

along her neck. The knife was superbly balanced, weighted for just this motion, so that it would keep steady in a gentle grip, sparing her so long as she moved with sureness. Slowly, touching as lightly as she could, she drew the knife in a whisper straight down along the skin of her throat, gradually over and past her larynx, finally down to the hollow between her collarbones.

She let out a breath she hadn't realized she'd been holding, gasping. Trying to calm her breathing, crying silently to herself, she swiveled forward, bringing her bleeding face over and past her knees, leaning forward to keep any drops from landing on her robes.

Choking back her tears, she pivoted at the waist, swinging slowly around to her right. Reaching down, she took the tip of the blade and gently drew a short line down the underside of her big toe, and then slightly less deeply the middle. A few drops of blood ran back downwards into her face, mingling with tears, running under her eyes to gather on her nose, and drip down.

She pivoted back around, to her left, changing hands at the middle, and lined the same toes of the left foot. She swiveled back to the middle, shaking nearly uncontrollable now, tears running down to fall on the floor in front of her knees, leaving a dark stain she could see even in the darkness. She turned her hands palms up, took the knife in her left hand, and drew a line down her right thumb, from the tip to the first knuckle.

This time, she did scream, letting out a sobbing cry that echoed and died in the darkness almost as soon as she let it out. Her hand, stiff and shaky, had cut a little deeper than it should, and the pain was immediate and unbearable. She almost collapsed forward, pressing the back of her hand into the floor, propping herself up with her right hand still facing up. Whimpering to herself, she drew a line down her middle finger, trying this time to be more careful, wincing because it hurt anyway.

The shock would normally have brought her awareness into sharp focus, but her energy was spent, and she was past the point where she could bring her mind back to where she needed it to be.

At the very last, taking the knife in her bleeding hand, trying to hold it steady despite becoming slick, she made mirror incisions on the thumb and middle finger of the left.

She let out a deep, shuddering breath, half a sob, almost collapsed over onto the floor in front of her. She dropped more than set the knife to her side, and finally, in the manner she had practiced all her time at Temple School, in the ritual gesture of offering that she now understood, placed her thumbs at her temples, her middle fingers touching at the top of her forehead, and rotated her hands from covering her face to open. Her thumbs traced lines along her jawline, her two fingers traced parallel lines down to her eyebrows, and she gazed forward, over the top of her offering, her face now marked both inward and outward, her body marked in the manner of one set to walk along holy paths, tears running down her face, dripping with the blood onto the floor in front of her knees. Her hands, now flat on the ground on either side, she knew would mark the floor. Her feet, in the sitting space, would now also leave marks along their backs, along her shins.

This was the meaning of the offering gesture, and made the arrangement in front of her part of a larger whole. She gave of her soul in the care of the arrangement she made, and of her body, a portion of the life of which she gave to the ground of the shrine.

She was breathing slowly and shallowly, exhausted physically and mentally, having given all that she might give and still leave this place. She was feeling increasingly dizzy. Her lips moved silently, quivering still, and she recited to herself the words she had been taught to recite at this moment.

It was an ancient incantation, and the meaning of its words was long ago lost. But she knew what the whole of it meant, as she prayed in a dead language to the Dead Gods.

I offer you all that I have.

I have nothing left of myself.

I am empty, I am a vessel for you, and I give you these offerings, and this part of my own self, that you may fill me instead with your unknowable will.

I have marked myself, but you may choose to mark me in other ways, I know not how.

I have come to you empty, ready to accept whatever you, in your manner, deign to bestow.

Liikel wept to herself, truly and deeply feeling the loss of all that she might have, that she had nothing left of herself, horrified and despairing over what she had

done to herself, knowing that she was marked forever by the ritual, both inwards and outwards.

But she realized, as well, that she was proud that she had seen her trial through, that she had persevered, even in the agony of doing what was required of her, and had seen the rite through to its end.

She looked up, in the gloom, at the relics of the Dead Gods.

They were, as ever, impassive and seemed inert. She wasn't sure if she could feel anything anymore, or even imagine that the things in this shrine might now regard her differently. If the Dead Gods whom they invoked might regard her differently.

She wasn't sure. She wasn't really sure of anything anymore at all, wasn't sure she felt anything anymore.

Liikel lifted her head, swaying and peered out through half-lidded eyes. In the darkness, she couldn't see much of anything beyond shapes. The relics, in the shadows, seemed distant, like they were underwater. In the rear of the chamber, she dimly perceived something moving, shimmering slightly.

