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The girl knelt by the body for a long time, not saying anything.

The sun was edging towards the horizon, and the Emissary said:

“We’re going to have to get moving. Anehlun, Mauto, we’ll go back to the public-house and get the carts, and find another boat.”

Anehlun looked to the west: “it’s almost nightfall. It’ll be dark by the time we get there.”

“Probably for the best. We’ll have to travel downriver by night from here on, and take shelter during the day. We don’t know how far ahead the other guide is, or whether the Temple will have spotters. You,” he said, turning to the remaining attendant, “head downriver with her and retrieve the longboat and bring it back. When we meet up we’ll distribute the cargo. We’ll have to leave the carts here.”

As the others got ready to head out again, the Emissary realized the girl still hadn’t moved. He sat down beside her. She didn’t turn to face him.

After a while, she quietly said, “I’m not leaving him like this.”

“I’m sorry, but we can’t take him with us.”

“It’s not right.”

“Liikel, under normal circumstances I’d-”

“No. I told you. I’m not leaving him here without proper burial rites. You know which Gods we follow, even if *he* didn’t. You know what They require.”

The Emissary looked at her. Her shoulders were set. He sighed.

“Very well.”

He turned to the attendant and was about to send him downriver on his own.

“I’ll need his help.”

“Very well. Stay with her, and help her send the guide on his way. The rest of us will head upriver. When you’ve finished, get the boat and come back to meet us. You two, let’s go. We’ll have to hurry; with luck, one of the shelters we passed on the way down will have another boat. We’ll have to steal one if we can’t convince the innkeeper to sell a private one.”

He sighed again. He was so tired.

“Hopefully he’ll have some tea. We have to get as far downriver as we can before daybreak.

It’s going to be a long night. Let’s go.”

With that, they left the girl and the attendant, and set back upriver at a jog.

It was long past sunset when they finally found another riverboat, a large outrigger, and loaded their supplies and headed back downriver. Another hour later, they met with the girl and the attendant, re-distributed the supplies, and the small flotilla made its way back towards the harbor.

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The night was long and still, with only the occasional sound of the water lapping at the boats, the poles burbling in the current as they steered around bends and pushed back from the shore. They drifted, lit only by starlight and the Eyes watching over.

Most of the group slept, with one on each boat keeping watch at the tiller and steering their course. The Emissary watched the savannah drift by in the greenish black and thought that the scene would be incomparably beautiful, if only he were free of the fear gnawing at him. The thought that any bend before them might conceal an ambush, that at any moment a flight of arrows might whistle out of that incomparable night and cut them all down, festered.

His attendant, with him on the outrigger, wasn't sleeping.

"You should get some rest. We'll have to sleep in shifts during the day and keep watch, and there's at least as long a night as this tomorrow."

The attendant spoke quietly. They had to be cautious that they weren't heard as they drifted by in the dark, and he understood this. But there was something else. He was ... troubled.

"I know I need to sleep. I can't."

The Emissary had been watching the girl, slightly ahead of them in the longboat. She had stayed mostly asleep, except for one bend in the river, as they passed those strange, skeletal ruins. She had sat bolt upright and stared intently at them, for as long as they passed them, trying to make them out in the depth of night. After they rounded the next bend and the ruins passed out of view, she curled up in the bow of the longboat and fell back asleep. The Emissary wasn't sure what it had meant.

"What she went through before we found her, I ... can't imagine. But as bad as it was, I'm sure she never had to shoot someone down. Someone running from

her. I'm sure she didn't ever ... dispatch a person like that. I'm sorry I put her through that, and I owe her an explanation for it. For why it was necessary. I owe to all of you an explanation. I'm sorry to all of you, for everything. For everything going wrong." He sighed.

"Everything has been falling apart since we found her."

"Why? Why are we running like this? Emissary, in all of our missions, I've never seen you like this. You're ... afraid."

"I am."

"Of what?"

He watched the shore drift by.

"The guide."

"Yes?"

"You helped her bury him. Tell me about it."

The attendant thought a while.

"It was ... strange."

"How did you bury him?"

"In the river. We floated him out to where it was deep, and weighted him with rocks and sank him. It won't hold forever, but maybe long enough."

"Maybe longer than you think. What else?"

The attendant struggled to put his thoughts into words.

"It's not the running, or the danger, that's the reason I can't sleep. It's ... she performed a rite over him."

"Yes. How did she do it?"

"She laid him out, and we wrapped him up, and then she arranged some of her carvings around him."

"Like the ones she was selling."

"Yes. No. Not exactly. These were different. Better made."

The Emissary gritted his teeth.

"That's what I was afraid of."

"What?"

"Those carvings? They weren't carvings. They were Relics."

