

The Ancient Ones

Chapter 13 - Nethra

“Dava Nerish had a wound just above her shoulder blade, but Galla had done a good job of making it heal quickly. Jelran Mosca had a gash in his side, which had received attention from both Galla and Lilleth. Nasty wounds when the fighting had just finished, but much better now. They had to be careful rubbing against each other in bed, though sometimes the intimacy was worth a little discomfort.”



Nethra had known the truth about herself for years, but had felt no need to tell everyone. For one thing, it might well have scarred away a few of the regulars at the Defender Tavern. Right back when she lived with Merrick in the City of the Lost God; she'd known the truth about herself. It was all to do with chaos energy and the multiverse seeming to play games. Muzzie had recognised her for what she was, something to do with having a little angel in his ancestry, Genova. If Muzzie didn't care, she didn't care; though she still didn't shout it from the rooftops. Maya had once asked her outright about the chaos energy swirling around her.

“Rare I am, very rare.” Nethra had told her. “Touched by chaos, but I survived to be stronger than I was before; a lot stronger. If I get angry my wings can get me through the air faster than Aeony can fly. Anywhere with plenty of background chaos and I become almost indestructible. I am a Chinnura, a super creature of the multiverse. Did I mention Chinnura being very rare ?”

Maya had assured her that being rare had been mentioned. Maya was a born healer and pretty rare herself. The young Dredger had hugged her and when they'd stopped hugging; Maya had looked more amazed than scared.

“Rare I am.....Really rare.” Nethra muttered.

It was her second day in a waggon owned by Higgall, toughest and oldest of the Annill fighters. Some called them the greys, though Higgall was of an age beyond simply being one of the greys. Some talked of him being older than one or two of the Gods. Higgall's waggon drivers thought of Nethra as something very special, almost some kind of mystical beast. That meant she had food, water and lodgings until the army arrived wherever it was going. The big money was on the greys heading for Nara-Unadaris, to reinforce the fighters guarding the portals. Occasionally her wings buzzed a little, as she floated around the inside of the waggon. The waggon handler smiled and asked if there was anything she needed. She knew him; he was one of her regulars at the Defender Tavern. His mother had obviously had big ambitions for her firstborn son, she'd named him Chosen. As often happens, life doesn't go quite as well as mothers hope it will for their children. Nethra sat next to the waggon handler, on the wooden seat at the front of the waggon.

“I know there's been betting on our destination.” Said Nethra. “You can trust me, Chosen. Is most of the money still going on Nara-Unadaris ?”

“Yes, and I'm not sure if anyone likes that.” Said Chosen. “Reinforcing the portals will mean Tandalla recalling their army and playing nice for another hundred year or so. The greys have been training for a long time now and are hoping for an all-out war. We can win that war.....We can win easily.”

“I'm sure the greys can win against Tandalla.” Said Nethra.

"My father has passed on, but his favourite memory in the war to make Muzzie emperor is of the battle to take Quron." Said Chosen. "He used to talk of it often; looking back as they left the ruined city. He watched as the towers fell. We have no moment like that to remember, but every army needs those sorts of triumphant memories."

Nethra had been in Quron for the battle, she'd sent many enemy fighters to meet their maker. It really had been a wonderful day, a high point in her own personal memories of that war.

"You're right, Chosen." Said Nethra. "The greys need some new triumphs and some new wonderful memories."

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Dava Nerish had a wound just above her shoulder blade, but Galla had done a good job of making it heal quickly. Jelran Mosca had a gash in his side, which had received attention from both Galla and Lilleth. Nasty wounds when the fighting had just finished, but much better now. They had to be careful rubbing against each other in bed, though sometimes the intimacy was worth a little discomfort. Dava kissed her lover and handled him a little; mainly because she enjoyed his sounds of pleasure. Sadly, there was no time to properly enjoy each other.

"Come on, we can't be late for the burials." Said Dava.

He looked sad when her hand was removed from his penis, but there'd be other nights and late mornings; hopefully lots of them. She threw his clothes at him and looked around for her own clean clothing.

"How many did die in the battle on Enster Island?" Asked Jelran.

"Chaos Island my dear, everyone now calls it Chaos Island." Said Dava. "An exact number is hard to discover, they seem to be trying to keep it quiet. It has to be a lot though and we can't be late for the burial at sea."