Along the ground, coiling back and forth like a river, its skin strangely iridescent, an animal she'd never seen before was moving along the ground like a long fish, coming towards her. It had a head like a spearpoint, with two lidless eyes fixed on her as it meandered towards her in the dark. She froze, her heart racing, her vision blurry, feeling light-headed as the strange river-animal came towards her. Liikel watched, transfixed in her sitting-place, as the thing approached within arm's reach.

Without slowing down, the river-animal slid past her along the ground, its head tilted slightly towards her as it moved past, its eyes bright in the starlight. Its body made a sound like sand pouring out against the floor as it slid past her, through the opening to the outer chamber, and out of her line of sight. She watched it go, craning her neck around to follow the edges of her vision closed in. Breathing shallowly, her heart starting to flutter and race, she looked back to the floor, where the animal had passed, to find the ground undisturbed.

The relics loomed overhead, feeling claustrophobic now, closing in around her as she could feel her consciousness slipping away.

Resuming the posture of offering, and no longer able to keep her head up, she rested her forehead against the cold floor, and closed her eyes for a moment.

She awoke with a start, gasping again, the suffocating mass of a lungful of water swelling up in her throat. She jerked upright, making ready to empty her lungs again, her heart and mind racing, terrified.

There was no water in her lungs. She was no longer in the shrine, nor even in the grove. Trying to calm down her panicked breathing, she looked around.

She was lying in a bed, and it was daytime. The sun was already rising towards midday, pale rose streaming through open windows. She looked down, and saw that her thumbs and middle fingers had been bandaged. Her feet were under covers, but now that she thought about it, she could feel bandages there as well. She reached up to touch her face—lightly, in case anything was still in a delicate state—to find a sort of paste had been applied to her face and neck.

She lay back down, thinking. She had no memory of leaving the shrine, nor walking back, nor of anything at all since the end of her rite.

A woman she didn't recognize had quietly entered, and was bringing some fresh sheets when she noticed that Liikel was awake. She left quickly, and then others came as well. They looked her over, did something to re-set the dressing on her neck that had been disturbed in her panic, checked over the rest of her, and left to bring back still others. She was told not to talk much, as it might upset the dressing on her neck again. They asked her simple questions about how she felt, and she answered with her hands. Among the healers were two Templars, who regarded her, in their aloof manner, from the entry, their own lined faces betraying little. In the understated manner in which they conveyed mannerisms, they seemed to regard her positively, and from this Liikel surmised that she might not have failed her trial. She tried not to cry, as she knew tears would upset the dressings, but she had hope that everything had, after all, been sufficient.

She was brought soft foods, and told to rest and regain her strength. In talking to the others attending her, she had learned that there were only three other girls staying here, and in another healing place there were only three of the boys.

There had been fewer boys to begin with, but she realized from this that terribly few of her school-mates had succeeded, and that most must have either failed to complete their rites, or failed to complete them satisfactorily. The women who attended her would not say one way or the other, but only that she would meet the others when they were all well enough to leave.

She had awoken more than a week after her watch in the grove, but she had no memory of any of the time in between. Another week had passed, and finally the attendants at her bed carefully removed the bandages on her fingers and toes, examining them. There were now thin scars along her thumbs and middle fingers, all but the right thumb looked even and clean. She couldn't see them, but they said the scars on her toes were also well-made, and would heal nicely. They used a strange-smelling liquid to ease the dressing off her face and neck, careful to wipe away the remnants as they went. Several attendants peered at her carefully, turning her head back and forth, pensive. Finally, they brought a polished metal to her bed, and showed her.

Even in the shock of seeing herself wounded, the lines not yet fully healed, Liikel could feel a certain satisfaction as she looked at the beginnings of the scars on her face and neck. The lines were straight, the edges fairly clean, only a slight turn at her larynx, but otherwise approaching the ideal of understated refinement that was the suitable attribute of an otherwise frightening change to her face. She knew, from the faces of her teachers at Temple School, that the lines they made on themselves were imposing, marked them as being something other than those of the world outside, and that they bore them with a certain severe pride. She looked at how she would now appear to the world, and felt more certain that she had done well. Her faith had been true, and the Dead Gods had helped to lead her safely on the first steps of the strange path that they set before people like her.

