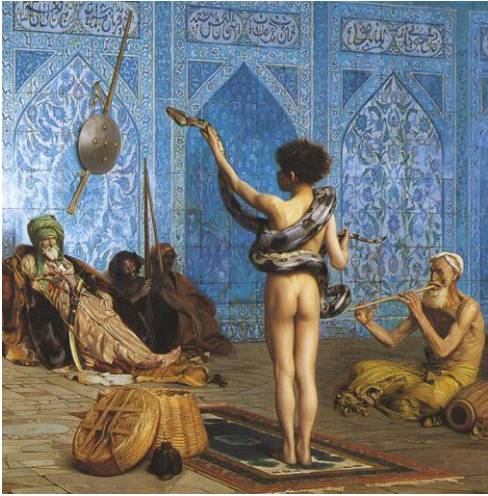


The Gods of Babylon



Alan Edward

THE GODS OF BABYLON

by
Alan Edward



© 2005 Alan Edward

All rights reserved. This is a work of copyright, however no fee may be charged for this novella under any circumstances. Permission is granted solely for non-profit publication and redistribution in its entirety, and does not extend to online or printed collections where fees are charged for public access. Small extracts of this work may be used in commercial publications as per “Fair Use” guidelines.

Cover Art: *The Snake Charmer* by
Jean-Léon Gérôme ca. 1889

Formatting and Typesetting by RMS

The body text typeface is *Ehrhardt*, a classically Dutch style developed for the Ehrhardt foundry in Leipzig by Hungarian punchcutter, Miklós Kis. During the late seventeenth century, Leipzig was a haven for expatriate Dutch type designers, and quickly became a centre for many Modern type foundries.

The titling typeface is *Myriad*, a direct descendent of *Frutiger*, designed by Swiss type designer Adrian Frutiger, who developed many modern interpretations of “Grotesk” sans-serifed typefaces.

Introduction

This brief novel is, above all, a product of its time - and indeed, with its author, is a kind of ramshackle and weather-beaten monument to a more gilded age, like the tumbled figure of Ozymandias. It transports the beholder far, far back to the distant days of the 1970s and 80s, when the fresh, intoxicating air of liberality blew through the Netherlands - liberality especially in relation to man-boy love and all that went with it. This happy age was ushered in, principally, by the brave and articulate campaigning of Edward Brongersma, a Dutch lawyer who had in his younger days been imprisoned for a sexual offence, but who in due course rose to become a member of the Dutch Upper House. In the powerful position of justice minister, Dr Brongersma saw through a range of liberalising laws, including reduction of the 'age of consent' to just 12.

In this altered atmosphere a number of new and exciting ventures flourished, notably John Stamford's Spartacus organisation, with its range of gay guides, many with an 'intergenerational' element. At the same time, the academic journal *Paidika* was established, with a distinguished editorial board. And enter Frank Torey, one of many refugees from the USA, who established the campaigning *Pan* magazine, and subsequently a range of boy-love publications, including many novels. There had been nothing like it before. For the first time, those who loved boys had powerful support and advocacy, together with a cornucopia of publications that mirrored their loves, fears, hopes and dreams.

Stimulated - possibly over-stimulated - by the spirit of the time, I wrote some short stories for *Pan* magazine, for the Acolyte readers (short story collections), and also in *Koinos* (still publishing), together with an article in the last-ever issue of *Paidika*. I also wrote two novels for the Acolyte Press - *Kit* and *The Fire-Worshipper*.

And then it all ended. A thesis could be written on the reasons - perhaps one has been - but at the core was a combination of pressure from outside the Netherlands (mainly from the USA), and a small upsurge of fanaticism within. John Stamford, Frank Torey and Edward Brongersma all died in tragic circumstances and within a short period of time, and further fierce pressure led to the closure of *Paidika*. All at once, Spartacus and the Acolyte Press, too, were no more. The most to be said on the positive side is that the Netherlands is still a country where issues around intergenerational sex can be discussed in relative freedom, and where conferences on the subject can be held openly, and still are. But that is all.

The Gods of Babylon was the last thing I wrote for the Acolyte Press; it was never published because of Frank Torey's sudden death. It is fair to say, however, that Frank did not much care for the first draft I sent him; it was, he said, an uneasy mixture of eroticism and a serious message. I therefore did what any right-thinking and civilised person would have done, and removed the 'serious message' bit. Alas, by then it was too late.

It would be an impertinence for me to dedicate the irreverent romp that follows to Frank Torey's memory; he deserves infinitely better. On the other hand, it's the best I can do. Thanks for everything, Frank.

Alan Edward
St-Germain-en-Laye, France
Summer, 2005

It was like breathing. If he lay with his face half in the sand he could see, instead of the flat horizon, the rhythmic heave and fall of its monstrous curvature, and could hear, steady like a drumbeat, the slow, regular sigh of its breath as each broken wave carried the shingle forward, then back, on the limitless foreshore. And if he turned his head and put his ear to the ground he could hear its dull, metronomic groan, its snoring, as the bigger pebbles shifted...in...out...

Hour upon hour upon hour.

The boy rolled on his back again, spreading his long legs in the hot sun. Today he wore nothing but a pair of ragged shorts. He was slim, deeply sun-tanned; his fair hair was uncut and, though the day was almost windless, a faint breath occasionally teased its confusion of light delicate strands, trailing them back and forth across his face and shoulders, the light ends slapping and flickering.

The beach extended as far as he could see in both directions, curtailed by a heat-haze over the harbour at San Felieu and, immeasurably further away, by the pale blue foothills of the Spanish Pyrenees. When he turned his head a little, he could just see the rising grassland behind the beach, a line of palms and cacti and, almost hidden, the tiny white fishing-town and its half-ruined church tower with the ragged stork's nest on top.

It was almost completely silent. There was just the muted shriek of a plover and the whirr of an occasional *gri-gri* in the hot pasture.

And the breathing. In, out... On and on...

The blue of the sky was unbroken. It grew hotter. The boy's shoulders started to tingle, and he wished he had brought a tee-shirt. But the regular rhythm from the sea was soothing, and he began to feel sleepy.

The breathing stopped.

The boy's guts loosened. He sat upright unthinkingly, then immediately sank back on the sand again and lay completely still.

It was awake.

He didn't move.

Go back to sleep. Please!

He continued to wait. Flat on the sand, still as a stone. *Madre de Dios...*

But there were different sounds now. *Now it was coming.*

But he had expected this for a long time. He was ready. Taking a long breath, he skinned off his shorts and pushed them deep into the hot sand, covering them over. He twisted a long frond of seaweed around his ankles,

The Gods of Babylon

another round his wrists, then lay on his stomach, motionless, as for a sacrifice.

The sun scorched like a furnace. The boy's shoulders, the backs of his thighs, began to bake, his freshly exposed bottom to burn. He squirmed, but otherwise remained still.

That new sound again. The scraping in the shingle, but closer.

His muscles pulled tight as bowstrings.

Feet. Coming from the sea, shuffling through the pebbles.

Then more quietly, in the soft sand. He closed his eyes tight. And the fire seared all of his naked skin. His bowels began to churn again, his eyelids to prickle. *Miserere me, Domine.*

He waited...

And now there was breathing again. Different from before, and very close. In and out, in and out... But nothing else.

At last, from under the cover of his tumbled hair, the boy dared to open his eyes a fraction.

He almost cried out when he saw them - shockingly close, only an inch or so from his face...

Legs.

But he couldn't close his eyes again; somehow his very fear held them fixed and open.

He took in the details, one by one. Two legs, sunburnt and grubby, shins narrow like his own, one with a small round bruise like a coin, bare wrack-stained feet, toes digging in the sand.

The breathing deepened. The boy on the sand closed his eyes again but not before he saw, puddled round the ankles, a pair of crumpled blue shorts.

He feigned sleep. He compelled himself to breathe regularly - *in* - one, two - *out* - one, two..

Above him, the sounds came faster, more stertorous. Like sobs now - *ah, ah...*

As if turning in sleep, the boy abruptly threw himself over on his back, eyes still tight closed.

A complete silence. But as the blond boy resumed his regular breathing...

A flurry of gasps... a cry, *oh, aaah*, swiftly muffled, then others. And it went quiet again.

The boy on the sand remained still. After a long interval, the feet scuffled through the sand and the shingle as before. When, at last, he opened his eyes slowly, they were gone.

He rolled on to his stomach again. But it was the sand that scorched him now; from underneath, on his tenderest flesh, invading him, the heat-thrill mounting intolerably. He squirmed extravagantly, bare as a fish and helpless on the sand's broad hotplate. The white flame grew inside him, his writhings grew more unrestrained... And then it arrowed all through him; his buttocks contracted as if cut with a whip, and he cried out loud as the fire opened him like a bomb, spreading his four limbs. He thrashed, twisted on the sand, cried out again, until....at last, the world once more hung suspended for a moment like the vast sun above him...and the tide, past its turn, began to ebb, and the waves to tumble again.



Tee-shirt, red.

Socks, blue.

Shorts, blue (matching).

Y-fronts, red.

Trainers, white. The almost-new Nikes today, the ones he wasn't allowed to wear on the beach. He laid everything out on the bed, but didn't put anything on yet. The shadow was on the wall again, and it grew monstrous as the boy advanced to it.

Where are your pants?

"Lost them."

Again?

"Yep."

Where?

"On the beach. Don't worry, I'll find them later."

You better, but go and get cleaned up now; it's almost time to go.

"Okay." But first the boy went over and pressed his nude body up close, arms outspread, loving the feeling of the warmth against all of his skin. "I'd rather go down the beach again, though."

"I've no doubt that you would. You have five minutes."

"Do something first."

"I said five minutes."

The Gods of Babylon

The boy reluctantly put his clothes on, then considered the overall result in the full-length mirror. The interior of the house was in semi-darkness, but the bedroom was illuminated with reflected light from the ceiling, a brilliant bar of light thrown up from a gap in the shutters. He could see himself perfectly. He twisted to one side, then the other, and back again. He was proud of his long sun-tanned legs, so he pulled the shorts up, then rolled them at the waist as much as he could, so as to make them as short as possible. Stooping, he turned the socks down a little further, then stood upright and looked in the mirror again. Better... He went closer and began to comb his hair, wincing a little as the comb grated on particles of sand, but persisting until the blond strands fell perfectly across the smooth curve of his cheeks on both sides. He put the comb down, then frowned and rubbed uneasily at a smut or two on the otherwise flawless skin. He should really have had a shower, but he couldn't be bothered now. He peered again. On the other hand, the effect of the pristine white against the olive-brown skin above it was really quite satisfactory.

He opened his sky-blue eyes wide, favoured his reflection with a wide sparkling smile. He held it for a moment, then slowly let it vanish. Finally, putting a finger in each side of his mouth, he pulled the ends down as far as he could.

Bleff me, Faffer, for I haf finned.

Now he had made himself late. The boy withdrew his fingers, raced out of the house, down the path, and along the narrow lane to the *pueblo*. It was very hot, even so early, but it was only a short run through a range of low dunes. The chirruping of the cicadas was all round him now, then the whirr of a *grigri* in the hot pasture. There was a pond where the houses began, and frogs plopped from the broad waterlily leaves into the shallow water as the boy jogged round its edge. The priest's house was on the near side of the village, its tall structure and dull brick contrasting oddly with the white and pastels of the low buildings behind. The schoolroom was built haphazardly on to the side of the already ugly building, but the inside was at least clean, freshly varnished, and well-lit through huge canopied windows.

The boy was just in time; he lined up at the desk behind the others waiting to give their names. Seated behind it, the priest, immaculately cassocked, entered details in a carefully ruled ledger. "Next, please."

The boy stepped forward. The priest looked up, and his pen skidded across the page, leaving a scrawl like a black whirligig.



It was a tall narrow window, a lancet window it was called, deep-set in a grey stone wall. It was the kind of window that usually had pictures of saints, but on this one there was just a layer of condensation from the steam in the bathroom. Pyjamas off ready for his bath, Paolo stood on the cold flagstones under the sill and rubbed a little space so that he could just see the beach, though at some distance. And he had to screw up his eyes against the low morning sun; the wide half-circle of sand was almost black against the brilliant flicker of sunlight on the water. But he could still locate the place exactly. Just between the line of the second and third palm-trees. Right below that, by the water's edge, he'd stood quite still, for a moment afraid to breathe, even to blink.

Paolo had never seen him before, or anyone like him. He wasn't one of the *muchachos* from the town, that was certain. He had been like a boy from a picture-book, or from one of the huge volumes in the library with the illuminated psalms and offices. But...the sun had been in his eyes, of course.

Water splashed beside him, and a shower started to hiss. The bathroom was long and half-lined with brick, with a low barrel roof. Formerly a chapel, it had also, centuries ago, served as a dungeon where the *reconquistadores* chained impenitent Moors till they recanted or died. Or at least, so visitors to the monastery were told. But now, as the eight o'clock bell stopped swinging, this was where the school day properly began with the ancient rite of *corpore sano*, with the splash of water, the slap of bare feet on the flagged floor, the tumult of shrill pubescent voices as ice-cold water cascaded on to bare pubescent skin.

The other boys from his dormitory tumbled past, yelling and pummelling one another; two of them flicked Paolo with their towels.

"Clever-dick Paolo," shouted Joaquín.

Paolo turned crossly. "It's not *my* fault I have to go to these" - he looked around cautiously - "these shitty classes; I don't *want* to."

"Yep, he can't help being a smartypants," said Rafaël more generously. "Give him a break, *chicos*."

The boys hung up their towels and jostled into line on the cold tiles; Brother Patrick and Brother Brendan rolled up the sleeves of their cassocks.

The Gods of Babylon

“Stop your pushing now.”

There were tables with large basins of hot water. The routine was, they soaped each of you down, one at a time, then you went under the cold shower for the regulation two minutes before being dried. Or less, if no-one was watching.

Paolo lingered by the window a moment longer, hoping to be last in line. Brother Patrick was slowest, and Paolo liked talking to him when it was a bit quieter and most of the others had gone back to get dressed; he thought Brother Patrick liked it too. If he held on just another minute or two...

“*Get* in line,” snapped Sister Clemency, looking up from her laundry list.

Paolo skipped across.

“*Está bien!*”

“And speak English; I won’t tell you again. It’s what you’re here for.”

In any case it was Brother Patrick. Paolo stood on a low stool, and the Brother rubbed soap in his hands and anointed the boy diligently with his large peasant palms – arms, chest, back, then rubbing up and down both sides of his chest, fingers up into his armpits, ticking him a little so that he giggled.

“Stay still now,” said the Brother. “It’s jealous they are, sure.”

“You think so?” said Paolo doubtfully.

“Sure I know so. It’s you that’s the lucky one to be picked, to go to Father Aeden himself. Ah, with a good brain like you have in you, and the Father to bring you on, there’ll be no stopping you at all.”

He soaped his hands again, then they slid to and fro over Paolo’s stomach and bottom, one in front, one behind.

“And it’s only for a couple of days a week, *chico*. The rest of the time there’ll be all of your friends, and your games.... Didn’t I *tell* you not to wriggle at all?”

Suddenly Paolo thought about the boy on the beach again. Would he be back this afternoon? And would he be bare again? Then he tried hard to think of something different, or Brother Patrick might guess something; you couldn’t hide much at bathtime. Even as things were, it would often stand straight out when Brother Patrick washed it – as it was doing now – or even when his bottom was being washed, especially in between or under his tender cheeks. He felt shy sometimes to be like that in front of Brother Patrick. And, when he was finally being dried, it would begin to tingle

even more, with the tingle starting to go all through him, till he wondered what Brother Patrick would say if, some day, he stickied the towel.

The bath over, the Brother dried the boy energetically. Paolo gulped. Be quick, he thought.

“You’re getting a big boy, so,” said the Brother. “How old are you?”

“Twelve and a bit.”

“There, so.”

“Brother..”

“Yes?”

“What would you say if...?”

“Yes?”

“Oh, nothing.”

“Well, be off with you, so.” Brother Patrick slapped Paolo’s bottom in dismissal, and the boy scampered. But it had been a close thing. Brother Patrick picked up the basin and went to empty it at the sink.



The room was so vast that the far end was invisible. On either side the walls stretched away into the dark; above, the ceiling with its painted stars was almost hidden by the rising smoke from the candles, flaming and guttering before a veiled mirror. To his right the boy could see the rows of skin-bound volumes with their spidery incunabula, beside them the globes, the skull and the hour-glass; on his left the shelves with the jewelled drinking vessels, burnished and shimmering in the candlelight, the tall jars of rose-oil and ungent and, hanging above them, bundles of herbs, dry greenery, and willow-wands.

The scent of hazel and rosemary filled the air. From somewhere in the dark came the harsh cry of a bird and, from near the floor, two yellow eyes – perhaps of a cat – met his own unblinkingly.

The man stood tall, caped and mantled for the night’s arcana. Before him the boy stood naked and shamefaced, gaze lowered to the carpet.

“Look at me, Cassian.”

He obeyed.

“This is the third flask you have broken today.”

The boy nodded.

“Answer me.”

“Yes, *maestro*,” said the boy in a low voice.

The Gods of Babylon

“You have been inexcusably careless.”

“Yes, *maestro*.” Almost in a whisper.

Tears burned his eyes now. But in front it stood up completely, because he was with the man.

The man rolled his broad sleeves back, rinsed his hands in a bowl of scented water, then dried them on a coloured towel. At a gesture from him Cassian stepped forward. The man knelt and put one arm round the boy’s waist, turning him sideways; his right palm he slid gently, almost caressingly, right down over the boy’s stomach...then raised it...then began to slap - one, two, three - while the boy writhed and shouted.

But it was tight, tight against him when the man paused. The man, with his left hand, pulled it out slightly, then began to slap it all round - on its upper surface, on either side, underneath... Twenty, twenty-one... Cassian hollered on; his bare feet, dancing, thudded on the carpet.

The flamelights lights shook in their sconces, their reflections shimmered. The glass vessels rocked and rattled.

The sting was spreading up, up through him; he was dizzying now...

Forgive me, forgive me...

The bird shrieked again - or perhaps it was the boy - and the jars vibrated till their liquids trembled and splashed on the floor.

The smacking finally over, the man knelt, kissed then enclosed it, his lips tight on its furious tingling. The boy gasped; his hips writhed frenetically.

Then he felt the man’s teeth on it.

Mercy, mercy...

But they were on it again. Harder now - working, pressing...

Till the boy screamed and exploded between them - once, twice, thrice...

The cat arched its back, hissed, then streaked through the open door and vanished among the tree-skeletons in the garden. With a clatter of wings the bird left its perch, flapped all round the room, then followed the cat through the door and spiralled up into the night sky.

At last the boy’s cries faded. The liquids were tranquil again, the smoke rose upward undisturbed.

Amor tecum. Go, and sin no more.

The boy’s knees had given and he had tumbled untidily on to the carpet. But the man picked him up as if he were a featherweight, and the

boy wound his arms round the man's neck and kissed him over and over. *I love you I love you I love you.*

But his eyes were spilling now and, when morning came, his pillow was wet through and through.



“You have ten minutes to read the passage at the top of the page - the one marked Number Three. Then I will ask you questions about it. You don't have to learn or memorise any of it, just take in as much of the meaning as you can. Then - “ Father Aeden looked at the wall-clock - “at two-thirty we will see what you have each got out of it - if anything.”

“Father?” A boy raised his hand.

“If you have any questions, I don't want to hear them,” said the priest. “I've told you all you need to know. Silence, please, until two-thirty.”

The boy put his hand down again. Cassian, seated near the front, gave the rather dull prose passage a brief glance, then eyed the priest covertly from between clasped fingers. Father Aeden had also pushed the textbook aside, and was giving absorbed attention to a small book bound in what looked like very old leather. Cassian had pieced together various pieces of information and gossip. Father Aeden, still relatively young, had been considered one of the most outstanding scholars of his generation and, at an unusually early age, had been a full professor at the English College in Rome; further rise to a position of dizzying eminence had been predicted. Until, suddenly and without explanation, he had decided to take the vows of what was - in the wider context of the Church at least - a relatively obscure teaching order. At the same time, the order - whose members were mainly English and Irish priests and monks - dominated this part of Spain, as they had done for three centuries. They ran the famous school and choir of the monastery of San Cristobal, just above the town, also the more modest schools in some dozen villages, as well as the local parishes. Father Aeden, also, served as a parish priest. His teaching took place on three days a week for the brightest of the boys of the region, including even a few from the monastery.

Among the twelve boys in the class, there were at present four from the monastery; all interested Cassian in various ways. But his eye had been caught especially by a youngster of some twelve years or so who had

The Gods of Babylon

started the classes on the same day as himself. Paolo...whose perfectly combed jet-black hair fell evenly on to his light olive forehead, whose unusual greenish eyes, oddly slanted, somehow caught the sunlight extravagantly every time he smiled - which was often - and who when he laughed showed white perfectly even teeth. The uniform of the monastery school - blue shirt, neat grey shorts, blue-topped grey socks - fitted him trimly, and when he moved about, in the playground, or helping the priest with books - he did so with an almost cat-like nimbleness, partly on his toes, sometimes half-skipping like a wood-pixie.

But there was something odd, that bothered Cassian. Paolo didn't smile at him like at the other kids, didn't talk to him either, but instead gave him extremely odd looks, long and peculiarly penetrating - though he always quickly looked away when he caught Cassian's eye. This was a pity. Spanish kids often disliked the English kids and thought they were a bit stuck-up. But he, Cassian, wasn't like that, and he hoped the other boys, including Paolo, would soon realise it.

Also in the monastery uniform was a handsome dark-haired boy of fourteen, Emilio, now frowning over his book, and finally a pair of strikingly good-looking black twins, Ephar and Roti, aged thirteen, and in their second term with Father Aeden. They seemed friendly; one had smiled and winked at him and Cassian had smiled back.

Cassian's gaze switched back to Father Aeden, who was still reading his book. It looked *very* old. Half-forgotten spells perhaps, bound in human skin. He began to make the sign of An, the one against "all manner of evil".

Father Aeden glanced up at precisely the wrong moment.

"Yes?"

"Nothing, sir."

"Nothing, *Father*. Very well, what's the passage about?"

Cassian hesitated.

"Have you even looked at it?" asked the priest.

"I've *looked* at it," Cassian acknowledged.

"So what's it about?"

"We...weren't supposed to memorise it," Cassian ventured.

Father Aeden had risen and stood by Cassian's desk. "*Ah, teach me not to remember, but rather to forget. For I forget those things which I would remember, but those which I would forget are ever before me.* Themistocles. Do you understand what that means?"

Cassian considered, then said, "I think it means that I'm in a bit of trouble."

"Come and see me at the end of classes. Now, read the passage."

"Yes, sir."

"Yes, *Father*."

"Yes, *Father*."



Classes were only in the mornings, with a short break at eleven. Cassian wandered out into the grassy area at the rear, and came upon Paolo sitting on the wall, swinging his legs.

Go for it now.

He went over. "Hi."

"Hi." Still that somewhat wary look.

The youngster's short pants had ridden upwards on the stone wall, exposing long smooth thighs, strikingly brown by contrast with the white stone, brilliant in the hot sun. Sitting on the wall alongside him suddenly seemed an attractive idea, and Cassian did so. "Hi," he said again.

"We did all that," said the Spanish boy, in lightly accented English.

Slightly disconcerted, the English boy said, "I - I'm Cassian."

"I know."

"How d'you know?"

"I hear you give Father Aeden your name. We all did."

Oh dear.

The boy's green eyes were on Cassian again. "I'm Paolo, I live in the village, I go to St Cristobal's, and I am twelve years old and three months," he recited unexpectedly. He went on, "I hope that you are keeping well. I am well, and my parents are well, thank you very much. The weather is exceptionally clement for the time of the year, but it may rain on Thursday." For the first time he smiled, showing even white teeth. "Very good, yes?"

"Exceptionally good," said Cassian, not to be outdone. "And I live at St Felieu, and I am exactly a year older than you. And bigger - and *stronger*."

"Yeah?"

"Yeah!" Suddenly Cassian swooped on the youngster, grasping him with both arms. Taken aback, the Spanish boy lost his balance, and the pair

The Gods of Babylon

rolled off the wall on to the grass where, giggling, they punched, wrestled and tumbled. At length, bare arms and legs tangled together, they lay still, flushed and panting.

"I'm really tired out now," said Cassian, his arms still tight round the Spanish boy's neck. Cassian felt the other boys arms tighten round him in turn. "Me too," he agreed.

"We'll probably get our breath back in a minute," Cassian said.

"Prob'ly."

More than a minute later Cassian asked, "What time is it?"

"Two o'clock, you should both be back in school *now*."

The boys started and turned. Father Aeden stood only a few yards away from them, erect and motionless as the cypress trunk behind him.

He said evenly, "The break is for private study, not for recreation." Then he went back into the schoolroom.

Untangled again, the boys got on their feet.

"Come down the beach later, the one near where I live," said Cassian. "I go there all the time."

"I know."



At mid-day it was baking hot, even in the shaded schoolroom. The sun had moved to the side of the building, and its dazzle was beginning to fall on the rows of desks and the scuffed wooden floor. Father Aeden crossed the room, closed the venetian blinds completely, then returned to his desk.

To Cassian, standing in front of him, he said, "So, I suppose you expect that I'm going to tell you off now."

"Yes, Sir. Yes, Father."

"Well, I'm not." The priest pushed the register aside. "Idleness and inattention bring their own consequences; no words of mine can add to them. Nor can any punishment be as great as the fog of impenetrable ignorance in which you are likely to pass the remainder of your life. I wanted purely to raise a practical matter."