"We could say we're not feeling well." Said Jelran.

"No.....We're going." Snapped Dava.

Dava didn't want to go either; funerals were dreadful; even if you knew those being buried. The crew of the Morning Tide weren't strangers, but they didn't know them that well. Seren had talked about Enster officiating at the ocean burial.

"The religious service will mean nothing to you." Seren had told them. "Just be very quiet and look miserable when you think it's appropriate."

Dava was dressed and Jelran still looked to be in a bit of a dream. She threw a grubby rolled up sock at him. Shouting looked to be needed, but others might hear that.

"Finish getting dressed." She said

"Sorry." Said Jelran.

She hugged him, knowing that with her lover; sugar tended to work better than harsh words. Jelran finished dressing and they were ready to attend a funeral service they wouldn't understand; for people they didn't really know. There couldn't even be counting of the dead as they went into the Sacred Sea. Large sailcloth sacks had been made, which might contain the remains of one person, or half a dozen.

"Let's get this over with." Said Jelran.

"Hold my hand if I cry, but only if I cry." Said Dava.

Jelran nodded at her and they left their cabin. It was a nice sunny day, but that seemed to be the normal on the Sacred Sea. Bird was flapping around the top of the masts and squawking about something. It was all so wonderfully normal, but no remains had been offered to the sea yet. Seren approached them.

"Come and sit with myself and Itzel." Said Seren. "We don't understand the funerary rights either."

"Oh, thank you." Said Jelran. "I was worried about looking a fool."

"Then we'll all look like fools together." Said Itzel.

They sat together, close enough to Enster to heard the words of the service; but far enough away to avoid being involved in it all.

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If Maya wanted to fly fast on the back of Uula, she never took Tareq with her. It had nothing to do with trusting him and everything to do with not wanting to put his life in danger. She loved Tareq and in her opinion, you didn't put someone you loved in danger; serious danger.

"Do you have enough food and water ?" Asked Tareq.

"Yes.....And Uula can always scavenge for more." Said Maya. "We're going to be covering a huge distance to the ancient Genova city of Gezenter-Aparen. Uula is certain to spot sources of food and water as we fly over them."

"Do you really have to go ?" Asked Tareq.

"You know I wouldn't go if it wasn't essential." Said Maya. "Gezenter-Aparen means gateway to somewhere magical. I have a feeling that gateway is about to open and so does Uula. I'll be alright, back before you've had time to miss me."

"I've never said it before, but please take me with you this time." Said Tareq.

Maya had thought about taking him, but one lack of concentration; a few seconds lack of focus and he'd be falling to the Sacred Sea from thousands of feet in the air. Water isn't gentle to fall into from that height; it's like hitting a marble temple floor. Tareq would be dead and something inside Maya would die with him."

"It's not a good idea.....You're not experienced in flying on Uula." Said Maya.

"I won't get experience if you never take me." Said Tareq. "Strap me to the harness if you like.....Then I won't fall to my death; no matter what happens."

"No....And that is my final decision." Said Maya.

"The final decision should belong to Uula Podda, she has to carry me." Said Tareq. "Ask her.....See if Uula thinks I should go with you."

There should have been no doubt about Uula agreeing with her, but her closest friend for five hundred years could often be a little unreliable. Not that she'd try to cause trouble between her and Tareq, but she often saw things in her own eccentric way. Still, there didn't seem anyway to avoid it.

"Well, Uula.....Do you think Tareq should go with us to Gezenter-Aparen ?" Asked Maya.

"Of course I do, he's the male half of you, to go with your female half." Said Uula. "It makes no sense to leave him behind."

"But he might die." Said Maya.

"If he dies.....He dies; at least you'll be with him when it happens." Said Uula.

Uula was looking from her to Tareq and back again, as though they were stupid children. Tareq had a smug look on his face, though Maya thought she might be imagining it. She was beaten and being honest; it would be nice travelling with Tareq.

"Fine.....Get your things and we'll be in the air in an hour." Said Maya.

"I'm sure Nim; the child of the hive would like to go too." Said Tareq. "He's very strong and tough and I'm sure he'll earn his keep."

