

## The Ancient Ones

### Chapter 5 – The Caves

**“Remember that no death is certain until you’ve seen the body.” Said the Lady. “There are reliable sources though, even in that part of the rifts. It seems Olvir, son of Caspian and Vella, has died. He was killed by bandits not long after using the portal from the Ring of Volkin.”**



Tejan found the bridge over the wide river, which seemed to be the only way to cross; at least for many miles in either direction. The bridge looked sturdy enough but the fort which housed the toll taker was like a ruin from a bygone age. She almost ignored the threatening notice on the doors, but picked up a lot of magical energy. It might be worth paying up after all.

“Better than risking a magic users curse.” She muttered.

She’d never heard of N’Sim N’Har who’d put his name on the notice, but she recognised the style and form of the name. He’d be a magic user of some power, probably a necromancer out of Leng. Why he was living in a dilapidated fort in the wetlands was a mystery. In all honesty, Tejan didn’t care who he was, or why he was there. She just wanted to deal with the two young Algarians and pick up the rest of her fee.

“One gold coin he’ll want.....Two at the most.” Tejan mumbled.

Once past the slightly apart doors, the fort was dark. There was a beam of light coming from a cracked window, but otherwise; it was too dark to get a good look at the place. Tejan dug a lamp out of her backpack, one with a power source guaranteed to last for several decades. It might survive being turned on a dozen times on the rifts. An expensive addition to her kit after having to feel her way out of a cavern on one of the uninhabited moons of Medrona. The lamp lit up the inside of the fort like daylight.

“Hmmm.....Not as shitty looking on the inside.” Tejan muttered.

“Has someone come to pay a toll to use my bridge ?” Shouted a deep voice.

“Maybe, that depends on the price.” She yelled back.

Her hearing was good and his voice had been loud. It took her very little time to open the door to N’Sim N’Har’s study and come face to face with a ghost. That was a relief in a way; she knew that the ghosts of magic users rarely had the powers they’d had while alive. Silly really, Tejan had no idea why she had to state the obvious.

“You’re a ghost.....A wraith if you prefer ?” Asked Tejan.

“I’d prefer to be alive, but I make the most of what I am.” Said N’Sim N’Har.

“How much is the toll to use your bridge ?” Asked Tejan.

“Thirty gold pieces; Imperial and not Tandallan rubbish.”

Tejan sat down in one of the many chairs in the room, without being asked. She laughed, though not to be rude. It was such an absurd amount of money to simply use a bridge. She knew ruffians all over the Menderan empire, who’d beat someone to a bloody pulp for thirty gold. Some would beat someone to death for forty.

“Sorry.....I’m rarely rude.” Said Tejan. “What a ridiculous sum. I was thinking of one gold piece, two if you’ve gossip worth hearing. Do you have any gossip worth hearing ?”

"I recently had a party come through from the City of the Lost God." Said N'Sim N'Har. "They were looking for someone who'd never returned from an expedition. A dark angel was their leader.....I can tell you a lot more about them for twenty gold."

It was obviously the party she was following and twenty imperial was a lot of gold just to have that confirmed. On the other hand, it would be nice to know she was chasing the right people across the arse end of the first rift.

"I'll give you ten for a few of their names and that includes the toll." Said Tejan.

"Make it fifteen and I'll tell you where they're likely to be heading." Said N'Sim N'Har.

Tejan dug out her purse from an inside pocket of her rain proof coat. She dropped ten gold on the desk and saw the Ghost's expression change. She'd learned over the years that few can resist a pile of gold coins, even if it is less than they'd ideally wanted.

"I know where they're going.....Just give me a few names." Said Tejan. "Was there a dark angel called Seren?"

"There was, and another called Itzel." Said N'Sim N'Har. "They had a ranger with them called Lilleth and an apothecary from the City of the Lost God called Galla. Famous she is, her name is known way out here. There was one odd thing.....They had two young humans with them called Dava and Jelran."

"That is odd." Said Tejan.