"Yes, Father." Cassian squirmed slightly. It was a fairly good resemblance to a telling-off, so far. Today his shorts were white, as he had decided that they showed off his tanned thighs even better; he had also put on bright blue socks, well turned down, and a loose blue top. Uncertain

where to put his hands, he fiddled with his shorts elastic. The priest said shortly, "Sit down, please."

Cassian obeyed. Father Aeden said, "But one thing at a time," and began to tidy his desk, putting the textbooks in a neat pile on one side, and exercise books on the other.

He puzzled Cassian in a number of ways. At first glance he looked youthful, with neat black hair, clear skin and an erect carriage, but when you got closer you saw unexpected lines around his mouth and eyes, and his gaze had a depth and penetration that you hadn't quite bargained for either. Also, while at some times he appeared more relaxed, and had even been seen to smile occasionally, it seemed that with Cassian in particular he preserved a certain cool formality, and this made the boy uneasy. Still, give it time...

The priest had opened his register, then he ran his finger down the list and said, "Yes, I have your address. It's simply that I like to meet the parents of each boy as soon as possible after he joins my classes." He peered. "Now, you live with a...."

"Guardian." Which always gave him the image of a ferocious warrior archangel twelve feet tall, with a flaming sword held aloft. *Be they giants, hobgoblins or witches, dread them not. THEY SHALL NOT PASS.*

"I beg your pardon?"

"Nothing." Then Cassian said quickly, "I don't think it will be easy. He's very busy, he's out a lot."

"So I've already discovered. Therefore could you please ask him for a convenient time - day or night - when I might call. Tell him I am totally at his service."

"I'll tell him, Father," said the boy slowly. "But - does it matter really?"

The priest looked up, raised his eyebrows. "Does what matter?"

"I'm the pupil, aren't I? Not him. Look, I'm sorry I didn't pay much attention this morning, Father, but I promise to do better - really."

Father Aeden sighed. "I'm not going to see your guardian in order to *complain* about you. I don't work that way. If I have anything to say I'll say it to you directly. I just feel that it's important we all know what is required in terms of your tuition, what is expected for you, and that we are all working towards the same objects. In fact, I insist on it." He stood up. "Tomorrow, I shall expect a day and time from you."

Cassian got up too. "Yes, Father."

The Gods of Babylon



In the house it was cooler, but the sun still made lemon-gold pools on the rush matting, and the shadow was still on the wall.

“Father Aeden wants to see you.”

That could present difficulties.

“You can say that again. What’ll we do?”

I’ve no idea, but I’ll think about it. We’ll work out something.

“You better. You really better.”



When Cassian entered, Adelard stooped and kissed him, so Cassian knew he was forgiven.

“You took your penance well,” said Adelard. “You didn’t whine, or complain. I respect you for that.”

That was an unusual thing for Adelard to say, and Cassian looked up in surprise. Adelard was half-smiling, so perhaps he only half meant it. Tonight Adelard was in grey, his ankle-length gown roped at the waist like a monk’s habit, its cowl thrown back on his shoulders. Its only adornment was, hanging from Adelard’s neck, the familiar moonstone, the one that seemed always to catch all the light in the room, then to flash it back in Cassian’s eyes, making him blink.

He himself wore a long black gown, like a nightshirt, but of silky material. There was nothing underneath and, when he moved, he enjoyed the feeling of the black silk sliding over his bare skin. Otherwise he simply wore a pair of leather sandals.

“You are ready to move on now,” said Adelard, his eyes fixed on the boy’s.

Cassian felt some kind of response was necessary. He said, “Thank you,” which seemed safe enough.

But Adelard was gone. Ahead, a pair of tall curtains that swished shut behind him, and Cassian thought he heard the shriek of the bird again.

He stood uncertainly, then heard Adelard’s voice again, rather testily, and seemingly from a long way off. “Come on, then.”

Cassian parted the curtains and entered. It was another very long room, lit only by a row of burning torches on each wall, with a great fire in

a grate. Soon he was able to take in some details, and he saw that, at the far end of the room, on a slightly raised platform, Adelard sat at a table. A richly patterned carpet flowed down the steps in front of him, the trunks of young trees snaked upwards on either side with, between them, a rich tapestry worked in scarlet and silver threads. On the table, as far as he could see, stood a cluster of crystal glasses and drinking-vessels. He approached slowly, taking in the details.

Adelard was no longer alone. Two young black boys, each of a similar age to Cassian, crouched by the table, one on either side, each holding a cup or chalice. Each wore nothing but a magnificent triple-chained gold necklet, from which hung a pendant with a great stone that turned and glittered in the torchlight; one pendant had a green stone, the other was blue. The boys were perfectly proportioned, like young gymnasts, with sleek thighs and exquisitely rounded hips, each poised half on his toes as if about to spring into action with the agility and grace of a cat or panther. Their naked skin, appearing to be lightly oiled, gleamed in the rich torchlight.

One of the boys turned his head slightly, and a pair of beautiful brown eyes met Cassian's from under a mop of dark curls. He considered Cassian for a moment, then he turned back and murmured something to his companion. The latter - who in fact looked like his twin - was unexpectedly seized with giggles; the chalice in his hands shook, and a few drops of the contents fell on the carpet.

Instantly Adelard was on his feet, a pillar of rage.

"So - you are not page-boys, you are mere pranksters, mere *circus*-boys. Very well then, so be it, you shall perform like circus-boys. He stalked to the side of the platform, pulled a curtain aside, and drew out a wicked-looking willow switch. "Oh yes, you shall perform," he said, drawing it through his hand. "For Cassian, our newcomer, you shall both dance and sing - but the music shall be the sound of my rod on these four pretty bum-cheeks. And *how* you shall sing!"

One of the boys said softly, "Perhaps, *maestro*, Cassian would not care to hear such songs."

Cassian started to speak, but Adelard had paused and, slightly unexpectedly, was talking to one boy, then the other, in low, rapid tones; he handed each boy in turn the switch to stroke in his fingers, then continued to talk, though Cassian could not hear anything he said. He saw that one least one of the boy's eyes glistened now in the firelight, but was surprised

The Gods of Babylon

to see, when Adelard made them kneel upright from their crouching position, that they both stuck hard out in front, one in fact pointing half-upright like a ship's bowsprit.

Then Adelard pointed to a long wooden bench. "Very well - bottoms up, both of you."

Cassian said impulsively, "Please don't beat them."

With one of his rapid changes of mood, Adelard nodded and put the rod away, but so readily that Cassian wondered whether he had intended to use it in the first place.

Coming back, he bent and ruffled one boy's curls, lifted his chin and kissed him, then the other. "You will be good?" he whispered.

"Yes, *maestro*."

Adelard said to Cassian, "They shall nevertheless dance and sing for you - to welcome you. Very well - Ephar, Roti - on your feet."

They stood, facing Cassian - and it may have been the effect of Adelard's words, but Cassian could see that both boys were pointing right up to their belly-buttons now. Adelard oiled both gently, then sat on a low stool, took a tight hold with both hands - at which the boys jolted and gasped - and at once began work with immense vigour. He must also have turned on some source of music, because very gradually the sound of quiet instruments began to filter into the room, setting a low, insistent rhythm which the boys adopted in unison. At the same time, Cassian could hear Adelard talking again quietly, and as the twins kept looking at him, Cassian, while Adelard talked, he was filled with curiosity, but again could not hear a word. Adelard began to work harder, so that both boys' feet hammered on the carpet, the pair yodelled in unison, and their exquisitely curved hips joggling and quivering like hula-dancers'. Gradually, the tempo of the music quickened. Adelard was merciless now, and each boy's contortions grew increasingly rapid and uncontrolled. Then one, next the other, leapt to his toes with a crescendo of shrieks, for the pair to conclude the spectacle together with a *tarantella di orgasma* of quite astonishing and delirious length; it was quite some time before either boy was still or quiet.

At length Adelard rose, wiped down each boy, then his hands, with a clean white towel. He returned to the table and touched a panel. The music faded, so that there was nothing to be heard but the crackle of the flames.

Cassian stood where he was. But the two other boys, now tumbled together on the broad patterned carpet with arms round each other, eyed him again and whispered together.

“Yes?” asked Adelard sharply.

Shyly one of them said, his gaze still on Cassian, “Now *he* must dance and sing,”

“Of course.” Adelard rose. “That will indeed be a fine sequel.”

He beckoned. “Come here, Cassian. Off with your robe.”

Cassian lowered his eyes to the carpet in mortification. “It – it’s too late,” he said.

But Adelard smiled, stepped forward, and held out his hands for Cassian to come up to him.



“Why do I have to do this?” asked Cassian, frowning.

At his desk, the Father Aeden looked up from the exercise he had been setting. He raised his eyebrows. “I *beg* your pardon?”

Cassian, standing in front of the table, said, “This. This Latin. Well, nobody speaks it, do they?”

The priest said coldly, “Everybody speaks it. If you don’t understand it, you don’t understand anything. Go and stand with your face to the wall until I tell you to return to your seat.”

Cassian made a wry face and obeyed. Father Aeden dismissed the others; Cassian, glancing over his shoulder, was surprised to see a rare smile as he patted one of the boys on his shoulder, whispered a word of encouragement to another – then they were all gone.

He pulled two chairs up to the desk and asked Cassian to sit down.

He opened a book. “Caesar’s Gallic Wars,” he announced. “Let’s see if *this* can convey something to you.”

Cassian sat, but didn’t open his book. “Why’re you like this?” he asked.

The priest raised his eyebrows. “I beg your pardon?”

“There – you see.”

“I don’t know what you mean.” The priest didn’t meet his eyes. “Now, on page...”

“You’re not as nice to me as to the other kids.”

The Gods of Babylon

For a moment Father Aeden looked slightly nonplussed, then he said, “That’s not true. I do my best to be... ‘nice’ and decently polite to *everyone* - including you. You’ve been in my class for two weeks now, you should have realised that by now.”

Cassian hesitated, then said, “Very well, thank you for explaining, Father.” He opened his book.

“Page 53. Caesar’s visit to Britain, brief and unfortunate. You’ll find that the passage in question begins in the middle of the page.”

“Yes, Father. Thank you, Father.”

“I’ll give you a number of key words and phrases to look for; they will help you to gather the meaning.”

“Thank you very much, Father. I hope it’s not too much trouble.”

The priest drew forward a sheet of paper and wrote briefly.

“There, now - that should help.”

“That’s very kind, Father - very kind indeed.”

Father Aeden glanced up sharply, then opened another book. “Then I want you to look at these other sentences and try and translate them into something resembling English. I’ll go through them with you tomorrow.”

“Only if you don’t mind,” Cassian said. “It’s very kind, very kind indeed. Thank you ever so much.”

The priest passed a hand over his forehead. “Will you stop this?” he asked wearily.

Cassian met his eyes coolly. “Stop what, Father? If you don’t mind my asking.”

“All this *please thank you* stuff.”

“So it’s a crime to be polite now?”

Father Aeden said sharply, “There’s a kind of politeness so exaggerated that it becomes rudeness. Hostility, even. And I think you know that.”

“Maybe,” said the boy.

The priest hesitated a moment, then said, “Yes - but there are things that you *don’t* know.”

“Such as, Father?”

“Such as about relationships in the classroom.” The priest pulled across the small book he had been reading earlier and flicked over the pages. “This may help you to understand. Listen...”

“The teacher, although naturally retaining a friendly and approachable attitude, must retain at the same time some degree of formal distance

from his pupils – polite, but not familiar – humorous, but not jocular – amiable, but not –”

“What’s jocular?”

“You know, being funny, telling jokes.”

“You haven’t told me any jokes.”

“Exactly,” said Father Aeden. “It’s a school class, not a knockabout session, I’m glad you understand that.”

Cassian frowned, puzzled. “It’s odd, though.”

“What is?”

“A teacher *reading books* about teaching. I’ve never seen one do it before.”

“I’m reading it to you – not to me.”

“Suppose so, said Cassian. “But it wasn’t just that.”

“What was it?”

Cassian twisted in his chair, spoke more hesitatingly. “Well, it’s just that you’re very nice to the *other* kids, but...”

“But not to you, you mean? I’m sorry if it came across to you like that, but – well, this may be more difficult for you to understand...” He flicked over more pages. “The paragraph I read you carries a note at the back of the book, marked, ‘For the teacher only’. It reads, ‘But there are *particular* cases where a schoolmaster must be especially wary, where he must not for a moment let slip his guard, allow his manner to slide from the friendly into the familiar...’”

“Am I a particular case?” asked Cassian curiously.

“I have no doubt of it.”

“So what more does it say about me?”

“Nothing – just that the readers will know *very well* what is meant.” He held up a hand as Cassian was about to ask a question. “No – not now. All you need to understand is this – I’m here to teach and *you’re* here to learn, and that’s *it*.”

Cassian got up, wrinkled his nose. “*Boring*.”

“It is, rather”, the priest admitted. “But life’s boring. Now I have work for tomorrow, so you must get on.” He closed his book. “That is, if it’s not too much trouble.”



The Gods of Babylon

They were waiting when he entered through the curtained door – Adelard and the naked black twins, this time standing on either side of him. Tonight, over his grey gown, Adelard wore a scarlet cape that came down to just below his shoulders; each twin held one of his hands.

“It is time to prepare for the ultimate ceremony of the evening,” Adelard announced.

“What’s that?” enquired Cassian nervously.

“Supper,” said Adelard. He nodded towards the twins. “They shall wait on you. Follow me.”

He began to turn, but Cassian hesitated, then stood quite still. Slowly, he shook his head. His eyes moved round the chamber and fell on a small table nearby, with a chair in front. Over the back of the chair hung a glittering necklet and pendant similar to the twins’, but the stone was this time ruby red.

Adelard followed his eyes. Cassian moved across to the table, gently lifted an end of the necklet with his fingers, and looked enquiringly at Adelard.

“It’s your choice,” said Adelard.

“I’ve chosen already,” said Cassian simply, touching the chain again. Then the twins came over, twisted their arms round him. He slid his hands through their curls, teasing them with his fingers, and they both smiled. Though they were outwardly identical, Cassian was already becoming aware of their quite different characters – Ephar, gentle and quietly-spoken – Roti, more inclined to be mischievous and giggly; it was he who had spilt the drink on the previous night.

Cassian was, as before, wearing only his black gown. Ephar untied the string at the neck, then pulled it over Cassian’s head to strip him nude, and draped it on the table. Cassian kicked off his sandals and reached for the necklet, but Ephar said, “No – first we must bath you.”

Cassian nodded, then said, “But everything you do for me, I must do for both of you. You must understand that.”

Ephar nodded. “It will be our turn tomorrow.”

Then, taking Cassian’s hand, Ephar led him across the carpet, up some steps and through a curtained arch, while Roti padded behind with an armful of towels.

The bath was huge and partly sunken, set in a low garden room glassed on three sides. Warm, pale green water already filled the bath; aromatic steam rose upward.

Cassian heard Roti laugh behind him, and turned. The youngster, setting the towels on a shelf, pointed downwards to himself and laughed again. It stood straight out already; impishly Roti swung his body this way and that, making it swing even more impressively.

He said accusingly, "See! *You* do that!"

Then Cassian was motioned to step into the water and Roti sat on one side of the bath. Drawing Cassian across to him, he stroked him affectionately for a moment or two and then, with no difficulty, draped the boy tummy-down over his lap and began rubbing liquid soap over his back, bottom and thighs.

Ephar, sitting in the water in front of Cassian, gently washed the blond boy's hands, arms, shoulders. He sang quietly, almost in an undertone, as he did so. It all felt delicious; Cassian half-closed his eyes. Now Roti was washing one foot, then his lower legs, bending each leg up in turn, then rubbing soapy palms over the backs of his thighs.

"Where do you live?" Cassian asked after a while.

"Here," Roti replied.

"Don't you ever wear any clothes?"

Ephar shook his head. "There's no need. We're indoors most of the time, and just in the garden when it's warm."

"Will you come and stay with us sometime?" asked Roti. He pulled Cassian's thighs wide apart, then began to soap diligently under, over and between the boy's bottom-cheeks, holding them open with one hand, working away with the other. Cassian *oooh*-ed and squirmed and heard Roti giggle.

To his question Cassian replied, "Of course", then asked, "Will I be naked-bare all the time too?"

Ephar nodded.

"Of course," he echoed.

Ephar's soapy palms slid over Cassian's chest, under his arms. Gently he murmured, half to himself, *Kono inatho ylémmi.*"

"What's that mean?"

"I love you," Ephar whispered, stroking Cassian's face.

"Me too - both of you," Cassian said. Then he squawked, "Roti's washing my *bot-hole* now!"

Roti shook with merriment again; it was clear he was enjoying his task. He said to Cassian, "You can wash both of ours tomorrow - *and* our willies. As hard as you like."

The Gods of Babylon

“And I *will*,” said Cassian, “Just *wait*.”

He joggled a little on Roti’s lap; he had little doubt that Roti could feel him underneath, as hard as hard, against his smooth thighs; he heard him snicker again. And Cassian could feel Roti’s, tight and upright, against his flank, he squirmed even more vigorously, and was rewarded by hearing Roti catch his breath and *oooh*.

Then Cassian asked curiously, “What was Adelard saying to you - you know, whispering, when he had that nasty-looking cane out? I couldn’t hear anything he said - but...it really made your willies stick up, didn’t it?”

Ephar grinned. “Yes, he said quite a lot - mainly, though, that he was going to give it to us right in our cracks. The cane. Hard.”

“Wow-ee! Would he have?”

Ephar shook his head. “He hasn’t ever given us the rod,” he said, confirming what Cassian had already guessed.

Roti said, “He just spansks us. Puts us over his knee, smacks our butts with his hand. But we’re used to that.”

Cassian soaped his hands and leisurely began to wash Ephar in turn, sliding his palms over the black boy’s smooth shoulders and upper arms. He asked, “And after that, when he was...working on you both. What was he saying then?”

Ephar hesitated; Roti said, “Go on, tell him.”

“We’re friends now,” Cassian said, “You must tell me everything.”

“He was talking about *you*,” said Ephar. “He said what a nice-looking boy you were, how we’d be able to undress you and give you a bath. And how we’d be able to wash your bare willy, as hard as we liked, and wouldn’t it just wobble, and wouldn’t it *g-r-o-w*.”

“And he said to me,” put in Roti, “‘Wouldn’t you just like to sticky right in between his pretty buns’ - and he said he betted you would really clench them and wriggle and *wriggle* them when I had it there, so that I would go off like a *bomb*...”

“And then we did,” concluded Ephar simply, “Both of us.”

“*Would* you... wriggle your botty, like he said?” asked Roti curiously.

Cassian said solemnly, “He didn’t even *begin* to say you how it’d be. I tell you, I’d joggle that stick of yours till you danced like a dervish, shrieked like a banshee - and till your head just about blew off your shoulders. A *nuclear* bomb, he should have said. It’d take *weeks* to pick up the bits.”

“Oh, w-wow!” said Roti, gulping. “Wow-wow!”

But Ephar leant forward and kissed Cassian, gently pulled him back on to his feet, and said, “Now we make *you* sing and dance.”

“Come out of the water, though,” said Roti, lightly slapping his bottom, “Cos we’d make you splash so much there’d be a flood!”

In a moment Cassian was out on the carpet; Roti knelt and parted his feet slightly.

“And now it really *is* our turn.”

Cassian screamed as the twins, kneeling on the floor, immediately began to give him enthusiastic four-handed attention. Both of Ephar’s diligent hands were engaged in front, and Roti’s nimble fingers were behind – poking, separating, deeply probing... Soon Cassian’s bare feet were beating a merry tattoo on the floor, and it was scarcely more than a few moments before, amid a chain of shrieks, his knees doubled and he tumbled to the tiles, long legs flung in the air and working like a grasshopper as his acrobatics continued – and for some time. The twins saw to that.

At long length Cassian sat up, still breathless. He asked, “Now, you want *me* to...?”

Ephar smiled back and shook his head slowly.

“No need to, *chicito*. I mean, being with someone like *you*... Look.”

Cassian’s eyes slid downwards and widened.

“Cripes!” was all he could say.

Adelard, in his usual silent way, had materialised from between the gap in the curtains. He looked the three over, then said evenly, “You will get back in the bath again before supper. All three of you.”

And again he was gone.



“Did you ask him?” enquired Father Aeden.

“He – he’s very busy,” Cassian said.

Father Aeden started to tidy away his books. “I won’t disturb him for more than a minute or two. I’ll walk back with you.”

“He’s out. He said he’d be home very late.”

“It’s all right; I can wait.”

“But, Father...” Cassian, standing in front of the priest’s desk, moved forward a little; his bare thighs pressed against the desk’s edge. The priest’s eyes slid down, then flicked up again.

The Gods of Babylon

“Cassian...”

“Yes, Father.”

“Your legs are grubby,” said Father Aeden.

“I know. Joe forgot to give me my bath last night.”

“Well, in that case –”

“In that case *you’ll* have to give me a bath,” said Cassian brightly.

“I *should*.”

Cassian started tugging at his tee-shirt. “Shall I get bare, then?”

Father Aeden said shortly, “Sit down, please.”

Cassian obeyed, and the priest said, “Right, let’s go from the top just once more. You say that your guardian – Joe if I may so call him without seeming over-familiar – is away from home today and won’t be back till late.”

“He’s away for *several* days,” Cassian said. “In fact he went away last Thursday.”

“Well then,” said the priest, “How was it that *last* night he forgot...”

“He forgot because he was away,” Cassian said rapidly. “I mean – he would, wouldn’t he? Being away, you know.”

“Yes, he would, I imagine,” said the priest dryly. Then he added, “You know, that’s in the book too.”

“What is?” asked Cassian uneasily.

“Chapter seven, paragraph three. ‘It is important to be aware of those instances where a boy is not telling the absolute truth, where he is seeking to conceal something from those set over him. To the experienced schoolmaster the signs are clear – persistent eye avoidance, a tendency to a guilty flush, a degree of unaccustomed restlessness...’”

“I read a book like that once,” said Cassian quickly. “Then it went on about ‘unspeakable vices’. Father, what *are* unspeakable vices?”

“You could probably tell *me*,” said the priest coolly. “In any case, not even unspeakable vices are going to throw me off the scent. I want you to listen to the rest of the paragraph. ‘It must be stated, however, that in many cases such attempted deception bespeaks a lack of trust, and it is because of an inability to trust the schoolmaster that the pupil fails to confide in him’.”

The priest’s eyes met Cassian’s. “Well, what have you to say to that?”

Cassian was silent for a moment, then he said simply, “I don’t know you very well yet.”

Father Aeden laughed suddenly, and the atmosphere eased. "Just get out of here. But do me one favour. *Wash.*"

Cassian lingered. "So *you* won't bath me?"

"I'll expect that Latin tomorrow," said the priest.



When the last of the boys had gone, Father Aeden locked up the house and the schoolroom and walked across the village to see Canon Odo. The latter, who had lived in San Felieu for over thirty years now, had so far gone native as to live in a house of local design, albeit distinctly in the grand style. On rising land among the orange-groves, it was extensive and spotlessly white, with broad terraces, a profusion of wrought-iron balconies overflowing with honeysuckle and fuchsia, and the whole set around an arcaded courtyard with an octagonal fountain in its centre. Father Odo, now middle-aged, was a considerable figure in many ways; he was in charge of the group of parishes in the area, was an honorary Canon of Seville, and was Senior Chaplain at the monastery school.

It was said that, in addition, Canon Odo possessed substantial inherited wealth. It was also rumoured – with more accuracy – that he gained a substantial second income by writing wine-labels, and that his inventive skills were in constant demand by exporters of failed Spanish vintages to the English-speaking countries.

He seemed glad to see Father Aeden. He led him into a spacious carpeted room with a huge window and with palms and weeping figs in the corners. It was silent and peaceful here, apart from the quiet plish-plash of the fountain beyond the glass.

"A nip of sherry?"

"Thanks."

The Canon regarded his colleague reflectively. "So, Aeden, what can I tell you?"

"Come, Odo, may I not simply make a social visit? I don't just come in search of information and tittle-tattle, you know."

"Quite," said the Canon, swilling his sherry round in the glass. "Ice?"

"A little, I think."

When the Canon had returned with ice-cubes Father Aeden said, "There is, however, one thing you could tell me about, since I'm here. Or one person, rather."

The Gods of Babylon

The Canon smiled and nodded. "If I can, of course."

There would be no doubt that he could. While no-one could call Canon Odo a 'gossip' - or not in his hearing, at any rate - it was certainly the case that the tittle-tattlers and rumour-mongers from the village and indeed from miles around found in him a ready ear. "Listening is my duty," he was accustomed to say, "I must know all about my flock - both the good and the evil. It is my mission."

"It's about a young boy who joined my classes a short time ago - one Cassian Dean. I don't know if you've noticed him at all?"

"Yes - he is in fact the sort of boy one notices," said the Canon. He waved his hand dismissively. "When I say 'one', of course, I naturally mean..."

"Quite - of course. Well, he has now joined my classes, and I wondered if you could provide me with any background. What I have is very scanty."

The Canon nodded. "Very well. I'll tell you as much as I know. He's English, as you must realise, lives out by the north *playa*. Now, I gather there's some kind of problem in the family - or was. One parent either dead or chronically ill, the other couldn't cope alone with a growing boy. This relative, Joe Dean, something like a second cousin - a man now in his forties - agreed informally to take on the boy about a year ago. Not, in many ways, a very satisfactory character, I'm afraid. Not exactly an alcoholic, I'd say, but certainly a heavy drinker, with uncontrollable binges when he's just about incapable of doing anything but getting sozzled for days on end."

