

RATHER THE THOUGHT THAN THE DEED

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Adventure, Mystery, Crime, Sci-Fi.

On the planet of Morgrel, a very young boy Cidie discovers he has a very special gift. Once that gift is discovered, he is susceptible to exploitation by several of the Planet's elders. As the young boy develops into a man, his power and understanding of the gift makes him more powerful than the elders. This takes him off-planet and a formidable force in the Universe.

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PART 1. MORGREL

A young man stood on the white rocky plateau. A solitary figure looking out over the seemingly endless majestic desert, hoping that someone would come and visit him.

Storms thundered in the canyon stretching away from him, the thin clouds twirled by the wind movement beneath them. Dry lightning scorched the sand, the sun sinking over the horizon, gold and red all at once. The boy's shadow, long and black, reached from the very edge of the precipice where he stood and darkened the stone house that was his home.

He watched until his eyes stung. Still no sign of anyone coming. He watched the darkness creep rapidly towards him and turned to see the moons rise behind him. One white, one blue. He walked back into the small house and closed the door, the evening chill forcing him indoors. Cidie was to spend another night alone.

The lights gently brightened and he saw the familiar smooth white walls and the simple furnishings. To one side lay his bed, comfortable but small. As far as prisons went, it could've been worse. But at the age of ten, he had little experience of prisons. Just what he had seen on the Wall.

The small home sat high above the desert floor and kels from any habitation. He loved company and hated it. But right now the love would overwhelm the hate part. He thought of an image and it sprang on to the flat Wall. He watched idly as the image transformed into a StoryWall and he whiled away a few hours watching a mediocre feature. He watched to the end, but his mind was elsewhere.

Sometime later, food appeared from a hatchway and he sat and prodded it with a spoon. It looked unappetising and he tried a small taste first. It tasted fine, but was not inspiring. He ate because it filled in some time before going to bed. He drained the tepid fluid that passed for a hot drink and stood up. He stretched and opened the single door. He walked outside, wrapping his robe tightly around his thin body.

The wind moaned over the rocky plateau and whistled around the stone house. He wasn't sleepy, but he was bored and thought of bed. High above a bird shrieked in the night. Something was dying so something else could live. That was the way of the world, and young Cidie had learned that while very young.

He sat on the flat stone and looked down the flat sided valley into the distance. On a clear day the small town of Tryier could just be seen, a smudge on the horizon. The nearest habitation, and he was banned from going there. His loneliness was getting stronger and he felt the tears welling in his eyes. He was emotionally strong, but there were times.....

The night's chill drove him inside. The room warmed to greet him and the Wall lit up expectantly. He wished it off and the glow vanished. He threw the thick robe on the floor and sat on his bed. He lay on its soft mattress and put his hands behind his head. The tears had dried and he let his mind wander. Into those places no one else could visit.

He knew his time here was limited. As soon as his cap had been made, he would be sent away. Perhaps off-planet. Somewhere, anywhere. It was all at the whim of Sulchem. If Sulchem willed it, it happened. The old craftsman had been three times already. A hasty and nervous fitting. The man hummed the whole time and tried to sing songs, anything but use his mind in the normal way. Sulchem had stood over him, glaring at the small boy. Reminding him not to use the gift, and yet hurrying the craftsman to finish so they could both leave. Sulchem had visited two days ago and thought there would be two more fittings. Cidie had to make the most of the next visit.

Cidie scratched his head below his natural hairline. It itched. The cap had made a small scratch and it was beginning to irritate him. Still, scratching took up a few more moments of the long night.

The wind howled around the corners of the building, slowly stripping the surface off the stone. Inside it was quiet and warm. Safe, very safe. Cidie slowly drifted into sleep, dreaming of greener lands and the freedom to

move amongst people and talk to them. He missed the company of people. He missed having something to do with his time. He missed his parents.

The town of Tryier suffered the growing storm by closing everything down and wrapping its protective cloak around it. The buildings had shutters and doors that smoothed the surfaces, allowing the abrasive wind to ease its way past. Allowing no sharp corners to create noise and turbulence. The town became part of the landscape. It was the storm season and most people were prepared for it. Sealed in their own dwellings, they waited it out, whether for an hour, day or week. They had no control over it and so made the most of their time indoors. This was the season when babies were created. When the population could expect its boom time later in the year. It was part of the world's cycle. It had happened for many millennia and was comfortingly natural.

The wind-borne sand scraped and polished everything. The hard stone that formed the walls withstood the annual devastation very well. It kept the occupants protected and safe. It was all they had against one of nature's most terrible weapons. All the shutters were on the inside and so were protected from being worn away. If left outside, they could disappear during a single night.

Cidie's parents sat on their cots and waited. There was no Wall here, nothing for them to while away the hours of natural imprisonment. Nothing to alleviate the heartache they both felt over the loss of their son. He was gone, but not forgotten. In the corner was a pile of money that was meaningless. They never spent a penny, hoping one day to be able to buy him back from Sulchem, the town's Overlord. Yumi cried herself to sleep every night and each sob tore at the heart of her husband, Lopii.

Lopii was angry and frustrated. He was deeply heartbroken as well, but that was a pain he had to live with. He hated the antics of Sulchem with a passion. Not a moment went by when he wasn't planning some terrible revenge on his Overlord. At each sob, he imagined another knife thrust into the evil heart. Another sob, another thrust. So each night went on. It was at times like these, when there were no other distractions that thinking about their lost son was the hardest.

Lopii sat by his wife to comfort her. They sat in silence for long while. Quietly Lopii opened his heart.

"I've always known there was something special about our son. I know all parents think their children are special, better than everyone else's. But we know our son's special. That's why he's been taken from us. I would like us both to be comforted by the thought that, because he's special, he will rise above any problems imposed upon him as a child. One day he will be a man and will use his special gift to better his own life. It may be a long way away, Yumi, but that day will come. I would like us to be alive to see it."

Yumi had stifled her tears and looked watery-eyed at her man. She nodded and a new light shone in her eyes.

"Do you really believe that? He'll be free one day, to do as he wishes?" Lopii nodded. "Will he come back and see us?"

"He'll come back and free us. Just you wait and see."

The old craftsman worked into the night, cocooned inside his home. Until the storm died he would have no visitors, no guests. Just he and his wife would sit out the storm. His task was a complex one. Although not admitting it to Sulchem, perhaps beyond his abilities.

The technology was certainly beyond him, but with everything he needed supplied in a modular form, he was able to experiment and get near the desired result. Sulchem provided anything he thought was necessary, and a few things extra for himself. He was fearful about failure. Sulchem was not known for his forgiveness and tolerance. The poor boy would know if it worked or not. Perhaps he would have some sympathy for Follec. If the cap worked, he could expect some reward, though no sum was ever stipulated. If he failed

He boosted the magnification and attended to the circuits once again. The principle was straightforward, but getting the circuitry to work was entirely another matter. Two different technologies and that was proving to be a problem. Follec had made a cap that was completely shielded and he knew Sulchem wanted to use that in the presence of the boy. But a one-way only cap for the boy – that was far more difficult.

Follec had made the cap itself and had constructed it to fit the boy's head exactly. With room for growth, the young man could use the equipment until manhood. It was now a matter of whether the system worked properly. He knew he was nearly there, but it was always the last hurdle that caused the fall.

His wife brought him a hot drink and he sipped it appreciatively. At least Sulchem had provided a little extra food allocation during this trial period. Follec tasted the bean and smiled. His wife sipped hers and smiled back.

Follec referred back to the plans he had been given and tried to understand why his new wiring was not working. As the night wore on, he slowly corrected each problem and slowly made the caps for his Overlord. During the early hours of the morning, he joined his wife on the narrow bed and fell instantly asleep.

Sulchem drained his wine and poured another large flask. He smiled at the Wall and watched the finale of the Worldcast that most of the population watched. He laughed out loud and it drew the attention of his wife, Guyion. She joined him on their floor-rest and lay with him as the show reached its climax. She took his cup and drank from it. He laughed at her and playfully pulled it away from her. Her eyes were bright and he knew she had been at the xxon again. Time to use this to his advantage.

She watched the Wall as he moved closer to her and offered her more wine. She drank it greedily, knowing he would pull it away again. Sulchem let her have it all and while she was drinking he was loosening her robe. She knew what he was doing, but she also knew that she had to do her duty, every now and again.

With exaggerated slowness she turned on to her back and stretched her arms wide. The robe slipped from her lithe body and she was naked underneath. Sulchem was immediately aroused. He bent his head to her breasts indulging himself in an activity she rarely allowed and continued downwards. Within minutes they were writhing on the ornate padded floor-rest, the Wall forgotten.

Guyion closed her eyes and brought forward her schedule for the following day. She needed new clothing for the annual Capital Gala and this year she wanted to look better than ever. Something with a high collar, emphasising the tall hair design she fancied. She wanted to look more....regal. The problem with the provinces was that the Overlord cast was looked down on by the City cast. This time it would be different.

She was aware her husband was reaching a climax and so she provided a little more effort while she decided what colour would be her main theme this year. Red was good, it was striking and royal. That would be it. She would see the costumier the following day, weather permitting, and get her started on the design. Payment – that was another thing. She helped her husband finish with a burst of energy and ecstasy. He would be pleased to pay after this.

