

The sun was already setting ahead of the junk, into the sea between the barrier islands, as the flotilla rounded the last spit before the lagoon and the temple came into view. It was a warm evening in the dry season, and the waters before the temple were low. They would have to debark well out among the moorings and go the rest of the way into the temple complex on tenders. As the junk was drawn in to the mooring pylon, the Emissary waited next to his cargo and took stock of the lagoon.

The water was dazzling in the sunset, rose and green and blue, clear as glass. The land all around rose gently into low hills, covered with mosses in a dozen different shades of red and brown and pale green, broken up by a few sparse stands of low trees. At the head of the lagoon, alongside the temple complex, the tidal flats gave way to a small estuary: the endpoint of a river that ran from oases deep in the dry country across the savannas to the coast. In the wet season the trees and scrub would flower, and the hills would flame to colors that the dry-country poets spent their lives describing with effusive metaphors. But it was dry now, and the hills were subdued. The Emissary preferred the subtlety of the dry season, the gentle contrasts between sea, moss, river, tree. He was accustomed to more austere landscapes, and the riots of flowers in the wet season were ... oversaturating.

There were few ships for this time of year, even under the circumstances. Mostly trading ships, there were a handful of lighter coastal runners, a few island-hoppers, and one or two oceangoing vessels. He recognized the banners of only a few of the greater nations of the seas, missing some that would normally have ships at the temple's port. It was disquieting. He made a note to himself to ask the abbess about it later.

At the head of the lagoon, along the mouth of the river, the temple complex loomed up over the water, reaching out onto the tidal flats before it on rows of thick stone piles driven into the mud, and snaking up the hillside behind. The temple's orderlies were already lighting the lanterns along its paths, flickering in the dying sun. The buildings themselves were opulent, here made of wood, decorated with polished metal and glass, dazzling in the fading light. The central

shrine had a traditional thatch-style roof similar to the shrines of his home, but here was covered with wooden shingles, elaborately painted. Black and red and gold and various shades of blue and green, he realized that it would always stand in contrast to the country around it: in the dry season it would stand out against the hillside, brilliant and shimmering, while in the wet season it would seem like a cool spot of shade under a bright sun, a point of rest, and a reminder of the principles of contrast, equilibrium, and change.

The stevedores who loaded his cargo into the tender were darker-skinned than people in his country, thin and wiry. Although the climate here was more amenable and the summer days a bit longer, the soil was poor; and the dry country behind was even less hospitable than his home. The temple complex was an important trading point between the various seafaring nations, a point of transfer to caravans bound inland or simply to conduct exchanges between merchants. Alongside the temple was one of the largest markets among the islands: a small city that had grown up around it to serve the captains and their crews. The temple had grown wealthy tending to the spiritual needs of travelers and pilgrims, the school it had built had trained a small army of functionaries in writing and sums, and even provided mediators to act as neutral parties for difficult exchanges. Its enormous size and lavish furnishings testified to its stature.

He had traveled privately, joining a small trade flotilla on its way across the southwestern seas, but he would stay behind when the merchants shipped out, and continue inland instead. He thought about the journey ahead and sighed: he had been traveling since winter, leaving at the first break in the snows, and still had a long journey ahead.

He rode with his cargo on the tender, gradually pulling in to the great stone pier built out across the shallows. The stevedores loaded his cargo onto several carts and followed him up from the berth, joking to one another in a language he didn't quite understand. An acolyte from the temple was waiting for him when he ascended to the pier's spine: a broad stone viaduct with moorings for tenders on both sides, it was more a road, with stevedores and their cargo in carts or on their backs trundling up and down its length. After making their bows and examining his travel documents, the acolyte made a gesture of welcoming,

turned, and headed towards the temple beckoning the Emissary to follow. The Emissary fell in alongside him.

“Emissary, we are honored to receive you. The Most Venerable Abbess Kokkondayama Usassika extends her greetings, and would be pleased to welcome you personally this evening after prayers.”

“Thank you. Please inform the Most Venerable Abbess that it will be my honor to attend.”

The acolyte bowed slightly. “You have done us the rare honor of a personal visit, and we are flattered that you would go to such trouble in these difficult times. I trust the voyage was not overly long or uncomfortable?”