"How does he live, then?"

"He's quite a gifted writer at his best, and he makes enough during his sober periods to do well enough. Far from an ideal background, of course, but the boy has always seemed fond of Dean, looks happy and well-fed, so no-one worries much. I met them both once, as it happens; in fact, it was I who put them in contact with you. Dean brought the boy and asked for my advice. A bright youngster, I thought; I was impressed. But surely you've met the man yourself at some stage? I mean, when he enrolled the boy."

Father Aeden shook his head.

"He just wrote me. A very pleasant, civilised letter, in fact, explaining that his charge had been attending the village school, but he didn't think the teaching was satisfactory, and that the youngster was running rather

wild. Said he thought Cassian was an able boy, and would I consider taking him on. I didn't have a vacancy just then, as I never take more than twelve pupils at a time - but after a few weeks I was able to see Cassian, and then I enrolled him. Bright enough, certainly. Tends to ask too many questions, though."

"Always a mistake," nodded the Canon.

"Just give me your opinion on one thing, though, Odo," asked the priest. "I mean - what's in it for Dean? Why would this...roving scribe have wanted to take on a twelve-year-old boy, just like that?"

The Canon half-smiled and waved an admonitory finger. "I wouldn't let your imagination run wild, Aeden. My impression is that, with all his faults, Dean has simply got a kind heart - and that isn't a crime."

Father Aeden nodded. "Fair enough, it isn't - but I just wish I could see him. The boy says he's away - but I'm convinced he's hiding something."

"Not necessarily. Dean does tend to disappear from time to time. When he finds a new project, or plot, or whatever. If you're concerned about the boy, though, I could get someone to call, if you like."

"For the moment, he seems okay - happy, well-fed, clean as any boy of his age. He seems self-sufficient enough; he's probably had to be. But I'll keep an eye on the situation and keep your offer in mind. Also, I'll make some further inquiries about Dean's whereabouts; I have my sources as well."

Father Aeden half got up to go, then said, "Speaking of which, I had a long yarn this morning with Carmela in the post office."

"Did you now?" said the Canon, producing the sherry decanter again. "Have another?"



Though it was past midday, the inside of the house was in almost complete gloom as the windows remained shuttered. Cassian unlatched one of the shutters and adjusted it carefully so that the shadow fell clean and sharp-edged on the wall. Then he went back to the writing table and examined the letters he had just collected from the post office.

Well?

"All bills. Let's see - phone, electricity, rent..."

It's that time of the month, I suppose. Well, best get on with it.

The Gods of Babylon

“*Bueno.*”

The boy knelt and carefully pulled open the drawer under the writing table; everything was exactly as he had left it, but he adjusted all the contents again, placing them in geometrically straight lines, with equal spaces between. The well-worn wallet, still with its six credit-cards, neatly aligned. The diary, the pocket calculator, the fountain pen, the bunch of keys. And the letter, in the brown envelope with the official stamp. All present and correct. Then he opened the cash-box at the back of the drawer and pulled out a substantial wad of notes in an elastic band; he carefully took off two thousand-peseta notes and pushed them into his shorts pocket, then closed the drawer again.

“I’ll go and pay everything now. *Adios.*”

Adios, chinito.



“They’re called crenellations,” Cassian said, “You know, when there are battlements, like a castle.”

Paolo, binoculars to his eyes, peered and nodded. “San Cristo’s looks best from down here. You can see all of it, and the mountain.”

“You’re lucky, living somewhere like that.”

“You think so?” asked Paolo doubtfully.

“Well – having all these friends, mainly.”

“There’s that, yes.”

The two boys lay on their stomachs on the part of the beach near Cassian’s house. They had been swimming – as they did almost every afternoon now. As it was an almost deserted part of the beach, they never wore swimming-trunks, and now they lay side by side, naked and tummy-down, drying in the hot sun. They had borrowed Father Aeden’s binoculars, in theory to observe the architectural features of the village and the monastery. The possibilities exhausted, Cassian carefully blew some grains of sand from the binoculars’ lenses, put them in their case, then asked Paolo, “Are you really allowed out in the afternoons?”

“Not really and truly, I suppose,” Paolo said. “We’re meant to stay in the grounds, but if you slip off quietly down to the beach they usually turn a blind eye, provided you come back on time.”

Cassian extended a hand and began to run it through the younger boy’s hair, twisting and stroking the dark silky strands.

“Why d’you always smell so good?” he asked.

“Do I?” Paolo giggled, then said, “I suppose it’s because of the Brothers; they bath us *thoroughly*, you know.”

Cassian squirmed on the sand. “Gosh, lucky you. With...a sponge, or their hands?”

“Hands - *big* hands,” said Paolo impressively.

Cassian gulped. “*Wow-ee!*”

“*Si, and* every morning. Then in the afternoons they bath the choir - you know, before Vespers. Lots of people come, and the choristers have to look nice. They do the trebles every day, the altos just three times a week.”

“The what?”

“You know, the boys of fourteen or so whose voices are breaking. It’s just on three nights ‘cos they take longer. More to do, you see.”

Cassian considered, then laughed. “I can see that.”

“Emilio’s an alto now,” Paolo said. “You know him, don’t you?”

Cassian nodded, a little surprised to learn that Emilio was in the choir, as he hadn’t quite seemed the type. Cassian had already learned that Emilio was the school’s junior football star, and he could well believe that at any rate. To the slim Cassian he looked wonderfully athletic, with thighs shown off to great advantage by the school’s brief uniform shorts - which Emilio’s rounded bottom in particular almost seemed to be bursting out of. Sometimes he played football on the school green with the others, when he moved with all the speed and grace of a ballerina - but most of the time he sat at the desk poring over a book, or copying notes with painful concentration into his folders.

“Bit of a swot, though, isn’t he?” said Cassian.

Paolo shook his head. “No, the opposite. You see, if he doesn’t do better in his marks he won’t get into the senior school, and he’s terribly keen to get on their football team; he’d even get to play abroad then. And they want to have him there too. So Father Aeden agreed to take him in his class, bring him on a bit.”

“Mm. He doesn’t always look too happy, does he? Maybe we could help.”

“Course.” Then Paolo said, “And maybe he’d come down here with us.” He grinned. “And we’d have his swim-trunks off, of course.”

“Wow!” Cassian tingled at the thought. To see all of *Emilio*...

“Let’s do it. then!”

The Gods of Babylon

“Let’s!” Then Paolo laughed and said, “Wouldn’t you just like to be Brother Quintin who baths him – you know, who gets to soap his big bare willy three times a week. *Hard*.”

“Wouldn’t I just! And I bet it *goes* hard.”

“Most of our willies do, when we get soaped,” Paolo told him. “When we come out of the washroom, they’re usually sticking right out. The brothers wash us *thoroughly*, you see.”

Cassian wriggled on the sand again. He slid his hand down over Paolo’s back, on to his bottom, then pushed a finger in between the small neat cheeks, tickling and twisting.

“What’s it feel like when they wash you right in there?” he asked.

“You can’t *imagine* what it’s like – not ever,” whispered Paolo. He squirmed deliciously. “*Big* fingers...”

Cassian’s breathing deepened, and he slid a hand underneath his stomach, then down. Paolo gently pulled it out, then pushed his own hand in. “It’s *me* does that now,” he said.

Cassian moved slightly, and Paolo began busily to prove himself, while Cassian *ooo*-ed, whistled and contorted. Paolo said, “We can bring the twins down here too; you could tickle their four nice black buns.”

“Wow! You all have your bath at the same time, then? Emilio too?”

“Sometimes.”

“T-tell me what they l-look like.”

Paolo, without missing a beat, slid closer and began talking quietly into Cassian’s ear, and in only a moment or two, writhing and scissoring on the sand, Cassian yelled and shot; Paolo, laughing as if in pride at his achievement, continued with even greater enthusiasm, making him yell and whiplash over and again. But then he too, having also been wriggling on his stomach like a sand-eel, suddenly caught his breath and jolted, then several times more, before slowly relaxing.

After a while Cassian eased himself upward, peered underneath, then giggled. “Same as before!”

“Eh?”

“Sticky towels!”



Cassian, seated in the cool rear study of his house, reached the last paragraph of his translation. He puzzled for a while, then he got up and took a book from the shelves, first stealing a glance behind him.

Caught you. You're not supposed to do that.

"I did it *nearly* all myself," Cassian pleaded. "And he wants me to bring it down by four. I've only a few minutes."

Well - I didn't see anything, I suppose.

Cassian sat down, began carefully to transcribe the passage into his exercise book.

You were very restless again last night, talking in your sleep.

"I know. I didn't sleep well. Can I come in with you tonight?"

Suppose so.

"Thanks." Cassian finished the exercise and signed it with a flourish. He went over to the window, opened the shutters and wiped his forehead. Today the sun was a little less intense, and light cloud lay over the sea, but it was almost unbearably hot and humid, and Cassian had had repeatedly to wipe his forehead to prevent drops of perspiration falling on his books.

He went through into the back bedroom and, after a moment's thought, took off all the clothes he was wearing, then went through and stuffed them into the washing-machine. Returning to the bedroom he pulled open a drawer, removed a pair of blue swim-trunks and wriggled into them. He considered the result in the tall mirror, turning this way and that. They were Speedos, very small and tight; they showed his long brown thighs to immense advantage and, when he squirmed round so as to see his rear, he could see that the trunks were brief enough for the pale lower half-moons of his bottom-cheeks to be visible, and that pleased him too.

"Bueno!"

He put on plimsolls, collected his exercise-book, and feeling deliciously cool and comfortable now, took down the slightly longer way to the priest's house, over the rocky esparto-grass pasture at the edge of the village, enjoying the fresh breath of the *mestral* on his skin, then down a lane between scarlet-tipped shrubs and tall cypresses to the schoolroom entrance.

The priest wasn't in the schoolroom when Cassian arrived and at first he thought it was empty. But then he saw that Emilio was seated at a desk in the corner, hunched in concentration over his books. He didn't see Cassian to begin with, and Cassian stood in silence, watching him for a

The Gods of Babylon

moment, looking at the fourteen-year-old's long bare thighs, his sun-tanned knees, his socks neatly turned down on his calves. He looked a real athlete with thighs like these, and you could see almost all of them; he wondered if the matron at the school picked out an especially brief pair of shorts on purpose. However, if Emilio *did* come down to the beach with them – and it all worked out – he would have to keep out of the way of those legs when the athletic youngster was brought off; it could be dangerous!

Cassian went over. “Hi,” he said, and Emilio looked up. He rubbed his fist across a somewhat stained cheek and Cassian saw, dismayed, that he had been crying.

Cassian asked amiably, “How’s it going?”

Emilio shook his head. He spoke in a light, pleasant voice, with just the slight huskiness of early puberty. His English was good, but not as ready as Paolo’s.

He pointed to the passage in the book in front of him.

“This *Señor* Shakespeare, is the good English they say, but I never understand. This – ‘speak, hands, for me’ I cannot understand – is no sense.”

“It isn’t meant to be,” Cassian said.

“No?”

“It’s poetry, it’s a play, it’s just meant to *sound* good.” Cassian seized a ruler and pretended to stab Emilio with it. “Spik, *handz*, vur me!”

Emilio giggled. “You’re funny.”

Cassian put the ruler down. “If you want to learn *real* English...” He picked his words carefully. “You know, *I* have lots of problems with Spanish still, and...”

“I could help you,” said Emilio eagerly.

“Great – and I’ll help you with your English, then. Deal?” He held out a palm and Emilio smacked it enthusiastically. He was really a most handsome boy, especially when he smiled, with his clear skin, his dark eyes with long lashes, and white even teeth like Paolo’s.

“There’s a book up here will help.” Cassian pulled a chair over to the bookshelves and stood on it to reach the top. “Father Aeden said – “

“And just *what* did Father Aeden say?” The priest’s voice came from the doorway behind him.

“Oh, Father...” Cassian turned and for a moment saw that the priest’s eyes, fixed on the almost-nude Cassian, were distinctly larger than usual.

The priest was silent for a moment, then he swallowed and said, "Come down off there before you fall."

"Yes, Father." Cassian obeyed, and the priest asked, "Why the swimwear?"

"It's a hot day."

"Well, this isn't the beach. There's a time and a place for everything; you mustn't wear your swim-trunks to school."

Cassian caught Emilio's amused glance over the top of his book and said on impulse, "Shall I take them off, then?" He started untying the string.

Father Aeden said shortly, "That doesn't amuse me, Cassian. If you think I'm going to cry out in horror, *O no, Cassian, please don't do that*, you're mistaken. Now please just -"

Cassian's smile sparkled mischievously, "You think you can call my bluff, then? *O-kay!*"

In an instant he had peeled down his swimming-trunks, had stepped out of them and flung them across the room. He jumped up and down on his toes, slapping the sides of his thighs. He spun right round, jumped again, giggled uncontrollably. "How's that, Father, how's that? No swim-trunks, see? Can I stay in school now? Can I? - can I?"

Father Aeden sat down; for a few moments he was silent. In spite of himself, his eyes were drawn down over the boy's pale belly; as the youngster pranced, everything bounced up and down extravagantly, his boyish four inches still perfectly smooth, with only a scatter of tiny hairs at the base.

The priest poured and drained a glass of water, then said crossly, "Emilio, get on with your work." To Cassian he said, "Okay, you've had your fun, but the joke's over now. Just put on your pants, and then we can continue normally."

"I can't find them," said Cassian.

"Well, look for them," said the priest, a little more sharply.

Cassian shook his head so vigorously that his locks flew. "Don't know where they are. I'll have to have my lessons without them. Sorry."

"*I'll show you sorry!*" Goaded, the priest reached out and grabbed the boy's arm. "There's such a thing as playing into the hands of the enemy. *Deos fortioribus adesse*, Cassian."

In a single movement he spun Cassian face-down over his lap; he briefly struggled to remove one of the plimsolls from the boy's wildly

The Gods of Babylon

waving feet, then gave up, and instead his broad palm landed crackingly some dozen times, while Cassian writhed and shouted.

“Now get up.”

Cassian stood, rubbing his rear with one hand and knuckling his eyes with the other. “Oh, my *bum!*”

The priest said, “Next time you take off your pants in class you can also take off one of your plimsolls too, and I’ll make very good use of it. *Now* find your swim-trunks.”

“I - I think they went behind Emilio’s desk, Father. I’ll have a look.”

“Well, look *now*.”

Cassian scampered across the room, bent and peered, then wriggled under the desk on his stomach. “Yes - I think I can just see them.”

“*Eyes on your book, Emilio!*” snapped the priest. “I won’t tell you again.” He swung round. “I have to leave you for a moment; get on with your work, both of you.”

Cassian had retrieved his swimming-trunks and pulled them on. “You’ll be next for a hot bot, from the sound of it,” he said to Emilio. Then he asked, “Shall I get that book for you, then?”

But Emilio twisted uncomfortably on his seat, then said, “I - I go too now. I have to get back. I see you tomorrow.”

He took up his books and left, but Cassian didn’t fail to notice that his pants were even tighter than before, and that he walked slightly more awkwardly than usual.



That night the vast hall was lit from end to end in honour of the night’s guest, the Venerable Otto of Cartagena, for whom an incomparable banquet had been prepared. Torches flickered in their sconces all along the walls, the flamelight throwing fantastic shadows into every corner, and on the great table, around a massive gold centrepiece, were grouped crystal glasses and decanters shimmering in a thousand colours, together with gleaming silverware, brilliantly glazed cups and salvers, and delicate china painted in rose and burgundy.

At opposite ends of the table sat Adelard, this time in a green cloak edged with silver, and at the other, under a spread of foliage, sat the patriarchal Don Otto. A fire had been lit in the huge open hearth, and music from a hidden gallery filtered down through the dark.

The three page-boys, Cassian, Ephar and Roti had been busy as bumble-bees. In their formal attire - nothing except gold necklets and scarlet slippers - they trotted up and down the steps to the table carrying loaded salvers, flacons, dishes, decanters.

Don Otto drained a goblet of chilled amontillado and said, "They serve you magnificently, Brother Adelard."

"Yes, but I spoil them outrageously, My Lord. They have already dined well, long before us, and will doubtless dine again, and even more ravenously, on what is left."

The Venerable Otto refilled his goblet, spilling a little, and shook his head emphatically. "Nonetheless, you have taste. Your pages, *hermano*, have the eyes of cherubim, the locks of goddesses, the bottoms of Cupids... He rolled the wine round on his palate, hiccuped, and said, "An excellent year, Brother Adelard... I congratulate you."

"I shall of course have a case sent to you tomorrow."

His guest crossed himself.

"*Deo gratias.*"

"And now..." said Adelard. He clapped his hands.

"*Chicos!*"

The pages ran forward, stood in a neat row and bowed. "*Maestro...*"

"They will be pleased to attend you further," Adelard told his guest. "The dessert... Something with a little cream, perhaps?"

"Not fattening?" enquired Don Otto anxiously. "My cassock grows daily more confining."

Adelard shook his head and drained his glass. His eyes flickered sideways to the pages.

"You would prefer some chocolate mousse, maybe?" he enquired of his guest, "- or something more of the vanilla variety, also of course with a little whipped cream. The choice, honoured Otto, is yours."

Don Otto put his beaker down. "Not an easy choice, my dear Adelard. But it is said, I believe, that a small helping of cream does delicately complement a chocolate mousse. I think I well may... Whipped at the table, if I might enquire?"

"I think you will find, Brother Otto, that the pages are capable of frothing it for you themselves - they are energetic *chicos*, they kick like grasshoppers. As you will see. Though if your Lordship wishes to take his choice across his exalted lap and whip further, the flavour may be enhanced, who knows?"

The Gods of Babylon

The Don reached for the decanter and said, "Tonight, Brother Adelard, I have no energy for such games."

At which Adelard said reprovingly, "The word "*phew*" does *not* figure in a polite page-boy's vocabulary, Roti. And please pour for His Eminence, one of you."

"Thank you, *chico*," said the Don. Then to Adelard, "You may choose first."

"Very well. The vanilla for me, I think." He pushed his chair back, beckoned Cassian over, then placed an arm round his waist, pulling him close. He slid his other hand down over the boy's stomach, then began to stroke, knead, massage... "First you must be prepared," he said.

Don Otto put down his goblet, peered at Ephar and Roti and blinked. "Are there *truly* two, *amigo* Adelard, or...?"

"Two, Eminence. Your eyes do not deceive you. But you would care to examine the menu more closely?" Adelard clapped his hands again and the twins, dissolved in giggles now, skipped up and stood beside the Don, jostling and pushing slightly.

"There is, you see, the more bubbly variety or the smoother; some care for the effervescence, others a dessert that slides over the tongue more gently..."

"Like life," said the Don, suddenly reflective. His hands slid all over Roti's smooth body, stroking and scrutinising his genitals, his bottom, turning him this way and that, Roti writhing slightly despite Adelard's warnings to keep still.

The scrutiny was long and thorough, then it was Ephar's turn. Meanwhile, for the first time Cassian noted the black cat curled by Adelard's feet. It stirred in its sleep, woke and looked steadily at Cassian with green, slanted eyes. It was beautifully sleek, and when it leaped upwards and picked its way over the table and then back towards Cassian it did so with exquisite grace, sliding between the delicate glassware without even brushing a single item. All this time, its eyes didn't leave Cassian's for an instant.

Cassian stretched his hand out. "Puss, puss..."

"Come," said Adelard gently, "You know better."

Even at the sound of Cassian's voice, the cat had started to purr. Almost in a whisper, the boy said, "Pao..."

The cat came to the edge of the table, rubbed itself luxuriously against Cassian's bare flank, its purrs vibrating through all of its elegant body now.

The boy looked back at Adelard. "Did you *have* to?"

"Hear him purr," was all Adelard said. He turned to his colleague. "Well?"

Sadly, the Don shook his head. "Some choices are impossible, *hermano*."

So a 25-peseta coin was produced and thrown, and a moment later Ephar, crestfallen, had been dismissed to fetch the serving trolley.

And in another moment, Cassian and Roti had been picked up in strong arms and laid face-down on the polished oak table, slippers and necklets removed, one in front of Adelard, the other in front of the Don.

"*Benedictus benedicat*," murmured Don Otto.

"So mote it be," responded Adelard.

And then the silence was abruptly shattered as Ephar, instructed by Adelard, spooned ice-cold sorbet on the two pairs of wriggling rear cheeks; Cassian and Roti shrieked and contorted on the hard oak while Ephar carried out his task enthusiastically, shaking with unaccustomed merriment.

"My bum's being *frozen*!" hollered Roti, his round rear jolting.

"He's putting it in my *crack*!" yelled Cassian.

"I'll get it out, never fear," Adelard said. "All of it." And to his colleague, "Liqueurs with this, I think. A little Benedictine would go?"

"A perfect accompaniment. So kind..."

After which conversation for a time lapsed as the guests, busy with tongues all over the four tender rear hillocks, to and fro, up and down. Soon Cassian squalled as the icy sorbet was vigorously excavated from deep between his cheeks, his whole body twisting tumultuously on the table's hard oak. Out of the corner of his eye he saw Roti's wriggles, too, become increasingly frenetic; then at once Roti's squawks rose to a crescendo, his knees flexed, and his feet pedaled the air for a few moments before finally thumping down on the table again.

Shyly, the boy turned his head to Adelard. "Sorry, *maestro*"

He was dismissed in disgrace, and the eager Ephar was recalled.

"Wipe the table first," Adelard told the culprit crossly, "And there'll be hot buns for supper tonight."

"Ouch!" Ephar fell silent, but winked at Cassian. He settled himself on the table, then both boys were spun over on their backs. Cassian caught his breath as Adelard flicked him with his fingers.

"*You're* certainly ready," said the latter, flicking again.

The Gods of Babylon

“You do that much more, *m-maestro*, you’ll g-get the cream *now*,” gasped the boy.

“Soon, certainly.” Then Adelard turned back to his guest. “But come, Eminence. To add spice to the proceedings – a race, do you think? A wager, even.”

“Rather improper, perhaps? Do not the Scriptures...? Yet, if it was for no ordinary stake...? A jeroboam of Munn, for example.”

“Certainly, *padre*. Adelard turned to Roti. “*Chico segundo*, you shall be umpire. Ring the bell.”

The bell tinkled, and instantly the pace was furious; the diners set to with unrestrained competitive fervour, using lips, tongue and teeth with such relish and gusto that Cassian and Ephar were instantly thrashing and contorting in unison on the hard oak, their bottoms bumping repeatedly on the wood, their ear-splitting treble duet rising piercingly as Roti the umpire, laughing delightedly, scampered from one side of the table to the other, bending and peering. But it seemed only a matter of seconds before both boys whip-lashed, screamed and shot simultaneously. Roti stood, threw out his hands. But the diners continued even more hungrily now, while the boys on the table spasmed repeatedly, chorusing like screech-owls, long legs spinning, feet pummelling the air until, with every last drop of dessert licked away, the Don finally raised his head, met his colleague’s cool eyes and said, “Honours, I think, are even, *hermano*.”

Adelard turned enquiringly to Roti, who nodded.

“An honourable draw,” he confirmed, and the two boys on the table, still breathless and tingling, sat up and slapped one another’s palms.

“Coffee?” Adelard asked his guest.

“A little,” said Don Otto. “Black, if you please.”

The pages got down from the table and poured coffee, then more Benedictine. The music from the gallery was muted.... At a signal Ephar and Roti slipped out through the tall curtains; Cassian remained at his post between the diners, coffee-pot and decanters ready to hand.

“A final piece of entertainment, Eminence,” said Adelard. “More music you might find tedious, and dances banal, so I offer...acrobatics.”

“A lively finish, Blessed Adelard,” agreed the Don. He half-turned to Cassian. “A little more Benedictine, please, *chico*.”

“And with it, *padre*?”

“Benedictine with it.”

“*Si, padre*.”

“You are indecent, *Chico* Cassian,” said Adelard, looking at him. “Put your necklet and slippers back on at once.”

“Sorry,” said Cassian, and obeyed. He started to pour for the Don – then paused and stared. The twins had pulled the curtains open, and the acrobatic turn walked, a little shyly, on to the carpet in front of them. He wore brief red swim-trunks, but the twins lost no time in untying them, peeling them down, making him step out.

“*Emilio*,” Cassian breathed. But Emilio as he had not seen him before.

He too had been well prepared. His jet-black hair was perfectly combed, to lie in a neat line across his forehead, and there was a light dusting of additional colour – rose and violet – on his cheeks, together with a subtle addition of colour to his lips, black to his eyebrows, and a faint lining of pale blue on his eyelids, just above the long lashes. But there was also a slight natural flush in the fourteen-year-old’s cheeks – perhaps due to bashfulness, but maybe also to mild vanity; Cassian knew he was proud of his athletic body. His eyes certainly sparkled notably as they briefly met Cassian’s. Cassian, though, was especially intrigued to see, for the first time, what Emilio normally kept in his trim school pants. It was rather bigger than his own, lying neatly between Emilio’s thighs, and Cassian thought he would have loved to stroke it with his fingers, even to run his fingertips through the little hairs at its base.

He found, somehow – though with his eyes never leaving Emilio – that he had slid back towards Adelard and was seated half on the man’s knee. He caught an enquiring look in Adelard’s eyes, and he nodded. Adelard’s hand slid down and he began very gently to caress the boy again.

