

An Unsuitable Job For a Messenger

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With advice from Velvet Belle Tree

Photo manip filked from Shadar

Dedicated to Jolie Howard... in hopes

* * *

Belside, Universal Year 1023-1 (1606)

“You have brought a message of particular importance for us, I believe,” said Ambassador Dar’vel.

“So I’ve been told,” the Messenger responded, handing over the capsule. “I have had the honor, and I withdraw.”

“On the contrary, your further services may be required here.”

Tera’nol was taken aback. Belside was a neutral planet; there was no place here for a Protector. On such worlds, Messengers served only as couriers. Their visits were as brief as possible, to carry diplomatic dispatches more speedily and more securely than the Scalantrans were able to.

Dar’vel saw the look on the Messenger’s face.

“Please wait a few moments,” he said. “I must read this in private. After that, I may have further instructions for you.”

The ambassador retired to his office, bearing the crystal egg.

Tera'nol was taken even further aback. A Velorian diplomat had no business giving orders to Messengers. These served at the pleasure of the High Council, and their business was to bring comfort and pleasure and word from home to the Protectors who served on distant worlds, having no other contact with their own kind. They were also expected to bring dispatches from those Protectors back to the High Council.

The bottom line was that he could serve as a diplomatic courier only when it would not interfere with his normal duties. Belside happened to be on the route to Epigone. Just a quick in-and-out. Such stopovers were always quick in-and-outs; that was the understanding between the Senate and the High Council.

Tera'nol was still considering whether to simply take his leave – which would be undiplomatic but well within his rights – when the ambassador returned. It had been more than a few moments. More like half an hour.

“I’m afraid we’re going to have to prevail on you to stay yet a while,” Dar'vel told him. “In answer to your obvious question, you’ll see that this assignment has been approved by the High Council as well as the Senate. It involves a woman we are now informed is a Junior Aurean Princess. Under the circumstances, that presents us with a singular opportunity.”

“That being?”

“She might know things we’d like to know.”

“Isn’t that a matter for Intelligence?”

“Intelligence has done all it can, with the aid of the Scalantrans. Without that, we wouldn’t know who our target is, or why she is here. She arrived on Belside seven years ago, using the name Sacolya, and was listed as commercial attaché by the Aurean embassy. That was unusual in itself.”

“And why was that?”

“The Empire never needed a commercial attaché before. It has nothing to market here. Furthermore, Sacolya has never been seen at a trade fair, or at any other venue related to her supposed duties. She has, however, been seen. Seen a great deal too much.”

“I’m afraid I don’t follow you.”

“She’s created a continuing scandal with her outrageous behavior, parading around naked and even making lewd overtures at public parks and beaches. She appears to delight in teasing Belsidea men and outraging Belsidea women. The way she thrusts out her chest at men, the media have dubbed her the woman of Unrelenting Breasts. Because she enjoys diplomatic immunity, there is nothing planetary authorities have been able to do, and complaints to the Aurean embassy have gone unanswered.”

“Is this really our concern?”

“Everybody here is concerned. The worst of it is that she could be setting a bad example for our embassy brats. Skietra knows, we can’t have any of our own young people taking after her.”

“But what’s this business about her being a J.A.P.?”

“Her real name is Naidu, and it seems that she was exiled from the Court for refusing an arranged marriage. As a member of a junior house, she didn’t have a chance of becoming empress, but she could cement an important alliance. As to why they sent her here, I suppose it was the worst punishment they could think of – no civilian Aureans to frolic with, of course, and their diplomats wouldn’t dare.”

“But what about—“

“Naidu has a rare allergy to gold. That’s what the Scalantrans told us, and we have no reason to doubt them. Surely if she could use it, she’d get hold of it somehow, and we’d have heard about the results. No, she’ll never be more than a statue to the Belsidea – a warm statue, but still a statue. She must be really desperate by now. You’ll be irresistible to her. Totally.”

“This is not a Messenger’s work,” he protested.

“In this case, it is. Read for yourself.”

The message on the foil, alas, was authentic, under the hand and seal of Senate President Va’Dim and Senior High Councilor Dar’nyot, most ancient of days, who would surely not have sanctioned this were he not in his dotage.

“Funny thing about that,” Dar’vel remarked.

“I don’t see anything funny about it.”

“No, I mean the name. One of the boys here is named Dar’nyot. Everybody calls him Daro. Really rambunctious, that one.”

