

The Ancient Ones

Chapter 6 - Adamaz

“His legs hurt so badly these days, but he’d probably been dead in any sensible definition of the word for many thousands of years. Chaos creatures, even converted ones like him seemed to be immune to the dying part of death. Their bodies stopped functioning in the normal manner, but they still remained sentient and active. Some did seem to get a degree of decay, but Adamaz was pleased that so far his flesh remained firm and had the slightly grey sheen it had always had. There were rumours that eventually he’d have an instinctive urge to join the other undead in the catacombs, but perhaps that was all just a silly rumour ?” – Lost God Chapter 1 - Silsk



Adamaz had been a chaos creature a staggeringly long time ago. Galla knew his history, though few still alive knew it all. He’d come from the chaos beyond Leng, sent with some task to perform. Many were captured by the magic users of Leng and turned into useful minions of one kind or another. Adamaz still had traces of the dents in his head, where the long fingers of a chaos mage had probed his brain. He had already lived the equivalent of many lifetimes and might well live many more. Eventually though all converted chaos creatures became mindless beasts who sought out dark places to live out a very dark and nasty existence. Being starved and injured hadn’t turned Adamaz into a beast, but he badly needed to feed.

Galla was out of breath and her legs ached, by the time she caught up with her Bird and the others. There was poor Adamaz, locked into a very solid looking metal cage. She went close to the cage, but not close enough for him to touch her.

“Oh, poor Adamaz.” Said Galla. “You’re hurt and starving, but I sense you’re still there; somewhere.”

“Does he drink blood ?” Asked Dava.

Humans and the ridiculous monsters they believed in, Galla had to give a quick laugh.

“No, if only feeding him was that easy.” Said Galla.

“Let him touch you and you could end up as a lifeless husk.” Said Lilleth. “All the life energy drained from you.”

“I saw him do it once, not a pretty sight.” Said Seren.

Adamaz growled like a wild beast and tried to get through the bars of his cage. Whoever had put him in there knew what to do, the metal was thick, tough and as it was still shiny; probably corrosion resistant. Converted chaos creatures were hard to kill, so someone had decided to lock him in a cage until whatever made him a sentient being; faded away. Who would have done it ? Adamaz might know, when he was more like his old self.

“Calm.....Calm old friend, we’ll get you out of there.” Said Galla.

“I hope you’re not looking for volunteers to be his food ?” Asked Chenad Gurd.

“No, I can let him feed on me a little.” Said Seren. “I’ll quickly recover; dark angels are very hard to kill. I’m hoping Itzel will let him feed on her too ?”

“Yes, of course.....It would be an honour to help feed Adamaz.” Said Itzel.

Hard to kill was one thing, but Galla knew the two dark angels would be weak for quite some time. She hoped that no one attacked them while they recovered.

“Are you going to open the cage ?” Asked Jelran.

“Dangerous.....Dangerous to let him out.” Said Bird.

Letting him out wasn't going to be easy, they had no key to the cage. Galla felt it was the wrong time to mention that, though she was yet to come across a lock her magic couldn't open.

“No opening the cage until he's no longer the beast.” Said Seren. “I just need to let Adamaz touch my bare arm.”

Adamaz pounced on Seren's arm, as she put it up against the bars of the cage. Seren visibly winced as the ancient librarian fed on her by drawing some of her life force out of her body. Galla knew that if Seren didn't stop him, she'd end up as a lifeless husk on the floor of the chamber.

“Enough old friend, enough from me.” Said Seren.

There was a very brief tug of war, where Adamaz refused to let go of Seren's arm. She was stronger than Adamaz though, even if he'd been at full strength. Seren stepped away from the cage.

“Thank you.” Said Adamaz, the first proper words they'd heard him utter.

“Good, he looks more like the head of the Great Library now.” Said Lilleth. “And a lot less like a mindless beast.”

“The beast has always been with me.” Said Adamaz.

“Here, take some of my life force.” Said Itzel. “It is freely given with some affection.”

Itzel winced, but there was no tug of war when she moved her arm away. Galla could see Adamaz as she'd always known him; as an intelligent and knowledgeable head of the Great Library.

“Thank you.....I still need to heal, but I'm me again.” Said Adamaz. “You can let me out of this stinking cage now; I'll be no threat to any of you.”

“The key is a problem, or rather our lack of one.” Said Seren. “I'm hoping Galla can open your prison, or we may need to carry you in that cage, until we get out into the open again.”

