

Chapter 02

The first memory of me is of my predecessor Hector inspecting me as I gurgle and drool all over my chin and tiny chest. He is sitting on the edge of his bed and holding me up under my arms. I am ten months old at the time. I must emphasize: the memory isn't mine; rather, it's Hector's memory *of me* when he met me for the first time. It also happens to be Hector's last memory that has survived, as he died shortly after.

I choose that very moment to empty my bladders. It is a copious stream: after making past my linen diapers, it soaks his lap well and good before he is wise to the proceedings. When he realizes what I've done, he curses and promptly let goes of me, putting my tender legs and rear on a trajectory with the floor.

I vividly remember the disgust he felt. Vivid, because I have nurtured—cherished, even—that particular memory over the years. Not just because it's a glimpse of me when I was a baby, but also because it is the only intimate part of Hector's that is left. Of course, there are other memories: some that I certainly know are his; some that are so intertwined with those of my other predecessors and of my own that I can only make a vague guess about their true origin; and some whose existence I am unaware of, but like an unbidden sea monster, surface unexpectedly from time to time and threaten to capsize my balance. All these memories are empty of emotion. When they come up, it is like reading scattered pages from the diary of a complete stranger. All except this very last. Because it is laced with emotion, the memory feels like it belongs to me, not Hector. Disgust was what he bequeathed me; I have embraced it and held it dear like a precious heirloom.

As I recall—or rather, as he remembered it—he was on his death bed, and had but a few days left. He had asked to see the child who would inherit his psi-cap, and someone had fetched me from the Lyceum's orphanage to his rooms at the citadel.

Luckily, the floor is carpeted and it cushions my fall. I will not end up with a permanent disability. I start bawling. My cries are loud and shrill and this shatters any remaining goodwill that Hector might have had for me. 'Take him away and throw him to the wolves!' he says between coughs and gasps to the shocked caretaker who has brought me. 'This villainous child will not have my soul!' he thunders.

Fortunately or unfortunately, the decision wasn't up to him. The Order had always been queasy about letting a psi-cap sit in the vaults: although there was no conclusive evidence, it was widely held that even the few memories that survive a psionist's death would be lost forever if the caps were left unused for long. Then there was the matter of availability. A psionist was almost always an orphan or an offspring of the poor and the desperate; the irrational fear and distrust we inspired in the populace meant that few from the upper classes willingly gave up their child to the Order (while the same were not too hesitant about letting their second- or third-born study in the Lyceum's universities or take up the Tellurian robe). To accept a psi-cap, a child had to be no more than twelve to fifteen months of age. Any older, and the soft tissue on the crown of the skull begins to harden and become bone, making it impossible for the cap to take root. Simply put, the Order couldn't afford to be choosy. At the time of Hector's passing, they had a child of the right age in the orphanage—me (Gil was available too, but for some reason the Order chose me; my brother would probably never have become a psionist if not for a quirk of fate, as I shall explain later). I was going to be the recipient of his "soul", whether he liked it or not.

The retreating back of the caretaker woman is the very last image of the scene that remains. I know now that he died two days later, but nothing of those final days is available

to me. There are no beatific visions, no epiphanies, no light at the end of the tunnel. There is no boundary where his life ends and mine begins, unless I deliberately choose to draw one myself. Me and my predecessors—and Hector is no exception—blend into each other like a headless corpse with too many limbs.

Like all children, I have little to no recollection of when I was an infant. However, along with Hector's memory of me, I may have retained one more memory of that nebulous time. I cannot say for sure, and it's certainly possible that it is just a construct of my imagination. I doubt, because the memory in question appears to segue seamlessly with a different, real, memory of an incident that happened when I was eight.

I speak of the time when I saw the rooting of young Mabel's psi-cap.

I was bedridden in the university's hospital on account of a fever. Mabel was in the bed next to me, suffering from a similar affliction—that's how I came to know her name. She must have been about a year old. She was from the girls' orphanage. The doctor attending me told me that they were waiting for her to get better, and I didn't enquire further about who was waiting and for what reason, preoccupied as I was with my own tribulations. I woke up one morning to find that she was gone and I thought no more about it. That same day my fever broke and the doctor said that I could get back to school in a day or two.

The memory goes like this. It is well past my bed time, but I am not able to sleep because it's too hot inside. Wanting to stretch my legs a bit, I sneak out of my ward into the cool night.

The hospital consists of three separate blocks of buildings. I decide to walk to the farthest one and back. There's a gibbous moon in the sky to keep me company.