“They say Councilor Dar’nyot was quite rebellious in his younger days, that he was the first to lend his support to Vespyr – before the Advent.”

Everybody knew the story of the First Protector, but few knew the details – many of which had been suppressed in the name of harmony between the High Council and the Senate.

Well, here they are in harmony again, Tera’nol mused. But in a less noble cause.

“I wouldn’t know about that,” Dar’vel said. “I answer to the Senate. As you are about to.”

“This isn’t the sort of thing I want in my file with the High Council.”

“You needn’t be concerned,” the ambassador assured him. “Your part will be strictly off the record. The only thing we care about – the only thing Velor cares about – is whether she lets useful intelligence slip. Not that she’ll open up intentionally. But even things she *doesn’t* say could be revealing, if she gets into a boastful mood, as Primes are wont to do.”

Dar’vel was interrupted by a call on his pocket telephone. It turned out to be the planetary president’s office.

“I’m afraid this will take a while,” he told Tera’nol. “I’ve arranged to have one of my aides complete your briefing. He’s already accessed the Scalantran intelligence as we’ve been speaking, and he’s our outside man, so to speak. He’ll set it all up.”

Set what up? the Messenger wondered.

But Dar’vel was already busy on the phone: “Sir and Eminence...”

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Ral’syul, the aide in question, was getting his daughter Nova ready for class at the embassy school when the Tera’nol arrived.

“I’m half a meg,” the girl told him after they were introduced. That was about six years standard, but Nova was using the Scalantran calendar – increasingly popular for interstellar trade – in which a megatron was about 13.3 Terran years.

“She’s very bright,” Ral’syul explained. “Precocious. Do you know what that means, Nova?”

“Ahead of my age.”

“Very good. But you’ve got to run along now or you’ll be late for class. Daddy has to talk grown-up stuff with this nice man.”

“She’s a handful,” he told Tera’nol, after the girl was out of sight and sound. And she’s a P1, so of course...”

The Messenger nodded in understanding.

“We’re thinking of enrolling some of our children in a Belsidea academy to broaden their outlook. They’ve got a marvelous educational system here... but that’s for the future. Let’s get down to present business.”

Ral’syul proceeded to show Tera’nol recordings of some of Naidu’s exploits. In most of them, she was simply exhibiting herself. Sometimes she wore a sheer top that revealed her nipples, seemingly in a permanent state of erection. Other times, she went bare-breasted.

The Messenger agreed that she had perfect pair, but so did any Supremis woman. Only there was a perverse element to her exhibitionism. In some of the videos, she kneaded her breasts to make them seem soft and inviting, although it was obvious they didn’t jiggle.

“There were unconfirmed reports that she tried to go further than that. There were even some Belsidea men who claimed they’d had her. That was absurd, of course, and the Science News Service was very helpful in explaining why. There haven’t been any further claims, at any rate. Thank Skietra they trust in science here.”

“Did they mention her gold allergy?”

“Of course not. We’re not supposed to know about it. We mean the Belsidea to infer that she’s some sort of pervert, only into teasing, not pleasing. But once she knows about you, that you’re available...”

There was no point in arguing with Ral'syul about it; he had no voice in the matter. Neither did Dar'vel. For a moment he wondered if the ambassador had pushed him off on this aide out of embarrassment.

"How do I arrange things?" he asked after a moment's reflection.

"You don't. We have contacts with the media. They can let it slip that you're on Belside, and she'll come looking for you. They can also let it slip where to find you. It can't take more than a few days. There's a secluded beach we have in mind. You'll be informed by pocket phone in time to... whatever."

"Whatever," murmured Tera'nol.

"Now you don't have to worry about onlookers," Ral'syul continued. "Senator Kelsor owes us a favor, and he'll make sure the beach is deserted. He also owns the lagoon, which will be posted against boat traffic, much to the annoyance of his son the praetor, who had been planning a regatta there."

But then he sensed that there had been something in the Messenger's voice that he'd missed, and his own expression changed.

"I wouldn't have sanctioned this," he said now in a low voice. "I know about Messengers. My daughter, you see... I'll naturally want her to be in good hands, when the time comes, if she's in need..."

He paused for a moment.

"I guess there's nothing more to say, is there? Well, good luck – whatever that means in a situation like this."

