

The crowd at the city gate was already large as the sun was barely clear of the horizon, and the air had a lingering chill that was uncommon for summer. The guards were more numerous than usual, watchful.

As the gate opened, the merchants, farmers, indigent, itinerant, and travelers from the dry country all slowly edged forward, shuffling around the carts, jostling to get through the gate and into the city.

The Emissary, dressed in robes he had bought at the oasis market, hunched over and held on to the girl's arm. Anehlun had managed to find some robes that were long enough for her, and with her headscarves covering her face almost entirely, the two of them looked like any of the other merchants waiting to enter the city with their apprentices and attendants.

The Emissary kept his voice low, and said: "keep your gaze down, and relax. Try to look bored and tired."

The girl almost laughed, but she was still weak, and the most she managed was a faint grunt.

They shuffled forward with the others, and gradually they passed through the gate. For a few tense seconds, they could feel the guards' eyes on them, but then they looked elsewhere, and the two of them were through.

"Keep walking slowly until we're out of sight of them."

They made their way across the square before the gate, then up a winding series of alleys and small courtyards. In the end, they couldn't walk much faster anyway. They were both too exhausted, and the streets of the market were small and densely trafficked. By mid-morning they had made their way to one of the market halls on the far end of the city from the Temple, and began checking the nearby public-houses for ship-captains. There were still too few of them for this time of year, and most were heading in the wrong direction. Gradually, as they made their way further into the alleys of the great market towards midday, the girl was getting agitated and he realized he was, too.

They sat down to rest in a shaded corner outside a public-house, and ate some flatbreads that came with various mixtures of vegetables for dipping. The girl was still badly underweight, and the past few days of running hadn't helped.

"We're not finding a ship, are we?"

“Most of the sea traffic this time of year travels eastward; it will be difficult to find a ship heading west on short notice. And even though I saw more ships in the harbor now than when we arrived, there are fewer moored in the harbor than usual for this time of year. I’m not sure what it means, but it’s going to be difficult to find any going the direction we need.

“But I have a few more contacts in the city, and at worst we can take a short passage to the transfer islands, and wait there for a while. There are a few small trading outposts where we could stay.”

“I just want to go *home*.”

“I know you do. I’m sorry we can’t go directly, but it isn’t safe.”

At this, the girl only grunted, and went back to the flatbreads. They ate in silence for a while.

Then:

“Finish up. Pack the rest. I have an idea that might work.”

The small Temple was just finishing midmorning prayers when they arrived, and they waited respectfully in the entryway, not wanting to disturb the ceremony. The Emissary whispered to the girl, “stay quiet. I don’t think they know who I am, so play along.”

When the officiates had finished, and the congregants were milling about, the Emissary approached the young attendant. As they came close, and the attendant recognized them, his eyes went wide and he clasped his hands together in a gesture of relief.

“The honored guest has returned to our humble Temple! This one is most pleased to have the opportunity to meet once more!”

“Thank you, humble servant. I was most deeply moved by your generosity towards my beloved daughter, and your hospitality to me in my travels. It is my honor to visit your graceful Temple once more.”

“Many weeks have passed: the honored guest must surely be recently returned from travels. This one would be most deeply moved to welcome the honored guest, so long in his travels and away from his home, to attend prayers at this humble Temple.” Saying this, he turned to the girl, and his eyes widened slightly, discreetly.

“And is this, if this one might be so intrusive to inquire, the honored guest’s...?”

“Thank you for your hospitality, humble servant. I regret that I have still many journeys to make before I can return home. But this one is, indeed, my attendant, accompanying me on this mission.”

The young attendant apologized for having inquired into the affairs of strangers, and begged forgiveness for the breach of etiquette. The Emissary reassured him that his attendant was long in his service, and sufficiently involved with his official duties that no breach of etiquette had transpired. The girl bowed and smiled beneath her headscarves, and the attendant seemed reassured.

Gradually, as they finally moved on from the pleasantries, the Emissary asked the attendant if any of the Temple’s congregants might be, like him, from the southwest islands and might be traveling there. The Emissary apologetically explained that his own travels had been delayed, and he had missed his scheduled embarkation. His mission obliged him, he explained, to travel westward, but he wished to save face with his superiors and was thus reluctant to ask them for a rescheduled departure. The attendant, sympathetic to his plight, begged a moment to make inquiries.

The attendant spoke for a while with the officiates, and then returned with a small slip of parchment on which they had written, in two nearly identical hands that still distinctly alternated from one to the other, the name of a trader, a congregant of the Temple who would be departing for the southwest islands with the morning tide in two days’ time. The merchant was staying, they had surmised, at one of the public-houses near the southeasternmost market hall, towards the harborside. With profuse expressions of gratitude for the help, and polite refusals of the attendant’s invitations that they might stay longer and attend evening prayer services, they took their leave.

As they made their way toward the harbor, the girl said, “long in your service?” The Emissary gave a tired smile.

“The southwesterners are sincere to a fault, and the adherents of the Sky Temple doubly so. It would be unthinkable for them to lie to the authorities, should any inquire after me, unless I explained so much of our situation that the knowledge of it would ultimately endanger them. I don’t know if the Abbess had me followed the last time I came here, or even whether she knows I attended this Temple. But if they were to ask, the attendant will tell them precisely what we

want them to hear: that I have booked passage further west, and that I was accompanied by one of my attendants.”

Her voice was flat: “You lied.”

“Sadly, a necessary lie, albeit only a partial one. And as I said, to a member of an order that prizes honesty and sincerity very highly and who feels himself personally connected to my affairs. I will need to say very many prayers to atone for this.”