I reach the far end and I am about to turn back when I hear someone sniffing. I stop and listen. There's some tall shrubbery beside the cobbled path, and it appears that the sound is coming from somewhere behind it. I go around the shrubs to discover a small cottage-like building concealed behind. It stands separate from the blocks. The sniffs are emanating from an open window nearby.

Unable to restrain my curiosity, I quietly walk up to the window. The sill protrudes a head or so above me (I was a short kid back then). I find some bricks lying around and stack them one above another until I have the height I need. I stand on them and peer inside.

There is a child sitting on a bed. I recognize her as Mabel. It is her sniffles that have drawn me to the place.

This is where the real memory ends. I have no recollection of walking back to my bed, but I am sure that's what I must have done next.

I never saw Mabel again. Not in the orphanage, nor in the hostels where psionicist children were housed after they started school. Nor did I encounter anyone in school with that name. While only a few children in the orphanage ended up becoming psionicists (either because nobody had died for a psi-cap to be available, or because they were past the implantation age), and those that didn't were usually given over to the university guilds to be educated and brought up in a trade, Mabel's fate had not been such. I didn't realize it at the time: it was years later, during my final year at school, when I came across information that helped me connect the dots. It wasn't exactly a secret—just one of those things they don't tell you when you are very young. The truth is, of the chosen recipients, it was an even smaller proportion that actually became psionicists. The Lyceum's anaesthetics and procedures, marvels as they were compared to the quackery that passed for medicine elsewhere, were but balms and tinkering compared to those employed by the antediluvians—the sorry result of which was that more recipients died than not (more than six out of every ten, I think the figure was). Some did not survive the process; some, the complications that developed in the days that followed; and sometimes the cap outright rejected the recipient, but not before

doing irreversible harm to the brain. That cottage was built apart from the rest of the hospital for a reason. It was where they implanted the damned things.

Whenever I try to recollect what I saw in that window, my perspective invariably shifts, and I find myself inside the room, sitting on the very same bed. There is a mirror on the wall opposite me. However, the reflection in the mirror is not of an eight-year-old Dante, but of an infant. I believe that infant is me. I am naked and I am crying. There is something on my shaven head, black, like a patch of hair that the barber forgot to shave. It gleams like a pool of tar caught in moonlight. It is a strip of metal, about three inches wide, and is held in place by leather straps that circle my face. The cap extends from the top of my forehead to my crown. There is someone else sitting beside me—a nurse most likely, her face hazy and featureless. She is trying to distract me from my crying with the toys that are strewn on the bed.

I am crying because there are a million little needles pricking my scalp. It feels like they are trying to bore their way into my head. The needles are alive, and endowed with a frightful resolve. Thin rivers of blood stream down from my head; they drip into my eyes and on my nose. Red lines crisscross my cheeks and flow down my neck.

Maybe because the woman does something to distract me, or because I'm tired of crying, I crack a smile. From the mirror, a maroon grin greets me back.

*

Chapter xx

I'd never been so cold in my life. A coven of banshees engaged in a dark ritual, the wind howled lustily through the gaps in the few ramshackle wooden huts that served as the port of Skelster Bay. It was a little past noon according to the ship's clock when we disembarked, but the sun was nowhere to be seen. Earlier, a storm had brought with it freezing cold rain and—something I had not experienced before—sleet. For a brief while, I had forgotten my troubles and let myself get carried away by the experience of it. Like the boy of yesteryear who suffered from bouts of excitement whenever it rained hailstones in Umber, I had stood in the open, feeling the little pellets of ice and snow land softly on my body, little realizing how cold I would get and how fast. My ardour vanished, I now sat shivering by a brazier in the small cabin that was the port watchman's residence.

When the ship docked, there had been no one in the port except the watchman and a lone fisherman bringing in his boat. The watchman, as soon as he'd heard the words cargo and sale from the caravel's captain, had rode off on his horse, presumably to convey the news to the nearest village.

It was a desolate place, Skelster Bay. If the world were flat, like the ill-informed believed, Skelster would be where you came to jump off the edge. Yet, despite the bleakness of it all and the cold nibbling at my bones, I was not unhappy. For the first time since Starguard, I felt like a weight had been lifted off my shoulders; with the increasing distance I had put between me and Livingstone had come a proportionate lightening of the heart. I knew it was temporary: there was no avoiding the fate that awaited me. Nevertheless, I drunk greedily of the illusory peace I found in that forlorn corner of the realm.