The twins, half-kneeling, busied themselves with Emilio. He had been placed on a small raised area of the floor; in front, Roti’s nimble fingers tickled, patted and stroked, while Ephar’s fingers, probing behind, were equally active; Emilio’s breathing deepened, his eyes closed, and Cassian watched breathlessly as the bigger boy quickly rose in front to a spectacular ninety degrees.

Adelard whispered, “You like him?” Shyly, Cassian nodded, and Adelard became still more active, his hand working up and down while Cassian began to whimper and twist on the man’s thighs.

Then Adelard made a sign to Roti, who tripped across to the Don; the latter immediately began to provide vigorous attention for Roti in his turn.

The Gods of Babylon

“More music!” called Adelard, and the tempo from the balcony quickened and swelled. “Warm-up exercise,” he ordered. “Running on the spot. See to it, *paje* Ephar.”

Ephar at once bent his head and, with the eager assistance of his tongue, teeth and lips – he had clearly been watching and learning – Emilio’s feet were soon thudding rhythmically on the wood floor; his head thrown back, eyes closed, he had begun to whistle and sob.

“Next exercise!” ordered Adelard after a moment, and Ephar straightened again. At once Emilio, his hands on the younger boy’s head, tried to pull it back down again. “*Por favor, por favor!*”

But Adelard rapped, “Press-ups next. On the floor!”

With Ephar’s hand pushed underneath him, Emilio flattened himself on the floor, back to the audience, and, with Ephar working steadily and energetically underneath, he was soon pushing himself up and down at a rapid and extremely creditable rate.

But Adelard was as always dissatisfied. “Come on, boy, legs apart, get yourself *right* up; we’ve seen up a bum-hole before. Let’s see right up to your *tonsils*, boy! Or do you want me to get my strap? *Then* we’d see plenty!”

This had an immediate effect; Cassian stared and swallowed.

“And you, Ephar – *work harder.*”

Adelard too worked ever harder. He began to speak quietly to the boy. “Just *look* at it – open, shut, open, shut....wouldn’t you just like to put your hard willy in there, right into that crack, *right* up that tight bot-hole...?”

“Ah-ah-ah,” the boy gasped, as his movements on the man’s knees became increasingly rapid and uncontrolled.

“You’d yell like an Apache, shoot like a Colt 44...”

Cassian began to *aaaaah* now, and heard Emilio joining in.

But he was aware of something else now. All around, brilliant white light was flashing and flickering – the tall doors had blown open, the curtains were beginning to fly, to billow into the room. Something like thunder cracked and growled, and, from far above him came sounds like those of creaking and fracturing timber.

But suddenly Cassian was jolting, crying out at the top of his voice, shooting repeatedly into Adelard’s busy hand; he didn’t notice anything else for a few moments, except that he could hear Emilio whole-heartedly keeping up the duet. But then the noise was everywhere, dust was flying, and fragments of stone and timber were beginning to fall all around him.

And he was off Adelard's knee, running out into the garden, naked in the lightning and torrential rain, the trees bending and blowing all round him. He saw the cat perched on a wall and went to pick it up, but it hissed at him and streaked off into the bushes. The twins had vanished but, between the trunks, two black panthers waited, tails swinging, great yellow eyes gleaming in the storm-light. One snarled and Cassian ran back to the interior, but everything was tumbling and cascading down now, in a noisy confusion of dust and debris. Yet at the high table the two diners poured Benedictine regardless as the building fell all around, and this was the last thing that Cassian saw before darkness blew in on him.



You're going to be late.

"Don't care." Cassian, lacing his trainers, struggled to unpick a knot. "Bugger them all, anyhow."

That's not very nice. Father Aeden and the others have been very kind to you.

"I suppose."

You didn't sleep well last night, did you? You look a bit pale. Did the thunderstorm keep you awake?

Cassian hesitated, then said, "No, it - it wasn't that."

You want to come in with me again tonight?

The boy leapt to his feet. "I bloody well can't, can I? And you know bloody well *why!*"

A brief silence. Then, *I'm sorry.*

"I'm sorry too," said the boy after a moment. "It wasn't your fault."

Yes, it was. But it won't be for long now, carissimo.

"Too long," said the boy, his good humour not yet fully restored. "Bye." He snatched up his book and darted off over the fields to the schoolhouse.



But it seemed a long morning in school. It was baking hot, and not even the heavy canopies could keep the interior of the big room tolerably cool; the glimpses through the windows of the beach and the shimmering surf-line simply made things worse. Nevertheless, Cassian managed to

The Gods of Babylon

finish a distinctly tricky translation of Ovid, and felt much more cheerful by break-time. He even looked forward to the relatively brief period that followed, though mainly because it brought ever-nearer the moment when he could escape with Paolo to the sand and the cool water.

But a surprise awaited him first. When he went outside there seemed relatively few children in the play area and, a moment later, his arm was grabbed by Paolo, who said in an undertone, "Come with me."

"Where?"

"Come on, you'll see."

Cassian followed to a deserted spot behind the school where there was a group of rocky outcrops between long and untended grass. To his surprise Emilio, the twins, and two other boys from the monastery were there as well, sitting on the rocks. They got up as he approached. Paolo indicated a low flat-topped stone and said to Cassian, "Stand on that."

Cassian obeyed, then the others came round and formed a circle round him, joining hands.

"What's this *about*?" asked Cassian, mildly alarmed.

"Don't be frightened," Paolo said, "We're all your friends."

"I'm not *frightened*. Just explain."

"We want you to swear an oath," said Paolo.

"What kind of an oath?"

"An oath to do exactly what we say."

"What's that?"

"Aren't you our friend?" Paolo asked. "If you were, you would trust us."

Cassian hesitated, swallowed. "Okay, I swear."

Paolo spat in his palm, made Cassian do the same, then they slapped palms together. "*Bueno*, you've sworn."

The rest of the group relaxed again, went back and perched on the rocks.

Cassian sat down as well. "So what d'you want me to do?"

"We want you to come to San Cristo."

"Is that all?" asked Cassian, getting up. "Okay then, it's not far."

"No, you don't understand," Paolo said. "We mean - to come to the school. You know - be a boy in the school, like us. We all want you to be. And remember, you swore."

Cassian stared at him, then gulped.

“Wow! Yes, I really think I would – if I could. But it can’t be just as easy as that, can it? I can’t just walk in. I mean, there’s exams, fees and so on.”

Paolo said, “It can be okay if a priest speaks for you. That’s how I got in. The priest in my village spoke for me, he said my work was good and that we hadn’t any money – so here I am.”

“But *I* haven’t anyone.”

“Yes, you’ve got Father Aeden. *He’ll* speak for you.”

“I wouldn’t think so,” said Cassian. “He tanned my bum yesterday.”

“I do know.” Paolo giggled. “Emilio said you got it completely bare. Did you?”

“Bare’s a button,” said Cassian.

“Emilio spunked his pants,” Roti put in.

“Oh, shut up,” said Emilio, punching him.

“Anyway, Father Aeden *will* speak for you,” said Paolo simply. “Because I asked him.”

Cassian stared at him again. “So it’s a set-up? It’s all been fixed? Behind my back?”

“Yes, pretty much,” Paolo admitted cheerfully. “The Superior wants to see you after lessons this afternoon – at three o’clock. With your guardian.”

“Oh.” Cassian’s face fell. “That would be difficult. He’s...away at present.”

“Then come and explain that,” said Paolo, not to be put off. “I’ll come with you – if you want.”

“Course.”



Back in the house, Cassian puzzled for some time over what to wear. His shorts were all distinctly grubby and crumpled, and shorts in any case were probably not dressy enough for such a personage as a *Superior*. On the other hand, jeans would be even worse. Then, on a brainwave, he pulled out from a suitcase the long grey flannels he had worn for school in England, but had never worn since. They looked neat enough, though his ankles poked out a little now. He found, from the same source, a pair of black shoes, and rubbed them with a tissue until they were tolerably shiny,

The Gods of Babylon

then he put on a blue open-necked shirt, tucked it into his trousers carefully, combed his hair, and the effect was complete. More or less.

He followed the winding road upwards, through a forest escarpment, to the vast grey monastery that dominated the village from the top of mighty crags just behind it. He felt dwarfed by the massive pillars at the entrance, indeed distinctly intimidated, and was relieved to find Paolo waiting just inside. The youngster, full of eagerness, led the way confidently through labyrinthine corridors to the lair of the Superior, knocked, and was told to come in.

People rarely look like you expected them to, Cassian reflected. The Superior did. He was thin, tall, upright and silver-haired, in a neat grey cassock with a short shoulder-cape. He wasn't, however, hung about with crosses and medallions as most priests seemed to be, and he surprised Cassian slightly by rising and courteously shaking hands. He looked Cassian over with a pair of keen blue eyes which, though kindly, probably didn't miss much, then he asked the boy to sit down. In the office, by a bookcase in the rear, was also Canon Odo, whom Cassian had seen once with Joe, and who was a familiar figure about the town; Cassian remembered now that he was Senior Chaplain here as well. The Canon nodded to Cassian, then went across to a far corner, walking with a slight limp, and sat in a leather armchair.

"Very well, you can go," the Superior said to Paolo.

"Father, can't I stay?" pleaded Paolo. "Cassian's my friend, he said he wanted me here."

"I didn't say I wanted you here," said the Superior.

Paolo looked at the floor. "No, Father. Sorry, Father."

"Very well, you can stay for the time being. But one single squeak out of you..."

"Thank you, Father."

"Now, Cassian, I'm not one to waste words, so I'll come straight to the point. Just let me say first, though, that one factor to have influenced me greatly is that you appear have made very good friends with certain other boys who are already members of the school. The fact that such affinities already exist bodes well, in terms of my experience, for your future in our community here. You agree?"

"Yes, sir."

"Father. A priest asks for respect, but not for subservience."

"Yes, Father."

“On the other hand, experience has taught me that boys are sometimes popular for the wrong reasons. They may be ringleaders in various pieces of mischief, for example.”

“Oh no, sir - Father. I mean, not me, Father.”

“Time will tell. On the more formal side - where your schoolwork is concerned, I have examined your work and heard from both Father Aeden and Canon Odo. In sum, I have decided, subject to certain conditions, to accept you as a pupil in this school, and -”

“Yipp-ee!” said Paolo.

“Out!” said the Superior.

Paolo winked at Cassian and left. The Superior went on, “As a matter of form I must, of course, interview your guardian and make sure that he consents to your attendance here. Also, because of certain legal requirements, there are forms he has to sign. When might it be convenient for him to attend?”

Cassian hesitated. “Can’t I take him the forms?”

“No, I should like to see him in person.” The Superior rose. “Ask him to ring for an appointment.”

Cassian realised that the interview was over, and in a moment or two he was on his way back down the hill. But something inside him began to hurt, terribly. To be on the *edge* of something that he now knew he really wanted, and then...

Back in the house, half in a daze, he took off his school clothes and wriggled back into his shorts and trainers. It *can't* be like this, he thought over and again, it *mustn't*.

Almost without planning it, he found himself on his way back to the schoolhouse. The other boys would have long since gone, but with a bit of luck Father Aeden might still be there.

He was. He was seated in a sunny corner of the classroom, studying one of his leather-covered books, making notes in a file. He glanced up, then looked more closely at the boy.

“Why - what’s wrong, Cassian?”

At his kindly tones the dam finally broke and Cassian started to sob, tears spilling from his eyes, then dripping from his nose and chin. He started to blurt out his story, but in an incoherent rush... “And I r-really wanted too...but I c-can’t now, cause he... And I d-did so w-w-want to...”

Father Aeden pushed his chair back, and held out his hands. “Come over here, *chicito*.”

The Gods of Babylon

Then the priest, with the boy on his knee, hugged and soothed him, murmuring quietly to him, repeatedly stroking his hair till he was quiet again.

"I blame myself, Cassian, you know," he said at length. "It's my fault, I've been foolish."

The boy stared. "*Your* fault?"

"Yes, mine. My poor child, I should have told you."

"Told me w-what?" asked the boy.

The priest produced a tissue and wiped the youngster's cheeks. "Told you that I knew about everything. But I hoped that you would tell me yourself, would trust me enough in the end."

"I do trust you. But...what is it you know?"

"About your guardian. About Joe," said the priest gently. "Where he is. Don't worry, hardly anyone else knows about it. Not even Canon Odo, who wants to know everything. But there were some things that didn't make sense, and I made it my business to enquire further. I - well, cared about you, you see."

"You're a good friend to me, Father."

"God, and don't you need friends. You poor boy, how have you managed?"

"Well enough. He left some money, then sent me more."

The priest said, "Go and wash your face and get a lemonade from the fridge, then come and tell me all about it from the beginning."

Cassian came back with the drink and said, "It was about three months ago, Father. He'd often gone for a few days together, but this was longer, and I began to get worried. Then I got this official envelope from Barcelona. The letter inside was - on prison paper. He'd got in some kind of fight, hurt someone, and they'd given him s-six months." His voice began to break again, and he looked pleadingly at the priest. "Father - he - he's a good man really, very kind - but sometimes he doesn't - well, know what he's doing, c-cos..."

"I've no doubt that he's a good man, Cassian. In fact, it's often some of the best people, the most sensitive people, who feel things most, who most need a little something... I've known many of them - friends of mine. But you know, my son -" he chose his words with care - "sometimes a while...away can do a man a lot of good - though I know it must be hard on you."

“He’s trying to get a reduction,” said Cassian eagerly, “And he thinks he might. And there’ll be time off for good behaviour.”

“Of course. Have you been to see him?”

“I went there once. They wouldn’t let me in, though. But they gave me all his things to take home, and we write to each other. B-but, Father, what happens now? I wanted to go to the school *so* much, but they need him to sign, and he *c*-can’t, and everyone will know why, and they’ll take me away - and - and...” His voice had begun to quiver again and his eyes to fill.

The priest shushed him, pulled him close again and said, “Cassian, don’t you see that the problem is really its own solution, in a way? Yes, you’ve been managing well, but certain people - if they learnt about the situation - might well say that you hadn’t got a real home and no-one to look after you. Until now, that is. Don’t you see, you’ll live at the monastery now, they’ll look after you. We’ll all look after you ”

“But - but the papers and everything.”

“Papers schmapers. All that can be arranged. Cassian, I’ll have to tell the Superior, but it won’t go any further.”

“But won’t he think now that I - I’m...?”

“Unsuitable? Not at all - the opposite, I would imagine. He’s a very kind man, and I’ve no doubt that he’ll be even more keen to help you. Leave it to me.”

Cassian was silent for a moment, then nudged his head against the priest’s neck, and said, “I love you, Father.”

“And I you - and all the others in the class,” said the priest, not very satisfactorily for Cassian. “Now, then -”

Cassian pushed the priest’s hair back on his forehead and asked, “Why the plaster? Did you bump into a door or what?”

“Something like that,” said Father Aeden briskly.

“Or did something fall on your head, maybe?”

Father Aeden got up. “That will be all, Cassian. Don’t forget, though, that your work with me goes on regardless. Except that - well, this evening I think you need a while on the beach, and your friend’s out there peeping through the shutters, though he thinks I can’t see him. *So hop it!*”



The Gods of Babylon

Cassian had expected Paolo, but instead Emilio was waiting. The fourteen-year-old had discarded his school uniform, and instead wore a pair of brief nylon football shorts, a scarlet top and matching socks, the socks doubled down almost to his ankles.

He noted Cassian's slight surprise, and said uncertainly, "Paolo is kept in, so he say I can come instead. Is all right?"

Cassian looked his new friend up and down - looked at his wide smile and sparkling teeth, his skimpy football gear fluttering in the light wind, his long sun-tanned thighs, his brown, perfectly-sculpted knees - and said emphatically, "Yes, it *is* all right. Oh, *yes*."

He went over, slid a hand up and down on Emilio's football jersey. "Very nice," he said.

On Emilio's cheeks, the slight flush that Cassian remembered. "Is our school football kit. You like?"

Cassian said, under his breath, "I didn't mean just the jersey."

"Eh?"

"Oh yes, I like," Cassian said aloud. He looked around, then clasped the other boy's hand. "Down the beach, then." He shivered with delight to feel his hand clutched in return. Then he wanted to know something.

"Emilio, is it true you stickied your pants when Father Aeden spanked me the other day?"

Emilio's colour deepened slightly again, and he asked, "You not laugh?"

"Course not."

Emilio said shyly, "*Si*. You very nice, very bare. I watch your bot go joggle-joggle... And then - *whop* - I come."

Responding to a sudden memory, Cassian said, "Yes, just like with me last n..." His voice tailed off.

"*Qué?*"

"Nothing."

"So you not mind?"

"No, it's *fantástico*. I mean, that it was because of looking at *me*..." Then Cassian giggled and said, "I did the same, you know. Maybe 'cos you were watching! On the way home my bot was tingling, then the tingle went all through, and I stickied right in my swim-trunks!"

"If I been there, I help you, it been much better" Emilio said. "I strong boy, I have made you sticky *lots*."

Cassian said, "I have strong wrists too - I used to play cricket. I could make you sticky even *more...*" He pressed his hand on the front of Emilio's thin nylon shorts, said, "Wow-*ee!*", then began to rub his palm up and down. "You'll *see!*"

Emilio whispered, "*Si*, but best you do it to - to my *bare* pico..."

Cassian gulped at the thought, then said, "And won't you just! In fact, I'm going to get *all* that kit off you *now!*"

"You *try!*"

Suddenly, laughing, scampering, tumbling, wrestling, the pair were on their way across the field, through the scrub and sand-dunes, in and around between the avenues of palms that led to the beach.

After innumerable circuits round the palm-trunks, the boys finished in a breathless, giggling heap on the grass. Cassian tickled Emilio under his arms, pulled his shirt off, pushed him flat on the ground, straddling him with his thighs, pummelled his chest. "You give in? You give in?"

"*Socorro, socorro! Si - si!*"

"Okay, you better come quietly, then." Cassian skinned down Emilio's shorts and underpants, then pulled them off completely, bundled these and his shirt under his arm, and pulled Emilio to his feet. "You can keep your plimsolls and socks on till we get to the beach," he said, but he bent quickly first and pushed the red socks right down his friend's legs. "Will anyone see us?" enquired the naked fourteen-year-old, looking round uneasily.

"No-one comes here. Anyhow, I've beaten you, and you do what *I* say now. Come on!"

"*Bueno.*"

Cassian firmly took Emilio's hand and conducted him to the beach, thrilled to see what preceded his friend, as he trotted alongside, pointing the way ahead.

Once in his own corner of the beach, below the house, Cassian lost not an instant in pushing Emilio to the ground, pulling off his socks and plimsolls. Then Cassian was stroking, kissing, all of Emilio's lithe, athlete's body, especially the wonder he had aroused, and then whispering, so that the other boy could scarcely hear, "Em, I'd love to have your big hard one *right* up me..."

At which thought his own threatened to explode spontaneously, and he saw Emilio's press hard against his stomach, but then Cassian had bent again, pulled it out, and was employing lips, tongue and teeth in the way

The Gods of Babylon

he had so recently learned, and with such shattering effect that his new friend, body jolting from end to end and heels hammering the sand, had in a moment or two whooped, bounded, and delivered substantially into Cassian's eager mouth - then, contorting and squawking - more, and even more.

At length, slightly breathless, he raised his head and asked hoarsely, "You - you swallow it?"

Cassian nodded. Then he said, "So - you said earlier, you were a strong boy - you'd do something for *me* - remember?"

"*Clar-o!!*" In an instant the fourteen-year-old had sat up, reached forward and jerked Cassian's pants down to his knees.

"Strip me bare first," Cassian ordered, and Emilio scarcely lost a second before his friend lay nude and giggling on the sand. Then with one hand working busily in front and the other at the rear, his finger prodding, penetrating and twisting, he put all of his youthful strength and agility into drawing from the younger boy shrieks and athletics fully comparable with his own, followed, with a final treble yell, by a *quid pro quo* that the older boy was only just in time to receive, stooping forward instantly and closing his lips tight on the offering, almost greedily drawing in more and more while Cassian writhed and carolled...and more...and more, until...

...at long last Cassian was quiet and then said, still breathless, "Wow, I think that was the best *ever*. You were *right!*"

"I swallow too," said Emilio proudly. "And I love, because it from you."

They lay tangled together naked on the hot sand for some time longer, squeezed together. They talked then about the monastery, about their friends, about plans for Cassian's debut in the school, about the football team, the choir...until they heard the four o'clock bell ringing from the high San Cristobel tower. Emilio sat up, hesitated, took a deep breath, then said, "It was a mos' delightful afternoon, which I mush enjoyed, and which was mush appreciated. I am most obliged, yours faithfully." He smiled, flushing slightly, and asked, "How that?"

Cassian stood him up, punched him, kissed him, and said, "*Fabuloso.*"



Cassian had a strange encounter on the following afternoon on his way to individual tuition. He was accosted in the narrow village street by a figure in a broad-brimmed hat and a black cloak, leaning heavily on a stick.

A sinewy arm shot out and grasped his own.

“’Tis Cassian, risen from the dead! Translated - nay, transfigured! *Deo gratias!*”

“Canon Odo!” said Cassian in some surprise.

“Cassian of Imola, tortured most cruelly for his faith, burned by his tormentors with red-hot styli, otherwise known as *Casciano il Constatto*, the ever-faithful. Your arm, please, Blessed Casciano.”

“You are hurt, Father?” said Cassian, noticing that the priest was still limping.

“A mere nothing, my son,” said Canon Odo, taking the boy’s arm and walking with him down the street. “A little falling masonry, a bruise or two, that’s all. *De minimis non curant sapientes*. Translate.”

“Of...um...small things...?”

“Come and tell me tomorrow. And if there’s anything else you want to tell me, Casciano the Courageous, I may be able to help.”

A little bewildered, the boy asked, “Something like..?”

“You have friends here - and friends can open many doors. Even doors of iron. *Benedice*.”

They had arrived at Canon Odo’s house, then the boy went thoughtfully on to the schoolhouse.

He asked Father Aeden right away, “Did you tell him? Canon Odo, I mean - about Joe?”

“Of course not, I promised not to,” said the priest. “But Canon Odo hears things from many people. Don’t worry - he’ll be a good friend to you.”

The boy nodded, then said slowly, “Funny, though, both of you having bumps and bruises.”

The priest said shortly, “I don’t see why.”

“Canon Odo’s hopping about today like a one-legged crow,” Cassian expanded.

“Canon Odo’s a very good man,” said the priest reprovingly. “He’s extremely rich in his own right, but he gave it all up to enter the Church.”

“Where’s all his money?”

“Salted away somewhere, I suppose. But it will have to go to the Order in his death - far distant, *Deo volens*.”

The Gods of Babylon

He took out the current textbook and began to thumb through it. Cassian sat on the opposite side of the narrow table and watched him. Then he reached across, put a hand over one of Father Aeden's, and said, "You've got strong hands for a priest."

The priest looked up and smiled. "So - should my hands be thin and willowy, then? In fact, I was a rower at College - helped to win a race or two, as it happens."

"I'm not surprised." Cassian kept a hold of the priest's hand, pulled it closer and said, almost dreamily, "Just think of a man's hands - big *strong* hands like these - on a boy's tenderest places." Cassian shivered, felt himself becoming hard in his pants again. "I mean, wow, that would be really *something*, wouldn't it?"

Father Aeden hesitated, then said, "Cassian, if this is about the spanking I gave you, it was thoroughly deserved."

Cassian shook his head. "No, I didn't mean on my botty, I meant on my..."

But the priest had leaned forward and gently closed Cassian's lips with his thumb and fingers. Then he said, "Can we get on with our Latin now?"

"I suppose so," said the boy gloomily.



The main school dormitory was on the first floor, so that through the tall lancet windows you could see through the archway into the cloister, with the sunlit grass and the brilliant water of the lichen-covered fountain. It was early evening, but still bright, with a splash of light on Cassian's bed, just under one of the windows. Though Cassian was only thirteen, he now looked, oddly, even younger in his neat haircut and new school uniform - brief grey shorts, ankle socks, short-sleeved white shirt with an open neck. He was also rather more silent than usual, slightly subdued by his surroundings.

Not so Paulo, who jumped up and down on his toes, hugging himself with unholy mirth.

"Disgrace! *Double* disgrace! Oh, you've started well!"

"What'd he do? Tell us?" enquired a dozen eager voices. The boys were clustered round Cassian's bed - Paulo, the twins Ephar and Roti, Emilio from the next dormitory, and a scatter of other twelve and thirteen-

year olds. The boys spoke in Spanish, as they usually did when no masters were around to hear.

Paolo giggled. "I mean, not *bad*, was it! Twelve Hail Marys for being hard in front of Sister Clemency - and on his first day!"

"Wow-ee!"

"Wasn't my fault," said Cassian. "There was I, good as gold, with Sister measuring me for my uniform - then you lot come cavorting in from the showers, capering around with your bare willies joggling about..."

"And at that *moment*," Paolo went on, "Sister said his pants didn't fit and made him take them off..."

"And then she gave me the *Ave's*," Cassian concluded.

There was a chorus of commiseration, then Paolo said, "Anyway, now you've got to show us what you promised - what you learnt in your school in England."

"What?"

Paolo said (in English), "Sticky buns."

Cassian said, "Okay, then, gather round. When any really nice-looking kids - or even some ordinary kids - came to the school, what they would get almost in the first week was *sticky buns*. Somebody who really liked you - usually a bigger boy - would give you them - and he'd do it like *this!*"

Paolo was nearest, wearing only a pair of shorts; he shrilled with delight as Cassian grabbed him, pulled the shorts off, and threw them on the floor.

"First, though - if you want me to do this," Cassian said, "Get your clothes off, *all* of you. Because you'll all go really *hard*, and I want to see!"

