

"I don't trust them."

Mauto rolled his eyes towards the wide country ahead of them. He and Anehlun had been having parts of this argument in various combinations for several days now, and he seemed resigned, if neither happy nor terribly in agreement with it. They had stopped for midday at a small way-station on a large plain, some hundred paces from the river's bank. The trees had thinned out to a sparse, low cover, enough space between them to lay the rough cartway they had been using. The Emissary and his attendants had set up on a small rocky hillock a fair distance before the way-station, while the two guides from the Temple had gone ahead, secured their cart in a small barn built up alongside the building's outer wall, and were now eating their own meal on benches alongside the front entrance. It was their distance, both physical and in their manner towards the Emissary's retinue, that was cause for Anehlun's mistrust.

The Emissary sighed to himself. He knew, and had told them, that the guides most likely *were* spies, that the Abbess had almost certainly sent them as much to report back to her on their journey as to serve as guides and translators. But this likelihood had also been expected, and as their roles in this expedition had been anticipated and the necessary measures had been taken, there was no real need for antipathy, any more than there was reason for naïve trust. He had told them all of this as well.

It wasn't really any anxiety about the guides that was putting Anehlun on edge: they had been traveling for ten days now, with likely five remaining before the oasis, and the monotony was wearisome. The country was little changed from one day to the next, becoming imperceptibly more arid as they progressed, the band of green on either side of the river becoming gradually narrower and the trees becoming gradually shorter and harder. But this was a change over many days, and the knowledge that they were now closer to the oasis than the Temple, though helpful, did not entirely alleviate their creeping restlessness.

The Emissary turned his gaze instead to the broad valley in which they had been traveling, and ate his flatbreads. Across the river, in the middle distance, what looked to be the ruins of an abnormally large settlement stuck up from the surrounding trees. They looked weirdly skeletal: a line of towers, listing at

uncomfortable angles, reached skyward at intervals along the length of the ruins, and into the distance towards the low mountain range behind them. Something about the place made him uneasy, and he felt no desire to travel any closer to it than the road made necessary: it reminded him too much of some of the stories he'd heard growing up, warnings of unspoken things that were now manifest, in the arid country on the other side of the world, with nothing for days of travel in any direction. No aid should the inhabitants of that place, long dead, choose to walk the earth again.

"Look, we only have to worry about them being around a few days longer. Once we reach the Oasis Temple, we can go off into town on our own."

"Fine." Then: "I still don't like them, though."

Mauto sighed, but that was the end of it. For the time being. The Emissary wondered, as he had on several occasions, if the two were romantically involved. It wasn't impossible, nor explicitly forbidden, that some among the apprentices and attendants of the administrative corps might carry out clandestine entanglements. Taboos weren't what they used to be. But he didn't think these two were in any case.

They turned to watch a small herd of long-necked grazers make its way through the trees on the far side of the river, towards the bank for water. They were large and graceful—their shoulders would clear the Emissary's head—and they had large, strangely iridescent eyes that contrasted with their pale topcoat. They were sometimes hunted for their skins, but they were clever and swift-footed; only the nomads deep in the dry country, with little else to trade to the coasts, bothered with them. One or two of them would look in their direction from time to time while their herd-mates drank, with a posture that seemed disconcertingly pensive, keeping eye contact a few seconds too long.

**

As had often been the case, the Emissary found that he was finally settling into the routine of a long journey overland just as they reached the outpost at the oasis. They had climbed the inland plateau three days ago and gradually transitioned into the real dry country, the weather warming and the ground becoming more hard-packed dirt and rocks than savannah. The trees grew smaller and sparser, and finally gave way to low, hard shrubs and scattered

clumps of tough grasses. The oasis itself was a loose cluster of settlements surrounding a network of springs. Mostly built of clay and earthen bricks, the buildings were reddish-brown or pale yellow, closely packed at the water's edge adjacent a smaller version of the market at the harbor and, his expedition's ultimate destination, a small temple.