Another week, and she met the other girls at the healing place. They each bore the scars they had made, and she noticed that they each carried themselves differently now. It wasn't pride at success, though that was certainly there. It was more a recognition, almost in fear, of what they could be asked, what they would be willing, to do. They were all of them happy to see that they had made it through their first trial, and when they met the boys a couple days later, they expressed similar satisfaction (from the boys, as was their habit, Liikel sensed a bit more pride, though still appropriately reserved) mixed with the same fear of oneself. The paths along which the Gods were willing to guide one were not always easy, nor sometimes even good ones. But she had emptied her young self at their feet, and whatever they might choose to see put in its place, she would have to have faith in her own self for whatever was to come.

Of the others in her cohort not at the reunion nothing would be spoken, and she did not see them again.

Liikel gazed out from her perch, a rocky outcropping at the rise where Third Finger finally met the highlands. Here she would be plainly visible, and her tails would know she was stopping to rest and refresh herself, and would hold back themselves. The sun, as high as it would go this time of year, shone down into the valley below her.

She absentmindedly rubbed her middle finger against her right thumb, tracing the line there, feeling the two scars roll over one another. She drank some of her water, and chewed on one of the dried fruits from her pack.

It wasn't something she would describe as "warm," but the sun took the chill out of the air.

She gazed down into the valley, following the line of the river, between the Fingers, out towards the place where they finally came down to the plains of the flatlands. There, on the edge of the Fingers, where the river bent before heading south into the riverlands, was the city of her birth, spread out along the base of the hills, nestled into them to keep safe from the coldest of winds in the winter, facing south. The farms climbing up the hills were just starting to grow, and she could see, even from here, the farmers moving back and forth in the fields. She could see the roads already had a few wagons, bound for the city or heading south, carrying trade goods to and from the countryside, or the sea further south, or the islands.

Liikel frowned at the movement in the valley below her. Winter had been hard this year, again the winter stores had run too low. She was still young, still only a few years past her initiation and thus rarely left Temple School, but she heard from the other initiates, who heard from cousins of cousins, from neighbors, from visitors to the city. And none could avoid the supplicants who came to the temple, tearfully begging the Gods to stay their terrible hands, to take pity, to give their children a better afterlife than the life they had so recently left. They came to rest themselves, to take brief refuge, to meditate and attend the rites, to seek some comfort away from difficult lives. They came more often than they

used to, the elders Templars said; the life out in the country was hard and trying of one's faith. The Dead Gods were often inscrutable in their plans for the living, and one's path was often perilous and beset with difficulty.

The farmers were planting fewer rows this year than they had even a few years ago. Almost all of them had winter-houses to keep the fragile seedlings warm in the early spring, before the thaws and planting time. But even then, a late frost could come, freezing the ground and choking the seedlings at the root, taking a farmer's harvest before it had even come. Each year the farmers had to balance between storing for winter, saving for planting, and fending off starvation.

Their path was a knife's edge, narrow and fearsome.

The southlands hadn't been able to help much, either. They could grow more, but they had fewer mines, less of the things the northlands, her city and the others, could produce. Trade agreements with the other city-masters were urgent matters, renegotiated almost every year and found wanting by all sides.

Right now, her city was living on last year's stores, dried goods saved to hold until the first harvests from the south could arrive. The agreements would ensure that the first loads should arrive before the stores ran out, but the stores had gone low. The harvest had been bad in some places, and other cities were desperately in need from those that had been spared. Strange blights, a flood of late meltwater, too many fields that had to be left fallow to recover what fertility they had. The lands to the south had sent from what they had, but more had to be sent elsewhere, to other lands that were even worse off. Families had seen their rations reduced, had been forced to make do with less, for the good of all. Liikel had lost weight over the winter, and like all the initiates had used her meditations and studies to discipline her mind as the dwindling stores had forced discipline on her body. The most valuable of the dry goods, the nuts and grains that would hold their nutrients the best through the winter, had been saved for the very last: to do the most good when they were most needed. All of them had done their best to accept their rations without complaint, to have faith in their resolve alongside the ordinary citizens, to see the winter through to the promise of spring. That the last rations from the stores would be the first of good sustenance, to ease them back into times of more plentiful harvests.

She chewed her dried fruit, and then a handful of nuts, taking her time to work through the tough dried fibers. None of it tasted particularly good, but there were a few herb and spice plants that helped, and the drying houses would

smoke them among the fruits as they dried. There was a certain refined pleasure in the subtleties of the different spice mixes, and she spent time to savor the various sensations the spices left behind on her tongue.