The better part of the afternoon was past, the haze of dust hanging in the air between the market stalls gradually turning a dull red in the fading light, when they finally found the trader. He had been frequenting the tea houses around a public-house near the harbor, just as the attendant had said. His dress was that of a southern merchant of some means, of the sort trading in regular commodities, with a few tastefully understated pieces of jewelry suggesting ambitions and some skill, and some minor but successful trade in luxury goods. Neither ostentatious enough to suggest smuggling, nor so rough as to suggest piracy, he seemed reliable. The Emissary mentioned the reference from the Sky Temple, and the trader seemed at ease.

The negotiations lasted into the evening, over several rounds of tea, but in the end they secured berths for themselves and the rest of the retinue bound for the transfer islands en route westward. The Emissary booked a much longer journey than he expected to take with this ship, but it would help evade detection a while longer. The girl remained silent throughout.

They took a room at a public-house on the other side of the market hall, down a quiet alley just off from one of the main streets. It was a small room, overlooking an alley with a few empty market stalls.

The Emissary turned to go, but when he reached the door the girl seized his arm. Her eyes were wide, her head shaking.

“Where are you going?”

“I have to leave the city before they close the gates.”

“No no no no no. You can’t leave. I don’t know where we are.”

She was talking in a rush, her voice rising.

“I have to get back to our camp outside the city. You have to remain, and board that ship on your one in case we’re delayed.”

*“Don’t leave me here.”*

The Emissary gently pried her hands from his arm.

*“You’ll be fine.”* He handed her a small package.

*“These are our travel papers, some money, and the writ of passage with the ship. It’s leaving in two days. You have enough money here for food for several weeks. In the worst case—no, don’t argue. This is how we have to do it. In the very worst case, if the rest of us are delayed, you can get to the transfer islands and wait for us there. The islanders have public-houses and will take your money. You can eat comfortably for weeks and rest, which you need to do anyway, and we can send word ahead if we can’t meet you by then.*

*“Likel, you need to listen to me. I don’t know how you got to the oasis, or who you are, or where you came from. But it is of the greatest importance that you make it back home safely. If the rest of us are stopped or delayed, for any reason, you need to keep traveling homeward.*

*“You’ve survived on your own with much less than this. If you want, you don’t have to leave this public-house. You can eat downstairs. But I’d suggest going out in the afternoons, and exploring the markets a little. You will need changes of clothes, and the food nearer the markets will be better and more interesting.”* The girl had relaxed a bit, but she still looked frightened.

*“Likel, I need to get back to our camp and gather the rest of them. It’s best if we all board that ship together. I have to go.”*

The girl backed away, still upset but resigned.

*“I won’t be long. Two days’ time, and then you leave with the merchant whether we’re there or not. Do not wait for us. You have everything ... important, with you.”* The girl nodded reluctantly, and he took his leave.

The Emissary hurried to the eastern gate, joining the last traffic leaving the city for the night, and then took a path around the city walls. Climbing the hills, cutting across the fields that surrounded the city and keeping distant from the watchposts, he made his way back to the inland road.

By the time he reached the road, the gates had been shut for the night, the lanterns of the city flickering as they receded into darkness the only movement. The Emissary stayed off the main road, following alongside it on a smaller footpath, keeping quiet and moving quickly in the deepening night.

Liikel huddled in the corner of the room, watching through the window as the city settled into night. In the distance she could hear the occasional raised voice and laughter as groups of revelers drifted past along the main alley. There was a flute-player playing what sounded like music from the country in a classical style, restrained and lonely.

In fits and starts, and then all at once, she finally stopped holding back the tears she didn't realize she'd been suppressing. All the fear and panic of their flight from the high desert loosened its grip on her, and she wept: slumped against the wall in a strange city, truly alone for the first time since she'd found the oasis. Whether from fear, relief, all the traumas of the last weeks, grief, or something else, she didn't know.

When she finally stopped, physically exhausted and emotionally drained, she crawled onto the bed-mat and fell asleep almost immediately.

For the next two days, Liikel rarely left her room. There was a stall around the corner selling a thick bean soup where she went when she was hungry, and she spent the morning of her first day on a short trip toward the southern market-hall to find some traveling clothes that fit and seemed nondescript. She kept her headscarves on whenever she was outside, though most people here didn't seem to wear them; and as she only spoke a little of the local language, she seldom talked. She always hurried back to the public-house, keeping her head down and avoiding passersby.

In her room, with the door locked, the shutters closed, and her knife close at hand, she would unpack her Relics and pray. She did this several times each day, praying with an intensity she'd rarely had before. Attending to every detail of her veneration, moving with a deliberate precision and a studied grace, she anchored herself in her devotions.

On the second day, she visited a bath-house and washed the last of the dirt from the road off, bathing as quickly as possible before hurrying back to her room. She slept most of the afternoon and into the night, repeatedly disturbed by confusing dreams.

She was digging for something, something she needed very badly, hidden in the dirt. It was bitterly cold, and the ground was frozen hard. Her hands were raw, chapped and bloodied in the cold, trying to find whatever it was. As she clawed into the dirt, she could feel the cold seeping into her, making it hard to breathe. Far in the distance she heard deep, menacing cracks like thunder, as if the mountains looming in the distance were breaking. The noise was gradually getting closer, making her tear at the ground more desperately.

Sometimes, she thought she could just barely make out distant voices, saying something urgent and important, trying to get her attention. Her vision narrowed to that small patch of frozen ground, focused on trying to retrieve whatever was buried there.

Something was happening just outside of her sight, but she didn't want to turn to see what it was. She had to ignore it, and keep digging.

She had to uncover it before it was too late. She had to hurry.

There wasn't any more time.