

Ephemera:

How the Arrogant are Wiser

“Any man can have knowledge. Its availability is what makes it so narrow-mindedly pursued, squabbled over and about, exploited and treasured. Fewer men, however, can take what they know and make it into what they do not know; and yet, it is that ability which furthers the path of the whole of mankind, without which leaves us the skill only to walk the same tired circles.”

The secluded crook of an alleyway wasn't in any way special, but in his mind, he'd gratefully dubbed it “Providence”. He'd scavenged a blanket-sized piece of ripped fabric among its muck, and half of it had already been stripped to make quick bandaging for his injuries. The rest was used for concealment and warmth, wrapped hood-like over his upper body. With his legs tucked in front of him and arms folded over his chest, he struggled to steady his mind in the aftermath of Rowan Manor and prepare himself for what lay ahead.

By now, his description would be known to all the militiamen in Riviem. Come daybreak, every man or woman to come by a town crier would learn of his misdeeds as well. If Azrael had not gotten to outside by then, there would be nowhere that he could hide from retribution. But he had few avenues to depart from Riviem. The six city gates were certain to be watched by the Lion's Sons. He knew of basement passages kept for the use of desperate criminals like himself - but those were maintained by the men of the Couriers.

Venting a frustrated sigh, Azrael thought harder. A massive channel branched through the city from the Timbegrin River, allowing trading barges to ship their goods to Riviem. If he could stow away on one of those – but ah, they would be on the watch for such a trick. No luck!

The channel wasn't a bad thought, though. Some years back, when Azrael had done some late-night tavern crawling, he'd met a cagey drunk who spoke of an escape in the canal. “If a soul were so driven,” the man had muttered to him, lips flecked with spit and breath soaked with beer, “he could swim - far under the water, and against the current! - to reach the river-gate. He counts six bars from the bottom, makes his way to the far right, there's a deep tunnel through rock that'll fit a man through.” He'd cackled then, playing with a bit of metal around one finger. “Dug out in wartime, you know, by Vel spies; bit of a story there, I'll tell you what!”

Azrael wasn't entirely confident that the information was good – but it was the best he had. However, if such a tunnel did exist, he had to assume that the Couriers were aware of it. They'd been at least two steps ahead of him this entire night, and he couldn't afford to underestimate them again. If he found the tunnel proved true, then the moment he was gasping for air outside the city, they would be upon him.

He needed to plan further, find something that would surprise them. Exhaling, Azrael tilted his head back, murmuring to himself. “They're not omniscient. They have to overlook possibilities. There's an opening somewhere, I just have to find it. But, *where...?*” he paused, wrinkled his brow. They'd taken all his supplies, and he'd always been dependent on the stores of the Couriers – *what if they're counting on that? Can I make it into an advantage?* If all his escape called for were something within his ability to procure – such as some decent lengths of rope - then he might have a chance....

But Providence, sadly, wouldn't be provident enough for what he needed. He pulled his face forward just enough to survey the alleyway before standing, and then began to walk. For what he needed, Azrael would need to go to the docks of Market Boulevard.

The streets grew labyrinthine the nearer to the dockyard he traveled, and were cluttered by ancient debris. More than once during the walk, he was forced to hunch for cover by some odd rubbish while booted steps drew near, taking refuge until the danger had passed. Soon, he'd come close enough to the docks that he could hear the creaking of barges tied in the river.

His assessment was grim. Azrael was in a long alley, devoid of activity, that was nearly parallel to the massive street running alongside the channel. He could hear voices from the river; the boulevard which he had to cross to reach the docks was certainly watched. The dockside warehouses would have lots of rope stashed away – but any man who didn't lock his doors didn't deserve his good fortune, and Azrael's lock-picking tools had been in his coat.

Stumped, he poked around the alley for rope, hoping that some careless merchant might have left some out for him. For ten minutes of quiet searching, he was lucky to scavenge one short length from beneath a pile of discarded cloth and broken pottery. The rope was barely usable, though slick and nearly rotten in some places; he looped it around his arm just the same, happy to have a start on his goal.

It was unlikely more would be lying around for him in the alleys. The docks themselves were going to be his best chance for finding what he needed. He might even be able to reach one of the ships – they'd have plenty of supplies on board he could outfit himself with, or at least some food he could filch.