"Let's all look at *you* first!" said one of the Spanish boys, fascinated by the newcomer.

"Yes - clothes off, and on that chair!" ordered Emilio.

Cassian obeyed, and his slim nude form turned this way and that to the accompaniment of *oohs* and *aahs*. Cassian saw that one of the youngsters stuck straight out already; another slid his hand down and began to stroke himself.

Then Cassian's demonstration went ahead without further delay. Paolo was already face-down over the bed, open white cheeks upturned; Cassian slid his hard four inches underneath, then deep between. With Paolo aiding his efforts by energetically twisting and wriggling his rear, Cassian after only a few moments' exertion yodelled "Wow-ee" and thoroughly lubricated his friend's narrow crack, to the accompaniment of

The Gods of Babylon

further delighted gasps and *oo*'s from the watchers as, clustered around, they bent to see, eyes wide. There was a muffled round of applause.

"In mine, in mine!" begged a youngster, this time to Emilio; the boy's eyes had not left the fourteen-year-old since he entered the room. "Your big hard one right in me - please!" He tapped it and pulled at the bigger boy's hand.

But Cassian had stood up and said, "Later. You see - we had our sticky buns, then we had our "afters". *El postre*. First, though, pick a partner, your best friend. Look." He had pulled Paolo to him, then wrestled with him in a spectacularly long mouth-kiss, the boys' tongues twisting and twining. After a moment or two Cassian's hand slid down over Paolo's nude body, then he took a tight grip and began to work furiously; Paolo twisted frenziedly and strangled mews began to escape from between the twelve-year-old's tight-clamped lips. And in a moment or two, with an "Oh-oh-oh!" Paolo broke away and, half doubled-up, delivered repeatedly into his friend's enthusiastic hand.

Blond Rafaël, also twelve, still kept tight claim on his new friend Emilio; he had been watching and imitating Cassian closely, and his agile hand was already in action, the bigger boy beginning to gasp and twist under his exertions. But Cassian intervened, said to the youngster, "That's not all. *Now* I'll show you what I mean by "afters". And as you're a good pupil, you'll get the biggest helping!"

Emilio, eager to participate, was laid on his back and the younger boy, thrilled when Cassian explained, at once bent and started eagerly, while Emilio turned and twisted, his long legs beginning to kick and pedal the air...

Juan, a slim, dark-eyed thirteen-year-old who had been looking with fascination at Cassian when he had been on the chair, gently touched the English boy's rear cheeks and asked shyly, "You'll let *me* sticky you some day? In your botty?"

"Of course," said Cassian, and was thrilled to see the youngster stick up in front even more, till it stood tight against his belly.

"Now, though, you get this," Cassian added, then in a moment he pushed the youngster on his back on a nearby bed, then bent to his task with such concentration that Juan was instantly soloing at the top of his voice, his four limbs thrashing on the counterpane. And in almost no time, with a shriek, he rocketed off the bed, his whole body went rigid for a moment or two - then he dropped, and the performance was repeated

twice more times as Cassian continued his enthusiastic work. When the two at last relaxed, Cassian squirmed on to the bed beside the younger boy, stroked him all over, then gently licked his wet and still quivering tip.

"I really *do* like some cream with my sticky buns," he whispered.

"Will you - will you give me some tomorrow?" asked Juan.

"You *bet* I will!" said Cassian.



"Most instructive!" said Canon Odo, lowering the curtain that covered the one-way screen. With his three colleagues he returned to a small study along the corridor; they sat in leather winged armchairs, and Canon Odo poured Benedictine. "Comments?" he invited.

"Well, Emilio *certainly* deserves his place on the first team," said Father Hwy, who was in charge of sport. "Those athletics were most impressive; he certainly has powerful legs. But I should play him as a forward more often. Those final kicks certainly promise the school an extra goal or two this term."

"The new boy, Cassian..?" enquired the Canon. "The so-beautiful Cassian?"

"Cricket, undoubtedly, Odo. That wrist action was quite spectacular; I could see him send down quite a few off-stump spinners with it. Even the Army school at Gib wouldn't be proof against one of those."

"And indeed the leg action - indeed, the whole body movements, what agility!" added Father Giles. "Put him down on sports day for the high-jump, the pole-vault too."

"I couldn't agree more, *hermano*," said Canon Odo. "But as for your own special area, the choir? Any fresh ability, you think?"

"Oh yes, at least two excellent prospects. That young imp Juan can really hit the high notes, can't he?"

"Ready for Easter, you think?" asked Father Odo, pouring another glass all round.

"Absolutely, Canon. Indeed, for Holy Week. You know, I've wanted for years to do Allegri's *Miserere*, but haven't yet found a soloist who can reach that high C. I think my problem's solved now, *Deis gratias*."

"Come, Father Lupo, you haven't spoken yet." Canon Odo had turned to the youngest member of the party, who had joined the staff only that term.

The Gods of Babylon

The young man shifted uncomfortably, then said, "Canon, may I speak frankly?"

"You must."

"Do you - well, do you really think it's right, spying on the boys like that? Sorry to raise it, but..."

Unoffended, Canon Odo laughed heartily and drained his third glass of Benedictine. "My dear Lupo, we wouldn't *dream* of spying on them. Tell me this, Father, is it spying when you watch TV?"

"No, but this is hardly..."

Canon Odo sighed. "Tell him, Hwy."

Back in the dormitory, Cassian sat hugging his knees with Paolo tumbled alongside; most of the others had gone to bed now.

Cassian asked, "Well?"

Paolo nodded towards the long panel of mirror-glass, grinned, and said, "I think it will have gone down well - I really do!"



The Monastery of San Cristobal, however one viewed it as an architectural concept (and there were different views) was a building that could not be ignored. Its sprawling bulk, visible for over seventy kilometres inland, completely covered the tallest hill in the region, and in places seemed almost an upward continuation of it, for example where the east wall of the chapel rose sheer from the very lip of a terrifying cliff, an immeasurable height above the tiny, huddled village. The monastery had been founded in the 11th Century as a fairly modest affair, perhaps for twenty monks or so, constructed in traditional Spanish style around a courtyard with four identical and perfectly proportioned cloisters and a central fountain; grouped around it were a chapel, a refectory, room, work-rooms and the monks' cells. This original portion had been spared the worst of the Moorish depredations, and the *reconquistadores*, as an act of extravagant but possibly misguided thanksgiving, had added a high battlemented tower and outer walls, a tall arched gateway and, inside, a massive galleried chapel-cum-hall, with a seven-storey apse on the East cliff, studied with tiny semi-circular windows. It was shortly after these additions that the building became the local prison. The Spanish order was by then terminally impoverished. But the richer English order in due course

bought the building outright and turned it into a school, adding a huge square annexe with Gothic windows to serve as classrooms and dormitories, then appending their own chapel – tall, narrow and red-brick, crenellated along the top, and bristling with latin crosses and tiny stone pinnacles.

For whatever reason, your first reaction on glimpsing the present-day monastery was to gasp. Your second reaction was one of dismay at sight of the winding footpath from the village that rose higher than the tallest pines, higher than the pines above these and that, on murky days, literally rose into the clouds themselves. Father Aeden had become accustomed to the monastery, but not entirely to the path, although climbing it twice a week was the only exercise he got these days – and to that extent grudgingly to be welcomed.

Father Aeden was also a member of the Order, though he believed it to be of central importance that he held his classes in the village so that the local children should not feel excluded. Even when he visited the monastery – mainly for sessions with boys who had been set individual tasks – he made a point of visiting his village pupils in their homes afterwards. At times, though, he wondered whether the long haul up the hill was worth it – though there was the wonderfully clear air at the top, the intoxicating scent of the pines, then the panoramic spectacle of the long, curving beach, the white surf-line, and the impossibly blue water beyond. And of course, there was the schooner of chilled Fino that awaited him in the Superior's study. After that, in the tiny classroom reserved for small groups, Cassian greeted him cheerfully, waving an envelope. "Got another!"

Father Aeden was momentarily stopped in his tracks by the dazzling sight of Cassian in his San Cristobal uniform, then he asked, "Another what?"

"A letter from Joe, from Barcelona, from the...*place*. Want to read it?"

Father Aeden shook his head. "We make a point of never reading the boys' mail – even when they ask us to."

Cassian looked at the folded sheets again, then said, "Perhaps it's just as well."

"You can tell me what he says, of course – if you want. Why is it just as well?" The priest took out his books, sat at the table, and motioned Cassian to sit opposite.

The Gods of Babylon

The boy spread out the letter, then said, "Because of what he says - about the Church. He really wasn't keen for me to go to a monastery school - but he says that if it's what *I* want, then it's okay."

"You're lucky," said Father Aeden, "And if it's in our power, he'll be back with you before long. As for the things about the Church - well, I can guess; I've heard them all before. Indeed, some of them may have an element of truth. But, incidentally, aren't you just putting off time till we get to your Latin?"

"Oh *no*, Father," said Cassian innocently. Then he asked, "But - you agree with Joe, then?"

The priest laughed. "I can't say if I do without reading the letter - which I'm not going to do." He opened his briefcase and started to take his books out. "I'll simply say this - that it's a matter of which gods you worship, that's all."

"Suppose so," said Cassian. He looked around, wrinkling his brows. "I never had much to do with the Church, but nothing here's like I thought. I mean, even the statues, the pictures..." He laughed and pointed to a niche in the far wall. "That's the first time I've seen a saint with no clothes on. Looks just about my age. A boy-saint?"

The priest nodded. "Yes - Hyacinthus was, I suppose, a saint in his own way. He died for love."

"Sounds a bit of a sap," said Cassian.

The priest laughed and said, "Well, just write back and reassure Joe that you're not being locked up and beaten every five minutes."

"You *did* give me a spanking once," Cassian said.

"I did too. And I hope you haven't forgotten it."

"I haven't," said Cassian. "It was quite...yummy, actually. Wriggling bare over your knee with your nice big hand on my botty." He giggled. "You know, on my way home -"

Father Aeden said quickly, "Cassian, we really *should* get on with your Latin. Books out, please."

Cassian nodded, then he asked, "Next time, will you go on till I shoot right in your lap?"

"Your *Latin*."

"*Madre de Dios*," groaned the boy.



“You’ve been starting to ask questions, is it?” enquired Brother Patrick.

The next morning, Cassian stood on the low stool in the wash-room, being soaped extensively by Brother Patrick’s broad palms. Around, the other boys, naked as moonbeams, whooped, shrieked and jostled, while Paolo, last in line, stood alongside awaiting his turn.

“Mayn’t I?” asked Cassian.

“Oh, you may, sure. But don’t they say, *Them as asks no questions...*”

“*Isn’t told no lies,*” said the boy. “*Ye-OOOW!*”

The meaty fingers had started soaping up and down deep between his bottom-cheeks, the other hand holding them apart. A moment or two later Cassian looked down and, slightly pink-cheeked said, “I - I’m sorry, Brother.”

“Ah now, it’s natural,” said Brother Patrick.

Paolo added, “They say you haven’t been properly bathed until it’s *really* hard. Just wait till he washes your nuts, and -”

“Less talk out of you, please,” said Brother Patrick, then proceeded to do exactly as Paolo had predicted; finally, soaping his hand again, he encircled the boy’s ever-hardening four inches and, with a firm grasp, rapidly lathered up and down.

The boy gasped, “Brother, Brother, I’m going to... *Wow-EE!*”

His whole body had jolted, then he stood still, scarlet-faced with mortification, as he spurted repeatedly into the Brother’s fingers, drops running down the man’s big hand and falling on the floor.

Paolo skipped with delight and clapped his hands. “*Olé, olé!* More! More!”

“*You* know all about that, for one,” said Brother Patrick tartly. He gently wiped Cassian down, then sent him to the shower.

“My turn now?” asked Roti hopefully.

“It’s washed *you* already,” said the Brother, who had been up early. “Git off wit ye now. And on the stool wit you, Paolo.”

“I can do like Cassian, you’ll see,” said Paolo, skipping on to the low stool.

“You can be silent for a bit,” said Brother Patrick.

“Not possible - or it won’t be in a minute.”



The Gods of Babylon

Though it ran parallel with the medieval and unworldly routine of the monks in their own area of the monastery, the life of the boys was similar to that of any good school. After baths, the boys had breakfast, then classes, with a short break until one-thirty. Lunch over, there was the long siesta period until four. The boys had to rest for the first hour, then were free to play in the grounds or, with permission, to go to the village or the beach. In the later afternoon came games practice, choir practice and similar non-academic activities - and finally prep and bed.

Cassian settled in quickly; it was all, as he frequently said, very different from what he had imagined. Mostly, he stuck with the same group of friends he had made on the first day, all but Emilio being from his own dormitory. Then there was of course the ever-devoted Paolo, the twins, then Juan, the slim dark-eyed thirteen-year-old who had been so fascinated with Cassian on the first night, and finally Rafaël, a cheerful boy of twelve who, unusually for a Spanish boy, was blond-haired with soft brown eyes and fair, clear skin with a light dusting of freckles on his cheeks.

As Emilio and Paolo were in another dormitory, it was most often the gentle, affectionate Ephar whose nude body would slide in beside Cassian's after lights-out. Sometimes they would do very little, just hug and hold each other, legs tangled together, until they fell asleep; Ephar liked to cuddle and stroke Cassian, crooning quietly in his own language, while Cassian loved to run his hands all over Ephar's velvety skin, especially his round bottom-cheeks and - sometimes all night - to hold his *pico*, always iron-hard when he was with Cassian. Sometimes, clutching Cassian with his mouth locked to the blond boy's, Ephar would slide his *pico* into the warm tight space at the top of Cassian's thighs and gently roll and twitch until he stiffened with a muffled sob and Cassian felt the sticky warmth seeping between his legs; at other times Cassian would push the blankets aside, whisper, "Buns up", then turn Ephar over on his stomach and push between the two boyish rear hillocks, after which - with Ephar tightening his cheeks, squirming and jolting to help things along - it was only a moment or two before Cassian, in his turn, exploded quietly into the tight, joggling crack, usually pressing his face hard into the pillow as he did so.

Once Paolo, appearing unexpectedly, pulled the pillow away and said, "Don't bother. *They* don't mind if you yell a bit."

Cassian nodded in the direction of the long mirror and asked, "Are they there every night?"

"Some are, usually - after their supper. Depends what's on TV."

“Cassian – would you take *my* buns?” whispered blond Rafaël shyly on the following night. He stood pale and naked in the moonlight, brown eyes fixed on the English boy.

“*Wouldn’t I?*” Cassian laid him tummy-down on the bed and stroked the two tender, exquisitely rounded round protuberances in question, then wriggled his fingers tight between them, making the youngster squirm and yodel. “I could spunk *loads* in that nice little bot,” Cassian whispered.

“I won’t clean it afterwards either. I’ll stay sticky all day tomorrow, ‘cos I love you, Cassian,” the kid whispered back.

Cassian, touched, kissed the blond youngster and then, finding himself surprisingly hard, proceeded to fulfil his promise with a display of athletics that brought gasps of admiration from the small audience behind the screen, towards which Cassian had thoughtfully angled himself.

“The *swimming* team – I should have thought of it!” exclaimed Father Hwyl, the sports-master, “The movements of those legs, that *bottom* – the speed, the co-ordination, the – the grace...”

And in only a moment or two Cassian brought his brief gymnastic to an end with a scream and with several spectacular kicks of his long legs that filled Father Hwyl’s head with visions of school medals, silver cups...

“I’ll try him with the Australian crawl tomorrow.” He made a brief note.

Cassian meanwhile had grasped the youngster firmly underneath; his wrist action – now developing on the cricket field – moved decisively into play, and he was fascinated and thrilled by the contortions and squeals that resulted, the clenching and quivering of the youngster’s round bottom-checks and finally by the extravagance of his yells as, hips flailing, the twelve-year-old bounced on the bed over and again.

At length Cassian slid a finger deep between the youngster’s neat hillocks, gently rubbing in his own damp offering. “Satisfied?”

“Mmm. And I’ll do what I promised.”

“I’ll *check*.”



Cassian was surprised, on the following afternoon, to get a summons to the games master’s office.

“I have reason to believe,” said Father Hwyl, “That you are capable of even more athletic endeavour than I had previously supposed.”

The Gods of Babylon

“I don’t know what you mean, Father,” said Cassian innocently.

“I’m sure you don’t. Nevertheless, come down for swimming practice in half an hour. We’ll see what you can do in the pool.”

“Can Paolo come?”

“If he has nothing else to do; I can give him a try as well.”

When Cassian and Paolo, in their swimming-trunks, got to the pool, there was only one boy in it, doing lengths. Father Hwy himself wasn’t there, but Brother Quintin, the young swimming coach, wearing only a pair of shorts, was on the edge with a stop-watch, coaching and shouting encouragement.

“Okay,” he said to the boy in the pool, “Come into the changing-room now.” And you two come as well.

The young swimmer was Jerome, a boy who had spoken to Cassian a few times, but who like Emilio was in another dormitory. He was about Cassian’s age - a handsome youngster with neat-cut shiny black hair, bright friendly eyes, and clear, light olive skin. He had slim legs and arms but nicely rounded thighs and hips, and Cassian could well see that he had a perfect, agile swimmer’s body. He wore the tiny Speedos that the school swimmers wore at competitions and galas.

“Okay,” said Brother Quintin. “Now Jerome gets his extra coaching, like all of my most promising swimmers.” He sat down on the bench and said the Cassian and Paolo, “I want you both to watch. Right, Jerome, off with them.”

With a slightly shy glance at the other two boys, the slim Spanish lad quickly peeled off his Speedos, put them on the bench and went over to the coach. “What first?” he asked.

“The crawl, I think,” and the boy quickly laid himself on his stomach across the coach’s lap, then as the man counted, he swung into a perfectly co-ordinated sequence of strokes, his arms swinging over and down, his legs thrashing rhythmically. The coach, watching closely, wasn’t satisfied. “Don’t squirm, you’ll waste energy! Keep that bottom still! Get those legs working - or *else!*”

“No!” yelled the boy, guessing what was coming, but the coach’s hand landed with a crack - then another, and another. Cassian suddenly wanted to giggle; the boy was beautifully sun-tanned, but his wriggling exposed bottom-cheeks were pale and a little ridiculous - especially now, with a pink blush forming on both of them.

After a minute or two the coach checked his stop-watch. "Okay, a hundred and thirty per minute, not too bad. Now the back-stroke!"

When the youngster rolled on his back his face was a little pink too; then his arms and legs began to work again, his long thighs banging on the coach's knees, the coach counting, rapping out instructions and advice. Paolo, staring, crammed his hands across his mouth and shook with mirth; Cassian, pointing, whispered, "Flip-flop!" and Paolo exploded again. But in just a moment or two there was no more flip-flop; it was rapidly stiffening until it stood vertically, though still swinging and shaking with the vigour of the youngster's efforts. Cassian, sliding a hand down, was not surprised to find his own almost as hard now.

Soon the coach was making the boy turn over again. "Finally the breast-stroke," he announced. He told Cassian and Paolo, "Shy boys don't like doing this at first, as they have to get their cheeks right open. But *you're* not shy, are you, Jerome?"

"N-no, Brother," came the muffled reply.

"Not that I'd care if you were. So get on with it...*one, two, one, two...* get these thighs *right apart!*"

Cassian, eyes wide, saw just what the coach meant as, with each stroke, the boy's thighs flew wide apart before slapping together again.

"Faster," said the coach crisply, "You should be up to one-twenty to the minute by now. You want smacks right on your bottom-hole? Because that's what you can get, when you're working on this stroke, remember!"

"Oh no, sir - no. Not on my bot-hole - not this time - please!"

"Then smarten up." The coach contented himself with a light slap or two, directly on target, with his finger-tips - at which the stroke-per-minute rate increased noticeably. And two boys watching noticed, too, that the coach's eyes were half-closed now, that his breathing had deepened. They nudged one another and snickered again.

The coach gasped, "Now I *know* you're a winner. But convince me - convince me."

"But, but, sir - it's like wriggling on an iron bar now. I c-can't - "

"Keep on - you must do better!"

"But- but my bare willy's *right* against it! yelled the boy.

"Keep *going!*" gritted the coach from between clenched teeth, "And you'll ch-change your tune in a moment, you'll see!"

And as he spoke...

The Gods of Babylon

“*Hi-hi-HI!*” The breast-stroke suddenly lost co-ordination in a flurry of jerks and wriggles; there was another juddering yell from the young swimmer, and at exactly the same moment the coach gasped, closed his eyes, and tensed from head to toe. Then, a moment or two later, he opened his eyes again, let out a long breath, reached for his stopwatch, gently raised the boy to his feet. “Now I’m *certain* you’re a champion!” he said. “Good luck at the gala tomorrow.”

“And I *know* I’m going to win now!” said the boy, his eyes sparkling. “*Thanks!*”

Brother Quintin looked at Cassian and Paolo. “Very well, are there any questions?”

There was only one, which the pair asked simultaneously.

“Can I be next?”



As the term went on Cassian was often in the company of Emilio; after the compulsory siesta period, on days when Paulo was in classes, they regularly went down to Cassian’s “own” area of the beach, where he never tired of looking at Emilio’s young lithe body, of sliding his palms all over it, of massaging and stroking every inch of it. Equally he never failed to be thrilled by the spectacular acrobatics he could elicit by the diligent use of his hand, his lips, sometimes his teeth. And Emilio proved an apt pupil. When his own turn arrived Cassian was invariably to be seen thrashing on the sand like a devil-fish, emitting shriek after shriek as Emilio’s firm lips and teeth provided their own enthusiastic attention. Afterwards the boys would lie jumbled tight together, often for an hour or so, talking and planning quietly until it came time to return. During this time Emilio’s English improved dramatically, as did Cassian’s command of colloquial Spanish.

On one long afternoon they heard the monastery bell ringing, and Emilio jumped up in horror. “*Buenos Dios!* I’ll be late for choir practice.” He started struggling into his clothes.

He was surprising in many ways; though he was a footballer, he also loved singing in the choir, and dreaded missing even a minute or two of it.

As they jogged up the hill Cassian asked, “Could *I* be in the choir?”

“Of course. Come and see Father Giles.”

They had made up a little time, so sat down on a rock half-way to rest.

“Dunno, though,” Cassian said. “It’s a bit late. I mean, I’ll be fourteen next year, so I suppose my voice will break soon.”

“Well, you could be an alto like me – or a acolyte,” Emilio said, getting up again. “But you have to be able to make spunk to be an alto or acolyte!”

“I can do *that!*” Cassian said.

“But Father Giles doesn’t know. There’s a special test before you can get in.”

“When can I do it?” enquired Cassian eagerly. “I’d like to be an acolyte, really.”

“Maybe after rehearsal today. I’ll ask.”

It was near Easter; Cassian waited at the back of the chapel listening to the choir rehearsing Allegri’s *Miserere*, in which thirteen-year-old Juan’s scintillating treble had exceeded all Father Giles’s expectations. After a time the juniors clattered off, there was a brief rehearsal for the altos, then Cassian was called into the small rehearsal room where the group of boys, eight of them aged about fourteen, looked at Cassian with great interest.

“You have the *looks* for an acolyte,” said the choirmaster. “There’s no doubt about that whatever. So, unless you want to go into the trebles –”

“I told him about the test,” put in Emilio.

“I’ve no doubt you did,” said Father Giles.

“I’ll do it,” said Cassian.

“Very well, then.”

Emilio said eagerly to Cassian, “Okay, so you –”

“Emilio,” enquired Father Giles, “Are you in charge or am I?”

The boy looked at him, smiled and raised his eyebrows, held his gaze for a moment, then Father Giles smiled back and said, “Okay, okay – *you* are – just this once. I’ll take a back seat for once, and make notes.” He went and sat down. “You don’t *mind* if I do that?” he enquired heavily.

“Not at all, Father,” said Emilio brightly. On his instructions Cassian wriggled out of all his clothes, including his shoes and socks, then stood on a small platform, about six inches high, normally used for the lectern. Seven of the altos were left now, including Emilio; one had been sent, grumbling a little, to clear up the music.

Cassian felt the remaining boys looking him all over with even greater interest – and with that, the feeling of the cool air on his nude body, and even the feel of his bare feet on the wood, he found himself getting hard almost right away. Emilio, however, said, “I have to get you ready.” He crouched down and, with his deft fingers, did exactly that, till it pressed

The Gods of Babylon

hard right against Cassian's stomach. Emilio stepped back and said, "Okay". The others had clearly done this before. One after the other each boy stepped forward, pushed a finger into Cassian's bottom, then took a firm hold in front and followed with six vigorous strokes - Emilio counting aloud - after which each boy gave place to the next in line. Emilio took his turn too. Soon the energetic action of one strong young hand after another had driven the nude youngster into a froth of excitement; eyes closed, he was after a minute or so gasping, sobbing, his feet hammering and twisting on the wooden platform, as boy after boy took him right to the extreme edge of a mind-blowing detonation - then...gave way again. After a little longer, hopping from foot to foot on the platform, he was almost in tears... *Please, please...*

"Okay," he heard the master say, then Emilio took the last turn - emphatically so - with all the robustness of his young right arm. And the dam burst, and Cassian was clutching Emilio round the neck, knees buckling, gasping, "Oh, Em - yes, yes, *yes...!*,"

And Emilio, kneeling a moment later with Cassian tumbled on the floor on his back, was in no hurry to end his task, continuing to work away with sustained fervour while Cassian, yodelling merrily, continued to spurt repeatedly into his friend's zealous hand, his long legs kicking and pedalling in the air, while the other boys clapped and cheered.