“Give me space.....I'll do my best.” Said Galla.

“Take any power you may require from me, Galla.” Said Lilleth.

“Thank you, though I'll try not to.” Said Galla.

The bars were strong; the lock would have thwarted some of the best thieves. The weakness was in the base of the cage, where a ring holding the bars was riveted to the base itself. The riveting looked solid, but something about it was telling Galla it was the place to concentrate her magic on.

“Keep in the centre of the cage, Adamaz.” Said Galla. “Don't move until I say it's safe to do so.”

Galla created a ring of heat, that began to heat up all the rivets. As she'd hoped, the base and bars might not be affected that much by the heat, but the rivets began to soften. A little more heat and the softened rivets began to really glow. So far all her magic had been purely from her mind, well known spells since she'd been a child. Now she sprinkled one of her favourite powders on the ring of heat, a powder which multiplied the effect of any spell.

“I will take some of your magical power, Lilleth.” Said Galla.

“Take it.....It'll all be back again after a good night's sleep.” Said Lilleth.

The powder tripled Galla's magic and with Lilleth's power added into the mix, the rivets melted completely and fell away.

“Lift.....Lift everyone, lift the cage off him.” Said Galla.

Dredgers were strong, which was why over thirty of them had been hired to pull their waggons. One or two of the melted rivets resisted for a moment or two, but soon there was a cracking sound. The Dredgers lifted the cage up and away from Adamaz.

“Wonderful, I'm free at last.” Said Adamaz.

A thorough search of the chamber gave them most of the leather armour Adamaz had been wearing when he'd left the City of the Lost God. There were a few bags of dried food, all with a Tandalla maker's label and all of them had been rotten for quite some time. It was a typical bandit's den.

"Did you hear that Olvir is dead?" Asked Adamaz.

"Yes, the toll taker at the bridge told us, for a price." Said Galla.

"Ahhh yes, the ghost of N'Sim N'Har." Said Adamaz. "He tried to get thirty gold out of us to cross his bridge. After a lot of arguing, he settled for five.....And he told us a lot of gossip."

"We had a similar experience with him." Said Lilleth.

Adamaz suddenly looked lost, as though mentioning it to them had put the death of Olvir in his mind again. They went back to their camp by the river, to get Adamaz cleaned up and collect their things. Adamaz had been in the cage for a very long time, he needed a thorough scrub down before putting on clothes given to him by the Dredgers.

"Must feel good to be clean again." Said Seren.

"Oh yes, every bit of me seemed to stink." Said Adamaz.

"Your armour can probably be cleaned up." Said Chenad Gurd. "I'll get my best Dredgers to work on that when we set up camp tonight."

Bird became effectively the leader as he'd been so far along the passage they needed to take. He told them of a large airy chamber, with a crack in the rocks which let in light from outside. Bird was never going to win prizes for describing things, but his brief description of a large airy chamber with light from outside the caves.....It cheered everyone up. They'd gone quite some distance before Adamaz turned his attention to the two Algarians.

"Humans I'm betting, two young humans." Said Adamaz. "Why did two humans become part of an expedition to look for my group?"

"We're from Algaria." Said Jelran. "Muzzie thought we'd be useful.....Our physiology is resistant to magic and we've a different way of looking at the world."

"Yes, I can see that." Said Adamaz.

"We weren't sent to find you." Said Dava. "Our expedition was sent to find Maya and Uula Podda." Poor Adamaz must have realised it would happen if his group failed, or vanished. Others would be sent to take over the search for Maya. If they found Adamaz and his people along the way, that was great. It wasn't their main objective though. Galla would never have put it quite so bluntly as Dava.

"Yes, standard procedure.....I understand now." Said Adamaz.

"I can feel air from outside." Said Bird. "You'll see.....Like setting up camp outside."

"Oh yes, I can smell fresh air." Said Itzel.

Poor Adamaz, it seemed Dava was curious and keen to ask him yet another awkward question. Galla thought it a little inappropriate, but Adamaz had been her friend for a very long time.

"I was wondering, Adamaz." Said Dava. "Even N'Sim N'Har who seemed to know everything was unsure. Who attacked you on the road to from the portal to the bridge?"

"Yes, who killed the famous Olvir?" Asked Jelran.

If Galla had been Adamaz she would have told them it wasn't their business. Instead he gave Dava a huge smile.