Maya was beginning to feel as though she'd been suckered, but Nim would make a good fighter for their trip. Left on his own, he might well consume most of their stored winter provision. Nim-Phraxis-Deh was very large now, probably the same size as his mother; Ginnda-Aanash.

"Why not, take one take all." Said Maya. "Anyone else you'd like to take?"

"No, that'll do." Said Tareq.

"As I said before.....Get your things, we leave in an hour." Said Maya.

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N'Faddy quite liked the general bustle of packing up the shepherd's camp at the Mahlgrim Oasis. Even her children were eager to be busy and useful and N'Faddy heard noises from Dynka and Yorn, which she wondered if she'd ever hear again. Not laughter, but definite giggles of delight. It seemed her children enjoyed petting the young Jangar beasts, as though they were pets of some kind. Lanssor's people had welcomed them and the shepherds were beginning to feel like family. Most of the paranoia and obsession with privacy had gone now that they were a fair distance from Tandalla. Many of Lanssor's people were Kveld, which gave N'Faddy a feeling of being well protected.

"Has Lanssor told you where we're going next?" Asked N'Faddy.

Rayan Morresa the spy and Kveld was still her main source of information, which made sense. To Lanssor N'Faddy was still an outsider, but she could feel that attitude changing.

"The shepherds move where they think they can trade their stock." Said Rayan. "We're just sort of along for the ride. In about a year, or two from now we'll be close to Mount Erran on the Pilgrim Trail. There is a rift gate there which will take us to the City of the Lost God."

"A year or two!" Exclaimed N'Faddy.

It seemed an age to her and her children would be starting to grow up with no proper education. Their safety was the key thing, but two years trudging along the Pilgrim Trail. That sounded a very long time in a far from ideal environment.

"Might be a little longer if the weather turns bad." Said Rayan. "There are teachers here who will look after the education of Dynka and Yorn. You might learn a few things yourself. Who knows, you might become attached to a shepherd.....We all have needs N'Faddy."

N'Faddy had learned to never say never about anything. Miscah, the father of her children, hadn't been liked by her family. In fact he'd been so disliked that marriage had never seemed likely. Still, in their own way they had a relationship which had worked well. N'Faddy smiled at Rayan.

"As you say.....Never say never." Said N'Faddy. "I'm beginning to suspect that you and Lanssor are more than just good friends."

"Sometime in the next year or two, I might tell you about that." Said Rayan.

More giggles as Yorn and Dynka chased a small Jangar Beast into tent. Round and round they went, totally ignoring all shouts to behave themselves. Eventually her children got hold of the young creature and vanished outside. N'Faddy made the sound she never thought she'd ever make again; she gave a short laugh.

"I think my children are going to enjoy the next year, or maybe two." Said N'Faddy.

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The main road out of Annill was busy and any towns on that road, tended to do well. Medenar was the closest town to Annill, reachable in just over a day; if the weather was good. Quite a small town with just a Mayor who ran things and he wasn't exactly a powerhouse of ideas. Medenar was safe though, only a fool would risk raiding a town that close to the City of Annill. Nethra was pleased when the greys marched straight past the road to Medenar and carried on towards Dessine.

"We'll be in Dessine just after full dark." Said Chosen, the waggon driver.

"Good, I need a decent walk to stretch my legs." Said Nethra.

Dessine was a fully walled town, with a large garrison of imperial warriors; plus its own standing army. The town was almost the size of an imperial city and the feudal Lord who ran the place, had

Muzzie's blessing to keep order; in any way he saw fit. Dessine did well economically, but some said the law there was a bit brutal and self-serving. Tough though, the garrison at Dessine was famously tough. Muzzie had once said they could march on Tandalla and defeat them in battle, without any reinforcements. Nethra owned a bar in Dessine, which made her particularly well disposed towards the town. The Dessine Defender would never make her rich, but it was profitable.

"I lost touch with my sister who moved to Dessine." Said Chosen. "Who is the Lord of Dessine since Arro Jumban was buried?"

Arro Jumban, now that was a name which brought back lots of memories of the past. Merrick had liked Arro, but Nethra had always thought he was a bit too shifty to do business with. Muzzie had always said that Arro was so crooked, that they'd need to screw him into the ground when he died. Hardly a glowing reference for a feudal Lord he'd personally appointed.