She was often told she had a good poker face; she tried not to look especially happy. The two young Algarians were heading across the bridge and making for the Sacred Sea. She left the ghost of the guardian of the way to enjoy his gold and left. It was beginning to rain as she began to cross the bridge. So far, it had rained just about every day since she'd arrived in that part of the first rift. It did cross her mind that she should have paid fifteen in gold to confirm where they were heading.

"No....He probably tries to scam everyone who wants to cross the bridge." She muttered.

Tejan continued towards the sacred sea, hoping to quickly deal with the two Algarians. The weather in that part of the first rift was dreadful, and strange beasts cried out in the night, as they circled her camp fire. Fighting two dark angels wouldn't be easy, but she'd already thought of several ways of avoiding trading blows with them.

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Muzzie had been looking forward to the first update from the Silver Lady. He sometimes wondered why he'd been scared of her when he was young. He hadn't been the emperor then though, just a humble tavern owner. Plus, everyone he'd known then had been scared of her. The Silver Lady was a left over from when the City of the Lost God had been a far scarier place in general. The Dredgers loved her though, as if she was more holy than all The Nine Divines put together. Aeony hadn't been pleased, when he'd told her he wanted to talk to the Lady in private once a week. She'd get over it though, once she was used to the idea. He began to close the high windows in his study, before remembering that Bird was with Galla, in the remotest part of the first rift.

"Food will arrive soon.....And the wine you like." Said Muzzie.

"You're always the perfect host, Muzzie." Said the Lady.

Two of the palace servants brought trays, loaded with enough food and drink to keep three or four people properly fed. It wasn't that Muzzie wanted to impress the Lady, or that he wanted her sexually. He remembered too many rumours about the fate of lovers who'd either betrayed her, or disappointed the Lady. Anyway, he had Aeony in his life and felt no desire to seek gratification elsewhere. Muzzie just wanted to do things properly. Especially as it was going to become a regular thing.

"I take it you found a compatible Dredger ?" Asked Muzzie. "One with memories you can read at a massive distance ?"

"It's mainly about faith, which is why I usually choose a female." Said the Lady. "Dredger women tend to have an unconditional faith in me; far more faith than their menfolk. There were only two women Dredgers sent on the expedition and I had trouble entering their minds. Too little faith you see."

"I see.....How did you get around that ?" Asked Muzzie.

"Over thirty male Dredgers, I guessed one must have been properly raised." Said the Lady. "Doffle is a common name; I wouldn't mind betting there are a lot of Doffles in your army. This particular Doffle is like an open book when he prays to me.....Total and unconditional faith."

"I can see how that would be useful." Said Muzzie. "What did you learn ?"

Her eyes changed, taking on a kind of darkness. When the Lady squeezed his hand, he knew the news was going to be bad.

"Remember that no death is certain until you've seen the body." Said the Lady. "There are reliable sources though, even in that part of the rifts. It seems Olvir, son of Caspian and Vella, has died. He was killed by bandits not long after using the portal from the Ring of Volkin."

"Oh, that is terrible.....Everyone in the City loved Olvir." Said Muzzie.

Caspian was still alive and running the Great Library. Vella had died a peaceful death in her old age over a century ago. Caspian would need to be told of course and there'd need to be a public announcement. Olvir had been due to take over the running of the library one day. His death was a terrible blow to the City of the Lost God. There was Adamaz of course, who'd run the library for countless centuries.

"Any news about Adamaz ?" Asked Muzzie.

"None.....Other than him being missing, but no body being found." Said the Lady. "I can show you most of Doffle's memories, but not his prayers; that wouldn't be right."

"Yes, I understand that." Said Muzzie.

Muzzie leant back in his chair and opened his mind. He'd used the mind link before, when the Lady had been on his side during the war to make him emperor. He saw it; all the sincerity with which N'Sim N'Har had declared Olvir to be dead. There was also his knowledge that Adamaz had taken his expedition into the caves, rather than heading for the Sacred Sea. The dead Tandallan Clerics by the roadside was a mystery, but Muzzie had never been that keen on Tandalla. Plus, they seemed to have been dead for quite some time. On the whole he believed what N'Sim N'Har had told Seren and he thought that heading into the caves was a wise move for Seren and her group of explorers. The glimpse into the memory of the Dredger called Doffle, ended as suddenly as it had begun.

