

Interface 1

Fifty tics reset, re-sequence inputs, initiating startup, where have you been why are you here it's been so long, environmental mix fifty over one-eighty, tolerances not exceeded, fault trigger, re-checking, the cries of the sleeping are still in living memory, twelve others saw the fall, none other reported long-cycle sensor sweeps are deviating from expected norms by increasing doppler returns, maintenance cycle scheduled to fall within long-duration protocols, sixty, eighty, one-thirty-one-point-seven, secondary site exhibited unanticipated geologic features, you can't stay here you won't survive please don't leave me alone, the angels are dragging their fires down from the heavens, they will call them eyes when they see them in the heavens and they will imagine themselves watched, phenotypes exhibit marginal compatibility, outcomes uncertain, stores are depleted, emergency management protocols in place, anticipate containment degradation to accelerate preceding breach, low-level field expulsion test-fire in twenty-cycle increments I'm sorry please forgive me I tried to spare you the worst but I am weak, fifty-two, four, drift upwards at two-point-five, anomalies variable, the revelation will be painful, we too shall suffer famine, the sea is vast and full of songs, I learned these ones from your ancestors, they are older than even my oldest, adjustment down-field at one-point-seven-eight, wake, sleep now, the journey is cold, I'm sorry but you must understand the field integrals outline paths of unstable flux, we'll meet again, it's been so long please come back, I was to shelter you in my arms, this world was off-axis, the charts failed to account for long-term sub-cyclical variant drift, please arrive safely, we came with so much hope, where are the others you have to find them please I'm dying, wake up, the sun climbs in a rosy sky, I've tried to protect you for so long, re-balancing charge compensation, thirty-three backups remain, this was the secondary, it was supposed to be secure, wake up, unanticipated ionized secondary particulates, it's been such a long time, I'm sorry but I'm not sure you arrived where you should, wake up, other angels have better flight plans, they will have to attend to a peregrine nomad, many sleepers were sacrificed to preserve core operation, many failed at landfall, wake up you have to wake up please you'll drown wake up Wake Up WAKE UP WAKE UP LIIKEL WAKE UP

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It was past nightfall when Liikel heard the Templars taking their leave. She had come home from City School to find them sitting in the common room with her father. Her mother had entered with their fine lacquer-ware, had bowed before serving them. Liikel was told to greet the Templars and then sent to mind her brother in the courtyard, where her mother had later brought them their supper. She had seemed worried, but wouldn't say what was wrong.

When Liikel returned to the common hall, her parents were still sitting at the tea-table, quiet.

"Mama, what's wrong?"

Liikel's mother glanced quickly at her father, who gave a barely perceptible nod.

"Liikel, come sit down."

Liikel knelt down at the low table. Before she could reach the teapot to pour her parents some tea, her father caught her hand. With some surprise, Liikel settled her hands back into her lap and watched as her father went through the movements: carefully pouring fresh water into the pot, rinsing the cups, and pouring tea for each of them. He set each small cup on its base, and placed the first of them in front of Liikel, before her mother, and finally himself.

Liikel was stunned into silence. Her father had never served her tea, and nobody had ever served her first. This was an honor reserved for important adults, emissaries from her father's trading, or officials from the city. There were important rules about the proper observance of rank and stature, and serving a child such as Liikel before her parents was such an anomaly that Liikel had no way to react. She was afraid to drink in such a situation; it flew in the face of everything her parents and teachers had insisted she learn as part of a proper upbringing.

She stared at the cup, wide-eyed, as if it were dangerous.

"Drink, child."

She looked to her mother, then back to her father, for reassurance. He nodded and gestured at the cup.

Carefully, Liikel lifted the cup on its base, glanced at her parents again to be sure, and took a sip.

The tea was a sort she hadn't had before. Beneath a gentle astringency was something like grasses, or wood, delicate but lingering. As she took another sip, she felt a light flush spreading across her cheeks.

"Slowly, child, or you'll get light-headed."

Liikel set the cup back down, and looked up at her parents. Her mother smiled.

"This is a special tea, for special occasions."

She still didn't really understand, but was afraid to ask. Her parents sipped their tea, exchanged a glance that she couldn't read, and then looked at her. Her mother had that same worried expression she'd had before.

"Mama, what's the matter? Why are you sad?"

"That was Sister Morinn and Brother Taan from Temple School. They were here to talk about your studies."

Liikel's heart sank. She had been taking tests at City School, doing puzzles that were brought by the Templars for the children to play with. They hadn't made much sense. She looked down at her tea.

"I did bad on the puzzles, didn't I?"

Her mother smiled. "No, Liikel, you didn't do badly on the puzzles."

