

I

The sun approached midday in a hazy sky, coloring the air a diffuse pink. Liikel kept below the ridgeline, tracing Third Finger back to its root in the highlands, approaching the upper plains from the southeast. Behind her, not half the morning's ascent between them, her tail followed, tracking from a respectful distance. Across the valley, moving more or less parallel alongside Fourth Finger in the shadows of its ridge, a second tail was keeping eyes on both of them, noting their progress.

Liikel would have to reach the highlands by late afternoon, crossing up out of the valleys into the foothills of the mountains in the west, where she could find shelter for the night before it got too dark and cold. It was late spring, and while the high country would just be losing its snows, the nights could still get dangerously cold, and the winds coming down into the foothills were still bitter. There was just enough snowmelt coming off the western range to find streams for drinking and washing; if she were lucky, there might even be a few alpine flowers.

If there were, though, she would have to note them herself, recording as best she could their location and how far along they were flowering. The tails would keep behind her for the next four days, until they met her as she reached the first pass into the mountains, and then they would return to the valley. Thenceforth she would be on her own, with four more passes to cross before she reached the high alpine plateau of the City of The Dead Gods, arcing back from the north to return home by midsummer.

She undid her headscarf and let it fall around her shoulders, picking up her pace to keep warm. She was lightly packed, carrying only the tools she would use along the way to make anything else she might need. She would reach the first real shelter just before the first pass, where there should still be enough stocked from the previous year to refill her supplies. The two tails behind her were each carrying a pack loaded with dried fruits and grains from the winter stores, to refill the shelter's supplies once she'd moved on. From there, the shelters were more closely spaced, every one or two days' travel towards the City. Those would have to be stocked up later in the summer from this year's harvest, once the trails were clear enough for heavy loads.

Despite the warmth from moving, Liikel could still feel the chill in the wind coming down off the highlands, lean and crisp. With the sun up over her shoulder, the mountains ahead were just barely in view behind the foothills, their peaks shimmering in the pale rose light of spring morning. The clouds were diffuse, almost a fog, but the mountains in the distance still glittered like jewels in the sun. Behind them, higher still and beyond the City, the valleys and mountain ranges disappeared under the glaciers, the endless White Sea that extended to the edge of the world in an unbroken, crushing, roaring mass. Liikel exhaled heavily, her breath lightly clouding around her, to dispel the thought and focus on the path at her feet.

This was to be her first trip to the City unguided: she would rely entirely on her own pathfinding and scouting abilities to find the way, and survive on what she could forage in the sparse forests and steppes of the highlands. This would be her first time entering the City itself unaccompanied, there to make offerings to the Dead Gods in their holiest of places: the shrine her ancestors had built in the heart of the City. To reach the shrine on her own, to venerate the Dead Gods and ask their protection, to pray for the return of their wisdom and guidance, was to be her first act on behalf of her people as a member of the Order: her initiation into the last stage of its mysteries and the beginning of her time as an acolyte. This journey, on her own, was a test of her training; it was the second test, and there would be one more before she was considered ready to serve her own temple: to roam, when the need arose, as the guide of her own nomad congregation.

Liikel reflected on her kit, going over her inventory: the tools that she had made herself, the ones she had earned in her training, the offerings she was to leave in the shrines. Three hundred paces of rope were coiled around her torso and across her shoulder, woven out of fibers from finely-spun reed and grasses from the riverlands. It was supple and strong, light and resistant to rot. She hoped it wouldn't be necessary, but it would bear her weight several times over, and would be her only way past certain hazards in the mountains if she needed it. The priest had made offerings and prayers over it, as the last line holding her to the world of the living, the last proof that her faith in the Dead Gods' protection would be repaid. It had taken the weavers almost a full year to coil and bind together, and was one of the most valuable things she was carrying.

Crossing over her other shoulder was her pack, holding clothes for the highlands and mountains, ice-claws for her boots, enough food and water for the next two days, offerings for each of the shrines she was to visit, her first-order tools, spare bowstring, her fire kit, medicines and salves along with a patching kit for small injuries and to ward against natural dangers, some small tools specific to pathfinding and ranging the upper highlands, and lastly her most precious possessions: a small collection of her family's icons, old beyond memory, entrusted to her care to leave her family's home for the first time to protect her on her journey. They would meet the relics of the Dead Gods in their holy place; and when Liikel returned home with them, they would endow her home with some remnant of that strange power.