"Do you think Adamaz might be alive ?" He asked the Lady. "Trapped somewhere, or imprisoned in those caves ?"

"I think that if such a famous converted chaos creature as Adamaz had died. We'd have heard something from the Gods and Demons who control the Underworld." Said the Lady. "I can't be certain, but I think there is a really good chance that Adamaz still lives."

"I really hope so." Said Muzzie. "We've lost too many great people from the City and not all of them fell to the ravages of old age."

They'd picked at the food and drank some of the wine. Muzzie called his servants and had more food brought to them and more of the wine the Lady particularly liked. Muzzie had decided that one huge advantage of being emperor, was a kitchen which ran right round the clock. He settled back in his chair and ate too much. He also drank too much and that didn't worry him. The Silver Lady had

become one of those friends; the ones you could get drunk with and not worry about what you might say.

“There are rumours of an assassin sent from Algaria to kill Dava and Jelran.” Said Muzzie.

“Would you like me to look into that, Muzzie ?”

“Yes, that seems a good idea.” Said Muzzie.

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Once out of the wetlands, even the air felt drier; Tejan no longer woke up to find her eyes needing to be wiped of dreadful sticky gunge. The terrain was more trees and far fewer plants that enjoyed living in swamps and marshes. All in all, she preferred that part of the first rift to the area between the portal from the Ring of Volkin and the bridge of N’Sim N’Har. It was still far wetter than the farmlands around Bredon’s Edge, but she could live with the conditions. It crossed her mind that it was surprising that eager Dredgers hadn’t set up farms in the area.

“I can think of a lot of things that would happily grow here.” Tejan muttered.

There were strange looking twisted trees and the road had become a narrow track in places. It may have been a large misshapen tree that saved her from getting an arrow in her side, or the archer might just have been a bad shot. The arrow buried itself in the tree and Tejan clung to the tree for cover.

“Your gold.....Leave your purse and you can walk away.” Someone yelled. “We just want your money.”

Tejan promised herself not for the first time; that she’d carry a bow on the next job. She also promised herself that she’d learn how to use it. Of course, the next job might be on a civilised planet where she could carry a blaster. She was an expert shot with a blaster.

“Walk away and get an arrow in my back.....I don’t think so.” Shouted Tejan.

Another arrow thudded into the tree, which seemed unkind; the tree had done the bandits no harm. Tejan was incredibly strong and agile; she went up the tree, climbing until she reached its canopy of leaves. She could see them now, but they had no idea where she was. Three of them, not that far away and all carrying long swords. One also had a bow and she was the real danger, if she could actually aim straight with it.

“There are a dozen of us.” A bandit shouted. “Drop your gold, you really have no choice. If you don’t, we’ll come and take it from your dead body.”

Their entire force appeared to be two men and one woman. That was the problem with bandits, they lied about everything. Not that Tejan was going to yell back. Keep quiet and the bandits would come to her. The woman with the bow hung back, but gestured to the other two to move forward. Not very brave bandits, the two men looked as though they didn’t enjoy walking out into the open.

“We just want your gold.....Leave it and go.” Yelled one of the men.

A little desperation in his voice, he really didn’t fancy getting any closer. Being a bandit on those roads had to be a hard and risky life. For all Tejan knew she might be up against the nervous survivors of a much larger group. Not that she had any sympathy for them, none at all. The woman with the bow moved forward again, while waving her hand at Tejan’s tree.

“Go on.” Muttered the woman.

Two nervous men with swords didn’t worry Tejan, but the archer was a different matter. If she’d just get a tiny bit closer. One of the men got to the back of her tree and saw Tejan’s bag, right where she’d dropped it before climbing up the tree.

“She’s gone.” Yelled he man.

“What do you mean gone ?” Shouted the woman.

“Gone.....As in dropped her bag and ran away.”

“Check the bag for anything worth having.” Said the other man.

The archer seemed a little put out now, at being the furthest away from a potential bag of gold coins and other things worth stealing. She moved closer, while actually putting her bow over her shoulder. It was the perfect moment as Tejan quickly leapt to another tree, before scampering to the ground.

