Nethra. "I've seen waggons eaten by the traps.....When they finally go, they go quickly."

"I know I can get the waggon straight.....I know it." Yelled Widden.

Normally Nethra liked confidence and optimism, but not now. It was stupid given the situation and it annoyed her. She used being annoyed of course, to give her Chinnura rage a little extra edge.

Widden's waggon tilted over and even the Jangar knew the end was close. They had a mix between a roar and a bark when really scared. They were biting one another to get away, but their harnesses were holding them tight. Nethra flew in and grabbed Widden.

"No.....I can do this, Nethra."

"No you can't, you'll die." Said Nethra.

Anger made it easy to hold his weight and take him up and away from his doomed waggon. Poor Widden really might never forgive her for lifting him away. In his mind it would have been too soon

and he'd sulk about it in every tavern the army frequented. He was actually crying as she took him towards safety and the portals at Nara-Unadaris.

"Never lost a waggon before." Muttered Widden.

He'd definitely never forgive her if he lived to be a thousand, though that was an ambitious age for a Dredger hybrid with a touch on Ubari. Nethra waved at Vita, as the ten wheeler reached the relative safety of a wider and more used trackway.

"You're alive Widden, be grateful for that." Said Nethra.

"Never, never.....Lost a waggon." Muttered Widden.

Nethra left Widden at the army checkpoint for Nara-Unadaris and the large hybrid was still crying. She thought he'd be grieving for the lost waggon for many years.

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Late in the day, though Tejan was still getting used to the strange day length on the rifts. Add on the constant ultraviolet wash that never stopped and the strange odour in the air; and she realised why some never really acclimatised to the seven rifts, even the fairly innocuous first rift. Being fair, the air smelled pretty clean as they crossed the Sacred Sea on 'Bright Magic.' A Screech had landed on the deck next to Sökkelf and they'd been muttering at one another for quite some time. Tejan only heard a few of the words muttered by the Screech; but one of them was definitely assassin. Privacy was difficult on such a small boat. Sökkelf and her had started whispering in each other's ears.

"They're there, in the Genova city." Whispered Sökkelf. "Those from the City of the Lost God who have the Algarians with them, have reached Gezenter-Aparen. Juliette has made them welcome, so they'll be under her protection."

In truth, Tejan had no intention of fighting Juliette, or any other angels in the gateway to somewhere magical. Seren and her group would seek whatever people sought from the angels, then they'd move on. Tejan had already decided to kill the Algarians once they left Gezenter-Aparen. Sökkelf already knew all that of course.

"We knew it would never be an easy fight." Tejan whispered.

"They're there too, Maya and perhaps the last of the ancient ones."

That complicated things, but Tejan had learned that there was always a solution to every problem; if you looked long and hard enough. Sökkelf must have misread the reason for her being quiet.

"How much is your final payment for dealing with the Algarians?" Whispered Sökkelf. "There are other ways of earning money. Live on the islands and we could survive on quite a modest income."

He was so sincere that she had to hug him. Tejan was top tier in her given profession and for a professional assassin it was just about the only tier worth being part of. Some of her need to finish the Algarians job was vanity, but mainly it was to keep money flowing in quite large amounts. If they decided to buy a nice house somewhere on the edge of the Sacred Sea, it wouldn't be cheap. There was also another reason of course.

"I've been paid a retainer.....If I don't complete the job, they'll send people after me." She whispered.

"I see."

Another hug was called for.

"Once the Algarians are dealt with that's it, I promise." She whispered. "We will live somewhere on the islands, buy a huge house and adopt at least a dozen children, to start with."

"Only a dozen?"

"Maybe two dozen." She muttered.

The crew brought them food and Tejan wished the Bright Magic would get them to Gezenter-Aparen sooner. The boat moved as quickly as it moved though, there was no way of changing that. A high wind might help, or it might end up with them all overboard and drowning. Tejan ate her food and she was patient. The Damned had taught her that patience really was a virtue.

A Screech circled the boat and then headed off at a few degrees north of east. The crew adjusted the direction Bright Magic was travelling. Tejan hugged Sockelf and being truthful, she wasn't sure if she ever wanted the journey to end.