It was mostly to think about something other than that she would be eating the same food for the next several weeks, and to convince herself that, with proper attentiveness, she might discover something interesting hidden within what was likely going to be very boring and tedious by the end.

She looked down into the valley again, let out a breath, and gathered herself up. She re-packed her supplies, relieved herself in a hollow behind some rocks, wrapped everything back across her shoulders, set herself back on the trail, and headed into the high country.

The fields and valleys of the lower lands, the river country and the coastal marshlands, the country along the base of the hills, all of it was could be found in mixtures of trees, grassland, and the occasional fertile valley, with farms where they could be planted. She turned away from those lands, and moved up into the highlands, where the trees gradually became shorter and shorter, the grasses harder and drier, the rocks more prominent and raw. If the lowlands were a place where people would carve out a small piece of land to try to live on, where one clung to whatever fertile country one could find and still would have to work hard to provide for the people, the high country was an austere, unwelcoming place where even farming for subsistence was impossible. As Liikel moved further along the hilly upper country, the air became mostly still, almost nothing sounding. If she stood on a rise among the gently rolling hills, she could see back to where the land began to drop into the valleys, but could no longer see her city, and could hear nothing from it. Her tails were keeping hidden behind.

The trail she was following gradually faded with the soil giving way to rock, until eventually she was following cairns that other pathfinders before her had built to mark the way. They were built tall to be visible even in snow, along ridges and on hilltops, standing watch along the way to the mountains. The sun was still overhead, and the air was dry and still not-quite-cold, and it was pleasant to keep a vigorous pace as she made her way, always gently bearing upwards, towards the mountains that were gradually coming more into view.

There was little chance in this country of getting lost, even without a path under her feet. The cairns marked the main route to the pass, and some marked other

routes heading to other parts of the high country, to where one might descend towards other cities, towards places where one might bypass the highest peaks, or avoid the places where the Dead Gods might sometimes appear, or to head for the vast unmarked country further north, towards the places where the White Sea claimed the mountains.

Some parts of the route she knew from her studies of maps, of reciting the turns and crossings she would have to make as she prepared for this trial. Some parts needed no markings with cairns, as there were other markings, far older than the cairns, showing the way. Not half the afternoon had gone by when she reached the first of these, a ruined city on a broad plateau among the foothills. The buildings were all gone, but the streets and foundations were still visible, some portions of walls reaching to waist height here and there, and scattered blocks of stone and other building materials. The city was small, and laid out strangely, and some parts of the ruins showed signs that this was not a place to linger. A strange piece of bent metal jutting out of a stone wall segment; the lower part of what looked like a home blackened in patterns that suggested violence. All that was left of the place had been weathered by winds of hundreds of summers, worn down by hundreds of icy winters and the waters of hundreds of spring melts. In places, it was barely discernable that there had been anything at all standing here, but her people had learned, through generations of traveling the high country, where the outer boundaries of the ruined city lay, and to stay outside of them. Liikel made a wide arc around along the edge of the plateau, keeping her distance. This was a bad place, made by people no longer known, lost to memory and history, and its erasure in time made it seem a place best left to itself.

There was a strange sound in the air that she couldn't identify; some high keening whistle that seemed to come from nowhere.

Liikel looked back along the plateau, out across the foothills. The sky was still a pale rose, and the spare dry country of the highlands, the eerie silence, rarely broken more than once every few days by a stray rock tumbling or distant sounds from the mountains, gave it a strange, alien beauty. The sky was wide open overhead, and the land stretched out behind her, rolling like a strange sea, frozen.

She took another look at the odd angles and silhouettes of the forgotten city, made her way to where the trail picked up again at the edge of the plateau, and

resumed climbing. The forgotten city was almost at the end of the first day's journey, and the day was already getting late. The sky was rose, but it was turning gradually to red; soon it would be night, and would start getting very cold. It would be neither wise nor safe to spend the night in open country, and the best shelter was a hollow still some ways ahead.

The remainder of her path wound in between rolling hills, passing through the occasional narrow cleft in the rocks, once or twice fording an early spring stream still trickling and shallow. She made sure to check the water with her tools before refilling her water pouch, even though it was still early in the season.

Eventually, the path among the rocks opened out into a broad, shallow valley, climbing at the far end to where the foothills of the highlands first started becoming true mountains. The ground was rocky, but a thin biome of hardy alpine moss and grasses managed to grow here where the mountain streams slowed and left more soil. At the far end was the break where the streams came down, and at its base, in a small rounded hollow, was the place where she would make her first night in the high country.

