

## 8

The Emissary sat slumped on his bedroll, staring into the last of the embers, his whole body aching. They had made camp as soon as they reached the savannah, sheltering at the foot of a large boulder and not even bothering to set their tents. Anehlun and Mauto sat next to him, as tired as he, staring at nothing; the rest of his entourage, and the girl, were all already asleep.

Looming up behind them, the edge of the plateau cut a jagged line across the sky, blotting out almost half the sky's stars. The night was clear and still, the Veil a thin band of haze almost directly overhead. The Eyes had already set, and the night was deep, the silence of the dry country profound. In the distance he could barely hear the river as it made its way to the valley floor, gurgling between rocks; that, and the ticking of the last embers of the fire, was all the sound in the world.

They had made the descent from the plateau by the end of the second day on the return, hurrying through the passes and down the switchbacks as best they could in the fading light, the carts jostling and bouncing as they dropped back to the river valley. One of the attendants had run ahead with a guide, and would reach the river way-station in another day. From there they could charter a river-boat and pole downstream for most of the way back to the harbor Temple, saving almost a week of travel time. Once they were safely heading downriver, they could rest.

Mauto poked at the last of the embers. Anehlun sighed, tired.

"Who is she?"

The Emissary looked over at the girl, and back to Anehlun. He was half-asleep already, and he knew tomorrow would be just as long.

"She only told me her given name. She wouldn't say any more."

"Why are we running? What's so important about her?"

"I'm ... not entirely certain. My instinct tells me there *is* something important about her, but right now I'm worried more about what she represents than who she is."

"Which is...?"

"Consider: there's only one way she could have reached the oasis, and that's the route we're following. In the other direction is weeks of travel through the desert

to reach the nearest port, and as we now know," he nodded at the bundle that lay next to the girl, "she isn't equipped for that.

"Even if she says she doesn't know how she got to the oasis, it would have had to be by following the river inland, from the harbor. She would have arrived there by boat, or by following the coast overland, but either way she couldn't have avoided notice, especially if she arrived when she says she did. As we also know," he nodded towards the guide, sleeping on a bedroll further off, "the Abbess keeps a close watch on everything, and every *one*, that passes within her Temple's territory."

"Why does that matter?"

"Two things are possible. Either, what I consider extremely unlikely, she somehow reached the oasis without the Abbess' knowing. Or, the Abbess *does* know about her, and yet said nothing of the arrival of a girl from the City she couldn't have failed to notice passing through her harbor. Why?"

"I don't know."

"Nor I. But the important thing is that, in either case, her sudden appearance in our party puts all of us us, and her, in danger."

The girl made a soft, plaintive sound in her sleep, and changed position. She never seemed to sleep well, always fitful. She seemed to have frequent nightmares.

"What if she did show up at the oasis unnoticed? The Templar seemed-"

"Genuinely surprised to see her? Indeed he did. He also seemed genuinely surprised to learn that an itinerant Templar had been living there on and off for years. And again, two scenarios are possible: either he truly *was* surprised about both revelations, in which case either the Abbess didn't tell him or neither of them knew, or he did know the Templar and the girl were there, and is a very good liar.

"And here, as well, in every scenario, our discovery of her puts him in danger, and he may have an interest in making sure that she, and all of us, never return home to tell anybody."

Both Anehlun and Mauto seemed to sink a bit as the weight of dangers, previously unremarked, gradually loomed into awareness around them. Mauto glanced back up to the plateau, as if expecting to find hidden pursuants suddenly come into view.

"And now you understand why we run."

Mauto set his jaw, wrapping an arm around Anehlun, suddenly wary. He had been the most easygoing of the entourage, keeping mostly unperturbed as their mission encountered its various difficulties over the weeks of travel. But now both of them seemed ill at ease.

The Emissary found he felt the same. He gazed at the stars for a while.

“The Abbess will know from her acolytes that the girl is with us; there’s no way to hide that. She will know, from our rushed return to the harbor, that something is wrong. If we seek passage directly back to the City from there, abandoning the rest of our mission for reasons we cannot explain, it will raise even more suspicions. We’ll have to transfer on our way, possibly hopping vessels at one of the island transfers.

“Word will get back to her eventually; there’s no way to avoid that. But it will take longer for her to learn of our change in travel plans if we depart from a ship that’s already bound westwards.

“But this is another reason why we must hurry: if we arrive early, before we’re expected, there’s a chance I can slip into the city and charter passage further westward before she learns of the girl. We might be able to get underway before she has time to find me in the city, or summon me. If we can manage that, we can explain it away later over diplomatic channels, and we can control how much of the situation she learns.”