His attendants and their two guides went through the same process of greetings and arranging for their stay. They wouldn't be here more than a couple days: the Oasis Temple, though it served the caravans that traveled the dry country, was small, and its own archives limited to newer records. Anything more than a few years old was sent to the harbor Temple.

**

It was late in the day, and they had been treated to a small meal hosted by the Templars of the Oasis Temple, had exchanged gifts, served tea, and now discussed the Emissary's business there. He had a feeling the inquiries were for show: that the presiding Templar had been informed of his mission, that their two guides had already passed on whatever information they had been instructed to convey, and that he was being managed. He found himself bored and irritable, already restless. The formalities, accustomed as he was to observing propriety, were tiresome. There was somewhere else he still needed to go, another meeting, and being kept from it was making it increasingly difficult to maintain a pleasant demeanor as the tea ceremony wore on.

Finally, shortly after sunset, they took their leave. As the Oasis Temple was too small to host visitors, and the surrounding village was too poor, they had been provided a cluster of tents on the edge of the settlement, outside the walls alongside one of the smaller streams. As they walked through the settlement on their way back, they passed through the market. On one side was a public house, where it seemed most of the settlement and the caravan drivers were loudly celebrating. There were still a few merchants selling trade goods from deeper into the dry country, a couple groups selling food from grills that filled the market with a smoky haze. Somewhere in the back alleys he could smell the tanning pools from the nomads, treating the skins of the grazers they had caught out in the dry country. It stank wafting into the market, and the mixture of the various smells made him slightly nauseated.

They crossed a few of the vendors, with their various offerings on blankets, slouched on small stools. It was a cool evening, and so they passed several selling shawls, headscarves, and cloaks. There was a girl selling wooden carvings, and next to her a young man was selling cloth dyed in elaborate patterns brought, he explained cheerfully, from small encampments deep in the dry country, preserving an ancient tradition. Past him was an older couple selling housewares.

Finally they reached the end of the market square, passed into a narrow alley, and eventually made their way to one of the gates leading out of the settlement. They turned at the river, and made their way to where their camp had been set up. Their guides made a small fire, and the Emissary's assistants went to their tents. He went to his, quickly retrieved a package, and turned to his guides.

"I'll return shortly."

Before they could reply, he turned, and hurried back into the settlement. From the market, checking the directions he'd been given, he turned down another alley, made several wrong turns, and eventually found himself standing before a low door, near the outer wall on the far side of the settlement, near a different gate. There were a few words in the local language painted onto the wall next to the door, which he could read well enough to know

He ducked in.

It had been a small residence, and was dimly lit. A few small rooms surrounded a central space opening through several upper levels to the sky. The space looked deserted, but as he was about to call, a man in an apron came out from a room in the back, toweling off a plate.

"What do you want here?"

"I've come to see her."

The man started to turn away. "She isn't here."

"Wait! Please. I've come a long way to see her."

The man regarded him, assessing.

"Like I said: she isn't here."

"*Please*," he lay the package on the table between them, "it's important."

The man paused, then lifted a flap of the package. His eyebrow went up slightly at the money.

"Apparently it is. But like I said: she isn't here."

"When can I expect her return?"

“Don’t know. She’s on walkabout.”

The Emissary’s stomach knotted. “I was told she’d be here.”

“You were misinformed.”

“How long until she returns?”

“Don’t know. As I said, she’s on walkabout, and hasn’t been here this season yet. but she rarely arrives later than this. I’d expect her to arrive in another week.”

“I’ve come a long way.”

“You obviously have. But if it’s as important as you say,” he nodded towards the package, “then you can afford to wait.”

He sighed. “Very well. But as soon as she returns, please tell her I’ve come to see her.” He left a strip on the table with his name and where he was camped.

The man nodded. “See you in a week.”

By the time he returned to camp, the fire had burned down to low coals, and most of his entourage had turned in for the night. Anehlun and Mauto were talking quietly, sitting on a low rock dimly lit by the embers; across from them, one of the guides was the only other one still up. He stood as the Emissary stopped at the fire.