Before anything else, he needed an observation point above the street so that he could size up the challenge of approach. Azrael glanced upwards. The structures of the area followed a variety of architectural styles, ranging from peak-roofed stores to flat warehouse buildings – there was even an elaborate Heraldic church further toward the end of the road. His shoulder was unlikely to bear much of his weight if he had to climb a long while, eliminating any building above one-story as needlessly risky. Warehouses could have men watching their goods at night, as could any stores with enough cuts in their wallet to hire them, so he had better avoid any building that looked overly prosperous if he didn't want to chance a run-in.

Azrael noticed a dingy little back door further down the alley, belonging to a squat wooden workshop. The area outside it strewn carelessly with refuse, promising a wasteful and unproductive owner. It was his best opportunity.

Concealing a groan as he put his tired body to work, Azrael hurried off, pausing when he overheard the voices of some late-night wanderers, then proceeded the rest of the way to the building. Knotting the two corners of his makeshift cloak around his neck, he planned a quick course up the wall, utilizing some boxes and an unused signpost, and began his cautious ascent. The final pull to the rooftop split a clotting cut on his back, and the unexpected pain nearly cost him his grip. Grimacing, he completed the push, arriving atop the building.

Azrael quickly flattened himself, taking advantage of the roof's slight incline to hide himself. From here, he now realized that the surrounding buildings were somewhat taller than his vantage point, and would interrupt his line of vision – but at the same time, they would provide him cover, which he

needed badly. Peering over the flat line of the rooftop, he got his first look at Market Boulevard.

The first thing he saw was that the Lion's Sons were there, all right; probably a round dozen, standing guard at every pier with a boat docked, along with a pair pacing the street and inspecting the connecting alleyways. Azrael ducked his head, shivering as a breeze brushed over his back. He would have little chance of reaching a ship to steal supplies – just getting rope was looking like a tricky proposition.

Inhaling deeply, Azrael glanced over the street again, twisting his back and tilting his head so that one eye was just barely over the angle of the roof. He found that there were two docks that had no vessels stationed at them, and therefore, were not watched by the militia. This didn't mean they were without supplies, however; both were sporadically loaded with stacks of crated provisions, presumably meant for incoming ships.

Azrael's interest piqued, noting that one of the docks was designed as a station for a nearby shipwright's business. There had to be plenty of rope set out for the use of pulleys and sails, and lashing together components. It was exactly what he needed - if only he could reach it!

Dropping back into the alleyway, Azrael planned quickly. The patrolling Sons were making their way downriver. He began shadowing their footsteps from the parallel alley, keeping slow so that they were never within his sight. At end of the street, the guards faced two options; they could either turn around and sweep this street again, or continue onward across the stone bridge toward the next set of docks. Whichever way their orders led them, Azrael knew he could slip past them and reach the street-side unnoticed – from there, it was just a matter of making sure the street downstream wasn't watched, and he could cross to the docks.

Arriving at the end of the street, Azrael took immediate refuge at a building corner. He waited to the count of five, then peeked around the wall, confirming that the patrol was not at the other side of the tiny alley. A smug sight; their course must take them over the bridge after all. He started forward, but then hesitated, hearing a sound from the river--

“M just sayin', somethin' fishy goin' on,” the taller of the pair attempted to persuade his companion, coming into view at the end of the alley.

Shit! He'd been too quick to discount them! It was too late to pull back - heart galloping hard, he flattened himself against the ground behind a broken-down old chair, covering himself as best he could with the cloth and making no motion, not even the smallest rise of breath. *I'm in trouble, ohhh am I in trouble....*

“Y'think too much, is what,” the other guard snorted, peering down the alley as they trekked past.

“Nah, listen! Eleven bodies for one man, plus the Lionmane and the young Lady? 'S too much! That many dead, we gotta be lookin' for more than one guy,” the man insisted.

“Ehh, maybe yer right. Or maybe not.” He paused for effect. “More likely not, knowin' that it's you.”

“Hey, that ain't much fair, is't?!”

The injured protests faded from hearing as the pair continued past. Shakily, Azrael raised himself up a few inches, looking up toward the main road before standing altogether. *Lucky, very lucky, you careless prick!*, he cursed himself. It would have only been another few moments of waiting and he'd have known the patrol had turned, but he'd been so damned *impatient!*

But there'd been no harm done this time, he reminded himself, and beating himself up about it wouldn't get him where he needed to go. It was time to take a breath and return to business. If he wanted to reach the docks, he'd have to time himself carefully and cross the road while their backs were to him. That meant Azrael couldn't afford to sit and stew over his mistake; he had to prepare and plan, while he had the time to do it.

