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Liikel awoke just before dawn, the last warmth of the stones of her bed finally gone, the air chilly. Though she was accustomed to sleeping in rough shelter, her dreams had been confusing and strange, leaving her feeling oddly groggy. She lay still for a moment, thinking about the images she had seen, and could only remember a broad, winding river in starlight, bifurcating into a wide delta. There had been something about the patterns in the waters that seemed like they were supposed to mean something, but remained just outside of her understanding.

As soon as she left the small ledge where she had packed herself in with grasses and blankets, the cold morning air took the last of the bedding's warmth. The alpine air hitting her face brought her completely to wakefulness, and she set about packing her things to get moving.

Her tails had left a few small packets alongside her sleeping space, supplies for the rest of the journey to the first shelter. She looked through them and smiled: some of them were gifts, from friends, family, and one or two small things from the Temple. Giving presents before the journey was fully underway was seen by some doctrines as inauspicious, and so the tails had carried them for the first day; now that she had completed the step of her pilgrimage successfully, some small tokens of well-wishing would not be inappropriate.

She quickly bound the packages back into their wrappings and stowed them in her pack while she ate her breakfast. A few small cakes had also been left, an indulgence for a young initiate, and welcome change on a highland journey. They were slightly sweet, herbed, well-made; not inappropriately pampering. She ate two of them, stowing the rest for later. She would not make another fire for tea, but instead mixed some crushed herbs in water. They were partially to help her maintain her strength on the day's journey, partially medicinal. They would help her body adapt to the cold and altitude, and would ward off some of the hazards from the things that grew in the mountains. She was the first initiate of her cohort to make the pilgrimage this year, when the journey was the most difficult. The cold and snows would make the climb arduous, and her volunteering for the ambitious first ascent of the year earned her some extra consideration from the Templars.

The last of her supplies safely packed, Liikel wrapped her packs and rope and gear around her torso, wrapped her headscarf to cover her head, cleaned up the last of her shelter, said a small prayer of thanks to the wild country for a night spent in relative comfort and safety, and set herself upon the trail into the mountains.

From this point forward, her tails would travel along other trails, out of her sightlines as they made their own way towards the mountains. She would make a small fire each night to signal her camp's location, and they would continue to leave small gifts each night. She knew her tails only in passing: one was an acolyte of the Temple with several of his own journeys to the City behind him; the other was a wanderer, older and not of the Temple, but known as a hardy traveler who strode the high country extensively on her travels. They would meet for one night at the first shelter, celebrating the first part of her journey together. Once she had everything she needed for the remainder from their packs, they would store the rest and return home. After that, the city would know nothing of her progress until her return in mid-summer. The hardest parts of the journey, both from natural dangers and the country around the City, would be hers alone to face.

The path out of the foothills was decidedly steeper than the previous day; she would cover less ground, gaining altitude instead. The vegetation would gradually thin, the few trees gradually becoming smaller and tougher, the grasses turning more to small clumps of hard stalks, the soil giving way to rock. That was still a few days away; here, she was still in alpine grasslands, her climb still not at its steepest.

She looked back over her shoulder at the sun, now just barely over the horizon in full. The last stars were still faintly showing in the west, the light still deep red. The dark grasses shone almost black in the light of early morning, a faint fog resting in the cusp of the valley where she had camped.

The morning's ascent passed by, the sun eventually climbing to its height, the sky clear and clean. Liikel ate without stopping, taking advantage of a short ridgeline to ease her pace to a gentle stroll. She enjoyed another one of the cakes, checked a spring and refilled her water, and resumed her climb feeling the warmth of her body settling into a climbing pace. She crossed a small pass, and spent the afternoon ascending a steep set of switchbacks and rock ledges on the

other side. By the time she finally reached her second camp, it was already approaching dusk, and she hurried to gather stalks and grasses for a rough shelter. She dug out a small hollow in the rocky ground, just enough for a small fire to signal to her tails and make tea, chewing through a small block of her trail food as she worked. By the time she had prepared her tea, washed, and finished stowing her gear and burying the fire it was dark, and she tucked herself into a small space underneath a rare outcrop of alpine trees, small and tenacious and offering some protection from the cold, feeling tired and satisfied with a long day's climb.

