

Wise Phuul

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Chapter One

THE CORPSE AT reception was busy. Busy pretending to be busy, Teltö judged, peering at the desktop folder. *Those weather reports are older than me, and it's reading the bloody things upside down.* Still, it was an improvement: last time the lich had polished paperclips for an hour. *Everyone needs a hobby.* Some people liked gardening. Some people counted trains. Madam Venomavat created lifelike office staff. Imperfect, of course, but the flaws only made them more human.

Teltö wished the Undersecretary were as interested in her living visitors. The reception held all the appeal of a backstreet dentist: no seating, except for the undead functionary, and nothing to look at save for the obese potted cactus in the corner. A mauve carpet completed the dreary ensemble. He kicked his heels. He'd trade his entire month's ration docket for a magazine or newspaper.

Teltö cleared his throat. "Excuse me?"

Pencil in grey hand, the lich scribbled something.

Teltö raised his voice. "Please?"

The lich scribbled something else.

"I'm a living human – class Necromancer, rank underkarl – here to see the Undersecretary?"

The lich slumped forward onto the desk. A bluebottle settled on its head.

Bugger this. Teltö consulted his pocket watch. He'd a double-shift at the Library this afternoon, and this appointment was eating into his lunch break. He needed to grab a cheese roll from the corner bakery too. *I'll come back tomorrow.*

The receptionist jerked up, as if attached to a string.

"Phuul."

Teltö leapt back and thumped into the cactus pot. He cringed, even as he struggled to stop the plant toppling.

The corpse nodded towards the office door.

"The Undersecretary will see you now."

Teltö brushed copper hair from his eyes. He scurried past the corpse and eased the door shut behind him.

A stout, grey-haired, grey-eyed woman in a greyer cardigan looked up from her desk.

"Phuul," she said, "sit."

He hesitated.

"There is a seat. I told you to sit. Now *sit*."

Teltö Phuul obeyed. Alio Venomavat's office looked much as he remembered it. Bookshelves leaned drunkenly against beige wallpaper; dust trickled onto reports in a dozen tiny waterfalls. Marmalade and malevolent, a feline blob blinked irritably from a corner fortress of velvet cushions.

"Now, Phuul." The Undersecretary toyed with a butterfly-in-amber paperweight. Papers, folders, and a plate of buttered toast graced her desktop. "Thus far, your service in the noble art of necromancy has been the stuff of glorious obscurity, no?"

"I'm but a humble underkarl, Madam Venomavat."

The cat padded over to the fireplace, and sniffed the encrusted soot. That grate grew its own coal deposits: it hadn't worked in years. *Last time this place had a decent blaze,* Teltö mused, *Emperors still ruled the Empire. They ought to burn the building to the ground and start again.*

"Puss, puss."

The cat leapt onto Venomavat's lap, purring like an engine. The Undersecretary scratched behind its ears. For one terrible moment, her face threatened to soften.

“You are twenty-two, Phuul. Twenty-two! Despite your elder sister blazing a trail, you have chosen the path of listless mediocrity.”

“I passed the Examination.” *She’s wearing nail polish. Someone’s come into money.*

“Barely.” Venomavat let her pet settle. “You’ve subsisted these past four years as a library clerk. Slaving among the drab and dull, never poking your prodigious nose beyond Qjvunako.”

Teltö opened his mouth to protest. The Phuuls spent midsummer at a seaside cabin, down at Dyrttölä on the south-east coast. Salt spray and grey waves soaked his childhood memories. *Ah. She means I’ve never been to the other cities. True.*

“Qjvunako is the loveliest city in the Empire.”

“Qjvunako is a backwater. The smallest and weakest of the Four Cities. Remain here, and your future is assisting some lowly iron mine supervisor. Surely you hunger for greater things? To do your family proud? To escape the towering shadow of Rhea Phuul?”

The towering shadow of someone who thinks the world runs on examination marks. “Not really...”

“False modesty.” Venomavat grimaced. An industrial accident had twisted her mouth muscles years earlier, or so the story went. Teltö believed she was just plain nasty. “Well, Phuul, the Lesser Council and I are giving you a present. Congratulations.”