"Yes, I need to tell someone." Said Adamaz. "When we make camp tonight I promise to tell you everything. Poor Olvir.....I never did want him to come with us."

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Tejan knew she was on the shore of the Sacred Sea, simply because it was an ocean. Not a large lake, it was truly huge. So huge that she couldn't focus her eyes on the other side. A massive ocean and

the only ocean on the rifts was the Sacred Sea. She could see small islands dotted about in the wonderfully clean blue water. She had to get past all those beautiful islands and right across to the other side. She hadn't passed Dava and Jelran on the road, so they were either still in Nara-Abash looking for a passage across the ocean. Or, they were already on a boat and heading east. Tejan took a hand drawn map from her pocket and smoothed it out. No sun or other celestial bodies made navigation hard, but assuming she'd been travelling in a fairly straight line.....

"I must get to Nara-Abash if I follow the road north." She muttered.

Tejan knew that compass points were meaningless on the rifts; she'd even been to lectures on it when she'd been a member of the damned. People need some kind of pointer though and compass points were as good a way as any. As the road followed the coast, the only real options were north and south. Hopefully north would take her to the ancient city of Nara-Abash.

"Nara-Abash.....Built before even the demons got settled in." She muttered.

Nara meant old, really old and Abash simply meant city. Nara-Abash had been a city from the days of the truly ancient reptilian looking gods. Then the demons arrived and took over, as they did throughout much of the rifts. There were fishing villages along the coast, even the occasional small town. Nara-Abash was it though, the only city port on the only ocean on the rifts.

"Be nice to stop for a while anyway." Mumbled Tejan. "I could do with a night or two in a proper bed."

Dressed right, talking aggressively in a bastardised version of old imperial and Tejan could easily pass for a pretty standard Dredger hybrid female. Add the sword on her hip and no one would give her any trouble, especially if she had a little gold to spend. She'd even had a few hybrid lovers, though that took some care. If the bits didn't fit right there could be a lot of pain, sometimes even copious bleeding and death.

"Hmmmmm, as long as I'm careful." She muttered. "I wouldn't mind a nice clean Dredger hybrid to help keep my bed warm."

Tejan had never seen Nara-Abash before, just pictures in forbidden books in the Sentinel Temples in Mendera City. It was late in the day, when she turned a corner in the road and saw the one and only seaport on the rifts. So like the drawing in the ancient forbidden tomes that is was almost unnerving. There were flying creatures circling the city. Not birds, far too big for birds; a mystery and she loved a good mystery.

"Oh, there are days like these; when I love my job." Tejan muttered.

Towers, the city on the ocean had towers, a real tell-tale sign of a city built a staggeringly long time ago. Towers and city walls, though some of the gates in the walls had been removed. Nara-Abash might not look beautiful to others, but it looked beautiful to Tejan. She had a full purse and made up her mind then and there, to stay at the best lodging house in the city. She'd also find an attractive male hybrid with the right bits to fit hers and spend some time getting hot and sweaty.

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It wasn't their regular day and time, but the Silver Lady had been looking into the mind of Doffle every time he prayed to her. As the Dredgers with Seren were obviously feeling stressed, he was praying to her a lot. The Lady might have sat on the news; knowledge is power as they say. It was good news though and likely to be well received after hearing about the death of Olvir. Not that the Lady wanted for much, not materially at least. It had been an ambition of hers though, to have worship of her made the official religion of the City of The Lost God. Muzzie could do that for her and as a hugely popular emperor; he could arrange for it to carry on forever. In perpetuity was the word and just thinking about it gave the Lady a warm happy feeling.

“Adamaz is alive.....I had almost given up hope.” Said Muzzie.

“Doffle is a fool, but his memories are very strong.” Said the Lady. “I can show you them before I leave. There is no doubt about it, Adamaz lives.”

“Who captured him ?” Asked Muzzie.

“He seems reticent to say, hardly surprising really.” Said the Lady.

“Yes.....It must have all been awful for him.” Said Muzzie.

“The big decision is yours.” Said the Lady. “Do you arrange for him to be brought back to the City ? Do it when Adamaz himself isn’t keen on the idea and it makes you look timid. Leave him there and he gets killed and.....The people will never forgive you.”

“You’re right.....Show me the memories of Doffle.” Said Muzzie. “Then I’ll decide whether to send Seren extra fighters, or send rescuers to bring Adamaz home.”

