

## Tea Leaf Technology

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The Teller stood silently by the table, his darkly-hooded face concealing any emotion, allowing the cluster of seated men to have their fun deriding his cult. The slanders rarely varied, but the speaker always laughed as if it were an original thought. When the laughter died away and no further insults seemed forthcoming, the Teller nodded his head slightly and steeled himself for the next onslaught before repeating his question for the second of three times. Always three times; the galactic population assumed it a ritual. The cult demanded consistency.

"Would you care to know your fortune, sirs?" the Teller repeated.

"Track off," one of the men snapped with a heavy accent. "Ask again and get on with you." When no one else said anything, the Teller repeated his question the final time. He noted the fast mood shift at the table, and assumed he would get no takers from this group. He was about to shuffle over to the next table in the restaurant when he was surprised by one of the men speaking up.

"I don't know why there's such a traditional tolerance for the likes of you," the man said, "but I guess you're about as amusing as a minstrel. What the hell, you can read my coffee grounds and tell me what beautiful wench I'll bed tonight."

The Teller silently extended his hand for the traditional donation while the man's companions erupted in a mixture of laughter and derision. There was no set amount; many customers... the cult called them leeches... took the Telling for free. It wouldn't matter, the Teller understood, and he was new enough to the cult to feel mild surprise when a customer actually did pay. He didn't let that surprise show when a few coins clinked into his hand. A generous one, the Teller noted as he shifted the coins to his mostly-empty purse. He extended his other hand for the man's cup. Coins with the right, cup with the left. Consistency, or ritual, the effect was the same.

After tossing back the last of the hot, dark brew, the seated man grinned at the jeers of his comrades and handed the empty mug to the Teller. With a slow, silent sniff, the Teller detected the blend, the pseudobrand, and the need to decalcify the brewer. Given the contracts, he was shocked at the poor quality, but the run-down district in which the restaurant sat probably indicated hard water. This might be an issue for the next Seminar. For now, a casual Telling was in order.

"Ah," the Teller said softly, as he was required to do, staring into the depths of the cup. The next few moments would be stylized ad-lib, but he would not stray from the path defined by the cult. The swirl of grounds he saw was meaningless; they always were. But the cup held the key to the cult's survival. "Money. Influence," the Teller began in a slightly-droning voice. "A friend will give you a gift of money soon. Beware a drain of your influence. Isolation. Hunger. You will travel alone. You must prepare well for your journey, or risk a loss of strength. Passion. Fury. Your love for a woman will be rejected. You will blame another man. These six things I have seen; all matters of the future are affected by your actions today."

"Uh huh," the man with the accent snorted at the Teller. "Nice and general, as always, and always the caveat that he might prevent your Telling from coming true by something he does. What a waste of time and money. Go bother some other innocent patrons, I've had my fill of you."

The Teller kept his attention on his customer, who then spoke up to answer the other man. "Ah, shut your hole, Kozzig. My money, my laughs. No harm done, and nobody's forcing you to believe anything."

"You're forcing me to sit through it," the man named Kozzig snarled. "I thought we met today to do business, not attend a carnival."

One of the other men chuckled. "Kozzig's afraid of his future," he leered, to another

explosion of laughter from the other men.

"Bunk," Kozzig snapped. "Bunk that I'm afraid, bunk that this hooded freak can tell it. Bunk." With an angry sigh, the man sat back and scowled at the Teller.

"Well, then," spoke up the man who'd just received his Telling, "if you're not afraid, you'll get your fortune told, right?"

"Wrong!" Kozzig exploded, to the delight of his companions. "I'm tired of wasting my time! Get out of here, Teller!"

The Teller nodded, face still enshadowed by the cowls of his hood, and he turned away to leave. He was surprised yet again when the man who'd joked about Kozzig being afraid spoke up sharply, "Teller, wait." The Teller turned back and stood silently, wondering what would come next. The cult had trained him well, as with all recruits, to recognize danger signs, and now he considered that it might be time for a hasty exit. In the name of "found revelation" of course, for fear was never to be shown.

