

Liikel was awakened by her tails preparing the ritual of departure, and she realized that she had overslept. She jumped out of bed, quickly washed and dressed, putting on her white pilgrim's robes, wrapping her hair in a deep blue headscarf. When she returned, the ritual was ready.

Her two tails knelt at the foot of the shrine, facing one another at its threshold in the robes of a Pathfinder, their faces painted with clay. The lines they had made for their own initiation were black streaks against a ghostly white that covered their faces, their hair covered with a headscarf wrapped into a hood, hiding their eyes in shadow. In the dim light of pre-dawn, they were surreal and frightening. Before each of them were two small bowls, one filled with water, the other with a small mallet. The incense had been lit, and its thin, fragrant smoke drifted out into the room. A few small lanterns flickered around the shrine, but otherwise the room was dark. The shadows moved as Liikel approached, barefoot on the cold floor, and knelt down between her two Teachers, facing into the depths of the shrine.

Before her was a small relic, a totem of mystery, and she unwrapped one of her family's relics and placed it alongside. Her two Teachers, in unison, began whispering one of the incantations of the Dead Gods, verses in Their long-dead language that Liikel wasn't sure she really understood. After a while, though, she got the sense of the incantation, and whispered along with the Teachers, slow and rhythmical. As they whispered, the two Teachers took the mallets, and began tracing the outer rim of the small bowls before them. Over time, the bowls began to sing, a long, strange wavering sound: the two bowls reinforcing one another to resonate throughout the large space.

Liikel took the bowl of water from before Teacher Surrover, and poured it onto the totem. Where the water struck the relic, it was absorbed instantly, vanishing into the strange black surface of the totem without leaving so much as a drop. She took the bowl from before Teacher Hikaren, and did the same, careful not to spill any of the water, mindful to give the relic its libation. As she leaned over to place the bowls back before their respective owners, she felt a warmth radiating off the relic, and smelled something like roasted tea leaves. She knelt back before the relic, and dipped her middle fingers into a bowl that sat alongside the relic,

filled with a black mud. She traced the lines of her own initiation across her face, along her temple, down her cheeks, and finally down her chin and throat. She leaned forward, holding her wrists together, palms upwards, fingers spread in a gesture of offering, and gently touched the last of the mud on her fingertips to two hollows on either side of the totem. As she did, she felt a strange tingling in her fingertips, and smelled something like the air before a thunderstorm. The totem was extremely warm, almost too hot to touch, and she knelt back down. As she chanted along with the Teachers, she felt the mud drying on her face, and a strangely warm, numb feeling crept into her skin. She felt a little dizzy, but chanted along, slowly and methodically, careful to pronounce the unfamiliar syllables as best she could.

Slowly, time passed.

After she wasn't sure how long, Liikel became aware that it was lighter outside. The incense had burned out, and they had stopped chanting, though she wasn't sure when she herself had stopped. The roasted-tea smell had faded along with the incense.

Finally, the two Pathfinders stood, and Liikel moved to rise as well; but her legs were stiff and her head felt wobbly, and she stumbled. The Teachers quickly took her arms and steadied her, and led her over to a table where breakfast was waiting. As she sat, Teacher Surrover rekindled the hearth and started water for tea. Teacher Hikaren pushed a small cup into her hands, emptied a packet of crushed herbs into the water, and lifted it towards her mouth.

"Drink."

Liikel did so, and felt her head clear a bit. Her face still felt slightly numb, and there was an odd, glassy sheen to everything, light in sharper relief against the shadows as she looked around the room.

"Honored Teacher, The rite of departure never felt like that at Temple School."

"As you said: the world that was reveals itself."

"Why here?"

"You are closer."

With that, Teacher Hikaren would say no more, and so Liikel nibbled at a small cake, and sipped her tea when Teacher Surrover brought it, thinking about the days ahead.