As she slept, two hushed shadows passed her by along the trail, leaving a few more small packages while she slept. She did not hear them, and slept through the night without dreams. The night was cold, but she had bundled up tightly and tucked herself into her hollow, and she was hardy and had trained to withstand cold, and the night passed by.

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The third day passed more or less like the second, with Liikel slowly ascending the outer edge of the mountains, crossing the occasional ridge as she moved up the mountain chain. She stopped by one small lake, glacial and frigid but clean to drink and bathe quickly, dousing herself and drying off as fast as she could. Her tails had left her more small cakes, seasoned differently, appropriate for an ongoing journey: passing the celebratory first night and its confirmation in the second to settle into self-assuredness that the journey was continuing without fault, she enjoyed the more nuanced seasonings, the subtler sweetening. The other initiates who were to undertake the pilgrimage to the City of the Dead Gods this summer would be followed by tails carrying gifts as well: from friends and family, from the Temple, from patrons wishing them well as they ascended to the holy places in the mountains. Each morning along the route to the first shelter they would find a few small packages waiting for them, helping them along their way. Nothing was overly luxurious, but all were made with great care, bearing the hopes of those who had made them as they accompanied the initiates into the mountains. Although the initiates had all trained to roam over open and alpine country, the journey was still dangerous, there were still

unknown hazards, the City itself was unpredictable and inscrutable. Strange and frightening things sometimes happened to initiates and Templars alike, a reminder that the Dead Gods were sometimes driven by impulses inscrutable to the living.

The initiates had trained their paths through the City over and over, tracing their way across an open field past the outskirts of the city, rehearsing every step until they could recite the entire route by heart. This was the hardest part of their preparations for the journey: while they knew from the maps and trail markings how to find their way to the City itself, once inside its walls there was no fixed path to follow. The routes they traced depended on sense, on feeling the land in ways they only knew by training and couldn't describe in words: here a turn to retrace the path, there stopping for thirty breaths, here resting a hand on the ground and listening for something they could never quite hear. In their quiet hours, they would meditate in the grove behind the Temple, gaining a sense of the place, resting in the smaller and greater shrines to gain a feeling for the artifacts, the relics the Dead Gods had left behind.

They had studied their dreams, looking for signs that the Dead Gods might be speaking to them in other ways. Liikel remembered sitting before an older Templar, in a circle with a few other initiates, as they tried to discover the meaning of a dream of a strange series of tunnels and caves beneath the city, with winding passages that never seemed to meet one another but could be glimpsed through small openings in the walls, and which ended in strange rooms. She remembered telling of a dream in which she encountered a strange animal, larger than any of the animals that one found in the countryside around the city, strangely proportioned and watching her from atop a rock in an open field, its eyes green like the Eyes in the heavens, looking as if it were waiting for something to take its course.

None of their dreams were ever interpreted conclusively, and all of them would play a game from time to time to see if they could tell their real dreams from ones they imagined on the spot. The purpose of the task had never been to learn what dreams meant, but to learn to pay attention to them. The Dead Gods sometimes revealed things to people in dreams, and one needed to practice receptiveness and memory, in case this were to be the means by which they might reveal the path they had set.

Two summers ago was the last time a ranger had roamed too close to the City. He had approached by the wrong path, and a pair of supply carriers had found him lying at an unnatural angle in a small valley in the foothills late in the summer. They had brought his body back to the Temple for examination, to try to discover what had caused his death, who he was, and where he might have been from. He was young, and had apparently been in good health. There were no signs of violence, but the body had a strange odor, and was disconcerting to look at: there was something wrong about the proportions of his face, and his legs had bent back in a way that they shouldn't. Liikel remembered looking at what was left of him, as a young initiate, and feeling both horrified and curious how he had spent his last days on this earth. She thought it was terribly sad, that the ranger had died alone in the wilderness of the north country, broken by whatever inhabited the City, unable to say what he had seen.

All the fingernails of his left hand had fallen out.

There was nothing in his effects to suggest where his home might be, and he might not have had one: rangers sometimes lived in the highlands, traveling from one shelter to the next and living from forage and what they could trade with other travelers. The city sent notices with the envoys to other neighboring regions, but none had any record of a ranger going missing. When one of the Templars who could speak the language of the Strange Men and sometimes did trade with them was visiting one of their camps, they had said they had no recollection of such a ranger, either.