The Emissary smiled. He was accustomed to much harsher climes, and rougher travel. The acolyte knew this, of course; and so the pleasantries were only intended to present himself as an attentive host of the temple, and not inquiring on its behalf. There was however a second, unvoiced question hidden in the acolyte’s pleasantries, and if perhaps the acolyte had meant something more than polite formalities, the emissary couldn’t be sure; he chose to take the question at face value, thankful for the hospitality. The people of his home were more pragmatic in their greetings, even in the observation of propriety and formality.

“The seas were calm and the winds favorable. We kept sight of the islands, and made the passage without trouble. It was even restful. Thank you.”

The acolyte smiled and lowered his eyes, and walked alongside him in silence.

They reached the harborside, and as they walked along the piers the Emissary scanned the stalls of the markets. With some unease, he noted that virtually every alleyway was crowded with people: slumped in doorways, children sleeping on laps, countless destitute people crowded up against the narrow strip where harbor traffic passed along the wharf. Dirty, with hollow, blank faces, staring listlessly at the water, at the ships, at nothing. There were refugees here from the dry country, emaciated masses of the destitute with nowhere left to go, crowded into the alleys of the markets, hoping for salvation; hoping, or no longer even that. As they walked, a small crowd of children hovered around them, asking questions, making offers to sell something or begging in languages he didn’t understand. The acolyte looked apologetic.

“We have more of them here every year. The Temple does what it can to provide for them, but there are often too many, even for us.”

He nodded towards the children.

“They are asking for some money for food. Ordinarily we would recommend making a donation to the Temple’s charitable works, but sometimes a small gift to one of the needy is not improper. As I’m sure you know, they very desperately need help.”

The acolyte reached into a pocket in his robes, and brought out some small coins, handing them out to the children that milled around them. They stopped for a while at an archway into an alley, and as the acolyte gave out money to the children around them, the Emissary thought for a moment, then opened one of his bags, and brought out some dried flat-cakes he had brought with him. Breaking it up into pieces, he handed out what he had to the some of the people slumped around the arch’s columns. A woman, a child sleeping on her lap, took a piece and looked up at him with a look of something like confusion. He smiled, and said, “please take this. I’m sorry it isn’t more, but I hope it helps.” The woman took the cake, and made a gesture of thanks; turning to the acolyte, she said something. She looked very tired.

“What did she say?”

The acolyte thought for a moment, and said: “she asked me to pray for relief.”

“Did she say from what?”

“No. But there are many reasons for the needy. Such are the times.”

“Shall I say prayers as well?”

The acolyte smiled apologetically, looked down for a moment, and then:

“That won’t be necessary. But thank you.”

“I would like to help.”

“You see, it is ... complicated. In her language, what I translated as ‘relief’ has several nuances. She might be asking for an ease of suffering in hardship. She might be asking to die. She might be asking, if you will pardon the saying, to expel the foreign demons. She might be asking for the world to end. I would not feel comfortable asking you to take part in a prayer for relief if it might be the case that you are the things from which she seeks deliverance.”

The acolyte made a bow of apology. The last of his coins distributed, he turned towards the temple and continued without another word.

That evening, after his cases had been delivered to his quarters, the Emissary walked down a small path at the rear of the temple, to the river. As the waters turned and spread out into the estuary, there were small pockets that had been cleared out for people to bathe. Stones had been arranged for bathers to sit, or wash their garments. Slightly upriver, ropes had been hung across the river, from which cloth partitions hung, sectioning off smaller pools for dignitaries and other noteworthy visitors to bathe in privacy. The Emissary waded out into one of these, leaving his robes on the rocks along the bank, carrying the small pot an attendant had given him. Small lanterns had been strung across the water, and in their flickering light he settled into a small pool.

The water was cool; not like the icy rivers he was used to from his home country, and quite pleasant in the warm evening air. In the distance, just barely audible above the murmuring of the river, he could hear a few others talking quietly as they washed. Overhead, the Eyes were high in the heavens, and they bathed the river in a pale, green light.

Inside the pot were stones that had been heated on a brazier, and a packet of herbs. He took the ladle slotted into the side, scooped a few helpings of river-water, and poured them onto the stones. They sizzled, and after the pot was a quarter full, he closed it again to let the herbs steep. He sat on a stone, half in the water, and contemplated the printing on the curtains. He looked back up to the Eyes.