She thrust a paper into Teltö’s hands. A travel itinerary. Full of typographical errors and smudges, but a travel itinerary nonetheless. *A river journey along the Nhagivat. Ugh.*

“Yes, Phuul. You’ll accompany our very own Master Hova to Kuolinako. He is filling the empty Grand Council seat, and the Lesser Council have designated *you* his Native Assistant.”

“But...”

“Your girlfriend works in the Last Capital, no? You’ll be delighted to see her again.”

Teltö would rather see things at the bottom of ponds. *Where I found her.* “Tuvena and I are no longer together.”

“A pity; she seemed a good match for you.” Venomavat nodded. “Too good, in fact. Dyrstin gave me updates. Anyway, he works there too, so no doubt he’ll show you the ropes.”

“I am sure Dyrstin would be a big help.” Teltö tapped his foot against a rug that may once have been blue. “But couldn’t...”

“No,” said the Undersecretary, “we couldn’t. You will ensure Hova’s home communications remain timely and provide physical aid in mundane tasks. The Master is no longer young.”

“But...”

“This is an honour, Phuul,” said Venomavat. Her tone suggested nothing of the sort. “Do not disappoint.” She shuffled some papers; her eyes drifted to the buttered toast. “You may go.”

“Perhaps...”

“No.” The Undersecretary reached for a brass hand bell. “Next!”

Teltö trudged from the office, doing the sums of corruption in his head. Even if he gave up black market chocolate and Asrak – and it’d be a cold day in the North before he did that – he’d need months to get enough bribery money together, and he didn’t have months. He looked over his shoulder. Madam Venomavat’s features were a study in *better you than me* and *sod off, I want to eat my toast in peace*.

The receptionist’s face was like a granite slab. “Good news, Phuul?”

“Define good,” said Teltö.

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THE SUN WAS sinking behind the Kullio Ranges as he turned into his street. Hungry shadows reached out from the grey-brick terraces, and crept over to where children played with marbles and spiders. The children shouted at each other, carefree and wild. Smoke from the Ironworks drifted across the sky like ink

through water, while one by one, drab inhabitants shut drab curtains against the coming night.

Dodging Unut shit on the cobblestones, Teltö hurried. His supervisor had kept him behind at the Library to correct his afternoon's bungling, which meant he was late for dinner. Again. *It's so unfair. The Lesser Council are packing me off to Kuolinako. No wonder I can't concentrate on work.* His worst error had been shelving a former Grand Master's memoirs under crime fiction. *My supervisor has no sense of humour.*

Teltö arrived at the house, and hesitated. He pressed his nose to the window. *No one in the kitchen. Excellent.* Then the front door opened and his father emerged in his best tweed waistcoat. *Shit.*

The elder Phuul frowned. The once coal-black hair and beard had grown grey, and the man leant heavily on his cane.

"What are you doing?"

"Just admiring the daffodils." Teltö patted the window box. "Don't mind me."

"You're late, again."

"It was a busy day at work, Dad. There was..."

Teltö's father raised his hand. "I've heard. I've also apologised to Widow Saavi for your absence."

Oh shit. It was today. The old woman on the corner had lost her husband to a mining cave-in thirty years ago, and couldn't afford a lich housekeeper to care for her potted rhododendrons and pre-war porcelain dolls. Teltö's parents had badgered him into cleaning the Saavi house once a week.

"As I said..."

"I shall talk with you later. My supervisor from the Ironworks is retiring, and I am already late to the celebration." He pursed his lips. "I have never asked for much, but Father Life, give me a son who is not utterly useless."

He pushed past Teltö and walked off down the street. Feeling his cheeks burning, Teltö climbed the steps.

A dark, pig-tailed head poked around the doorway and grinned at him.

“Don’t worry,” said Kyrmvcs. “I kept your dinner warm.”

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SMALL AND SPOTLESS, the dining room valued respectability above all. Special-occasion crockery, unused even on special occasions, frowned down from the wall-shelves, as if eating here were a crime. But Teltö Phuul had other things to worry about.

“Well done,” said his younger sister, pulling back the sleeves on her academic robe. “A Native Assistant to a Grand Master-elect. I’m so proud.”