She watched the memories too, as she projected them into the mind of the emperor. She had once thought about using the link with him to take Muzzie over; to make him her thrall. He was her friend now though and she respected his ability to rule the rifts fairly. There would always be troubles on the rifts, but Muzzie had brought stability for most. And somewhere inside her, the Lady suspected he’d have her banished from the city if he noticed her tricks.

“Oh, Adamaz.....He looked so near death when they found him.” Said Muzzie.

“Whoever imprisoned him wanted him to starve to death, very slowly.” She said.

“Will he be alright now he’s fed a little on the dark angels ?” Asked Muzzie. “It didn’t seem much of a meal.”

“Ideally Adamaz needs a captured enemy to drain.” Said the Lady. “Seren will know that of course. They’re almost certain to be attacked by bandits somewhere along the road.”

Doffle was tending to remain close to the other Dredgers. Adamaz promised to talk about who had captured him around that night’s campfire, but Doffle wasn’t there to hear his words. It was as frustrating for Muzzie, as it was for her.

“I’m torn between sending an extra ten dark angels.” Said Muzzie. “They could fly all the way to the Ring of Volkin and then straight to the caves from the portal. No toll for N’Sim N’Har, but I don’t see why a ghost needs gold. On the other hand, that implies a lack of faith in Seren and Itzel. I definitely don’t want to bring Adamaz back to the City. He might actually help them find Maya.”

It all sounded indecisive, but he was using her as someone to talk through ideas with, which she took as a compliment. He’d probably have a similar conversation with Aeony later that day, but the Lady wasn’t going to dwell on that. Her emperor was advocating doing nothing for now, which she genuinely agreed with.

“I agree with my emperor.” Said the Lady. “Let Adamaz fully heal and he may well fulfil his task of finding Maya and the ancient ones. Sending reinforcement will just muddy the water.”

“So for now, we do nothing.” Said Muzzie.

“As you say, we do nothing.” Said the Lady.

“Good, I’ll have Faal create a public notification for the people of the City.” Said Muzzie. “Adamaz is alive, well and carrying on with his quest. Everyone will love that.....I might even call for a public holiday.”

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Tejan came to Nara-Abash on a track which went round the side of a hill. It gave her a wonderful view of the city’s towers. There were long sea walls and several jetties, which went quite a way out into the ocean. Tied up at the Jetty were at least a dozen sailing ships, of various shapes and sizes. Tejan knew that Nara-Abash was the only port on the Sacred Sea, so who were the ships trading

with ? It had to be other ports on the far side of the ocean. There had to be an entire part of the first rift over there, separated from the main rift by miles and miles of blue ocean water. There was nothing about that in the Menderan archives, but they were famous for having huge holes in the information they carried. Tejan regretted never visiting the Great Library in the City of the Lost God, to examine the forbidden archives on the Sacred Sea. It would have meant being a burglar for a night, but nothing she hadn't done before.

"Here we go." She mumbled.

Tejan had been practising the raspy voice of a female hybrid fighter. Her own imagination of how the voice should sound of course, she'd never heard such a creature speak old imperial, badly. She had her hood up on her quite grubby coat and thought she'd make a convincing person best avoided. Even the gateways with no gates had guards. Only two on the gate she was heading for, but two was enough to make a lot of noise.

"Stop there.....What is your business in Nara-Abash, my pretty ?" Asked a guard.

She didn't look pretty, she'd spent a while making sure she didn't look pretty. The guard was trying to be mildly insulting, which was perfect.

"My business is my own affair." Said Tejan. "And who are you calling pretty ? Arse face."

She sort of leered at the guard and being sensible they waved her through and into the city. One raggedy hybrid woman wasn't really a threat to the city, though she might have used her blade on a rude guard. Tejan might have overdone the whole raggedy thing. A woman she asked about lodgings had been shaking as she'd pointed to a tall building on the other side of Nara-Abash.

"There.....The Boiling Kettle." Said the woman.

"Is it a good place ?" Asked Tejan. "Is it clean ?"

"The best lodgings in Nara-Abash." Said the woman.

Tejan found a public water fountain and cleaned herself up a bit. Not too much, the raggedy female look was excellent cover. Her purse full of gold would gain her a good room at the Boiling Kettle. She'd yet to stay anywhere that didn't put gold above appearance, or just about anything else for that matter. Another surprize, the Boiling Kettle had a stables, a place for guests to leave the creatures they'd ridden in on. There were very few such four legged creatures in the City of the Lost God; the hybrids had eaten them all during bad years of famine and plague. Tejan walked into the lodging house and dropped her bags in front of the counter.