“You already had a plan for all of this.”

“No. I’m improvising a lot of this. As I said,” he nodded again towards the girl, “nothing about her appearance here makes sense. And I don’t know how the Abbess, or anybody else, might react to her discovery. But I’ve also been doing this for a long time. When you’ve been a diplomat for as long as I have, you get a sense for how things work. And especially lately, I’ve found I need to have a clear head about these sorts of things, as it seems a lot of my colleagues who didn’t wound up not returning from assignments.

“I’m sorry to bring all of this on you so quickly. It’s a lot to consider. But circumstances ... have imposed themselves on us, and the path has turned out to be less clear than we thought. We’re going to have to be careful.”

With that, they spoke for a while about other things, but the Emissary quickly lost the energy to speak, and was already falling asleep before he was finished lying down.

They had rushed from the oasis, as he had ordered, as soon as the girl had dressed and they had finished packing. Their exit from the settlement had been ... chaotic. The girl had took off running down an alley before he realized what she was doing, and when he finally caught up with her, she was brandishing a knife in a small courtyard, facing what looked like three beggars. Two of his attendants came running behind him, and when they saw the girl, and the beggars, they both drew their own knives, and with that the beggars backed off. The girl ducked into a low door in the corner while the Emissary and his attendants kept the beggars at bay, and after some muffled shouting the girl came back out, clutching a small bundle in one arm, yelling at somebody inside and waving her knife with the other. There was blood on the knife, and on her sleeve, but he didn't think it was hers.

With that, they were truly running as they made their way back to the carts, threw the rest of what they were carrying onto them, put on their packs, and hurried out of the settlement as fast as they could.

Once they were far enough from the outpost, onto the main road along the river, the Emissary set a ground-eating pace, pulling the carts as fast as they could over the dirt track, for hours on end.

\*\*

By the middle of the afternoon, the girl was becoming increasingly agitated, running ahead of the group, looking for something. After an hour, they reached a crossing where a small tributary stream fed into the river, and she stopped, dropping her pack in the small clearing next to the ford. When the rest of the group caught up with her, she was bent over, her breath ragged, hands on her knees.

"We have to stop here for a while. I have to head up this gully and get the rest of my things."

"No. We can't stop here. We have to keep moving. They might be chasing us; it isn't safe."

"I'm not going any farther without the rest of my things. I won't be long. The rest of you can stay here and keep watch."

"We don't have *time* for this! I don't know what you're doing here, but you shouldn't be here, and no matter the reason, we have to get you back to the City

as soon as possible. You're in danger here, don't you understand that? The longer we take, the greater the risk. To you, and to everybody else. Please. We can't stop."

The rest of the group was getting restless, despite their exhaustion. But the girl didn't move.

"I'm *not* going any farther until I have the rest of my things. You're running because of me, right? All of this is because of me, isn't it? Then you need me to come with you, and I *won't* until I have all my things. I won't go without a fight. And then you'll have to carry me."

The Emissary thought she looked to be on the verge of collapse, but the rest of the group didn't look much better. The girl's feet were planted, and she had a wild, cornered look in her eyes that finally convinced him to think better about trying to dissuade her. The blood on her sleeve had dried to a dark brown.

"Please."

He let out a frustrated sigh.

"*Very well.* We'll move the carts up out of sight. With any luck, if we *are* being pursued, they'll run past us."

The girl relaxed somewhat.

"I'll get back faster if someone comes and helps me carry everything."

"Mauto can run upstream with you. We'll stay hidden here."

He turned to Mauto and nodded towards the girl. Mauto looked at the girl, dumped his pack onto one of the carts, and trotted up to stand beside her, waiting.

After what felt like an eternity, the girl finally relaxed, and stood upright.

"We'll be back in a couple hours."

"Hurry."

She scowled at him, but then turned without another word and set off heading along the stream into the gully. Mauto fell in behind her, and before long they had disappeared around a bend.

The Emissary took another long breath, looking back the way they had come. There was nobody behind them. *Still.*

"We'll move the carts up past that bend. You," he pointed at one of his attendants, "will keep watch there. The rest of you: get settled to wait."

The sun was edging towards evening when Mauto and the girl finally returned, each with a bundle wrapped in their arms. When they loaded them onto the carts, the bundles shed a layer of fine reddish dust. He looked at Mauto, who shrugged.

“She had them buried under some rocks. It took us a while to find them and dig them out.”

“It’s fine. We have to get moving again.”

