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On the fourth day, his eyes bleary and his hands aching, the Emissary finally left the archives. He blinked in the light of the upper courtyard: it was approaching midday, and while a few Templars were sweeping the pathways, it was mostly quiet.

His attendants were packing the last of his cases when he returned to his quarters, a rather nice if small house within the Temple complex that he now regretted not being able to use more. He stowed his document case, ate quickly, and headed to the river to bathe. He spent a long time in the waters, washing the grime of the last three days off and working the stiffness out of his body. He dried off lying on the shore, making up for lost sunlight.

By the time he returned it was already mid-afternoon; as it was too late to begin heading upriver, he gave his attendants leave, changed into clothes less likely to be noticed, then followed them out of the Temple complex and into the city's sprawling market.

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The market had originally been built as a complex of several large halls, separated by large squares and enclosed in walls; over generations, as more merchants and traders settled there, stalls had filled in the open spaces haphazardly, and now the market was a sprawling warren of narrow alleys, winding paths, dead ends, narrow entries, and makeshift squares. The large arched gates opened into courtyards where traders could rest or eat, but the rest of the market was shaded in canopies; and a certain familiarity with the place, or the help of one of the guides enthusiastically offering their expert knowledge for a reasonable price, would be needed if one wished to avoid getting lost.

The Emissary, however, knew the market well enough that getting a little lost had its own charm, and could find his way around. The trading halls had gradually specialized over the years to deal in different goods, and the stalls around them tended to follow the same; and so if one remembered that the textiles hall was on the southern end of the market, the farm-goods hall to the

northern end, and the rough locations of the others, one could more or less navigate by what was on offer.

It was also refreshing, for a while at least, to let his focus slip: not concentrating on anything in particular, he found he could pick out small details of the surroundings that he would otherwise have missed. As he passed through the great arched gateway facing the Temple square, into a small inner courtyard where several of the market's inner alleys converged into an open space maybe two dozen paces across, he idly noted the produce for sale was late for the season, that the early-summer produce should already be harvested. There were more homeless and beggars slumped in alleyways and sleeping in the entries of the stalls, of which more were closed than he would have expected. Few people looked up as he entered the courtyard; there was a certain uneasy feeling in the air that he couldn't quite identify, something out of place, as if a popular local merchant had abruptly stopped opening her stall or attending evening prayers, and nobody knew why.

The Emissary put this disquietude to the side, and made his way down one of the alleys leading off of the courtyard. At the first corner he stopped at a stall selling a local variant of a thick bean soup, served with flatbread and a confusing mixture of spices. Unlike the inland varieties, this was less spicy, with a type of mushroom and a chewy, sour kind of fruit added for texture; both of these came from the southeastern islands, and the shopkeeper's wife spoke with the broad accent of the same region. When he finished, he gave back the hollowed-out gourd they were using as bowls, thanked them and paid, and made his way further down the alley.

The first few turns were still mostly smaller items made for foreign travelers, but as he made his way down towards the southeast of the market, past the large portion dedicated to commodities for heavy traders, buying a few small presents to take back home, he found what he had been seeking. Tucked towards the part of the market that backed up on the outer wall farthest from the Temple, with its spires arching high over the tops of the houses surrounding it, their pennants flapping in the sea breeze, a small Sky Temple was hidden away. The entry from the alleyway was unassuming, but the Temple—more of a large shrine—was built in an inner yard surrounded by small pools, the water burbling through channels tracing out complex patterns in the paving stones.

It was approaching evening now, but not yet time for prayers, and so the yard was mostly empty. The Emissary left his shoes along the outer wall, washed his feet in one of the pools, and stepped inside.