"Mottle, once called Mottle the fearless." Said Nethra. "Now called Lord Mottle."

Not a good choice, but Muzzie was famous for picking the wrong people to run imperial towns and cities, only to have them make a sensational success of the job. Some called it luck, while others grudgingly accepted that Muzzie knew what he was doing.

"Not him.....We knew him as Mottle the fool." Said Chosen.

"Dessine seems to be thriving under his leadership." Said Nethra.

Chosen gave her a look, as if doubting that she understood the nuances of being a feudal Lord.

Nethra decided she needed to keep in with Chosen, at least until they were at the portals of Nara-Unadaris.

"Come to the Dessine Defender, I still own the place." Said Nethra. "Have whatever you want to eat and drink, there'll be no bill. Think of it as a thank you for looking after me in the waggon."

"Thank you, Nethra." Said Chosen. "Can I bring my wife?"

"Of course you can." Said Nethra.

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The Sacred Sea was wide and the time taken to reach the other side was likely to be long. Galla Sinsa-Ennari prided herself on having a sharp mind and sharp minds never became bored. Restless maybe, perhaps even fatigued by the long journey; but she'd never admit to being bored.

"Will it work?" Asked Lilleth.

"I do believe it will." Said Galla.

Once the next day began to resemble the previous day and the day before that, Galla had put her sharp mind to use. Her bags of powders could be remixed, their efficacy improved. Best of all her most potent powders could be changed from being absurdly toxic to wonderfully healing. Bird had helped too, finding useful flora on the islands they passed. Where Bird wasn't strong enough to carry the fruits and berries required, Itzel had helped. There was a chance her new super powder might kill Ezzel Pinthrad. Seren understood that and had agreed that remaining as he was, wasn't much of a life. Ezzel was more focused than when they'd found him, but there still wasn't much left of the Pinthrad Galla had known. Repeatedly bludgeon someone and the result was often death or massive brain damage. Adamaz was with them, as a friend to speak on behalf of Pinthrad, should an unpleasant decision look likely. Everyone accepted that it was a kill or cure situation, even Ezzel seemed to grasp that. Bird was in the cabin too of course, he seemed impossible to keep out of anywhere.

"You're using dark magic, I can smell it." Said Adamaz.

"I'm also using a lot of chaos energy, there's no real option." Said Galla. "I'm sure Ezzel wouldn't argue with my choices, if he was in any kind of state to understand my intentions."

"I've watched the preparations.....Galla knows what she's doing, Adamaz." Said Lilleth.

"Galla very clever." Said Bird.

"But he was improving, we all saw that." Said Adamaz.

Seren had given her permission to try the almost impossible, to totally heal Pinthrad without killing him. If they took him back to the City of the Lost God, he'd end up as little more than a much loved figure with massive brain damage. Galla imagined the Guild would put him on a desk in a corner of their reception area. Good old Pinthrad, look how well he's done. Galla had no intention of letting Ezzel be reduced to that.

"I have permission from Seren, to try whatever I think will work." Said Galla.

"But.....He's Pinthrad, not a test subject." Said Adamaz.

"You're wrong, Ezzel has gone.....What is left is now a test subject." Said Galla. "Will you let me continue, or do we take the matter to Seren, yet again ?"

"No, no.....Do what you think is best." Said Adamaz.

Galla had several objects of chaos, including a priceless chaos blade. Her fingers were covered in rings of power, which she took off and placed next to the blade. Sold at an honest auction the artefacts would bring in enough gold to buy a small town. Galla intended to drain the chaos energy to use on Pinthrad, leaving nothing but dross behind. There'd be no mention of the cost later on, Ezzel was an old friend and worth any sacrifice. Lilleth was fine, but Adamaz trembled slightly at the sight of the blade.

"Now.....It begins." Said Galla.

There are always unexpected side effects to such things, but usually they occurred towards the end of the treatment, or ritual. Galla had only said a dozen words to call up more chaos energy, when there was a flapping noise at the cabin door.

"It's the large flying creatures the crew called Screech." Said Lilleth. "They seem to want to come in."

"Then I think we should open the door." Said Galla.