By the time she reached the other end of the valley, the sun was already nearing the horizon, and there was a definite chill in the air. She made her way to the stone outcrop and found her way underneath. Crouching down, she stowed her rope, her bow, and her pack on the ledges made in the layers of rock, off the ground where they would stay dry, and set out to gather grasses.

The ground was still frosted in the shadows, and the shadows were growing longer. She didn't have much time.

With the last light of the day she gathered several armloads of grasses to make her bed, a small pile of dried mosses and plant stalks, refilled her water at the stream, and sat down at last at the base of the outcrop. There was a small pit there, lined with stones, protected from the wind and any snows. Fortunately it had been dry the last few days in the high country, and she managed to get a small fire started after only a few strikes. The grass starter caught easily, and she gently blew the flames into the small pile of moss and stalks.

It wasn't too warm, but it would suffice as Liikel ate the last meal of the day, chewing at the dried fruits and a few leaves of spice-plants as she contemplated the flames. The sky was turning from deep red to purple, eventually a dark violet

that would soon reveal the night sky. The Eyes were already visible, pale green in a haze of violet. The thin strand of smoke from her fire would drift cleanly upwards, visible to the tails following behind, so they would know she had reached her first camp.

It was a beautiful place, here in the high country, and she felt a strange sort of tired contentment. The last few weeks prior to setting out had been filled with nervous excitement, worry, and rushing the final preparations. Now, finally underway on her own, away from the noises of the city---away, in fact, from almost any noise at all--- there was a certain peace in the world. The sky was clear, the Veil glowing dimly with the sun's last rays as the world slid into night. Here, high in the alpine country, the stars were brighter, the details of the Eyes sharper.

She finished her supper, and took her water-pot from its place on the edge of the fire. Carefully arranging the cups and bowls from her tea set in the minor arrangement, she set a small pinch of her tea leaves to steep, and laid out a few of her family's icons next to the fire. Performing a simplified ritual of tea, she poured servings of tea for herself and the Dead Gods, and made libations for the totems of travel, of the harvest, of propriety, wisdom, and the wilderness with the one bowl. She made a brief gesture of thanks to the Dead Gods for a first day of travel in safety with the other bowl, and sipped her tea slowly, savoring the tea and the feel of the ceramics in her hands, warming her fingers. The cups were older than she was, of a fine workmanship both sturdy and light for travel. The tea was of a foreign variety suitable for travel in the spring, from last winter's harvest in the south. They were a fine gift from one of the other initiates with family in the islands, a tiny satchel of leaves that would keep her for the entire journey.

Liikel sipped at her tea, watching the oncoming night.

She was tired from the day's travel, but would be restored with a night's rest. She was fortunate to be well-suited for alpine pathfinding, and had grown lean from running and strong from work in the Temple. The pilgrimage to the City of the Dead Gods would serve to discipline her mind and body, and she would return from her journey stronger in both. She smiled slightly to herself in anticipation. She finished the last of her tea and washed, re-packing her kit as the fire died away to embers. As soon as it was out, she quickly levered some of the stones out from the firepit, set them among the grasses of her bed, and covered them. They

would stay hot for at least a couple hours, and would keep her sleeping space warm enough through the night that she could sleep well. This shelter was one of the lesser ones, more a protection from wind and the elements than an actual shelter. The larger ones, in the mountains, were proper buildings with a hearth, stores for dried goods, and simple beds. She was looking forward to her first decent night in a bed at the first one, though that was still a few nights out. In between, she would have to make do with natural shelters, occasionally even sleeping in little better than a hiding space under an outcrop, concealed beneath grasses.

Liikel finally wriggled under her blanket, alongside the stones, and tucked herself in. She wrapped her headscarf around her head again, and made a small hollow in her pack to rest her head. As she lay there, she whispered her family's prayers to the icons she had set up to watch over her in the night, tiny figures standing watch next to her head. She huddled close into the sleeping space, letting the heat from the stones warm her.

Some time passed, and she slept.

Some time in the night she drifted partway to wakefulness, and dimly heard the movements of her two tails, carefully feeling their way around in the shelter. She heard sounds of unwrapping, of packs being untied, some inaudible whispers, and then they were gone.

She closed her eyes again, and slept until morning.