The watchman had been long gone now, maybe an hour. People had started trickling in, unmindful of the ghastly weather (how quickly perspectives change!). I stepped outside and stood by myself, watching them haggle over the prices. I left my head uncovered intentionally; the townsfolk glanced at me curiously before returning their attention to the captain and the sacks of grain being unloaded by his men. Evidently, they had seen the likes of me before—I couldn't have generated less interest if I were taking a stroll in the streets of Old Town. This place was no stranger to strangers.

Still, I couldn't help but feel that I was being watched. The longer I stood there, the stronger the feeling became.

I found her by a crumbling stone hut, alongside the narrow path that led off the port and into the crags behind. She had been in my line of sight all along, but her sandy hair and her dun-coloured dress and the fact that she was standing still had made her more or less invisible. Now that I'd noticed her, I responded in kind to her scrutiny. When she realized that she'd been spotted, the woman immediately started walking toward me.

She walked in a bouncing way—a heavy rolling gait which at first glance seemed comical until I realized that she had a limp in her right leg. She was a large woman, rather matronly, with dull grey eyes set in a hard face. A slight smile hesitated at the edges of her stodgy expression as she gave me a short bow.

'Pardon my intrusion, master,' she said. 'It's none of my business but I couldn't help but notice you standing here unattended. Has no one received you yet?' My silence made her continue. 'Surely the Consul knows you are here?'

'No one knows of my coming,' I said.

She mulled over this new information for a moment or two. 'Oh well. Then it's good I happened to come here. When I heard that a merchant ship had arrived, I reckoned I'd take a

look. It's difficult to get the things one wants here. Cut off as it is from everything nice and decent, a woman is hard pressed to maintain a semblance of grace around here. What would I give for a box of rouge and some perfume! Would it kill these savages to— Oh! Look at me rambling on! I'm sorry master, where are my manners? Allow me to introduce myself. My name is Ika. Ika Ellingsen. I work for the Consul. I... It is I who looks after the shipments from Livingstone... among other things. You must be Psion Doyle's replacement. He did mention last time that these trips were not kind on his rheumatism. You are very young, aren't you? It must be not be easy, to be entrusted with such big responsibilities so early in one's life. Is that a new shipment? I don't think the Consul is expecting one. The last one came in less than two months ago.'

She had not paused for breath even once during the frantic expulsion of words.

I shook my head. 'I bring no shipment.'

She nodded, as if she understood. 'You wish to meet the Consul. If you will allow me, I shall go arrange for transport. Or do you prefer to wait here while I go inform him? Either way it's—'

'Transport would be good. I do not wish to wait here much longer.'

'Don't you worry about that, young sir. I'll have you out of here in no time.'

She limped over to where the townspeople were standing, and grabbing one by his arm, pulled him aside. As they spoke, I saw the man's expression sour. He was shaking his head. Ika gesticulated angrily, poking his chest and pointing at me. Finally, the man waved toward where the townsfolk had tied their horses. He was still shaking his head, but this time in dejection. Ika walked back to me sporting a triumphant grin.

'The people here think they are masters of the world. No respect for authority. Uncouth lot, the bunch of them. Just because they are not part of the Empire, they think they can do as they please. The only reason our good Emperor has not crushed this dung heap into dust is because it's not worth his time. The man refused to let me borrow his ponies, even when I told him who it was for. But I showed him, didn't I? I told him where he could stuff his insolence. Now if you please, young Psion, I will fetch your belongings from the ship.'

I felt sorry for the poor fellow. I suggested borrowing the watchman's horse as he had nowhere to go but she wouldn't hear of it; the mangy beast was as near death's door as can be, she said. 'Don't try to be nice to these backward folk, sir. They will not return the favour,' she advised.

'I don't have any belongings. Let's get going.'

She raised an eyebrow at this, but did not enquire further. She had brought her own ride, so we had to borrow only one of unfortunate man's ponies. The animals were a sturdy stock, quite popular down south in the Isles as well; I remembered from somewhere that the breed was named after the island—to be accurate, the island as it was known a few hundred years ago. Now people in the Isles just called it the Small Archipelago—the big one being the Isles themselves—provided they knew about the wretched place at all.

I waited until we were round the bend when I told her—'We are not going to the Consul's. I want you to take me somewhere else.'