“Our plans have changed. We shall remain here for a while longer than originally planned.”

Anehlun sat up. “What? But we—”

The Emissary held up a hand. “I don’t expect it to be longer than a week.”

“A *week*? Here?”

“Yes, here. I’m sorry. It’s not what I would have liked, but the matter is out of my control. I’ve provided for extra funds to supply us for the duration.” He turned to the guide.

“Please inform the Temple here that we’ll be staying longer, though I don’t expect to trouble them more than the already agreed-upon time. I’m sure there are places here to keep us entertained for the rest of our stay?”

The guide nodded.

“Suitable for young attendants on their first diplomatic mission, for whom the more ... *colorful* of the dry country’s traditions might prove inappropriate?”

The guide smiled and nodded again. Anehlun rolled her eyes.

“Good. Then it’s settled. Again, I’m sorry for the delay. If all goes well, however, I promise you an ... enlightening experience before we return home. It will be

worth the wait. Now: I'm going to the river to wash, as should you, and then to bed."

The next day, as agreed, he worked at the Oasis Temple. As he had at the harbor Temple, he worked as quickly as he could, this time with his guides standing guard outside to ensure he would not be disturbed. It went much more quickly: by mid-afternoon of the first day he had finished, and could pack his documents and supplies and return to camp.

As there was little else to do, he and his attendants toured the settlement, taking their supper in one of the public houses along the water. It was strikingly beautiful: the air of the dry country was clear, the country past the settlement was quiet, and in the low lantern-light they could gaze at the stars. The occasional vendor came by to offer them trinkets for sale, but the guides waved them off. Still, despite everything, he was uneasy. Something he couldn't quite remember was wrong, itching at the back of his mind, just out of reach.

They had only to wait a few days, and the oasis settlement was built mostly for the benefit of dry-country travellers and thus offered all manner of entertainments. He suspected one or two of his other attendants would be surreptitiously visiting the bawdy-houses as the days dragged on. But there was nothing that he could identify that should have him ill at ease. Something about this place, despite all its charms, was out of place.

As they sat around a table, drinking a mildly psychoactive tea from small cups and listening to the water flowing past, he tried to put it out of his mind.

**

As the days dragged on, the sense of unease only got worse. The dry country was getting gradually hotter at midday, and his entourage was growing restless and irritable. Beneath the pleasant veneer of the settlement, there turned out to be a certain ugliness that broke through from time to time. On the third day, for no reason he could see, two men at the market broke into a fistfight, the one beating the other into unconsciousness before walking away. Nobody moved to stop him, or to help the unconscious one after he left. Mauto squinted out into the market square, the paving stones almost luminous in the bright light of midday. The air was heavy and stagnant, the market square filled with a haze of

smoke from the various cooking fires, dust from travellers, and the dried leaves of a desert plant that the nomads sometimes smoked. Even in the open square, it felt mildly suffocating, stultifying.

“I hate this place.”

Mauto turned away from the man in the square and slumped over his teacup, scowling.

They were seated at a small public-house at the side of the market that had become their regular place to eat. They mostly ate a thick, lightly spiced bean paste on flatbread, with little bowls of salted vegetables. None of the other regulars had made any motions to make them feel more welcome, but the food was cheap, and they could escape the worst of the midday sun under awnings. The Emissary realized they needed to get away from the settlement soon. The place was getting to them. And so on the fifth day he took his attendants out into the country for the afternoon, high up onto an outcrop overlooking the oasis. The settlement shimmered in the heat, the buildings barely distinguishable from the surrounding earth. Only the colors of the plants and trees growing around the water stood out. All of them had changed to the pale robes of the dry-country nomads, wearing headscarves against the sun. They sat in the shade of an outcrop, and gazed out across the open valley.

It was striking just how quiet the dry country was, how austere. It had its own beauty, wholly unlike that of home; and were it not for the ugly, ramshackle settlement where he suspected they were wearing out their welcome, and the nagging sense of something out of place, he would find it deeply restorative.