The door was opened and in came several large Screech. No huge amounts of noise, no flapping about like crazy things. The Screech were quiet and dignified, as they found somewhere to perch. Like judges at a trial, they quietly watched and gave the occasional mutter.

"Screech here to help." Said Bird.

"Ancient creatures of an ancient sea.....I can understand that." Said Lilleth.

"Just so long as they're not a hindrance." Said Galla.

Pinthrad seemed unaware of the Screech. He'd been mumbling the word 'Ahoy,' for a while; with no one understanding why. Galla drained the chaos from the artefacts on the table, leaving nothing but shattered metal and dust. There was now a wonderful tingle of power at the back of her neck.

"Ezzel Pinthrad, may chaos find you and bind your mind." Said Galla.

The Screech began nodding, as if Galla had been judged and found worthy in some way.

"Ezzel Pinthrad, may dark magic heal you and cleanse you." Said Galla.

A lot more nodding from the Screech, who obviously thought she was doing it right. What were the Screech ? Galla had a few ideas, but nothing definite. They spoke to Bird more than her, in a fairly basic version of Old Imperial. With luck Bird would learn enough to fill in a few pages on Screech at the Great Library.

"Ezzel Pinthrad, I give you my magic.....May you become again, as you once were." Said Galla.

Galla nodded at Lilleth, who'd been given the unenviable job of keeping Ezzel's mouth open, if he refused to swallow the powder. The powder probably tasted terrible, it smelled bad enough. Galla tipped an entire large powder into Ezzel's mouth and was pleased that he swallowed it all; washed

down with a little water. Did she imagine her empath skills picking up clearer thoughts ? She definitely hoped it was real and not imagination.

"What next ?" Asked Adamaz.

"Quiet old friend, I haven't finished yet." Said Galla.

Galla kissed Pinthrad on the cheek, before pressing her forehead against his. Her apothecary skills were second to none and she'd taught the famous Maya to be a healer. The magical powder was a one off and the real magic source of enough dark magic to heal Ezzel. It was her empath skill which often told her if everything else had been a success, though many didn't realise that.

"Ahhh, there you are Ezzel.....A nice cleansed mind." Said Galla.

Gone was the damage, gone was the confusion, and gone was the anxiety. Ezzel Pinthrad was her old friend again, she was sure of it.

"He doesn't seem any different." Said Adamaz.

"Such massive changes can take a while to settle down." Said Galla.

"His eyes look clearer." Said Lilleth.

Galla kissed Ezzel's cheek again, before moving her lips to his. She kissed him as she'd have kissed a lover and felt him respond with some passion. All the time her empath skills were telling her Ezzel Pinthrad was healed and currently pushing his tongue into her throat. Not that she discouraged him; Ezzel had always been a fantastic kisser. Eventually they were left breathing hard and looking into each other's eyes.

"I knew it.....I knew you were in there somewhere." Said Galla.

"Galla Sinsa-Ennari.....You shook the cobwebs out of my mind." Said Pinthrad.

They kissed again, ignoring the grumpy sounds from Bird. The Screech actually seemed pleased, judging by their happy back of the throat noises. Of course they might have been angry; it was difficult to be certain. When Galla stopped kissing Pinthrad she was sure his mind was healed and whole again.

"Ahhhh Pinthrad, my dear clerk to the guild." Said Galla. "I do believe you're fully healed."

"Bring him to Gezenter-Aparen." Said one of the Screech. "The Genova are expecting you to arrive fairly soon."

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It wasn't that Nethra was nervous about going anywhere alone; she'd once invaded one of the Quron towers on her own, and won the fight. She did own the Dessine Defender and personally decided on whether the staff were paid well, or poorly. Unlike Merrick, she did her best to be fair in her dealings with the people she employed. It wasn't that she'd picked Chosen and a few of his friends as guards; they'd sort of picked her. Nethra assumed they all expected to have free beer for the night. It was already the darkest part of the night, when Nethra saw the lamps outside the main door of the tavern she owned.

"Not too much ale." Said Nethra. "I don't want to be accused of getting you all drunk."

"No, not us.....We're well behaved." Said one of the greys.

"Just here to give you a bit of company." Said Chosen's wife.