But at length they were both exhausted, and meanwhile the choirmaster had now come forward; Emilio rose and displayed his palm with proprietorial pride.

"O-*kay?*" he enquired jubilantly.

"There's no question about it," agreed Father Giles as Cassian, slightly flushed, got slowly to his feet.

Emilio grinned delightedly, then flexed his slightly stiff right arm. "So *that* was a good afternoon's work!"

"I'd have had him anyway," said Father Giles.



Cassian was called out of class about eleven the following morning, and was quite glad at first, as it was a maths class.

Once in the corridor, the boy who had been sent for him said, "The Senior Chaplain wants to see you."

Cassian's face fell. "Ouch."

“What’ve you done?” asked the other boy with interest as he led the way down a long stone-walled corridor.

“Nothing. Well - nothing I know of.”

“Then don’t worry. He sends for us all from time to time - for a *talk*. Boring, but it doesn’t last long.”

“A talk about what?” asked Cassian uneasily.

“Oh, nothing much; don’t worry, I said,” the other boy reassured him. He was one of those who had been present at Cassian’s “test” the day before. The pair went up the short flight of steps to the chaplain’s room; before he knocked the older boy, Juan-Manuel, nudged Cassian and said, “Hey, you were the best *ever*.” And he lowered his voice to a whisper. “And you weren’t the *only* one to sticky yourself, either.”

“I beg your pardon?” The door had opened unexpectedly and the familiar black-garbed figure of Canon Odo appeared.

“Sorry, Father,” said Juan-Manuel. “I was just showing Cassian the way.”

“I very much doubt whether the Blessed Casciano *needs* to be shown the way,” said Canon Odo.

“I’ve come to see the Senior Chaplain,” Cassian said.

“I am he,” confessed Canon Odo. He touched Juan-Manuel on the forehead in dismissal. “*Pace tecum*.” Then Cassian was ushered into his office.

He had been in the office before - clearly one of the best rooms in the monastery, situated as it was half-way up the tower. It was almost perfectly round, with a row of narrow windows giving, on the landward side, a dizzying prospect of the pines a hundred metres below, and of valley floor below that. And, on the seaward side, the vast sweep of the San Felieu bay, and the brilliant white surf-line, with light clouds of spindrift hovering where the waves broke. Inside, the walls too were spotlessly white, and hung with a double row of portraits - of saints, Cassian supposed; besides that, there was only a wide black table without any papers whatever on it, and a matching black chair on either side. There was a single statue in one corner - of a boy holding a drinking-vessel.

The chaplain invited Cassian to sit, and followed his glance to the statue.

“What do you think of it?”

“Very fine,” Cassian said, “Actually, I’ve never seen so many saints with no clothes on.”

The Gods of Babylon

Canon Odo said, “There are different kinds of saint. This one – um, St Ganymede – has been around a lot longer than some of the others. Speaking of which, *chico*, could you bring over that decanter from the corner?”

Cassian got up. “You want me to bring your drink naked? Like him?” He nodded towards the statue. “I will, if you want.”

“Just fetch it, *chico*.”

“Or...wearing nothing but a gold chain, maybe? With a big jewel on the end?”

“I *beg* your pardon?” asked the chaplain sharply.

“Nothing. Sorry.”

“Well, stop talking nonsense then.”

Cassian brought and poured the drink. “Joe – my guardian – likes Benedictine too,” he said conversationally. “I expect it helps your sore foot, though. How is it?”

The chaplain drained his glass and held it out again. “Much better, thank you, *Casciano il Constato*. I can walk without a stick now – as your all-seeing eyes will have no doubt have observed.”

“It must have been something quite heavy to give you a bump like that,” said Cassian solicitously. “A brick, maybe?”

“Maybe. Now, boy –”

“And poor Father Aeden – got a nasty bump on his head at the same time. I never thought being a priest was so dangerous. Do you need special insurance?”

“*Chico* Cassian,” said the chaplain, putting his glass down. “I begin to ask myself whether I have sent for you, or whether *you* have sent for *me*.”

“Sorry, Father,” said the boy contritely.

“Very well. Now, for a change, listen... Among my duties here – which are many – is the overall supervision of our teams of acolytes at the masses.”

“Yes – I passed the test,” said Cassian eagerly. “With distinction, Father Giles said.”

“Maybe so, maybe so. Or perhaps Father Giles, misguided man that he is, believes that you will have some...ornamental value in his team, though I can’t think why. Be that as it may, my purpose in seeing you today is to arrange a series of training afternoons for yourself and the other new acolytes – who will be joining us shortly. It is especially important, *chico* Cassian, that you are all brought thoroughly up to scratch within the next

week or so. There will shortly be a very major event, and at the Festal Mass we shall celebrate it is essential that your performance be *faultless*. There must not be a single mistake. You understand?"

Cassian nodded, then indicated the white-bearded figure in the print directly behind the chaplain.

"He wouldn't like it, I suppose."

"Who wouldn't?"

"God," said Cassian.

"It's Leonardo da Vinci," said the chaplain. "Cassian - as you are a newcomer, I have to tell

you a number of things now in order to - bring you up to speed, so to speak. The first is - we are all leaving the monastery shortly."

The boy stared. "Leaving? For ever, you mean?"

"I hope not, *Deo volens*"

"But why."

"The reason is not something that can be very simply explained. In outline, however, the fact is that we have to do something so important and secret that we cannot do it here, even within the walls of San Cristobal."

"Wow!" said Cassian, intrigued. Then he said, "We have so many secrets as it is, though, one more wouldn't make a difference, would it?"

"I have no idea what you mean," said the Canon tartly, "And if you do not listen, and do not refrain from inane comments, your career as an acolyte will be the shortest on record."

"Sorry, sir - Father."

"Very well. Not everything I say will be immediately clear to you; you will understand more fully as matters unfold - but in essence the Superior will shortly be leaving us, so that we will need to elect a new leader. But why all the secrecy, you ask? What you must understand, Cassian, that the Superior leads not only our community here, but a worldwide Order - a vast Order. In fact there is no town, hardly a village on the face of this earth in which a member of our Order is not to be found."

"Cor!"

"Yes - or words to that effect. So you will see the importance of the process on which we are about to embark. The second reason why we must leave the monastery is somewhat harder to explain. But the fact is that, it is only in another location - the one we are going to - where the identity of the new leader will be made clear."

The Gods of Babylon

“You mean, we all go somewhere, like in the mountains, and get a vision?” asked the boy, with vague memories of school scripture lessons.

“Yes, something a little like that – well, a very little, really.”

“Where do we go? When?”

Canon Odo shook his head. “No more questions for now. It may not be for some little time yet. What you have to concentrate on is getting ready, as I explained. Our first session is tomorrow, at four o’clock. Now –”

“Can’t I ask just one more question? About something quite different?”

“Oh, I suppose so, boy. Out with it.”

“Do you ever have dreams, Father?” enquired Cassian.

The chaplain, slightly taken aback, shook his head. “Not often. I take a glass or two of...medicine last thing at night.”

Cassian went on, hesitantly. “But, Father, have you ever had a dream when – well, you weren’t sure if it was a dream or not?”

Puzzled, the chaplain frowned, then asked, “You mean – if there’s something that happens...and it’s the sort of thing that makes you say, ‘Pinch me, I must be dreaming.’?”

“Yes.”

Canon Odo considered, then said, “I really don’t think I can help you. Unless you can bring yourself to be more specific, that is.”

“I’m not quite sure that I need to,” said Cassian, his eyes fixed on the priest’s.

“Well, I am,” said Canon Odo shortly, getting up, “And confessions aren’t until six.” He touched Cassian’s forehead. “*Pax tecum*. Which means in English, *hop it*.”



At five that evening, after his first rehearsal, Cassian changed into his swimming-trunks and ran down to the pool. He had been extremely hot in his unaccustomed acolyte’s robes, and had thrown them off as soon as he could. He was on his own for once; the coming events were affecting many school activities, and his friends were involved in rehearsals of various kinds – Emilio with the choir, Paolo with the sports team, the twins and Juan helping with general cleaning and tidying, and Rafaël with the art class, painting a new mural for one of the side-chapels. He wondered, however, whether Brother Quintin would be at the pool, and whether he

might provide some more of the special coaching. He wasn't, but Cassian was even more pleased to see that Jerome was again practising lengths, his slim brown body cutting to and fro in the clear opal water.

When he saw Cassian, he smiled, stopped, and stood up in the water. "Hi - race you?"

Cassian shook his head. He replied, in Spanish, "I wouldn't have a hope." Then he plucked at his tight school swimming-trunks and asked, "Why do we have to wear these? In my prep school in England we always swam naked-bare. Why not here?"

"It's to do with the swimming competitions - the races, you know. We've got to get used to swimming in pants."

Cassian turned up his nose, then Jerome said suddenly, "I'd like you better with them off, though." He climbed out of the pool. "Come here."

Cassian went over, then Jerome quickly undid the string of his trunks, slid them down and made him step out. Jerome crouched on one knee, slid his hands up and down Cassian's smooth naked flanks.

"You have a swimmer's body too," he said. "You just need some coaching."

"Will *you* give me some?" asked Cassian eagerly.

"Of course," said the Spanish youngster, getting up. "And I'll give you a coaching session you won't forget - like I had yesterday, and more - much more!"

"*Wow-EE!*"

Jerome sat on a long bench beside the pool and patted his knees. "Come."

Cassian said, "Wait." He stooped, untied Jerome's trunks and peeled them down to his knees. "I'd much rather be on your skin."

He draped himself across Jerome's lap, then giggled. "It feels funny, you being no bigger than me."

"I'm strong enough, though," declared Jerome. "You'll see. Now, just get these arms and legs moving. Kick, *kick*... One, two, one, two..."

Cassian's nude form was soon bouncing and twisting on Jerome's thighs, Jerome urging even greater efforts. "More rhythm, more rhythm - and *don't* wriggle your bum!"

Smack!

"Ow! What was *that* for?"

"Just to encourage you."

The Gods of Babylon

Jerome went on spanking Cassian with his open palm, but gently – nevertheless was rewarded with a greatly enhanced performance, and he was soon nodding in unqualified approval. “*Molto bueno!* Now the breast-stroke.”

Then he was rapping out further instructions. “One, two – get your legs *apart!* As far as you can!”

A moment later Cassian felt Jerome’s body shake with giggles. “Good, good – each stroke now, I can see your bot-hole. *And* your nuts. They *jog-gle...*”

“You can’t see my willy, though,” said Cassian breathlessly, “Because it’s *hard.*”

Then he started to laugh too, and said, “Hey, Jerome, that reminds me – when I was watching your coaching the first time I thought of a way to make you do even *better* – though mainly in the back-stroke, though.”

“Show me, then.”

The pair swapped places. Cassian rolled Jerome on to his back, his shoulders resting against the bench, then he said, “Wow, it’s right up against your tummy. I’d hardly get a sheet of paper behind it.”

“Nor yours.” Jerome touched it, pulled it out a little, then Cassian said, “Okay, *this* is what I meant; watch how *I* get these legs moving!”

Sliding his hand down over Jerome’s stomach, then taking a firm hold, he began to work rapidly up and down, and soon the Spanish boy’s long bare thighs were smacking rhythmically on his own, the slim legs and feet kicking strenuously. But Jerome was laughing and giggling too. “I *knew* this was what you meant! Brother Quintin rehearses me like this too sometimes, and it’s *fantástico* – but it doesn’t go on for long, ’cos I soon shoot. He’s a strong guy, and does it really fast.”

“So can I!” said Cassian, redoubling his efforts.

“No – not yet, not yet! Let me flip over again.”

He did, and Cassian felt him iron-hard between his bare thighs, also felt Jerome’s hip press tight against his own.

“Some breast-stroke first,” announced Jerome. “Then the crawl – and I *am* going to wriggle this time!”

Without being told, Jerome pushed his thighs as far apart as possible at each stroke before slapping them together again; the view was every bit as delectable as Jerome had described earlier, and Cassian very soon began to feel himself tingling unbearably, then with little slivers of electricity shooting all the way up, making him half-dizzy.

“And the c-crawl now”, he gasped. “Quick!”

Jerome obeyed at once. “Put your finger in my bot-hole,” he said, as breathless as Cassian. “That *really* makes me kick!”

Cassian did - as a result of which the practice period lasted only a moment or two longer. Cassian *waaa*-ed and exploded against Jerome’s wildly jiggling flank, and almost at the same moment Jerome *wow*-ed, tensed, jolted from head to toe, and Cassian in turn felt the damp warmth on his thighs. For a while after that both boys were silent and breathless, then Jerome said a little hoarsely, “I’ll win *all* the races tomorrow, you’ll see!”

“Will you, indeed?” The voice broke in from very close. The two youngsters jumped quickly to their feet to confront Father Hwy, the games-master. Cassian, looking down, tried ineffectively to wipe himself with his palm.

“We were having...extra practice, Father,” he said.

“That much was evident,” said the priest. “But you know very well that you are not allowed to be in the pool or *by* the pool unsupervised. You in particular should know that, Jerome.”

Jerome looked at the ground. “Yes, Father. Sorry, Father.”

“Very well,” said the priest. He took out his stop-watch. “You will both swim twelve lengths. And if I do not consider your respective times to be good enough, you will swim them again. Have you anything to say?”

“I’m really sorry, Father,” Cassian said again. “And, as an extra penance, I’ll swim the lengths without my pants.” And he dived like an arrow.



Three days later, the entire monastery was in turmoil. The journey into the mountains could only be undertaken on foot, so handcarts had to be loaded, not only with personal possessions, but also with sacred items required for the coming ceremonies. Grumbling - though under his breath - Cassian had to help in loading a wooden trolley with a life-size statue of a boy and eagle, two bronze cupids, and a figure of a tall robed man with a sunburst round his head which Brother Hwy told him was the god Apollo.

“He’s very *big*,” grumbled Cassian. “In all senses.”

“Please,” said Hwy. “Cheerfulness is called for at all times. The Brothers of El Viejo will expect it, especially as they are being very good to us. That’s where we’re going, El Viejo - the old monastery.”

The Gods of Babylon

“Dark and mysterious, I suppose,” Cassian said, pushing the last image on to the trolley and helping to pull a cover over it. “A bit like Father Aeden, really.”

“The dogs bark, the caravan moves on,” said Father Aeden, who was standing behind him. “*Pax vobiscum*. Let’s get going.”

The caravan moved on.

The first leg of the journey was easy, down the long road from the monastery to the village and the valley bottom. The difficulty was, indeed, in holding the carts back on the steep down-grade. Once or twice a cart escaped into the bushes and heavy scrub by the roadside, to be pursued and returned with war-whoops and shrieks of merriment, as the boys were still in high spirits. Reaching the level, the long procession skirted the village, took the path through the olive groves by Canon Odo’s house, then started to climb again. Beyond the olive-groves the village very quickly thinned out - there was just an occasional flat-roofed farm-cottage, perhaps with a tiny lean-to granary, perhaps with a creaking water-wheel, sometimes a few goats or a tethered donkey - then just the forest. Now the going was more laborious. Although the incline, winding upwards between tall pine-trunks, was not especially steep, the ground was stony and uneven, and it was at times a struggle to get the carts over bumps, dips, and heavy scree deposits. There was a kind of a path, certainly, in that the trail that the long line followed was slightly less overgrown than the rest of the forest, but this was the most that could be said. Though it was relatively shaded under the dense pine foliage, it grew hotter and more exposed as they climbed; the occasional glimpses of the far-off sea were merely tantalising. The boys were lightly clad, wearing only shorts and tee-shirts, but Cassian impatiently tugged his shirt off and knotted it round his waist.

He said to Father Aeden, “Can’t you tell us how much further it is?”

“Not so far. Half an hour more, perhaps less.” Aeden had been leading the way with confidence, apparently without the aid of any map. After a few more minutes he called a break; the group sat on a wide bluff overlooking the sea, now a vast distance below, and Aeden and Hwy handed out sandwiches and cool drinks. It felt fresher here, as there was a light breeze; white rock-roses, cacti, and scarlet-tipped quince bushes flickered in the stony crevasses.

When the group had almost finished eating Aeden said, “Okay, before we move on I’ll tell you just a little more. I didn’t want to say too much

before we left because – well, there are some chatterboxes among you, who might let something slip without meaning to.”

Cassian felt his face colour slightly, but Aeden wasn't looking at him directly.

“Hidden where almost no-one can find it now, is an extremely old and venerable building, the headquarters of the Order to which all of us belong. The building, though almost a thousand years old, is built on the site of an even older building, and there was probably another before that. No-one knows just when the Order was first established here – but we're probably talking about times before those written about in your school history books. The building is called “El Viejo” – The Old One – for obvious reasons; most of it still stands, as it was built in heavy stone, and with thick walls, by skilled and dedicated craftsmen. And it is used still. We in fact have used it ourselves from time to time – for quiet weekends and retreats, for example, so there is fairly good – if basic – sleeping and living accommodation. What extra needs to be done you can help with, as you are strong boys – isn't that so, *chico* Emilio?”

“*Work,*” groaned Cassian.

“I don't know why we brought you,” said the priest.

The line moved on again.



Aeden had spoken accurately, and it was indeed only a further half-hour walk or so before the trail levelled, and the forest began to open out all round them. There was more open grass now, a succession of clearings dotted with brightly-coloured shrubs. Soon Aeden paused again and said, “Okay, we're almost there, but first we have to cross a narrow marsh. The grass is deceptively green and inviting, but if you stood on it you'd get a nasty shock. It's not the kind of marsh where you'd sink out of sight for ever, but you'd still take a lot of pulling out, and you'd come up pretty mucky. Leave the carts for now; we'll put down planks to bring them across later. Then follow me in single file; there are hidden stones, and you must each put your feet where the person in front does.”

The boys followed one by one; Juan, hopping from one firm patch to another, started to warble a Spanish ditty. “It's like a game,” he said.

The Gods of Babylon

“Let’s all join up and do a conga,” suggested Cassian. He reached out, clutched Juan round the waist, then slipped and went in up to his knees.

“You see?” said Huy, helping him out.

“See what?”

“What a bozo you are,” supplied Emilio, whose colloquial English had advanced by the day.

The ground became firm again, then the trail ended abruptly at a thick curtain of creeper and briars that seemed to stretch from one side of the forest to the other.

“One final push,” said Aeden. “But remember, there’s only one way through. My way.”

Cassian avoided the priest’s eye as he led the procession along a brief, tortuous path; as the boys followed, again in single file, the thorns and briars seemed to melt away in front of them. One by one they jumped a clear, bubbling stream, and then, just a short distance ahead, behind a wide, still lake, rose the ancient monastery of El Viejo.

“Wow!” Cassian breathed, and all the boys stood still. The building was not huge, but it gave the impression of great size, rising from the grassy undergrowth like a cliff, its soaring facade perfectly mirrored in the water. It was built of brown sandstone, battlemented along the top and with a five-sided tower on one side; along the front there were rows of narrow, perfectly regular windows and, between them, a set of stone steps led up, between balustrades, to a massive pillared doorway. A roofless chapel formed one wing, but the bell-tower was still intact, though the space for the bell was empty. The utter silence and stillness was what struck you, as if the place had been totally undisturbed in the thousand years since its building, as if the boys were discovering it for the first time, even as if it had magically risen out of the swamp. Ivy hung from its stonework like water-weed, and tendrils of mist floated around its base and its lower windows.

“An *enchanted castle*,” whispered one of the boys.

“Watch out for Dracula!” warned another.

“Dracula didn’t even exist when that place was built,” said Aeden. “Okay, you can explore now.”

“Dracula never existed,” muttered Cassian, but not so Aeden could hear.

He opened a narrow Judas-gate in the main door, and soon the boys were rushing up and down the stone stairways and from room to room, tiredness forgotten, wrestling and tumbling, whooping till the old building took up the echoes from top to bottom. Though ancient, somehow it wasn't frightening, and the group felt almost at home there already. However, only a small part was in current use; in it were dormitories with bunk beds, a kitchen and dining-room, bathrooms, and three classrooms.

"Classrooms," said Cassian in disgust.

"Yes, they've been used for talks and lectures," said Hwy. "And *you* didn't think you were on holiday, did you? You're still at school, you know."

But there would be no lessons for at least several days. Now, the huge boiler was lit, and hot water began to bubble through the long, twisting pipes. The range was lit in the kitchen and soon the boys ate supper, seated on either side of a wooden table like mediaeval monks. It was still light, but Aeden went around setting lamps on tables and niches, checking the oil and filling them up.

He stopped by Cassian, who was sorting out blankets on his bunk bed; he wrinkled his nose. "That mud - you're disgusting. You should have washed it off by now."

Cassian looked down at his muddy legs and said, "There's too much of it." Then he suddenly grinned and said, "Now you'll *have* to give me a bath, Father!"

The man sighed. "Okay, take your clothes off, let's get it over with."

Cassian quickly obeyed, then scampered naked down the long stone corridor to the washroom, Aeden following. Passing Jerome, he said, "Aeden's gonna bath me, you want to come and watch?"

"Si, *si*, could be fun."

"You can dry him, then," said Aeden, "I've a feeling he's going to be a handful."

The washroom had a row of sinks, and a big stone bath in the centre; Aeden turned creaking brass taps and water poured and bubbled into it from curved faucets amid torrents of steam. At length Aeden tested the water with his hand and told Cassian to get in. He soaped his hands and told Cassian to stand up, then rubbed his palms all over the boy's smooth skin, beginning with his chest, his back, his stomach.

The Gods of Babylon

“I like best talking at bath-time,” Cassian said. “I feel most relaxed then.”

“You like talking always,” said Aeden, briskly soaping the youngster’s neat round buttocks, then running the side of his hand rapidly up and down between the trim cheeks. “What d’you want to talk about now, then?”

“Dunno,” said Cassian. Then he said, “You know, this is the second time I’ve felt your chunky big hand on my bare botty.”

“This time better than the last, eh?”

“I’ll let you know,” said Cassian.

“Thank you.” The priest straightened. He placed his palms on the youngster’s hips, looked him up and down and nodded. “Yes...I’ve only done half, but already we’re beginning to see an improvement.”

“Joe said things like that.” Cassian suddenly took one of Aeden’s hands in his and said, “He had big strong hands like you as well. I liked it *especially* when he came to wash my willy and nuts. That was the part of my bath I enjoyed most.”

“Wash him *hard* there,” entreated Jerome. “Teach him a lesson!”

“I intend to.”

Soaping his hands again, Aeden proceeded with even more energy than Jerome had urged on him, so that Cassian, skipping from toe to toe and carolling enthusiastically, was in a moment or two showing a response that made Jerome point and clap with delight. “*Bravo, bravo!*”

“All right, then.” Aeden straightened, but Cassian grabbed his hand and pulled it back again.

“Please, Aeden, *please...*”

“Mmm...let me think about it,” said Aeden maddeningly. He took hold again, drummed his fingers on it, making Cassian *waaaah*, then drummed his fingers even more vigorously on the very end, driving the youngster almost into a ferment.

“*Please, Aeden.*”

The man said, “I wonder if you know what you’re asking? Don’t you remember what I said about being a college oarsman? I was a wizard at cricket too; if I gave you the works, I’d just about blow the top of your head off!”

The boy gulped. “Oh, *please!*”

“You asked for it...” Aeden said, then caught Jerome’s wistful expression out of the corner of his eye.

“Come over here, *chico*, I’ve two hands,” said Aeden.

“Lemme get bare first?” asked the youngster eagerly, skipping across.

Aeden nodded, and Jerome quickly wriggled out of his clothes. Then Aeden took a secure grip with both hands, and commenced to carry out his threat with such merciless determination that an ear-shattering duet immediately began to ring round the old washroom, the two boys skipping and jumping on the stone floor, their nude bodies contorting, their hips agitating like limbo-dancers’. The tempo quickened, the boys trilling and whistling, then Cassian was the first to screech and convulse, Jerome almost directly after him. Both boys’ knees buckled, then Cassian was half-tumbled against Aeden, arms round his neck – the latter continuing work unabated while Cassian yelled, writhed, and spurted repeatedly, Jerome meanwhile giving an equally excellent account of himself. At last the man gently detached them both, wiped his hands on a tissue.

“I warned you,” he said.



A semblance of routine was established by the third day, with lessons in the mornings, and the afternoons given over to free time or working in the building or the grounds.

“I thought we’d come for some ceremony or other, not for more *lessons*,” Cassian said disgustedly.

“All in good time; preparations have to be made. The ceremony is not be an excuse for neglecting your school-work – as you had clearly hoped.”

It was gloriously warm now, and most lessons were out of doors – which was at least something, Cassian agreed.

“In your explorations around here, have you ever looked at the old chapel?” Aeden asked. “You should.”

Cassian said, “We haven’t been round there yet. It’s difficult to get to. There are thorns and nettles and things.”

“Yes, if you go round the outside. But if you follow the cloister, beyond the old washrooms, then go on past the refectory, there’s a little wooden door. It’s deep in the wall and there’s ivy around it; it’s easy to miss if you aren’t looking for it. That will take you straight into the chapel.”

“The door’s probably locked.”

The Gods of Babylon

“It was, but the bolt has rusted away. You can get through easily, I was in last night.”

“There are masses there still, then?”

Aeden shook his head. “Not for...hundreds of years, I’d say. But just take a look, *chico*. Then come back and tell me what you’ve seen.”



It was early evening before Cassian, with Emilio, went along the arched cloister to the ruined chapel. It was the only spot in the monastery the boys hadn’t investigated; it was still bright enough to see, but there was ivy and overhanging branches everywhere, and the area at the end of the cloister was bathed in a dim, greenish twilight, as if they were under the sea. Cassian pushed the door open, and it gave easily. He went first, Emilio saying uneasily, “Mind the floor doesn’t give way.”