'Not going to the Consul's? But...' Her heavy eyelids rose and fell in tune with the expansions and contractions of her humungous chest. Then suddenly, her frown vanished. 'Ah! You wish to find some accommodation first, perhaps rest a while. I understand. You must be very tired. There's no need for an inn, young sir. The Consul's mansion is quite luxurious and you will find plenty of opportunity to relax there. The Consul will chew my head off if I were to take you to some cut-rate inn. That's all they have here: dirty, flea-infested shacks that are liable to fall over in the next gust of wind. To call them inns is a travesty. All they are fit for is the cultists. And don't get me started on *those* cretins. If you think there aren't enough of them leeching off this place already, wait for a while. In a couple

of weeks, swarms of the fools will descend on these isles like hungry locusts. If I may say so, you've come at a bad time, for this is when they have their half-yearly debauchery. The Melding, they call it. You won't find any peace and quiet, I tell you. But then again, with the war going on, it remains to be seen how many will actually turn u—'

If I had not jumped in, she would have rattled on until she'd dazed me into submission. 'I thought I made it clear. I *do not* wish to meet the Consul,' I said sharply.

She glanced my way with a hurt look. 'Oh. What then?'

I sighed. 'I'm sorry, Ika. I don't mean to be rude.'

'There's no need to apologize, young master. Stupid me, I'm always blabbering on. Just yesterday, the Bailiff—my superior, you see—Constable Macgille told me yet again, and not so nicely either. He was locking up the station, ready to go home, and I—'

'Ika, I'm here on behalf of the Three. The Council of Three. You do know who they are, yes?'

If she hadn't been deferential enough toward me before, she now perused me as if she had happened upon a most rare and precious jewel. Her jaw slackened as she fumbled for the right words. 'The Emperor's eyes and ears! Oh, who hasn't? Forgive me milord, if I have been presumptuous. I... I—' She looked like she would jump off her pony any moment and prostrate herself on the dirt road.

'I am no lord. Just a humble servant of the Emperor. My name is... John. The thing is, Ika, my mission here is a rather delicate one, and the less the Consul knows about it, the better. Before I can tell you what it is, I need to know I can trust you.'

She was all interest now as she digested this new information. 'You can trust me, sir.'

'How long since your posting here?'

'Four years next November. But how... how did you know I wasn't from around here? Is it my accent?'

'One can tell. Now, how would you like it if you were to receive a transfer to the capital? Or perhaps you'd prefer the Nordic provinces. You are from that part of the world, are you not?'

Her dead eyes suddenly glinted with enthusiasm as she looked at me. She struggled to shake off the stolid expression that seemed to have been permanently grafted on her face. 'Oh sir, then it would mean god is indeed listening to my prayers. I have wanted that since the day I set foot in this accursed place. And how have I tried! The times I have applied for a transfer, the times I have begged and pleaded! If there's—'

'I can get the authorities in the Lyceum to put in a word to the civil service.'

How many more will you betray in your quest to get what you want, Dante? And what is it that you really want? Do you know?

The lumpish visage broke into a wide grin composed of yellow teeth and garlic breath. 'Oh, can you sir? Can you really? Tohen's mercy be with you sir. The great mother Gaia herself shall—'

'You have to do something for me first.'

'Anything, young sir! Just say the word!'

'First off, I don't want anybody knowing about my arrival. This includes the Consul and your superior officer. Is that clear?' She nodded. 'Second,' I continued, 'I want you to take me to the ruler of these isles.'

'The ruler? The Consul is the authority here.'

'The king of this place, Ika. The Consul is not the king, is he? He's merely the Emperor's envoy—unless he has fashioned himself a crown without the Emperor's knowledge, that is.'

'I think you are talking about the Seer,' she said and chuckled softly to herself. 'Oh young sir, you must never, ever call him that. A king, I mean. A very unusual man, this one.'

He has actually forbidden people from addressing him as king. Imagine that! Why, if I were in his place, I'd make sure these horrible people touched their noses to the ground whenever I passed by. Would serve them right too!

'The *Seer*'?

'The cultists who follow him call him that. To the rest, he is just Mr. Travers.'

'But he is king of these lands by birth, yes?'

'Most certainly. But he'd rather let the Consul have the run of the place. I tell you, some people such as our beloved Emperor are born to shoulder the burdens of others, and some... Oh what the hey, I'll say it! Some people are born to indulge in fanciful woolgathering while others toil and sweat for them. You should listen to some of the nonsense that Mr. Travers' followers spout—when they are coherent, that is. Hopheads and lunatics, all of them,' she said, spitting. The fluid missed its target and landed on her pony's snout.

'He is not well liked then?'