"Relics'? Of what?"

"Of the Dead Gods."

"Relics. Of the *Dead Gods*. Here, with her? That's impossible."

"Indeed it is. And yet ... What then?"

“She ... sang something.”

“A funerary song?”

“Maybe. I’m not sure. I couldn’t understand it.”

“It wasn’t City Language?”

“No. No, it was something else. I didn’t recognize it.”

“I doubt you would.”

“Why? What’s so important about her? How does somebody like her end up with Relics, all the way out here? Is that why they’re chasing us?”

“I don’t really know for certain, but I’m fairly confident they don’t know about those Relics yet, or we’d be in much worse trouble than we are. Still: the funerary rite makes me worry we’re in even greater danger than I feared.”

The Emissary realized he was struggling to stay awake.

“We’re going to have to find shelter and hide the boats sometime before sunrise. Somewhere we can wait out the daylight, and maybe sleep a while. Once we’re rested, we’ll need to discuss some things. We have to make plans.”

The sky was turning a hazy, dull lavender as they finally found a small tributary and dragged the boats onto the shore, moving as quietly as they could to hide the boats from the main branch, silhouettes against the predawn sky rippling off the water. They rolled the smaller boat over, stowed the supplies underneath, and tucked their sleeping mats along the hull of the outrigger’s cabin and collapsed into sleep. Mauto took the first watch of the day.

When darkness finally fell again, they were better rested, and they ate a small breakfast. Once the supplies were loaded back onto the boats and they were ready to head out, the Emissary sat them down.

“We’ll arrive at the outer edge of the harbor Temple’s lands by morning. It won’t be safe to continue downriver any farther than that. When we’re just out of sight, we’ll stow the boats again, and in the evening the rest of you will have to keep watch there as Liikel and I head into the city and secure passage.”

He looked to Anehlun and Mauto, who nodded.

“I know, it’s not a good arrangement. But she’s the only one the Templars haven’t seen. They’ll be looking for me with a group of attendants, and if we’re inconspicuous enough, and are arriving earlier than expected, they might not give an old man and a nondescript foreigner a second glance. Anehlun, you have some spare robes, you’ll have to lend her a set; can you find her something that

might fit reasonably? Something plain, for travel. Liikel, you'll have to leave most of your supplies with the boats, but we'll come back. No, let me finish: you can bring a travel bag; you only have to leave the winter clothes, the rope, the bow. The ... smaller items, you can bring with you, but keep them close to you and out of sight."

Liikel sat with her arms wrapped around herself, not looking at anything.

"They're my family's Relics. I *won't* let them out of my hands."

"Pray that you don't. They put us all in danger. The Abbess, were she to learn of them, would kill us all without hesitation to acquire them. If anybody had recognized them, if *anybody* figured out that you had the originals in your possession, you would have been dead weeks ago."

"They're *just Relics*."

"Don't ever refer to them as such, not here."

He sighed.

"You noble families. It's unimaginable your parents could be so careless. How they could let a child travel halfway across the world with some of the most precious Relics I've ever seen?"

"We're not nobles. My parents are just merchants."

By now Mauto, Anehlun, and the third attendant were all staring at the girl, eyes wide in disbelief.

"If they are, and they have *those*, they're the richest family in the City. In the country. *Nobody* has those; or, if they do, they keep them well hidden. I've only ever seen anything comparable in the Temple itself. How could they have been so foolish?"

"I was the first to take them away from home. They'd never been on pilgrimage before."

The Emissary shook his head in disbelief.

"Pilgrimage. What were they thinking, playing at 'pilgrimage'? Nobody takes Relics like that out. Not since the wars."

"Wars'?"

"Yes, the *wars*. Didn't they teach you about those in school?"

"I ... wasn't very good in City School."

"Evidently not. In any case, they happened long before you were born. There were hard times, for many years. And ever since, we don't act so carelessly with Relics, and *certainly* not with Relics like that. What few we have left are jealously

guarded, and never seen. The Magistrate will be very interested to learn how your parents let you travel, alone, wandering so far into the dry country with them and nearly losing them.”

“I didn’t lose them.”

“You were a month away, maybe two, from starving to death. What then?”

“I don’t know.” She coughed and fell into a sulk.

“Yes. Well. We’re going to have to be more careful. You don’t yet have your strength back, and none of us will be safe if we’re discovered. So we travel as quietly as we can, stay out of sight, try to book passage and get at least as far as one of the transfer islands before anybody notices. With any luck we’ll slip through undiscovered.”

They hardly spoke as they pushed the boats off from the shore, and turned back into the main river and headed downstream.

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Geni eased onto the bench and sighed. There was a small brazier next to him, and from this he lit a reed for his pipe. He leaned back against the wall, looking out into the scrub country beyond. His head hurt.