“She’s here you idiots.” Shouted the woman.

The last words the archer ever said, apart from a gurgling sound. Tejan drove her blade into the woman’s throat, before twisting it around a few times. The archer wasn’t dead, but she soon would be. The two male bandits hadn’t moved and didn’t seem at all keen on fighting Tejan. Impossible to let them go of course, they’d just follow her; hoping to kill her while she slept. Tejan didn’t fancy sleeping in trees with one eye open, until she reached the Sacred Sea.

“Drop my bag and go.....I have no wish to kill you.” She lied.

He either believed her, or hoped she wasn’t lying. Tejan could use a bow, but she’d never considered herself good at using one; her aim tended to drift to the left. She picked up the woman’s bow and took an arrow from her quiver. The bandit had his hands up now, as if assuming there’d been a terrible mistake. He’d dropped her bag; she shouldn’t be aiming an arrow at him.

“I can help you.....I know the area.” Said the bandit.

“I know it better.” Said the second man.

Tejan fired the arrow and amazed herself. It hit the bandit in the centre of his chest and he went down. Now the second man knew it was run like hell, move in and fight her, or freeze up and accept whatever fate had in store for him. He quickly closed the distance between them, his sword up and ready to strike.

“At last.....One of you has a little courage.” Said Tejan.

Her sword wasn’t as good as the Nurigen blade she’d once used as a senior member of The Damned. It was pretty good though; the metal had never been notched or damaged in numerous fights. She stepped to one side and ignored the bandit’s blow. Off came his wrist and the sword he carried, with just one blow from her blade. He looked at his hand lying on the ground, as though he didn’t believe it; as if it was all a magical trick. Tejan drove her blade into his chest as soon as he began to scream. They were all dead, all three bandits; she checked as she recovered arrows and her bag. No burying them of course.

“Night scavengers need to eat.” She muttered.

Tejan had almost a full quiver of arrows, as she continued on her way. The bow wasn’t exactly top of the line, but it had hit the target she’d aimed at. She had a definite warm glow as she walked between the twisted trees and carried on towards the Sacred Sea.

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Galla didn’t reach the entrance to the caves first; she’d been delayed by gossiping with Lilleth. The others were quietly prodding at something in the bushes to the side of the entrance. Bones mainly, lots of bones, joints and sinews. Far more than the average Dredger hybrid had in its skeleton. The dead creature making everyone so curious was an oddity. Luckily Galla knew what had travelled a very long way to die at the entrance to the caves below the mountains.

“Galla is here, she’ll know what this creature was before it died.” Said Ash.

“Looks like nothing I’ve ever seen before.” Said Seren. “Too many arms, feet and.....Just about everything.”

Galla had Bird on her shoulder and he knew what the creature had been, before it had died. It had only been a child, poor thing.

“Ginnda-Aanash will be crying for this lost one.” Said Bird.

“Yes, I see it now.” Said Chenad Gurd, Leader of their Dredgers.

A child of Ginnda-Aanash, the Hive Mother. They get everywhere, but someone must have helped this one get so far from home. Galla knew that Ginnda wouldn't properly rest until her child was found, even if the poor thing was dead. Not that her children were harmless, it might have died in a fight.

“All those legs and joints.....It's obvious now.” Said Seren. “You're the expert, Galla. Do we bury this child of Ginnda, or leave its bones on the surface ?”

“Leave it.....Ginnda's children are legion.” Said Galla. “Some of them will eventually find this one where it lies.”

Galla had noticed that Dava tended to be the curious one, but Jelran quickly joined in with anything that looked interesting. They were both down on their hands and knees, moving dirt and soil from the skeleton of Ginnda's dead child.

“It's amazing.” Said Dava. “Like a truly huge spider.”

“Its mother is thirty feet long and guards the lower entrances of Muzzie's imperial palace.” Said Galla.

“Wow, I hope to see her one day.” Said Jelran.

“Ginnda has tales of the rifts going back thousands of years.” Said Lilleth. “When we get back, ask Muzzie to introduce you to the Hive Mother.”

“Oh, I will.....I definitely will.” Said Dava.