"Can I help you ?" Asked a well-dressed young woman.

"A room for two or three nights.....Best you've got." Said Tejan.

The woman looked at her as if Tejan had suggested that they found an empty room to enjoy a little fun. Tejan took her purse out of a bag and decided that three gold pieces would change the woman's attitude. She dropped the gold on the counter.

"Three gold.....Imperial, not Tandallan." Said Tejan. "Should do for a start."

The best gold was imperial gold from the Menderan Empire, not Muzzie's empire. Muzzie's mint tried hard, but they never managed to get the same purity as the Menderan mint. The woman put her hand under the counter and for a moment, Tejan wondered if she might be reaching for a blade. No, the theory that gold is the key to just about everything, was still holding true. The woman placed a key on the counter, with a fob marked as Room 5.

"Would you like your bags taken to your room ?" Asked the woman.

"No, I'll carry them." Said Tejan. "I was hoping for some male company tonight. Is there anywhere you can recommend for decent ale and good looking men ?"

The woman was actually smiling as she pointed at the open front door of the Boiling Kettle.

“Straight out of our door and a ten minute walk, will bring you to Dragon Alley.” Said the woman.
“Only a short alley, you should easily find the Seaman’s Tavern. If you get lost, everyone knows the place. You’ll find men there, though as for good looking.....You might have to settle for clean and available.”

Tejan liked the woman on the reception desk. She added a mental note to give her a decent tip when she left the lodgings.

“Thank you, I’ll try there.” Said Tejan.

Room 5 was on the first floor at the rear of the lodging house, with a good view of the woodlands to the north of Nara-Abash. The bed looked clean and there was enough cupboard space for her things. It wasn’t in the same league as a five star hotel on Algaria, but it was nice; in a rustic kind of way.

Tejan flopped back on the bed.

“Good.” She muttered. “The springs aren’t noisy.”

In her mental list, food came next and maybe, just maybe; some new clothes. Nothing too flashy, that would ruin her hybrid female best avoided persona. The woman on the desk pointed her in the rough direction of a place that, according to her, served decent food all day. As for the clothes ? She’d ask a local woman in the eating place. Her mental list was a long way from complete, but Tejan thought she was getting there. The big item on her list was finding where the two Algarians might be staying, along with the rest of their group.

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Adamaz could feel blistering on his skin that would only go away after he fed properly. Under his arms and down his sides mostly, it wasn’t the first time he’d been hungry in his very, very long life. On the whole he thought of his long life as a blessing, but he could think of only a few unpleasant things that hadn’t happened to him. It was like throwing a dice when he rose every morning, eventually they were bound to come down snake eyes. He was alive though, even if he had a few nasty scabby areas on his skin. Settled around a camp fire, with a little fresh air coming from somewhere, Adamaz finally agreed to tell them all about the death of Olvir. As to his own capture and being locked in the cage ? It was a little embarrassing, but he had promised Dava that he’d tell the entire story.

“This is a good spot to camp and the Dredgers cooked us a good meal.” Said Adamaz.

“A very good meal.” Said Ash.

“Now.....You owe me the story of how Olvir died.” Said Dava.

“And how you ended up like a bird in a cage.” Added Galla.

“Bird hates cages.” Said Bird.

Where to start, the beginning was too easy and didn’t really answer all his own questions. The bandits who killed Olvir had vanished after doing the deed, as if they’d been paid assassins. That didn’t fit though; they were too grubby, too useless with their weapons. They vanished after killing Olvir, but by then; less than half their gang of bandits still lived.

“I have to start somewhere.” Said Adamaz. “We left the City of the Lost God with a wonderful group of adventurers; famous names most of them. As far as I’m aware, I am the only survivor from that party of heroes.”

“You’re saying that Aalghan of the Assassins Guild is dead ?” Asked Lilleth.

“Yes, I saw her die.” Said Adamaz. “Killed right in front of me, though she sent many bandits to the underworld.”

“I was hoping my sister dark angel might still live.” Said Seren. “I was sure Aishar would return to us, full of tall stories and stories of worlds unseen.”

“Please.....This can’t end up as a depressing list of the dead.” Said Adamaz. “Aishar survived the bandits, but died in the caves. Getting back to Olvir, I buried him myself; next to a trackway across the wetlands.”