Kyrmvcs Phuul meant that sincerely, Teltö knew. She was that sort of person. So infuriating.

He stabbed at his corned beef and potatoes. With his mother on nightshift at the Food Factory and his father out, they had the run of the house.

“It’s not an honour, you know.”

“Of course it is. You’ll meet all *sorts* of people!”

Teltö shook his head. “All sorts of people just itching to do horrible things to me. The Inquisitor General, for instance.”

Kyrmvcs frowned. “But you haven’t done anything wrong!”

“What I do doesn’t come into it. Here in Qivunako, I’m safe. In Kuolinako? I’m a plaything. And players get bored with playthings.”

“Then do something else.”

Teltö dropped his fork onto his plate. *Think*. “I can’t. I don’t live in some weird world where a mere underkarl’s choices matter.”

“Everything matters.”

Teltö wanted to shout at her. *You poor little idiot. The world is made of vicious bastards determining how everyone else lives or dies. It’s the way it’s always been, and the way it’ll always be. All us plebs can do is stay out the way.* But he couldn’t bring himself to say it. Not to Kyrmvcs, sweet little Kyrmvcs with those earnest blue eyes staring at him from across the table. A vintage too good for the world – including him – to sour.

He shrugged. “Three days, then I’ll say goodbye to this place for years. I never thought it’d end like this.”

“It’s not an end. It’s a beginning. Like when Rhea got that paper published on Mnoman responses to pain.”

Teltö winced. His *other* sister had still not shut up about that damned paper, two years after the event, though now that she’d bugged off to a Mustanako Research Unit, he no longer suffered on a daily basis. *Apart from her bloody letters.* He’d have to open them eventually; the pile under his pillow made sleeping awkward.

Teltö shovelled more potato into his mouth. “She should write a paper on *my* pain. Working for Hova means plenty of data.”

Kyrmves poured herself another mug of tea. “Hova isn’t that bad.”

“He is. It’s why the Lesser Council wants rid of him.”

“Maybe he’s lonely. Never married, has he?”

“No, and any prospective spouse has to be mad.” Teltö absently waved his fork. “There’s a thought: we marry Hova to a Mnoma. Opposites attract: tall, thin, eccentric alien meets short, pudgy, dull Grand Master-elect. Hova gets a partner, and the Mnoma has the unique sensation of tolerating him. A shame so few Mnomo live here.”

His sister snorted. She’d never learned how to laugh normally; an outsider might mistake it for choking, but Teltö knew better.

“Ah,” she said, “I shall miss your funny ways. Rhea’s good for homework, you for company. Fancy a spider war? We won’t have another chance for years!”

A far weaker Necromancer than his sisters, Teltö had learnt long ago not to play at spiders for money. *Except against Dyrstin and arachnophobes.* As Tuvana had said more than once, a Phuul and his bits were easily parted.

“I’m not sure,” he began. “I’ve an awful headache...” *Tuvana said that too. Just not about spider wars.*

“Come on, what sort of odds would you like? I’ll give you two Bluetails against a single Yellowtail. No money, just fun.”

Generous, but not patronising. How like Kyrmvcs. The Blues could take more damage, but the Yellows were faster.

Teltö sighed. “Very well.”

Kyrmvcs grinned. “I’ll get the spiders. You clear the table.” She dashed into the next room, nearly tripping over her robe. Teltö shook his head. *My old school robe. Rhea kept hers.*

He had finished re-shelving the corned beef when Kyrmvcs returned with a pine box. Picking out three fresh spiders, she placed them gently on the table.

Teltö took his Bluetails to the far end. Mostly black, they were distinguishable by sky blue markings. Kyrmvcs’ Yellowtail looked like a wingless wasp with eight legs and extra hair.

“Ready?” she asked.

Teltö nodded, and concentrated on the small dead brains. Revival of spiders was easy even for most non-Necromancers, creating a gambling game ubiquitous throughout the Empire. But reanimation was just one part. The secret lay in controlling the creatures.

The Bluetails stirred beneath the current of mental energy, and Teltö sent them scuttling towards Kyrmvcs’ Yellow.