She thought about my question. She said, 'To tell you the truth, young sir, I am not entirely sure. He is an enigmatic personality. To some, he is a revered figure, while to others he is an object of scorn. There are those who despise him because of the cultists and what the cultists have done to their peaceful community. When we reach the town you'll see what I mean. And there are others who have prospered because the cultists are good business. They bring coin to this impoverished place and spend it on food, clothing, lodgings... among other things. You know what I mean. Such folk are bound to have a favourable opinion of Mr. Travers. It also goes in his favour that he is exceedingly generous. I hear that he keeps very little of the taxes and rents that go to him. After paying the Empire the annual tribute, the rest is distributed to those in need. If I had to guess sir, I'd say half of the islanders love him and the other half hate his guts.'

We soon crossed the crags that separated the coast from the rest of the island. Spread before us was a rolling, treeless shelf of low dune-like hills with a sizeable settlement nestled in between. The town of Skelster. Scattered elsewhere on the shelf were tiny hamlets ringed by patchworks of fields. A ruinous castle perching on a hill at the far end of the main town completed the picture.

We led our mounts down into the plateau and along a barely there gravelly road that seemed to serve the purpose of connecting the smaller settlements with the town. Ika never let up during that entire journey. When she wasn't asking me questions about the rebellion—of which she knew very little except that there was one taking place—she asked me about life in the capital. When she realized that I was not too keen in answering her questions she launched into an extended critique of the islanders, their culture, their hygiene habits, the cultists, and finally, her superior.

The captain of the ship had warned me it was going to be cold and had let me take a jacket and a woollen cap. I put the cap back on my head before we entered the town.

The streets were little more than tracks of dirt and horse dung; the town an assortment of grey-faced stone buildings in various stages of dilapidation. We encountered dour-faced people clad in drab garments everywhere we went, and every now and then, I saw a cultist with a shaved head. A while later, we must have crossed into a lane containing lodgings for the cultists, as scores of them thronged the broken pavements, walking around on their business, mingling with each other in idle groups, sitting by themselves and staring into space. They were everywhere: on roadsides, on footsteps of houses, in empty gutters... One sat squatting on a windowsill like a vulture on a treetop and was making whooping sounds at passersby. It felt like I had been transported to a bizarre version of the university at Umber—what you'd get if you replaced the sunny, clean environs with one made of gloom and grime, and the redolent smells of honeysuckle and jacarandas with those of urine and ganja and foul-

smelling cactus tea (which was being cooked in the open), and my fellow psionicists with shaven-skulled pretenders with tattoos and hair fashioned to look like psi-caps. It was then it hit me that I was never going back to Umber again. I was never going to walk in the hot afternoon sun in those tree-lined streets, or stand by the riverbank and gaze at the sunset, or lose myself in some obscure book in the cavernous Wedell library, or get drunk in the pubs with a friend or two, or do any of the thousand-and-one things that were for me the very definition of life not so long ago. Or visit Thalia in the old town. *Thalia!* I would never find her in that church again, even if I somehow managed to go back. My whole world crumbled to dust, all because of the silly dreams of a naïve boy and the machinations of an old fool...

A half-crazed cultist sketching arcane diagrams in the air bumped into my pony. He clung to the poor beast's neck and pawed at me. 'The codex! Did you bring the codex?' I kicked at him lightly but it was enough to send him sprawling to the ground where he kicked and flailed at imaginary assailants. The animal, panicked by the man's attentions, almost trampled over him; Ika managed to grab hold of its reins and pull it away. I heard peals of laughter behind me.

A few traipsed over to us, holding out their palms in supplication. 'A triffin for the needy, good lord and lady. A triffin to fill our bellies while we wait the Harbinger. Do you good, kind sir.' There was a dull gleam in their eyes that wasn't entirely the substances they were partaking. Ika sent them running with a crack of her whip and a steady stream of curses.

We made our way past the centre of the town, a marketplace of sorts with most of the shops boarded shut, and travelled toward the edges again, in what appeared to be a cleaner, and healthier precinct. A road opened to my right, wider than anything I'd encountered in that place. There were trees lining it.

'The Consul's office and residence is over yonder. Are you sure you do not want to go there first? There'll be many more of these lunatics at Mr Travis' place. Maybe you'd prefer to go with an armed escort?'

I ignored her suggestion and asked how much further it was to our destination. She pointed to the castle on the hill. 'Mr. Travers lives up there.'

We soon exited the town and arrived at the base of the hill. I told Ika that I preferred to go alone from there and dismounted, handing her the reins to farmer Burns' property.

She hesitated. I reassured her that I would set the wheels in motion for her transfer as soon as I got back to the capital. She left me only after she had told me her full name twice and the name of her commanding officer and the address where she could be reached.