And so, he had brought them here, in the hopes of clearing their minds.

“I know it’s been difficult for all of you, waiting here. Thank you for your patience. I thought it might help if we could spend some time outside of the settlement, to see the country.”

Mauto shifted. “I wish I knew *why* we were here,” he said as Anehlun tossed a pebble.

“I’m waiting to meet someone. She should return in another couple days. When she does, I promise meeting her will be worth the wait. For now, though, I have realized that we have all been neglecting our meditations, and that it might help us, in this place, to reconnect to our exercises. Mauto, you’ve visited Temple, if I’m not mistaken?”

He nodded.

“Good. Please guide us back to our path.”

With a bit of grumbling, Mauto started with the exercises. As he spoke, the rest mouthed the words; and eventually their breathing slowed, they fell into the rhythm of the prayers, and the Emissary could feel himself sinking into his subconscious.

Time passed.

It was evening by the time they returned, and the Emissary could tell as they arrived at their camp that his head had cleared. He was still anxious, but the weight of the place had lifted somewhat.

As they made their way to their tents, the guide who had stayed behind to keep watch approached and handed him a strip. As soon as he read it, he stopped and turned back.

“We’re going.”

His attendants all stopped and turned around. He pointed to Anehlun and Mauto.

“You two come with me.”

“Now?”

He nodded. “Wash and change quickly. The rest of you start breaking camp. We can leave in the morning.”

There was an audible sigh of relief from the entourage. The guides turned and headed to their tents to begin packing, as did the other attendants. Anehlun and Mauto rushed to their tent, grabbed a change of clothes, and went to the river to wash. The Emissary did the same, and after a few minutes they were all dressed again and heading into the settlement.

He found his way quickly to the marked door in the alley, and motioned for Anehlun and Mauto to follow him in. Inside, the man with the apron was there again, and upon seeing him disappeared into one of the back rooms. After a moment, he returned and motioned them to follow.

The back room had a small alcove with a table, at which sat an older woman. She was sipping tea with a half-finished plate of supper set aside, and barely looked up when they stopped in front of her.

But she set down her tea, and said: “this must be important indeed. I heard you were up on the plateau today.”

“We were. Thank you for seeing me.”

She didn't move, and only darted her eyes to the package he set on the table for a moment.

“Very well. Sit, and tell me.”

Mauto and Anehlun both looked at the Emissary. Inclining his head slightly, he said, as discreetly as he could, “this is Kuusavita Mikkon, one of the last of the itinerant Templar. Do not speak of what you see or hear to anyone else, and watch closely.”

At the mention of Templar Kuusavita's rank, both of their eyes went wide, and they turned to the woman at the table, reassessing. She seemed not to possess any of the mystical bearing that Templars were reported to have, but who could ever say what mask one of them might choose to wear? They drew close behind as the Emissary sat down. The man in the apron placed a small teacup beside him, took his package, and left. The Templar glanced quickly at the tea and back to him, then nodded slightly. He took a sip, and almost choked. It was eye-wateringly bitter tea, but when the Templar raised an eyebrow in question, he downed the rest of it. Seemingly satisfied, Templar Kuusavita leaned forward, and took both of his hands, palms up, in hers. Her eyes sharpened as she stared into his.

“Tell me.”

The Emissary took a deep breath, and said:

“I was in a city. It was like my home, but somehow much older. It was very hard to breathe. There was a house, with no door

“I couldn't see into the house, but just beyond the threshold was a figure. I couldn't see the figure's face; there was something wrong, I couldn't focus on it. The figure was standing very straight, pressing its hands together. It was holding something in its hands. It wanted me to come look, but I was afraid.

“It was dark in the house, but the thing in its hands was bright, painfully bright. I knew if I looked something terrible would happen. I couldn't see into the house. It was dark, but I knew there were other figures behind. But they were all dead. Or not-dead.

“There was a terrible howl in the wind that I'd never heard before, and the sound of branches snapping.