Sulchem lay exhausted as she looked over his shoulder at the dying moments of the popular series on the Wall. She bit her lip, trying not to laugh and settled back as the credits began to blink on and off the Wall. She groped around the floor-rest until she found the pad and turned the Wall off. The wind howled outside and she resigned herself to another few bouts like this. If they were to be imprisoned in their own homes, Sulchem would be needing more of her wifely duties. She sighed and felt him drift into a light sleep. After a short while she eased from under his arm and stood up. She slipped the robe back over her body and pushed her hair back into its proper shape. She headed for the essential room and eased the door quietly shut.

She sat and thought about the coming Gala. From the pocket of the robe she took another xxon and slipped it into her mouth. Trapping it between tooth and gum, she left it dissolve and with it went all her cares and stress. Her eyes glazed and she began to dream.

The familiar misty images returned to her mind as her body slowly relaxed on to the floor. She lay, softly moving, as she let the images wash through her mind. Some cloudy, others sharp, in colour and with smell sensations. The mists cleared and she was standing on a plateau, overlooking the vast expanse of yellow sand. A valley stretched before her and she recognised where it was. It was the forgotten region. The place where no visitors were allowed. A high place, a holy place. A forbidden place.

A woman was standing beside her. She turned to her mother and smiled. Ommi's wild white hair blew in the ever present wind, lashing her face as her bright green eyes bored into the very soul of Guyion. She had been accused of supernatural powers and was banished years before. Ommi had been sent into the desert and never seen again. Guyion had never missed her mother, she had always feared her mother. But now her mother was back. At times like this she made an appearance and always something happened. Always something was shown that was later proven to be true. Guyion was about to see into the future.

The wind blew a mist around them and when it cleared they were standing outside the high and ornate City Lords building. Its massive bulk seemed to leap in the air, throwing huge carved rock structures out from its centre. From the air it looked like a drop of gold had hit the sand, with little splashes radiating from the centre, like a water droplet frozen on impact, the shape of a crown with a tall spire rising majestically up into the sky. From where the two women were standing, the building rose up and appeared to touch the very sun.

Ommi turned and looked towards the multi-arched entrance and watched as a procession of people came out of the main building. In the lead, with the high white headdress, was the City leader. Behind him, the Council members. And behind them, a short gap before the invited guests. This was the prelude to the annual gala. Guyion thrilled at the prospect of attending once again. Her mouth opened in astonishment as she saw the next bank of people. She was there, resplendent in a red dress with a very high collar. Beside her walked Sulchem, dressed in red also. They were the guests of honour!

Guyion looked quickly at her mother who was smiling and nodding gently. This was a premonition that Guyion and Sulchem would be the guest of honour at the gala! She looked back at Ommi.

"How?"

Ommi waved a hand across the image and it changed to a large vaulted room. The rock was carved and painted a bright blue. Around a large table were seated many men. Guyion recognised this as the Council chamber. A meeting was in progress and there was much dissention amongst the councillors. She was puzzled why her mother was showing this. Through the door walked a young boy and he stood and listened to the conversation. After a while he walked away and brought Sulchem into the room. Both listened and finally Sulchem held up his hand and took charge of the meeting. The scene faded. Sulchem was going to influence the Council because of a boy?

The mists cleared and they were back on the plateau. Ommi turned and looked at the small building and the small boy standing looking at them. Guyion felt ill at ease. There was something about the boy's eyes. They were staring at her. Looking through her. Straight into her mind.

The shock brought Guyion back to reality with a jolt. She found herself lying on the floor and drooling. She had no idea what time had passed. She sat down and tried to recall everything she had seen and heard. After she had assimilated all the images, she walked out of the room and back to the main living area of the house.

Sulchem was still asleep and she lay down beside him. As she nuzzled close to him, his eyes opened and he smiled.

"So, tell me all about this boy," she said quietly.

It took two days before the wind began to ease and people risked moving out of their dwellings. The craftsman knew he would be getting a visit from Sulchem very soon and prepared all his samples ready for another test. He sat and awaited his summons.

He was sure they would work now. He couldn't test them on anyone other than the boy, so being sure wasn't necessary proof they worked. He was getting nervous. He knew Sulchem was anxious to get this over and done with. He sat and fidgeted. His wife tried to calm him, but he just wanted to get this test over with. The knock on the door made them both jump.

The journey took several hours. It was an old and slow moving craft that Sulchem was inexperienced to fly. It skimmed the desert and headed towards the smudge on the horizon. The car vibrated and Follec sat in the back with his blindfold. He tried to relax and think of other things. But it was a long journey.

Sulchem was extra careful when it came to his protégée. He took a circuitous route to the plateau to ensure Follec would not be able to find it under any circumstances. Up ahead he could see the rock rising out of the desert. A solitary place that was almost inaccessible, unless you knew it was there. He aimed for the base of the upward thrusting rock face and powered the craft steadily upwards. He cleared the edge of the precipice and eased the craft to a soft landing on the smooth surface. The boy was waiting for them.

Sulchem opened the door and stepped out. He waved the boy inside the house and took hold of the craftsman's hand to guide him into the building. Follec clutched his caps and walked as a blind man, unsure of his steps and his guide. Once inside, the door was closed and the blindfold removed.

Follec blinked and smiled at the boy. The boy stood watching him. Follec looked away and began to unwrap his golden caps. Sulchem watched the boy intently and tried to clear his mind of all thoughts. The very act of trying not to think of something brought it to the forefront of his thoughts. He thought of cool running streams, his wife in bed...no not that...back to the streams. Why was Follec taking so long?

Sulchem stepped forward for a test. He looked at Cidie and said, "Read my mind."

Cidie went into his act, closing his eyes and trying to think. He pronounced the words slowly and with a sense of the dramatic.

"A...river...stream. Fast flowing....cool."

"Yes!" Sulchem seemed delighted. Follec raised the cap and placed it on Cidie's head, like he was crowning a king. The cap was very thin and soft. Gold in colour he covered Cidie's whole head, from the base of his neck to the eyebrows. It looked strange, but felt comfortable. Cidie was nodding and showing interest, but his mind was at work. Follec was standing before him and Cidie probed his mind.

He saw the confusion there and with it fear. Follec was fearful of Sulchem and feared his cap wouldn't work. He feared the boy would expose this and back came the fear circle to Sulchem and what he would do to him. Cidie read him easily and now turned his attention to a new area he had recently discovered. Very carefully he probed Follec and began to make suggestions. Follec appeared to react and realised only that these suggestion had come from himself, no reason to believe they came from an outside source. Follec understood that the boy could read minds. What no one else knew yet, was that Cidie could also plant covert suggestions into people's minds.

He repeated his requests and phrased them as if ideas from Follec's own subconscious. Follec continued the careful fitting and seemed to be unaware of Cidie's influence. Finally Follec stood back and admired his work. He looked to Sulchem for the real test.

Once again Sulchem moved near to Cidie and said, "Now read my mind." He thought of his wife and her special dance she did for him on their special nights. Let's see how the boy handled this.

Cidie looked puzzled, in stress. "I can't pick up....there's nothing there. Please try again," his voice weak and feeble, as only a ten year old can be when overwhelmed. "Is it still the river?"

A flush had coloured Sulchem's dark face and he turned to Follec with a broad grin. Follec was visibly relieved.

"It works!" grinned Sulchem.

"Of course!" braved Follec.

Follec felt so relieved, he sighed almost contentedly. Now he had a few final touches and a few special arrangements he'd just thought of and he would be finished. This should be his last visit to this poor child. What had Sulchem in mind for him? It didn't bear thinking about, it wasn't his affair. He knew he was taking a risk, but it seemed so worthwhile. First he had to make a duplicate cap for the boy. Not a problem, he had several ready as substitutes if one didn't work, or became damaged. He would simply make the alterations to that. A simple task, just switch off the facility to block the thoughts.

The second task he'd set himself was to remove the screening circuits from Sulchem's cap. Both of these modifications would benefit the boy, but somehow he felt assured that it wouldn't be a problem to him. He smiled. He needed to get those modifications underway as soon as possible. On his return. He packed away his equipment and waited for his driver to take him home.

Sulchem studied his golden egg. A slim boy, fair haired and strange looking. Large, almost black eyes and small mouth. Of pallid complexion and poor skin quality. He stood looking vacant and unsuspecting. All will had gone. There was no life in this lad. As malleable as Sulchem could possibly wish. He looked into the eyes and could see no spark in them. The mind was elsewhere and that might be a problem later. He walked around the lad slowly, studying every inch of him. The long and grubby shift covered him from neck to ankles and made him look like a bag of bones. He needed feeding up.

"Cidie. The next time I come, you will be ready. We will leave this place and your new life will start. You and I are going to change the face of this world. We are going to do some remarkable things. I'll look after you and give you everything you desire."

A spark of life seemed to flash into those dark eyes. "My parents?"

Sulchem looked away. "All things are possible. Wait and see. Do me a few favours...and I'll do you some favours."

Cidie was looking through the face that held the false smile. In his own mind he could see other images. He recognised them as Sulchem's. They appeared faint until he focused directly upon them. He was seeing what Sulchem saw in his own mind. A rapid succession of ideas and concepts. Images and words. In front of this mosaic of confused thoughts were the thoughts required for speaking. As he watched, or rather SAW, Cidie noticed the images that were transformed into speech and also the underlying images that were the real thoughts behind the conversation.