I could have climbed straight to the summit as it was mostly scrub and bracken but I decided to take the road winding around the hilltop. Anxious as I was to get to my destination, I was at the same time apprehensive of what I would find up there. What if I was wrong about my assumptions? And even if I was right, was I justified in expecting help? Time can erode mountains; what things are dogmas? The sharp wind battered against my face. I felt more tired than I'd ever felt before. I wanted to turn around and go back to the town and find a small room where I could sleep for days and days. My stomach craved for something hot and filling.

It then occurred to me that I wasn't afraid of being proven wrong. My creeping lethargy was because I was afraid of being right—I was afraid that everything from then on would go according to plan.

You can still turn back. You don't have to do this. You are no saviour of anybody. You are Dante, the failed psionicist. The world can take care of itself. Do not make the same mistake that Gil did.

I saw them approaching at the turn of the bend ahead, but I continued, not thinking much of it. They were coming from the castle, six in number—a woman among them. When they got close I saw that one was a cultist, with the make-believe tattoo on his shaven head.

They made me stop.

‘Where are you headed this fine day, brother?’ one of them said in a heavily-accented common tongue. He was a scabby fellow with a knife slash that ran deep from his upper lip down to his chin. His companions encircled me. They were all young and unkempt and, except for the man who addressed me, looked like sticks clad in gristle and skin and rags. They had a hungry look in their eyes, but I wasn’t sure it was from lack of nourishment.

‘I seek audience with the Seer,’ I said.

They sniggered in unison, closing in tighter around me. The scabby fellow said, ‘And who might you be to so boldly presume the Seer will give you audience? He’s a very important man. State your name and business, brother.’

‘I will. But to not to you.’

He clearly did not expect to be talked back to and I could see him hesitate. I was equally startled by his reaction a moment later, for he slapped me on the face.

‘This brother has a big cock,’ he said to his companions. ‘He doesn’t know we cut them down to size here.’ He snarled at me—‘You will answer the questions put to you. We are the free militia of Skelster Commune. We are the executors of the people’s will. And you are a little mouse that’s wandered into a place it doesn’t belong.’

Another remarked—‘Your speech... Which commune are you from little mouse? You little islanders may be used to having different rules for each of your different rocks, but here we make the rules, you get?’

‘Billy already said that, you idiot,’ the cultist said to the fellow who had just spoken. ‘If you weren’t so inbred, you’d know from his speech he is from the Protectorate. Way down south, I reckon. You a Birmingham lad? Umber, perhaps?’

The girl put an arm around my shoulders and brought her face close to mine to sniff at my burning cheek. ‘The Protectorate! Imagine that! I’ve heard everyone in the Protectorate has a big cock, even the women.’ Cackling laughter. ‘Do you, dear brother? I like big cocks.’ She snapped her teeth in a biting gesture.

‘If you have come from so far, you must be carrying plenty of coin. An auric,’ Billy said. ‘An auric to go up the hill.’

‘And to go back,’ the girl added.

‘Two aurics,’ Billy corrected himself. ‘One for going up, and one for when they kick your arse and send you rolling down the hill.’

‘I don’t have any money,’ I said, for which I received another slap from Billy.

‘Offence number one: refusal to answer questions. Offence number two: refusal to pay road tax. You awful eager to make this hard on yourself, don’t you brother? Search him.’

One of the hooligans locked my arms from behind while the girl patted me down. After she had gone through my pockets, she squeezed my crotch and snapped her teeth at me again.

‘Not a triffin.’

‘Check his hat.’

They let out a collective gasp when the girl removed my hat. ‘A mind mage!’ the cultist exclaimed. ‘It’s a mind mage! Let him go, you idiots!’

It was an unexpected development for the gang. Billy scratched his head while he pondered what to do next.

Then he said—‘The fuck we will. He could be the Phoenix Emperor for all I care.’

‘Let him go, Billy. He is one of the chosen—they who will lead us into the light!’

‘A bloody sorcerer!’ someone else hissed.

‘Yeah, listen to your mate. He’s danger, Billy.’

Billy suddenly whirled toward the cultist and grabbed him by his robe. ‘Listen to me, you raving fruitcake. I only allowed you to join our patrol because Orrick fell ill and we were

short of hands. I don't care what twaddle you baldies believe in. If you obstruct the people's justice you will get the same treatment he's about to receive.'

'There's no telling what he can do!'

'He's not doing an awful lot, is he now?'

'The Seer will be mad if he finds out!'

'Fuck the Seer! Isn't that what he preaches, to distrust all authority? Kat, do you think that metal thing on his head is worth an auric?'

'I will have no part in this,' the cultist said.

'Then piss off!' Billy growled. 'Kat?'