Her bow, disassembled, was bound and wrapped up tightly with a small quiver of arrows and slung across her back. She would not likely need them. People almost never ventured into the highlands except, like her, to make pilgrimages to the City of The Dead Gods, occasionally to roam in the barren and inhospitable country: driven by the compulsions of a vision, seeking solitude or feeding some urge to disappear into lands unwelcoming and unknown.

Pathfinders sometimes found their bodies in the spring, thawing with the snows. Small camps of brigands and Strange Men sometimes left the remnants of their travels, and sometimes those who wandered too far from home were found later murdered and violated, but all of that was in the low country and the riverlands, further south towards the islands and the sea. Nothing else here was worth shooting: the few animals that lived up here were small and not for trapping or eating; the Pathfinders all knew that their meat was bitter and sour, and relying on them for food more than once or twice a season led to strange sicknesses that all ended badly.

There was little else to fear in this place but the elements, and the few small pests one could only keep at bay. The City itself, however, and the country around it, was a whole other matter. Most of what she had learned the last four years had been about that place, and it was both unpleasant and luridly fascinating to think about.

She had just turned past the age of childhood the month before, and at the start of spring she had been admitted to Temple School to prepare for the first trial. City School was to teach her in all the practical matters she would need in adulthood, the lower levels part of the basic education every child received. There had been, however, as she remembered later facing the first trial, a few exams she had been given together with a small group of other children, watched carefully by the Headmaster, and two people from Temple School she didn't recognize. There had been a couple visits from her teachers to her family, discussions in low voices using words that she, still a child, hadn't understood. She wasn't particularly good at any of her subjects in City School, and the special exams hadn't asked her anything that had seemed important. The questions and tasks had been strange, and she wasn't sure she had gotten any of the answers right.

But now, as a young girl, she had been to Temple School for a few years, and she had begun to understand what the exams had been made to test. The questions had been strange because they were asking for things that didn't have words to describe them, ways of living in the world that weren't like the way most people lived in the world, but were *unlike* that life in ways that couldn't really be named. She had never been sure whether what she was doing at Temple School was the right way to do it, but the schoolmasters had signalled approval in the oddly aloof manner of Templars and monks of the Order, and so she had learned to trust her instincts.

She had been sent, alone, on the night of one of the first days after they had celebrated the Ritual of First Womanhood with the other girls of her cohort at Temple School, into the Temple's inner garden. There lay the entry to the grove behind the Temple grounds where the innermost shrines were kept, for the service of the Templars and monks alone. Four other girls had gone on previous nights, and another eight would go subsequently, but she would stand watch on this night on her own. The boys had their own Ritual of First Manhood in another part of the Temple, and their own shrines to stand vigil. None were to see any of the other initiates until all were finished. At the end, those who had passed the trial would hold rites at the in-between shrines, and would conduct ritual services for the first time together to celebrate the beginning of summer. Spring, even here in the valley, was still cold at night. She had shivered, as much from the chill as from fear, as she stepped across the threshold from the inner

garden into the grove. The night had been cloudless, and the two Emerald Eyes were both clear overhead, watching over her as she attended the shrine. Then, too, she was carrying little, dressed only in the light robes of an initiate, carrying the few items she would need in her watch. Her bare feet sank a little into the fine, cool gravel of the grove's pathways, but her feet were not cold. As she walked carefully into the groves, she realized for the first time how enormous the trees there really were. From outside the Temple the walls hid the rear parts of the garden, and the grove itself descended into a hollow in the hills that concealed the trees from view. They loomed over her, like the Eyes flickering through their long branches keeping watch over her progress. Liikel felt intimidated by the place, but worked to calm her thoughts and dispel her fears. Facing her fear, alone in a strange place, she knew to be part of the trial, and she recited some of the poetry she had learned in order to calm her nerves and focus her mind.

The poems had a certain rhythm to them that was oddly appropriate to the place, and it helped to steady her pace and bring certain parts of the grove to her attention. A passage seemed to suit the formation of rocks she passed, and so she contemplated them and considered the poem's archaic language about time and place in light of the rocks' arrangement along a hidden corner in the path. Another passage helped her to consider the small stream winding through the grove in a new light, and so she thought about how the stream might help her to understand something about her upbringing.

Some time had passed.

From inside the grove, for some reason, she could not hear the bells of the temples and towers of the city, but she could tell from the wheeling of the sky overhead that enough of the night had gone by that she could take out another of the dried leaves she had been given, wrapped up in a small satchel at her waist. She chewed on the leaf, which tasted like an odd kind of tea, and continued, with the poem in her head, along the path.