Determined to keep his mind reading a secret from Sulchem, Cidie kept a straight face and appeared to be listening to the words. He was watching the conscious brain activity of Sulchem and it told a different story. *Images of Sulchem and his wife living in luxury. Sulchem was imagining his domination of the City Lords and ruling the world. Why was Cidie so important to this dream? And how was it all going to happen?*

Sulchem was ready to leave. "I'll be back in a few days with your completed cap and then I'll take you to your new home. We need to experiment and train you, but it will be an exciting time. For us all."

The real thoughts translated as, *I will put you to work for me as fast as possible and start to earn money and credibility.*

Sulchem touched his cap and smiled. Secure in the knowledge his golden egg could not read his mind, he began to put the blindfold on the craftsman. Cidie waited until the two men left the house and walked outside to watch the old rusty craft struggle into the air and drop over the edge of the precipice. Then he smiled. Then he laughed and he laughed out loud for a very long time.

Cidie waited on the edge, watching the various moods of the desert. The storms were dying out and the air was getting heavy again. It had been two days since his last fitting and Cidie was anxious to know if his new found ability to implant suggestions in a subjects' mind was really working. If it did, he could begin to plan his future. If it didn't, he would have to make plans around purely mind reading, a gift as unusual as anything on

the planet. As valuable as.....well he didn't know how to value it. His experience of life was too limited for him to make any comparisons.

He'd discovered his thoughts were not his own a few years earlier. At first he thought he was losing his mind. He was becoming confused when talking to people. He seemed to hear them twice and thought it was them making errors. He'd always been an intelligent boy and soon reasoned what was happening, but didn't understand how rare and improbable this ability was. His mother was the first to realise. She immediately started to protect her son. She knew too well there were those who'd want to abuse this boy and his special gift.

Lopii was not told of his son's development until months later. By then Cidie was developing his ability rapidly. He practiced on Yumi and she was amazed at how quickly he was learning to separate random thought from specific thoughts. To know when a person was lying was a great gift, but it was extremely complex to separate lies from fantasised thoughts.

Everyone has thousands of thoughts a day, sometimes an hour. At any one time several thoughts, ideas and concepts will occupy the conscious part of the brain. Even the individual sometimes has trouble identifying real thoughts from fantasised daydreams. Each learn how to handle their own thought patterns, what's important to them and what to ignore. For a total stranger to enter a mind and make those selections instantly is a major task. It requires intellect and concentration. It also requires an understanding of human nature, normally well beyond an adolescent male.

Cidie was a quick learner and warmed to his subject. He became deeply interested in people's thought processes and wanted to study the phenomenon that was the biological brain. He wanted more subjects and Yumi was careful who he was exposed to. Mother and Son were becoming co-conspirators. She was providing the food for his thoughts. They both learned how to cover their actions and Cidie mastered the art of deception. He could read minds and the victim would never know he understood what they were really thinking.

Yumi knew they were both going down a road she could regret. She also knew that if she didn't help her son expand his knowledge, he might go it alone. Or worse, get someone else along for the ride. At least she would always have his interest at heart, whereas others might wish to turn a profit in some way or another. Cidie was a young and still innocent boy. He knew little of his own world, outside of their small town of Tryier. She knew from his experiments and desire to master his new found gift that he would not remain in Tryier any longer than necessary.

Apart from the fascination Cidie had developed for reading other's thoughts, he found the gift very practical too. Especially when it came to negotiations. In the market place he could quickly understand how low the trader would go when selling any item. If they started at ten Doetera, he would read they would accept four. He argued his case until they reached their lowest limit and he would accept that price. Both parties were satisfied and he soon gained a reputation as a negotiator.

Another area where his gift benefited him was solving simple problems people had when it came to petty crime. Theft and dishonesty were soon uncovered. The culprit could not hide their guilt from Cidie's mind probe. The local law enforcement officers soon began to take an interest in this boy who seemed to know everything. The boy could tell the victim who had stolen the item and when. The victim then could put together a case and the police could make an arrest. The villain, normally so shocked, admitted everything. As the police took interest, Yumi urged caution, but Cidie was on a mission.

To her horror, Yumi realised Cidie had come to the attention of the local Over Lord, Sulchem. A man of mean disposition and a dictator within the town's boundaries. She, like all other residents, was fearful of any involvement with this man. But he paid a visit to their humble house one day, specifically to meet Cidie. The local police had alerted him to the strange ability of a young boy to sniff out the truth from people who would otherwise lie.

Sulchem sat in the only comfortable chair in the main room and crossed his legs. He refused the simple brew and waited for the boy to be brought to him. Yumi had tried to coach Cidie in what to say and do in front of this powerful man, but Cidie wanted everything his way. He stood before the Over Lord and looked straight into his eyes. Sulchem held the stare and took in the slight figure before him. A ten year old boy who was causing such a fuss amongst the locals.

Cidie remained calm and tried to analyse the mind of the overweight man before him. The thoughts were confused, more so than the others he had practiced on. He probed deeper and tried to separate reality from fantasy. The two halves of the mind. Master this separation and you can master the world, he told himself. It was not easy. Slowly the patterns seemed to become clearer, as Cidie answered the few simple questions. Sulchem would ask a question and that thought would be to the forefront of the images Cidie could see in his own mind's eye. But behind them were others. Ideas of what the answers would be. What Sulchem wanted to hear. It was becoming clearer.

Cidie held firm to his excuse that he didn't know what he was doing, he just did it. He just knew that someone was lying and that was it. Nothing more, nothing less. Sulchem remained unconvinced. He leaned forward and tried to get Cidie to commit himself to a technique, a trick. Was this all just a scam to earn money? As the mind of Sulchem became easier to read, Cidie began to realise that here was a man with power and influence. Here too was his route out of the small town. With this man as his patron, he could improve his lot and move on. Here was his main chance and he should take it. First, he needed to know what it was that Sulchem needed from him.

As the questions rolled on, Cidie realised that this man was ambitious. He wanted to get out of this town too. Into the city. Become a City Lord. High ranking and important. What could Cidie offer him to achieve that? With his limited knowledge of adults and greed, he did not know the proper way to go about this, so he told the truth. He told Sulchem that he could read minds. Sulchem stood up in amazement. Yumi looked on in horror. Cidie had just sacrificed himself. She was devastated.

Cidie read the mind before him. It was stimulated. Images flashed faster than he could read. He caught a few. Images of large buildings and ornate ceremonies. He saw a woman dressed in very fancy clothes, smiling at Sulchem and showing approval. There was money in these thoughts. There were sights of opulent buildings and people cheering. Sulchem was seeing his future as a wealthy and influential man. Cidie was seeing his future as being part of that success.

Suddenly there was a change in Sulchem's face as a thought suddenly sprang into his mind. Cidie saw it coming and was prepared.

"Can you read my mind?"

Cidie shook his head and said, "I've tried, your Lordship, but you seem to be too sophisticated for me to understand what's happening there. I have more success with simpler people."

The answer seemed to satisfy Sulchem and he sat down again to think. Cidie followed the progress and saw the end result coming. It wasn't what he wanted, but he knew the journey had to start somewhere. Sulchem turned to the boy's mother.

"I shall be taking your son for further training. I'll be responsible for his welfare and education."

Yumi started to cry. "You cannot. He is my only son."

"You will be reimbursed. Now, pack his things. We leave immediately." Sulchem stood and Yumi froze, devastated and grieving for her sudden loss. Cidie moved to her and hugged her.

He whispered in her ear. "Don't worry, Mother. It's what I want. I'll be back for you."

Moments later her son had gone.

For several weeks Cidie was hidden away from the people of the town. Sulchem knew of a solitary house set high on a plateau. Few knew about this secret and it was a forbidden area. It took a while to organise it, but eventually Sulchem moved the boy to the remote location. He could be assured that the boy would not be discovered, nor disturbed there. He needed time to plan his next moves.

Aware of the boy's abilities, he also needed to protect himself from those talents. He approached the local craftsman and gave him instructions. When the special caps were developed that could stop minds being read, Sulchem felt he was ready to move the boy back into civilisation.

Cidie's next home was a small room in an annex of Sulchem's house. The door was locked every night and Cidie was left alone for most of the day and all night. He was treated like a slave or prisoner. He gritted his teeth and knew it was purely a means to an end.

For the first few days of his 'apprenticeship' he was left alone. He could feel the presence of Sulchem's mind through the walls and knew he didn't know what to do with this new found valuable prize. It was three days before Sulchem decide to experiment with Cidie's gift, a gift Sulchem needed to exploit for himself.

Sulchem's office was in the centre of the small and dusty town. The anti-room was occupied by a secretary who looked like she should've retired some years previously. But she had one major asset Sulchem favoured. She was cheap. Several times a week Sulchem held an audience in his office. Sometimes it was people requesting help or assistance from him. At other times it was Sulchem demanding payment, or an explanation for a wrong doing from his loyal subjects. On the first day of his 'training', Cidie was seated in the corner and the first citizen asked to sit facing Sulchem, but with his back to Cidie.