Finally, it was time to go. The shelter, tucked into a cleft in the rock, was never in direct sunlight; but from the pink glow that filtered in, Liikel knew it was already mid-morning. She stowed her Initiate's robes, packed her supplies, loaded up as much food as she could carry for the trip through the mountains, and dressed herself for the cold days ahead. Over her normal traveling clothes she wrapped a thicker, warmer coat, then her rope, the bow, her kit, her headscarf, and finally her boots and gloves. Liikel stepped outside into a cold wind coming through the pass, took a few steps, and looked back, squinting in the bright light of morning. Her two tails stood, side by side in their Pathfinder's robes, their faces still painted and hooded. They looked deathly and frightening, somber as they watched her from the door, and Liikel was suddenly afraid. Ahead of her there was nothing but rock and ice, no help until she returned from the City of the Dead Gods towards midsummer, and she felt that a pallor of death was already creeping into the world of the living around her. She took a step back, and then in a rush reached for both of her Teachers, seeking one last protective embrace before she was on her own.

To her surprise, both teachers returned the embrace just as tightly. After a moment, they let go. Teacher Hikaren, speaking more kindly than usual, gently turned her back around towards the path.

"Go. You still have far to travel."

"Honored Teacher, will I be all right?"

"You have all you need. Now off with you."

Liikel squared her shoulders, hitched her pack onto her shoulders, and set off. Just before she took the first turn into the pass, she took one last look back at the shelter, and saw that her tails were still standing at the door, watching her. At this distance, they looked even more ghostly; in the rocky wilderness, where scarcely anything grew, their appearance was even more uncanny, the whole scene weirdly alien. Liikel had the distinct feeling that she was passing into some other world, leaving the one she knew far behind, attended only by the spirits of her ancestors as she crossed some unseen threshold into the Dead Gods' realm. Liikel took the bend in the trail, and the shelter passed out of sight. From here, the pass was a narrow, winding trail between the rocks. She would come out the other side shortly before midday, and from there it was a long climb upwards, across uncertain terrain. If the ice hadn't melted yet she would need her

ice-claws, and she would almost certainly need climbing poles past the first shelter, if for nothing else than to steady her footing. The trail in the mountains was mostly well-developed, and wide enough for heavy loads all the way to the City, but this early in the season there was no guarantee that parts of it wouldn't be covered with snow, or buried in ice, or an avalanche or rockslide. She'd been here only in the summer, but she had studied the route and knew where there were most likely hazards, but she was still the first pilgrim of the season, and would have to rely on herself to reach the City and return safely.

But she remembered, Teacher Hikaren had said she had all she needed, and with some pride she realized she did feel mostly ready for this challenge. She had volunteered to be the first, and she was strong on her legs, and had studied high-country skills with more interest than most of the other Temple subjects. Besides, she realized: it was actually quite rare that an Initiate *didn't* come back from the first pilgrimage, even though some came back with scrapes and bruises, and the route was safe enough in summer that they brought the youngest Initiates to the gates of the city.

As Liikel came out of the pass, and followed the trail up into the open mountain country, she started looking forward to the days ahead, to the chance to prove herself alone in the mountains. She hitched up her pack again, let out a deep breath, and set out.

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Liikel went through her supplies again, taking stock. She was tucked into a corner of the shelter, some hanging curtains dividing off her part of the room from the rest, keeping some of the warmth in. She hadn't lit a fire for heat, only to cook her evening meals: although there were enough dry goods in the shelter to keep her fed for a while, there wasn't enough fuel to heat the entire shelter for long, and melting snow for water took a lot of what she had. She was beginning to get worried.

She had reached the first two shelters without much trouble, spending her first two nights modestly, eating her own supplies first. She was carrying more than enough for a week on her own, and she shouldn't need to refill from the shelter stores if everything went well.

But everything hadn't gone well: heavy clouds rolled over the mountains on the afternoon of the third day, and by the time she reached the shelter snow was pelting her sideways, her vision reduced to only a few paces ahead. She had barely reached the shelter, and then the snowstorm buried everything.

That had been four days ago. She had holed up here, keeping warm, conserving her supplies, riding out the storm. It hadn't been bad: her worst problem was boredom, with the hours dragging on, the only difference between day and night the relative lightness of the snowstorm outside. During the day she took to working to clear the trail and grounds around the shelter, using a broad shovel from the shelter's toolshed to shove the snow off the ridgeline and down the hill to the front.