“The figure wanted desperately to tell me something.

“It was very still, but I knew the figure was moving. There was ... *something* about the house. It made things inside as if they were moving so slowly that they seemed to be keeping still, but this was something about the shape of the house. I couldn’t put it into words, and it frightened me.

“After a very long time had passed, the figure’s hands had parted the tiniest sliver, and the light of the thing it was holding burned my body to ash.

“When I opened my eyes again, I was in a field. The grasses were moving, but there was no wind. It was night, but I could see. An animal, long and silver, like a river in moonlight, wound past me. It made no sound, just a rushing noise as it slid across the ground. As it passed my feet, I saw on the ground two bees, locked in a struggle. One was larger than the other, but it was losing. I stood and watched, and piece by piece, the smaller bee pulled off the larger bee’s wings. Then her legs. Then cut off her stinger. After a few minutes, the larger bee had no more limbs to defend herself, and the smaller bee bit her in half between thorax and abdomen, then began breaking the abdomen apart and eating the innards. The antennæ of the larger bee were still moving for a while, but eventually they stopped. I was horrified, but I couldn’t stop watching.

“When it was over and I finally looked up, the figure was standing far away in the field. It spoke, so terribly slowly, and it said these words.”

Here, the Emissary tried to form the words he had heard in his dream, the things the figure had said to him. He did not understand the language, but he had woken in such a terror, the first time he had had this dream, and had heard the figure speak them to him so many times since, that they were etched into his mind in a sharp relief that would remain until his death.

The Templar set his hands down and considered him.

“The figure spoke to you in the language of the Gods. I recognize it, but I can’t tell you what they mean.”

“Who would know?”

“Few in the world study that language anymore. Fewer still understand it. I’m not sure any of my order would know enough to tell you what those words meant.”

The Emissary sank back into his chair.

“And the rest?”

The Templar thought for a while.

"I have heard of dreams like this before. This, too, is something from the Gods. You were right to seek me out."

"What does it mean? I've had this dream over and over, for years."

"I can't give you all the answers you seek. But I can tell you this."

With that, the Templar leaned forward, and whispered something in the Emissary's ear. When she sat back down, his eyes were wide, a look of alarm on his face, and he watched her, very still.

"I can tell you one more thing. It isn't an accident that you came here."

"Of course it isn't. I came here looking for you."

"That's not what I mean."

The Templar's face froze into a mask. Her eyes went blank and distant, staring through him, and her voice dropped to a hissed whisper.

"You're right near the heart of it, and you don't even see."

"I-"

"In the wastes of the desert he drags himself forward to be consumed by the depthless stone, reflected in its surface he will witness the death of his younger self, and will give himself over blind inversion of time, he will stare sightless into the uncoiling future."

The Emissary reached for his teacup. The teacup was gone.

He spun to look for Mauto and Anehlun, but they were gone.

The lights were out throughout the house, with only the lantern in the alcove casting any light.

In horror, he turned back to face the Templar, who said:

"He will pull aside the veil that obscures the vision of the empire of dying stars, and the whole world shall fall into the maelstrom that flows from the obsidian throne. The gate is being made ready for those prepared to see."

The Templar raised both her arms in front of her, and in each hand there suddenly appeared long, thin knives, narrow as knitting needles. With a flick of her fingers she spun the knives around, and drove them straight into her eyes, burying them into her eye-sockets up to the pommel. Beneath her hands, where her eyes had been, suddenly a light blazed out between her fingers, blinding him.

The Emissary screamed and jumped backwards, toppling out of his chair and onto the floor. Everything went dark.

When he opened his eyes again, Anehlun and Mauto were leaning over him, shaking him. The Templar was sitting at her table, unchanged.

“What hap— ... did you see?”

Anehlun looked back at the Templar, who shrugged.

“I don’t know. Templar Kuusavita whispered something in your ear, and then you were just ... staring at her. And then you fell out of your chair, screaming.”

“I-”

“It was horrible. You sounded terrified.”