"Close your face, Brakka," Kozzig hissed. "We've wasted enough time as it is. I can't afford to sit through more lunacy."

The man named Brakka snorted. "You haven't had enough orders lately to keep your so-called wife in the wine she must need to tolerate your stench. You've got more free time on your hands than any other man at this table. Except for the Teller, but he doesn't count. You want our business? Then humor us."

Kozzig stared hatefully at Brakka, the muscles under his right eye twitching in anger. With a final glare around the table and a sigh to underscore it, Kozzig relented. "But I ain't paying a damn thing for it."

"Being a leech is your nature," Brakka smirked. The Teller fought to conceal his startlement. The term 'leech' for non-payers was an in-cult usage, not expected to be known by outsiders. What did this man know? Was he a plant? That would mean that Kozzig was a prequalified Candidate. And Kozzig did fit much of the profile, but not enough that he'd stood out as a Candidate before. Or was it mere coincidence? The two men seemed at odds anyway, so it was possible... It was time to decide.

The Teller extended his right hand for the donation he knew would not appear. Ritual -- consistency -- demanded no less. When Kozzig merely thrust his emptied mug of tea forward, the Teller lowered his right hand and accepted the cup with his left. A glance and a silent sniff, and he made his decision. Kozzig was a Candidate.

"Ah," the Teller began, as all present knew he would. "Blood. Children. There will be an accident. You will be the sole eye-witness. Boredom. Stars. You will travel to a nearby planet. Somebody is awaiting your arrival there. Contracts. Bank. Your family wealth will rise unexpectedly. Obscured clauses will be overridden. These six things I have seen; all matters of the future are..." The Teller let his voice trail off, keeping his attention on the cup, but watching Kozzig and Brakka peripherally.

"What?" Kozzig snapped.

With his heart rate rising slightly in nervous anticipation, the Teller used his right hand, concealed in the folds of his robe, to quickly key in one of several thousand codes on a keypad implanted under the skin of his right thigh. He felt the faint tingle in his left hand that let him know the cup was charged, and he swirled the small amount of liquid in it slightly.

"I cannot..." the Teller said softly, his voice reflecting horror. With another swirl of the cup, he was satisfied with the pattern of tea leaves on the bottom, and he turned off the charge with a single hidden keystroke. The non-toxic metals impregnated in the leaves had arranged the pattern to match the temporary magnetic pattern in the base of the mug, the technological culmination of a deeply-rooted, galaxy-wide, organized con. It didn't take much imagination to see the outline of a skull traced by the leaves. Payment was coming.

"Cannot what?!" Kozzig demanded, his anger waxing again.

"I cannot... I'm sorry," the Teller continued, "but I cannot tell you more. I apologize to

have wasted your time. I must go." He set the cup on the table, giving it a slight shake to disrupt the pattern that might have been too obvious. It was a well-trained caution, repeated out of habit.

"Tell me more about what?" Kozzig insisted, but the Teller shook his head and began to move away. A concealed glance toward Brakka displaced any suspicion of him as a plant, for he looked too confused for it to be an act. It had been mere coincidence. That was much better for the Teller, as long as Kozzig reacted predictably. As he drifted away toward the kitchen doors, the Teller listened to Kozzig in the background.

"Gimme that cup," Kozzig growled, reaching to pick it up. His voice was noticeably shaken when he handed it to one of the other men and asked, "What do you make of that?"

The other man hesitated. "I... I'd make of it that I'm glad it's not mine," he finally replied.

Only a moment later, the Teller felt Kozzig's hand on his shoulder, and he was yanked around to face his latest customer. His very own Candidate. "Is this some kind of prank?" Kozzig shouted at the Teller, drawing the attention of other restaurant patrons.

"I don't know what you mean, sir," the Teller said quickly. "I must go."