* * *

With its red sun and brassy sky, Belside reminded him of home. Only the moons here weren't training grounds, but mines that served a rich export trade in radioactives for industrial, medical and even military use – the Belsidea tried to downplay that last, of course.

With a day or two to kill, Tera'nol devoted his time to strolling or sometimes flying about the capital. The latter might draw attention from Naidu, he supposed. From the air, he could get a panoramic view of the city, including the river that

separated the residential and industrial sectors – *clean* industries there; heavy industry had been relocated to the moons. Jet boats traveled up and down the river, mostly on business. The one-man kequas were strictly recreational.

Beyond the industrial sector lay the spaceport. Much of Belside's wealth derived from its being the nexus of several interstellar trade routes. Scalantran ships put in here, not just to trade with Belside itself, but with each other. There was no greater commercial hub for hundreds of light years; that was why the planet prized its neutrality – and why the Enlightenment and the Empire alike seemed to respect it.

Science was a passion with the Belsidea, but that too was related to trade. At the Kelsor Institute of Technology, there was a research program dedicated to finding a way to tap the virtual energy of space itself. Nothing had come of it for decades, and some of the media thought the project was a foolish extravagance – although it hadn't yet proven to be as futile as the genetic engineering program that was said to have produced only ugly and alienated gay twins.

The head of the Institute, apparently some relative of the senator, was being interviewed on the news screens when Tera'nol came to ground and stopped by a sidewalk café to people watch. The Belsidea, even while enjoying their meals, seemed intent on the report – the colorfully-dressed males and the more somber females alike.

“Sir and Doctor, are you saying that if we cannot tap the sea of energy in our own universe, we might be able to access power from another universe with a different cosmic constant?” the newsman asked.

“That would be quite premature,” Dr. Kelsor said. “We must exhaust every possibility of this continuum before considering alternatives elsewhere. I was speaking only of a hypothetical possibility which, even if it exists, may be forever beyond our reach. And there are many things we still don't know about our own cosmos, such as how the wormhole network was constructed. As a matter of fact...”

Tera'nol didn't hear the rest, because his pocket phone rang.

Sooner than expected, he thought. But maybe that was only to be expected. He keyed the phone and got his flying orders. It didn't matter that Naidu had a head start; he'd beat her by at least an hour.

Before long, he was lying naked at the beach, clothes and pocket phone stashed neatly out of sight. There was still time to admire the native trees that lined the inland side of the strand. Their foliage seemed black at first glance, but as it waved in the gentle breeze he could see subtle highlights – deep purple, ochre, even an occasional dark green.

To bring healing where there is pain, joy where there is sorrow. The mantras of the Guild ran through his head as he prepared himself for an encounter which he expected to be at once like and unlike those he was accustomed to.

In time, he heard footsteps approaching, but pretended not to. She was, after all, supposed to be the huntress and he the hunted. Her arrival was meant to be a surprise. It wouldn't do to make her think otherwise.

The footsteps stopped. There was a long silence as he waited for her to make the first move.

Then came her voice.

“Hey there!”

Tera'nol jumped up, as if he were startled, as if his private reveries had been rudely interrupted.



Naidu was reclining on a rock, wearing only a thong, her magnificent breasts pointing proudly upwards. Her flawless skin fairly glowed.

Tera'nol feigned surprise, averting his gaze.

"What are you doing here?" he asked.

"I like the view," she said, gazing at him. "Don't you like the view?"

He stared at her frankly now, as any man would.

"You can look all you want. No need to be shy," she said. "You can feel all you want, too."

Tera'nol again pretended to be startled.

"Let's cut to the chase. I know who and what you are, and you can see what I am."

She paused for a moment, gazing at him gazing at her.

“Oh, is *that* it?” she teased, a touch of sarcasm in her voice. “You think you shouldn’t make it with a Prime, being a Messenger? Belside *is* a neutral planet, after all. We both have embassies here. We go to the same diplomatic functions. I know it’s all a sham, can’t last in the long run. But right now, we aren’t having a war, so why not have a ball instead?”

“A tempting offer,” he admitted. “But not part of my job description. I’m just on stopover here. But you seem to know more about me than I know about you. How did you—“

“I have my sources,” Naidu said. “My embassy keeps track of your people’s comings and goings, as I’m sure yours keeps track of ours. And we have local sources, as I’m sure you do. By the way, my name is Sacolya, and I’m rather well known, or have they told you?”

“I’m just passing through,” Tera’nol persisted.