They had lost time. They still had hours of running ahead of them, and another long day tomorrow if they were to descend from the plateau by nightfall. Even if they could keep up this pace for the rest of the way back to the harbor, it wouldn’t be enough. And judging by how ragged his entourage looked, even after resting, they wouldn’t keep this pace for more than a few more days.

The thought for a moment, and pointed to one of the attendants.

“You, and you,” gesturing to one of the guides, “take food and water, and leave the rest with us. Run ahead as fast as you can manage, to the way-station at the river head. If you hurry, you can make it in three more days. If there are any river boats free, charter it and put a hold on it until we arrive. Take this,” fishing out some documents from his travel case, “and show the captain. That should secure us passage downriver to the harbor.”

The attendant nodded, looked to the guide, who nodded as well. They spent a few minutes changing their packs, taking on only the minimum necessary. As the sun was just reaching for the horizon, they were ready, and set off at a near-run.

The Emissary watched them go for a moment, then turned to what of his mission remained.

“We can’t stay here any longer. We have to go. With any luck, we can make it down from the plateau tomorrow night. After that, it’s only two or three more days to the river head. We’ll have to hurry.”

Before any of them really had the chance to feel rested, they were on the move again.

The Emissary's sleep was disturbed by a recurring dream. He was being chased through the alleys of an unfamiliar city, running from unknown assailants. Far in the distance, a strange, alien light shone into the night sky, nearly blinding in its intensity, throbbing. When he chanced to look back at his pursuants, he couldn't make them out clearly, but knew they were getting closer. The wind was rushing overhead, driving thin clouds across the sky. Just as he could feel their hands reaching out to seize him, he woke with a start.

It was later into the middle of the night, the air cool and still. Their bivouac was quiet and undisturbed, the boulder looming over them.

The Emissary drifted back to sleep, and this time did not dream of anything.

\*\*

Travel through the river valley, though still pushing themselves beyond a sustainable pace, was easier to bear than the plateau. The ground was softer, there was more shade, and the road met with others and grew wider and more level. They would reach the way-station by midday on the third day. And then they could rest.

When they arrived at the way-station, the Emissary's stomach clenched into his chest.

There were no boats moored that could carry them.

"Wait here."

They dropped the carts in a large courtyard and collapsed onto the benches surrounding a few trees, too tired to speak. The Emissary went into the public-house to find the host.

He was an older man, fat like an innkeeper, grizzled and tired-looking.

"We need to charter a boat downriver. When does the next one arrive?"

The host squinted at him.

"There should be one arriving in another two or three days. I'd have to check, but they usually come."

"My attendants should have chartered one for me two or three days ago. Where are they? I need to speak with them."

"There haven't been any groups passing through in almost a month. Last was a trade caravan bound for the dry country, about six weeks ago."

“They must have arrived here. There’s nowhere else they could have gone. You’re sure nobody came from the dry country?”

“Just one, but he was traveling alone.”

“When did he arrive?”

“Two days ago, now. He chartered the only boat I had, a spare, and piloted it himself.”

The knot in the Emissary’s chest tightened.

“*What did he look like?*”

The Emissary rushed back into the courtyard. All of them were still there, looking up as he came to an abrupt stop.

He turned to Mauto and nodded at the guide.

“Grab him.”

Before any of them could finish asking questions, he yelled.

“*Grab him!*”

In a heartbeat they were all on their feet, Mauto and the other attendant surrounding the guide, who looked just as confused as the rest of them. They each took an arm.

“Your friend. Where did he go?”

“I ... I don’t know.”

“What were your instructions?”

“We didn’t have any other instructions but to work as your guides.”

“What happened to my attendant?”

“I don’t know. He wasn’t with my associate?”

“No. Your ... *associate* arrived alone, and left immediately. *What were your instructions?*”

“I didn’t have any! I was just supposed to attend you on your mission inland. That’s all.”

The Emissary gritted his teeth. He turned to Anehlun, and said:

“We’re going to have to make camp here for two or three days. The host says a trade ship should arrive to take us dow-”

Before he could finish, Mauto yelled, and when he spun back around the guide and both attendants were on the ground, struggling. The Emissary said to the girl,

“Get out your bow.”

“Wh- what?”

“Your *bow*. I saw the case. I know you have one. Get it out, *now*, and get it ready.”

“I-”

“Do it now!”

The girl was backing towards the carts. Too slowly.

“*Liikel*. Go!”

With that, she shook herself and spun around, lunged at the cart, and started digging frantically into one of her bundles. He turned back to the struggle on the ground, just in time to see them working to pin the guide to the ground. As they were shifting to hoist him up, Mauto yelled,

“Knife!”