“It’s just earth,” Cassian said. He stood inside the doorway, slowly taking it all in. The building was almost roofless; you could still see the broken beams above, and heaps of planks still lay tumbled in the centre of the floor-space, and in the corners. The interior was of surprising length, with tall stone-traceried windows, now glassless, down either side; at the end furthest away from him, under a great rose-window, was the altar area, raised like a stage or platform. There was still a crumbled flight of moss-covered stone steps leading up to it. The small hairs at the back of Cassian’s neck began to prickle; he stood completely still, looked all around again. To the left, an alcove, with a tall space for a curtain.... To the right, a wooden door leading to the overgrown garden... Above and behind him, a long gallery for the musicians and their instruments...

“What’s the matter with you, staring like a *tonto*?” enquired Emilio, “Come on, if there’s nothing to see, lets go.”

Cassian hushed him, not sure why, then he asked, “Emilio, have you ever been in here before?”

“How could I have?” asked the practical Emilio.

“Just take your time, look all around you.”

Emilio obeyed, then said, “I suppose.. I could have been somewhere *like* here before.”

“But not the same?”

Emilio shook his head. “I dunno. I mean, all churches are a bit alike inside, *si?*”

“Maybe,” said Cassian, dissatisfied – and then he got his second shock of the afternoon.

“*Lo - the Blessed Casciano!*”

Both boys jumped violently. Not just because of the booming, echoing voice, but because of the outlandish figure that – when they turned – they saw on the long wooden gallery. The figure of a tall man in an ankle-length grey cloak and a grey broad-brimmed hat.

Cassian’s heart was still hammering, and his knees still shaky, when recognition came.

“Canon Odo!”

The man shook his head, came forward to the front of the gallery. “Brother Odo here – none other than a humble member of the fraternity. Greetings, Brother Cassian – and also Emilio the Dancer, if I am not mistaken.”

“*He* says he hasn’t been here before,” Cassian said.

“I just said I wasn’t sure,” protested Emilio.

“And you, Brother Cassian, what do you say?”

“Now that I’ve seen *you*, I’m pretty sure,” said Cassian with confidence. “But how? When?”

Odo took off his hat and cradled it in his hands. “You seek knowledge, my son?”

“I do,” said Cassian.

“This place is old – older than you know,” said Odo mysteriously. “And with the old times went much. But not everything.”

He crossed the gallery to the staircase, then reappeared from a side door. Then he walked towards the main entrance, and the boys followed.

“The roof certainly went,” said Cassian.

“Ah, Un-Blessed Casciano, I feared that explaining would be pointless.”

“Sorry.”

“If you wanted something enough – or someone – on *both* sides, mind you... It had to be both, you see.”

Cassian considered for a moment, then he bent and picked up a piece of wood from the floor; it crumbled to pieces between his fingers. “But this place fell to pieces *ages* ago, didn’t it? It wasn’t just a few days. Must have been years and years.”

“Approximately three hundred,” Odo said. “Yet is time everything, *queridos?*”

The Gods of Babylon

“But three hundred *years!*” Emilio looked round the roofless interior again, then shivered. “Let’s go, I don’t like this place any more.”

“I never liked it, *querido*,” Odo said, leading the way out. “The damp, it was killing me.”



“Do we all get to vote on it?” asked Cassian. “The new leader, I mean?”

“No, the Superior tells us who it is.” Hwy told him. “He’s been to the retreat house, he meditated on it, then today he’ll announce it – soon, I hope.”

“Probably you or Aeden,” Cassian said, “Actually, I’d be happy with either of you.”

“Thank you,” said Hwy. “But don’t make assumptions.”

“We’re taking bets in the dormitory,” Cassian said. “Only five pesetas a ticket. You interested? It’s your last chance.”

“I’m scandalised,” said Hwy. “Finish that altar, or it will be penances – not pesetas.”

“Very amusing.” Cassian returned to his work of decorating the altar in the old chapel, where the ceremony was about to take place. Under the supervision of Aeden and Hwy, the interior had been completely transformed. The boys had swept the earth floor, cleared away the piles of old and jagged wood, painted the roof-pillars in brilliant white, and today they had hung the building from end to end with laurel and may branches, still in blossom; there were lemon-flowers and hyacinths on all the stone sills, and the sides of the stone altar-steps were being piled with an abundance of bluebells, scarlet rock-roses, and spring daffodils. The colours and the scents were brilliant and intoxicating. The Superior, when he arrived, stopped short on the threshold and gasped in wonder.

“I’ve *never* seen it like this – *never*. Bless you all.”

He had come with Giles, the choirmaster, who had brought a box of flutes, recorders, and a quartet of viols, which he distributed among the boys who had played them in San Cristobal. He assembled his group in a half-concealed transept, and soon familiar music began to drift through the roofless chapel; Juan and three other boys sang three verses of a celebratory psalm as the rest of the boys assembled, then the Superior took the platform and addressed them all.

“My dear children,” he said, “You will never again in your lives witness a ceremony more important than that of today. In the future - very soon - our monastery, our school, our very lives, will be under threat - maybe in great danger. But there have been other, indeed greater dangers in centuries past and our Order has outlived them; we have survived, indeed we have triumphed. But this has only been possible under the person who is our true leader, and now it is time for me who tell you who will succeed me as the leader of our Order worldwide. The choice, you must understand, is not mine; our leader has been ordained from the beginning of time. But it is for me to reveal the choice, to anoint the new leader - just as I, while still a mere child, was anointed many, many years ago.”

There was total silence. The Superior came to the front of the platform.

Suddenly, Cassian felt both his arms being gently grasped from behind, then he was being lifted to his feet. Startled, he half-turned and saw that Aeden was on one side and Hwy on the other. “Come up to the front, Cassian,” said Hwy.

“But I haven’t *done* anything,” Cassian protested.

Jerome kicked him. “It’s *you*, you *burro*,” he hissed.

The Superior had come down the aisle now; he smiled at Cassian and touched him on the forehead.

“*Ave*,” he said simply. “Welcome, Most Beloved.”

“Eh?” said Cassian.

“You are - as was I - a stranger from a far country. But the moment I saw you, I knew - beyond a shadow of a doubt. And now it has been confirmed. Follow me now.”

He turned. Cassian, bewildered, was propelled up to the platform behind him.

He stared round at everyone - the priests - the silent rows of boys.

“This *isn’t* a joke..?” he asked at length.

“You know it isn’t,” said the Superior. Then he added, “First, though, there’s the test. While I myself am certain, everyone else has to be. But I have every confidence you will succeed.”

“I haven’t,” said Cassian. “What test? I’m not good at tests.”

A narrow curtain had been pulled aside, and behind it was a table heaped with huge and elaborately decorated plates, candlesticks and drinking-vessels; most of them looked like gold.

The Gods of Babylon

“Part of the monastery treasure,” said Hwy, “And among the chalices is our greatest treasure of all, the Holy Pudding-Bowl of Solomon.”

“I’ve heard of the Holy *Grail*,” said Cassian doubtfully.

“This is much older. But legend tells us that this dish also was used at the Last Supper, lovingly preserved as it had been for thousands of years. From this very dish, we are told, the Last Pudding may have been eaten.”

“*Laus Deo.*” The priests crossed themselves.

“You will see,” said the Superior, “that there are a number of dishes here. Your task is to pick out the Holy Pudding-Bowl from all the others.”

Absolute silence fell; everyone was watching Cassian now. He approached the table, then hesitated – but just because the task was so easy that it didn’t seem fair. Almost all the drinking vessels were dull and tarnished, except for one that shone and sparkled in the sunlight from the window; it was set all round its base and centre with blood-red jewels, and these too caught the sun, and glowed and flashed like fire-flies. Cassian stepped forward and touched it. “That one.”

There was a collective release of breath from all around him, and the Superior said, “Yes, Most Beloved, you have chosen rightly.”

“*Laus Deo.*”

“Well, it was easy,” said Cassian. He turned back to the table. “Look, it’s...”

His voice tailed off. Every one of the vessels was drab and tarnished now, none reflected the sun any more. Cassian blinked. “Oh,” he said.

The Superior nodded, remembering. “Now *you* know, too, that you are chosen..”

Cassian hesitated for a long minute, then he ventured, “Suppose – suppose I don’t want to do it – to be it? Can I refuse?”

“Yes, you have that right,” said the Superior. “But the Order can only survive under its true leader, there can be no other. Without him the Order, the monastery, the school would perish. And then They would have triumphed.”

“Who are They?”

“They of whom we must not speak.”

Cassian paused just a moment longer, then said, “Put like that.. All right, then. I agree.”

The Superior said, “I knew you would. We had this ready.”

A plain white robe was handed to him. Aeden said, “It will fit over your clothes. Just take off your socks and trainers; *they* won’t go with it.”

Cassian obeyed; the robe fitted perfectly. He saw for the first time a complex star-shape that had been chalked on the floor. As instructed now, he stood in the centre of it.

Then a number of things were said in a language he didn't understand. The Superior was saying things to Aeden and Hwy, reading some of them out of an old book bound in brown skins, they were replying, making signs he had never seen before.

A ring of flowers was laid around the star on which he stood, then the Superior approached him again. From around his own neck he removed a narrow gold chain with, on its end, a blue amulet that swung and flashed in the sunlight.

He held it out towards Cassian.

"This is the ancient badge of the leader of our Order. Wear it always, until the time comes for you in your turn to hand it on to a successor - many years from now, *dei volentes*."

Cassian nodded, inclined his head, and felt the chain placed round his neck.

Perhaps then he moved slightly, stepped out of the shadow of a broken roof-beam, but for an instant the sun shone full in his eyes, half blinding him. Until now there had been only the Superior, together with Aeden and Hwy. But now, all around him, numerous and different shapes were vaguely perceptible, mostly mere shadows - shadows of old men, robed, bearded - a company that surrounded him completely, silent and unmoving. Yet he was not frightened; he felt somehow an sense of overwhelming warmth, of love almost. And he sensed that, for just a brief segment of time, all the long-dead leaders and patriarchs of the order had come back, were sharing the moment with him.

In front of him, too, the shape of the old Superior had begun to blur, his outlines to dim and waver...

Then there was instead, much more clear than the others, the form of a boy - a boy slightly younger than himself, an boy of exquisite beauty, with tumbled locks and brilliant blue eyes. Those eyes he recognised without hesitation; they had looked into his own on that very first visit to the monastery, across the wide desk in the Superior's office.

The boy parted his lips, leaned forward, kissed Cassian, then gently touched the amulet. "Look after it."

Cassian kissed him back, whispered, "I promise."

"Goodbye then, Cassian."

The Gods of Babylon

“Goodbye, Cosmo.”

Then the sun was shadowed again, and everything was as before. A wind blew through the chapel, ruffled Cassian’s hair, and the Superior straightened and smiled.

“We will always be with you, Most Beloved,” he said. “And look after the Holy Pudding-Bowl.” And then he was gone, slipping out like a ghost through a side-door, and Cassian felt suddenly immensely sad, because he knew, somehow, that he would never see the old man again.

“*Amor tecum,*” he whispered.

Then the music began to play again, and slowly the chapel emptied, the boys leaving in silence, almost as awestruck as Cassian had been. He was left in the chapel with Aeden and Hwy; he went over to Aeden, wound his arms round his waist, pressed his face into the man’s neck. Aeden stroked Cassian’s hair for a moment or two, then touched the white robe and said, “You don’t have to wear this all the time if you don’t want to. We can put it away and keep it for special occasions.”

“Okay.” Cassian slipped the robe off and Hwy folded it carefully. Cassian put on his socks and trainers again, then Aeden said, “Come along,” and led the way back down the long cloister. “There are special quarters for you,” he said. “They’ve been empty for many years, but...”

Cassian shook his head. “I won’t live in any special ‘quarters’. I think I would rather stay with my friends like before.”

Aeden said, “If you would rather stay in the dormitory, fine. But I’ll show you the other place anyway. You might have some use for it; you might even change your mind.”

Aeden led the way across the lawn to the edge of the tower and paused beside a deep-set door; he fumbled on a large bunch for the key.

“Did you know about this? About me?” Cassian asked curiously, as he waited.

“It’s only the Superior who *knows*. Others, such as myself, can only guess.”

“Did *you* guess?”

“Yes.”

The key turned at last, then Cassian was led up a winding stone stair-way that followed the tower’s interior wall. There were only tiny slit windows to illuminate the darkness, and the boy climbed uncertainly, but after they had gone up only a short distance Aeden unlocked another narrow door and told Cassian to go in ahead of him.

“No-one has used this room for centuries,” he said, “But it has always been kept clean and in perfect repair. Because one never knew when it would be needed.”

Cassian stood still, taking it all in. At first, it reminded him of the Chaplain’s room in San Cristobal; the view was not quite as magnificent, since the tower did not stand so directly on the edge of the cliffs, but there was still the impression of tremendous height, with the tops of pines falling away steeply at the tower’s base and, even further beneath and more distant, the shimmer of sun on the bay. The room itself, apart from the alcove for the staircase, was perfectly round, the walls were spotlessly white, while the furniture, by contrast, was all in black ebony - a desk, carved chairs and cupboards, with, near the window, a wide couch scattered with colourful embroidered cushions. In the very centre of the room a spiral iron staircase wound upwards through a square opening in the ceiling. Aeden pointed to it and said, “There’s also a bedroom, the same size, directly above. So you could live all your life in here, if you wanted!”

“It’s *magnifico*,” said Cassian. “But all my life...no, thanks.” He crossed to the window nearest the sea. “I could look out of here for a long time, though.” He could see a ship now, a tiny white dot with a brilliant feathery wake behind, sharply etched against the blue of the water.

He turned suddenly, and said, “Perhaps I’ll make it into a kind of den, though. Bring my friends up here.”

“Office sounds better than den,” Aeden said.

“Office, then,” said Cassian

Back in the dining-room, the other boys pushed around Cassian, hugging him, punching him, full of congratulations and good wishes. He had insisted in taking his old place at the long table, and in the general chatter, gossip and plan-making during lunch, Cassian’s new status was almost forgotten. For a few minutes, it seemed like it had been some kind of dream, and that things would go on much as before.

Probably this was why Aedan called Cassian aside after lunch. “Don’t you think,” he said, “that, as Leader, you should keep a little separate from the others?”

“Separate?” queried Cassian. “How d’you mean?”

“Well - have another look at that room, perhaps?”

Cassian wrinkled his brows. “This new thing that I’ve got...”

“Yes?”

The Gods of Babylon

“Well, it would be pretty pathetic, wouldn’t it, if it didn’t work unless I had my own room?”

“I - suppose so.”

“Thanks all the same,” said Cassian, and Aeden left.

“*Rebuked*, b’God,” said Hwy, who left with him. “The times are a-changing, I think.”

“My thoughts precisely.”



The old Superior had brought with him, from monastery funds, a substantial sum of money which, the old man had firmly stipulated, was to be spent on a celebratory banquet to mark the installation of the new leader.

“Yes, this plan meets with my approval”, said Cassian, when he was formally told. “Thank you for the information. When will this event take place?”

“That depends entirely on your wishes in the matter,” said Aeden gravely.

Cassian replied, equally solemnly, “In that case, it is my wish that the banquet take place as soon as possible.”

He was with Aeden in a small cell-like room overlooking the rear monastery garden - a small area enclosed by high walls, and sadly overgrown. Every day, a small amount of time had to be given over to business - usually to reading and signing papers that Cassian scarcely understood. But the old Superior had nevertheless brought a number of documents and parchments that needed Cassian’s slightly awkward signature over huge and impressive seals.

“Good,” said Aeden, rolling up the last of the documents. “Now I have two...persons with a request.”

“That would be *two* requests, if I may correct you” said Cassian. “One each.”

“No, these two go together. Ah - here they are.” Aeden opened the door to the corridor to admit the twins, Ephar and Roti.

Cassian got up, slapped both their palms, and sat on the edge of the oak table, swinging his legs. Today he wore a loose, light-blue robe that came to just below his knees. Most of the time he wore his ordinary clothes - tee-shirt and shorts - but at Aeden’s request he had agreed to

wear semi-formal garb at least for official occasions, such as signing papers and interviews.

He said now, "You may state your business, O Exotic Ones."

Ephar nudged Roti, and the latter asked, "Can we be your *pajes*?"

"At the banquet, you mean?"

"Well - all the time, if we can."

"No - I don't want you to *wait* on me," said Cassian impatiently. "We're friends - mates - just like before. I told you that ages ago, when we were..."

His voice tailed off. For a moment he tried to catch Aeden's eye, but Aeden had gone to take the books and papers back to the library.

"But Aeden said that it's a great honour to be picked as your *paje*, as your attendant. It - it's a promotion, really. Won't you pick us?" pressed Roti. "Not just for the banquet - but for all the time."

"Well, if it's like that - okay, then," Cassian said; the twins' eyes sparkled, and they they smacked palms again. Then Ephar picked up a small calf-skin case he had been carrying, put it on the table and clicked it open.

"Aeden said you'd agree. He gave us these, said you were to put them on us."

Cassian already half-knew what to expect when Ephar opened the case. However, his skin prickled as the boy drew out two magnificent triple chains, each with a deeply-coloured pendant at the end. They shone and sparked even more brightly than when he had seen them last.

"You...wore these before, didn't you?" he ventured.

"Before what?"

"Don't you remember?" The twins probably thought he was crazy; however, Roti looked at his chain, held it up, half-closed his eyes. "I may have *dreamt* of something like that, once," he said doubtfully.

Ephar nodded. "Me too. Maybe."

Roti broke in suddenly, "Yes, we did - you remember, Ephar. We talked about it. It was fab - there was this other big banquet, Cassian was there too, and we just wore the chains and nothing else."

"Oh, *yes*," said Ephar, "Best dream ever."

Roti asked eagerly, "*Can* we be like that - I mean, completely bare - just the necklets?"

"And the red slippers. We have these too."

The Gods of Babylon

“That’s the nicest page-boy’s uniform I can think of,” Cassian said. “But, if you think back to your...dream, can you remember what came first?”

“No,” said Roti, his eyes wide.

“The ritual bath,” Cassian said solemnly. “And *then* I’ll put your necklets on. So all your clothes on the floor - now - and get along to the bathroom.”

The twins instantly wriggled out of their clothes. Cassian pulled off his own robe and, in just his shorts and sandals, pursued the two nude youngsters down the cloisters to the wash-room; they scampered ahead of him, yelling and whooping. The large bath was filled; Ephar was put in and, squirming and giggling, was soaped all over; then, with distinct memories of his “dream”, and sitting on the edge of the bath, Cassian turned the unresisting younger over his knees and recommenced operations above and below with both hands, and with an enthusiasm that made the youngster squall, writhe and kick uncontrollably. Then Cassian spun the long-legged boy over again, sat him upright on his lap.

He flexed the fingers of his right hand. “And now - to initiate you *properly*...”

It was the hardest he had ever seen, and almost up to Ephar’s belly-button.

And then he was merciless, his right arm working with all its speed and force, his left hand sliding underneath, then his forefinger pushing in, as far as it would go, turning and twisting.

The boy’s nude body leapt and bounced on Cassian’s knees; his long legs thrashing, he “sang” like an Apache, then his whole body jack-knifed repeatedly, the bathroom rang with a chain of banshee-shrieks, until at last Cassian, slightly breathless, was looking delightedly into his palm. He licked it experimentally, at which Roti said triumphantly, “You’ve *got* to have him as a page now!”

“You bet!” said Cassian. He pointed into the bath. “Your turn now!”

“I can do even *better* than him!” said Roti, jumping in. “I can kick like a *grillo*.”

And very soon he did. Roti also insisted that Cassian lick his palm afterwards and watched him closely, then said, “Yes, that’s quite correct.”

“What are you on about?” Cassian enquired.

Roti pulled a thin leather-bound book from the case and said, “The ceremony for you to make your *pajes*. Father Aeden gave it to us. The next bit is best, though.”

In high spirits, he bounded across and hung both chains over the back of a chair. He said to Cassian, “Now I have to strip *you* bare-naked!”

He skinned down the blond boy’s shorts and underpants, all he wore, then made him step out of them.

He knelt, rubbed both palms up and down Cassian’s nude flanks, murmured, “You look...*fabuloso*...”

Ephar knelt on the floor too, slid his hands all over Cassian, then the whole of their warm naked bodies squirmed against, twined around his own.

“So *hard*...” whispered Ephar soon. “You *really* like us.”

Roti bent, licked and nibbled gently, making Cassian catch his breath. Then he became businesslike again.

“The *final* part of the ceremony...” He had already taken tight hold and started work.

“You have to tickle his botty and nuts,” he instructed his twin. Ephar obeyed, and so effectively did the pair operate that after only a few moments - skipping, *oh*-ing and *waaah*-ing - Cassian had delivered generously into Roti’s eager palm. The latter whispered to his twin again; the pair knelt solemnly side by side on the floor, eyes closed. After which - instructed by Roti - Cassian, still tingling, put his finger into Roti’s palm, and anointed Roti’s forehead, then Ephar’s.

“So *mote it be*,” murmured Roti piously. Then he jumped up. “Now the chains.”

He knelt again, and the glittering necklets were hung round both of the twins’ necks.

“So that’s it?” Cassian asked.

“I’ll check,” said Roti, picking up the small book again.

“No - let *me* see,” said Cassian suddenly.

He snatched the book, taking Roti unawares, and scanned the closely-written pages, then looked up accusingly. “It’s in *Latin*! You can’t read Latin. You can’t know what this says - not a word of it.”

“I don’t.”

“Well, then..?”

“I just...guessed,” said Roti. And the twins burst into giggles.

“I should have you boiled in oil,” said Cassian.

The Gods of Babylon



The banquet took place just as soon as teams of boys, working over-time, had managed to ferry in all necessary supplies from the village. It took place in the main refectory, with most of the boys seated at the long tables, the chief guests at a raised table in front. The hall had been extensively decorated with spring flowers and blossom-bearing branches, and candles burnt in sconces all along the walls and on the tables.

“*Benedictus benedicat...*”

Seated in the centre of the top table was not Cassian, but Otto the Revered, whom Cassian had installed as guest of honour. Cassian sat on his left; on his right was Emilio who, under the terms of the ancient charter, Cassian had appointed High Wizard.

Otto the Revered was now Cassian’s chaplain; he had also been placed in supreme charge of the ancient wine-cellars, with responsibility for selecting and laying-down the monastic vintages.

“A young yet grateful wine,” he said now to Hwy, holding up a glass to the light and lovingly examining its contents. “Creating an initial impression of innocence, even of naïveté, yet with a mysterious power to astonish the palate with the merest hint of its underlying suavity and sophistication, leaving behind an overwhelming sense of nostalgia, nay, of regret.”

“What piffle you talk, Otto,” said Hwy.

“But the growers love it, *hermano*. Anyhow, this is a Montrachet, none of your Spanish muck.” He sipped the wine, closed his eyes, and said, “Not bad, either.”

The twins were of course in their element tonight – in their “uniform” of chain and slippers, sometimes standing behind Cassian on either side, at other times scampering to and fro with dishes and with beakers of wine, their chains, and everything else, dangling impressively in front of them as they went.

Cassian laughed, told Aeden about the “installation” ceremony, and Roti’s part in it.

Aeden nodded. “So he is a suitable *paje* for you. They both are.”

“They’re completely shameless,” added Hwy. “Especially that Roti.”

“That’s what I meant,” Aeden said.



The main courses over, Cassian was provided with a special dessert, which Paolo had volunteered to provide. Quickly stripped naked, Paolo was lifted giggling on to the oak table and placed face-down in front of the new leader; Roti fetched a tub of ice-cream, enthusiastically heaped and patted it into place amid frenetic squeals and wriggles, after which Cassian licked it assiduously from all over and between the youngster's two squirming bottom-cheeks to the enjoyment of both himself and the rest of the high table. Now the musicians were in place; under Giles' direction, they struck up a sprightly gavotte, and Paolo, his bottom licked clean as a whistle, was quickly rolled on his back. There was a burst of laughter and a little crackle of applause as the audience saw that his *pico* stood impressively vertical; the applause was redoubled when an instant later it angled right back, tight against the youngster's stomach. Upon which...

"Hi-hi-HI!!"

And all of the table was again convulsed by Paolo's reaction as, once again, ice-cream was generously layered in place. A moment later his shrieks had become ear-splitting, as his thighs flexed and flailed, his bottom hammered convulsively on the oak table. Cassian, both hands holding down the youngster's bounding nude body, continued his dessert with even more relish. A moment later...

"Si-si-si!" yelled Paolo.

Cassian lifted his head for a moment. "And now the *real* cream!"

And a trice later Paolo *ah-eeee-d* and, feet deliriously kicking the air, delivered just that, repeatedly.

Nor was that the end of the festivities. His own dessert finished, Cassian rose and shouted, "Now - ice-cream for *everyone!*"

Tubs of ice-cream were brought out by Ephar and Roti, and then countless writhing urchins, screaming with delight, were swept from their places in the body of the hall, peeled like bananas, and tumbled naked before the diners on the high table. Enthusiasm was unbounded. "Me, *me!*" was shrilled from all around and, there followed utter pandemonium, with shrilling, yodelling and whistling from every quarter of the table as freezing ice-cream was slapped on to, then licked off, furiously contorting small bottoms, and subsequently - with even more deafening racket - as the same process was applied to a small forest of rock-hard *picos*; finally the yells and war-whoops as quantities of cream were delivered would have

The Gods of Babylon

drowned the orchestra several times over...if they had not already given up playing in despair.