“I’m more than passing horny,” she teased, heaving her breasts. “I just can’t get enough action at the Embassy.”

Tera’nol knew it was time to show some interest. He gazed at her breasts now, and his cock responded. She watched it grow, his manhood saluting her womanhood in a signal as old as time.

“And don’t worry about compromising yourself,” she added. “I’m not after any secrets you might have. I leave that sort of thing to the Intelligence people. All I want is sex, and plenty of it. I’ve heard that Messengers are very skilled. Unlike some Aureans I could mention.”

She stretched, arching her body, then relaxing again against the rock.

Think about her body, Tera’nol told himself. *Put everything else out of mind.*

“Feel,” she urged him, gesturing towards her breasts.

They felt as good as they looked, filling his hands, more than filling them as he squeezed them, thrilling to the silky-smooth feel of her Supremis flesh and the bullets of her nipples, harder than Vendorian steel. Naidu screamed with delight; her hands, gripping the rock beneath her, broke off shards of granite – no more obdurate to her than schist.

“Suck them! Bite them!” she urged, and Tera’*nol* bore down on them with all his might. With lips and tongue and teeth, he did as she commanded, confident that he could make her come and come again with breast-play alone. Oh yes, Naidu’s unrelenting breasts were relenting to his fierce assault; she was bucking and moaning and then screaming uncontrollably.

The force of her multiple orgasms shattered more of the rock, something of great delight to her even after she came down for a moment.

“That was a good start,” Tera’*nol* understated, more to calm his own arousal than to tease her.

She was incredibly beautiful, after all – and extremely orgasmic. Under any other circumstances... that was it: imagine that she was coming over, forsaking the Empire for the Enlightenment, and that he’d been chosen by the High Council to reward her. Oh, if only it were true, if only they could make passionate love for days, weeks...

“Let’s see how long it takes us to smash the rest of this rock into rubble,” she challenged him, apparently expecting him to take her then and there; but he surprised her by moving downwards and nibbling on her toes. Perfect toes, like every other part of her body.

“You’re worth the climb,” he told her, as he began kissing and caressing his way up her legs. “Every inch of it.”

Tera’*nol* knew that even Supremis calves could be erogenous zones, if they were treated right. Naidu began moaning again in response to his ministrations, and by the time he reached her inner thighs, her fragrant juices were dribbling from her cunt.

“You taste so good, so good,” he moaned as he drank them eagerly, while stroking her flesh rhythmically. Again, she bucked and moaned before exploding in a staccato series of orgasms – so loud that he could hardly make out the further cracking of the rock.

“Eat me!” Naidu responded.

With his teeth, he tore off the flimsy fabric of her thong, then buried his face in her pussy, holding her down against the rock as she tried to rise, sucking and biting her clit as she exploded again, as she drenched him with her love juice.

When he finally pulled away, there was a heavenly look on her face. He felt a momentary pang of guilt. He had brought that look, but under false pretenses. Words failed him, but she didn't even seem to notice his reticence.

Just think with your dick, let go, let go.

"I can't wait any more, I *can't*," Tera'nol shouted.

"Oh yes, take that big, thick Velorian cock and shove it in my wet, slick Aurean cunt," she pleaded, as if she thought he needed any urging. He focused on his conversion fantasy; in seconds, he was deep inside her.

"Let all my greedy e-spots relish every bit of it," Naidu urged. "Just hang in there for a few moments while I caress it..."

Her idea of a caress seemed to be using her cunt as a vise, squeezing with the superhuman strength of her inner muscles and then relaxing.

It was common for Supremis women to make their men come that way, as an appetizer for the main event; but Messengers were trained in self-control. Not only did Tera'nol hold back, but he made Naidu come again from the pressure of his cock on her inner pleasure centers.

"The last Prime I tried that with didn't last," she told him. "You are indeed a man of Vendorian steel. But I'm a woman of Vendorian steel, and my cunt can take everything your cock can give it. Time to let loose, and I mean *let loose!* Pound away. Show no mercy!"

What was left of the rock crumbled as Tera'nol slammed her into it again and again. The battering of his cock against her cunt might have sent her into orbit... if only Aureans could fly.

"Shoot, shoot!" she finally begged him. Their shouts and screams of release when they came, when they felt each other come, might have deafened anyone close enough to watch.

When they finally came down, there was nothing under them but gravel. This was the moment the embassy had advised him to wait for, the moment when all judgment fled.