They all wanted to know and it wasn’t a surprise when Galla Sinsa-Ennari asked the question. Adamaz had been thinking it through; should Muzzie be the first to know the truth ? The problem was that if Adamaz threw the dice wrong one morning, Muzzie would never know the dreadful truth. “So, Aisha died in the caves.” Said Galla. “Who killed her, Adamaz ? Who put you in that cage ?” “Tandallan clerics, the same ones you found dead in several places.” Said Adamaz. “Their numbers were huge and they didn’t seem to worry about dying in battle. For every ten of them we killed, they killed one of us. In the end it was just me left, though I think Pinthrad from the Magicians Guild might have survived.”

Their oldest allies had turned on Muzzie and the empire. No wonder everyone went quiet. There had been a half-hearted attempt by Tandalla to take over the empire, but that had been close to three hundred years ago. They’d been thoroughly defeated in battle and everyone thought that was that, their ambitions of empire were over. Sadly they’d been wrong.

“I don’t know what to say.....Tandalla turning on us.” Said Seren.

“It seems they wanted Maya and her control over one of the ancient ones.” Said Adamaz. “They tortured me for weeks, trying to get me to give them a location for Maya. I don’t have a location to give them, though I never told them that. In the end, after realising I’m hard to kill; they locked me in that cage. The idea of starving me to death seemed to amuse them.”

“They want Maya and went to find her, that much is obvious.” Said Galla.

“Galla is right.” Said Bird.

Adamaz had been thinking long and hard about what to do next and even he didn’t like the idea he’d come up with.

“We could go back to the City of the Lost God.” Said Adamaz. “Then Muzzie will know his old allies have become enemies.”

“No.” Said Seren. “I respect and appreciate your ideas, but I was put in charge of this expedition by Muzzie.”

“Yes, of course.....I accept that you’re the leader.” Said Adamaz. “Where do we go next ?”

“We carry on looking for Maya of course.” Said Ash.

“Ash is right, we keep going.” Said Seren. “All now hangs on finding Maya and Uula Podda.”

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Tejan had booked passage on a ship before going out to find a little adult enjoyment. She had the paper to prove she’d booked passage on the Angel’s Gaze, bound for Windhome Harbour. Written in ink, by hand, while she’d stood and watched. She had no idea where Windhome Harbour was, but guessed it was on the far side of the sacred sea; that was where she’d said she wanted to go. The Angel’s Gaze was due to leave that morning, so gone was her idea of enjoying a few lazy days in Nara-Abash.

Sokkelf was still asleep in her bed and she’d miss not having his company for the next few nights. His bits had fitted hers well enough and the sex had been the best she’d ever had on the rifts. A real gentleman was Sokkelf, he’d even insisted on paying for their evening meal. It was sad that the vagaries of passenger time tables was ruining her plans. Still, she was being paid very well to deal with the two young Algarians. She should have mentioned it to Sokkelf the night before, but she’d had other things on her mind. She sat on the bed and gently shook her lover of the previous night. “Sokkelf.....Wake up.” Said Tejan. “I should have told you my ship leaves this morning.”

"Oh yes, just give me a moment." Said Sockkelf.

"No problem.....Tell me." Said Tejan. "Is Windhome Harbour a nice place ?"

"No, it's a shit hole."

"Hmmmmm, I'll leave you to dress." Said Tejan.

She wanted to discuss the matter of the three gold she'd paid in advance. Tejan wasn't mean, but she wasn't going to pay three imperial for the use of a bed for one night. There seemed to be two young women who ran the reception desk and one older woman; all three alike enough to be sisters. One of them would be down there.

"Crap." Said Tejan. "I'll get blamed for this."

One of the young women had been killed; the floor was covered in her blood. Her head was at a crazy angle, which implied her neck had been almost severed. Tejan heard a scurrying sound, but there was no visible assailant. Tejan looked up for some reason and there it was, clambering around a large light fitting on the ceiling. A large spider, that still had the woman's blood on its jaws and the very sharp looking tips to its legs.

"Fuck !!" Tejan muttered.

Back up to her room and the spider wasn't following her. The size of the spider, the way it attacked. There was a memory of something she'd read somewhere, but it was getting lost in amongst lots of other memories.

"Good, you're dressed." She said. "Follow me, we're leaving this place."

Tejan grabbed her bags, while Sockkelf just stood there, looking confused.