The Emissary looked at the Templar, who simply said:

“I think that tea was too strong for you.”

They went back to their camp without speaking. It was late, and their supplies were packed onto the carts and ready to depart early in the morning.

None of them slept very well.

**

In the morning, as they finished their breakfast, the Emissary couldn’t focus, couldn’t supervise as they broke the last of the camp. He found himself standing at the river’s edge, staring at the water.

Something still wasn’t right. He couldn’t leave; he was missing some crucial part, something overlooked, out of place.

He thought about what the Templar had said to him the previous night, but none of it made sense, and whatever unease he felt hadn’t started there. It was something earlier.

He thought about the week they had spent here, tracing his way back to their arrival. Something has bothered him that very first day, and he didn’t know what, and it wouldn’t let go of him. Something-

He froze.

His pulse rising, he hurried back to camp, called to the attendants to stay put, and set off back through the gate into the settlement. Pushing his way through the early-morning merchant and caravan traffic, he nearly ran through the narrow alleyways, and finally back to the market square. He froze top of the square, turning in every direction. Finally, with a gasp of relief, he saw what he was looking for.

His guides caught up with him just as he reached the far side of the square, both out of breath. In front of him, slumped on a stool, was the girl selling carvings. He looked at them again, and knew at once that this was what had bothered him so much. He had walked right past them day after day, barely noticing, but now that he looked more closely, it was unmistakable.

To the girl, he said, "where did you get these?"

She was young, still school-age, dirty and underfed. Her one arm was bandaged, the other had the hand splinted. Her clothes were torn. When she looked up, what of her face he could see under her headscarf was scratched in a few places. She squinted at him.

The Emissary turned to his guide, who leaned down and asked her again, more loudly. The guide stood up and turned back, unsure. The Emissary leaned over, gestured at the carvings, and spoke quietly.

"These. They don't come from anywhere near here. Nobody here, or *anywhere* in the dry country, would know how to make these, or how to arrange them like this. I want to know where she got them, and who taught her how to place them like this."

The guide turned to the girl, and asked again with more insistence. But she just shook her head, said a few words he couldn't make out. The guide stood.

"She says they are hers, and they are traditional."

"She's lying."

He leaned down to the girl.

"These," he pointed at the carvings, "not yours. Where did you get them?"

The girl clenched her fists, and said, "they *are* mine."

"They are *not*," he grabbed her by her shoulders, and realized too late he was already raising his voice.

"These do *not* belong to you. They are *holy*. These belong to the ..." he didn't know the local name, so he turned to the guide and spat out, in his own language, "the *Valley Temple*."

The girl froze, her eyes going wide. After a moment she whispered, flawlessly in his own language:

"You ... you speak the City Language?"

For a moment, the Emissary was speechless.

"*You* do?"

Before he had time to react, the girl lunged at him. She leapt over her carvings, broke his grip on her shoulders and wrapped her arms around him so tightly he lost his breath. Stumbling back, he tried to get away from her, but before he could take more than a couple steps she let out a high, keening wail, and burst into uncontrolled sobbing.

His two guides rushed to pull her off of him, but he waved them back. Trying in vain to calm her down, he eventually gave up and stood there, letting her cry herself out on his shoulder. Now that she was standing, he realized she was almost taller than he was. After a while, her knees buckled and she slumped down to the ground, dragging him down with her.

He turned to one of his guides, and ordered him to retrieve the Templar from the Oasis Temple. The guide started off at a run back towards the Temple. To the other, he said:

“Go back to the camp. Tell them our departure is delayed. Bring the medic with her kit. When you bring her back here, take some money and go see if you can find her some clean clothes, and bring those back to the Temple.”

He turned to the girl, who was now breathing through broken, hitching sobs, but had calmed down somewhat.

“What are you doing here?”

“I don’t know.”

“How did you get here?”

“I don’t know.”

“When?”

“About three months ago. I’m not sure.”