“Ginnda is one of the few surviving creations of Sevril-Narge.” Said Seren. “Sevril-Narge was known as the bug goddess, though she boiled away in the wastes of eternity a very long time ago. Ginnda can tell you ancient knowledge, gossip from before humans even existed.”

“Wow.....I'm really glad we were rescued by Muzzie.” Said Jelran. “I've already learned so much.”

“Come.....We need to be some way into the caves before full darkness.” Said Seren.

The waggons had to be left outside; they simply wouldn't fit through many of the pathways in the caves. Most of the supplies they contained were shared out between them. Everything too heavy to carry was left on the waggons, in the hope that it was all still there when they returned.

“Bandits will take everything, including the waggons.” Ash had said.

Galla tended to agree with him, but left it unsaid. They had too much to carry and not enough time to hide it, or bury it. Unpalatable as it was, they had no option than to leave three waggons and a lot of supplies to the first bandits to spot them.

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Dava quite liked the place Seren had decided would be their campsite for the night, which was just as well. She wasn't keen on having two dead Tandallan clerics being buried there. Two more clerics from Tandalla to bury, someone must have missed them. It was a wide chamber, with a constant slow breeze of cool, fresh air. The remains of a camp fire looked to have been used by many over a long period of time. A perfect spot to light a fire, eat a meal and set a watch for the night. If it hadn't been for the two dead clerics that were being buried by the Dredgers. She felt quite sorry for the Dredgers; they seemed to get all the worst jobs. Galla had shown her two quite nice brooches the Tandallans had been wearing. Beautifully worked jewellery made from silver and gold. Whatever else they might have been, the clerics hadn't been poor.

“Very nice, Galla.....Beautiful.” Dava said. “I just wish we didn't have them buried in here with us. It just doesn't seem right.”

“They’ve been dead a long time, there are no gooey bits.” Said Ash. “Just bones mostly and a few bits of their clothing.”

“Ash.....You’re right, but it could be put a little better.” Said Galla. “They’re unlikely to return as wraiths to haunt us and burying them is the polite thing to do. They were clerics in life, holy people from the temple.”

It made sense and Jelran was smiling at her, as if it all made sense to him. The question remained unvoiced in Dava’s head though; why not drag them down a side passageway to bury them ? Rather than not far from the fire, where they’d soon eat and spread out their bedrolls. It was such a cosy place, if hadn’t been for the two clerics being buried quite close to where they’d eat and sleep. “We’ll only be here for one night.” Said Lilleth. “Don’t begrudge the dead a little company and warmth for one night.”

“You’re right.....It is only for one night.” Said Dava.

One thing to say it was only for one night, another to be happy about it. Dava still felt agitated and Seren must have noticed.

“We’ll pair up for the watch tonight.” Said Seren. “Do you fancy doing the first two hours with me, Dava ?”

“Yes.....That sounds perfect.” Said Dava, and she meant it.

Jelran now looked a little fed up, he had mentioned them pairing up together for a two hour stint at the watch. What that meant to him was two hours of kissing and petting. Not that Dava hated that idea, but pairing with the dark angel felt safer.

“We’ll have a meal ready in about an hour.” Yelled Chenad Gurd.

Good, Dava felt very hungry and she looked forward to seeing what the Dredgers managed to create out of fairly basic looking ingredients.

“Plain food, but tasty and reliable; not the sort of cooking to poison anyone.” As Galla had said quite a few times.

After the meal, Seren came and found her to begin the first watch of the night. There were no problems; just a few scurrying noises that Seren put down to cave crawlers. Dava suspected that anything making scurrying noises in the caves, were being called cave crawlers. Similarly anything caught for the pot in the wetlands had been called a rock hopper. After her two hours on watch, Dava crawled into her bedroll next to Jelran and cuddled up to him. He felt warm and grunted as her arms went around him. They were likely to see some very strange sights on their way across the top end of the first rift, but Jelran would be there with her. She gently nibbled at the back of his neck.

“Oi.” Muttered Jelran.

“I’m just a harmless cave crawler.” Said Dava.