Emilio, naked and with his High Wizard's robe puddled on the floor, tugged a little shyly at Cassian's arm. "The Most Beloved will have dessert too, yes?"

Cassian's eyes sparkled wickedly. "No! The High Wizard shall have his dessert now - and the Most Beloved will give the company the best show of the evening."

Cassian stood and pushed Emilio into his seat, then peeled off his clothes and tumbled them on to the floor with the High Wizard's. Nude and giggling, he stood facing Emilio and said, "Now - take your afters!"

Emilio was strong enough to sweep Cassian up and lay him tummy-down on the table just like the others had been - both boys by now giggling helplessly. Emilio called to Roti, "Ice-cream, *paje!*"

Roti ran across, Emilio picked up the spoon...and an instant later Cassian shrieked, "No! Not right in like *that!*"

"The vessel must be filled to the brim - and from the very bottom," pronounced Odo the Revered. "If you will pardon the expression. But you neglect my glass, *paje* Ephar."

Ephar poured but - with eyes elsewhere - most inaccurately - though the Revered scarcely noticed.

"Hold his little bot-cheeks open!" Emilio ordered the pages. "Wide as you can. And don't wriggle, Cassian."

"Oh - wah! Can't help it."

"Spank his botty!" suggested Roti.

"Help!"

Emilio said, "Then I can have my ice-cream with two lovely cherry-red blancmanges."

The pages slapped diligently...

"Waaaaaaaaaaaah!!!"

Then the rest of the ice-cream was spooned over Cassian's blushing and still furiously squirming rear cheeks and - amid even more noise from Cassian, Emilio's busy tongue twisted, explored and licked, until every last trace of ice-cream had been removed from every single nook.

And now the command that everyone had been waiting for, because everyone else had ceased operations and were watching wide-eyed, the smaller boys standing up to see better.

"Over!"

Cassian obeyed.

“Aaah!” a collective gasp from all the banqueters.

“Wow!” said Emilio.

“Go!” gasped Cassian in turn. “But with a strong boy like you... You’ll need the Holy Pudding-Bowl.”

“*Deo volens*,” murmured the priests.

“WaaAAAAAH!” shrieked Cassian.

Emilio has bent his head and...the show was over almost in seconds. With Emilio’s head pistoning rapidly, and Cassian hollering, with his long slim legs pedalling the air faster and faster and his bottom hammering on the oak table, it was scarcely a moment or two before he screamed and convulsed - over and over - rising from the table, his thighs flexing again and again...as the diners, from end to end of the big room, broke into spontaneous applause.

At last the two boys at the top table relaxed, began to breathe regularly once more. But then Emilio whispered into Cassian’s ear, and the two shook with mirth again. They stood, and Cassian addressed Canon Otto solemnly: “Canon, would you be so good as to say Grace?”

“But, my son, dinner is neither at its beginning nor its conclusion.”

“Yes, but the best course is about to begin,” said Emilio.

“And what is that, my son?”

The fourteen-year-old, taking his nude young friend by the hand, led him across to a couch which he heaped with cushions.

“Sticky buns,” he said.



Within two weeks, spring had turned into early summer, and the air was full of the mingled scents of hazel, pine and hawthorn. In the hot sun, *grigris* whirred, butterflies fluttered, and bees bumbled. The boys had built a dam in a small stream, and in time added to it so much that the area had become a mini-lake, and they splashed and wrestled there for hours after lessons. However, before swimming was allowed, cricket practice had been decreed. Cassian at times thought that their team might some day challenge the English school at Gibraltar, but the standard of bowling still drove him to despair.

“We are being ruled by a *tyrant*,” grumbled Juan, rubbing his arm after an hour at the nets.

The Gods of Babylon

Watching from a first-floor window of the monastery, Aeden expressed a similar thought, then turned to Hwy and said, "Mind you - *you* could be down there helping with the cricket, flying the flag as it were."

"I'm a *Welshman*, boyo," said Hwy emphatically. "Now, if there was talk of a ruggie team.."

So Aeden went out to encourage the players. Cassian came over and said, "They improve, if slowly. When we go back... But when are we going back?"

"When you decree it, O Most Beloved," Aeden said.

Cassian eyed him narrowly; he was never sure whether Aeden was teasing him or not. But the priest didn't laugh. He said, "When the time comes, you will know."

"But *how*?"

"Quite simple," said Aeden, "The Brothers of El Viejo will tell you. And it will be soon."

"The Brothers...?" asked Cassian, intrigued. "But they're a shy bunch, aren't they. You know I have to go to the Chapel every morning to say the daily Offices and - no matter how early I go, the place has always been cleaned and swept, there's a really nice scent in the place, and there are heaps of fresh flowers on the altar. New every single morning."

"They are very dedicated."

"But I never see them. How many are there?"

"A few hundred, I would imagine."

Cassian's eyes opened wide. "*That* many? But it's not possible. Where are they all?"

"All behind the chapel, I would imagine."

Cassian's brow wrinkled. "Hiding?" he asked.

"Dead," said Aeden.

"Eh?"

"That's where all the monks' graves are. You should visit the place sometime. It's a beautiful graveyard - very peaceful."

Cassian stared, shivered, then said, "*Nuts!* I don't believe in stuff like that."

"As you say, O Wise One."

The priest's face was as expressionless as ever. "Rubbish!" Cassian muttered to himself every time Aeden's tale - for tale it was - came back to him. And because such tales are nonsense, Cassian's experience of the following night was undoubtedly a dream - even if a very vivid one. After

all, the chapel bell could not have been ringing, as there was no longer any bell there.

He had just fallen asleep when he heard it. It was a warm night, and he and Emilio were tangled together on Cassian's bed with the window wide open and the sheets thrown back. So it seemed to come to him especially clearly - faint and slightly cracked, but unmistakable, clanging regularly.

It seemed then that he went to the window - either because of the sound, or to cool off slightly in the airless night - and it was then he seemed to see them - scores of them, walking in pairs, dressed in the tall white hoods and gowns of *penitentes*; hands clasped, they were passing the edge of the woods, coming from the direction of the chapel, two by two, in total silence. As in nightmares, Cassian found himself unable to move - even when he saw the procession turn, headed by a tall figure with a cross, and come straight for the narrow door than led into the dormitories, right underneath him.

If it had been real, instead of a dream, Cassian would have been terrified. As it was, he simply clutched the window-sill, hoping to wake up, but saying, "*I am the Leader; I cannot be frightened. Not by you, not by anybody.*"



The monks did not enter the door, but stopped underneath his window, and were looking up. he could see their eyes - or at least could see dark spaces behind the slits in their hoods.

"Cassian," came a score of quiet voices, faint like the breeze in the pine branches. "*Cassian...*"

The boy swallowed. "Yes?"

"Do not be frightened, Most Beloved." came a single voice.

Cassian swallowed again. "I'm not."

"You are our Leader, Most Beloved. You have but to command, and we will go."

"It's okay, you can stay."

"Blessings upon you." It was the same figure who spoke; he was tall and thin and stood just behind the cross-bearer. "We will be with you always, Most Beloved."

"Thank you very much," said Cassian.

The Gods of Babylon

On the other hand, did he really *want* a raft of hooded monks following him about everywhere? It could be awkward in shops, for example.

“With you in spirit I mean, of course.”

So that was all right, then.

“We come to bring a message. You may return to San Cristobal when the eagle returns for his boy.”

“So mote it be,” murmured the procession.

“But what’s..?”

The tall man merely held up a hand in blessing. “*Dominus tecum*. Look after the Holy Pudding-Bowl, Most Beloved - and may you never lack a pudding-spoon.”

So mote it be.

The bell started to ring again, the procession turned and moved off, and in a few minutes the grey monks had disappeared back into the trees.

Next morning, in the Chapel, Canon Odo joined Cassian for the Recitations. Immediately afterwards, Cassian lost no time in telling the priest about his dream.

“Ah,” said Canon Odo, “I, in turn, have something to tell you. I could scarcely contain myself until the Recitations had ended. The fact is, my son, that the eagle *has* now returned for his little cupbearer.”

“All this stuff,” grumbled Cassian. “Why can’t people tell you a thing straight out?”

“Very well, I will do so. When you return to San Cristobel - which I hope will be soon, *Deo volens* - someone will be waiting for you. Waiting very impatiently, I think.”

Cassian stared - then shrieked with delight and launched himself at the Canon, hugging him extravagantly. “You did it, you *did* it! Thank you, *thank* you...!”

Canon Odo shook his head. “It was little of my doing, son. In the normal course of events... But pray detach yourself, O Delectable One, otherwise I shall forget my vows.”

But Cassian nuzzled and kissed him. “Who cares? You have done *everything* for me, and I love you. You can undress me and take me now, if you want. Right here. Right now.”

The priest traced a cross on the boy’s forehead.

“*Benedictus benedicat.*”



A week later the dam had been removed from the stream, and the water once more flowed freely over the pebbles and through the grass. The cricket stumps had been pulled up from the lawn. Inside, everything had been swept, cleaned and polished, and now all the doors and windows had been closed and locked. On an impulse of Cassian's, however, flowers and blossoms had been gathered from the gardens at the rear and laid out on the floor of the front hall; carefully arranged into large letters, they spelt *Thank you*.

Outside, the carts had been loaded early, before the main heat of the day. But the sun was already on the lawns, drawing out the heady scents of the pines and the hawthorn. Yet the air was still beautifully fresh, and the line of boys, with loaded rucksacks, were eager to be off now.

Cassian looked back just once more at the old dreaming building, and echoed, *Thank you*.

At the start of the long path down through the forest, the leading group clustered round their cart - Emilio at the head with *pajes* Ephar and Roti in their scarlet outdoor uniforms. And with them, brown-eyed blond Rafaël, lively Juan the chorister, dark-eyed lithe Jerome the swimmer, and finally olive-skinned Paolo, already tugging at the handles. "*Vámos, vámos!*"

Odo, slightly late, came puffing through the shrubbery, carrying a flask for the journey and, with leaves in his hair, looking like a middle-aged Bacchus. "Bless you, Casciano," he said, and kissed him. "This is the best day of my life."

"Mine too," said Cassian. He waved Aeden on to the steep downward path ahead of them. "Okay - you know the way."

Aeden shook his head. "This time, *you* must lead."

"Then the gods help us," said Cassian. But his heart swelled with happiness. A moment later, starting down the hill, he stopped short and said, "Listen, all of you. It's the old chapel, the bell. It's ringing for us - for one last time."

But he was mistaken. It was in the great tower of San Cristobal, infinitely far below, that the bells were ringing - all of them, as they had never been rung before, and never would again.

Other Titles From Acolyte Press

The Acolyte Readers Series, Various Authors.

In the long-running Acolyte Reader series, the short story format allows for an impressive variety in each volume. Every book includes serious authors of short fiction and masters of erotic prose including Kevin Esser, Luis Miguelito Fuentes, Hakim Bey and Robert Campbell. They also comprise less realistic pieces that really deserve the name fairy tales: everybody lives happily ever after.

Acolyte Reader Five (192 pages)

One of the last stories by the late Robert Campbell follows a teen-age tennis star through central Africa on a wild trip filled with the threat of danger and the promise of love, Luis Miguelito Fuentes's first story for the series introduces the astounding, unique voice of a gifted teenage writer; he was 14 at the time of publication of this sexy romp through New York City in the 90s. Also included is an important translation of a novella by Dutch writer Jef Last, about a 12-year-old threatened by the guns of World War I and the prejudices of his own community.

Acolyte Reader Six (192 pages)

Bob Henderson's warmly romantic piece demonstrates why it's so hard for some men to stop loving boys: there are just too many of them waiting to be loved. Hakim Bey's "Yohimbe Poems" weave dances with words, remembering two boys loved by the poet, and Jacques de Brethmas performs a comic turn with a boy at his most intriguingly deceitful.

Acolyte Reader Seven (192 pages)

Alan Edwards updates an ancient Spanish coming of age ritual in one story and explores the confluence of locomotion and eroticism in another, I.L. Ingels turns up the heat in a tale of a 13-year-old who cruises the beaches in search of a lover.

Acolyte Reader Eight (192 pages)

Kevin Esser's "One Last Time" begins at the ending and traces twin themes of pain and pleasure that are never clearly separated, showcasing the writer's unparalleled ability to sketch deeply human characters in

wildly erotic stories. Luis Miguel Fuentes offers his trademark no-holds-barred imaginative autobiography in “Early Times,” and Edward Bangor uses pop culture to comic effect in “For Those About to...”

Acolyte Reader Nine (192 pages)

Jotham Lotring's “Night Ride” reveals the subtle erotics possible on across-country bus trip, and Christopher Monteriano filters the effects of family friendships on a delicately blossoming love affair with a 15-year-old. In Mark Derby's “Not Again,” a schoolboy stigmatized for one same-sex attraction finds in his next relationship with a boy the strength to stand up to an abusive teacher.

Acolyte Reader Ten (192 pages)

I.L. Ingles imagines the developing relationship between a teen-age boy and his Japanese captor in a World-War-II internment camp and B.J. Freedman chronicles the leisurely growth of affection between a runaway teenager and a rock-and-roll drummer. Other tales are set in New Zealand, Mexico and Scotland in perhaps the most international collection of Acolyte stories.

Acolyte Reader Eleven (192 pages)

Kevin Esser's Santo Domingo is full of incident and emotion: love and betrayal, passion, the threat of death and the promise of renewal. B.J.Freedman's Brian's Dick is a considerably lighter story of the young narrator's frustrating months long campaign to get a peek at the title object. In Rocky, a lonely retired schoolteacher loves a boy and loses him, but receives a special gift.

Attic Adolescent, by Bob Henderson (Acolyte Press)

Did paederasty die with the Ancient Greeks? Not if Bob Henderson's account of the country in the mid 70s is any indication. This book of interconnected short stories and one novella recounts the amorous adventures of an incurably romantic expatriate Andreas, Takis, Pavlos, Achilles, Nikos, Stelios, Stavros and Spiros are all loved, and all different. Some are street-wise hustlers, others bourgeois schoolboys; some of Henderson's passions are fleeting and others stretch for years. A sexy and sensitive account.

Crowstone, by Hakim (Coltsfoot Press)

This sword-and-sorcery tale has developed an almost legendary status with both boy-lovers and science fiction fans because for many years it's been almost impossible to find a copy. On Qarnar, the fairest of the 108 moons of Algol, a monk/thief meets a wandering warrior in a fight against air-pirates; they band together in a quest that introduces them to a score of boys: Jethael, greatest of the Temple dancers; blond Xiri of Thurenian blood; tattooed Dragon from the Chromatic wastes; Ravinian the voyeur; and pig-tailed sorcerer Varonael.

Explosion, by I.L. Ingles (Acolyte Press, 384 pages)

Inspired by *Lord of the Flies*, I.L. Ingles created this novel of a mixed group of black and white boys surviving in an African cave after a nuclear war has devastated the earth. The boys build their own society with a set of rules, but contradictions grow up immediately. Clothes, they soon realize, are more trouble than they're worth, but the casual nudity makes challenges to the prohibition against "playing sex" inevitable. The struggle over sex becomes an emblem of the battle between freedom and custom, between a past that conjured the disaster that left the boys by themselves and a future that demands they create traditions of their own.

The Fire-Worshiper, by Alan Edward (Acolyte Press, 192 pages)

Imagine what it would be like today if the old pagan religions of Europe had not just survived the on-rush of Christianity, but prevailed. Alan Edward has created such an alternate world. England in this tale is a happy place, a society of advanced but semi-pastoral people where talented boys sing and dance and openly make love in elaborate religious celebrations. But the worshippers of Jaweh have not given up; driven underground and onto a polluted island, their faith has grown ugly and fanatic. They have begun kidnapping youngsters and forcefully converting them. This is the story of 12-year-old Alric and his quest, along with a local wizard, to rescue his lover, abducted and forced into the catacombs of the dark faith.

Getting It On, by Dr. Joseph Winchester (Acolyte Press, 208 pages)

It's easy to doubt the veracity of the author's claim that his "Homosexual Histories of Six Heterosexual American Boys" is nothing more than the unadorned report drawn from his interviews with you boys and adolescents. And if it fails at science, it doesn't succeed as great literature, either.

But as “one-handed reading,” it offers verve, variety and a veil of respectability.

**Growing Old Disgracefully, by Casmir Dukahz
(Acolyte Press, 224 pages)**

Casmir Dukahz confuses wordplay and foreplay, using both to produce an explosive climax. These rollicking accounts of amorous encounters with a bevy of teenage charmers are full of puns and double entendres, filled with situations recalling French farce and slapstick comedy. Seldom is erotic writing so humorous. Dukahz store of naughty anecdotes is apparently unending, and he taps it to great advantage in this pseudo-autobiographical record of a life spent in loving pursuit of boys. *Growing Old Disgracefully* is the fourth volume in his partly satirical autobiography; woven throughout is the story of ‘Duke’ and his flaxen-haired Baltimore born favorite, Remy. Readers familiar with his earlier books will find Dukahz has lost none of his literacy and none of his wit as he recalls happier days before bigotry and hysteria spread across the land.

It's Okay to Say Yes, by J. Darling (Acolyte Press, 192 pages)

Subtitled: “Close Encounters in the Third World: The Adventures and Misadventures of a Well-Traveled Boy-Lover,” Darling’s book is an account of a dozen years he spent traveling the world. He has visited all those places where a well-publicized boy-love “scene” exists, and many more where it doesn’t. Darling is revealed in these pages as a basically decent man willing to suffer persecution, and even imprisonment, to experience the fulfillment of his desire for physical love. Read with some insight, his book also reveals, perhaps unintentionally, the prejudice and paternalism Westerners often bring to their relationships with boys from far-off lands.

**Kim, My Beloved, by Jens Eisenhardt
(Acolyte Press, 192 pages)**

Jens Eisenhardt describes an incredibly intense love in this autobiographical novel about a 28-year-old teacher and a pupil half his age. Critics hailed it as a “very important work of erotic literature” when it first appeared in Danish. This English translation lets American readers enjoy Eisenhardt’s precise mapping of the emotional journey hazarded by a lonely man who follows his heart to a region proscribed by polite society. Eisenhardt faithfully recounts both the joys and pitfalls of a relationship whose passion must be hidden from the prying eyes of outsiders.

Lucky Lips, by Rob Elan (Acolyte Press, 224 pages)

Ernie Willet is 11 years old, handsome, popular and athletic. He still struggles, though, with the grief of losing his father two years before. He looks for emotional support from 16-year-old Rick, who lives down the street, but it takes classmate Gordie Lewis to show Ernie what it is he really wants from Rick. Rob Elan's account of a boy's discovery of the world outside his home is warm, funny and more than anything, sexy.

A Natural Lizard Activity, by B.J. Freedman (Acolyte Press, 176 pages)

This boy-love novel is set in California of the 70s amid the obsessive fans of the Grateful Dead who style themselves Deadheads. Thirteen-year-old Kim and his Pop are packed off on a transcontinental bus by Mom and her new dope-dealing lover. Once a trendy professor, Pop had burned out his wits on an overdose of scared mushrooms; by the time he and Kim end up in Venice Beach, the child has definitely become father to the man. When a 31-year-old coke dealer falls for Kim, it sets the stage for a comic, erotic trek through the state of California as the teenager seeks to balance his responsibilities to his family, his lover and himself. Freedman's casual racism is a bummer, almost scuttling the novel's appeal. But his eye for the realistic detail - emotional, geographic and sociological - makes the novel worth the trip.

Operation Jock, by C.R. Labarge (Acolyte Press, 1995)

Operation Jock is very much like the problem novels aimed at juvenile readers you might remember from the Scholastic books you used to order through your English class in junior high school. Of course, I can't recall a scholastic book where the protagonist's problem was anything like this: how can 14-year-old Evan, just beginning to understand the joys of boy-boy sex, integrate his sensitive lover into the gang of rowdy jocks that are Evan's best friends. But Evan's other concerns would fit right into one of Scholastic's extracurricular readers: how to convince his mother to let him try out for junior varsity football and what to do about an anti-tax activist who wants to cancel the school sports program to save money.

The Pagers Papers, by Richard Rawson (Acolyte Press, 192 pages)

For years a little Philippine village had been famous for taking tourists on boat trips to a scenic waterfall. Western gays soon discovered that many of the handsome, muscular boatmen were willing to supplement their mea-

ger earnings with prostitution. Soon, their younger brothers were drawn into the game, and vacationing boy-lovers arrived in increasing numbers. In the mid-seventies, Western media labelled the situation an example of child abuse and exploitation, and local politicians built careers promising to crack down. This book is one man's recollection of the village when man/boy relationships were tolerated, and even encouraged. It's partly a nostalgic paean to a boy-lover's lost paradise, partly a social document about boys' sexuality as it can develop in a palliative environment. While Rawson's memoir shows that the accounts of abuse were products of narrow prejudice, his portrait of himself as a not-particularly-sensitive Westerner proves that sex-tourism has complexities that deserve a more nuanced analysis.

Panthology 3 and Panthology 4 (Coltsfoot Press)

These short-story collections provided the model for the Acolyte Reader series published by Coltsfoot's successor, and many of the authors will be familiar to fans of those anthologies. In *Panthology 3*: a whore's son is set up to trap a boy-lover, only to find his own heart trapped; a rich 14-year-old falls in love with a gigolo; a young camper is abducted (to his delight) from a train; and lots more. In *Panthology 4*: a 13-year-old-boy robot has human feelings; a boy at summer camp falls in love with his counselor; a boy-lover rescues two young beggars in Calcutta; and much more.

Pulling It Off, by Joseph Winchester (Acolyte Press, 192 pages)

Readers will differ on the validity of "Dr." Joseph Winchester's claim that this book is a non-fiction account of the "masturbation practices of American boys." Certainly, its value as a scientific document or even oral history is quite limited. It might serve as a test of one hypothesis: it's as hard to resist reading about jerking off as it is to resist doing it. And it doesn't take a Nobel prize winner to predict that readers will have as much trouble keeping their idle hands from becoming the devil's play-things as do the boys depicted in the text. Perhaps that's what makes *Pulling It Off* a paradigm of the scientific method—it encourages its audience to launch its own experiments into the matter at hand.

Shakespeare's Boy, by Casmir Dukahz (Acolyte Press, 248 pages)

The final book and the only novel written by Dukahz just before his death in 1988 is centuries removed from his whimsical accounts of 20th Century America. He uses the Elizabethan Age and the world of Shakespeare's

Globe Theater as the backdrop for the story of Ruy, orphan and actor. The 13-year-old thespian achieves instant and tumultuous fame in the role of Juliet, but his romances off-stage are as passionate as anything the Immortal Bard ever envisioned. Seduced by tramps and kings, Ruy's gender-bending on stage lends spice to homoerotic encounters that begin once the curtain falls.

**Singularities, Book 1 by Robert Campbell
(Acolyte Press, 192 pages)**

The stories in *Singularities* focus on man-boy relationships in a variety of settings, punctuated with a series of parodies of newspaper advice columns that would make Ann Landers blush—at the very least. Campbell's vision spans a Caribbean island, a military prep school, a junior varsity football team and a lonely outpost in the African desert. Though much of the value of *Singularities* comes from the variety of plot and settings, recurring themes provide an underlying unity to Campbell's writing. One is the persistence, ingenuity and resilience of pederast relationships that thrive even in the most hostile environments; another is the contrast between the expansive joy of those relationships and the crabbed morality of religious bigots who condemn them.

**Something Like Happiness, by Kevin Esser
(Acolyte Press, 202 pages)**

Andy Damon swipes a picture of Caravaggio's *Victorious Amor* from his small-town Midwestern library and launches himself on a libidinous adventure that introduces him to a world of pot smoking, kiddie porn and anything-goes sex parties. Along the way he meets a host of boys not so different from himself: the black Spinks twins, Snickers and Deacon, Manny and Fernando Fuentes, track star Timmy Jenco and Matthew, the neighborhood paper boy. Some are "gay" and some are "straight," but they're all grist for sexy Andy's mill. Esser captures the excitement of the young male animal with exceptionally vivid prose and reveals a touching sensitivity when Andy's sex-hunt becomes a search for true love.

**Strange Catharsis, by Daniel Mallery
(Acolyte Press, 240 pages)**

When Richard Eldred takes a job as house parent at a boarding school for problem children located in the wild Scottish highlands, he hopes the isolation will restore the inspiration that's seeped away after a series of best-selling novels and film scripts. But he finds a growing attraction to the boys at the school that suggests a deeply buried motivation. There's

Danny, a tough boy exploding through puberty, who battles authority with his fists. And Hansa, a gentler, reserved boy desperately seeking love. And Steve, whose perfectly developed runner's body hides a heart sickness. As Eldred helps them solve their problems, he finds a solution to his own alienation—but one that challenges him to respond to feelings he's long suppressed. Mallery's compelling novel has needlessly Gothic plot complications, but is both warm and sexy.

The Trucker and the Teens, by Louis Colantuono (Coltsfoot Press)

The title of Louis Colantuono's autobiography suggests a cheap porno paperback, and when the book's at its best, it reads like one, too. Colantuono offers descriptions of the countless boys he encounters, and attempts to suggest the emotional depths of his relationships. But he's obviously happiest writing dialogue like "Quick, Louie, I want you to do my bongo. . . Bone me good." Twice jailed for sex with boys, Colantuono created this unabashed record of his non-stop sex life between 1969 and 1975.

The Gods of Babylon

by Alan Edward