The shelter was dug into the back of a small shelf in the rock, big enough for a couple dozen pilgrims, with a small yard in front. This, and a length of trail fifty paces in either direction, Liikel could keep clear during the day. But overnight the snow piled up, and in the morning she would have to start over again. She knew that if she didn't keep active, her body would slip into a winter's torpor, and she would lose the conditioning she would need for the return, but nevertheless: after the first couple days, it became tedious. After four, Liikel was uneasy. She was safe here from the storm, and could keep warm enough in the shelter, but not indefinitely. Even if the fuel held out, eventually her delay would be noticed. She still had to reach the City, and her return by the northern route would take at least another week once she left the mountains; even though midsummer was still a ways off, she was running out of time. She didn't want to

embarrass herself as the first pilgrim of the season by returning weeks later than she should have. A delay of a few days from a sudden late-winter storm her Teachers would understand; days on end holed up in a shelter, this close to the City, they would be less inclined to view favorably.

And so after four days, Liikel resolved to set out, snowstorm or no. The shelter's supplies included snow-shoes, and she already had hiking poles and other tools from the previous shelter. She was so close to the city, she couldn't turn back now.

Liikel carefully repacked all her things, wrapped her food supplies carefully, stowed her tools, and spent the rest of the evening cleaning out the shelter, putting everything back in its place. In the morning, she ate a quick breakfast, bundled herself up and set her pack in place, and headed out into the snow.

It was snowing lightly now, the wind not as fierce, the sun occasionally shining a wan light between the clouds. It would snow for another day or two, she figured, but should be clear by the time she started her return. At the edge of the area she'd spent the last four days clearing, she strapped her snow-shoes onto her boots, and set out over the snow.

The trail wasn't hard to follow, even under snow deeper than she was tall. The difficulty was mainly the air, growing thin at this altitude, which made her easily winded. Even after four days to acclimate, Liikel still needed to rest frequently. She knew the last days' climb was difficult, and she took her time. When she stopped, there was only the sound of the snow falling, a barely-audible rustling, or the sound of wind, in an otherwise total silence.

By mid-afternoon, Liikel was feeling the ache of the climb deep in her bones. Hiking through snow, even with shoes, was hard work, and the thin air made it even more so. One foot in front of the other, she told herself, concentrating on moving forwards, feeling her pack starting to dig into her shoulders and trying not to think about it. The last shelter before the City was just before another pass through a ridge, and she didn't want to spend her last hours feeling her way forward in the dark.

This part of the pilgrimage had taken much longer as well, when she had first made it as a new Initiate. It had been summer, and they were in a group of maybe a dozen, guided by a handful of Teachers. Teacher Hikaren, the lone Pathfinder among the Templars accompanying the group into the mountains,

kept a watchful eye, scouting ahead as they went while the other Templars herded the Initiates up the trail. She had seemed strange then as well, barely saying a word, but directing the Templars with a gesture, a nod, a word or two. Her watchfulness had given the first pilgrimage to the City a feeling of treading on alien territory, of going somewhere where the Gods, if they weren't hostile to those still among the living, were at best indifferent to their wellbeing. The Templars had shown the young Initiates how to pace themselves in the thin mountain air, how to rest on the move, how to climb the path with the least energy possible.

Liikel thought about those lessons, about the way the Pathfinder had seemed to glide along the path without exerting herself at all, the easy rolling gait she had used, and focused on doing the same. She mustn't tire herself out, with such a long journey still ahead.

Still, keeping the best pace she could took her until well after dark to reach the last shelter. She almost missed it, the entry almost completely buried in the snow. With a groan, Liikel dropped her pack, dug her way to the entry, felt her way through the dark for the hearth, and set about getting a fire started.

She had to work almost entirely by feel, barely able to see the kindling as she struck sparks with her fire-kit. Finally, her fingers growing numb as the cold crept into her, she got a fire lit, and with its light found the lanterns. Once they were lit, she could see her way around the inside of the shelter, find the tools, and set to clearing the entryway as the hearth warmed up the inside.

This shelter was much smaller than the other ones, with space for perhaps a dozen people at most. When they were all young Initiates they had fit easily on the sleeping platforms, but as adults it would have been cramped. Liikel cleared the entry, brought her pack in and set it out on one of the platforms, unwrapped her outer coat and headscarf, and huddled next to the hearth to warm up.

After a while, she set the pot onto the hearth, melting snow to boil for tea. There was a bucket by the door which she used to scoop out heaps of snow, clearing a path in front of the entry while making water for cooking at the same time.