And then he screamed as the guide’s hand twisted free and something flashed along Mauto’s arm. Mauto pulled up, pulling his arm away, and it was enough that the guide could lunge at the other attendant, who fell back. The guide stood up, wheeling right and left, brandishing a long, narrow knife. Before any of them had time to react, he spun and ran out the courtyard, and was gone.

The girl came panting back, her case slung over her shoulder, carrying what must have been the most exquisite longbow he’d ever seen. Her eyes darted from the Emissary to Mauto’s arm, searching. The Emissary pointed to the back of the courtyard.

“There. That’s a path leading up over a small rise behind the house. You’ll have high ground there to reach him.”

“*What?*”

“We can’t let him get away. We’ve already lost whatever element of surprise we might have had. If he gets away from us, our lives are in peril.”

The girl’s eyes were wide, welling up.

“I ... I can’t.”

“Do you understand me? They will *kill you*, and all of us.”

Her face knotted up in an expression of despair, but she turned and headed out the back of the courtyard. They all followed.

Scrambling up the path, they were on a small hill behind the way-station, and had a view of the whole river in both directions.

“There.”

Fifty paces down, along the water, the guide was dragging a small long-boat out of a shed, along the bank towards the water. The girl looked back at the Emissary, pleading.

“We can’t reach him in time. If he gets into the river, we’ll lose him. We won’t reach the City alive.”

The girl grimaced, but turned, and raised her bow.

The first arrow fell short, striking the gravel bank. The guide’s head snapped up, and then he started shoving the boat faster, racing to the water. She drew another, but her arm gave out at the last second, sending it wide.

“I *can’t*. I can’t draw it.”

“Liikel. *Please.*”

She drew again, and the Emissary gripped her elbow, steadying her bow-arm. The last arrow struck home, hitting the guide in the shoulder. He stumbled, fell to his knees, but kept crawling forward, shoving the boat ahead of him with his good arm. When it was in the water, he heaved himself up, rolled over the side, and collapsed into the boat.

The girl let out a cry of frustration.

The Emissary let out a gasp of relief.

“We’ll be alright. He can’t navigate the river one-handed. We’ll catch him.”

The girl looked back at him, tears in her eyes, fury and sorrow knotting her brow.

“I need to get my arrows.”

\*\*

Hours later, the party keeping pace along the shore, the guide finally lost control of the longboat, and capsized at a bend. The boat drifted away, slipping out of his grasp, meandering downriver. Unable to swim, he dragged himself to shore, his shoulder both numb and flaming in agony. He was huddled between some rocks when they finally found him.

The girl stepped up to stand over him, and came to kneel down at his side. He tried to reach for his knife, but she batted his hand away. His arms were too heavy. He couldn’t lift even his good arm.

She reached under him, felt the entry point. He tried to pull away, his shoulder burning, but he couldn’t. She touched the arrow shaft, and he felt a grinding,

scraping agony, making a noise like stone, deep in his shoulder. He tried to scream, but could only let out a weak, pleading wail.

Her hand came back bloody.

She turned to the Emissary and shook her head. When she turned back to the guide, tears were streaming down her cheeks. Looking in his eyes, she said to the Emissary,

“It struck bone. I can’t get it out. Not here.”

A shadow behind her, difficult to make out, shifted its weight and said,

“He won’t survive long on his own out here. And we can’t take him with us. He’ll die of infection before we reach the harbor.”

The guide strained to sit up, tried to reach up to the girl, but his shoulder was on fire, blotting out everything else. She turned back to him, and he looked into her eyes. She had pulled down her headscarf, and he saw that she had strange lines, scars, tracing down each cheek, making a path where her tears were flowing. He tried to speak, but his voice was barely a whisper, hissed through gritted teeth.

*“Please.”*

His shoulder had sunk back into the earth, and his weight drove the arrow deeper into his shoulder. He let out a low groan, and tried to pull himself over to rest on his side. He turned to face back upriver. Far off in the distance, on the other bank, he could just make out the pale iridescence of a herd of grazers making its way through the trees. Just a shimmer between the shadows.

She turned again to the Emissary, waiting for a moment for some sign, then he could hear her reaching into her pack, rummaging. When she turned back to him, she reached out with one hand and cupped his cheek, holding his head.

“Try to keep still.”

With the other hand, she reached forward. He could hear her breathing in quick, hitching sobs.

“I’m ... I’m sorry.”

He whispered, “it’s all right. Make it quick.”

She gently drew a finger across his neck, and he was surprised to realize he didn’t feel any pain.

Something hot spilled out across his chest and onto the ground, and then he didn’t feel anything at all.