

the BITTER ROAD™



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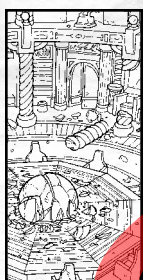
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PRELUDE: A MEETING OF MINDS



Under the vaulted ceiling of a tremendous chamber, Kyle felt insignificant not only by dint of inexperience but also by architecture. He'd come to meet the Traditionalists at Lee Ann's insistence — "The broadening experience will do you good," she'd said — but he hadn't expected an ornamental manner, a gathering of strange individuals with distinctly uncanny traits.... He wasn't sure what he'd expected.

Overseeing the house was Alistair, a skilled Hermetic mage of some distinction. His hair just graying and his presence powerful, the mage projected the authority of a leader or a teacher, which he was. He was a master linguist, in fact, who specialized in academic translations. As Kyle took in the statuary, tapestries and well-maintained indoor gardening, he adjusted his appreciation for linguistics upward a notch.

"Let's come to order," Alistair pronounced in a slow and resonant tone. He remained standing at the head of his large, wooden table, as various other individuals that Kyle didn't know — a woman in a strange, tight skinsuit, a short man with simple tattoo designs and feathered trappings, a haggard paramedic — took their own seats.

Lee Ann, for her part, lounged in one of the tremendous chairs and motioned for him to do the same. Kyle took a seat uncomfortably and waited to learn.

Alistair nodded once in his direction. "It seems we have new blood. You've brought in another stray, Lee Ann?"

Lee Ann nodded without much emphasis. "Yeah. He needs a little training, but he's got talent, and he'll go a long way." She shot Kyle one of her impish grins.

Alistair peered out from under his bushy eyebrows as if scrutinizing Kyle for some sort of hidden defect. Eventually, he nodded once. "Very well, he shall be counted among our number by your word until such time as he is released and considered a competent magus of his own," Alistair intoned with some formality. A moment later, he too sat down.

"It's good to have you, kid," the woman in the skinsuit said. "We've been suffering enough losses lately. We need all the help we can get." General nods around the table assented to her assessment.

Alistair held up a hand to silence the murmured concerns. "We have old business first. This new recruit..."

"Kyle," Kyle put in helpfully.

"Kyle," Alistair continued, "will catch up as we go." He nodded to his left, toward the paramedic.

"Local situation? Crime's as bad as ever. I still see a never-ending stream of trauma patients. No exceptional ones yet," the paramedic said bitterly.

Alistair simply nodded. It seemed that they'd grown accustomed to the paramedic's negative demeanor.

"Technocracy's lying low," the woman in the skinsuit noted. "Apparently we're not the only one with problems. Their trans-dimensional technology isn't working right, and they have lost a lot of their contact with their outposts. Plus, much of their hyper-tech is failing too. We can expect that they won't be bothering us as much; they have problems of their own now."

The tattooed man sighed in evident relief. "That's good," he said. "Maybe I can stay for a few extra days." He grinned lopsidedly. Kyle noted that some of his tattoos seemed intermingled with scars.

Alistair cleared his throat and continued. "My own resources remain stable. My library is the primary source for our information, and it will continue to be so for the foreseeable future. However, I've received word that a herald is arriving from a Chantry in Portland, Oregon."

The paramedic mumbled something. Lee Ann perked up and straightened in her seat. "Any word about what he wants? Good news?"