He held still for a short while after the men had passed the alleyway, then began to walk. His heart was already thudding hard as he neared the point where the path met the road; the illumination from lanterns on the street made this area dangerous. Even if the backs of the patrol were to him, it just took one chance look from one of the guards standing at the piers, and he'd be outed - and he wasn't confident that he could escape a third conflict that night. Better if he just moved quickly, and took as little risk as possible in reaching the docks.

Stooping near the corner, keeping the cloth drawn over his face as much as he could, Azrael peeked toward the nearest Son standing guard. The man was shifting from foot to foot slowly, eyes wandering, wholly inattentive to his duties. Perfect!

He waited for his chance. When the guard's gaze drifted upwards, moon-gazing, the time to move had come.

Azrael sprinted out onto the boulevard, covering the gap from the alley to the service dock in less than two seconds. Keeping low and quiet on the wooden planks, Azrael hurried on, not so much stepping as rolling his feet from heel to toe to propel himself forward, quickly reaching a tidy piling of barrels on the docks and taking cover from the street. Crouching, he steadied himself with a few quick breaths and scanned the pier.

Almost immediately, he spotted what he'd come to find. There was a coil of rope wound around a mooring post, waiting for the need of a docking vessel. It was several yards away and in plain sight from the street, but it was a worthwhile risk.

Glancing around his cover, seeing no one in the immediate vicinity, Azrael made his way to the post at a dead rush. Stooping, he palmed his hunting knife and wrapped the cord once around his hand. Pulling it taut against its tie on the post, he sawed fervently through it. Collecting the lengthy piece, Azrael flew back to his hiding spot. With this and the other piece he'd already scavenged, he was making good progress. *I won't need much more*, he judged shrewdly; another decent piece might be enough for his needs.

Studying the dock, the young man found no other anchoring lines to make his job easy. There were short amounts of rope binding the stacks of supplies which he briefly considered cutting free and tying together, but then decided that they would be too difficult to remove, for too little reward. There had to be more rope *somewhere* in the mess, though! He would have to move further up the dock, where more goods were stacked, to find anything.

Leaning back more heavily, Azrael looked across the slip of water between docks. It hadn't been that long yet, so he guessed that the patrol was probably still making their way to the end of the street. Once they'd turned around again, he'd have to wait out their cycle before he could risk anything – it might be safer for him if he waited to act until they'd just passed him again, but every moment dallied increased the risk of someone coming through to search the area more thoroughly. Playing it too cautiously was just as likely to get him in trouble as acting too boldly.

I should try for it now, he decided, already rising to a hunched stand. A quick glance at the street vindicated his decision; the patrol wasn't even as far along as he expected them to be. He took his chance. Hustling, Azrael reached the nearest of covers and ducked into hiding. As he took a few deep, silent breaths and reoriented, he began absorbing the view from his new hiding spot. He could see another mooring post that he might reach, but it almost half the length of the dock away from him; he worried about having to be in plain sight of the street that long. But there were no other posts that he could find that were closer.

Tensely, Azrael shifted to a ready crouch. If he were going to go, he'd better go now....

Ah... wait. A rope was immediately to his left, stashed alongside a number of repair tools, overlooked when he'd been conducting his scan of the dock further away. *Glad all that observation training paid off.* Ignoring the biting criticism of his inner voice, Azrael smiled sardonically and took the few steps needed to pick the bundle up, tucking it around his arm with the rest. That would have to be enough – the area was just too risky to keep looking.

Rising to get a good look at the street, he saw that the guards were on their slow way back toward him again. Azrael knelt down to wait for the patrol to cycle past. He'd have a few minutes to rest before he'd have an opportunity to move again; better to make use of it while he could.

Rest and danger didn't mix well. By the time that the patrol was passing on its way down the street, he was itching to move. The longer he sat, the more he felt of the aches of his hurts, the growing weakness in his limbs, the bulkiness of his straits weighing over him. He couldn't afford the sense of bleakness that was hovering behind him, waiting for a crack of room in his busy thoughts to swoop in and remind him, *Emiree--*

Azrael stood stiffly, banishing all thoughts, and crept around his meager refuge. The way was clear enough. He crossed the length of the dock at a hurried walk, and strode into the street. *Safe so far, still safe so far...* Then, imagination or reality, he thought he heard a voice behind him as he passed into the alleyway – and without looking back, he broke into a dead run. If anyone had followed him, they were quickly lost behind.