Being unclaimed and unknown, he was put to rest in the burial grounds of the civil government, his information recorded in the civil records in case his identity might ever be discovered and his remains and effects might someday be returned to their home.

Liikel had remembered that, even in death, his face had an expression that had filled her with unease: something unnamable had crossed his path, and his face was frozen by its passage. She shuddered remembering the strange ways his eyes, even milky in death, had looked.

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The third night was spent in the least suitable hiding space so far, just below a small peak, tucked among rocks on the lee side. The biome had gradually turned

from the dry highlands of the foothills to the rocky terrain of the true alpine country. The hollows now had patches of snow still in them, the shaded sides of valleys were still dusted with the morning's frost, and there were few plants of any kind to cover herself in her hollow. There was little material for a fire, barely enough to make tea, and only slightly warming the few small rocks she huddled up against trying to warm herself for the night.

This part of the country was the most difficult for sheltering, with neither enough plant matter to build a covering nor snow to dig a cave. Even huddled under an outcrop and below the peak, there was a wind that robbed her of heat. Still, she tucked her knees to her chest, wrapped her headscarf and her blanket to cover herself as best she could, stuffed the empty spaces with a few spare grasses, and settled in to try to get some rest despite the cold. A few small icons stood watch in a small hollow space in the rock next to her head, and in the dragging minutes as she huddled into her hiding place, she felt comforted that they were sharing her vigil.

It was a long time before she slept, and it was not restful. Her tails moved past her while she was still awake, leaving a few spicy cakes for the morning to help her get warm again. All the initiates knew that the third night was one of the hardest, and that a long night spent shivering and miserable was also a test of fortitude. She would persevere through the night, keep watch of sorts if sleep eluded her, and could look forward to her first night in a real shelter the following night. She had been through worse experiences, and would no doubt again: one night spent shivering on a mountaintop was but a step on her path forward, and however the Dead Gods might see fit to lay it, she would follow it.

Pride in her indomitable spirit in the face of hardship did not keep her warm, however.

But if sleep would not come, the view from her hiding-place was more than enough in return. She was tucked into an angle made by two larger rocks, perched on a small ledge. From there, the ground dropped steeply into a mountain valley, with the other ranges she had crossed on her approach stretching out under a starry sky. The Eyes turned everything a faint green, as if under the waters of one of the great mineral seas to the southeast, the rolls of the lower valley cloaked in shadow. The mountain air had been gradually thinning as

she climbed, and now her vision was sharp and long-seeing. The far peaks were a pale silver under starlight, utterly unlike the pale rose of the sun, a few scattered clouds casting shadows of darkness on darkness, bathing the mountains in shadow. Her breath steamed out through her blanket and headscarf, wreathing her head.

Slowly, fitfully, Liikel drifted into a kind of half-sleep. It was too cold and uncomfortable for anything that might bring dreams, but she could manage a sort of torpor that would allow her body to rest and prepare itself for the following day. She recited a few prayers to herself, easing her way into almost-sleep with the meditations they had learned, the recitations of the rangers and itinerant Templars.

Gradually, Liikel only dimly aware of it, time passed. Her head sagged to her knees, tucked to her chest, arms crossed and tucked into the folds of her blanket. Silver-green clouds slid across the heavens, the stars slowly wheeled overhead. When she drifted towards wakefulness, it was only to shift in her hollow and settle back into not-quite-sleep.

Eventually the sky grew towards a pre-dawn light, and she could no longer keep in her half-sleep. It was time to get moving: the climb to the shelter was longer and slower, and would take her past sundown to reach. She would need to start early even then, and so she gradually unfolded herself from her hollow.

Liikel let out a dull groan as she stretched her limbs back out and unwrapped her blankets. She wasn't really rested, and huddling into a crevice had left cramps in her muscles. She stood, splashed some water on her face, drank, took a breath, and downed one of the spice cakes her tails had left. Immediately her mouth was on fire, and the blood rushed to her face, then to her hands and feet, and her eyes flew open with a gasp. The cakes were painfully spicy, meant to shock the body into wakefulness on a cold morning after poor sleep. Her tails had good foresight in knowing exactly what kind of breakfast she would need.