Wholly unlike the Temples of home, or the Temple here, the Sky Temple was built in the style of a string of large islands far to the southwest, nearly the opposite end of the world. The stonework, all a dazzling white, turned almost to lace as it reached skyward, more open air than stone, seemingly weightless. It was a trick of masonry that the Templars had refined for centuries, extremely time-consuming to execute; and the effect, even in this small shrine, was breathtaking. The light traced out filigrees of shadow across the paving stones inside the shrine during the day, and on an evening like this, in the reddening light of the setting sun, the white stone blazed in reds and oranges against the purple sky above, bathing the inside of the temple with the warm glow of the heavens.

The Emissary made a small offering, purchased a batch of incense sticks from an attendant, and knelt at the edge of the large, circular pool that sat at the center of the temple. He said his prayers, keeping very still.

Some time passed.

From behind him came a polite cough, and he realized the attendant was now standing a respectful distance behind him. As he rose, the attendant made a bow, and with a gesture of apology informed him that the evening prayers would be starting soon, and he would need to prepare the Temple. He spoke with the clipped, halting accent of the far southwest, the pauses longer than usual; most likely he was on his first missionary assignment after leaving his Temple School. "Deep apologies for the disturbance, honored traveler, but if he would like to remain for prayers, he is more than welcome to do so. This humble servant would need, however, to sweep the space around the pool, and shouldn't wish to disturb the honored traveler's prayers."

The Emissary wiped his eyes.

"That's quite all right. I was finished."

"If this humble servant may inquire: the honored traveler appeared to have been deep in prayer."

"I was."

“It is not customary for visitors of our humble Temple to practice here so devoutly. Does the honored traveler follow the Ways of the Heavens in his home country?”

The Emissary thought a moment as the attendant went about sweeping the small space around the pool.

“I follow other Gods.”

“Might this servant inquire what brings the honored traveler to our small Temple?”

The Emissary sighed.

“It is for my daughter.”

The attendant stopped, and briefly regarded the Emissary anew. There was a curious look in his eyes, but he bowed his head, unwilling to pry into family matters.

“She is ... unwell.”

The attendant now looked up with the wide-eyed, affectionate concern typical of southwesterners, deeply moved to have been permitted to share in the personal grief of a stranger. After a few moments of silence, he clasped his hands together in a gesture of respect, and cast his eyes down in deference to the great emotional weight he placed in his words, which were: “it would be a great privilege to this humble servant of the Sky Temple if the honored traveler would please to remain with us for evening prayers. Though he is young and inexperienced, and his eloquence is small, this servant would offer to pray on behalf of the honored traveler’s beloved daughter.”

It was florid compared to the Emissary’s home country, but it was the manner of the southwesterners, especially devotees of the Sky Temples, and so he nodded in assent. The attendant bowed deeply, his forehead almost touching the paving stones, and then quickly resumed sweeping the Temple. By now a few other attendants were preparing the space, and a few worshippers had arrived as well, seated along the walls around the central pool.

The prayers of the Sky Temples, wholly unlike those of home or of the main Temple here, managed to be both florid and austere. The prayers were sung in a strangely beautiful, close two-voice polyphony, complex in its harmonies but very simple in the individual melodic lines. It sounded weird and rustic, almost primitive, but the Emissary knew the structure of the prayers was subtle and complex, difficult to master. The Sky Temples, open to the heavens, did not fill

their spaces with dense resonances, but spun out threads of harmony that disappeared into the air as soon as they passed, fleeting and endlessly variable. Like the souls of their faithful, or the pennants occasionally flapping from the spires overhead, they were cast to the winds, precious for their transience. The two officiates, a man and a woman, sang in their native language, which he only barely understood. They knelt facing each other, their eyes closed and their foreheads almost touching, breathing the same air together with each breath, on a small stone platform in the middle of the pool. The water caused a strange amplifying effect, carrying sometimes both voices, sometimes only one or the other, sometimes echoing off the walls of the Temple from unexpected angles. When they finished, they stood, faced the small congregation, and spoke in the uncanny hocketed manner of all Sky Temple officiate pairs: alternating every few words, or sometimes speaking in unison, seamlessly and without any apparent signal to one another or sign that they had rehearsed, they spoke a brief sermon. After a few more intervals of speaking or singing, a presentation of offerings, the lighting of incense, the ceremony was over.