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Galla had thought Bird was gradually growing and putting on weight. The Genova weren't helping, though their intentions had obviously been good. Once they learned that her pet loved live Nesh bugs, they were feeding them to him for every meal; and Bird liked to eat a lot of meals during the course of the day. Maya joked that Bird would soon be larger than Uula Podda, the grown up child of a golden ancient one. Hatched from a very old egg, there was a real chance that Uula was the last of her kind. Just after breakfast and Galla liked to walk around the grounds of the temple where she was being lodged. Invariably Maya joined her and Tareq, who was obviously Maya's lover.

"Uula isn't the last of her kind.....I can feel it." Said Tareq.

"He feels things by listening to the winds." Said Maya. "I've never known him to be wrong."

Listening to the winds indeed, a nonsense invented by charlatans. Still, many thought empaths like Galla were liars and cheats. She'd give Tareq the benefit of the doubt, for now.

"What does Uula think?" Asked Galla. "Does she think she was the last ancient one from the very last egg?"

"You really need to ask her, but she might not tell you." Said Maya. "Uula hears echoes, but she's not sure where from. They might be echoes of her people who are long dead, or....."

"They might be echoes from living ancient ones." Said Galla. "That would be exciting; though it makes you wonder why they've hidden themselves away for millennia."

Juliette was a full blood Genova and she didn't so much walk, as stomp. The angel seemed to radiate energy from her entire body, maybe even the pores of her skin. Juliette knelt on the main road up to the temple complex. She knelt to talk to a Screech, before standing up and stomping off towards the river.

"She has offered to go with us, if we go." Said Maya. "Through the gateway to somewhere magical, I mean. It is here in the temple, but hasn't been activated in many, many centuries. It can only be activated by a living ancient one."

"It seems they'll need to take the roof off the temple so that Uula can get to the gateway." Said Galla.

"A lot of effort to visit parents who abandoned Uula." Said Tareq.

"I don't think Uula sees it like that." Said Maya. "She was an egg after all, not a living breathing child."

As if she'd heard them, which she might well have done; Uula came from the direction of the hills to the north. Not flying, she stepped over the city wall of Gezenter-Aparen and walked across an immaculately kept area of grass. Her huge claws left deep indentations in the grass, but as the Genova seemed to almost worship her; no one was likely to complain.

"Have they decided to take the roof off part of the temple?" Galla asked Uula.

"Change of plans, the gateway will be moved out into the courtyard." Said Uula.

"Makes sense, a lot less destructive." Said Maya.

"The building work will also give Tejan and Sockelf time to get here." Said Uula. "The Screech say they're still a few days away and travelling in a small fishing boat."

"The assassin, you're inviting the assassin and her lover?" Asked Galla.

"I haven't sensed much of the two Algarians, but they seem nice." Said Tareq.

"They're both involved in the illegal weapons trade." Said Uula. "Don't worry though; I'm sure the Genova can stop anything nasty happening to Dava and Jelran. They are part of it all you see, they're needed for where we're going. The Genova, us, the expedition from the City of the Lost God. The plan is now larger than anyone, even me."

So they were taking an assassin with them, which made no sense to Galla. Still, the plan as Uula called it was in the hands of the Genova. If they couldn't keep Dava and Jelran safe, no one could. Galla thought Uula was unlikely to elaborate on the grand plan, but it was worth trying.

"Any chance of some details on this large plan?" Asked Galla.

"Oh, Galla my old friend." Said Uula. "You know these sorts of things are never that easy."

Uula stepped over the city walls and was gone, in the direction of the river. The ancient one actually chuckled as she left. The strange thing was that Galla didn't think of it as being rude; just Uula Podda being herself.

"She becomes more inscrutable with every passing year." Said Tareq.

"We should tell the Algarians that the assassin has been invited here." Said Galla. "We can explain that the Genova can keep them safe."

"They still might run away.....I'd consider it if it was me." Said Maya.

"There isn't anywhere for them to run to." Said Tareq.

"True, very true." Said Maya. "So who gets the job of telling them the assassin trying to kill them, will be arriving here soon?"

"Seren, she is our leader; and a dark angel." Said Galla. "I'll tell her what we know and she can tell Dava and Jelran."

"Poor Seren." Said Maya.