Jelran helped her wash and dress the next morning, by holding up a towel in front of her, while she sort of cowered against a wall. The wash was just what her mother would have called a catlick; water was being rationed until they were beyond the tunnels and exploring the open rift again. It was nice to get into clean clothes again, though those would have to last her for two, maybe three days.

“Wear the same clothes for as long as you can tolerate.” Itzel had told her. “We’re all having to do it.”

Easy for her to say, dark angels seemed to wear very little. Just a little armour most of the time and a tough pair of boots. To Dava, grubby clothes were worse than eating many different cave dwellers, all known as cave crawlers. Dava asked Galla how long the deprivation would last, she was sure to know.

"How long until we're out of these caves?" She asked Galla.

"Seven days should see us on the other side." Said Galla. "Ten days at the most."

Jelran was the other side of Galla and lifted his eyebrows in an expressive way. They both liked Galla and most of the others, but ten days trudging through caves with them and their body odour.....It was going to be a tough trip.

"I can see you young Jelran." Said Galla. "Never make faces at an empath as old and wise as me. I can tell what you're up to, even if I can't see you."

"Sorry, Galla." Said Jelran.

"I forgive you." Said Galla. "Now where is my pet? Bird.....Where are you Bird?"

Bird appeared from somewhere up above them and he was flapping his wings to get rid of a coating of dust. He'd obviously found somewhere comfortable but dusty to roost for the night.

"Hungry Galla.....Bird is hungry."

"Only two Nesh bugs a day now.....Until we're out of these caves." Said Galla.

Bird gave a grumbling sound, as he ate the two bugs Galla had given him. Everyone loved Bird; the Dredgers would make sure he didn't starve. Galla talked about him as though he was a nuisance, but the way she stroked his head. She was obviously more than a little fond of her pet.

"I can give you witchlight, I know you like that." Said Galla.

"Yes.....Bird can fly in the caves." Said her pet.

"Witchlight.....What's that?" Asked Jelran.

"Light with no heat, fixed to him with no weight." Said Galla. "He can't go too fast, the light doesn't travel far.....Be careful Bird."

"I will..... I promise." Said Bird.

Quite a few people seemed interested, when Galla used a tiny amount of one of her powders and two lines of the ancient language of the demon gods. Everyone gasped when it looked as though Galla had a tiny ball of fire in her right hand.

"Silly.....Doesn't burn." Said Bird.

Lilleth watched too, as Galla fixed the light in some way, on Bird's back, right between his wings.

"There.....No going too fast or you might crash into a wall." Said Galla.

"No hitting walls.....It hurts." Said Bird.

"Come and find me when the light starts fading." Said Galla.

"I will.....I will.....What way should I go?" Asked Bird.

"Anyway you want, we'll search another way." Said Seren.

When Galla released him, it was as if she hadn't told him twice about not going too fast. He shot off like an arrow, straight down the widest looking passage from the chamber where they'd spent the night.

"We'll take the passage to the right." Said Seren.

Lilleth sent a light orb to the ceiling, which Dava now understood, just a little. It was a larger form of witchlight, that would follow her and those with her, as they explored the caves. When it started to go dull, Galla would create the next light; and so on.

"Everyone ready?" Shouted Itzel.

There were a lot of yells of yes, from a lot of people. As they trudged down the passage Seren had selected, Dava felt more excited than nervous. They saw a surprising amount of wildlife for somewhere underground. Fairly quickly the Dredgers had killed two cave crawlers for the pot. Bigger than the last ones, there would be plenty for their evening meal. Of course, Jelran was there, walking beside her. It was as if they had an invisible cord, tying them together.

“Do you know much about this Maya who we’re hoping to find ?” Asked Jelran.

“Not much, not that much at all.” Said Dava. “A young Dredger healer who was trained by Galla. I get the feeling Galla thinks of her almost as a daughter. Maya befriended a young creature who turned out to be a baby Ancient One. It actually hatched out of an egg. After Muzzie became emperor Maya headed towards the last known home of the Ancient Ones, the islands on the far side of the Sacred Sea. The young Ancient One is with her and is called Uula Podda.”

“That’s an unusual name.” Said Jelran.