Sulchem started the official interview and his secretary, Naiini, took handwritten notes for the records. Sulchem had prepared a series of hand signals for Cidie to inform him of the interviewee's thoughts. As the interview started, Sulchem watched the face of the man before him, but kept an eye on the hand movements of Cidie seated away to his left.

"You have not paid your taxes for three months, Ullio. Why is that?"

"I have no money, Lord. None at all. The crop shares have been poor this year and my wife has had another child. I cannot pay something I do not have."

The hand signals showed the man was lying. Now Sulchem needed to know how much money the man could pay.

"You owe five-hundred Doeteras. I would like you to pay half now and the balance in three weeks. Can you do that?"

"No my Lord. As I said, I have no money at all."

"I believe you could easily pay three-hundred Doeteras right now!"

"No, my Lord. I have no money." It was a lie.

"I think you could pay the full amount, Ullio."

"I cannot, my Lord." The truth.

"Then you WILL pay four-hundred right now, or I suspend your licence to farm on my land. Leave and return with the money tomorrow, or someone else will be living in your house by tomorrow night. Dismissed."

The distraught farmer left the office, but paid the required amount the following day. Sulchem was delighted.

"You can never tell with these peasants. They're always pleading poverty and having no money. But they do. Well done, little Cidie. Well done. Extra food for you tonight, I think."

That night the door was shut and locked and Cidie sat on his bare cot and thought through the day. Ten people had been admonished by Sulchem for not paying taxes, debts, or other financial misdemeanours. In

each case, Cidie was able to guide Sulchem to the amount of money each of his citizens was able to pay. The end result was an income better than Sulchem could expect and peasants who were not too dissatisfied with the way they'd been treated. It was too easy for an Over Lord to demand full payment and evict the serf from the land he rented. All that happened then, is there was an increase in unemployed serfs and no income coming in from them. If all could pay the maximum they could afford, Sulchem had a steady income and a ready supply of labour for the future. Sulchem was happy. Very happy.

A few other of the town's populace were brought in front of Sulchem, in his capacity as peace keeper. He served as Judge and Jury when required, but he saw the first step as peace keeper. All reported crime was sent to the City and each area was judged on its ability to keep the peace and provide a steady revenue to the country's coffers.

As soon as the direct question was asked, "Did you commit this crime?" Cidie knew the answer. If the interviewee was guilty, a few probing questions could make the person remember the incident and Cidie could see it all. The method, motive and opportunity. Sometimes it was necessary for Sulchem and Cidie to move outside of the room to discuss the finer points of the case, and then Sulchem could make a judgement which seemed to be infallible. Most criminals succumbed when presented with intimate details of their wrongdoings. They offered guilty pleas to prevent any further investigation into their private affairs.

One other area where Sulchem had a developing interest was the priesthood. There was only one religion allowed on Morgrel and the priesthood held great sway with the populace, who generally treated religion with fear and respect. This was an area where Sulchem could see a great deal of future profit and status. Once again Cidie was his instrument of awareness. It was relatively easy to find out a person's fears and lack of understanding about the various religious elements. Where there was fear and ignorance, there was a subject waiting to be guided, influenced – controlled.

Within a few months, Sulchem was suddenly a very successful Over Lord. And Cidie had a much better understanding of the adult psyche.

Cidie had been extra careful not to give anything away to Sulchem about his true abilities. Sulchem knew Cidie could read minds at a rudimentary level, but, beyond that, it was still a mystery as to the talent the boy possessed. Cidie found, as he developed his own skills, that his mind was changing too. He felt he could transmit messages as well as receive them. This was an area Sulchem would be interested in exploiting, but Cidie knew that Sulchem had enough to get him to his desired social level. Cidie was going to help him get that far and after that he had his own plans.

Sulchem kept the lad isolated. The only time he came and experienced contact with people was at Sulchem's office and then only for a few hours. So the only person Cidie could continually practice his burgeoning gift on – was Sulchem. And that might prove to be dangerous and potentially disastrous.

Cidie was learning a great deal about people, and also himself. He was cultivating the asset of patience. He never hurried anything and always thought before acting or speaking. So it was with great caution he approached the controlling of Sulchem's mind.

At first it was a gentle probe, testing for resistance. Although a greedy man, Sulchem was not stupid. He was aware of Cidie's abilities and was wary of everything the boy said and did. He always wore the special cap to prevent the boy reading his mind, when they were together. He would never be too careful.

The old craftsman had made the changes to Sulchem's cap as Cidie had instructed. Cidie was particularly pleased with this control he had over the old man. It was a start, and would lead to much bigger things. Of equal importance, at this time, was Sulchem believing his mind was not being read. Cidie took extra care to visit the man's head infrequently and was careful not to get caught out with knowledge only Sulchem should have. A slip of the tongue could be fatal for Cidie.

Cidie's cap was designed to stop him receiving the many broadcasts from everyone's mind he came in contact with. He knew from experience that this overwhelming bombardment was mentally and emotionally wearing.

He knew it could start him on the road to madness. He wore it at all times except when alone. Even then he could pick up thoughts through walls and realised he could stretch the distance of reception when he tried hard enough. So sometimes he wore the cap when he wanted a rest, or to sleep well.

His room was small and very basic. Twice a day he would be brought food, by either Sulchem or his wife. She never stayed longer than to give him the food. She never spoke to him and was humming a tune all the while in his presence. He always showed gratitude to her and slowly he was wearing her down. Her mothering instincts rebelled at imprisoning a young man. She spoke at length to Sulchem, who began to get angry with her. It was his business and if she wanted the grander lifestyle of the City, this was how they were going to get there. She didn't understand, so Sulchem found himself revealing more and more about the boy's abilities and what was going to happen in the future.

Guyion slowly understood the implications of this wondrous boy, yet felt he should not be treated like a prisoner. Sulchem warned her about getting near the lad.

"He can be extremely useful to us, my dear. But also extremely dangerous. He knows what's going on in here," he tapped his forehead. "Do you want him to know what YOU'RE thinking?" A fearful look crossed her face and Sulchem made a mental note to remember it. What was she thinking? What was she hiding?

Guyion was hiding little. What she was thinking was at last her husband was going to break through the political curtain holding him to this sand drenched town. He was going to get her into the bustling socialite city. That's where she thought she belonged. What was surprising to her was Sulchem's fortune at finding the boy. Now she understood the need to keep him a secret and ensure every step they took brought them nearer the city gates.

Now she knew the kernel of his secret, Guyion pressed for more details. At every opportunity she asked for an update on progress. What were his next plans? When was the next meeting of the City Lords? Questions, questions, questions. At times he felt relaxed enough to let her in on his next development, at others he was weary and wanted to forget about his covert activities for a while. At times like these she had to resort to more basic methods of extracting information from her man.

Sulchem's strategy was a slow and steady one, while Guyion wanted to accelerate the process. Now armed with more details of Sulchem's long term goal, Guyion decided she should take a hand in the next phase. The argument for her having a screening cap of her own was a just one. As Sulchem had said many times, he didn't want the boy reading any mind unless he wanted him too. Now Guyion was around Cidie more often, she needed to be protected too. For Sulchem, there was one problem.

Cidie listened to these discussions in his mind and at times saw the funny side of the situation. He knew exactly what she was thinking and understood her impatience and frustration at not having a more major input in her social climb to the city. Cidie had never been to the city and so knew nothing of its attractions. The more desire the adults had to go there, the more desire he had to see for himself.

If Sulchem thought his wife a little more insistent than usual, he was unaware of the real reason. So was she, for Cidie was pressuring Guyion all the time to accelerate the programme. Get Sulchem moving on the bigger picture. Every night as Guyion lay in bed, Cidie reached into her mind and planted images, ideas and suggestion. The following morning Guyion would start to worry at Sulchem to take these new steps forward. She told him he was wasting the huge opportunity on peasants and minions. None of them would bring any real benefits, they should now be using Cidie on the bigger boys. The councillors, the leaders of the City. Think big, act big. With a little help from Cidie's night time probing, Sulchem saw the sense, but lacked the real courage to take large steps. Guyion decided she should take over his campaigning for him. First step, a cap for her!

Sulchem was very embarrassed when he admitted to his wife what he had done to the craftsman. She ranted at him and made him realise just how valuable this man was to their long term plans. What if any of the caps were lost or damaged?

Sulchem shrugged. "He knows too much. One errant word and the secret's out. Cidie will be taken from us by the City Lords. Then where would we be?"

"We must be grateful you didn't decide to kill him. Take me there. Now. And the boy."

There was no point in keeping the destination a secret from his wife and the boy, so Sulchem aimed the low flying craft straight at the horizon. Soon the plateau rose in the distance, shrouded in mist and looking both sinister and romantic.

"What is this place?" asked Guyion, prompted by Cidie.

"It's been a forbidden territory for a long time, the reason lost in antiquity. Some say because of spells cast by evil Warlords in the past, others that it was a dangerous part of the desert. Weak sands, strong winds. No one is allowed here any more and few know it exists."

"How did you find it?"

"By accident. A piece of folk law I stumbled upon. Here it is."

The craft hauled itself up the high cliff face and swooped over the top. The house looked even smaller from the air and two people were sitting on chairs outside the small door. They were waiting.