'Maybe. Maybe not,' the girl shrugged.

'Let's find out then, shall we?' said Billy. From his belt he withdrew a long dagger and waved it at me.

Until that moment, I had assumed I was in the clutches of some small-time bullies who would let me go with a little rough treatment and a bruised ego at worst. But now I realized with mounting dread that the guy brandishing the knife meant to use it. Life meant little to this bunch; the life of a stranger from a faraway place even less.

'Not here,' said the boy holding my arms. 'Let's take him off the road, into the bushes.'

I struggled, which made him grasp my arms even tighter. He made me walk toward the vegetation by the side.

Not like this! Not when I am so close to the end of my journey. Have I come this far and done all those terrible things only to meet my end at the hands of some murderous backwater thugs?

I shouted for help, hoping that someone would hear me. I kicked behind, but the fellow holding me just laughed when my leg connected with his shin. My entreaties for mercy and my promises of a substantial reward if they took me to the Seer fell on deaf ears. They were only interested in the here and now, and blood was all that was on their minds. I twisted my neck around to appeal to the cultist but he was gone.

Once we were behind the shrubbery, I was dragged down to the ground. Two of them pinned my arms while another sat on my legs. Billy crouched over me and placed his dagger at my throat. The girl was watching me with glazed eyes.

'No,' she said. 'Remove it while he's still alive. I want to see what happens to him.'

The man sitting on my legs objected. 'Cut his throat and get it over with lest he rouses the castle with his screams.'

'Stuff this in his mouth. Here,' said the girl, thrusting a handkerchief she took out from her trouser pocket at Billy. He smiled crookedly and accepted the cloth, which he next tried to put in my mouth. I bit his fingers, drawing blood. He cursed and began punching me on my face. Amidst the pain and my screaming and his curses I heard a series of sharp sounds behind him—the sound of twigs snapping. Billy stopped what he was doing and turned. I saw a large shape crash through the dry bushes and bear upon our group. A horse.

A gunshot rang through my ears.

'Let him go or the next one is for you, shitface.' It was Ika, pointing two pistols at Billy. Smoke was coming out of one. Billy stood up to face her.

'Why, it's one of the Consul's dogs. Inga, right? Go away. You have no business interrupting the administration of the people's justice.'

'Justice? Right! And I'm the pirate queen of the Hundred and One Isles. Do you know you have in your custody an imperial citizen, wise administrator? Do you know what will happen to you and your little troop of monkeys here when word gets out that you laid hands on one—and a psion no less? The Consul's Guard will flay you and string you up like pigs at a butcher's. Right in the middle of that shithole you call a town.'

‘He was acting suspiciously! And he refused to reveal his identity. We have a right to prosecute him,’ one of them cried.

‘Go home child. And wipe the snot off your nose.’ She made a show of pointing the gun at Billy. ‘I know you. You are the carpenter’s son. Now think long and hard—do you really want to do this? I’m more than enough to take on the five of you and send you crying back to your mamas.’

The two holding me down were intimidated enough to let go and step back. I stood up panting. Billy glared at me and then at Ika.

Finally, he growled—‘Let’s go.’ His coterie followed him wordlessly except for the girl, who hissed something as she passed next to Ika. Ika bent from her mount and gave her a hard slap in the back of the head, sending her yelping after her friends.

‘Thank Tohen I found you when I did!’ Ika said, grinning. Fighting back my tears of desperation, I began to express my gratitude but she was all humility once more and brushed it off as if it were nothing. ‘Thank Tohen, if you must young sir. It must have been He who put the thought in my head. After we parted company, I said to myself, Ika, you should have at least offered him the use of the pony—the climb to the castle can be tiring. I know you will return it after you are done with your mission, sir. And if that inconvenienced Burns, then too bad for him; what does he know of important affairs of the state? So I turned around and came after you. A cultist on the road told me how you’d been waylaid. See, I told you these people were no better than animals. Let me take you back to the Consul’s, sir. He’ll berate me for letting you wander off alone but that’s the least I deserve. We’ll have you nice and cleaned up. Then I’ll personally go with the Guard and teach the vermin who did this to you not to trifle with the Emperor’s own.’

I shook my head. ‘I must press on, Ika. But I’ll be glad if you’ll accompany me up to the castle. I’ll feel a lot safer with you around.’

She beamed a broad smile at me. ‘Why of course, that goes without saying. You needn’t even have asked, young sir.’