She danced around slightly, cursing and waving a hand at her mouth as if it really were burnt, her forehead breaking out in a sweat. Quickly, she ate some dried fruits to cool her mouth, chewed on a few leaves of herbs while she packed her things, made a small offering to the mountain peak in thanks for a night

spent safely tucked under its wing, wrapped her icons back in their cloths, stowed all her gear, and found her feet back on the path before the first rays of dawn reached her.

Still in the semi-darkness of early morning, she muttered one last good-natured obscenity as her mouth still burned, and set out towards the pass into the mountains.

The ground here was no longer the dull oranges and reds of the high country, rather the grey and silver of hard rock. After the first peak where she had spent the night, the path dipped slightly into a shallow col, then began to climb. Splotches of browns and blacks and a few pale greens from lichens were about the only growing things she passed on her way up the mountainside, and clumps of snow and ice filled more and more of the shadows and hollows in the rocks. It wasn't long before the path turned steep and her pace slowed considerably. The rest of the morning and the first part of the afternoon was spent climbing the Staircase, a long ascent through a steep, boulder-filled couloir: clambering over ledges, hauling herself up over smaller boulders, sometimes scrambling up larger rock faces. Somewhere deep under the rocks she could hear a thin trickle of water running, and occasionally small pools of glacial melt where she stopped to rest and refill her water.

Midway up the climb was a broad flat ledge reaching out from the mountainside, with a shrine tucked into a cleft in the rocks. She said a brief prayer to the icons, gave thanks for her safety, and rested a while as she ate. She gazed back down the couloir, the rocks glowing pink in the midday sun, listening for the faint burbling of the water running alongside her path. The spring melts hadn't yet started in earnest, and the stream would eventually swell to a small torrent, filling the pools and forming waterfalls over the rocks and ice. The water was a deep blue-green, clean and pure.

It was well past sunset by the time she gained the ridge, and now she crossed a broad rock field leading up to the pass: picking her way between the boulders under the light of the Eyes rising into the heavens, and only a few stars. At the far end of the rock field, Liikel could see a thin column of smoke rising from a place hidden behind an outcrop, and she smiled. Her tails had arrived early, and they were already at work warming the shelter, and maybe cooking dinner. Her

mouth began to water just at the thought of a warm dinner, and the promise of sleeping in a warm bed made her quicken her pace.

The shelter was a long stone house tucked under an outcrop that was almost a small cave. There was space to store supplies and dry goods, and the shelter itself had space to accommodate a large pilgrimage if needed. There were hearths on both ends of the house, and rows of platforms for sleeping with heavy braziers between them. Benches and tables were lined up in the large open area in front of the sleeping platforms, and a large shrine was built into one corner, aligned to the pass in to the mountains, the icons of all the various Dead Gods, and those of a few from more distant lands, each with space to be venerated by all the pilgrims who might take their rest here on the way to the City. As Liikel passed through the entry into the shelter, the warmth of the room struck her in the face, and the light of the fire and all the lanterns her tails had lit made her squint.

“You’re late.”

Liikel smiled. Across the room, tending the food cooking on the hearth, was Hikaren, the older tail. Tall and wiry, with close-cropped hair that was starting to gray, she was one of the most experienced Pathfinders of the high-country, and also one of the sternest teachers at Temple School. She was not generally known for personal warmth, and this admonition had been her version of a welcoming embrace. Liikel bowed and made a gesture of greeting.

“Apologies, Honored Teacher. I was slow on my climb.”

“Did you oversleep?”

“I set out before dawn, Honored Teacher.”

“Did you dawdle on the Staircase?”

“No, Honored Teacher. I made time as best I could.”

“Were the spice cakes insufficient to burn the sluggishness out of you?”

“They were ... invigorating, Honored Teacher.”

Teacher Hikaren Reitolha regarded Liikel for a moment. There was almost the appearance of a faint smile.

“Very well. You still have time to pay your respects and settle yourself. Do so; we’ll discuss your pilgrimage recently traversed and yet before you once you’re fed.”

“Thank you, Honored Teacher.”