Cidie touched minds straight away with Follec. "*Be patient. You will return home. Just follow my orders and you will be home very soon.*"

Cidie felt a positive response, but behind it a great deal of despair and anger. Cidie knew those feelings well. He'd spent a few weeks on this barren place and hated every moment. The craftsman and his wife had been there months and would remain there until their deaths, if Sulchem had his way.

"*Only I can get you away from here. Do as they request, but ensure her cap does NOT block me. Understood?*"

The old man almost nodded, but quickly turned his attention to the tall woman, who stood glaring at him.

"I want a cap like my husband's. Quickly. What do you need?"

After a moment of confused hesitation he said, "I will need my workshop."

"How long for?" questioned Sulchem.

"A week. Or two."

"You have three days. Get in the car and leave your wife here." Guyion looked at the wizened old woman and tried to smile. "We'll return him safely, don't worry." She turned and got back in the car.

The whole time Cidie had sat in the back seat concentrating on the old man and woman. He imparted gentle and calming thoughts and was making promises he hoped he could fulfil.

Follec was allowed a few moments to say goodbye to his wife and then the car was heading back across the desert to his workshop. There he was to remain under guard from one of Sulchem's 'volunteers' to ensure he spoke to no one and worked day and night on this latest project.

As Sulchem left the small workshop he turned to Cidie and said, "Well?"

"He'll do it. He's frightened and is fearful for his wife left alone. I think he can be trusted with the secret. He doesn't need to be left on the plateau ."

"Yes he does," was all Sulchem had to say, as he walked home.

Cidie increased his invasive demands to see his parents. He pushed harder on Guyion, playing on her mothering instincts. It was beginning to pay off. He had requested to see his parents many times, now Sulchem and Guyion were talking about it too. It was Sulchem that remained resistant. Cidie had to devise a plan.

As the days rolled by and Guyion's cap was being made, the daily process of meeting the town's residents and extracting money and confessions from them continued. Cidie was making mistakes. Sulchem knew it and became angry. Was Cidie already outgrowing this gift? Was it going to be for a limited time only? Sulchem began to panic. Had he missed the best opportunity of his life to improve his lot?

"What's wrong with you, boy?"

"I'm not sure, my Lord. I feel...a little depressed. I'm missing my home life. My parents."

"Don't start that again. You must forget them. You're in my service now. Shortly we'll be leaving this town and you'll never return. Is that understood?"

A resentful silence followed. After a few more days of poor performance, Sulchem reluctantly agreed to Cidie seeing his parents for one hour. But it would be supervised and he was to say nothing of what he was doing, or any of Sulchem's plans for the future. On those terms he could see his parents for the last time.

Another guard had been found from the growing list of people owing Sulchem a favour and Cidie sat in the single chair of a room in Sulchem's house waiting for his parents to arrive. He felt them coming long before they got there. He felt concern and fear in their minds. Anxiety and anger. He waited until they entered the room and rushed to hug them both.

"Don't worry. I'm safe and well. Our time will come. It may take a year, or even two. But believe me, life is going to get so much better soon."

"How are you?"

"Fine. And well."

"Are they looking after you?"

"Very well, yes. *I'm doing fine. Honest.* How are you? You've lost weight."

"I have missed you so much!"

"Me too."

"Don't worry about me, mother. I'll be leaving soon..." a look of fear clouded her eyes. "But I'll keep in touch when I can. *I'll be back within a year and it'll all be over. Don't worry.*"

They talked about their stagnating lives and how they were ever hopeful of Cidie's return.

"So, you're pregnant again?"

Yumi smiled and looked across to the guard. She looked into her son's eyes as she thought. "Yes. *It's a surprise. Are you happy for us?*"

"Delighted. I want a brother."

"You'll get what you're given. I hope it's a daughter."

"Spend the money Sulchem gave you."

"We were hoping to try and buy you back."

"There will never be enough money for that. He's after grander things than money can buy. Spend it. Move house, build a better life for my new brother, or sister. Spend it. You'll not need money soon. I promise."

The hour went quickly past and the guard strictly enforced the rules. There was time for one last goodbye and exchanged thoughts. His parents were ushered out of the room. Both felt a pressure taken from them. They still had concern for their son, but both had noticed how he had grown up since they last saw him. He was almost a man now. But then, he was doing things no normal child had an opportunity to do. They felt secure that he knew what he was doing and would live up to his promises - if at all possible.

They were delighted they had been given the opportunity to see him again. Neither parent fooled themselves into thinking the future was going to be easy, or straightforward. First of all they had to survive. Cidie had to survive. He was in a very dangerous position. One false step, a slip, and he would become as much an enemy as an asset. Enemies died in this world.

It took several more weeks, but finally Sulchem received an invitation to attend the Grand Council of City Lords. They were going to Ploom.

Guyion became very excitable and Sulchem tried to keep his nerves in check. Arrangements had to be made and accommodation organised. They would travel as a family and, for the purpose of their time in the city, they decided to adopt Cidie as their son.

Now Cidie probed both his new parents in an effort to get better treatment for himself. He began a campaign to convince them that he wanted them as parents and he wanted to live in the city. For this he was more than willing to read the minds of their friends and foes alike. He really wanted to do this. Especially if it gave him a better lifestyle. He would not be so effective if he was treated like a prisoner. Slowly he wore them down.

They could both see the common sense in his argument and felt it in their minds. Neither suspected their caps were not actually having any defence against him and they resumed their lives as if they were in full charge of their destinies. To give Cidie a little more freedom was not too great a risk for the added benefit of a willing tool. There was always the threat of a terrible fate to Cidie's parents unless there was continued good behaviour.

Now they were excited about the visit to the city, they were not aware of the small things going on around them. Cidie was ignored as Sulchem was no longer interested in his daily duties at the office. He had achieved his short term goal. He had brought himself to the attention of the City Council and they were now going to look at him as a possible addition to their membership.

Cidie was becoming increasingly bored. Confined to the small room he had nothing to do all day. Although in many ways similar to the small house on the plateau, this room was significantly better for him. A small window opened out to offer a good view of the town. If he stood on the chair he could watch the world go by. It was larger, but did not have a Wall.

His bodily functions were adequately catered for, he had his own bathroom and the facilities were basic, but acceptable. The sonic shower cleaned his body. The paste cleaned teeth and invigorated his gums. Clothing was provided, a few shifts, robes and sandals.

Food was very basic, purely synthetic and supplied on a time schedule he'd no control over. The food arrived and he ate it while it was still hot. The food was supplied through a standard food machine which was installed at Guyion's insistence, as she didn't like being a waitress to feed the boy several times a day. Sulchem finally agreed and knew it made sense. It suited Cidie too. He wanted to be left in peace for the last few weeks leading up to visiting the city. He had a lot to learn and needed to concentrate on his education.

He needed nothing, but wanted many things. He eventually persuaded them to install a Wall for him to pass the time away. Once this was active, he spent every waking hour watching and learning, about his home planet and about those worlds outside of their own atmospheric shroud. Once he found the library channels, he was constantly absorbing more and more details of the areas of his future he needed to know.

The day came when it was time to leave. Cidie's door was unlocked for the last time and he left that large and opulent house as a member of Sulchem's family. As they boarded the carrier for the four-hour journey, Cidie

sent his farewell messages to his parents. They smiled as they felt him in their minds. Yumi felt her swelling and knew Cidie would keep his promise, if he could.

The transport was crowded and the Sulchem family sat together in one row. For all of them it was a first time on the shuttle. The wide body held several hundred passengers, most of whom were business travellers, or people visiting family and friends. It was the evening flight and therefore a little cheaper than normal. Sulchem was not a person to spend money unnecessarily. He had tried to get Cidie on board as baggage, but the operator refused.

The lights in the cabin dimmed and there was a slight vibration as the ship poured power into its propulsion unit. It was very basic technology, but Morgrel was not a technology rich planet. This shuttle had to make several journeys a day and its seven sister ships covered the whole surface of the world, being the main air transport system.

Sulchem and Guyion appeared nervous, but smiled at each other. Her hand crept into his. Nether worried about the emotional state of the boy next to them. Cidie was even more nervous. He knew the mental state of the pilot and was sure they were all going to die in a crash. He gripped his arm rests and closed his eyes. The mind was becoming more distant. The pilot was not aware of the state of his craft.

The vibration increased and suddenly they were off the ground. The slight increase in pressure, pushing them into their seats, signalled the rapid rise of the craft into the upper atmosphere. The air screamed across the hull until it was high enough to thin out completely. The course was set and the machine flew on. The pilot was now asleep.

The craft remained steady and cruised smoothly in the rarefied air. Slowly Cidie relaxed and he assumed that perhaps the pilot was not really in control of the craft and that it was mostly automatically controlled. It was no real consolation as the pilot was still in charge of the people and their lives. He should not be asleep.

“Wake up!”

In the cockpit the pilot awoke with a start, his mind racing, looking for tell-tales and alarms. There was nothing. The flight was progressing as planned. What had woken him up? A dream perhaps? He remained alert for the rest of the journey.