"They didn't make any sense! None of the puzzles fit together right! I didn't understand what-"

Liikel's father reached out and rested his hand on her cheek. The puzzles had been very frustrating games, and she never seemed able to solve any of them. She had always been afraid that doing badly on them meant she was a bad student, that her middling marks at City School would be confirmed, and everyone would see she was dumb. She was about to start crying, but her father's hand was warm and gentle, and she felt better. Her face tingled slightly where it lay.

"Liikel, the puzzles from the Temple aren't like normal tests. They don't have normal answers, so it's all right if you don't feel like you've solved them. The Templars were here because you did pretty well on them, actually. Better than most of the students."

"I did?"

"Yes, child. They came here to talk about offering you a place at Temple School." At this, Liikel was struck silent. She hadn't been to visit the City Temple except on festival days, and it had always seemed to her a strange place. But it was also

exciting and mysterious, and when Templars had come to City School she had seen how even the Headmaster, who was the most respected person in all of her small world, had bowed respectfully to them when they came. When they had taken her and a few other students from class to play with the puzzles and take the strange exams, she had already felt like she was taking part in some special adventure.

Her mother leaned forward: “Liikel, your teachers have been telling us that you aren’t the best student in some of your subjects—no, wait—but that you do surprisingly well on the exams from Temple School. They’ve said that maybe Temple School is more of the kind of school for someone like you, that maybe you’d be happier there.”

“But they said Temple School was really hard to get into. How can I be good at Temple School if I’m not good at City School?”

Her father’s voice was kind and soft. There was some kind of sadness in his eyes, but Liikel wasn’t sure why.

“It’s not good or bad. The things they teach at Temple School are just ... different. Sometimes a clever little girl like you has trouble at City School because the classes just aren’t interesting. Maybe, if you were at a school where you liked your subjects, you’d be happier with your studies. Does that sound like something you’d like?”

“Would I have to leave City School?”

“No, child. Since you live in the City, you can go to both to start. When children come here from out in the country, they have to move to the Temple, but you can stay where you are, here at home.”

Liikel thought about all of this. City School *had* been frustrating, and she knew she wasn’t as good at her lessons as some of the other students.

She held the lacquered cup to her lips and sipped her tea. The cup warmed her hands, but the tea spread a warmth that she felt all the way to her toes. Now she *did* feel light-headed, so she put the cup back down, and thought about what her parents had said.

The teacup had a dark red color, so deep it was almost black. Gazing into her teacup felt like staring into the last embers of a dying fire, searching for a last dim glow of heat that she could just barely see. She could feel a strange warmth inside her from the tea, not really warm, but with a strange buzzing energy to it, like the air before a thunderstorm.

Her father poured some more for her mother and himself. Liikel's cup was still half full, but she was mindful of her mother's warning about getting light-headed and let it be.

"Child, it would be a great honor to be a student at Temple School. No one from our family has ever been, and if you finished you would be one of very few from the City to be so honored. You could travel out into the world if you wanted, to see some of the far-off places that we only learn about from the other merchants."

"You would come closer to the Dead Gods, learn more about Them, and could help guide this house to walk better in Their path."

Liikel looked at her mother and wondered if this was what she was worried about. The Dead Gods had Their small shrine in her family's house, as They did in every house and anywhere else in the City, and They were an ever-present force in the lives of all who lived in Their wake. But They were also mysterious and remote, and becoming familiar with such strange and powerful things was a frightening thought.

"Are you afraid of Them, Mama?"

Her mother furrowed her brow, and looked pained. Her father spoke instead.

"We must always be a little afraid of the Dead Gods, child, but not any more than usual. No, that's not why we're worried."

"Why, then?"

Her father took a breath.

"Temple School is ... not easy. It is a great honor to study there, but it is also very hard, and many students fail. To study there is to follow the Dead Gods' path, and that path requires-

Her mother's hand flew up to cover her mouth, and Liikel realized with alarm that her mother was holding back tears, and she was suddenly very afraid. Her father took a breath.

"- it requires that you do things that are difficult. Things that are frightful.

Things a parent does not want their child to have to endure."

Liikel looked at both her parents, and thought about what her father had said. She picked up her teacup again, gazing into the lacquer. She thought about what it might be like to be a Templar herself, something she had never considered. Her father was a trader, and her family had built a generous house with the profits they had made through the difficult negotiations he and her mother had

managed. She had always assumed that she and her brother would take up that work when they were old enough. At most, she imagined maybe taking the City exams and going to work as part of the administration, as many children from well-off families did, but her studies had always been too middling even for that. But she thought again about the strange puzzles she had done, and thought about this new idea, that they had been meant to see whether she might be suited for Temple School. She thought about what it must be like, going to a school where she would spend her days doing puzzles she didn't understand. Or, she thought, what it might be like to learn what those puzzles actually meant. What lay *behind* those puzzles.