“Mmmmmmm. I’m glowing all inside,” she said. “Are you glowing all inside?”

It should have been the glowing that he felt now, but it was the knowing. Not post-coital sadness, which was unknown among Velorians, but post-coital guilt: the knowledge that he had been sent to *use* this woman. Nobody on his world, *nobody*, thought there was anything wrong with casual sex. But to—

Skip it. I have to say what I’d say if this were an innocent encounter.

“Your inside makes me glow,” he cooed.

“They wanted me to marry a pig,” Naidu suddenly revealed. Just like that.

“That would have been a crime.”

“Well, most male Primes are *pigs*, to be perfectly honest about it. They think a woman is a fortress to be reduced instead of a goddess to be worshipped.”

Tera’nol suppressed a laugh.

“But I *am* a goddess, as you are a god. Why mince words? Why do you Velorians may such a fuss about those frail Terrans, who can only grab and scramble, making nothing of their pitiful short lives?”

“Considering how little they have to work with, they’ve actually accomplished a great deal. We like them for that.”

“You *like* them? I’m sure that sort of sentiment went over very well with them at the Madstop Conference, but we’re far from Madstop.”

“A lot you know about *that*,” Tera’nol snapped.

“Oh, we know *all* about it. The Scalantrans sold us the minutes, including the closed sessions. They’ll do anything for money, or haven’t you figured that out yet?”

“A rumor. They also trade in those, you know.”

“*I’m* the one who bought those minutes. It was only a century ago, after all. For their factor general, of course, it wasn’t a matter of sexual infatuation. Strictly business. They wanted to start trading again on our side of the line, and they had to put something on the table to show their good faith.”

“And then the Empire sends you here?”

“A new emperor, with a short memory. But I don’t want to talk about that.”

She did want to talk about other things now. Anecdotes about Aurea, about the embassy here on Belside, things of no great import. Until...

“Ready for another round? Yes, I can see you are. Only this time, you just lie back and take it.”

As far as the Embassy would be concerned, his job was done. As far as he was concerned, the pretense was over. He could no longer comfort himself with the fantasy that Naidu was different, that he might bring her over to the bright side. No, she was like all her kind; there was nothing they could share on any fundamental level. Still, he had to play this out, lest she suspect.

Tera’no! lay back on the gravel that had once been a rock and invited Naidu to impale herself on him.

“Watch my cunt devour your cock!” she shouted with joy. “Watch me drench your balls!”

Her breasts, perfectly round and firm and gravity-defying as only Supremis breasts can be, loomed over him – soft and pliant to his hands, and he toyed with them as only a Supremis man could. But as she rode him faster and faster, he needed only to hold on to them – her own movements did the rest.

“Watch me fuck you!” she yelled. “Watch me pound you into the ground!”

The earth really did seem to him to move as they came.

* * *

Then came the really hard part.

When the afterglow dimmed, when they were done with the post-coital small talk, Naidu revealed that she too had a hidden agenda – knowing nothing of his own.

“Come with me,” she urged him. “I mean, *really* come with me. You could be my mate, my prince.”

“We’ve had a glorious time here today. Why not just leave it at that?”

“We could have children.”

“We have children on Velor,” he said. “I could have children there. Some of us are mated, strange as that might seem.”

“You know what I mean. The natural way. They’d be yours... and mine. Not some machine’s.”

He tried to let her down gently.

“We don’t see it that way,” he explained. “We do choose the gene sets of our children. Every child is unique, and treasured. We leave nothing to chance.”

He paused.

“I don’t have children of my own, yet. But I have family. I love them. And I believe in Velor. I believe in the Enlightenment. I could never forsake them.”

Of a sudden, Naidu’s mood darkened. A cloud had just passed in front of the sun, as if it were a storm signal. And then the storm broke.

“Who’s going to fuck me when you’re gone? *Who?*”

“What—“

“Seven years here and nobody to fuck. The fucking Belsidea and the fucking Therans with their dickfaces. They get it all the time and I get nothing. Nothing but to watch their dicks get hard when I show off, and then play with myself and pretend I’m with them and they’re hard enough to... It’s not *fair*.”

“I don’t understand. I thought... You’ve got a whole *embassy*—“

“They’re *afraid* to. Ordered *not* to. By the Emperor himself.”

“I don’t believe it.”

“They’ll never take me back, unless I bring them a prize. Like you.”