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Dava knew that sounds rose through the air of Algaria. It seemed they even rose through the strange air of the rifts. Jelran and her had found a nice comfortable roof to snooze on. A couple of blankets and a pillow and the roof was perfect. Not that they knew what the building was, even though it was close to the temple that held the gateway to a magical place. If they were careful and quiet, it was also a good place to enjoy outdoor sex. Seren had flown over them once, but she either hadn't seen their conjugal gymnastics, or simply didn't care what they did. No mention was made of her seeing them. It was a flat roof with a small wall right around the edge to hide behind and peer down on whoever came out of the temple. They'd just heard the entire conversation below, including the assassin being on her way to Gezenter-Aparen.

"Maybe we should find a boat and leave here." Said Jelran. "The assassin was trained by the Damned and they're just about as tough as they get. They tell all sorts of stories about the Damned on Algaria."

"I'm sure the Genova are tougher and Uula is definitely tougher." Said Dava. "I think we should stay here and keep going where Seren wants to take us. Besides, this place is such a long way.....I mean, it's a long way from anyway. We'd probably starve if we stole a boat, or die of thirst."

"It just.....It sounds as though we're letting ourselves be bumped along by whoever is bigger and stronger than we are." Said Jelran.

"If you think about it, our lives have always been like that." Said Dava. "If it wasn't my parents bullying me into doing this or doing that, it was a careers adviser at college."

Dava hadn't thought it through like that before because her life had been comfortable and she was happy to let herself sort of drift along, directed by people she didn't actually like that much. Now her life looked likely to be less comfortable and safe, she was less keen on being told what to do by others.

"We could stop being so eager to obey these people." Said Jelran. "I think we should start asking why they want us to do something."

"They might get upset and Galla is so nice." Said Dava.

"I know.....I like Galla, but we have to break the cycle." Said Jelran.

"We've been well fed and Seren saved our lives in the caverns." Said Dava. "I don't want to upset Seren, she's looked after us so well. And Muzzie.....He's so nice and I don't want to let him down."

"You're not helping, Dava." Muttered Jelran.

She knew she wasn't helping but the people they'd met in the City of the Lost God had been so nice. No one had ordered them about, they'd even been offered a portal to get them almost home; and transport to get the rest of the way. Still, Jelran was right, they had to begin getting a lot better at saying no; or at least asking for explanations about what was expected of them.

"How would you like us to assert ourselves more ?" Asked Dava.

It was odd that she'd always been the tough one; she'd often teased him for being timid. Jelran had grown up on their trip across the rifts though; nearly being killed can do that to some people.

"We could start by demanding to know why they want us to enter the gateway." Said Jelran.

"Yes.....I like that." Said Dava. "Makes a point without being too bossy. Anything else ?"

"Marriage.....We could demand to be married before we're zapped to somewhere magical." Said Jelran.

That caught Dava like a blow to the midriff and left her looking at Jelran in disbelief. The next level in their relationship had been mentioned; and that meant living together back in Algaria. Cheap housing maybe and fairly low level jobs, but marriage.....No, that had never been mentioned.

"We've never discussed marriage." Said Dava.

"Sorry, but it'll take them a while to set up." Said Jelran. "They'll be fussing around us for a while. Plus, we do love each other don't we ? I love you."

Love was a word used sparingly, just in case something went wrong. Not just one of them dying, a friend of Dava's had loved the same guy all the way through college; only to drop him for a real dweeb at her first job. Love can be like that, weird and not open to reason. As for Jelran.....Of course she loved him.

"I love you Jelran Mosca; I have almost since we first met." Said Dava.

"Let's get married then Dava Nerish." Said Jelran. "We'll get them to pull out all the stops.....Imagine what a wedding ceremony is like in the City of the Angels."

"Yes, we'll do it.....We'll ask them to be married before we go any further." Said Dava.

A large Screech flew over them and shrieked at them to get on with it, though that might have been her imagination. Dava ran her hand down the front of Jelran's trousers, quickly getting him hard. A girl more experienced than her at school had told her that boys wanted girls to be wet, the wetter the better; it seemed there was no such thing as a girl being too wet. Girls wanted boys to be hard, the harder the better. Jelran was very quickly as hard as a rock, she actually yelped as he entered her. An hour later and they were both laying on the blankets, letting the cool air dry the sweat off

their bodies. Her thoughts were all about passion and marriage, with marriage winning by a tiny amount. Marriage indeed, they both had to be crazy.

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