She lunged out at him again, grabbing his arm with such force he was afraid she would leave bruises. Her eyes wild, she hissed at him: “*get me out of here.*”

He was frightened by the intensity in her voice.

“Relax. Please. We’ll find a way to bring you home.”

She was crying again, clutching at him like she was drowning.

“*Please.* I can’t stay here. You have to take me home. My parents...”

As she finished crying, the first guide returned with the Templar. The Emissary turned to him, and said:

“This is a citizen of the City. How did she get here?”

The Templar looked at her.

"I don't recognize her, and we have no record of any others from the City this season besides yourself and your attendants. But ... many travelers arrive with the caravans and don't register or have papers. It's possible she arrived with one of them."

"Do you have medicines? Can you treat her injuries?"

The Templar made an apologetic gesture.

"I'm ... afraid the only medic here is away on another call, and won't return for another month."

"Fine. We'll make do with our own. You," he pointed to Mauto, who had just arrived, "gather her things. You," pointing at Anehlun, "can you find the house where we were last night? Good. Go there, and bring Templar Kuusavita to the Temple to meet us."

At this, the Templar from the Oasis Temple's eyes went wide.

"Templar...?"

"Yes. You have an itinerant Templar here, who's passed through your gates for at least a dozen years, apparently without notice. I wonder what else you will prove to have neglected."

But before he could finish, the girl had suddenly turned back towards Mauto, who was moving to gather up her carvings. She produced a knife from somewhere, and was bracing to lunge at him.

"Don't *touch them*."

Mauto looked back at the Emissary, who held her arm.

"Don't worry. They're coming with us, as are you. We need them."

"They are *mine*."

"Yes, and you will have them. But we need to get you fed and changed, and I need to find out how you got here. We have too much for you alone to carry. You can trust him. He's one of my attendants. And he *won't*," he shot a glance at Mauto to drive the point home, "let them out of his sight."

Mauto nodded to this, and the girl relaxed. But only slightly.

By this time the second guide had delivered the medic, and disappeared again into the market. They moved out of the square and to the Oasis Temple. When they arrived, the Templar hurriedly laid out some food, which the girl fell on and devoured. She didn't speak. While she was eating, Anehlun returned to say that Templar Kuusavita had left again for parts unknown, early that morning, and would not be found.

After it seemed the girl had eaten enough, Anehlun took her to the Temple's baths, bringing a change of Temple robes for her to change into. After a while, she came back with a worried look on her face, and summoned the medic. They left to one of the private rooms of the Temple for the medic to examine her.

When she returned, the medic reported that the girl was severely malnourished, had suffered a break in her left hand that she had apparently tried to set herself and which would need to be rebroken and set again once they were back in the City, but which would hold for now. She had suffered numerous cuts and bruises, which she had sustained at the hands of locals. The worst was on her right arm, another below her ribs that had miraculously not been fatal, and various abrasive cuts along her back and legs. Lowering her voice, the medic reported that the girl had suffered violations of a more personal nature, the details of which she would not go into here, but which had been deeply traumatizing and into which she would not be able to inquire more fully until the concomitant emotional wounds had had time to heal.

The girl had apparently arrived alone, with no recollection of how she got into the settlement and, without protection and unable to speak the language, had been marked as easy prey. The medic sighed.

"There is ... one other matter, and you need to see it for yourself."

The girl was backed into a corner, hugging her knees on a bench, when they entered her room. The medic knelt down, spoke quietly to her, and brought her into the light by the window.

She had cleaned up considerably, and the wounds were now more plainly visible without the dirt. And also...

No. It wasn't possible.

The Emissary looked more closely, turned her head back and forth, looked at her hands. He was certain that, if he had looked at her feet, they would have been there as well.

"Who gave you these?"

"I did them myself."

"Impossible."

Indeed, it was. But nevertheless, though they were faint, they were unmistakable: across the girl's face, down her throat, and in the tips of her

fingers, in the raking light of the sun passing into afternoon, he could make out the lines of a Templar of the Valley Temple, as perfect as any he had ever seen.