The Yellowtail waited until half a millifurlong separated it from the Blues, then dashed through the centre, biting one of Teltö’s spiders on the abdomen. Teltö gritted his teeth, and wheeled his Blues around, but Kyrmvcs’ spider was now safely out of range. He looked up at his sister. She smiled serenely back.

“Come on, Teltö. You’ve got two of them. Coordinate!”

Easy for you to say. He sent one Bluetail chasing after the Yellow, and the other along the table edge. The Yellow fainted, raced across and rammed. Teltö’s spider wobbled on the brink, tried to sink its fangs in, but couldn’t get into position. It fell off the table. Teltö cursed. *So much for flank attacks.*

Kyrmvcs snorted. “Where did you learn that manoeuvre?”

Thank Father Life I’m not playing Rhea. I’d never hear the end of it. He concentrated on his remaining Bluetail, and hurtled it

towards the Yellow. Kyrmvcs pulled her spider out the way. The Bluetail whirled and bit. *That's better.* The opposition fled.

“Stand and fight!” muttered Teltö. His Bluetail gave chase. The Yellowtail edged into the centre, until the spiders crouched a millifurlong apart. Teltö tried a diversion: he abruptly shifted his gaze to the door. This often worked against Dyrstin, but failed here. Kyrmvcs sent her spider in for three solid bites.

“Your Blue is slowing,” said his sister. Teltö had to agree. The damage was getting to the Bluetail. He needed to attack, and quickly.

The Bluetail scuttled forward, leaping at the Yellow. It missed. Then Teltö noticed Kyrmvcs had repositioned her spider near the edge. *Here we go.* The Bluetail moved closer, closer... Teltö rammed. Or tried to: at the last moment, the Yellow drifted left. Carried by momentum, the Bluetail hurtled over the edge.

“Good game.” Kyrmvcs held a Bluetail up to the light, checking damage. “Don’t worry. You *are* getting better.”

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TWELVE DAYS LATER, a dark ship drifted down a dead river in a dead land. The Mää Wastes stretched from the banks of the Nhagivat to the clouded horizon, hills and plains heavy with the decay of centuries. Only a few brave tussocks and thistles stood firm against the encroaching dust. But desert though it was, the Mää Wastes’ true terror was its life. As if the land mimicked the necromancy of its rulers, strange insects scuttled beneath grey rocks, while shadows lurked amid the skeletons of ancient trees. And the unseen eyes...

Alone at the ship’s prow, the young Necromancer shivered and wondered how many hours still had to pass before they reached Kuolinako. *Probably a few: the air’s still breathable.* The mists rising from the depths of the Nhagivat coated Teltö’s hair with icy beads; not even Unut furs stopped the chill entering his marrow and stealing the warmth from his soul.

“Oh, for a Qivunako fireside, and a mug of Asrak,” Teltö muttered, wiping his nose on his sleeve. Having forgotten to bring handkerchiefs, and unable to borrow one, he needed alternatives. The greatcoat fur tickled his nose and made him sneeze. *Damn you, Hova.*

He glanced down the ship, to where the dead heaved and the living haunted. Mostly crew; the two-dozen or so passengers were staying below deck. Teltö didn't blame them. He'd have ensconced himself on the Common Room sofas too, under normal circumstances. But the higher-ups were packing him off to the Imperial capital, and while nothing he could do would change that, Teltö had spent several afternoons staying on deck and watching.

On the far riverbank, a sliver of steel caught the setting Sun: a remnant of the Qivunako-Kuolinako railway tracks, unused and forgotten for nigh on half a century. Teltö smiled grimly. Waterway passenger and freight had stood unchallenged even as the years dragged on, and appointments and bribery being what they were, the young man doubted his master would advocate for the restoration of the rail route. Madam Venomavat's nail polish alone testified to that.

Teltö sneezed again, and once more cursed the lack of handkerchiefs. No doubt his superior had stacks among the cargo. The older Necromancer was nothing if not meticulous, though his meticulousness did not apply to anyone Master Hova considered beneath Master Hova. *And that includes his assistant.*

He won't stop at handkerchiefs either. Bloody black-market Asrak prices already burn a hole in my pocket – if he tries to stamp it out like he's promised, how in blazes will I afford it? Why can't he let us drink in peace? It'll take our minds off other shortages for starters. Perhaps Asrak traders engineered Hova's rise as much as the shipping companies. Strongly enforced prohibition jacked up prices, but that wouldn't drive away customers, not in the Viiminian Empire.