Liikel set her pack down onto the platform and quickly shed her outer layers as the heat from the fire warmed her. From her pack she took a clean set of clothes, and went quickly to wash and change. The shelter was alongside a small spring, and it was deeply refreshing to be able to take even a cold bath after so many days on the trail with few such opportunities. Still warm from the ascent to the shelter, and with the heat of the fires, the icy spring even felt good. She did her best to scrub off as much of the dirt and dried sweat as she could, and climbed out quickly before she started to get cold. Liikel wrapped her hair up to dry, put on a house-robe, and wrapped herself in a light blanket. Returning to the main space, she took some small offerings from her pack and set herself before the shrine.

This shrine, unlike the modest shrines of the open country, was large and ornate, with many generations of work undertaken to build it. Each Dead God's icon was given attention, each in its own niche, each one decorated differently, with a different array of accouterments and offerings. Some icons were housed in glass cases, too fragile to stand unprotected. Some were draped in cloth, or with small pendants wrapped around them like a necklace. The niches were sometimes lined with ornate tile, or carved in wood, or stone, or delicate mosaic patterns. There were scrolls with excerpts from the holy texts tucked underneath some of the niches, or woven into banners hanging alongside them. Incense of various kinds was arrayed before the icons, ready for use in prayer.

It was an almost overwhelmingly elaborate shrine, with each of the Gods' icons arrayed with layers of symbols and meanings that would themselves require a lifetime of study to understand. But in the deepest recesses of the shrine, half-hidden in shadows where the most important icons were kept, the shrine was different. There, in stark contrast to all the rest, the icons were housed in austere, almost bare alcoves of pale stone. There were no offerings arrayed before them, save an occasional remnant of a branch, or the dried petal of a strange flower, resting alone next to the icons in a way that made Liikel unsure if they were there by accident, or had been placed with the utmost care. These icons needed to offering, and their power was so great that no attempt was made to elaborate on it or embellish it. No family or group dared to claim them as their house's icon. They stood, silent and looming and frightening, for themselves. There, in the last and greatest of shrines before the City itself, Liikel knelt down before the icons, and arrayed her own offerings before those of her family's Dead

Gods. A small box of spices from the dry country, a carving of a small animal called a dappled creek-runner, some dried fruits from her family's trees. She knelt for a while before the icons, praying in silence, hoping for a clear path into the City and that she might safely come into the Dead Gods' presence. After a brief meditation, she whispered a last quick prayer of thanks, and stood. Standing beside the hearth when she returned was the younger tail, Teacher Surrover, carrying a lacquered box. When he saw Liikel had finished her prayers he turned, set the box aside, and came to her with a smile, arms wide. Liikel made another quick bow, and then hugged him tightly. He was one of her favorite Pathfinders.

Teacher Surrover hugged her back just as tightly, nearly crushing the air out of her. He was thickly built for a Pathfinder, somewhat scruffy, rough around the edges in a way that most Pathfinders were not. His house-robos smelled vaguely of spices. As a tail, one of two companions to a young initiate making her first pilgrimage to the City on her own, he was an almost polar opposite in bearing and habit to the elder Hikaren. Liikel suspected the two were paired together often for this reason, and they both seemed to have grown to appreciate one another after years of roaming the high-country together (Liikel also imagined that Teacher Hikaren would rather have said "tolerate").

Teacher Surrover Aanzi finally released her, stepped back, and regarded her with a smile.

"Young Initiate, your path is finally alongside ours."

Liikel smiled back. "I'm grateful, Teacher, to be able to walk with you for a while."

"You arrived without incident?"

Liikel straightened a bit: "I didn't have any difficulties. The climb was scenic and pleasant."

"You've grown to be a stronger climber since I was last down in the valley. Better than I was at your age."

"Teacher Surrover, I wouldn't presume--"

He held up a hand. "You kept a good pace, despite what Honored teacher probably said," he said with a slight wink and a glance at Hikaren's back. "Most mornings you passed us early enough, even Teacher Hikaren noticed. If you keep at it, you'll be one of the best Pathfinders we have."

“Teacher Surrover, I’m just focused on my pilgrimage. I hadn’t thought about anything further ahead.”

“Nonsense. Someday, you’ll be even a better Pathfinder than we are, and you can frighten the Initiates with your own uncanny high-country manner.”