Afterwards, as the congregants were leaving, the attendant approached the officiates and, gesturing towards the Emissary, spoke something softly to the two of them. When they approached, the Emissary made a respectful bow and a gesture of greeting. The officiates, standing shoulder-to-shoulder, bowed together and returned an intertwined, four-handed version of the same gesture. They had almost identical robes, both wore their hair long and straight, both had the characteristic honey-colored skin and wide-set, silvery eyes of the southwest, and were now regarding him with identical expressions of sympathy and inquiry.

“Thank you for letting me stay for the ceremony. I haven’t visited the Sky Temples for a long time.”

In his own language, delicately accented, they said: “It was the humble pleasure...”

“...of these servants...”

“...of the boundless Heaven, to ...”

together: “welcome you to their small Temple.”

“These have been given to...”

“...understand, that the honored...”

“...traveler, far from the Temples of his...”

together: "home, ..."

"...has visited our humble..."

"...Temple to offer..."

together: "prayers, for his beloved ..."

"...daughter."

The Emissary bowed his head slightly.

"Though I follow other Gods, my daughter has always been captivated by your prayers. She heard them when we visited the Sky Temple of the Northern Seas when she was a child, and has kept a place in our family shrine for your ceremonial items ever since."

The officiates re-clasped their hands together, an expression of shared grief and complex emotion.

"The honored guest has..."

"...given prayers and offerings..."

"...at our humble temple, and has attended..."

together: "our rites."

"These should be most..."

"...grateful, if the honored guest..."

"...would accept this small..."

"...token, a bundle of..."

"...prayer strips, for his beloved..."

together: "daughter, for her prayers."

At this, the attendant returned with a tightly-wrapped coil of cloth strips. They were finely woven, fluttering in the slightest breeze but able to withstand the strongest winds without coming apart, each woven with different prayers from the Sky Temple's books of scriptures. The southwesterners were known for their generosity and habitual gift-giving, but these were a much more generous gift than usual, generous even by Sky Temple standards.

"This ... this is an opulent gift. I couldn't possibly accept something like th-"

One of the officiates quickly reached out and placed her hand on his, stilling him.

Together: "Please. The honored guest..."

"...has traveled far, and chose..."

"...of all the many handsome..."

"...Temples..."

“...of the city...”

“...to make his offerings...”

“...and give his prayers...”

“...in our humble place. These...”

“...would beg...”

“...the honor...”

“...of presenting him with these,...”

“...the prayers of this Temple...”

together: “for the wellbeing of his beloved daughter.”

“These insist.”

“Thank you. I am deeply moved by your generosity, and my daughter will treasure them.”

Together they intoned: “These ones reserve a humble portion of honor for themselves, that they are able to serve,” and bowed deeply.

It was nighttime now, and the attendants had lit lanterns in the Temple that suffused the spires overhead with a dim glow, flickering from the inside. The Emissary stood for a moment in the yard surrounding the temple, gazing up at the sky; the faint rush of the sea was just barely audible over the gentle flapping of the Temple’s pennants, watching the spires against the few faint clouds drifting past. After a while, he realized the attendant was standing nearby, in the shadows of the inner wall, gazing up with him. He smiled and bowed when the Emissary noticed him, and said:

“This Temple, though small, was very beautifully made.”

“It was.”

“This humble servant had always heard of the beauty of the eastern Temples-by-the-sea, but was ignorant. It’s very different to see it in person.”

“It is. Have you traveled to many others?”

“This humble servant can sadly admit only to very limited travels. This one is still too young to have seen much of the world.” He seemed truly sad about this, but brightened for a moment: “This one has heard, however, that if one wishes to see the masonry of the heavens, then this small Temple is one of the finest examples. This one is very fortunate to have been sent here to attend.”