Liikel made a thick gruel out of the grains from the shelter's stores, adding few spices. She was too tired for anything else; after washing up, downing the gruel quickly, she drank her tea, cleaned up, poured the last of the embers into a small brazier to keep her warm, and collapsed into bed, exhausted.

In the morning, the snow was only barely falling, the thin mountain air a hazy pink, and Liikel crossed the last ridge before reaching the plateau of the City of the Dead Gods. She had left most of her pack in the shelter, as she would be returning here by nightfall, taking only her most essential tools, her bow, her rope, her family's icons, and some food for the day. The rest she stowed neatly in a corner of the shelter, ready for her return.

Once she crossed onto the plateau of the City, she no longer needed the snow-shoes, and she stowed them in a hollow just before the entrance. It would be best to take only what was necessary into the City itself, only supplies that she might need in an emergency.

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The City of the Dead Gods was, as it was when she had first seen it, a place that overwhelmed her with its enormity, its alien strangeness. Liikel entered through the main gate, onto a central avenue that ran straight to the heart of the City. She paused at the threshold, taking stock of the place.

As far as she could see in any direction, the buildings of the City stretched off into the distance. On either side of the central avenue were rows of houses and buildings of stone, all of them missing any sort of dressing, most of them missing their rooves. But at intervals between the buildings, seemingly at random, other structures loomed up, reaching to the sky at many times the other buildings' height, sometimes arcing in strange curves, tilted at unorthodox angles. As she crossed into the City, the snow tapered off and died, the sun a faint light behind gauzy clouds.

Liikel had difficulty breathing, and she wasn't sure if it was the altitude, or the uncanny strangeness of the place. She felt watched, like she had intruded into a room where there had just been a conversation that had now fallen abruptly silent, and she was disturbing something, even though she could see nothing living. She walked hesitantly along the central avenue, mindful of the place. The closer she came to the heart of the City, the more of the larger buildings broke through the regular spacing of the houses, their black skin glinting in the weak sun.



After a time, the avenue opened up into a large square, and Liikel froze. There, in the center of the square, where normally one built a fountain, or set up market stalls, was a spire: tilted to one side, the spire broke through the paving stones like a giant knife from below, with protrusions at odd intervals. It was as tall as the tallest trees in the Temple grove, and it cast a threatening shadow across the square.

Liikel remembered the urgent warnings of the Teachers, that from this point forward the City was dangerous, that she would have to tread carefully, following the unseen paths she had worked so hard to learn if she wished to reach the inner sanctum. At the corner the avenue made with the square, she found some small pebbles, and gently rolled them ahead of her, a few paces at a time. She took a few steps, cocked her head to one side, touched the paving stones with her fingertips, felt the ground as she went along, crouched low. She took an irregular, winding path through the square; sometimes she came perilously close to the spire, only to wander away again. Once or twice, as she rolled her pebble forward it seemed to turn in a direction it shouldn't have, and she retraced her steps, seeking a different way forward.

These were the steps she had practiced countless times at Temple School, the part of her schooling most carefully watched by the elder Templars for this reason. The only sound in the place as she inched forward was the faint, low moan of the wind through the streets of the City, the skittering of her pebbles as she rolled them forward, the occasional falling ice, and her boots on the stone. Still, something about the place felt wrong, somehow off, and she was careful not to step in the wrong place.

After what seemed like hours, she had crossed the square, and then resumed along the avenue, still inching forward at a crouch, rolling pebbles. After several more streets, she crossed a second, smaller square, and, feeling the pressure in the air ease up a bit, knew she could safely resume a normal walking pace. The square with the spire was one of several hazards on her way to the inner sanctum, and she would have to cross all of them similarly, carefully feeling her way forward through invisible dangers.

After she had crossed a second such hazard, it was midday and she stopped to eat. Overhead, many tree-heights above her, an enormous half-arch hung in the air, its one end looking like it had violently broken off. There were other signs of violence in the buildings of the city: strange scorch marks, walls of buildings

collapsed, roads upheaved. Whatever had led to the Gods' dying, it had done violence to Their City as well. Liikel shuddered.

By mid-afternoon, she had crossed two more hazards, and finally stood at the entry to the inner sanctum. A huge, curved wall cut through the streets and buildings of the city at an angle, and into the wall was built an entryway, leading down into darkness. Fronting the entry was a small square, in the corner of which was a small shelter, storing lanterns and other tools. Liikel crossed the square to take a lantern for the interior of the sanctum.