Liikel arrived at one of the smaller shrines not long after, and sat for a while inside, contemplating the small arrangement of carved and shaped objects at its center. The patterns in the floor indicated relevance to certain schools of the Temple, affiliation with certain aspects of the Dead Gods and their history, and so she took some of the offerings out of her satchel that were appropriate to

those schools, and prepared a small arrangement which she hoped the Gods would find pleasing. They were never certain to respond favorably, as their motives were not those of people, but most of the Templars believed that even offerings that weren't quite what the Gods might want from a person might nevertheless find favor if offered faithfully. It was a gamble, but (as the Templars explained) all faith was.

She finished her arrangement and placed it before the objects, in the place for such offerings. It was very dim inside the shrine, with only the night sky's feeble light coming through the entry, and through the openings in the roof. She considered her arrangement. There were other smaller shrines in the grove, and other initiates would visit them, each making her offering on her own watch. Liikel wondered if there were any sign she would see from the objects that sat before her, but they seemed to remain as they were, perplexing and impassive. She had seen some of the shrine objects outside the grove, in lesser shrines and temples, and on festivals when some were brought out in the city center to view, but these were not quite the same. She sat in the shrine for a while, thinking about the way the night's dim light fell across the objects, the way some of them seemed familiar, made by the hands of a Templar, and some standing among them shaped in ways that suggested some other origin.

Liikel jerked upright, her heart racing as she gasped and choked, panicking. She had abruptly woken lying face down in the stream, drowning in the icy water. Her robes were soaked through on her left shoulder and arm, clinging to her skin and freezing. She struggled to understand what had happened, how she had gotten back outside the shrine, how she had ended up lying in the stream, tried to fight the terror that gripped her in an iron fist, crushing her. She coughed up a lungfull of water on her hands and knees, trying not to retch, and collapsed on her side. Her chest kept hitching, desperately trying to get air while the rest of her muscles spasmed against water still clogging her airways. Icy needles jabbed all through her throat, raking down into her lungs with each breath. The fingers of her left hand were numb, her hand stabbed with countless icy needles. After agonizing minutes that felt like the death of hours, her breathing slowly returned to something like normal, and she finally rolled up into sitting, shuddering, her hands bracing against her knees. Her hair was completely soaked, as was most of her left side. She undid the wrappings they had carefully

made in her hair, and tried to wring out some of the water to keep from soaking what of her robes was still dry.

She leaned back, and looked up at the sky.

It was still night, and little time had actually passed since she had made her offering in the smaller shrine. She still didn't understand what had happened, and she was deeply afraid. Nothing made a sound, the trees loomed overhead, and the sky behind them watched over her, all of it now seeming much less of a place where one such as her ought to tread.

But as she calmed down, as her breathing steadied, she realized that wasn't right. Had she not just considered the motives of the Dead Gods, how they were not like those of people? How their favor—if indeed one could even describe it as such—was difficult to interpret? She had visited the smaller shrine and made an offering, and now she had found herself here, albeit in a manner that was terrifying and incomprehensible to her. Was this not the way of the Gods, as best one might try to understand it?

She had been sent into the grove on her own, to attend the shrines and to keep watch through the night. She let out a deep breath, and considered her situation. Upon checking, she realized that her satchel was miraculously still bound and dry. She could still make her offering, and stand her watch over the greater shrine. She could still tread into the heart of the grove, and venerate the place where the Gods' presence was most keenly felt down in the valley, the holiest place there was outside of the City she had read so much about.

She looked around, and realized she was in a different place in the grove than she should have been, but could make her way to the greater shrine from here. The smaller shrine was around some bend, too far back to see any more. She wasn't sure how she had arrived here at the stream, and had left no footsteps that might explain how she had come here, but she could find her way back to the greater shrine, and complete her task.

Liikel realized with some misgiving that she might still be considered to have failed. The Templars might view her wandering away from the smaller shrine, her near death, as rejection, as not being judged worthy to walk the grove's paths.

But that was for the Templars to decide, and Liikel couldn't do anything about that now. She reached into her satchel, took out another leaf, and chewed on it for a while, trying to fix herself on a path forward.