They'd get drunk and there'd be a fight, it was almost certain. Fights with locals in Dessine could be complicated, even if she did own the town's largest tavern. If anyone died in the fight, things might become doubly complicated. Not that telling them to avoid fights helped, they'd take that as a challenge.

"Is the food good, Nethra ?" Someone asked.

"Best rock hopper stew on the rift." Said Nethra.

A small hard to categorise hybrid with steely blue skin and wings that occasionally buzzed. She hadn't seen the guard on the doors of the Dessine Defender before, but he knew who she was. A retired soldier probably, he actually stood at attention as he saw her and the greys.

"How's business tonight?" Asked Nethra.

"Great Boss.....Plenty of ale being sold." Said the guard.

Nethra knew there was something wrong, she could feel it in her bones as her mother used to say. The tavern had just one long bar and two rooms, but Nethra was proud of the place. It was all inspired by Muzzie's tavern in the City of the Lost God, but Nethra thought she'd improved on Muzzie's ideas. The Tandallan soldiers at the far end of the bar definitely weren't improving on the look of the place. Nethra heard every grey with her; grip the hilt of their sword. No doubt they were eyeing up the Tandallans and working out the odds of surviving a fight.

"No, behave.....We're not here to fight." Hissed Nethra. "At the moment Tandalla are still allies, so no fighting unless they start it. I have a little business to attend to, so be good while I'm gone."

"Of course, Nethra." Said Chosen. "We won't let you down."

"Be sure you don't." Said Nethra.

Realistically, she thought that a fight with the Tandallan soldiers was almost certain. Nethra wanted it to be on her terms though and after she'd finished a little business with the hybrid who managed the place for her. First she made sure the greys were given free ale and as much food as they could realistically eat. The poor bar staff looked terrified, but they still did their jobs.

"Is Garus in the back office?" Nethra asked the hybrid female preparing the food.

"He is, but he's really busy." Said the hybrid.

"I didn't ask if he was busy." Said Nethra.

To the staff Garus was the boss, the grumpy bastard who gave them their wages, in gold from a strong box in his office. Anyone paying staff tends to be thought of as just one step down from their family deity. Nethra was rarely there and looked harmless, so they were always going to do what Garus wanted. At the moment Garus probably wanted to be left in peace.

"No.....No, he's very busy."

Nethra ignored the female hybrid and opened the door to the back office. Garus really was incredibly grumpy; he could have won prizes for it. Garus glared at her until he recognised her.

"Nethra.....I had no idea you were coming to Dessine." Said Garus.

"I'm travelling with the greys and they decided to come this way." Said Nethra.

"The greys; that might be a problem." Said Garus. "When I last looked out into the bar, there were quite a few Tandallan soldiers enjoying the ale. They are still our allies.....I can hardly ban them from the premises."

Nethra would have done the same in his places, so she couldn't blame Garus for having several inebriated Tandallan soldiers in her tavern.

"I can't see the night ending without a fight, the greys are already angry." Said Nethra. "Once we've completed our business, you should probably keep out of the long bar. Let the staff know too."

"You really think there will be a fight?" Asked Garus.

"Oh yes, almost definitely." Said Nethra.

Merrick had known a few people from Annill called Garus. Some were good fighters, while some were good at admin. Never good at both though, it was always one or the other. The Garus sat behind his hardwood desk was good at admin. He was looking very perturbed at the thought of an Annill versus Tandalla battle beginning in the tavern.

"Now, about my little bit of business." Said Nethra.

"Yes, of course.....What can I do for you ?" Asked Garus.

"Gold.....I left Annill in a hurry and have been relying on the charity of the greys." Said Nethra. "I have a little gold, but I can't keep expecting the army of Annill to provide me with free food and accommodation."

"Of course.....Of course." Said Garus. "We've had a good quarter. How much do you need ?"

"Can the strongbox spare five hundred in imperial gold pieces ?" Asked Nethra.

"Yes.....I'll get it."

Garus made her sign for it; he definitely was a Garus that was good at admin. Nethra was putting the five hundred gold in her purse, as the sound of fighting began in the long bar.

"Is that.....Are they fighting ?" Asked Garus.

"I believe they are." Said Nethra. "Lock the door after I leave the office. I'm going to teach a few Tandallans why they should never fight a Chinnura."

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