They were fed standard synthetic food, dispensed from the seat back in front of them. To Cidie the food tasted very good. It was certainly a step up from the meals Sulchem had been giving him. He ate with an intensity, all the while aware that Sulchem and Guyion were not enjoying their journey too well. He was also aware of the many minds around him, all thinking a myriad of thoughts and he was soon overwhelmed with the input. He discreetly rubbed his hairline and activated the hidden switch on his cap. The cacophony was blanked out and he was left with his own thoughts.

He finished every scrap of food and drink offered to him and settled back in the reclining seat. Within moments he was asleep. It was the first time he had slept deeply in a very long time. He had to be awakened as they started their descent. He was instantly awake and looking out of the window.

The clouds parted and below him was the city. All he had known was the town of Tryier, so the sight of the city took his breath away. Tall metal buildings rose from the ground, with wide flat areas for flying machines sprouting out from them like the fungi in the indoor farms back home. The sun sparkled off the glass and metal of the spires and made the whole city look like a jewel set in the desert.

The air seemed full of cars of all shapes and sizes. How they didn't hit each other was a complete mystery to the country boy. With a pilot like his, an accident was impossible to avoid. The craft spiralled towards a large building with a particularly wide landing platform jutting out from the side of its flat wall. The touch down was gentle and the passengers seemed to breathe a collective sigh of relief. The relief showed on Sulchem and Guyion's faces. They even managed a smile.

They had arrived. This was to be their new home. With new opportunities and a better way of life for them all.

As he walked through the main doorway in the shuttle, his eyes were everywhere. With his mind cap set to block, he absorbed every image and sight he could see. Everywhere were people and machines, flying or rolling along the ground. It was marvellous to see so much in such a short time.

There was a short walk towards the side of the building which they entered through a large door that automatically opened for them. Cidie was looking all around him and Sulchem had to take him by the arm, pushing him into the building. They found themselves inside a small room with many other passengers when suddenly the room dropped like a stone. Cidie screamed out loud and even Guyion looked frightened. The lift slowed and the doors opened to the ground floor.

Shaken, but still in awe, Cidie was led outside and into a waiting car. The car was large and looked new, unlike the few he saw back in Tryier. They were old and slow and made a noise. This was almost alive. He felt the surge as it pulled away silently, rising into the air like a feather. The windows darkened and Cidie sat with his face pressed against the transparent panel and tried to see everything. The car swerved between buildings and rose and fell at will, avoiding the other cars that also seemed to have a purpose and destination.

They landed on the top of a tall building and Sulchem ushered his family into another lift, which descended to a level half way down the building. When the doors opened, they were received by a uniformed man, who welcomed them and showed them the way to their new home for the two weeks of their stay. He called their new home the Tower Hotel.

Their home had one big room and one small room, plus a bathroom that was as big as the whole of the small house on the plateau. Cidie sat on his new bed and just stared out of his window looking out over the city. He spent the rest of his first day in total awe of his surroundings, his face pressed to the window.

There was only so much wonderment a young boy could handle at any one time. He saw everything and remembered it all. Later in life he would recall this as the most wondrous place he had seen in his short life. But he was a ten year old child and sleep soon overtook him. He'd slept well on the overnight flight and despite him not wanting to miss anything, his eyes closed and he slumped in the chair.

There was no lock on the outside of Cidie's room, so Sulchem left Guyion to watch over him while he made his way to the Council Chambers to report his arrival. Guyion was not pleased to be confined to her room when there was the city and its shops to explore. She agreed, if Sulchem agreed to watch the boy while she went out later. He readily accepted the compromise and reserved judgement on whether he would keep his promise, or not.

The boy was asleep, so Guyion decided it was a good idea to have a good rest too. When Sulchem returned, she would do her own exploring. She wanted to have energy for that. She lay on the large bed and felt its softness, the comfort soon made her relax. Within moments she was asleep and dreaming again.

Sulchem had asked directions where the Council Chambers were and found to his dismay that it was a long distance away. Probably too far to walk. The receptionist saw his puzzlement and realised he was from out of the city and took pity on him.

"I'll arrange transport for you, Sir."

Within minutes, another shiny car was waiting to take him to another destination. It lifted and sped across the city and gently deposited him outside of the low, but impressive, Council building. He stepped out of the car and was called back by the driver. To Sulchem's disgust, he was expected to pay fifty Doetera for the ride. He handed the money over and realised he would need a lot more cash if he was to stay here much longer. He

swore at the driver who lifted off in a blaze of energy and disappeared above the city. Sulchem squared his shoulders and entered the building.

It took an hour to find the relevant office for him to make his report. The office was empty and contained a desk and two chairs. He had nothing to do but wait. He waited. Two hours later someone finally entered the room and was surprised to find someone sitting there.

“Can I help you?”

“Yes. I’ve an appointment with the Council. My name is Sulchem.”

“First, or second name?”

“Sulchem. I have only the one name.”

“All right, citizen. Let’s see if I can find who it is you’re to see.”

“The Council. The Council have summoned me here.”

“Right. Well, the Council is a large body of people. Ten sit on committee, each have assistants, secretaries and various other supporting staff. Who was it summoned you?”

“I have no name. It was a message for me to visit the Council and they wanted to talk to me. Congratulate me, actually.”

“Good. Well, there’s no record here,” the man said, flicking through a pile of papers on the desk. “If you’ll excuse me, I’ll go and ask someone.”

He was gone an hour. Sulchem tried to be patient and realised he was losing this battle. What was he supposed to do? He wished he’d brought Cidie with him. He could cut through this banality and find out who wanted to see him. He waited with increasing agitation. Was it worth sending for Cidie? He thought not, the cost alone would be prohibitive. No, he would handle this alone, but the next visit he needed Cidie with him all the time.

More time passed until the man came back with an apologetic look on his face and he laid a piece of paper in front of Sulchem.

“Apparently, you’re due to meet with the Council the day after tomorrow. Here, in the chambers. If you report to the main reception they’ll show you up. Midday is the scheduled time and they’ll send a car for you. Where are you staying?”

“The Tower Hotel.”

The clerk’s face dropped a little and said, “Unusual choice.”

“It was considerably cheaper than the others.”

“I’m sure. There you go. We’ll see you in a few days then. Enjoy your stay in Ploom...Sulchem.”

Sulchem looked at the paper and the clerk had disappeared by the time he’d looked up. He made his way back to the main entrance and was not looking forward to the walk back. It would take him hours.

Two days later Sulchem sat in a chair at one side of a large elliptical table. He was facing a swathe of Council members, who were stern-faced and anxious to get on with other business. Sulchem had spent the few days observing how people behaved and dressed in the city. He had reluctantly purchased an outfit for the occasion, taking advice from the tailor. The final cost brought an apoplectic fit from Sulchem, until Guyion reminded him of the end result he could expect. If they got this next bit right, these outfits would seem cheap to them. Sulchem finally agreed and paid cash for something he thought to wear only the once.

To one side of him sat Cidie. Dressed also in a smart one-piece outfit of a suitable dull colour. This was a haggled down price from the tailor, who was left in no doubt that the expensive suit would not be sold without a heavy concession on the child's clothes. Cidie sat upright and seemed attentive. Many new hand signals had been worked out between them and Sulchem was getting nervous now his interview was about to begin. He had no idea what they expected from him. He held his breath.

Cidie studied each of the ten men individually and noted their names on the little boxes in front of them. He was blessed with a good memory and now he needed to put it to the test. With the name on each box, he imagined the face of the man sitting behind it. As he formed impressions of each of the councillors, he added that imaginary image on top of their heads. The bizarre fantasy image usually worked. He could recall any detail he wanted to remember, sometimes months after the event. This was the most important moment of his life so far and he was not going to mess it up. His future depended on it.

Cidie relaxed and opened his mind. He took the time to touch the minds of each of the men. At each visit he assessed their mental ability and examined how their patterns formed and how many layers their minds held at any one second. After his first sweep he made another. This time he was quicker in picking up individual thoughts and images. A third sweep set everyone in his own mind and he could flick between them and get a fairly accurate reading.

The Chief City Lord announced himself as Immi Velee and welcomed Sulchem and his son to the proceedings. Sulchem nodded graciously and Cidie followed his new father's lead.

Cidie studied the mannerisms of these important people. Their clothes were very strange. They wore thin layers of clothes. None of them would last more than an hour in the desert. The colours were dark and sombre. Almost depressing. The Chief held Cidie's attention. The man had a great bearing and a wonderful calm presence. Cidie liked him immediately. He wanted to appear like him. In control, pleasant of manner and calm in all things, praising words and soft spoken.

The Chief soon handed over to another of the Lords who read out the record of Sulchem for the past six months. It was significantly impressive against his earlier records and stood up very well from many of the other small towns on the planet. Sulchem was to be congratulated.

The Council stood as one and applauded him. In surprise and genuine gratitude, Sulchem stood and bowed. Cidie followed suit.

Immi Velee said, "We were trying to think of a way of thanking you for the extra efforts you have shown over the last year, Sulchem, and we would like to offer you a rather unique position. For some time we have been looking for someone to act as a go-between from the city to the thousand townships we are responsible for. We would like you to consider that position, if you would. *A seat on the Council would be more appropriate.*"

The thought came unbidden into his mind. Why would that be more appropriate? He would need to think about that. The others around the table were having similar thoughts and would need time to decide why they thought that way.