After maneuvering through some uncomfortably well-lit back streets, Azrael reached a little-used alley lining the channel nearing the city's walls. Without any docks, this narrow road had little purpose other than being a convenient place to throw trash into the river; secluded and quiet, it was the perfect place for him to set up operations. Taking refuge behind a low cover of crates, he slid ropes from his arm to the ground and assessed the situation.

The channel emerged from a tall arch in the city's outermost wall, its waters swollen several inches by some recent rainfall. To his advantage, the muddy waters would hide him easily, so long as he stayed beneath the surface – but the currents were also stronger than ever. Its course was nearly straight for about three dozen feet before it turned westwards, off in the direction of the dockyard. The

area near the iron gate was illuminated by lanterns from the nearby gatehouse, with few obstacles to provide cover until the crate stack where Azrael was, approximately twenty-five feet down the river.

His work was cut out for him. Azrael pulled off his boots and unwrapped the cloth from his shoulders, and then drew the first of the coils around his good shoulder. Observing the rushing water, he steeled his resolve, sat at the channel edge, and dropped the few feet down to the river in near-silence.

The water started hauling him off the moment he was in the water, away from the gate; a quick grab got a handhold on the cracked stone of the channel wall, anchoring him against the flow. The chilly river immediately began to numb his skin, working the unexpected blessing of taking a small bit of hurt from his injuries. Acclimatizing quickly, Azrael inhaled a deep lungful through his nostrils, then ducked under the water.

Utilizing the wall, Azrael kept himself from being taken by the current as he worked his way down to the rocky floor of the canal. Once there, he began grasping for handholds among the silt, and pulled himself along toward the gate. It was slow progress, but more effective and less consuming than if he tried swimming against the river.

That didn't mean that it was easy, though. Since every inch between his hiding place and the portcullis was in view of the guards standing post at the city gate, the distance had to be traveled beneath the water to avoid being spotted. Every motion had to get him the most distance possible without fail, or he would be unsuccessful. His arms and shoulders ached horrendously as he progressed, already abused by injury and not muted half enough by the water's cold – which was itself becoming torturous, wracking his body with shivers. *Maybe I'd have been better off facing the Sons*, he thought bleakly, forcing himself another measly foot forward.

Then his fingertips, grasping forward, scraped against something foreign to the rocks and dirt and muck lining the bottom of the river. It was thick, smooth, and hard, and very, very cold. With a rising hope in a chest made tight for lack of air, Azrael grabbed blindly through the dark water, finding the strong iron tine piercing the river floor. He'd reached the gate!

Azrael quickly got his other hand around the grated barrier, anchoring himself against the current. He had no time to feel more than a brief flash of gratitude, angled toward the powers that be, for having reached his destination. His lungs begged him for air, but this near to the gatehouse, he couldn't afford the risk to catch his breath. Forcing patience, he groped his way westwards along the gate. If the underwater tunnel existed, he'd find out shortly; if not, all his efforts would be in vain.

He came to a stone wall quickly enough; and, having found it, began to pull himself upwards. Six bars from the river's floor, Azrael ran his hand over the wall blindly, his heart sinking. There was no hole, no secret door, nothing in the stonework here. Had he come for nothing?

Disbelieving, Azrael wrapped a foot around the gate bars and began exploring the wall with both hands. No tunnel, it was true, but he found that the wall immediately near the gate was worn and chipped away. It was really just a narrow gap of a few inches, but it was remotely feasible that a man might be able to squeeze through it – and in his time of desperation, that was all that he needed. The rumor of an escape route had been exaggerated, but it was true; he would be able to pass this way.

Refusing a distracting sense of relief, Azrael freed the rope from his shoulder and threaded one

end around the thick bar and tied a fast, effective knot. Once it was secure, he gripped the connected length tightly with his left arm and released the gate. The current caught him and threw him back before the rope pulled taut. It was the only anchor he had keeping him from being swept off downriver now. Surrounded on all sides by the rushing water, he struggled through it until he felt his foot touch the riverbed.

Taking a place on the rope with his right hand, Azrael slipped his left hand down until he had two feet of rope loose between his hands. Releasing his right hand, he was pushed back again by the current to the place marked by his left hand. He found the ground again with his foot, retook his grip, measured out the rope again, and repeated. That made four feet between him and the gate – he did it again a third time for six feet.

His lungs were throbbing in his chest, now - holding his breath had *not* been a focus of his training through the years. Azrael worked quickly through the eight, ten, twelve-foot marks, aware of a growing panic. *Fourteen, sixteen, eighteen!* he counted off, focusing his attention on the steady progress.