“There you are. For an assistant you are most lax.”

Teltö leapt to attention. In Imperial society, sycophants survived. “My sincere apologies, Master Hova.”

Snowy-headed and porridge-complexioned, Hova hobbled over. *Tap tap* clacked the infamous black cane, elegantly carved by Tuonakonian artisans, yet as malignant as its master. Teltö eyed it warily. Hova too wore a greatcoat and green scarf, but, befitting his station, his hat was adorned with the white ribbon of the Grand Masters. The furry chimney reached three millifurlongs into the air, majesty turning faintly ridiculous on a man so short and podgy.

The stick lashed out. *Owww!*

“You call me *Master* Hova?” Hova’s small black eyes glistened like currants trapped in a stale bun. “Are you forgetting the purpose of this little boat ride? I am of the Great Nine now, and you will address me as *Grand Master*. Not even the Chancellor himself would so presume.”

Teltö rubbed his arm. “Sorry, Grand Master Hova.” With the investiture ceremony not yet held, the Grand Chancellor *would* make that presumption, not that this son of an Unut cared. Teltö pictured months of fobbing off snubbed officials and wearing his tongue out on stamps, all the while sharing blame as Hova’s pettiness added unwanted polish to everyday hardship.

The old man shook his head. “Father Life, the other cities already regard Qivunako as backward and unmannered, and with you even Grand Master Meerm will laugh up his sleeves at me.” Hova wagged his stubby forefinger. “On arrival, you shall stay silent, except when I order the contrary. Though I promise duties will leave you no time to think, let alone speak.”

An opportunity. “Duties must be carried out, lest our last world crumble,” Teltö quoted.

“Saari Ooks, Book Seven, Chapter Fourteen, Verse Thirty-Nine, as definitively translated by Grand Master Ooseman in 7878. Good. You have absorbed some knowledge of the Nine Authors. May you act on that without falling into elementary error: large Kuolinako holds no love for little Qivunako.”

“Surely Grand Master Keer is well-respected in Kuolinako?” asked Teltö, meekly.

Hova rolled his doughy face. “Grand Master Keer is the eldest of the Great Nine, and has served the Empire longer than the Grand Chancellor himself. His age commands respect, so much so they forget he is of Qivunako. Enough! I will not discuss high politics with a mere underkarl. The Lesser Council must have been joking when they foisted you on me.”

The older man stomped away, the tapping of his cane fading in line with his assistant’s blood pressure. Teltö sneezed. *Trust me, Hova, you’re not the only one who thinks the Lesser Council was having a good joke.*

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FROM ABOVE CAME shouting and creaking timber. Teltö’s eyes flickered open; the low cabin ceiling stared back. *I’m still on that bloody ship.* Scratching fresh fleabites, he rolled out of bed and stretched, taking care not to bump his head. When man and wood fought, wood won.

He yawned, and scooped up his scattered clothing. It needed shaking before wearing. *How sawdust penetrates underwear is beyond me.* The cabin housed a dirty mirror; having checked his ribbon hung as per regulations, and satisfied even Hova couldn’t find fault, Teltö climbed over the suitcase barricade, and out. He kicked four heavysset rats pushing his way through the corridor; yesterday he’d seen one perched on a corpse-oarsman’s shoulder, daintily nibbling the lich’s ear. *A pity Hova isn’t scared of rats. It’d almost make this journey worthwhile.*

He slid open the door to the deck; a blanket of thick smoky air stung his nose and throat. He gagged. *So we’re near Kuolinako.* Even in the distant south, they knew of the Last Capital, long ago driven below ground by the stench of its own filth. Teltö had heard stories enough about those dark pits and endless mines, and about the cramped, confusing, and short existence of the people who lived in that twilight world of shadows and lamps. Coal ruled the diseased heart of the Viiminian Empire: coal, fumes, and fear. Holding his breath, Teltö looked skywards. A

mustard tinge drenched the clouds, set against shades neither truly grey nor truly green.