Her heart was heavy, because she feared the shame of failure. But she remembered that she had been schooled to trust her instincts, that she had been taught to walk along paths even when she was blind to them, that the teachings of Temple School were often about how to follow a path set forth by parts of herself of which she was neither consciously aware nor that she really understood. Understanding her part in something that she *didn't* understand, that parts of the outside world was unknowable, was helped by her understanding the same truth about herself: and having the faith, directed both outwards and inwards, to move through both of those unknowable realms, was part of what she had set herself to do.

And so she stood, arranged her robes as best she could, wrung out her hair again and re-set parts of it to keep the wet off her neck, set her shoulders with a sharp exhale, and closed her eyes for a moment. She thought back to the poetry she had been reciting in her head, chewed the leaf in her mouth slowly, and opened her eyes again in the middle of the night, and carefully made her way back to the path.

Not in a straight line, nor directly towards the greater shrine, but in a manner that seemed to match the part of the grove in which she now found herself, tracing her way back to the path in a way that gradually brought her towards the deeps of the grove, and finally to the threshold of the greater shrine.

It took her not just a few more stages of the night, pausing to contemplate the natural features around her, occasionally taking out a new leaf to chew, reciting not only the one but several different pieces of poetry, as she slowly made her way to the heart of the grove.

And finally, there she stood before the entry to the greater shrine, peering with no small fear into the darkness inside. It was now past the middle of the night, and she knew that the rest of her watch was to be spent inside, keeping vigil over the relics and objects she would find there. The Templars had refused to give any hint of what was inside, or what one was supposed to do there, but she had brought her offering, and had faith that, at the least, there would be a place for her to lay it.

She paused for a while once she crossed the threshold, letting her eyes adjust. The light coming through the openings in the roof was feeble, a dim green from the Eyes, but it was just barely enough to see. Liikel gave silent thanks that the night was clear; a cloudy night would make it almost impossible to see inside the shrine, and she feared she might bump into something, or worse.

She realized she was exhausted, that her ordeal with the stream had sapped what little energy she had so late into the night, that she desperately wanted to sleep. But the leaves she was chewing seemed to help her keep a sort of dull wakefulness, neither completely awake nor falling asleep. Only her body seemed to be drained, deeply cold and stiff. Her hand ached, and her fingers were slow and thick to move. Her throat still felt raw, even though that had been almost half the night ago.

She moved slowly forward, feeling like she were in a dream, as she gradually could make out the shape of a large area in the inner part of the shrine. She knew, from her familiarity with some of the other civic shrines, that this was probably where the most precious objects would reside, and so she pushed herself into the heart of the shrine, moving as if in slow motion, at last coming to stop in front of the place of the relics.

It was barely lighter here, more appropriate to describe as “minutely less dark,” but she could make out a few shapes before her, larger than those of any other she had seen in any other shrine. Their forms were difficult to discern, and eluded her efforts to describe in words. Some of them loomed in the corners, dark and foreboding, keeping hidden in shadows within shadows.

She again found herself gripped with fear, surrounded by things that she didn't really understand, barely past her childhood standing before terrible, inscrutable things that had existed before any memory or record. Her mind was both dull and alert, aware of its own fear, feeling it as a thing, one of many, that might be a part of her.

There was a place that seemed appropriate for sitting, and so Liikel, careful to observe propriety and deference, lowered herself into a formal sitting posture, and spent a few moments feeling her surroundings. She wasn't sure if she sensed anything from the place itself, or if her body was simply past the point of real awareness of anything, giving everything the strange logic of dreams.

She considered her surroundings. She felt watched, and also not watched. She felt like she had stepped into a place with terrible power, but which also felt devoid of everything.

Worried that she might become fearful, or might abruptly wake in the middle of drowning without having completed her trial, she turned her focus to the objects in her satchel, the whole of the rest of her offering.

She drew what remained of her wakefulness, and tried to bring it to bear in preparing her offerings, setting the arrangement in the manner required in this, the most holy and crucial of rituals one might be asked to make outside the City itself.

It took a very long time, as there were many small parts, and it was very difficult to see them well enough to arrange them properly. She had to stop several times, fighting off both her own exhaustion, and panic that she might not finish correctly or in time.

The night wheeled overhead, and the Eyes, though she could not see them from here, slowly passed from overhead, away towards the horizon.

Finally, after what seemed to have been a much longer passage of time than seemed possible in a single night, her arrangement was as close to finished as she could bring it. She was resigned, but reminded herself that she had to keep faith. Some of her ways of arranging her offering were not exactly as she had learned, but she had been forced to improvise, her hands moving in near-total darkness, her left struggling and then sometimes unable to make the necessary steps. She had to work around her body's weakness, finding a way to continue regardless.