Without warning, what felt like a giant arm swept her legs out from under her. Liikel landed with a heavy crash, barely avoiding hitting her head, and then before she had time to realize what was happening ... *something* threw her towards the curved wall of the sanctum, flinging her like a doll. She struck the wall feet-first, her legs crumpling up underneath her, and her left ankle exploded in agony.

Liikel let out a cry, curling into a ball, reaching for her ankle, scrambling to protect herself from whatever terrible force was about to crush her to death.

*No no no no no...*

Grimacing, Liikel looked up from her protective huddle; but now she saw she wasn't looking "up" at all, but rather sideways. She sat, as if the whole world had flipped on its side, on the wall itself, her body's weight pressing into what should have been a vertical surface as if it were the ground. She had ... fallen, some twenty paces across the length of the square, and landed at a bad angle.

Eyes watering in pain, Liikel gently untangled her legs, tried to feel her ankle. Even in the boot, she could feel it swelling. But there was no sharp pain of broken bones, and maybe not even torn ligaments. If she were truly lucky, it would be just a moderate sprain.

Liikel grit her teeth, and tried to put some weight on it. Her foot immediately gave out, and she fell back onto the wall with a cry. She spit out an obscenity through clenched teeth, wincing, and looked around.

The ground, now to her right, extended upwards, back the way she had come. She looked across the square, trying to find anything to lever herself up off the wall and back to a normal orientation. Her mind was too distracted by her ankle to try to think about how she landed where she was, how the whole world spun around her. For now, the wall was the ground, and she had to find a way to crawl

off it and get back to the sanctum. She was not going to fail, not here, and so her only way home was forward, into the inner sanctum.

She would have to drag herself, if that was all she could do, back to the shelter and retrieve a lantern. The inner sanctum was unlit, and she wouldn't be able to find her way without one.

Liikel levered herself up, propping herself against the paving stones. She looked upwards, across the ground of the square, to the shelter now overhead. As she watched, she saw a pebble, still rolling, skitter across the paving stones, then abruptly change direction and "fall" to land on the sanctum wall.

Liikel cursed to herself. She had been stupid, hadn't been careful about her path, had rushed into dangerous ground negligent of the paths she had so carefully practiced at Temple School, and had nearly gotten herself killed. She still might, if she didn't find a way out of her situation: she couldn't stay in the City overnight, even if she did have food for it. It would be even more dangerous to remain where she was, doing nothing.

Sweating from the effort, Liikel pulled herself up, then undid her climbing rope, and her toolkit. With her knife and a small pick she managed to put together a sort of grappling hook, and tied the end of the rope around it. She tossed it upwards, trying to hook it against a window ledge, or a doorframe of one of the buildings over her head. The grapple wouldn't fly straight, suddenly falling one direction or another as she tossed it. But with practice, she figured out how to throw it through the strange space of the square, and eventually it caught on a doorframe at the far side.

With her one leg hanging free, Liikel wrapped the rope around her waist, and slowly, half-crawling, half-dragging herself, she pulled herself up along the paving stones. Her right boot, scrambling, found purchase on the uneven stones, and she slowly inched her way up, as if she were climbing up a sheer rock wall.

Gradually, about halfway up the wall, it stopped being a wall, and Liikel felt a strange, nauseous feeling as her sense of up and down suddenly rolled on its side, and she found herself lying, gasping for breath in the thin air, facedown on the ground in the center of the square.

She still couldn't stand on her left leg, but she could bring herself up to a crouch, and hopped over to the shelter, collapsing onto a stone bench along the wall. She gathered up her rope, re-coiled it, and slowly undid her grapple, packing

everything back into her kit. She said a prayer of thanks to the Dead Gods for not harming her more, for granting her a way out of her difficulty, and caught her breath.

She took a lantern from the shelter, and considered her path. Taking a few pebbles from under the bench, she rolled them across the square, turning her head side to side to try to see better how they rolled. Slowly, she got a sense of where it was probably safe to tread, and after spending some time gathering herself up, she half-limped, half-hopped her way across the square, taking a winding path around the hazards she thought were there, and finally, late in the afternoon, reached the entry to the sanctum.