A crewman wearing a gas-mask and a lumpy grey uniform shuffled over. "You're the Grand Master's assistant?"

Teltö spluttered and nodded.

"You'll need this." She handed Teltö a mask. "We can't have you getting Kuolinako Lung on your very first trip. My uncle died of that. A Shipping Necromancer he was, one of the best."

Teltö pulled it over his face, and breathed relief. Cumbersome as the devices were, they were better than the naked reek of the Last Capital. "Sorry to hear it," he said, half to the woman's face and half to her ample breasts.

"This was his ship. He trained me to help; I was his only family."

If this was his ship, was he fond of rats? Teltö noticed she wore a studded silver ring.

"Is it nice being in the Guild?"

Behind the mask, the crewman's eyes studied him. "What's it to you?"

"I'm just asking," Teltö pleaded. "I'm not an undercover Inquisitor if that's what you're thinking, and I won't lecture you on social inferiority. I'm just bored, and there's no one else to talk to. If I were Mnoma, I'd be dying."

The woman laughed. "Oh, you've a way with words. Nah, I knew you weren't a shadow-stalker. They're smart."

Teltö bristled. "I'm not?"

"A real Inquisitor would use their time aboard. All you've done is sulk since we left Qivunako."

Drawing himself up to his full height, Teltö puffed out his chest as best he could. "Do you know who I am? One word from me to Hova, and you'll be keel-hauled for impudence."

The crewman shook her head. "Father Life, you are pathetic. Hova hates you, and you know it. Whine to him, and he'll roger you with his cane. You deserve each other."

Hova wasn't exactly Teltö's type. "I..."

“I’ve work to do. Find someone else to listen to you whinge.”

His cheeks were probably red as his hair. She thought she could mock him with impunity? He might tell Hova after all. That fat Unut didn’t like underlings, but he liked disrespect even less. A grin crossed Teltö’s face. *Yes. That’s how he’ll see it. The Guild mocking the authority of the Grand Council.*

Tucking the mask under his arm, he returned below. He knew Hova spent mornings doing paperwork over hearty breakfasts; more than once he’d found a stale kipper trapped between council reports. Teltö had never discovered if his master intended them as bookmarks or whether he was saving them for later.

A plump rat begged outside Hova’s cabin.

“Shoo,” said Teltö. He kicked the rodent, and it scurried away. *If I escape the Black Spot after this, it’ll be a bloody miracle.* He tapped on the door.

“Grand Master?”

No answer. He tried a firmer knock.

“Grand Master Hova?”

Still no answer, not even protestations of annoyance. Teltö decided to risk it. He poked his head into the room.

An oasis of luxury, Hova’s cabin embodied everything wrong with Imperial society. The newspapers may be full of pleas for belt-tightening in the face of shortages and eternal war reparations, but this shipping company catered to those with fine tastes and the funds to match. Emerald silk curtains enclosed a four-poster feather bed, and bookshelves housed crisp and saucy first editions, some of which Teltö had filched on previous visits.

Where is the old bastard? Teltö stepped inside. And stopped.

Hova lay face-down on the cabin’s large green-and-white rug, the shattered remains of a porcelain teacup beside his head. *Oh shit. He’s dead. The Inquisitor General will peel my skin for boots.* Dropping the gas-mask, Teltö raced to his superior and heaved him over. Hova groaned, and struggled awake.

The currant-eyes glared up. “Who... are... you?”

The bastard's memory was going. But he was alive. *Thank Father Life.*

"I'm your assistant, Teltö."

"Assistant?" Hova's flushed and flabby face contorted grotesquely. "I... have... no assistant. You are... a spy! Guards!"

Teltö knelt. "No, Grand Master. We're on the ship. You're ascending to the Grand Council. The Lesser Council sent me with you. Remember?"

"Keer, you traitor!" Hova seized Teltö's throat. "Keer! The treacherous little lapdog!"

What in blazes? I'm not Keer. Get your paws off me. Choking, Teltö tried to pry Hova's hands away, but the crazed fingers tightened. *Help!*