A few careless bubbles broke out of his mouth, precious breath that might still have had bits of oxygen to feed his starving lungs. *Damn it!* he swore as he struggled against the insane urge to try recapturing the lost air. He couldn't afford this kind of error! Twenty, twenty-two, twenty-four feet – had he estimated his hiding spot at twenty-four, or twenty-six feet? The memory was gone....

His chest was shrieking wildly, wracking him with pain. Panic struck him, harder than ever before, telling him *go up, go up now!* Jittery and indecisive, he fought to remember, but his hysterical mind was being little help, jabbering on about how he was going to drown drown drown, or he was going to get c-caught, and then – THEN, he was going to get killed!

He'd go twenty-eight feet, he decided; just to be sure. His hands quickly supplied the last few feet of distance from gate: *Twenty-six, twenty-eight-- here!*

Allowing his desperation to drive him at last, Azrael propelled himself to the wall of the channel. Clawing and kicking his legs, half-climbing and half-swimming, he went straight up as fast as his body could take him. When his hands found the edge of the street, he pulled his head above water with violent need, trying at the same time to empty the staleness in his chest and suck in the fresh night air.

Hearing himself gasping, Azrael gritted his teeth. The price he'd pay for making this much noise was terrible; he needed control. He bit down on one wet sleeve and forced himself to work through his babbling air madness slowly, hissing his breaths through his teeth and sucking drops of water along with gulps of air, smothering the ensuing coughs. Gradually, the tight sense of danger began to pass, and he felt human again. Soaked to the bone and cold as a killer's smile, maybe, but at least he was thinking like a man again.

Climbing the few feet of wall above the water, dripping from his face and shoulders and arms, Azrael dragged himself free of the river. Flopping onto his back, he spent a time simply breathing, shivering, and recovering. Exhausted, Azrael soon found himself closing his eyes, relaxing.... “Better not,” he groaned, working open his eyes again and taking stock of his condition. His shoulder was hurting something terrible, and his muscles felt stiff and inflexible; but all that aside, he was breathing normally again. It was time to resume his work.

Holding the wet rope still in his hand, Azrael tossed a quick loop around one of the crates by the river. Pulling the rope through its length until the length disappearing into the water was *just* slack, he tied it off and cut the excess. He now had a line of rope tied between the gate and his hiding place. Coiling the extra twenty-foot length around his arm, Azrael returned quietly to the river. *At least the water doesn't seem so cold this time*, he thought, taking a deep breath. Holding his guideline tightly, he disappeared under the water's surface once more.

Making it to the portcullis was an easier matter now that he could pull himself along the rope. With breath to spare, he felt his way to the hollowed-out divide between gate and wall and struggled to squeeze through. The recess only gave him a few measly inches of room to press through, and it cost him a few bubbles of air and some rips on the loose fabric of his shirt just to get through to his chest. But only seconds later, he'd struggled through to the other side of the gate, and outside of Riviem.

He didn't have time to enjoy the feeling of freedom. Groping to the river's bottom, he began proceeding along as before, pulling himself along the stone-littered riverbed. If the Couriers were here as he suspected, any slip could give him away; what had needed care before, now demanded perfection. He pushed ahead as far as he could, as long as he could, as carefully as he could. When he felt himself begin fretting about air, Azrael pulled free the rope from around his arm. It took a few moments of searching to locate a rock buried deep in the river-floor; wrapping a loop around it, he tied the end off, then let himself loose to the waters.

The current swept him away, and he fought to make sure that he kept far from the deadly surface overhead until he reached against the portcullis gate once more. He was beginning feel fuzzy-headed by the time he had squeezed through the gap, found his guide rope, and began slipping along it back to his hiding place above water. Gasping quietly, he pulled himself out of the canal and rested, waiting until his strength was enough revived to take up the next rope. He would repeat the entire process twice more, pulling himself along the ropes already established to make it as far up-river as he could before tying off his latest piece and retreating back for air.

When he returned to his sanctuary for the final time, it was almost forty minutes after he'd begun. Most of that time had been spent in recuperation, but it only helped him so much. He was overexerted by the building trials of the night, and more than anything, Azrael thought wistfully of sleep, warmth, safety. He wasn't there yet, though; *still one final push, come on, you can do this...!*

Once he'd recovered as much strength as he dared rest for, Azrael wrapped up his discarded boots in the cloth and knotted the bundle around his neck once more. Half-rising, he leaned heavily on his knees, relying on them for balance and support as he steeled himself for his last venture into the channel.