I resumed the journey with Ika, who graciously maintained an atypical reticence of speech throughout. I didn’t think I had it in me to engage in any conversation, even if that involved just listening. My face throbbed with the pummelling Billy had given me and I was shaking from having come so close to death. I hadn’t been this afraid during the previous times I’d faced a threat since I left Umber. Not in the sea with Armand, when I had blacked out; not when I was xxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxx with the yibrids rampaging around me; nor in xxxxxx’s house, nor when the Emperor’s soldiers came after me in xxxxxxxxxxxx. It was the sheer mindlessness of the most recent encounter—the almost casual way the gang approached the prospect of inflicting unbearable pain on me—that had me shuddering. There was no logic or emotion behind their actions. Cruelty I could understand, if not empathise with, but I had not seen it in the eyes of the girl who had suggested taking my psi-cap while I was still breathing. She was merely curious. I want to see what happens, she had said. Like a child plucking the wings of a dragonfly.

And these are sort of people who you think will aid you? Turn back. You are in over your head on this.

The castle was the size of a large mansion, nothing compared to the citadel in Umber. Evidence of some older, much larger structure that the castle had most likely cannibalized its materials from lay everywhere in the open space around it: stumps of long gone walls, the barest imprints of what must have been circular towers, a large rectangular pit, now filled with half-burnt rubbish, a couple of crumbling outbuildings of unknown function. The castle itself was scarcely more than a ruin within a ruin. Years of neglect lay heaped over it like detritus on a forest floor. The battlements had collapsed in several places; the grey stone of the outer walls had mostly turned brown by playing host to generations of rock lichen. A

drawbridge with rusting chains that probably hadn't been raised in years bridged a moat filled with rainwater and refuse. Yet, it seemed to me that the building had a certain gravitas that managed to assert itself through the miasma of decay that surrounded it; it was like an old soldier with rickety joints and fading vision who was intent on proving to the world that he still had one last battle left in him.

Tens of cultists were busy at work in the grounds: some were erecting tents while others were busy constructing a wooden dais in the centre. Ika told me it was in preparation for the Melding.

'The hillside will be full of tents soon and the town will be swarming with cultists,' she said with disdain.

I watched her ride off after much protestation on her part and a plea from my part that she not tell anyone about what had happened or try to inflict punishment on the patrol. *The kindness of a stranger repaid by duplicity. Good work, Dante.*

As I walked past the men and women in the grounds they stared at me with astonishment. I then remembered I had forgotten to put my hat back on. Some even bowed reverentially. As far as I could tell, there were no guards about. I walked up to the moat and hailed a cultist who had just come out of the castle and expressed my desire to meet their Seer.

'He is meditating right now. But he should be finished soon. Come,' he said and led me inside.

The interior was not as bad as the outside. It was cold, but the place was clean and tidy. Threadbare carpets lined the passages.

'Who shall I say is calling?'

'I'm Da... Um, tell him Hector of the Psionicists is here.'

He made me sit in a large drafty hall that looked more like the interior of a Tellurian church than a castle's great hall. There was a slightly raised circular stone platform at the centre with chairs and benches arranged around it. Paintings adorned the walls: not of lords and ladies but of astounding visions and scenes. Some were so inscrutable I couldn't even begin to guess whether they represented something real or were just tormented dreams bereft of form and structure. There was this depiction of a city so bizarre it was hard to take my eyes away from it; buildings and streets bent into each other, curving up into the sky, and then you realized that the sky was no sky, but an extension of the city.

Not all were so mysterious. Some, I recognized, because I had seen them before in the libraries at Umber. There was one which was clearly a vast forest seen from above—Eden, most likely—and several that depicted psionicists and their cubes, as well as other Antarkan golems that hadn't survived the test of time. A few showed antediluvian technology: flying machines, crafts traversing the void, towers that grazed the clouds... It slowly began to dawn on me that there was a common thread to the paintings. They were all from the Codex: depictions of the visions of Tarquin. With that newfound realization, I walked back to the drawing of the strange city. It too was not entirely unfamiliar. I had seen something like that before... long ago... in Abdus's rooms at the citadel. Nineveh! The place built by man and supposedly now the home of the singleton in the void. When I'd asked, Magister Callum had described it as the ravings of a madman. It was easy to take Callum at his word back then, young as I was, and considering the unimpressible quality of the crude sketch I'd seen in Abdus's book. But this... this felt real. There was too much detail, too much deliberation for it to be—

I heard footsteps approaching. I turned around to see a haggard figure with sunken eyes and a long, unkempt mane standing before me.

'The child is now a man,' he said, smiling.

It was xxxxxxx, looking like he'd aged two-score years since I had last seen him.