"No! No, please, don't go," Kozzig's tone suddenly turned to pleading. "Am I going to die? Is it me? You have to tell me! How am I going to die?!"

"I cannot!" the Teller exclaimed, his voice sounding shocked, but with a mental grin beginning to grow. "Please, sir, I must leave!"

"Tell me, you filthy rat!" Kozzig exploded. "You can see how I'll die, so tell me! Or I'll kill you!" When the Teller said nothing, Kozzig's tone changed again. "Please, please, you must tell me how I'll die. You have to give me a chance to avoid it. Can it be avoided? Or delayed?"

The Teller paused significantly before repeating, but with less stress behind it, "I cannot."

"It can be avoided," Kozzig said softly, before his voice rose again. "You must tell me! Have some compassion! I'll do anything, but, please, you must tell me how to avoid my death that you saw. Please!"

"Nothing in the future can be guaranteed," the Teller responded, shaking his head. He noticed without looking that the other patrons had mostly returned their attentions to their meals, but word of this disturbance would spread. The Teller pressed a few hidden keys to transmit a standard message to the cult. No Candidates would be tried within a five light-year radius for the remainder of the standard year.

Kozzig's face was wet and red with emotion. "I don't need your guarantees, I just need hope. Please, you must tell me how to avoid the death you saw waiting for me. You must!"

"I... I cannot."

"I will do anything! I'll pay you however much you want! Just tell me!"

The Teller shook his head. "No payment is enough for this. It is not allowed. I simply --"

"Cannot!" Kozzig barked. "Yes, you keep telling me that! Maybe it's easy for you, you're not the one dying. I don't care what is 'allowed' right now -- I want an answer, and I'm telling you I'll pay you for it!"

"If... No, it's not a matter of payment."

"What do you want from me? What do I need to do? How much must I pay you? Tell me!" When the Teller didn't reply, Kozzig went on, "I'll give you access to my bank account, you can take what you want! I can make more money -- I can't make more days of my life without you! Tell me, you've got to tell me, you stupid bastard!"

The Teller raised his hands slowly, palms facing out, to quiet the other man. "I cannot take your pay," he said slowly, "and I must not tell you all I see. But perhaps I can suggest a path that may lead you past the greatest danger. Will you accept that?"

"Yes!"

"Will you, of your own free will, donate at least 50% of your monetary wealth to the Order of Tellers?"

"Yes. Yes! Just tell me what to do!"

"Very well," the Teller nodded slowly. "I cannot guarantee that what I suggest will prevent, wholly or partially, what I have foreseen. Six nights hence, you might go to the Temple of Arukas in time for the feeding of poor children. You might volunteer to help with the labor of the feeding, and you might then sleep the night on the temple steps. You might spend the following day praying at the temple. You may wish to do these things rather than anything else you might have planned for those hours. And you may wish to end these suggested activities, if you are still alive, with a suitable donation. I urge you to understand, sir, I cannot guarantee any future events. And I feel I have said too much already."

The Teller bowed his head deeply and turned to leave. "Teller," Kozzig spoke up to his back. The Teller paused but did not turn. "Thank you. And I'm sorry." The Teller nodded minimally, and shuffled toward the door to the kitchen. Tellers always entered and departed through the kitchen. This was tradition. Ritual. Consistency.

"In the back room, Teller," the restaurant owner spoke up from beside the sinks, gesturing toward a nearby door. He continued when he and the Teller were alone. "That was sloppy. You're new, right?"

"Somewhat," the Teller agreed, keeping his head down.

"I want my due, and an advance."

Coins clinked onto the table from the Teller's hand. "This is all I collected in donations. And you will be paid your percentage when his 'donation' is received."

"I'll be waiting."

The Teller began to move toward the door. "Ah, one more thing, Owner. Decalcify your equipment. You are in violation; the discrepancy will be reported, and your percentage reduced accordingly." A moment later, the Teller was gone from the restaurant.

The End

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