This was the last time that he would be in Riviem, he expected; looking somberly at the sleeping buildings downriver, Azrael wondered how he'd feel once he'd parted ways with it. One city was very much like another, from his experience; only the people made the difference. *Without her...* the thought went unfinished, shoved away, reconstructed into something less painful. The Couriers and the Lion's Sons were all that he had left here. *I think I can stand to leave it.*

Azrael returned to the waters, filled his lungs, and dipped beneath the surface. The first stretch of rope was easy to navigate; struggling past the gate was a little more difficult, particularly with the small package tied to his back, but he wormed through. It took him some seconds of groping to find his

lead rope, but once its length, the next's length, and the final length were behind him, there was still some bit of deadened strength in him. The combined ropes had to have taken him at least thirty yards from the city wall, but there was no telling how much of the river might be watched.

From this point on, Azrael could only pull himself along the bottom of the river. He had to make it as far as possible, as soon as possible, before his air ran out. Once it did, whether or not he would have slipped past the Couriers would rely wholly on whether he'd misjudged them in his preparations or not.

He was unsure how far it was he'd actually made through the swollen river before his resolve slipped, and he inhaled a mouthful of water. His lungs panicked, seized; his reflexes thrashed one arm wildly before he fought back control. That, he knew, was the end of his run - he wouldn't make it any further up-river than this. His body would battle him every inch of the way, and he'd only lose ground to try gaining more.

Surrendering the fight, Azrael kicked off from the river-floor toward the surface. His first breath of air was deep, frigid, and caught him in an immediate cough; he ducked, fearful of the sound, covering his lips under the water surface and breathing in through his nose as he swam exhaustedly for the shore.

It was astonishing how difficult it was to pull himself out of the water. Meaning to stand, he staggered, meaning to crawl, he fell, and even just meaning to breathe, he gasped. Even through his exhaustion, though, he felt a smile – he'd done it! He was free of Riviem! Finding strength enough to rise, Azrael turned to observe the stretch of river behind him.

SVN. The monstrosity was *there*, across the river and about a dozen yards downstream. Azrael froze, hunched and supporting himself by his hands on his knees. He could swear that the gargantuan was looking straight at him. A numbness overtook him, and Azrael staggered one step back before falling gracelessly on his backside. He was struggling to find some response to *SVN*'s presence, but could only think- *it had all been for nothing, then?*

It took Azrael a while, but gradually, sense worked its way into his fear-stricken mind. *SVN* wasn't moving. The cloaked form was only standing. Observing, – was he observing? Azrael wasn't even certain of that any more - but he was not... acting.

A quick dart of Azrael's eyes confirmed that *SVN* was the only one at the riverside. Shakily, he pulled his feet under him and stood. The expanse of river separating them was significant, but not impossible to cross – why was *SVN* balking? He must have orders to kill Azrael, and Azrael had never once seen him resist an order; but....

There was something. Azrael was certain that there was *reason* to this, something more than the desperate rationalization that perhaps *SVN* hadn't really seen him. But he couldn't stand and try to think it out now; whatever gift of time he had, he had to use. Swallowing, Azrael took several steps back – and, when *SVN* still showed no reaction, he turned from the river and fled to the safety of the southern woods.

There would be pursuit soon. There would *have* to be. Tired and sore as his body was, Azrael pushed himself to keep moving, quickly, running whenever he could find the energy, limping hastily when he couldn't. Minutes passed, then half an hour, then an hour, all with no sign of followers; but this

brought him no sense of relief, or accomplishment.

He rested only once, and then briefly. Once finished, Azrael pulled his boots from the cloth bundle and got them over his feet, and then he was moving again. He didn't know if he was being tracked, but knowing didn't seem to matter; he was certain that a Courier would be coming.

But there came a time when it began to matter less and less if they were. The pain of his injuries were worsening, and after a day of travel over heavy-growth terrain, it was distressingly tempting to surrender to the shakiness he felt all over his body. Azrael resisted, proceeding onward with mindless perseverance – but he was growing slower, sloppier, lazier. Whatever his determination, his body could only function without failing him for so long.

It was strange in its suddenness when it struck. Azrael had his hand on a young birch tree, and was pushing against it for support as he continued forward. The palest light of dawn trickled through the branches overhead. Even as he urged himself to press on, only a little further, his legs rebelled. Before he realized it, Azrael was plastered against the tree, and slumping lower with every passing moment. *Just a few minutes*, he bargained as he sank to the dirt, laid out uncomfortably on the uneven ground. He'd just... just close his eyes, just for a few minutes, and....