The Emissary wondered if the people here thought of them watching over, whether they felt them to be a protective presence in their lives, or whether they regarded the watchers with a certain misgiving. He thought about the woman at the market, about her strange request for deliverance from afflictions unstated. He wondered if the acolyte, thus the temple, had put the whole encounter on as a sort of theater for his benefit. If they were trying to send him some message to take back to his government, or carry with him inland.

He dipped a cloth into the pot and scrubbed himself off. The herbs were pungent, and the hot water soaked deep into his skin. He felt himself releasing a tension he hadn't realized he'd been carrying. He poured the last of the water over his head, packed everything into the pot, and took a last quick dive into the water before making his way back to the riverbank.

By the time he was back in his quarters and dressed, the bell was ringing for the last evening prayers, and he was obliged to stand at the rear of the temple,

arriving just before the ceremony started. He couldn't see the Abbess, but imagined she was somewhere near the front, seated among the Templars. The ceremony was little more than a few short prayers; he left a small offering in the shrine by the entry, and headed back to his quarters quickly, to await the Abbess' summons.

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The Most Venerable Kokkondayama Usassika, Abbess of the Temple, had decorated her receiving room sparingly, but the few items she chose to display were ancient and of exceedingly rare quality. There were no relics of any Gods here, but small items of ceramic or stoneware or woodwork had been carefully placed in niches around the room, with little else to distract from them aside from the shelves of scrolls and codices behind a raised platform bench at the opposite end of the room.

As he was ushered in, an attendant was setting a tray with a teacup and a small glass of some pale rose-colored liquid on a small table next to a chair facing the Abbess' bench. The attendant bowed as he sat down, and silently made her way out. He sat down and waited.

Before much time had passed, a pair of doors on the side slid open. Two attendants entered and stood on either side. Then the Abbess entered; the Emissary rose to greet her, she waved him down, and sat on the bench in front of him. A third attendant brought in a tray with the rest of the tea set, poured a cup for the Abbess, and set the tray on the bench. She filled the Emissary's cup, and placed a small plate of cakes and some fruits on the table. As she left, the two attendants closed the doors, and stood at either side.

Abbess Kokkondayama was about average height, the few hairs poking out from under the cap the Templars all wore starting to gray. She seemed at ease, and friendly, but the Emissary could see a sharp attentiveness in her eyes, and found himself slightly anxious all the same.

The Abbess gestured to his tea.

"Please, honored Emissary, let us drink a while together. I've no doubt, that despite your refreshments, you would like to sleep in a bed on solid ground once more. Let me not keep you from this any longer than necessary."

“Most Venerable, thank you for your hospitality. The Temple has been most accommodating. I am honored to have an audience with you.” He took a sip of his tea: it was a lean woodland tea, fresh from the western countries, it left a slightly sweet-sour aftertaste that lingered longer than expected. He took a second look at the cup, reevaluating it. The Abbess had refined tastes.

“I have also brought you a small gift in thanks.” With this, he reached to a small box he had brought with him. Without a sound, one of the attendants was at his side, took the box with a slight bow, and brought it to lay on the Abbess’ tray. Inside was a small codex, with a fine woven binding, dark with age, wrapped in gold-threaded cloth. The Abbess carefully opened the cover and examined the first page.

“The Magistrate has spoken frequently of your extensive learning, and your fondness for books. This is an old collection of histories and mythology, from early in our nation’s days, collected and commented by one of our great authors of the classical period. I had hoped you had not yet read it.”

“I have not. Indeed, I have never even seen a copy. Of course I’ve heard of these, and had always been interested to read them, but I’m given to understand that copies are exceedingly rare.”

“They are, Most Venerable. The script is very old: there are few among us who can read it, and even fewer who can copy it without error.”

“Is that not something that your Temple would teach?”

“It is, Most Venerable, but as with everything, the Temple’s resources are scarce. The Temple still keeps to the rites, but we have fewer Templars than in previous ages. There are only so many who can copy the older scripts, and books such as these are rarely copied.”

“Then you must have gone to considerable trouble to acquire this one, even more to part with it.”

“I am proud that my travels bring me in contact with a number of discerning collectors. It was my pleasure, and I am glad that it pleases you.”

“Indeed it does.” She gestured to the bench on the other side of the table: “Please. Let us not be so formal. Come. Sit.”