The passage into the inner sanctum descended into the earth at an odd angle, and it was lined with a strange material Liikel couldn't identify. At the first bend in the passage, before she lost daylight, she knelt down and lit the lantern. With a wince, she hobbled up to a crouch, and headed into the sanctum, one arm holding the lantern aloft, the other steadying herself against the wall.

It was a slow, painful descent. Twice the lantern almost went out as she stumbled. Liikel's ankle was throbbing, but it didn't hurt unless she put weight on it. But hopping down the passage into the sanctum was tiring, and her good leg was losing strength. After a while, feeling her way along with the faint light of the lantern, the passage turned, and Liikel was surprised to see sunlight shafting in through one wall of the passage. Through chinks in the wall she could vaguely see what looked like a vast amphitheater, bigger than she had ever imagined possible, enclosing a vast, empty space. The passage bent away from it, back into darkness. Finally, after what felt like hours, the passage opened up into a large chamber, and Liikel stopped short, swaying, at the threshold of the inner sanctum, the holiest place in the whole City of the Dead Gods.

The chamber wasn't very large, but there was a small breach running for a length of the ceiling, and a faint light filtered through. The entire chamber was tilted up at a slight angle, the floor rising to the right. At the opposite end of the chamber the floor ruptured, and the largest relic Liikel had ever seen punched through the space, floor to ceiling, pieces of the surface material hanging down, bent away from the rupture like splinters. Surrounding the relic, at various unexpected intervals, many smaller relics were arrayed across the floor, or hanging from the ceiling, the whole grouping filling half the room. It was as if some massive alien

tree had crashed through the ceiling and into the floor with terrible force: the relic must surely be much larger than what she could see here, unimaginably massive.

Towards the center of the “tree” was an enormous semi-spherical shape embedded in the limbs and branches of the structure, a texture different from the rest of the structure, and alongside this was a small platform. This had been built at an angle to the room, so that it was level to what Liikel felt to be upright. Slowly, full of fear, terrified of the enormous thing looming before her, Liikel shed her outer layers, her headscarf, her mountain gear, her cloak and her pack, and crawled forward, dragging her left foot gingerly and wincing as she went, slowly feeling her way in the semi-darkness.

Kneeling before the platform, she laid out her own relics, and set out her tools. With utmost care she lit her incense, and unwrapped each of her family’s icons. With a cautious glance to the relic towering over her, she placed each of the icons on the platform, carefully arranging them in the proper orientation. Liikel realized she was trembling: she remembered the strange experience of her initiation, the relics looming over her in the Temple’s shrines, the strange visions, waking up as she drowned in a stream.

Slowly, she unpacked her knife, and carefully reopened the lines on her middle fingers and thumbs. This time, she was careful not to cut too deep, but she winced nonetheless. It only needed be deep enough to draw a few drops of blood; that would suffice.

She pressed her fingers to thumbs, and squeezed out a few drops of blood onto the stone altar, onto a dark circle in the middle of where she had arranged her family’s icons. She then wrapped her fingers in the bandages she had brought, emptied a small flask of strange-smelling liquid onto the darkened spot, then a packet of fine powder as well, and then struck a spark to it with her fire kit. After a few attempts, the spark caught, and the mixture burned with a smoky, coppery smell that wafted up around the arms of the great relic.

As her offering burned, Liikel closed her eyes, and said her prayers. She asked for nothing from the Dead Gods -- they would give or take as they saw fit -- but she prayed to be found worthy, hoped she had not done offense. Hoped that her courage facing injury and hardship to come here would be accepted, that it was satisfactory.

After a long while, the flame of her offering guttered, and went out. Liikel sat a long time in the fading light, listening to the wind passing through some part of the sanctum, hissing faintly in the distance. With one last bow to the great relic, Liikel packed her family's icons back into their wrappings, crawled slowly back to her gear, dressed again for the outside, and slowly started making her way back up the passage to the City above.

As she passed by the breached section of passage, she realized that the wind had picked up, now a bit louder running through the passageways of the sanctum. She would have to hurry if she wanted to get back to the shelter before another storm hit, and the thought of having to hobble her way through the City made her grit her teeth.

But at last, she reached the bend in the passageway, and ahead of her she could see a fading daylight filtering in through the entryway. She knelt down, doused her lantern, and as she stood up, she set herself towards to outside, and

## 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

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.