He was hardly aware of it when he nodded off.

It was a thoughtless slumber – like that of the dead, except it was explicitly for the living. Body cells could recharge, injuries heal over, tired muscles regenerate. He could have lain there for days and still begged for more; other needs brought him back to wakefulness soon enough, though.

Barely lucid, Azrael opened his eyes to the world once more. The land was lit only by the barest slice of moon - one full day had vanished during his slumber. Even after having slept so long, every limb of his body was still *tired*, deadened by exhaustion. A stomach burning with hunger didn't add much to his strength, either. He had no food though, and he couldn't afford to sleep any longer; this was as replenished as he would get.

Propping himself up against the tree, Azrael checked the bandages he'd set the day before. They were filthy, as could only be expected. It was time to strip the rest of the cloth and replace them. As he worked, he turned his awakening mind to the larger picture: What was he to do now?

Strategy was slow to come, and hollow when it did. He couldn't fight; he had to run. But the roads would be watched, by the Couriers and the men of the Kingdom alike. Escape west, to the kingdom of Vellais where pursuit could not follow, was sure to be blocked. He could try to vanish from sight - but his chances of avoiding discovery in western Ephene were poor. Too many eyes would be watching for him.

Pressing a hand to his brow, Azrael pressured himself – *try harder!* But an answer just wouldn't come. Even out of the city, he was still outmaneuvered on all fronts. Logic tried to convince him of only one course: He had to surrender to the Sons. If escape was so unlikely, then survival was the barest that Azrael could achieve. The city would want him put to death sooner or later, but if he sold out the Couriers, he might buy time. And perhaps with time, he could find a plan for a better freedom.

Azrael stewed over the likelihood of survival through capture. Caught by a wash of fatigue, he closed his eyes again; *no*, he decided. The kingdom's protectors were corrupt – *or merely human*,

Azrael's more forgiving side interjected, *and prone to be misled*. Whatever information he could trade would do him no good on his life, when the night watch took a heaping amount of blood money to overlook his killers visiting his cell. He would be silenced before he could compromise anything; certainly, before he could plan escape.

There was no option, then. If Azrael couldn't beat the impossible odds that he could win it on his own – fool his would-be killers, slip free from the Courier's area of influence, and escape so far south that no one had even heard of the Lionmane, – then, very simply, he could only be killed. Be it now, in a day, in a week, his death would be inevitable if he did not rally against it.

It was time to begin moving again. Azrael's only mission was to reach someplace safe, where he could get some real rest. There were any number of small towns scattered in these woods, mobilized to catch the trickling profits of the nearby city. All he needed to do was to find a forest road and follow it, and sooner or later, he'd get to shelter.

He struggled through until mid-afternoon, when he at last came to see what he was hoping for. A thick and beaten trail split the trees before him, with heavy lines of wagon wheels still discernible in the dirt. Hopeful, Azrael followed it southwest until he came in sight of a sprawling village.

It was a logging town, less than thirteen homes in its entirety and only one inn to satisfy the thirst of all. News of a wanted killer wouldn't come quickly to such a small town. Azrael guessed that he'd have two days before word would arrive; and when those days had passed, he would either be dead, or facing those who would kill him once more.

Not a whole lot of time, that... With a bitter wince, Azrael struggled to walk onward, following the packed-dirt roads into the village. The wound in his shoulder stabbed of pain with every clumsy step, joined in harmony with the gash in his leg, both threatening to tear anew. Misty-headed, he knew that he couldn't afford to bleed any further, or he might not make it. So he moved slowly and carefully, focusing all his presence of mind just to survive the next step along the path.

As he came closer to the town, an old brick-and-mortar wall grew alongside the road. Soon he was moving just a few feet at a time - stumbling once and then leaning on the wall for support, catching his breath, then stumbling again. Every small motion seemed to tip the entire world beneath him, and he would fall, he would surely fall – “And when I do,” he babbled in a quiet hiss, speaking only as loud as it took for him to recognize his own thoughts, “I'll not have strength to rise again.” There was no choice but to move onward, however. He would reach the village, or he would die here in the road.

Through design or miracle, he reached the short and plain buildings of the town. Azrael wasn't sure how far he'd gotten before he faltered, leaning one shoulder against a shop-front of some variety. The building's entrance was somewhere behind him; he wondered if he shouldn't have gone in and tried to beg a place to rest, but it seemed like too much effort to turn himself around now. Pressing harder against the wall and letting his chin drop to his chest, he allowed gravity to drag the weight of his body at last onto the ground.