"Move.....There's a giant spider and it killed the woman on the desk." Said Tejan. "I seem to remember it is just one spider out of many. Come with me, or you won't survive the day."

Why wasn't she running down the stairs, leaving a man she hardly knew to his fate ? Tejan liked Sockkelf; he was the kind of straightforward, honest guy she'd never quite managed to find in her teens. Besides, she felt she'd run away from too many people in her life already. He followed her, though he still looked confused.

"What are these spiders ?" Asked Sockkelf.

"I'm having trouble remembering.....I will though." Said Tejan. "Do you have a blade ?"

"No."

"Just stay close to me, we're both leaving on the Angel's Gaze." Said Tejan.

"I can't just leave.....There are things I need to do today." Said Sockkelf.

"You can't do anything if you're dead." Said Tejan.

The dead woman on the floor seemed enough of an argument for leaving to stop Sockkelf firing off questions at her, for now. The giant spider seemed to be an ambush predator; it leapt at her from the top of a large old cupboard up against the wall. Actually there were two of them now, both leaping at her. Tejan had fast reflexes, something to do with her conversion to being one of the Damned, which couldn't be reversed. Her mind reacted without the usual stress and anxiety most people have before taking action. She reacted ten times faster than the average Dredger hybrid and probably a little faster than the spiders. Both spiders were bloody and dead at her feet, before Sockkelf had even moved.

"Green blood.....Crap, they're children of the Hive Mother." Said Tejan.

"Who ?" Asked Sockkelf.

"I'll explain once we're on the Angel's Gaze and heading out to sea." Said Tejan.

No spiders just outside the door to the lodgings, but there was a dead member of the unformed city guard. Tejan picked up his sword and gave it to Sockkelf. No holding it awkwardly, or looking at it like it might bite. It obviously wasn't the first time he'd held a sword.

"Now.....Which is the fastest way to the Angel's Gaze ?" Asked Tejan.

"I don't have enough gold to pay for the passage to Windhome Harbour." Said Sockkelf.

"Don't worry about that, I have gold.....Plenty of gold." Said Tejan. "Which way do we need to go ? We have to keep moving."

"This way." Said Sockkelf.

They went past where Tejan had eaten the day before and then across a small park. More dead, two male hybrids and one female. Tejan was beginning to get an inkling that the Hive Mother had probably sent her older children after the assassin sent to kill the two Algarians; her. Not that Tejan was going to mention that to Sockkelf, there was no telling how he might react. Why looking for an assassin had become wholesale slaughter might always be a mystery.

"This is a cut through to where the Angel's Gaze is tied up." Said Sockkelf.

"We need to pick up the pace a little." Said Tejan.

A tree lined cut through, it was hardly a surprise when several massive spiders fell out of the trees. Tejan killed several in her usual efficient manner. Sockkelf also killed a couple of them with accurate thrusts of the blade he hadn't even seen until Tejan had given it to him. A little training and experience and he had the makings of an expert swordsman.

"There are so many of them." Said Sockkelf.

"Not far to go.....I can see the jetty." Said Tejan. "I was here yesterday to pay my fare to Windhome Harbour."

The crew of the Angel's Gaze weren't keen on anything that slowed down them leaving harbour. That seemed to include paying passengers; as they waved swords at Tejan and told her to try another ship.

"I paid you for passage to Windhome, I paid in gold." Yelled Tejan. "Let us on and I'll pay for my friend here."

An angry woman swinging a bloody sword had to be difficult to say no to. One of the crew nodded at the others and they were allowed onto the vessel; barely a couple of minutes before it left where it had been tied up and headed out of the harbour. A bit slow to leave, the wind was fairly light. One of the spiders leapt onto the Angel's Gaze. Tejan quickly turned it into a bloody mess.

"You mentioned a Hive Mother." Said Sockkelf. "Who is she ? Why has she attacked Nara-Abash ?"

"I've no idea why they'd attack the city." Tejan lied. "As for the Hive Mother, have you heard of the City of the Lost God ?"

"Yes, but I've never known anyone who has actually been there." Said Sockkelf.

"The Hive Mother has her lair deep below that city." Said Tejan.

Tejan found the captain and paid Sockkelf's passage to Windhome. After that they simply watched the city for a while. Nara-Abash was a long way from the City of the Lost God, a very long way. Tejan was only guessing, but the children of the hive had to be finding it hard to receive orders from the Hive Mother. Attacking everyone in Nara-Abash might have been unintended, a dreadful error.

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