As he rose, an attendant took his tray, and placed it on the bench alongside the others, between him and the Abbess. As she rose, the Abbess nodded slightly to her, and with that the two attendants quietly left, closing the doors behind them.

“Now. Try these cakes; they, like the tea, came on a boat from the western countries the week before you arrived. Please be at ease. And tell me why you are here.”

The Emissary looked up from his tea, and realized the Abbess was watching him intently, animal-like, her expression both placid and full of a latent energy, waiting for something to transpire. He was immediately nervous, and struggled for a moment to retain an outward calm. The air in the room was suddenly very still, the only sound the occasional guttering of the lanterns in their cases.

He let two exhalations pass to steady his breathing, and said:

“As you are aware, the Magistrate was recently inaugurated.”

“Indeed she was. It was ... two years ago, if I’m not mistaken.”

“You are correct, Most Venerable. She has asked the diplomatic corps to conduct visits with our various trading partners, and I have been tasked to travel here, and hence inland, to review our various trade agreements.”

“You have? Is that what she asked you to do?” The surprise in her voice was feigned, and the Emissary felt her eyes boring into him as she leaned forward a barely perceptible degree. A bead of sweat shot down the hollow of his chest, and he knew this next part of the conversation with the Abbess was crucial, and that she was, by reputation, frighteningly perceptive. He had to hope that either she didn’t see through him (very unlikely), or that if she did, that she would be ... accommodating. He felt his heart racing.

“Yes, Most Venerable. The Magistrate has directed me to ensure that our trading shipments of the last several years match our records and the signed agreements. I have a writ from the Magistrate herself, and hope that we can come to an agreement regarding the Temple’s assistance in this matter.”

In a whisper that was barely audible, the Abbess said: “*is that so?*”

He froze. There was a smile in her voice, but also a barely contained force underneath it, like the light of the sun on a clear summer day, burning into him. She *knew*, she had to, and all that was left now was to see whether she would go along with him, or have him drowned in the lagoon, buried up to his neck just below the tide line to die a hand’s breadth from air as the waters rose.

He had been about to reach into his robes to retrieve the packet of documents, but the sound of a floormat creaking just outside the doors told him the attendants were just on the other side, one of them subtly shifting her weight. They were waiting for something, and he could feel their focus on the two of

them seated on the Abbess' bench, smothering him. He thought better of it, and kept still.

After a few agonizing seconds, the Abbess leaned back again.

"I'm sure the acolytes in the Temple library would be more than happy to provide you with whatever records you need to examine." She smiled warmly.

He struggled not to show any outward sign of his relief, to maintain an outwardly calm and pleasant demeanor, despite the tension rapidly dissipating from the room. They were, after all, merely discussing diplomatic formalities, the sort of audits that every new government undertook, a diplomatic tour against which none of its trading partners would object. He had to act as if it were so, to maintain the image. To preserve the fiction.

"Now, Emissary. I am pleased to hear from our acolyte that you were graciously charitable to some of this city's less fortunate ..."

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That night, the Emissary's dreams had been strange and confusing, waking him several times with encounters of ambiguous tension with unidentifiable figures. He did not sleep well.

The next morning, before sunrise, the Emissary made his way in the dim light across the Temple complex to the archives. The sky was a deep reddish gray, a few Templars going about their tasks in the dim pre-dawn light. A few lanterns were still lit, but it was mostly still. There was a light haze in the cool morning air.

At the entry to the archives, a sleepy-eyed acolyte was already waiting for him, and led him to the lower levels. The Temple's earliest quarters had been carved out of the hillside, the first Templars' cells rough, stone-lined rooms with barely enough space for a bed and a small table. The archives, built above, now used them mostly for storage, but they were also convenient for work requiring privacy or discretion. The acolyte led him to one of the cells that had been set aside for such work, informed him of when he might expect to join the Templars for meals, or that he might request to have his meals delivered in recognition of his diplomatic status.

He thanked the acolyte, and then handed him the list of the records he was to examine.

For the next three days, pausing only to sleep on a rough bed in a neighboring cell, with instructions to allow no disturbances except on instruction from the Abbess herself, the acolyte's leaving his food on a table outside the door, as quickly and discreetly and meticulously as he could, the Emissary did his work.