Even in so small a town, there was common sense. Azrael watched wearily as men and women steered themselves far clear of the bloodied stranger sitting beside the road. One woman in particular caught his attention as she yanked clear her young daughter, who had ventured foolishly close. The mother's face was so stern and unyielding an expression, with her lips drawn out thin as a cow's and her wide-set eyes nearly popping out, Azrael couldn't help but to ask her softly, “Do you really think I'm a

danger?” Startled, the pair went hurrying away, and the effect of their retreat set everyone else on the street further back as well; *yes*, apparently, was her answer.

There would be no help for him from the timid populous. Perhaps that was some twisted device of fate, and he was getting only what he deserved. Drawing a grimace onto his face, Azrael lowered his gaze. Brash, reckless, and short-sighted; he'd miscalculated in every way feasible, and the consequences had cost lives....

A pair of bare feet crossed the graying line of his vision, accompanied soon by a festering odor - some penultimate grouping of rot, sweat, and stale beer. Azrael lifted his head and saw a deep-shadowed face, bearing a pitying smile. It was an older man, sporting a receding hairline and a matted, disgusting beard of curly brown. His clothes were assembled with patchwork scraps, and he wore a cheap tin ring on one pinky.

“Y'luk laihke ye're a bi'd more'n need of dis d'n I'yam.” Between the man's thick rural accent and his alcohol-slurred mumbling, there wasn't a syllable out of the unruly mess of words that Azrael could make sense of. The whiskey bottle dancing in his face, however, was clear enough an offer.

Azrael hesitated, considering if the offer were some sort of Courier trap - but examining the bearer, he realized he was being paranoid. This man was just an honest villager, acting with an ounce of honest compassion. Swallowing a mineral-tasting mouthful of spit, Azrael took the bottle with a weary nod to the sympathetic drunk. “Thank you.”

The man had no more consolation to offer, so he nodded and went toddling off on his unsteady way.

The uneducated villagers were unlikely to know the value of the gift he'd been given. A half-empty bottle of strong alcohol could be enough to save his life. Azrael was constitutionally sound - a great deal more so than most men, he liked to think - but the danger of sickness and infection was ever-present all the same. Working aside the bandage on his ruined shoulder, he fumbled to pour some of the whiskey into the palm of his hand, and then spilled it over the wound.

He choked down a groan and stooped over his knees. His hand remained clasped to the injury, his grip tightening to keep the alcohol from dripping off. At least when he'd gotten these wounds in Riviem, he'd had the numbing gift of adrenaline. But here he was without reprieve as the alcohol burned deep, fire melting into flesh - damn, it *hurt!*

But pain was pain, and mattered little. He sat glaze-eyed and still, taking careful and shuddering breaths, waiting for the bout to pass. Azrael's body shook with relief, the anguished nerves settling at last, and his fingers trembled only nominally as he reworked the bandages over the stinging wound. But once he'd dressed his shoulder, he moved onto the next most serious of his injuries - the gash on his upper right thigh - to continue the torture with a new handful of whiskey. His breathing was forcefully slowed as he soaked in the makeshift antiseptic - *in the air; out the pain*, purposeful meditation to steady the mind against the onslaught of the body's demands.

Quite soon, Azrael had washed clean every significant scrape with the distilled drink. He now reeked of alcohol, adding one more to an ever-lengthening list of reasons for the villagers to keep their distance.

Pulling tight the last of the bandages, Azrael leaned forward and balanced his head against his knees, exhaling. Glancing at the bottle, he realized that there was still some liquid left. Without thirst or desire he drank, letting the whiskey fall to the back of his throat. Barely a swallow and hardly a buzz, then the bottle was useless. He broke it from his lips with a noise of disgust, tossing it aside so that it clattered and rolled over the dirt. Once it had stilled, the life-saving gift was indistinguishable from the rest of the rubbish lining the road.

Azrael dropped his head back again, molding himself against the wall. He had to heal now. Life would be slow and patient for the next two days. Food and shelter and rest would be the most needy of cures for his body. For other things, though....

He could have almost believed it was Emiree's breath by his ear; her soft fingers over his hand, her dark touselles spilling on his shoulder. The grief was a quiet one, numbing, and he felt oddly affectionate of it. If he could have nothing else left of her but misery of her memory, the chain around his wrist, then that would be what he would treasure. The faintest, most bittersweet dream began lulling him away, murmuring:

Rest now, my love, and let the rest not matter 'til later.

Figment of his own imagination it might be, it was good advice. Azrael slept.