“It is. I have had the pleasure of visiting a few, and I have to admit that this one, though small, is superb.”

“The honored guest must pardon this one’s intrusion, but is it true that he and his beloved daughter had the fortune of visiting the Temple of the Northern Seas?”

“We did. I was part of a delegation, and brought my family. It was very different: much colder, barely any sunlight at all, much windier. You could barely hear the prayers over the waves crashing. And the outpost is much smaller, so there were very few congregants. But we were able to attend the nighttime prayers, and even saw some of the heavenly lights.”

At this, the young attendant’s eyes widened. The lights of the deep polar regions were famous, and a rare sight: a Sky Temple stood at the northern- and southernmost settlements, offering only nighttime prayers, in the hopes that their singing might be carried away on those strange, alien bands of light reaching down from the stars. They were legendary, but the journey to either Temple was long and difficult, and few ever undertook it; this young missionary most certainly had not.

“They were far beyond the descriptions you’ve read. But don’t worry: I’m sure you’ll have the chance to visit them someday.”

The attendant cast his eyes down and said, softly: “this humble servant is ... unaccustomed to the colder latitudes, and fears he would be ill-suited to the journey.”

“You acclimate quickly, don’t fear. And the Northern Temple has a guest-house that is well-heated.”

The attendant looked up again, and seemed encouraged.

“The honored guest is very kind. This humble servant shall endeavor to visit some day.”

With that, he took his leave of the Temple and made his way back across the market. Taking a different route on the return, he passed several small courtyards, with a few groups sitting out in front of food stalls, talking. Some of them quietly, some boisterously, some of them sitting listlessly and staring at nothing, the shopkeepers seemed mostly to be paying one another their respects, sharing a respite together before heading home. Here, too, they seemed troubled, a hard edge to their expressions, an occasional furtive glance. After several of these, he passed by another small square and stopped at a public house that was frequented mostly by emigrants from the deep south. With

uncharacteristically broad, hairy faces and boldly patterned clothes, they were known mainly for a curious dialect and unusual food. The Emissary took a small pack of mixed cakes and steamed dumplings, wrapped in leaves, and sat on the edge of the pool opposite. He ate quickly, listening occasionally to the regulars grumbling to each other, took an eye-wateringly strong swallow of a strange liquor that was offered to finish his dinner, and made his last way home.

By the time he was back in his quarters it was late, and he was very tired. He packed the prayer strips and the other gifts into his traveling cases, made one last check of the smaller set he would be taking inland, washed quickly from a basin in his room, and went to bed.

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In the early morning, with the air still bearing a light haze from the pre-dawn cool, the Emissary and his attendants were standing in the upper yard of the Temple, facing the gate that opened to the inland road. The Most Venerable Abbess was speaking with two acolytes, and then turned to face the Emissary. He bowed.

“Most Venerable, it has been a great pleasure to have been able to spend our time under your generous care. Thank you very kindly.”

“Emissary, the pleasure was mine. Please travel safely, and give this to the Templars of the Oasis Temple when you arrive.”

At this, one of her attendants handed one of his a small case of documents, which he expected would provide, along with his own, the necessary access to the Temple’s archives.

“In addition, that you may traverse the inland country along the fastest and safest routes, please accept the assistance of two of this Temple’s acolytes, who are familiar with the savannah’s landscape this time of year.”

At this, two attendants with a small cart of luggage wheeled up next to the Emissary’s own cart, and bowed respectfully. The older of the two introduced herself as Hoshi, and explained that she was also familiar with the local dialect, and could help translate if any difficulties should arise.

The Emissary could feel himself tensing, and tried not to show it. There would be no way to refuse the offer without arousing suspicion, and so instead he smiled,

made a gesture of thanks, and said he would be honored for the two guides to accompany them. The Most Venerable Abbess presented him and his attendants with some last gifts before they departed, she and the Templars spoke some prayers, and then slowly the caravan made its way out of the gate, across the northern fields, and then onto the road into the dry country.