Teacher Hikaren, still at the hearth, turned her head slightly towards where the other two were standing.

“Surrover.”

“Right. You can start getting ready. I have to help finish cooking.”

Teacher Surrover gestured towards the laquered box he had been carrying, which Liikel took back to one of the tables and began unpacking, cleaning the utensils. There was a small tea set, enough for a proper setting for six, which she laid out on its own tray. The main setting she wiped down and set out at one end of the table: the bowls were sturdy porcelain, glazed black and shades of reddish brown, much older than any of them. As she worked at the table, a loud, angry sizzle erupted from the hearth: Teacher Hikaren had tossed the fast-cooking vegetables into the pan, and it would soon be time to eat. Liikel set out the last of the utensils, and went back to the hearth to bring the serving dishes to the table, and she realized suddenly just how hungry she was for a proper cooked meal. Even though the feast they could prepare here was more modest than what they could make in the city with a proper kitchen and supplies, it was still a feast by high-country standards, better than what they had eaten when they had first brought her, shortly after her first initiation, to the City of the Dead Gods. She had been hungry then, too, she remembered, not at all used to hiking in the mountains, and they had taken twice as long to reach this shelter. The stew the shelter’s attendants had made for the young initiates, modest though it was, had made her truly feel as though she had reached the heavens after so many days of trail food and spring water.

This, however, was something else altogether. She was the first Initiate to make her pilgrimage, the first to travel to the City alone this year, and her tails were doting on her. There was still a stew, but it was more elaborate, and now there was flatbread to go with it, a large bowl of grains from the lake countries, three different mixes of vegetables, and a bowl of spicy noodles. A stack of small cakes, still wrapped from the climb, sat on a three-legged tray to the side.

It was the best of the Temple’s last winter stores, and Liikel struggled to keep her composure as the two Teachers sat and she served them tea. The noodles, which

her tails knew was her favorite, steamed off a scent that made her almost dizzy. Finally, she sat herself, and they ate.

They spoke only briefly, even though Liikel knew she mustn't eat too much or too fast or she would regret the morning. The food was spare but not spartan, meant to nourish even with small portions, a moderate (and not excessive) luxury for a traveler on her way through the pass and into a difficult climb through barren terrain in the mountains. Liikel was careful to eat slowly, attending to the subtle ways each dish complemented the others, pausing to drink her tea and listen to the two Teachers as they occasionally discussed the conditions of the trails leading up to the pass, sightings of the sky that might predict good or bad weather in the mountains, might foretell the summer's weather.

Gradually, she relaxed a bit and realized how tired she was after the last several days of climbing, and she noticed the Teachers were more at ease as well. Even Teacher Hikaren, though her expression remained one of a stern Teacher, gradually eased her posture, allowing herself just a bit of a tilt off of perfectly upright, resting her elbows on the table. Liikel wasn't sure how to act, here alone with two Teachers: an Initiate's first pilgrimage was a public matter, part of the Temple's rituals, but with most of the rituals there were usually other acolytes, Teachers, and Initiates around to witness. Here, she was on her own with two adults she didn't know very well, Pathfinders at that, both of whom the other Initiates described as ... eccentric. Teacher Hikaren said little and about herself next to nothing, and her manner made most of the Initiates afraid of her.

Teacher Surrover, though he was generally thought of as a sort of friendly elder uncle, was one of the few Pathfinders who did trade with the Strange Men, and he sometimes came to the city, after months without word or trace, bringing back curious objects, sometimes with writing in the Strange Men's language, which only he could read and the meaning of which he adamantly refused to explain.

As they unwrapped a few of the cakes, Surrover produced a small ceramic bottle and three small cups, and poured out a sip of fire-water for each of them.

Hikaren scowled slightly as Liikel took hers, but accepted her toast of thanks nonetheless, and turned a corner of her mouth up in a slight smile as Liikel nearly choked on the liquor. It burned as it went down, but the aftertaste was one of sweet summer grasses and alpine flowers, a warm promise of the spring to come.