“It means big foot.” Said Dava.

Bird returned once to have his light refreshed and he reported finding nothing of interest the way he had gone.

“Go ahead of us, see what you can find, Bird.” Said Galla.

According to Galla, the light was fading outside; it was becoming night; when they discovered an underground river with clean water and space enough to make camp for the night. There too, there was evidence that others had created a camp fire and made a meal. There were animal bones and the remains of a meal, but it was all from a very long time ago.

“Wonderful, a river.” Said Dava. “I can bathe in the water before sleeping.”

“The water is likely to be extremely cold.” Said Lilleth.

“I don’t care; I just need to get clean.” Said Dava.

There was wood there, left in a pile by someone who’d brought it in from the outside. The Dredgers had just got a hot fire to cook on, when Bird appeared. His witchlight had gone dull and Galla’s pet seemed very upset by something.

“He’s here and alive.....I found Adamaz in a cage.” Said Bird.

“Is he injured ?” Asked Seren.

“He was tortured and left bleeding.” Said Bird. “They thought he’d bleed to death.”

“But he hasn’t ?” Asked Lilleth. “They didn’t know what kind of being Adamaz is.”

“No, alone, shrivelled and with such a hunger.....But Adamaz lives.” Said Bird.

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The Silver Lady hadn’t liked the Hive Mother when she’d first set up her lair beneath the imperial palace. Two powerful beings from the days when the Old Gods walked the rifts, they were bound to be wary of one another. Then a connection had formed, an understanding that they could be mutually useful to each other. Muzzie encouraged them working together and eventually a genuine friendship had formed. Sometimes the Lady could hardly believe she was friends with a huge spider type creature, but Ginnda-Aanash was clever and seemed to remember everything that had happened on the rifts since before Tomma-Goran had built the City of the Lot God. The Lady was sat in Ginnda’s lair, enjoying a tale about the days when the Xanash dynasty had still ruled the rifts. Ginnda had even given her a glass of wine and a few nibbles; no doubt provided my Muzzie’s imperial kitchen.

“Ahhh, the Xanash emperors.” Said the Lady. “Very clever, very driven, but sadly.....Nearly all of them were also very mad. Things have improved so much since Muzzie became emperor.”

“Yes, long may he survive and reign.” Said Ginnda. “In my view, he takes far too many risks for an emperor. Now, I’m sure you had a reason for wanting to see me ?”

Not a hard subject to raise, though it had to be put diplomatically and the Lady knew diplomacy wasn’t something she was good at. No telling Ginnda that her huge number of children were clogging the underground walkways, that hadn’t gone down well. The Hive Mother might have a

staggering number of children, but she seemed to love every one of them. On the other hand, they'd make wonderful eyes and ears to find the assassin sent to kill the two young Algarians.

"Muzzie has received information about the two young Algarians." Said the Lady. "It seems an assassin has been hired, a very good assassin."

"Dreadful, they deserve to be found and take a long time over dying." Said Ginnda.

That was one of the things the Lady liked about the Hive Mother; when it came to punishment and retribution they were always on the same page.

"I was hoping; actually Muzzie agreed to ask you." Said the Lady. "Would you mind sending a few of your older children to the area of the first rift, between the mountains and the Sacred Sea. Seren took the expedition there, so it's likely any assassin is in the same area."

Ginnda began tapping her claws on the stone floor of her chamber, a sure sign that she was becoming aggravated. The Lady just hoped it meant she was going to agree to help and not send her on her way.

"Yes, I can do that.....Some of my children need a little experience of battle." Said Ginnda. "I can get them close to where the ghost of N'Sim N'Har guards his bridge. If there is an assassin in the area, he will know."

"Good, I was hoping you'd have a contact in that area." Said the Lady.

"If N'Sim N'Har has knowledge of where they are, the assassin will soon be dead." Said Ginnda.

"Perfect." Said the Lady.

They carried on drinking for a while and eating cakes that were still warm from the imperial kitchens. They talked of long dead kings and who was currently guilty of adultery in the City of the Lost God. They discussed seemingly endless gossip, until it was time for the Lady to leave.

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