At last, she contemplated the objects of the Dead Gods, and the arrangement she presumed to offer them. She felt like it wasn't enough. It would have to do. There was one final step. She was deeply afraid, trembling now much more from fear than cold.

She slowly raised herself back to standing, closed her eyes for a moment trying to steel herself. She looked back down at her offering, feared that it was inadequate, and hoped that this last step of the ritual would be enough to make it worthy.

She took the hems of her robes and tied them just above the knees, the sleeves just above her elbows. They were still wet, and she was still cold deep into her

bones, but she knew the pale fabrics would have to be kept clear. The air on her bare limbs was cold, but she focused on not letting the cold overtake her. The leaves from her satchel were all gone, and she had arranged the last of her objects for offering. All that remained in her satchel was the knife. It was small and delicate, finely made of a sort that was understated yet bespoke the most dedicated of craft to make, appropriate only for this one task. It was the only part of her tools that she had not made herself, as its workmanship was far beyond her skills. It was beyond the skills of all but a very few.

Liikel lowered herself back down to sit back on her heels, her bare shins on the cold floor. She regarded her offering in the darkness, sat quietly for a few moments with the knife lying in her open hands. Slowly, she undid the bindings on the sheath, and lay it carefully to the side.

The first part was the most difficult, as she couldn't see what she was doing, and was the most delicate and dangerous. She tried to steady her hands, squared her shoulders, and fixed her gaze straight ahead. Holding the knife delicately and carefully with both hands, she brought it up to eye level. She knew she would have to be fast, both to overcome her fear, and to complete the ritual without error.

Gently, she placed the tip of the knife just to the outside of her left eye, swiveled her hand, and drew the blade straight back across her temple, stopping just short of the hairline.

Liikel stifled a scream, but almost immediately was surprised to discover that it had hurt less than she was expecting. The knife was terribly sharp, and the priests had told her that the biggest danger, once she began, was in cutting too deeply. She need only draw the blade just barely across the skin, and the flesh would separate. The merest pressure, and she risked deep injury, leading to scars that healed badly, or much worse.

She forced herself to focus again. She had only just made the first, and she could feel the blood beginning to pool along the cut. She would have to move fast to finish before any ran down onto her robes.

She carefully passed the knife into her left hand, trying to hold it delicately despite the lingering stiffness. She crossed to the other side, and carefully—using her right hand to steady the knife—drew a second incision across her right temple.

She paused, and felt both lines aching. Now her heart was racing, and she knew that the rush of fear and danger would make her hands even shakier. She passed knife back to the right hand, moving as quickly and deliberately as she could. Laying the tip of the blade just below her eye, she fixed her gaze forward, and tried to feel where her pupils were centered just over the ridge of her cheekbone. This draw was longer, more dangerous as the flesh was deeper, and so she tried to keep her expression fixed, trying not to move the cheek under the knife. She stopped at the line of her lips, switched hands, steadied, and drew a mirror line down her right cheek.

Now her face was beginning to hurt, although the cuts she had made were neither very deep nor uneven, and she could feel tears welling up that she had to fight to keep back. She could feel her breath starting to hitch, the fear of what she was doing threatening to make it worse. She dimly thought to herself, perhaps the leaves she had been chewing were helping to keep her nerves calm, and a part of her imagined that if they were, she was thankful that her agony and misery wasn't worse.

She had to keep her composure. If she lost her focus, she would disfigure herself, or worse. The fear brought clarity, and she was thankful, in the fog that was gradually enveloping her, that the clarity would help her complete her trial. Disfigurement was awful to contemplate, as was death, but she did not want to come so far only to fail. Her family would love her regardless, and the difficulty of the trials was known and thus brought no shame in failure. But Liikel was determined to see her trial through.

This was the most dangerous part. She tilted her head back, feeling the blood that was pooling on her temples and cheeks drain back into her hair, into the wrappings. This had been the purpose of those wrappings, and why she needed them for this part.

She craned her neck upwards and back, arching her back to reach her gaze straight up to the small opening in the roof. She could barely make out a few stars, and now, truly afraid and in pain and misery, felt tears streaming down along with the blood along her temples. She choked back one agonized sob, then fixed her jaw. As carefully as she could, she set the knife at the middle of her lower lip, just in the hollow of her chin. Trying to move as slowly and surely as she could, she gently, delicately, drew the blade down her chin, under her jaw, bracing her palm of her hand against her throat as she inched the blade down