In his pretended shock and disbelief, there was nothing Tera’nol could say. But she took his silence as a challenge.

“I could *tell* them!” she shouted. “Tell them that you consorted with me – with the *enemy*. You’d be through. Then you’d *have* to come with me.”

There was no good way to end this, Tera’nol knew. But end it he must.

“Inform away,” he said, taking to the air, lest she turn her disappointment to violence. He wanted nothing of fighting, knew nothing of the art of sexual combat.

Protectors were occasionally forced into that, he knew – and they usually needed counseling afterwards

So his business here was done. It was a nasty business, and he'd report as much to the Guild when next he returned to Velor. Much good would it likely do him, or any of the other Messengers.

* * *

When Tera'nol returned to the embassy, Ambassador Dar'vel took him to the Quiet Room. "This isn't even for the staff," he advised.

"They bought the official story about Madstop," Tera'nol informed him after they were settled and secure. "And they don't know about our Compact with the Scalantrans."

"Is that all?"

"Isn't it enough?" the Messenger said crossly. "It isn't as if we had a Diaboli here to pick her brain."

"Those Imperials," Dar'vel marveled. "So conspiratorial themselves that they see conspiracy everywhere. So now we know they've been wasting their time trying to expose all sorts of secret protocols and special favors. They simply can't believe that the Enlightenment is based on an open covenant, openly arrived at."

"And yet they trust the Scalantrans. They think they've cowed them."

"Can you carry word back to Velor?"

"My next stop is still Epigone. Nothing in the joint advisory alters that. In any case, the Senate and the High Council have been awaiting this information for a century. They can wait a little longer."

"I suppose," said Dar'vel. "Quite frankly, I wasn't too happy with the way they handled this. But it was necessary, I think you'll agree."

"I'd rather not think about it."

"Look at it this way: she was out to compromise you from the start. Anything to get back in the good graces of her people."

"I suppose that should make me feel better. But it doesn't."

“You’ll get over it. In this business, we all do.”

“But it hasn’t been *my* business. Not until now.”

“Quite. Well, pleasant journey.”

* * *

As Tera’noI made his way out of the embassy, school was just letting out. And there were snatches of conversation.

“Dickfaces! Dickfaces!” shouted one boy.

“That’s not nice,” said the girl next to him. “They’re *Therans*.”

“Who cares?” the boy persisted.

“But they’re *people*. I might have to protect them someday. I’m going to be a Protector, you know.”

Nova. That was her name. He remembered seeing her before. She was the hope of the future, he thought. Only six, and already showing sympathy towards an alien people who were often mocked for the appearance of their noses.

This is what the Enlightenment is all about. Or should be.

On the teeming streets outside, the Belsidea went about their daily business, their faces filled with joy, heedless of what might be going on in the rest of the universe. There was a gaggle of Theran tourists, who seemed to be enjoying the day too, drawing neither censure nor sniggers from the Belsidea.

Would that all planets were like this.

But then something caught his attention on a news screen. Naidu’s picture appeared, followed by stock footage. He caught the words “disappeared,” and “no comment from the Aurean Embassy.”

Moments later, he was back in the Velorian Embassy, confronting Ral’syul.

“What do you know about this?” he shouted, after relating what he’d seen.

“*Nothing*, I swear, by the love of my wife, by the love of my daughter. We’d *never*.”

“Find out.”

As a Messenger, Tera'nol carried no weight here. But as a man, as an angry man...

"I'll get to the bottom of this. Let me make a few calls. Please wait outside."

He stepped outside and waited.

She might be dead, he agonized. She might be on her way to some horrible place. Was it that important to find out that we'd put one over on the Empire?

It seemed like hours, but it couldn't have been more than 20 minutes before Ral'syul summoned him.

"It seems that our media cut-out decided two paydays were better than one. He informed on her to the Aureans. With considerable embellishment. I'm sorry."

"That's it?"

"For what it's worth, I informed on *him*. He'll never work for us again, or for them. In fact, he'll never work in the media again. Of course, he has no idea what the Aureans did with her. We'll probably never know."

Not knowing. Was that a comfort or a curse? That was the question that haunted Tera'nol as he made his way out of the Embassy for the last time.

And as he took to the sky on the first leg of his long journey to Epigone, he prayed that the Protector there was untroubled in her work and of good cheer. He was supposed to be her counselor, but he was sorely afraid that he'd be in need of counseling himself.