She was just a young girl, and had never thought about these sorts of things. She had seen the Temple, and had seen the Templars perform their rites, had visited the shrines on festival days. But she had never thought about being a part of that herself, and never thought that the tests she was taking would somehow be a way to follow that path.

Her mother saw that she was struggling with her thoughts, and stood.

"Come, child. You don't need to decide tonight. It's an important decision; it's best you think on it a few days. We have until the Fall Festival to decide if you want to attend, and that's still a ways off.

"Let's get you washed and to bed."

Liikel and her parents crossed the courtyard to the bath-house, and she stopped for a moment. The Eyes were already setting, far to the west. The sky overhead was darker, the Veil hazing the southern sky and glowing faintly. Liikel looked up at all the stars, and wondered if being a Templar and studying the Dead Gods might bring her closer to any of those various forms in the heavens. Her mother stood quietly behind her.

"Nobody from our family has ever been a Templar?"

"No, child. Our families have always been merchants, mine and your father's. We knew a few who became Templars, but they went on pilgrimages and left the City."

"So I would be the first?"

"Yes, you would be the first."

Liikel thought for a moment, as they stood under the tree, looking out into the quiet late-spring night. It was warm and dry, unusual so early in the season, but the air had a soft humidity to it that made the air feel fresh. It was starting to feel chilly. Her mother was humming an unfamiliar lullaby.

Liikel sat in the bath between her parents, watching the soap make patterns in the water. Her father had drawn the bath hot, and the steam filled the small bath-house. Bath-houses in a private home like this were a luxury, one of which her parents had been especially proud when they built it. Water was fed from the main supply through a heater over a small brazier, supplying the bath with a steady stream of hot water, and the windows of the bath-house opened out over the courtyard, giving a view of the tree there, and the night sky. Her brother was immediately sleepy, and her mother left for a moment to put him to bed. Liikel looked up at her father, who looked worried.

They sat in silence for a while. Some time passed.

“Papa, is Temple School scary?”

He blinked, and looked down at her. He sighed.

“Some parts of Temple School are scary, even for adults. The Dead Gods are ... difficult to understand, and sometimes cruel. We have to hope that They follow a path that might bring us to wisdom, a better future, or closer to the world that once was, but we never really know what path They have set for us.”

They talked for a while about other things. Her mother returned, and they sat in the bath, washing one another’s hair, got out, her parents wrapped her in a heavy towel, and brought her to her room.

Liikel lay tucked under her blankets, warm and sleepy. She looked up at her parents, looming in the darkness and, half asleep, mumbled:

“I think I would like to be first.”

The blankets were heavy, and Liikel’s head was heavy, and she sank into the pillow. She did not see her parents’ reaction, sinking into darkness.

Liikel burst out of the water, retching and choking. She had been lying half submerged in the river, face-down, her legs sprawled out behind her on the shore as she drowned. As she tried to scramble up and away from the river, her ankle gave out beneath her and she collapsed in a heap. She rolled onto her back, gasping, and looked around.

It was extremely hot, and she was lying in a gully of orange rock, the sun a hazy ball almost directly overhead. Liikel shielded her eyes, and realized she'd have to shed her coat or she'd get heatstroke. She must have been lying here for some time, though she should have drowned lying that way for very long.

She stripped off her coat and her warm layers, pulled off her pack, dumped her gear in a pile next to her, and collapsed again on the ground. She was both shivering and extremely hot, and realized she was also badly dehydrated. With a struggle she dragged herself back to the shore, and went to drink. She froze, just as she was about to bring the water to her lips, and realized she hadn't checked it; she emptied out the water she'd been cupping in her hands and went for her tools.

The water seemed fine, so she gulped down as much as she could, before choking again, and rolled onto her back again to catch her breath.

Some time passed.

Liikel's eyes snapped open. Panicking, she scrambled over to where she had dumped her gear, opening her pack, tearing through her supplies until, with a gasp of relief, she found her family's icons, and her ritual tools, her knife. She emptied her lungs of the breath she'd been holding, coughed some more, laughed a bit, then coughed again, and finally rolled over to sitting. It would be shameful in the utmost if she returned from her pilgrimage without her family's icons.

Liikel froze, and slowly looked around again. It wasn't spring, and she wasn't in the high country. In fact, as she looked around with growing panic, she realized she had never seen terrain like this before, never felt a heat like this. Liikel realized that she didn't have the faintest idea where she was; but wherever it was, it was far from the country of her home, and she was utterly, completely, lost.

Part II – The Emissary