Sulchem was invited to stay for the special lunch they had arranged and suggested they all meet in one hour in the dining room. Sulchem stood and nodded for Cidie to follow him. They left the meeting as the councillors continued with their other daily matters of state.

Sulchem walked into the outer office and sat on a chair. Cidie sat next to him and smiled. "That went well."

Sulchem nodded and said, "And I'm going to be promoted. Go-between. Sounds grand, doesn't it."

Cidie shook his head, "You'll be offered a position on the Council."

"How do you know?"

"I know."

"What happened in there, what did you see?"

Cidie went slowly through the list of councillors and what he could find out about each one. Sulchem found a piece of paper and began to write down all the details, with a pen borrowed from the clerk in the corner. By the time the list was complete, Sulchem's mouth was open in horror.

Three of the ten councillors were having affairs with women other than their wives. Their minds dwelled on that more than anything else, Cidie had said. Two of the councillors were secretly planning to move off planet and were trying to stay on the Council long enough for something called a pension. One was obsessed about his children. He had many of them, all boys. He was constantly thinking of pictures of them. Sulchem looked hard at Cidie to see if this was some sort of joke, but Cidie was serious.

Two of them were embezzling money from the Council funds and paying them into a fraudulent account. Cidie couldn't remember all the numbers of the accounts, but recorded the name of the depository and the names of the account holders. There was a list of minor Council infringements, like claiming expenses when they weren't spent and spending Council time on private business.

There was a great deal for Sulchem to go on and he started to lay out a strategy to Cidie. Together they were going to approach each of the councillors and confront them with this knowledge. Cidie would get a reaction confirming their suspicions were true. Cidie would relay, as best as he could, details to Sulchem who would then use the new information to press home his discovery of their guilt. Then he would make his pitch. A vote on to the Council for his silence. It was obvious someone would have to resign. Cidie was surprised when Sulchem decided it was to be the councillor who seemed to love his large family of sons.

Cidie was fascinated by the workings of Sulchem's mind. Now busy planning and plotting to get on to the Council, his mind was unsuspecting to probing. Cidie rested his mind and allowed all the thoughts to come and go. Sulchem was a very crafty man. He had been given information that few knew about and he straight away understood how to turn it to his advantage. There was no mercy in his mind. The councillors were his remote enemy until he was on the Council. Then they would be his near enemy, on whom he could keep a close watch.

The meeting finished and the councillors moved from the large meeting room to the slightly smaller, but more sumptuous, dining room. Cidie looked around him in awe at the carvings and paintings that adorned the walls. The central table was laid out with more food than he had ever seen in his life. He was nervous of eating until he saw everyone else pick up morsels of food and put them in their mouths.

Sulchem and Cidie stood close together and waited for their first victim. Within a few minutes a councillor came up to Sulchem and greeted him. He announced his own name and smiled at Cidie.

"Interesting you brought your son. How old is he?"

"Twelve."

"*Twelve? I'm only ten!*" said Cidie to himself.

Sulchem took a quick look at his scribble and found the councillor by name and quickly re-read the notes.

"Sonni Jonte. Pleased to meet you. How's the wife?"

Jonte looked around quickly and tried to smile. "Have we met before? How would you know my wife?"

"I don't, but I do know about Galene. Lovely girl. But I don't have to tell you that do I."

"*He knows my secret. What does he want?*"

"I'm afraid I don't....what do you want, Sulchem?"

"I want to thank all you councillors here today and would like you to consider me for a position on the Council."

Jonte tried to smile as he said, "I'm afraid that won't be possible. We have the full complement of members as it is."

"We should get rid of Eronn Roppe. You know his secret don't you."

"There are always ways around these things. Perhaps if you were to put in a good word for me, please?"

Jonte made his excuses and left the room. Sulchem smiled at Cidie and said, "This is good. Well done, my son. Well done. Now, who's next?"

Sulchem worked the room and one by one the councillors knew they were up against a strong adversary. They had invited a tiger into their home and now they had to deal with him. An extraordinary meeting was called for and as the lunch finished and people drifted back to work, Sulchem sat in the outer office, waiting for something to happen.

Cidie had watched the councillors quietly chatting to each other and noted where they all went to after the meal. He saw one room was popular with them and when the door finally closed he moved towards it and opened his mind. He felt a wave of turmoil wash over him. There was anger and fear in there. He recognised some of the minds and the conversation flowed with Sulchem's name and image coming to the fore. There was disagreement, but suddenly there seemed to be some facts reviled that upset some of the men in the room. There were voices raised in anger and some accusatory words shouted. The door flew open and one man marched out, slamming the door behind him. He turned and glared at Cidie, momentarily frightened.

He recognised the man as Eronn Roppe. He turned his attention back to the room and felt the situation had eased. He began to probe, suggesting gently that Sulchem was the right man to replace Roppe. The meeting continued, with less outbursts, but an overwhelming feeling of puzzlement and surprise. By the end of their discussion they held some sort of vote, and Cidie tried to influence every mind as they spoke.

The meeting was breaking up and Cidie moved away from the door and sat beside his father. Sulchem looked up expectantly as the door opened and men walked towards him. Immi Velee didn't smile as he stood in front of Sulchem.

"It appears you've expressed an interest in joining the Council in committee. Well, I'm pleased to say that we have enough members here that wanted to vote you on and a vacancy has just been made. So, welcome to the Council, Sulchem."

Guyion was delighted to hear the news. She hugged her husband and hurt his ribs. She was almost jumping up and down with excitement. She turned and kissed Cidie on the cheek. He wiped it off and turned away, entering his room. Guyion's joy was not going to be spoilt.

"We must celebrate."

Sulchem waved at her, "Let's not be too hasty here. Have you seen the prices they charge for everything!"

"So what! You're a councillor now. How much money does that bring in?"

To his amazement he wasn't sure. He hadn't asked. In fact, now he started to think about it, it wasn't his idea to become a councillor. It had all happened so quickly, Sulchem hadn't had time to react to his new found fortune.

"We need to look for a house and one of those bright new cars. I need a whole new wardrobe and so do you. I'm so proud of you, darling." She kissed him hard on the lips. He responded and they fell on to a huge chair and began to kiss more urgently. Guyion was quick to pull off the light covering Sulchem wore and soon removed her own clothing. They staggered towards their bedroom and slammed the door shut.

In his own room, Cidie turned his cap on and shut out the vivid images created by his new parents. There was something weird about those two. On the other hand, there was something he was becoming interested in. He turned the cap back on and lay on the bed.

The next few days Sulchem and Guyion were busy. They were trying to fit into a new society and they hadn't a clue where to start. Sulchem was due to report for his first committee meeting in two days and they had just finished buying his wardrobe. Their money was rapidly running out and Sulchem was getting worried. What if they changed their minds? Guyion pacified him and convinced him it was written in the stars. She had seen them walking from the Council chambers in full regalia. She'd had a dream and it was already coming true.

They spent some of their time touring the city, mostly on foot as Sulchem refused the prices they asked for the chauffeured cars. There were some shuttle vehicles that seemed very cheap and they seemed to travel regularly along defined routes. They used those when they could. The city was certainly an exciting and bustling place. It suited the socially active Guyion more than the quieter Sulchem. But both of them enjoyed their visits to the popular culture arenas of Ploom.

The night before his big day, Sulchem relaxed in front of the Wall and was still impressed by the number of different channels that were available. Guyion brought a glass of wine over and sat beside him. He searched for something they could both watch and settled down for a quiet time together.

In his room Cidie watched the Wall too, but he was searching for information. He found a source detailing the work of the city councillors and studied what they did and how they were supposed to do it. He felt Sulchem could be in for a shock in the next few weeks. But as long as Cidie was there.....

Sulchem reported for duty and introduced Cidie as his personal assistant. There was a moment of tension until Cidie eased into the mind of the clerk and made him realise it was okay to have a junior as a full time assistant. Sulchem was shown to his own office.

The office was almost as large as Sulchem's home in Tryier. It had a window that looked out on to the main street and all the bustling traffic throughout the day. There was a secretary who introduced herself and gave him a pile of paperwork to make a start on. Cidie hid his smile and turned to examine the other room. Here was a smaller room which contained a couch of some sort and was clearly intended for the councillor to take a rest, or break, from the trying tasks of the day. Cidie sat on the couch and waited for something to do.

It was a few hours later when the Council was called to order and Sulchem's secretary showed him the way. Cidie followed on behind and took his place directly behind Sulchem. There were puzzled looks on the faces of the councillors and some hostile glares directed at Sulchem.

Velee welcomed the new Council member and then had a point to arise.

"Sulchem, I'm afraid we do not allow juniors in the chamber. This is for elected Council members only. We must insist he remain outside, or preferably at home, or in a school. This is not the place for children."

"*He can stay.*" The thought went out.

Sulchem stood and hesitantly addressed his peers. "I am honoured to be part of this illustrious gathering, but would ask a favour, from all of you." He looked each in the eye and their eyes slowly lowered. They knew he had information they did not want aired and would be careful what they said and did in his presence. "My son is a vital part of me. We've always done everything together and believe it or not, for his age, he is a lot brighter and smarter than I am. Especially when it comes to what we have to do here. He is the best interrogator and negotiator you will ever have the pleasure of meeting. Please grant me the opportunity to prove this to you and allow him to stay until he can prove his worth to us all. Thank you." He sat.