It was already nearly middle-night as Liikel helped to clear away the table and store everything back in its place, but they still needed to discuss her pilgrimage. Teacher Surrover set out a different tea set, a pale white crackle-glaze with wide-mouthed teacups, and poured out a needle-leaf spring tea from the lake country. It had a tart, floral scent that brought Liikel sharply back to focus despite the late hour -- not to mention the fire-water, which had made her a bit drowsy -- and they sat now on one of the sleeping platforms, the braziers brought closer as the outside cold started to creep in, the tea set on a low table between them.

“Liikel Isorhu, Initiate of the City Temple. Where are you now?”

Liikel had known that this discussion of her pilgrimage was partly a ritual of the Temple, that the questions and answers were more than an everyday exchange of pleasantries among travelers. She thought about the question, and remembered some of her lessons about the City of the Dead Gods in the years since her first trial.

“I have followed the path to the door, and am seeking entry.”

“How did you arrive?”

“A journey of four days.”

“What did you see?”

Liikel took another sip of her tea, and saw that her Teachers had both done so at the same time. With a realization that was both extremely vivid and strangely dull, she could taste something else under the floral scent of the tea, some herb she didn't recognize, and she understood that there was something more here than a ritualized question-and-answer exchange. She looked into the eyes of her teachers, and both of them had a glassy intensity that was more than a little frightening. She thought more carefully about the question, and her answer seemed both correct and not what she was expecting to say.

“The world underfoot fell behind me, the heavens overhead wheeled; I saw the watchers watching me, and I saw the world that was reveal itself through the veil of the world that is.”

Teacher Hikaren's eyes darted towards Teacher Surrover for half a heartbeat, and then she leaned forward a barely perceptible degree. Her eyes narrowed.

“Where does the door lead?”

Liikel was worried by the Honored Teacher's reaction. She wasn't sure what she had meant with that answer, nor really why she had said it, and thought maybe she'd said something wrong. She thought more carefully about the question. In the room, as they sat, she could hear the soft crackling of the embers in the braziers, and she looked down at her teacup. She wondered if it had made a similar crackling sound as it was pulled from the kiln, still red-hot, and smothered in cloth to smolder and produce the distinctive glazing pattern. Under her fingers, she could just feel the hairline cracks, and wondered if they grew over time, spreading across the surface of the cup like fissures, until ... Liikel realized with a start that she had been sitting there for some time without saying a word, and that both her teachers were now watching her intently.

"The ... door?"

Teacher Hikaren tilted her head slightly. Liikel thought carefully, tracing lines on her teacup. She could feel her heart starting to race, and felt both very warm as her face flushed, and strangely very cold.

"The door leads into a house, but the house is already empty. The ... the hearth is broken."

Both her teachers held still for a few heartbeats, watching to see if she would say anything else. Then, in quick, precise motions, Teacher Hikaren emptied the teacups, opened a small flask and poured out three cups of a pungent liquid. She and Teacher Surrover downed them together, and Teacher Hikaren pressed the third cup into Liikel's hand. Her fingers felt tingly.

"Drink. Quickly."

Liikel downed the liquid, and her vision cleared. The strange foggiess in her head started lifting, and she realized that the pungent liquid probably counteracted whatever was in the tea, bringing her back to a more usual sort of tiredness. The rite was over.

Still groggy, and now extremely tired, Liikel slouched into her bedding on the platform, undid her hair, folded up her house-robe and blanket and set them alongside her pillow, and tucked herself in. She was asleep before she finished settling in.

Liikel dreamt for a long time. In her dreams, she was a child again, and her mother rose over her, looking down with an expression of love that was somehow also sad, and sang her a lullaby. But the lullaby was strange: Liikel

couldn't understand the words, and the tune was confusing. After a while, Liikel looked past her mother, into the room behind her. It was dark, and strange shadows loomed in to corners. Liikel was frightened, but her mother reached down, caressed her, told her to be still in words she didn't recognize but which she understood. She sang a different lullaby, but as she sang she leaned down, her face coming into the light, and Liikel saw that it wasn't really her mother's face at all, but someone else she didn't know, who looked exactly like her.

Liikel woke with a gasp, her heart pounding, in a darkened room lit only by the last embers from the braziers. She rolled over, and realized she was now facing the shrine. The relics of the Dead Gods, looming in the corner, remained, as always, impassive and frightening. Liikel feel back asleep, and this time dreamt nothing.