Aovi, his wife, stepped out from the light of the entry and onto the terrace next to him, drying her hands.

The night was still warm, the stars faint, and the small patch of farmland that surrounded the house was difficult to make out in the dim green glow of the Eyes. He had been late getting back from the village, and it had been a long journey, and now all he could do was sit.

Down the hill from where he sat, along the gentle slope towards the river, he had spent the last several seasons tending a few groves of nut trees. They were hardy and could manage in the dry, rocky soil.

Aovi followed his gaze outward, taking in all the land they had worked so hard the last few years to bring to life.

“The merchant?”

Geni closed his eyes. He didn’t want to have this conversation. Not yet.

“He had two bundles to sell.”

“Two’? But we need at least eight. You know that. Harvest season will come in a few weeks. We’ll need even more by then.”

“I know. He said there were some problems with his suppliers. They should have another shipment arriving from the harbor next week. I’ll go back.”

Aovi furrowed her brow, looking over the groves.

“The deliveries have been getting later every year.”

“I know. But we’ve always managed so far.”

Aovi sighed. From inside the house there was a faint cough.

Geni turned to the entry.

“How was he today?”

“Better. He’s eating a little more.”

“That’s good. I think the worst of it is past. When I go back to the village, I can talk with the medic. Maybe he can trade us some more of the herbal tea. That seemed to help.”

“See if you can. He’s eating more, but he’s lost weight.”

Geni unclenched his jaw, and realized he was avoiding looking his wife in the eye.

“We’ll be all right. You’ll see. When harvest comes, we’ll have more to sell, and we can pay back the merchants for the last few weeks.”

“You know it would be easier if they weren’t cheating you.”

“Heart, they aren’t cheating us.”

“They *are*, and you know it. They’ve never accepted us here. I’d bet you a handful of coins he has a dozen bundles in his warehouse, saved for the other farmers. For the locals.”

“It’s not as bad as that. There really are problems with deliveries. The shop was half-empty. Heart, please: I know it’s difficult—”

“It doesn’t need to be *this* difficult. I just hate to see them treat you like this. As if our crops aren’t the same as theirs. As if—”

Geni took her hand, which had clenched into a fist. She relaxed somewhat.

“We knew it was going to be hard here.”

“I know.”

“But we’ll make it through to harvest, and then things will be easier.”

His wife sighed.

“I hope you’re right.”

“We’ll spread what we have, try to be sparing. It isn’t perfect, but it’ll be enough for the trees to last another week. I can go back into the village, and he’ll have more to sell.”

“I hope so.”

“You’ll see. We can always sell th—”

“No. You’re not going to sell them. Not now. I’ll sell my dowry first.”

“We can’t sell that. Your parents...”

“I know. So you’re right: we’re going to have to hope for the best. We’ll find a way.”

Geni let go of Aovi’s hand, and she went back inside. In the back of the house, he heard her talking softly, murmuring comfort.

He leaned back and closed his eyes again. In the end, despite everything, she was the stronger one.

It would have to last. He thought about the trees along the length of the slope, and at the same time tried not to think about them. About how the ones on the western side were already starting to drop their leaves. How half of them had dropped their flowers without producing any nuts at all. About the one row where the roots had gone dry and brittle, the whole tree threatening to break off at the base of the trunk.

He tried to unclench the tightness in his chest. Tried to keep his breathing steady. Tried not to weep. Tried to stay strong and keep his family’s spirits up. They had moved here to be closer to Aovi’s family, to be closer to others that looked more like her and their son. They had a small settlement here, near the edge of the Temple’s holdings, and they had hoped they could make a decent living here, and their son wouldn’t have as much troubles here as he’d had in the City.

But the villagers and the other farmers hadn’t been as welcoming as they’d hoped, and they’d struggled. Eventually they’d settled for this farm, far on the outskirts of the village. He knew something about tending groves from growing up in the east, and these trees were suited to the climate. But they depended on fertilizer, and good rains during the wet season, and Geni could see their whole farm, year by year, gradually slipping away from him.

But where, now, could they go if it failed? Their son was too weak to travel, and they were in debt to the merchants. They wouldn’t be able to start over. They

wouldn't be able to get travel documents from the village council, and without them no other community would take them.

He had to hope, then, that this farm would hold out. That in the end, *he* could hold out, until better times.

He leaned back against the house and turned his gaze skyward. Far above him, the Eyes watched over the farm, impassive as always. He stayed that way a long time.

Had he looked out over the groves, toward the river, he would have seen two boats, sliding past in the night, silent in the current. They passed by, unnoticed, and disappeared around a bend and into the night.