"*The kid stays.*"

They formed into small groups to discuss this development as Cidie kept up the pressure on their minds. After a few moments they had reached a decision. One week.

The meeting was incredibly boring to Cidie, but he wasn't concentrating on the matters being discussed. He was watching and listening to the thoughts behind the words. This time he made notes and would relay them to Sulchem later.

He sensed the nervousness within the assembly. There were several members now intensely hateful of Sulchem being part of their elite group. He had proved he was ready to bribe and coerce them at a moment's notice. When would he start again? They had to be rid of him as soon as possible. There had already been several discussions about how they were going to do it. Physical harm was one suggestion. Not rejected, but kept as a last resort. Cidie needed to keep a watch on these members. He wanted to keep Sulchem in, but wanted an out when he was ready.

The meeting drew on and several outstanding matters consolidated and closed. There were a few new issues bubbling under and one of them required an agreement to be brokered with the organisation that provided building support services. There was currently a dispute over payment by the Lords and the Council was bogged down on how to resolve the issues. After a subtle hand signal from Cidie, Sulchem offered to have a word with the principles and get something sorted out.

"What outcome would you like from this?" Sulchem asked.

Velee answered for the committee. "Ten thousand Doetera final payment and a promise not to hold up future work on current projects."

Cidie read the minds of two of the committee, who seemed would settle for a lot less than that. He recorded it in the book.

Sulchem smiled and said, "Let's see if we can get that down to five-thousand, shall we?"

Cidie rolled his eyes skywards.

The committee insisted on another committee member attending the meeting, to show respect for the aggrieved party and also to help with details of the case if necessary. Conni was given the task. This was one of the leading opponents to Sulchem's committee post. He was one of the members that favoured Sulchem being killed. An extreme opinion, but a passionate one. Sulchem readily agreed. He wanted them to see that Cidie was vital to him.

The night before the meeting, they discussed tactics. This time it would have to be different. Cidie must do some of the talking and appear to be negotiating on behalf of the City Lords. His youth was against him, but he was confident that it wouldn't matter in the end.

The meeting was arranged in the Council offices and several of the construction company representatives arrived laden with papers detailing the project. Their lead spokesman was a thin man with very close together eyes and Cidie took an instant dislike to him. The feeling was mutual and the meeting started with a request that the kid left. It took some persuasion, but they agreed Cidie could stay if he wasn't a disruptive influence on the meeting.

The spokesman started by stating how much money he thought the Council was in arrears and demanded it be settled quickly, or they would refuse to continue with the refurbishment of several buildings already under contract. Cidie asked him to read out the relevant invoices.

As he read from his list, the man's mind gave away the authenticity of the papers. There were several that clearly he was uncomfortable with and nervous when detailing. Cidie took a breath and tried to remain calm as he stood up and leaned across the table.

"We're aware of several discrepancies with your accounting. There are several instances where your expenditure is significantly lower than you claim."

"How dare you. What proof do you have of this!"

“Let me think. If I remember correctly...” Cidie watched the figures flicker into focus in the man’s mind. As he saw them he called them out, a series of invoices and charges that were false. He could even see the dates and quoted them too. The evidence was damning and the man couldn’t think other than the proof was substantial and could be made available if necessary.

Cidie quickly paid attention to Sulchem. He was thinking they were on the ropes and a threat of legal action could put the final touch to the plot.

Cidie took a breath and said, “We could, of course take this matter further, but that would mean a long legal wrangle that neither of us want and one you couldn’t win. We’d prefer you just agreed a payment of, say, five-thousand Doeteras, and we get on with the next project without this happening again. Can you agree to that?”

The construction representatives left looking shaken. Conni was unmistakably impressed. The three remained seated in the room and Sulchem grinned at Conni. “Well?”

“Excellent. I have to say...you were right. Cidie, well done.” He stood and shook Cidie’s hand. It was the first time anyone had shaken his hand. It was the first time anyone had shown Cidie any respect. He was moved to tears, but knew it would not be adult to cry in Council chambers.

Sulchem’s success improved his image in the Council. Although he was widely recognised, it was Cidie who did the real work. Cidie was only a boy and so couldn’t be really worthy of the credit. Sulchem took the praise and reserved his comments about his son until they returned home at night. Cidie spent all his time in his room, while Sulchem and Guyion began to enjoy the city life.

There followed a succession of negotiations and investigations where Sulchem and son were successful. It was soon the policy of the Council to give Sulchem every problematical task the City Lords encountered. After six months, Sulchem was accepted as part of the Council membership, especially as nothing more had been said about their...private matters.

Sulchem’s new home was provided by the City Lords and along with it came a car and a driver. The view from the hundredth floor was staggering to the country folk. The ever moving city provided hours of entertainment. The plush interior was everything Guyion had dreamed of. She felt she had ‘arrived’.

One evening, Sulchem and Guyion were out at a function. They’d been invited by another Council member to attend a ball. It was an opportunity to meet and greet and Sulchem would’ve liked Cidie to be by his side. But for once he was refused and Guyion insisted they attend without the boy. They locked the front door and set an alarm. Cidie was a prisoner again.

He sat in his room staring as darkness descended. The cars weaved their way around the buildings like flies with fire in their tails. The towers bristled with lights, a fairytale scene. Tears filled his eyes and he brushed them away. He wanted to be with his real parents. This night of all nights. He was too depressed to consider watching the Wall. He sat and watched the sun sink and the darkness surround him. He sat alone in his dark room and watched the rest of the world enjoy its freedom.

Back in his birth place, his parents also sat in a darkened room. Their small table had a single candle which flickered in the wind easing through the shutters. Outside a storm was dying away. The two people held hands across the table and tears flowed freely down their cheeks. Cidie had promised a return and Yumi was sure he would. Any day now he would have a sister.

“Happy birthday, Cidie,” said Lopii too far away for Cidie to hear.

His eleventh birthday was the turning point for Cidie. The following morning he had dried his tears and stood tall in front of the window. Today he was going to change things. He felt it was time he made his long awaited move. As he heard the lock release in his bedroom door he was determined it would be the last time he was

ever locked in a room again. Enjoying the new found power of commitment he walked to the door and slid it open.

Sulchem was kissing Guyion goodbye and was impatient to get to work. They both had a big day today and Sulchem needed special input from Cidie. Guyion turned and walked into the bedroom as the two men walked out the front door. Cidie paused and watched her retreating back. She had not spoken to him, or even seen him. He followed Sulchem outside to the car.

Once in the air, Sulchem ran over his plans for the early meeting. The main concept was that he was going to be voted in as Deputy Chief of the City of Lords. Once Immi Velee retired, Sulchem would be leader of the city. Just the thought brought his mind alive. Cidie read it all, the power hungry aspirations of a man losing sight of the real goals available to him.

Wearing his gold cap under a wig, Sulchem allowed his mind to play on the excitement of his elevation to the top. It was further than he could ever dream of progressing. Once there, he would need Cidie less and less. He could remain at home with Guyion, brought out only when needed. But today Cidie had a vital part to play. He needed to know who on the committee was going to support him and who was going to fight him. The ones that fought would be reminded of his knowledge of their private lives. Once again he would use any tactic to get what he wanted. It was going to be a big day.

The meeting came to order and several urgent matters were deal with. Sulchem gave a report of six very successful meetings with problematic scenarios and was acclaimed at pulling off miracles again. While he was in the hot seat and getting applause, he made his move. With an overly subservient tone he asked to be considered for the post of Deputy Chief City Lord.

The current encumbant, Wiyi Sool, looked surprised and was about to interrupt. Sulchem finished his rehearsed speech with the statement, "I think I've earned it."

Cidie read their minds. With subtle finger gestures he told Sulchem who was for and who was against him. There were four he needed to persuade. Sulchem suggested a break for refreshment and they could discuss this informally if they wished.

With Cidie by his side he visited each of the four and reasserted his knowledge of their private lives and would not wish to reveal it to others. The four errant members fell into line immediately. An hour later the vote had been cast all voted for Sulchem except the outgoing Deputy.

On the way back in the car, Cidie was studying the workings of Sulchem's mind. The images were racing and intertwining. The man was so excited, he couldn't hold on to one thought before another more exciting one replaced it. He was going to have a joyous evening with Guyion and tomorrow start on the next stage of his plan – to get rid of the Chief City Lord. There would be no stopping him then.

"I can read your mind, Sulchem!" said Cidie with surprise.

After a gruelling journey by shuttle and two aerocars, they were finally in sight of the plateau. Sulchem's anger was only surpassed by Guyion's tirade at both her husband and adopted son, apparently now only temporarily adopted, soon to be dropped over the balcony and got rid of because of this stupid situation. But Sulchem took most of her wrath and blame.

The hurried departure from their luxury home was a particularly distressing moment for Guyion. Several parties had been planned and they wanted to announce Sulchem's promotion, firmly establishing their new found social status. But here they were, half way around the world trying to find some old craftsman to fix both their caps. Suddenly, and this was what Guyion could not comprehend, suddenly both caps stopped working, allowing the brat to read both their minds.

Sulchem had called in to the Council saying he was unwell and wouldn't be to work for a few days. He gave Guyion no time to re-arrange her social calendar, but they had left that night, without even packing for the